

From History to Evolution: Jürgen Habermas and the Philosophy of History[‡]

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Abstract: This paper asks whether at the heart of Jürgen Habermas's discourse theory there stands a problematic conception of historical change. Having spent the 1960s deeply immersed in the difficulties of navigating the force field of the philosophy of history in a non-determinist manner, in the course of the 1970s Habermas decided to cut through the Gordian knot. He embraced social evolutionism, tightened a number of Kantian distinctions, and adopted a sociological analysis of society as system and lifeworld. This paper traces his move from history to evolution and suggests that Habermas ironically and unwittingly ends up replicating a number of problematic aspects of the philosophy of history on the social-evolutionary plane.

1.

During the 1970s Jürgen Habermas worked out the philosophical system that would undergird his seminal accounts of communicative action. As part of this development he came to embrace social evolutionism. Having penned the rich historical reflections on The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere a decade earlier, by the mid 1970s Habermas hailed the ahistorical character and lack of historicity associated with a reconstructed theory of social evolution. At the same time he began to adopt and adapt Weberian themes of rationalization and

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integrate core aspects of Niklas Luhmann's systems theory. While Habermas's creative reliance on a Weberian theory of modernity as rationalization is well known, his use of a social-evolutionary logic of cognitive development remains little understood. Habermas's shift occurred in the context of a broader renewal of evolutionism during the 1970s. In the associated controversies concerning the relationship between history and social structure Habermas chose one of the most extreme responses available. This essay takes stock of Habermas's move whose radical nature and continuing repercussions are still insufficiently appreciated.

The innocent reader of Habermas's mature works occasionally stumbles upon brief references to social evolutionism that do not receive further explication. One might be excused for being left somewhat puzzled. Consider the following programmatic statement from Between Facts and Norms: "Through communicative action the rationality potential of language for functions of social integration is tapped, mobilized, and unleashed in the course of social evolution." (BFN 42)¹ In an interview from 2002, Habermas summarized his position as follows: "That promise [to save Kantian insights in a detranscendentalized yet analytical vein] also pertained, for me more than for Apel, to a reconciliation between Kant and Darwin, between a transcendental and an evolutionary perspective."² This move, or in any case this manner of presenting it, may seem quixotic. It is conventionally and conveniently dismissed as of little relevance. Rather than glossing over these statements as insignificant eccentricities, an unfortunate choice of words, or perhaps quaint but ultimately unnecessary and irrelevant tangents

¹ See also BFN 25, 52, 74, 77, 111, and 146. "Naturally, in the course of social evolution the risk of dissension increases with the scope for taking yes/no positions on criticizable validity claims. The more societal complexity increases and originally ethnocentric perspectives widen, the more there develops a pluralization of forms of life accompanied by an individualization of life histories" BFN 25. Also: "The legal form in which these norms are clad is a relatively recent product of social evolution" BFN 111.

² Jürgen Habermas, 'Postscript: Some concluding remarks', in Mitchell Abouafia, Myra Orbach Bookman, and Cathy Kemp (eds.), Habermas and Pragmatism (New York: Routledge, 2002), 227. The reference here is to Karl-Otto Apel, Habermas's long-term collaborator and friend.

of Habermas's efforts to think through modernity, this paper argues that such superficial reading ironically underestimates Habermas's own systematic consistency and self-reflectivity. What may seem like mere throw-away comments can guide us toward the central pillars of the philosophical architecture of his mature works. On that reading, social evolutionism turns out to answer to a systemic need in his turn toward communicative action. To be sure, in the Theory of Communicative Action and Between Facts and Norms, Habermas relegated the discussion of this diachronic dimension, and with it the social evolutionary strain, to the far background. But it was still present and continued to be crucial for the critical and progressive dimension of Habermas's project. As Habermas clarified on numerous occasions, the fact that these issues are no longer at the analytical forefront does not mean they were theoretically redundant or had been abandoned.³

Why did Habermas then come to ground the progressivism of his theory of communicative action in social evolutionism?⁴ This question demands two related responses. On the one hand it calls for a more precise intellectual reconstruction of the 1970s moment in Habermas's thought with all its pressure points and vulnerabilities. To understand and evaluate his answer we need to acquaint ourselves with the successive questions and challenges Habermas sought to address. This involves working through Habermas's defining struggles with Gadamer and Luhmann, taking into account the curious mixture of emphatic rejection and extensive appropriation involved. In particular, the permanent presence of system theory as an interlocutor

³ Besides the numerous references in Between Facts and Norms listed above, consider the following succinct statement: "Genetic structuralism in developmental psychology ... seems promising for the analysis of social evolution and the development of world views, moral belief systems, and legal systems." Jürgen Habermas, Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1990), 23. This is a translation of the collection of essays that appeared as Moralbewusstsein und Kommunikatives Handeln (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983).

⁴ To provide a definition at this point: social evolution, for Habermas, is "the realization of an ordered sequence of structural possibilities". Social-evolutionary theories manifest themselves as a specific kind of structural change, namely one that is ordered through a teleological component. It is a "cumulative process exhibiting a certain direction" RHM 155, CES 141. See also William Outhwaite, Habermas. A Critical Introduction, second edition (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 57.

must in this context be described as a “pact of sorts”⁵, even though this has been largely lost on the reception of Habermasian thought in Anglophone scholarship.⁶ On the other hand, in a more philosophically mode, the question demands once more a tracing of the recurring tensions in post-Kantian philosophy, in particular German idealism, that continue to characterize the unfinished project of modernity. I will first briefly sketch the historical trajectory (2), then turn to the philosophical stakes (3), before concluding by spelling out some implications (4).

2.

In reconstructing Habermas’s shift toward social evolutionism this section will proceed in two steps. I will first sketch Habermas’s position throughout the 1960s before subsequently turning to his incorporation of social evolutionary theory centered around his engagement with Niklas Luhmann. Habermas’s first move – from the beginning of the 1960s to the early 1970s – was in many ways a gradual one, characterized by continuation and deepening. His second step, most explicitly laid out in Zur Rekonstruktion des Historischen Materialismus from 1976, was a decidedly more radical one.⁷

Despite its neo-Marxist language from early on Habermas’s position was characterized by a subtle but nonetheless considerable distance to orthodox forms of historical materialism. Far

⁵ Thomas A. McCarthy, “Complexity and Democracy, or the Seductions of Systems Theory,” New German Critique, No. 35, Vol. 35 (Spring-Summer 1985), 28.

⁶ Consider the following impression by a contemporary reader: “One can see the difference very clearly in BFN, when Habermas, after laying out his reconstruction of the normative foundations of rights, turns to consider ‘realist’ objections. The English reader naturally expects that he will be dealing with problems that arise, in one way or another, from the fact that agents are self-interested, or instrumentally rational. ... Yet for Habermas, ‘realism’ means both ‘economic theory on the one hand and systems theory on the other.’” Joseph Heath, ‘Habermas and Analytical Marxism’, Philosophy and Social Criticism, Vol. 35 (2009), 892.

⁷ See Jürgen Habermas, Zur Rekonstruktion des Historischen Materialismus (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1976). Hereafter RHM. The book was only partially translated as Jürgen Habermas, Communication and the Evolution of Society (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979). Hereafter CES.

from embodying a crude historical materialism from which the mature Habermas might have later felt compelled to distance himself for fear of determinism, already his early position was a highly nuanced one. In 1957, Habermas published a literature review on the philosophical discussion of Marx and Marxism in Gadamer's *Philosophische Rundschau*. It was at the time widely perceived as attempting to bolster the legitimacy of a Marxist philosophy of history, and harshly criticized by Horkheimer along precisely these lines. But the piece in fact expounds a complex argument of simultaneous rapprochement toward and distancing from different parts of Marx, shifting the focus toward the young Marx as a detranscendentalizing social philosopher who had insisted on the sublation of philosophy as philosophy.⁸

The argument was more fully fleshed out in Habermas's 1960 essay on Marxism as Critique (abbreviated hereafter as MC) in which Habermas continued his reconstruction of a philosophical reading of the early Marx as a way of exploring a potential synthesis of Kant and Hegel.⁹ It was Hegel's dialectical resolution of Kant's dualism, Habermas suggested, that had prepared the way for the young Marx who "reconciles Vico, who is *aufgehoben* in Hegel, with Kant" (MC 248). Mankind, far from being guided by some external deterministic laws, "makes its history with will and consciousness" (MC 248). Though this project was rooted in Kantian practical reason, Habermas explained, regulative ideas alone were insufficient. For Kant "the meaning of history can only be delineated as an idea without relevance for the theory of history in any way." (MC 248) What was missing was a link between the pragmatic intent and its theoretical roots. "Marx establishes just this relevance with his thesis that the meaning of history

⁸ Jürgen Habermas, "Literaturbericht zur philosophischen Diskussion um Marx und den Marxismus," *Philosophische Rundschau*, Vol. 5 (1957), 165-235. The piece was included in *Theorie und Praxis. Sozialphilosophische Studien* (Neuwied am Rhein: Luchterhand, 1963) but left out of the English translation published as Jürgen Habermas, *Theory and Praxis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973).

⁹ The piece was first presented as a lecture in Zurich in 1960 though only published in 1963. See Jürgen Habermas, *Theorie und Praxis*. In what follows I largely follow Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality. The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 462ff.

can be recognized theoretically to the degree that human beings undertake to make it true practically.” (MC 248) The required link was provided by historical self-reflectivity.¹⁰ Habermas proceeded by pointing to the practical implications. It may be “a fiction,” he conceded, but “from the lofty observation post of this fiction the situation is revealed in its ambivalences, which are susceptible to practical intervention, so that an enlightened mankind can elevate itself then to become what up to that point it was only fictitiously.” (MC 252) Even though any kind of historical totality was an epistemological fiction, the self-reflective understanding as a historical actor could spur future action.

As this outline of the early 1960s moment highlights, already the young Habermas had left behind a deterministic philosophy of history – “the God’s eye view of history” as he himself sometimes referred to it – whilst embracing the philosophy of history as an inescapable form of enquiry, indeed perhaps the most self-reflectively modern one. Firmly holding on to refashioned Kantian concepts and a quasi-Marxian language, he instead continued to purge the philosophy of history in a rather pragmatic vein of its epistemological pretensions. The theoretical framework of the young Habermas was that of a “philosophy of history with a practical intent” (MC 212), as he put it then and would continue to do so for much of the 1960s.¹¹

A series of debates over the subsequent years would gradually alter this position and add

¹⁰ Having thereby placed a philosophical reading of the young Marx back on the table, Habermas at the same time distanced himself from substantial Lukacsian presuppositions of Western Marxism. Invoking an argument from Merleau-Ponty’s *Adventures of the Dialectic*, Habermas was keen to stress that there was a theoretical mismatch in declaring the proletariat as both subject and object of history. See MC 251 for this point. Martin Jay explains Habermas’s position in detail in Martin Jay, “Habermas and Modernism,” in Richard J. Bernstein (ed.), *Habermas and Modernity* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1985), 470.

¹¹ One can even read parts of the *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (orig. published in 1962) as having provided an example for such a philosophy of history with pragmatic intent. There he had drawn attention to the centrality of discursive space by presenting a dramatic account of its declining health. The underlying practical philosophy of history – though of course nowhere made explicit – was not lost on his contemporary West German audience of increasingly audacious public intellectuals in a slowly liberalizing Adenauer era. Throughout the early 1960s Habermas remained within this paradigm that sounded out a number of recognizably Kantian claims by relating them to the young Marx.

further nuance to it. Most crucially, there emerged a challenge posed by Hans-Georg Gadamer who in his hermeneutics put the finger precisely on the sore spot with which Habermas had ended his Marxism as Critique essay: the privileged vantage point of the theoretician.¹² It was in order to contain Gadamer's critique that Habermas began to elaborate an empirically grounded analysis of potentially universal presuppositions of theoretical and practical reason. Spurred by Gadamer's arguments Habermas took his reading of the philosophy of history even further than he had done beforehand whilst simultaneously beginning to ground Kantian reason in linguistic structures that could give rise to quasi-Hegelian collective *Bildungsprozesse*. In his reply to Gadamer in the Logic of the Social Sciences from 1967 this was spelt out by way of an explicit call for a philosophy of history with practical intent:

Gadamer ... does not see that in the process of tradition he must consider as already mediated what in terms of its ontological difference is not capable of mediation: linguistic structures and the empirical conditions under which they change historically. Only because of this can Gadamer also conceal from himself the fact that the practical connection between understanding and the initial hermeneutic situation of the interpreter requires a hypothetical anticipation of a philosophy of history with practical intent. (LSS 174-175)¹³

Gadamer had been right to draw attention to the hermeneutic situation of the interpreter but his excessive emphasis on tradition crucially concealed that our taken-for-granted linguistic structures were open to historical change under the influence of critical reflection and that a philosophy of history with practical intent had the capacity of feeding precisely into such historical changes. As a result, Habermas polemicized in best Frankfurt manner, “[o]ne is

¹² Thomas McCarthy's Ideas and Illusions provides a wonderfully illuminating and critical account of Habermas's "overcoming" of hermeneutics. See Thomas McCarthy, "Reason and Rationalization," in Ideas and Illusions. On Reconstruction and Deconstruction in Contemporary Critical Theory (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1991). For Gadamer's position see Hans-Georg Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr Siebeck, 1960) as well as Gadamer, "On the Scope and Function of Hermeneutic Reflection [1967]," in Philosophical Hermeneutics (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

¹³ Habermas's Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften (published as a *Beiheft* in Gadamer's Philosophische Rundschau in February 1967) included as a central chapter a critical review of Gadamer's Truth and Method. Translated as Habermas, On the Logic of the Social Sciences, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen and Jerry A. Stark (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1988), 143-175. [Hereafter LSS.] See also McCarthy, Ideas and Illusions, 129.

tempted to use Gadamer against himself and show him hermeneutically that he is ignoring that legacy because he has adopted an undialectical concept of enlightenment.” (LSS 170)

Besides the critical engagement with Gadamer a parallel and related development had set in with the Positivism Dispute and the associated engagement with Karl Popper and Hans Albert that formed the second strand of the Logic of the Social Sciences and gave rise to a number of further essays collected in 1968 as Knowledge and Human Interest.¹⁴ As the above snapshots from the 1960s indicate, by the end of the decade Habermas’s views had been complicated along several dimensions. In response to Gadamer, Habermas had put in place many of the distinctions familiar from his later theoretical framework. But at this point his quasi-pragmatist stance could still breathe, the distinctions were fluid and revisable. His nuanced position on historical change had remained largely in place, as had his skepticism about the solutions implicitly proposed by the social sciences whose impoverished treatment of history he singled out on several occasions.¹⁵ All this would change during the 1970s.

In an attempt to further stabilize his response to the pressure exerted by Gadamer’s critique of his transcendental commitment but also in response to a simultaneous neo-Marxist

¹⁴ Habermas, Erkenntnis und Interesse (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1968). Martin Jay underscores the significance of the Positivism Dispute and references a conversation with Habermas in Starnberg in December 1980. Jay adds that Habermas also credited his reading of the late Wittgenstein. Martin Jay, Marxism and Totality. The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

¹⁵ Habermas, On Logic of the Social Sciences, ch. 2, “Sociology and History: The Contemporary Discussion”, 16-42. An interesting middle position between this stance of the late 1960s and his later theory of communicative action can be observed in a little-known piece from 1973 – “On the Subject of History” – where he once more defended a philosophy of history with practical intent. The volume, edited by Reinhart Koselleck, was an apt place for this. Its explicit purpose had been to serve as a venue for evaluating historicity and the philosophy of history. But in contrast to the overwhelmingly hostile and, as Habermas remarked, “overly hysterical” tone of the volume’s other contributions Habermas proposed a remarkably sober attitude to the philosophy of history. Not least in marked difference to his own later rhetoric in the TCA and BFN, Habermas dismissed all those who felt compelled, for one reason or another, to discredit the philosophy of history as such. This was escapism. Rather, he explained, the need for thinking in terms of the philosophy of history was as urgent and as it was inescapable. At the same time, he distanced himself from traditional determinist philosophies of history that had been based on exuberant epistemological demands. Jürgen Habermas, “Über das Subjekt der Geschichte. Kurze Bemerkungen zu falsch gestellten Alternativen,” in Reinhart Koselleck and Wolf-Dieter Stempel (eds.), Geschichte: Ereignis und Erzählung (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1973).

challenge, Habermas began an increasingly absorptive engagement with Luhmannian systems theory. Could societies not be described as complex social systems continuously adapting to crisis tendencies and steering pressures? Could Luhmann's system not perhaps be welded onto communicative action and the possibility of learning effects? It was this tempting combination of theories of social evolutionary learning with a Weberian *basso continuo* that licensed Habermas in his move toward a social philosophy of communicative action. The broader shift has since then been characterized as continuing a "gradual shift from Hegel to Kant", a "creeping Weberianism," or less often as an absorptive engagement with Niklas Luhmann's systems theory.¹⁶ Implicit in all these characterizations, but less often appreciated as such, is the flip side of this evolutionary embrace: a radical break with all forms of history.

Habermas's evolutionary turn certainly went hand in hand with his exposure to Luhmannian systems theory and its attempts to translate theories of biological behavior and evolution into analyses of societies as complex social systems continuously adapting to crisis tendencies and steering pressures. Already in 1971, Habermas and Luhmann engaged in an intense debate in which the two displayed their agreements and differences over the prospects of systems theory and the idea of emancipation.¹⁷ The joint volume was however less the end point of their debate than merely the beginning of a continuous back and forth over the subsequent decade at the end of which there stood two seminal publications: Habermas's Theory of

¹⁶ For the first two, see John P. McCormick, Weber, Habermas and Transformations of the European State: Constitutional, Social, and Supranational Democracy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 290, 17. McCormick's description of a problematic assimilation of Weber is an apt one. Michael Schmid, by contrast, has criticized Habermas's reliance on social evolutionism precisely for not having taken seriously enough Weber's argument in the Wissenschaftslehre. Schmid presents his argument as essentially rehashing Weber's original critique of conflating explanatory and evaluative viewpoints. Michael Schmid, "Habermas's Theory of Social Evolution," in John B. Thompson and David Held (eds.), Habermas: Critical Debates (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1982), 177, 305n58.

¹⁷ The debate was documented in a jointly published book that same year. See Jürgen Habermas and Niklas Luhmann, Theorie der Gesellschaft oder Sozialtechnologie. Was leistet die Systemforschung? (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1971). Could systems theory, the question was, be turned into a full theory of society or did it constitute a merely technical approach to the social, a *Sozialtechnologie*?

Communicative Action in 1981 and Luhmann's Social Systems in 1984.¹⁸ On the surface, the two books presented two radically different models and suggested radically different answers. But behind that façade of disagreement some core elements of systems theory had been silently incorporated into Habermas's philosophical system. An adapted form of social evolutionism was one of them. "[S]ystems theory," Habermas granted, "offers useful instruments for analyzing the initial conditions of evolutionary innovations, namely, the appearance of system problems that overload a structurally limited steering capacity and trigger crises that endanger the system's continued existence." (RHM 40; CES 125) But if societies could indeed be fruitfully described as complex social systems continuously adapting to crisis tendencies and steering pressures, there was something missing in Luhmann's picture.

Luhmann's system theory, Habermas argued, had to be turned on its head by incorporating into it the potential for learning effects. "With the aid of learning mechanisms," he affirmed, "we can explain, why some systems find solutions for their steering problems in a way that points evolutionary forward, whilst others fail in the face of evolutionary challenges." (RHM 134)¹⁹ Systems theory stressed the adaptive behavior of complex systems from a social evolutionary perspective, but in doing so, Habermas suggested, it neglected processes of social integration. It simply could not explain, he insisted, why some systems turn out to be more responsive and thereby robust. That missing link were learning processes. But, as Habermas explained, these were not to be found in specific political actions but rather occurred on a cognitive level and could as such be read off from the development of a society's underlying

¹⁸ Niklas Luhmann, Soziale Systeme: Grundriss einer allgemeinen Theorie (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1984). Translated as Niklas Luhmann, Social Systems, trans. John Bednarz, Jr. with Dirk Baecker (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

¹⁹ As he had already argued in Legitimation Crisis, "societies are also systems, but their mode of development does not follow solely the logic of the expansion of system autonomy (power); social evolution transpires rather within the bounds of a logic of the life-world, the structures of which are determined by linguistically produced intersubjectivity and are based on criticizable validity claims." (LC 14)

normative structures, its worldviews, moral systems, and legal structure. “The learning mechanisms have to be sought first on the psychological level,” Habermas writes.

If that succeeds, with the help of cognitive developmental psychology, there is need for additional empirical assumptions that might explain sociologically how individual learning processes find their way into a society’s collectively accessible store of knowledge. Individually acquired learning abilities and information must be latently available in world views before they can be used in a socially significant way, that is, before they can be transposed into societal learning processes (RHM 36; CES 121)

Habermasian learning and Luhmannian adaptation could exist alongside each other on this account. Indeed, Habermas’s discourse theory could be interpreted as providing a normative superstructure to Luhmann’s descriptive theory of society.²⁰ But to understand the issue from Habermas’s perspective we also need to flip this question around: what exactly in Habermas’s emerging system of communicative action created the need for a social evolutionary theory of learning processes?

3.

The peculiar role of social evolutionism in Habermas’s thought, both central and hidden at the same time, I want to suggest, is deeply intertwined with his broader philosophical repositioning. Rather than pondering about why Habermas might have found this or that aspect of Luhmann’s systems theory attractive, a different perspective avails itself once we appreciate Habermas’s wider philosophical shift in the 1970s. The attractiveness of systems theory may have less to do with its specific theoretical virtues than the systemic virtues of theory.

²⁰ This argument is for example made by Poul Kjaer, “Systems in Context: On the outcome of the Habermas/Luhmann-debate,” *Ancilla Iuris*, Vol. 66-77 (2006). Luhmann himself had suggested another possible, though far from innocent, rapprochement when asking after the publication of TCA: “Was wäre gewonnen, was ginge verloren, wollte man die Theorie der rational argumentierenden kommunikativen Praxis in eine Theorie autopoietischer Kommunikationssysteme übersetzen?” Niklas Luhmann, “Autopoesis, Handlung und Kommunikative Verständigung,” *Zeitschrift für Soziologie*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (October 1982), 376.

As is well-known, Habermas structures his mature philosophy by re-drawing, in a remarkably strong manner, a Kantian distinction between theoretical and practical reason whilst at the same time submitting Kant to a treatment of detranscendentalization. This detranscendentalization of the Kantian posture was of course always intended to be only partial. At the heart of discursive practice there continues to exist a curious transcendental spring. In the counterfactual, idealizing presuppositions that enable communication in the first place we find a moment of quasi-transcendental striving for a regulative ideal of the uninhibited ideal speech situation. This quasi-transcendental residue was a “transcendence from the inside” (*Transzendenz von innen*), as Habermas put it in using an expression incidentally taken from Kierkegaard.²¹ A trace of transcendence is retained in the form of the idealizing presuppositions of communication. But in insisting on a sharp Kantian distinction between theoretical and practical reason Habermas intentionally sacrificed an earlier mode of reflection – what he once called a pragmatist philosophy of history – to a division of labor between practical reason and communicative action on the one side and theoretical reason (giving us inter alia theories of social evolutionism) on the other. The progressive link between the two was to be provided by the quasi-transcendental presupposition of ideal communication.²² Habermas’s move during the 1970s must thus be seen as both a culmination of and a break with the philosophical position he had developed, deepened, and defended throughout the 1960s.

The distinction along broadly Kantian lines was Habermas’s answer to a whole host of philosophical problems in a post-metaphysical age. On the (much better known) practical side,

²¹ See Habermas’s essay with the same title, “*Transzendenz von innen, Transzendenz ins Diesseits*,” in Jürgen Habermas, *Texte und Kontexte* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), 127-156.

²² Though he portrays this move as a return to Kant, it is worth pointing out just how little space there is in Habermas’s thought for the Third Critique and its discussion of systematicity and teleology. As a generation of scholars has by now pointed out, often with contrasting reference to Hannah Arendt’s treatment, this aspect of Kant’s thought is largely absent in Habermas.

Habermas expounded a moral constructive view of practical truth claims as justification grounded in linguistic exchange and communicative action. The theoretical position, by contrast, has never received the same attention, neither from Habermas nor his critics. And besides that arch prerogative of theoretical philosophy, the theory of knowledge,²³ the most important theoretical pillar for our concern is of course that of social evolutionism. Here Habermas began by gradually separating elements of history and narrative from theoretical notions of progressive change. The former was left to the realm of practical reason and discursive exchange, the latter developed into a theory of social evolutionary learning effects. History and narrative were cut off from questions of social change. This was the implication of an attempt “to combine Kant with Darwin”.²⁴ Though one doesn’t quite know how serious to take such self-descriptions, for they surely obscure as much as they illuminate, the sharp drawing of a quasi-Kantian distinction, coupled with the associated relegation of history, created a gap to which social evolutionism could respond.

Social evolutionism, Habermas explained, no longer assumed the burden of proof in having to present an actually existing pattern of progress. Instead, it was a “reconstructive science” of successive developmental stages of interactive rationality. The purpose of such reconstructive sciences had been first set out in Knowledge and Human Interest as Habermas’s

²³ On epistemology, Habermas now endorses a “Janus-faced concept of truth”. Having outlined a broadly Peircean position during the 1960s in Knowledge and Human Interest (Erkenntnis und Interesse, 1968), Habermas only returned to questions of epistemology in Truth and Justification (Wahrheit und Rechtfertigung, 1999) where he then introduced a two-sided conception of truth in response to his pragmatist critics, in particular Richard Rorty. The two sides mirror the distinction between theoretical and practical reason, with a discursive-pragmatist concept of truth on the practical side and a stronger concept facing the theoretical side.

²⁴ Habermas, “Postscript: Some concluding remarks,” 227. “That promise [to save Kantian insights in a detranscendentalized yet analytical vein] also pertained, for me more than for Apel, to a reconciliation between Kant and Darwin, between a transcendental and an evolutionary perspective.”

emerging substitute for the tasks previously carried out by transcendental philosophy.²⁵ Applied to social evolutionism this meant that the concept of a “developmental logic” (*Entwicklungslogik*) – a term borrowed from Weber but also extensively used by Piaget – would have to be a key building block of such reconstructive efforts. History was thus transformed into a process characterized in terms of a successive number of hierarchical stages, phases, or steps in the development of normative structures.²⁶ The systematic reconstruction of these developmental patterns and the associated evolution of world views was, according to Habermas, the goal of a social evolutionary theory intended to reconstruct the role previously played by historical materialism. (RHM 41; CES 126)

One of the few places, apart from the *Reconstruction of Historical Materialism*, in which Habermas fleshed out the full implications of his social evolutionism can be found in his reply to a collection of critical essays from 1982 – that is after the publication of TCA.²⁷ Although (or perhaps because) Habermas devotes little more than two paragraphs to address his social evolutionism it is worth quoting from them at length:

One can learn from the course of critical theory why the foundations of the critique of ideology in a philosophy of history developed cracks. Assumptions about a dialectical relation between productive forces and productive relations are pseudo-normative statements about an objective teleology of history. ... This mixing of descriptive and normative contents was present in the basic concepts of historical materialism. It is possible to avoid this confusion without surrendering the leading intention behind the theory, if we ascertain the rational content of anthropologically deep-seated structures in a transcendently orientated analysis which is initially unhistorical. ... Through this move I have myself attempted to free historical materialism from its historico-philosophical ballast. (RC 253-254)

²⁵ See also Benhabib who stresses Habermas’s attempt to thereby address Hegel’s critique of Kant. Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia. A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 264.

²⁶ Habermas went on to specify three such processes of structural change: The ontogenesis of the individual (ranging from the cognitive to the moral faculties), the development of technical knowledge, and that of normative structures.

²⁷ For the essay collection, see John B. Thompson and David Held (eds.), *Habermas: Critical Debates* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1982).

It is important to note how the first part of the argument, as presented here, sets up a straw man that Habermas himself had long left behind during the 1960s. Surely the point never was to return to a deterministic historical materialism of an orthodox Marxist kind. The conclusion Habermas nonetheless proceeded to draw from this straw man was that it was necessary to endorse a developmental logic of “anthropologically deep-seated structures in a transcendently orientated analysis which is initially unhistorical”.²⁸

As became clear very quickly, the shift to such “anthropologically deep-seated structures” of social evolutionism required that other aspects of political life began to suffer what one may call a structural underdetermination in Habermas’s system. Political action and agency, reflective judgment, and political history were all relegated to a practical realm about which Habermas, beyond his capacity as participant and occasional gate keeper of discursive content (as in his Kleine Politische Schriften), censored himself to remain silent. While progress in normative structures would take place in the practical realm in the form of the continuous actualization of the underlying idealizing presuppositions of communication, it had to be explained on the theoretical side of reason. Not history, narrative, or individual acts of political choice propel mankind closer toward the transcendental ideal but social evolutionary developments on the cognitive level.

Crucially, such evolutionary developmental structures occur for Habermas not so much on the level of the individual but on the societal plane. This reflected and implied a further move on Habermas’s part from a kind of situation-dependent but hermeneutically rich mode of social

²⁸ In the second paragraph Habermas then reiterated some of his distinctions in the History and Evolution essay that was precisely missing from the English edition: “...this procedure requires a clear analytic cut between social evolution and history, critique can no longer draw upon the guiding thread of philosophy of history. It must be orientated to the possibility of learning processes opened up by a level of learning already achieved historically. ... This double abstraction—of social evolution from the historical concretion of forms of life, and of the development of cognitive structures from the historical dynamic of events—removes that confusion in basic concepts to which philosophy of history owes its existence.” (RC 254)

enquiry to a purely theoretical standpoint. The rich minutiae of political narrative were relegated to the realm of practice and thence subjected to discursive testing, which also meant more often than not that they were ultimately underestimated or neglected, as happened with reflective judgment. As one commentator put it, “the practical meaning guiding the interpretation of history as well as the present was thus located not in a historically and socially situated practical reason, but, in a neo-Kantian turn, rather in pure practical reason.”²⁹ The void left by this relegation reflective assessments of historical narratives into pure practical reason was to be filled on the theoretical side by rational reconstructions. It is important here to emphasize why then from this perspective the fundamental attraction of social evolutionism derived precisely from its purportedly ahistorical nature. As Habermas repeatedly stressed, in his appropriation of Piaget’s evolutionary logic of competences, “such competences have no history but a development” (RHM 217).

In the process of projecting the structure of ontogenetic learning processes onto the social evolutionary plane, historical events and other drivers of that process, such as social movements, are casually removed from the picture. This can lead to paradoxical results. “At all the points which he wants to use to document historically the process of moral learning,” Honneth and Joas argued in an early critique, “Habermas must have recourse to a social phenomenon that is hardly compatible with evolutionary classifications.”³⁰ Social movements and historical actors, it seems, learn not so much in an evolutionary manner in reaction to system problems but rather through the collective experience of opposition to repression and social injustice which Habermas

²⁹ Piet Strydom, “The Ontogenetic Fallacy: The Immanent Critique of Habermas’s Developmental Logical Theory of Evolution,” *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 9, No. 65 (1992), 67. Interestingly, Strydom subsequently stresses that these issues could be addressed if one only took to heart the sharp separation of social evolutionary developmental logics from historical narratives. But this position seems confused in misinterpreting the reductionist concern on McCarthy’s part and just responding with an even sharper separation of evolution from history.

³⁰ Axel Honneth and Hans Joas, *Social Action and Human Nature* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1988), 165.

struggles to capture adequately.³¹ Question marks concerning the thinness of Habermas's social philosophy when it comes to political action are of course nothing new. In particular in reaction to the Theory of Communicative Action many commentators could not help but wonder just how "remarkable" it was "that Habermas has little to say in the Theory of Communicative Action about the political system as such."³² This was all the more surprising given his earlier intellectual trajectory. Habermas's subsequent embarkation to democratic theory and legal analysis in Between Facts and Norms has hardly alleviated these concerns.

"I share the view," he granted in RHM, "that evolutionary theory should have a reflexive status, so that it is able to explain its own context of genesis [*Entstehungszusammenhang*] as well as its possible functions in a given societal context." (RHM 130) But by fixating it in a cut off theoretical realm Habermas robbed his evolutionary theory precisely of such possibilities for reflectivity and contextualization. And allowing in thicker modes of contextualization would have meant opening the door to reflective judgment and history, both of which are categorized by him as mere exercises of practical reason in the discursive realm. As a result, Habermas's stance entails an opportunistic attitude to the experiences of the past; selectively cropping only some past experiences to stabilize the developmental structure of his model. It is precisely at this point

³¹ The architecture demanded by Habermas's system dictates instead that "the actual history of social movements becomes completely insignificant in comparison with the logical sequence in which systems of norms ... have evolutionarily achieved general recognition and acceptance. ... Because the explanatory evolutionary models are constructed without any possibility of linking them back hermeneutically to the unique experiential situation of subjects acting in the present, they cannot be introduced into historical praxis for the purpose of supplying practical orientation for the acting subject." *ibid.* See also Strydom, 'The Ontogenetic Fallacy', 73. As McCarthy warns, Habermas's social evolutionism excludes precisely the practical and hermeneutic dimension that made critical theory methodologically distinct. Thomas A. McCarthy, The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1978), 264.

³² McCarthy, "Complexity and Democracy," 34.

that aporia turns into overstretch. The oversimplification of historical experiences and contingencies becomes the precondition for a flattening of the horizon of the future.³³

4.

As I have argued so far, the motivations and implications of Habermas's embrace of social evolutionism during the 1970s can only be understood once we appreciate, on the one hand, the implications resulting from his partial detranscendentalization of Kantian thought and, on the other hand, his encounter with Niklas Luhmann's systems theory. In Habermas's writings of the 1960s this question was still posed open-endedly and acknowledged as perhaps the most perplexing and intricate question of modernity. By the mid-1970s Habermas had applied his sword to this Gordian knot of historical change.³⁴

The implications were wide ranging and carried over into many other areas of his social philosophy. Habermas often framed his underlying conceptual distinctions and choices as characteristically modern ones, not denying but embracing their occasionally tragic or at least disenchanted implications. We moderns, as Habermas explained in a related context, censor ourselves by banning ethical questions of the good life from public discourse. As a consequence, the ethical motivations of our moral questions have to necessarily remain obscure.³⁵ Concerning

³³ As Outhwaite perceptively puts it, "Habermas is in danger of neglecting the real learning processes in history in a Hegelian jump to a level of abstraction which explains less rather than more." Outhwaite, *Habermas*, 60. Though Habermas hinted at the existence of such deep-seated problems, their troublesome significance is not adequately addressed by him. See also Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia*, 276.

³⁴ Interestingly, what motivated this removal of a whole host of philosophical options previously defended by Habermas seems to exhaust a strictly philosophical reconstruction. By implication, his motivation appears then to have been at least in part political, though this is not the place to develop such an argument. Were one to do so however Habermas's allergic reaction to what he perceived as the "left-fascism" of 1968 would surely be a good starting point.

³⁵ Note the misnomer thus involved in speaking of Habermas's "discourse ethics". This was a confusion introduced by the fact that the distinction between ethics and morality was only rigorously worked out toward the

the philosophy of history, Habermas thought a similar move was required. Given the narrative structure of history and historiography, Habermas insisted that they can only ever belong to the realm of practical reason. There they will be securely deflated, opened up for debate, and scrutinized under the gaze of discursive reconstruction. Introducing narrational structures into the theoretical realm had by contrast been precisely what had led to the dangerous determinist philosophies of history against which Habermas long admonished his readers. At this point the unnecessarily tight distinction between theoretical and practical reason began to foreclose a number of otherwise available positions. In order to nonetheless derive a progressive thrust from such a disenchanting theoretical realm of reason, Habermas had to introduce a notion of social evolutionism that was oddly cut off from the motivating narrational resources in the practical realm.

No one, of course, can accuse Habermas of being unreflective.³⁶ He saw the threats that his daring position inevitably carried clearer than many of his subsequent commentators. “The danger of slipping into bad philosophy,” he writes in the opening pages of the Reconstruction of Historical Materialism,

was always especially great when there was an inclination to suppress philosophical questions in favor of a scientific understanding of science. Even in Marx himself the heritage of the philosophy of history sometimes came rather unreflectedly into play. This historical objectivism took effect above all in the evolutionary theories of the Second International – for example, in Kautsky and ‘Diamat’ [Dialectical Materialism, S.E.]. Thus special care is called for if we are today to take up once again the basic assumptions of historical materialism in regard to social evolution. (RHM 10; CES 96)³⁷

end of the 1980s, that is *after* the Theory of Communicative Action. To speak of “discourse ethics” is then contradictory because in theorizing communicative action we are, according to Habermas, precisely not dealing with ethics but rather a theory of morality, even though the individual claims exchanged in communication are of course ethical – that is particularistic – ones.

³⁶ Though it should be noted that if the process of reconstruction had initially been introduced in the service of self-reflection (as Habermas had insisted in Knowledge and Human Interest) this possibility of reflection ironically now became harder and harder. On this issue, see also Benhabib, Critique, Norm, and Utopia, 264.

³⁷ And in a different context Habermas had even highlighted Adorno’s worry about the lack of historical contingency implicit in conceiving of historical change as a developmental logic. “Adorno distrusted the concept of a

Has Habermas heeded his own warning? There are reasons to cautiously doubt it. In evaluating these themes one should not lose sight of the numerous trade-offs Habermas faced and the costs he self-consciously accepted. The irony is nonetheless palpable. Whereas the young Habermas had accused the mature Marx of naturalizing progress and “succumb[ing] to the illusion of rigorous science,” the mature Habermas arguably falls victim to a similar charge.³⁸ Needless to say, Habermas’s social evolutionism is not the first “Darwinization of Marx,” to use Karl Korsch’s phrase.³⁹ Kautsky’s meliorism and Bernstein’s revisionism were similarly clad in the impressive but somewhat unfitting clothes of theoretical rigor. It was this frustratingly evasive position that prepared the ground – no doubt without intent – for the excessive voluntarism that would characterize so much of early twentieth-century politics. Habermas might once more respond that this is a price we moderns have to incur. For him, as for Weber, modernity spelt a partial loss of meaning – despite all his attempts to highlight the not only reifying but simultaneously emancipatory ambivalence of rationalization. But it seems fair to point out that many of these haunting distinctions are less related to actual processes of differentiation than consciously chosen ones. To essentialize them as the price of modernity is not a helpful path.

It is at this point that the argument defended here points us toward another implication of Habermas’s theory of modernity that might be worth spelling out briefly before concluding. For Habermas, modernity no longer simply meant the one-sided spread of instrumental reason, as it had done for Weber. But he continued to conceive of modernity as an inescapable process of

developmental logic because he held the openness and the initiative power of the historical process [*geschichtlichen Prozess*] (of the species as well as of the individual) to be incompatible with the closed nature [*Abgeschlossenheit*] of an evolutionary pattern.” RHM 66; CES 72. Translation adapted. It is not clear to me that Habermas paid sufficient attention to this warning.

³⁸ McCarthy, *Ideals and Illusions*, 180.

³⁹ Karl Korsch, *Die Materialistische Geschichtsauffassung und andere Aufsätze* (Frankfurt am Main: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1971).

societal differentiation that continuously forced him to draw rigid distinctions and make disenchanting choices.⁴⁰ This not only entailed a differentiation into distinct societal systems but, crucially, a distinction between systems and what Habermas came to call “the lifeworld” – by which he meant the social realm of taken-for-granted background beliefs within which communicative action was necessarily grounded. Societies were thus conceived as simultaneously consisting of systems and lifeworlds, each in turn associated with the corresponding forces of system and social integration.⁴¹ Social evolutionary theory immediately fed into these distinctions because it allowed one, Habermas explained, to “separate the rationalization of the lifeworld from the growing complexity of societal systems so as to make the connection Durkheim envisaged between forms of social integration and stages of system differentiation tangible, that is, susceptible to empirical analysis”.⁴² Only if the emancipatory rationalization of the lifeworld could be separated from the reifying rationalization of societal systems, he insisted, could the overall promise of qualifying Weber’s rationalization thesis from within be redeemed.

But to naturalize these distinctions and take literally what are best understood as metaphors is an odd way of going about this task. Reading the second volume of the Theory of Communicative Action it is sometimes hard not to understand “system” and “lifeworld” as referring to distinct societal realms – a point that arguably finds expression in the by now

⁴⁰ Besides the critical rapprochement toward Weber and systems theory, see in particular Habermas’s discussion of Durkheim’s *De la division du travail* (1893) in chapter V of the second volume of the Theory of Communicative Action (“The Paradigm Shift in Mead and Durkheim: From Purposive Activity to Communicative Action”), 1-112.

⁴¹ This was a distinction introduced into systems theory by David Lockwood in an important piece from 1964. David Lockwood, “Social Integration and System Integration,” in Zollschan, George K. and Hirsch, Walter (eds.), Social Change: Explorations, Diagnoses, and Conjectures (New York, London, Sidney, Toronto: John Wiley & Sons, 1964), 370-383. See Habermas, TCA, vol. 2, 117-118.

⁴² Habermas, TCA, vol. 2, 118.

proverbial “colonization of the lifeworld”.⁴³ The costs associated with framing these questions in terms of a disenchanting differentiation narrative of modernity become visible once more. The analytical and rhetorical effects of speaking in terms of system and lifeworld have not always been wholly persuasive, not least because these terms struggle to capture either the complexity of actual experiences that cut across any straightforward dichotomy.⁴⁴ It is worth repeating that during the late 1960s Habermas himself had in a pragmatist vein stressed the practical intent of both social scientific categories and the historical reflections within which such categories were temporally embedded. It remains an open question how such fluid insights can be brought to bear onto Habermas’s own later hardened sociological and philosophical distinctions.⁴⁵ Irrespective of our answer to that question it is clear that Habermas’s distinctions are better understood as self-consciously chosen options instead of inevitable responses to processes of differentiation.

Instead of further elaborating on this detour, let me conclude here by making once more explicit two further implications of the above reconstruction of Habermas’s turn towards social evolutionism. The two perhaps most substantial points emerging are, first, a notion of how much of his mature system was developed as a response to a small number of key interlocutors, indeed often assimilating substantial (and just as often substantially twisted) parts of their arguments. The very scale of Habermas’s system makes it sometimes hard to sufficiently appreciate just how

⁴³ Habermas, *TCA*, vol. 2, 322, 325, 331, 333, 356, 371, 386, 392-6.

⁴⁴ In particular when it came to the relation between democratic politics and markets, the “colonization of the lifeworld” has given rise to an oddly defensive posture, too abstract to frame actual problems, insufficiently abstract to allow for new forms of action. Similar headaches have also been plagued incurred by theorists of bureaucracy who have been left to wonder how one could conceive of processes of social integration within bureaucracies without contradicting their systemic character. Again, Habermas comes close to appreciating this aporia when he has to admit the existence of “domain-specific public spheres” within bureaucratic systems (BFN 391) without however then spelling out the potentially wide-ranging theoretical implications of admitting such of allowing for such exceptions/localized areas of social integration within systems.

⁴⁵ To invoke Bruno Latour, one may ask what critical thrust could be gained from refusing to heed the plea for the “purification” of system and lifeworld? Bruno Latour, *Nous n’avons jamais été modernes: Essai d’anthropologie symétrique* (Paris: La Découverte, 1991). As well as more recently Bruno Latour, *Enquête sur les modes d’existence. Une anthropologie des Modernes*. (Paris La Découverte, 2012).

much of a mark was left by specific confrontations with Gadamer and Luhmann, to just name the two most obvious interlocutors and critics. The precarious shift in Habermas's position from a nuanced philosophy of history to a theory of social evolutionism only becomes fully intelligible once understood as having emerged as successively accommodating responses to these authors. Secondly, the above reconstruction has highlighted the centrality of Habermas's basic architecture in the form of an attempt to update a Kantian distinction between theoretical and practical reason whilst simultaneously partially detranscendentalizing the role of Kantian ideas. Habermas's theoretical reliance on a reconstructed theory of social evolutionism and the associated claim of having successfully left behind the philosophy of history are to be seen as consequences of this foundational move.

Having defended during the late 1960s a cautious philosophy of history with pragmatic intent and an open conception of social theory that sought to escape both the hermeneutical critique as well as scientism, in the course of the 1970s Habermas qualified his philosophy of the social sciences and turned away from all philosophizing about history. Instead, his self-consciously disenchanted if no less radical response was to ground the progressive thrust of his communicative project in a distinction between system and lifeworld and a social-evolutionary developmental logic. As I have argued, such an account of practical and theoretical reason can easily appear at once too strong and aporetic. The daring move of playing out social evolutionism against any kind of historico-philosophical reflection ironically runs the risk of smuggling in again elements of a deterministic and unreflective philosophy of history that Habermas himself had long escaped. Such moments bring Habermas closer to Hegel than he may either like or would want to admit. And even if one were to think that some form of proximity to Hegel may be an inescapable feature of modernity – as Michel Foucault famously quipped, whenever one

thinks to have escaped Hegel one miraculously finds him “motionless, waiting for us”⁴⁶ – to find oneself *unwittingly* in Hegel’s company is surely a more dubious predicament.

⁴⁶ Michel Foucault, *L’ordre du discours* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 75. Translated in Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 235.

Abbreviations of Habermas's primary texts

MC	Marxism as Critique (1960)
TP	Theory and Praxis (1963)
LSS	Logic of the Social Sciences (1967)
KHI	Knowledge and Human Interest (1968)
SG	Über das Subjekt der Geschichte (1973)
LC	Legitimation Crisis (1973)
RHM	Zur Rekonstruktion des historischen Materialismus (1976)
CES	Communication and the Evolution of Society [Partial transl. of RHM]
TCA	Theory of Communicative Action, 2 vols. (1981)
BFN	Between Facts and Norms (1992)

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