

'Legitimation crisis' in the later work of Jürgen Habermas*

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Most political theorists became acquainted with the work of Jürgen Habermas through his 1973 publication of *Legitimationsprobleme im Spätkapitalismus* (which became available in English two years later as *Legitimation Crisis*). In this work, Habermas argued that the traditional Marxist analysis of crisis tendencies in the capitalist system was outdated, given the relative success of the welfare-state compromise. He claimed instead that crisis tendencies generated in the economic sphere would be displaced, via state action, into the cultural sphere. This would in turn create problems of social integration, undermining many of the resources that the state requires for its ongoing management of the economy. In particular, it creates the possibility of a large-scale loss of legitimacy for government institutions.

Even though this thesis was not especially new, Habermas's analysis offered the promise of a more rigorous formulation of the mechanism through which these undesirable cultural side-effects would be generated. However, Habermas billed his discussion in *Legitimation Crisis* as only a set of "programmatic" suggestions. Despite being provocative, they were in no sense articulated at a satisfactory level of detail. Unfortunately, despite the fact that Habermas has gone on to a considerable refinement of his broadly sociotheoretic views, he has never returned to an explicit treatment of the principal issues raised in *Legitimation Crisis*. Nevertheless, through a number of brief discussions that appear in his later work, it is possible to piece

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together an understanding of how the central thesis of this work would be reformulated, given his more considered views.

In this paper, I trace the development of Habermas's analysis of legitimization problems from the time of *Legitimation Crisis*, through *The Theory of Communicative Action*, to his recent *Between Facts and Norms*, and use this to reconstruct and evaluate an updated version of his crisis thesis.¹ Habermas's position in *Legitimation Crisis*, I argue, is characterized by two central commitments that are dropped in his later work: a version of late-Parsonian systems theory, and a broadly Lukácsian view of cultural modernity. I describe briefly the problems that Habermas is able to resolve by abandoning these commitments, and sketch out the reconstructed version of his crisis analysis that appears in *The Theory of Communicative Action*. Finally, I show how the concept of "communicative power" introduced in *Between Facts and Norms* enables him to establish far more precisely the relationship between the lifeworld and the polity.

I. The Parsonian Background

The concept of "legitimation," which is central to Habermas's crisis theory, is a somewhat abstract sociological notion. Habermas's use of the term, particularly in his early work, is heavily indebted to Talcott Parsons. In order to understand this usage, it is necessary to understand certain ideas that play a central role in Parsons's systems theory, in particular, the related concepts of normative integration, functional differentiation and interchange relations.

Parsons refers to any social interaction sequence that involves a meaningful interdependence between the actions of the units as a *social system*. In order for this system to be

¹ Jurgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975), hereafter *LC*; Idem, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, 2 vols., trans. Thomas McCarthy, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984-87), hereafter *TCA*; Idem, *Between Facts and Norms*, trans. William Rehg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, forthcoming), hereafter *BFN*. All page references to *BFN* are to the German edition, *Faktizität und Geltung* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1992).

maintained and reproduced, four fundamental problems must be solved: (A) adaptation, (G) goal-attainment, (I) integration and (L) pattern maintenance.² Since these problems require resolution, each subject the system to an independent “functional imperative.” The rationale for this schema is best illustrated by taking as an example the system that comprises the society as a whole. Since Habermas is only concerned with this level of Parsons’s analysis, from now on we will refer to this system simply as *the social system*.

The logic of Parsons’s functional imperatives can be seen from his analysis of social action. In Parsons’s view, an instrumental model of action, such as we find in standard microeconomics and rational choice theory, is inadequate because it does not impose enough constraints on the range of action alternatives available to agents. This makes it unable to account for the regularity and determinacy that is characteristic of everyday social interactions.³ In Parsons’s view, the orderly quality of social interactions is made possible by agents’ willingness to adhere to a set of shared rules (or social norms). The so-called “problem of order” that arises within instrumental models of action stems from their inability to explain how agents could develop credible rules of this type to govern their interactions.⁴

The “normative” solution to the problem of order developed by Parsons suggests that agents acquire through socialization a set of values that motivates them to conform to the prevailing system of social norms. Thus unlike an atomistic instrumental theory, which attempts to explain all action in terms of particular beliefs and desires, Parsons’s model posits four primitive attitudes: beliefs, goals, norms and values. Beliefs reflect the objective circumstances in which the action takes place, goals specify the particular outcome that the agent seeks to obtain, norms supply the specific constraints that limit the agent’s choice of means, while values

² Talcott Parsons and Neil J. Smelser, *Economy and Society* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957), pp. 14-19.

³ See Talcott Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action*, 2 vols. (New York: The Free Press, 1968).

provide the general normative pattern that the agent reproduces through her action, reflected in both the choice of goals and the force of norms.

In order for an interaction system to achieve the routineness and predictability that is characteristic of orderly interactions, the specific beliefs, goals, norms and values of different agents must be brought into alignment, and this alignment must be non-accidentally reproduced. This amounts to solving the four fundamental functional problems (AGIL). Thus the first functional imperative of the social system is to maintain the integrity of its underlying value system (L), since this is what makes the system hang together in the broadest sense of the term. Without shared values, agents may not have any motivation for engaging in the relevant social practices at all, much less for doing so in the expected manner. The second imperative is to maintain social integration (I) in terms of a system of shared norms. Integration pins down the precise content of social expectations, and enforces compliance through a set of punitive sanctions. Third, goal-attainment (G) specifies the “point” of the relevant practices, giving direction and sense to the action system as a whole. Without some specific goal-states, the practice would not have any determinate use. Finally, adaptation (A) requires that the system be responsive to changes in the external environment, so that its successful maintenance and reproduction is immunized against the impact of strictly exogenous factors.

Every society, in order to function as a stable social system, must solve all four of these problems. Social evolution, in Parsons’s view, is a process through which the mechanisms for solving these problems become *differentiated* into specialized subsystems. In a primitive society, for instance, kinship systems provide the basic resources for socialization, political organization, allocation of productive tasks and group decision-making. Over the course of time, a division of labor arises between different institutions, classes and roles, so that, e.g. a religious leadership arises specializing in problems of value-integrity, legal institutions arise to handle integration problems separately from legislative processes, economic ownership of land is separated from

⁴ See Jon Elster, *The Cement of Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

political domination, etc. The modern social system is characterized by four such independent subsystems, shown in Figure 1.

| | |
|--|---|
| A Adaptive subsystem (the economy) | G Goal-attainment subsystem (the polity) |
| L Pattern-maintenance subsystem (locus of cultural and motivational commitments) | I Integrative subsystem (law, norms and social control) |

Figure 1: The social system

With the differentiation of these subsystems, the responsibility for meeting certain sorts of social needs is “handed over” to specialized agencies and processes. Because each subsystem is itself no longer functionally self-sufficient, it relies upon certain “inputs” from the other subsystems. At the same time, it produces *generalized resources* that are employed throughout the society. The economy (adaptive subsystem), for instance, is specialized in the production of *value*. It does not, however, determine how this value is to be used. Specific uses for the values produced are determined in other sectors to which this value is transferred, e.g. in the form of (G) tax revenues for the government, (I) profits for corporations and (L) wages and consumer goods for households.⁵ Thus Parsons argues that each subsystem can be analyzed in terms of the inputs it requires and the outputs it produces for the other subsystems. From the perspective of the social system, he refers to these as *interchange relations*.

⁵ See Parsons and Smelser, *Economy and Society*.

Legitimation, in this view, is an output product of the pattern-maintenance subsystem that is required as input by the goal-attainment subsystem. The idea is fairly simple. In a primitive society, in which decision-making processes are simultaneously value-integrating, e.g. where group decisions are made by directly consulting the gods, the justification for any political action is always direct and internal. With the differentiation of political and value-integrative functions, decisions no longer have this sort of immediate normative warrant. Once complex procedures are introduced for the setting of group objectives, like bargaining, compromise and majority rule, it is no longer possible to hold every government action directly accountable to the value system. Instead, what the polity requires is a more generalized form of consent to the basic institutional processes and outcomes.

The pattern-maintenance subsystem is specialized in the internalization of values through the process of socialization. Because of the need for legitimation of the goal-attainment subsystem, one of the functional constraints on these values is that they must include certain very general symbolic resources for the justification of political action. Other requirements are that agents be willing and motivated to participate in productive activities and involve themselves in collective self-regulation. These three outputs from the pattern-maintenance subsystem are shown in Figure 2.

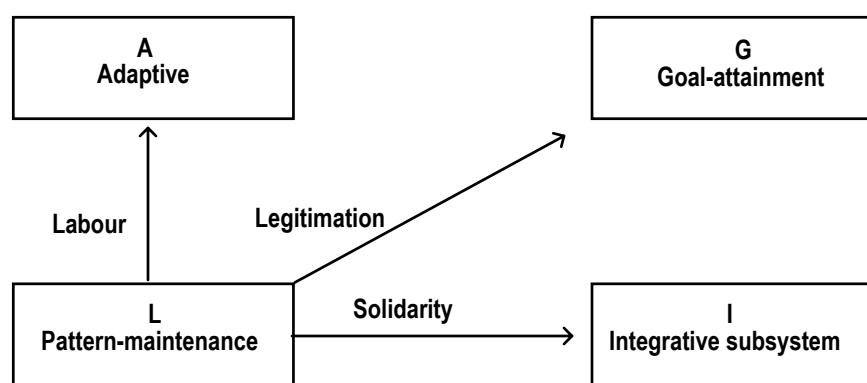


Figure 2: Pattern-maintenance subsystem outputs

The important point, for our purposes, is that Parsons views legitimization as a *form of subsystem output*. This means that the question of whether a particular political order can secure its own legitimacy is more than a simple empirical question (i.e. can people be convinced to support it?), it is a structural question that concerns the interchange relations between the different subsystems of the society. It was Parsons's hope that using a model like this the output of legitimization and solidarity could be predicted from macrosocial factors, in the same way that employment levels can be predicted from other macroeconomic variables.

II. Legitimation Crisis

The central difference between Parsons's model of the social system and the one that Habermas uses in *Legitimation Crisis* involves the interpretation of the (L) and (I) subsystems. The (L) subsystem, in Parsons' view, governs the socialization of agents into the system of shared values, while the (I) system is responsible for social control through a set of shared norms. These two subsystems differ from (A) and (G), however, in the type of general mechanism through which their resources are channeled. Parsons argues that resources in each subsystem are represented in the form of generalized media in order to mediate interchange relations. These media are: (A) money, (G) power, (I) influence and (L) commitments. Each medium is used to structure interactions in such a way that subsystem-specific functional exigencies are respected, e.g. that public works are tempered by considerations of efficiency, etc.

But the manner in which each medium is able to structure interactions differs. All provide some form of sanction, positive or negative, but there are two types of channel through which this sanction can be conveyed. The agent can either control elements of the situation in which others must act, or she can attempt to alter their intentions independently of any changes in the situation. This breaks down as in Figure 3:⁶

⁶ Talcott Parsons, "On the Concept of Political Power," *Sociological Theory and Modern Society* (New York: The Free Press, 1967), p. 363.

| | | SANCTION | |
|-------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|----------|
| | | Positive | Negative |
| CHANNEL | | | |
| Situational | Inducement (money) | Deterrence (power) | |
| | Persuasion (influence) | Admonition (commitments) | |

Figure 3: Media types

Habermas argues that this difference in channel introduces a significant disanalogy between the two cases. Since agents' intentions are propositional attitudes, any media that operate upon these intentions will employ natural language as a substratum. Situational factors, on the other hand, can be controlled without any such recourse to language. In Habermas's view, the use of language in this way places important constraints on the range of interaction patterns available to agents. These restrictions are dictated *a priori* by the requirements of the pragmatic component of a theory of meaning. Thus Habermas suggests that steering media proper must be distinguished from *generalized forms of communication* (*TCA* 2:256-282).

Natural language, in Habermas's view, does not allow for functional differentiation in the way that steering media do. Steering media operate like a system of signals whose meaning must be directly stipulated. But in natural languages, sentence meaning is given compositionally, and therefore exhibits considerable independence from specific conventions and contexts of use. This gives natural language a number of unique properties: meaning is holistic, i.e. the meaning of each lexical item depends upon the meaning of other components; meaning is autonomous, i.e. there are no intrinsic limits on the number of different speech acts that a given propositional content can be used to perform; and language is reflexive, i.e. capable of self-reference.

Habermas refers to the integration of subsystems through steering media as *system integration*, and integration through generalized forms of communication as *social integration*

(*LC*, 3).⁷ He refers to socially integrated domains of social interaction as *lifeworlds*. These are, by virtue of their dependence upon natural language, holistically structured. While lifeworlds may be viewed as “socio-cultural systems” from an objectivating perspective, they cannot be functionally differentiated in the way that media-integrated systems can be. Because of this, he lumps together Parsons’s (I) and (L) subsystems, yielding a tripartite model of the social system (*LC*, 149n). The interchange relations between these three systems is shown in Figure 4.

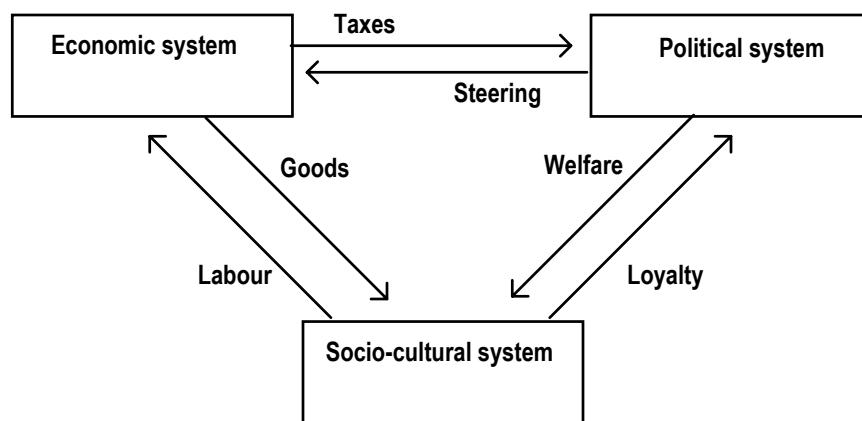


Figure 4: The Legitimation Crisis model

The socio-cultural system, in this view, produces a single generalized resource, *meaning*, which is drawn upon by both functional subsystems in order to motivate members to suitable levels of economic and political performance. The socio-cultural system receives input in order to secure its *material reproduction*, but the production of meaning, i.e. the *symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld* follows an independent, non-functional logic. This means that the socio-cultural system does not simply adapt in order to meet the function imperatives of the

⁷ Habermas is intentionally modifying this terminology, adopted from David Lockwood, “Social Integration and System Integration,” in G. Zollschan and W. Hirsch, eds. *Explorations in Social Change* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1964).

larger social system. This is due to the role of natural language in its reproduction. For example, a variety of cultural artifacts, like a body of scientific knowledge, a legal canon or an educational curriculum, must meet certain internal standards of logical consistency, evidential adequacy, procedural integrity, etc. These standards of *validity* (or rationality) are imposed by the vehicle through which the lifeworld is reproduced, i.e. natural language. Since these standards cannot be compromised or breached for political or economic purposes without undermining the validity of the artifact, the lifeworld maintains a certain functional autonomy with respect to the other subsystems of society.

This autonomy of the lifeworld is what creates the potential for crises in welfare-state capitalism. Having adopted from Lockwood the idea that two principles of integration may be operative at once in a given society, Habermas argues that the functional differentiation of modern society, because it has taken place through a *class-based division of labor*, exhibits a low level of systemic integration. In this way, Habermas translates a basic Marxist analysis into the Parsonian framework.

Social integration, in Habermas's view, because it operates through intentional channels, must be a form of normative integration, involving a system of shared values. But since values cannot be imposed upon agents, they must be brought about through consensus. In order to merit this general approval, they must in some form embody generalizable interests. Since class societies are ones in which the fundamental material interests of different groups are in opposition, social order in such cases cannot be secured purely through normative integration. The alternative, according to Habermas, is the selective application of force or coercion, with the goal of keeping these underlying conflicts *latent*. An official value-consensus can be attained once these conflicts are sufficiently repressed or out of sight. In cases where social integration is achieved in this manner, the value-consensus is *ideological* in the classic Marxian sense.

We can speak of the 'fundamental contradiction' of a social formation when, and only when, its organizational principle necessitates that individuals and groups repeatedly

confront one another with claims and intentions that are, in the long run, incompatible. In class societies this is the case. As long as the incompatibility of claims and intentions is not recognized by the participants, the conflict remains latent. Such forcefully integrated action systems are, of course, in need of an ideological justification to conceal the asymmetrical distribution of chances for the legitimate satisfaction of needs (that is, repression of needs). Communication between participants is then systematically distorted or blocked (*LC*, 27).

Because system integration is brought about through sanctions that operate on the external circumstances in which agents act, it can be achieved through force or coercion. Thus in functionally differentiated class societies, the “fundamental contradiction” of productive relations can be displaced into the system realm. Capitalist societies therefore present high levels of social integration through shared systems of bourgeois ideology, e.g. equality of exchange, formal rights, etc. while at the same time harboring latent contradictions in the functional organization of economic and political systems, that manifests itself in the form of low levels of systemic integration.

The central weakness in class forms of organization is that when problems arise in the functionally differentiated realm of system integration, they cannot be diffused or compensated for socially, simply because class-based asymmetries in economic or political power cannot be justified in terms of generalizable interests. Thus simple steering problems in the economy or polity quickly becomes crises of social integration (*LC*, 25).

In the transition from feudal to liberal-capitalist societies, class divisions in the polity are reduced, thereby eliminating much of the potential for political crisis. But class divisions are still reproduced in the economic sphere, and so “economic crisis is immediately transformed into social crisis; for, in unmasking the opposition of social classes, it provides a practical critique of ideology of the market’s pretension to be free of power” (*LC*, 29). Economic crises of these type are frequent, following the natural course of the “business cycle.”

The welfare-state arises in response to these problems with liberal capitalism. Rather than dissolving the underlying class tension, welfare-state (or *late*) capitalism attempts to prevent or soften economic crises through administrative intervention. This involves primarily fiscal and financial regulation of the business cycle, through a variety of administrative means, including “credits, price guarantees, subsidies, loans, secondary redistribution of income, government contracts guided by business-cycle policy, indirect labor-market policy, etc.” (*LC*, 35). At the same time, the welfare-state “safety net” provides some insurance against risks encountered by workers on the labor market.

But in Habermas’s estimation, there are limits on the extent to which the economy can be successfully managed. The range of state intervention is limited by a number of factors dictated, in the end, by the class structure. These concern primarily the incentive-compatibility of its programs. Most importantly, any intervention that redistributes wealth too dramatically has the effect of interfering with investment and production decisions, resulting in the gross misallocation or underuse of economic resources. Such policies also run the risk of prompting either investment strikes or capital flight. This means that there is only so much stabilization that can be done within the framework of a capitalist economy.

However, once the political system assumes responsibility for management of the economy (and politicians take credit for instances of successful management), economic crises are immediately transformed into political problems. Thus political system crises, which are no longer generated endogenously in liberal societies, arise in the form of displaced economic crises. This in turn requires that the state draw upon resources from the socio-cultural system in order to restore functional equilibrium. But because these political crises reflect once again the underlying conflict of interest in class societies, it is impossible to solve these problems through direct social integration. This makes it increasingly difficult for the state to justify its actions, creating something of a legitimization deficit. In order to compensate, the state must make increasingly strategic use of the meaning resources of the lifeworld, e.g. national symbols, religious and civic traditions, cultural references, etc.

Familiar strategies of this kind are the personalization of substantive issues, the symbolic use of hearings, expert judgments, juridical incantations, and also the advertising techniques (copied from oligopolistic competition) that at once confirm and exploit existing structures of prejudice and that color certain contents positively, others negatively, through appeals to feeling, stimulation of unconscious motives, etc. (*LC*, 70).

Unfortunately, since the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld occurs under a non-functional logic, it is not clear that these meaning resources can be arbitrarily “tapped” in order to meet the legitimization problems of the state. The increased demand for legitimization, and in particular, the strategic use of meaning resources, may have the effect of compromising the validity or coherence of precisely those traditions that it seeks to employ, resulting in a widespread “loss of meaning.” As Habermas puts it, “*there is no administrative production of meaning...* The procurement of legitimization is self-defeating as soon as the mode of procurement is seen through” (*LC*, 7).

Furthermore, the strategic use of meaning resources does more than simply “spoil” elements of the cultural tradition. It also has the “unintended side effect of causing meanings and norms previously fixed by tradition and belonging to the *boundary* conditions of the political system to be publicly thematized” (*LC*, 47). This has the effect of problematizing social institutions that were once taken for granted, thereby placing increasing pressure on a wide range of deliberative and legislative forums.

Administrative planning produces a universal pressure for legitimization in a sphere that was once distinguished precisely by its power of self-legitimation. Examples of the indirect perturbation of matters taken culturally for granted can be found in regional and city planning (private ownership of land), in planning the health system ('classless hospital'), and, finally, in family planning and marriage laws (which relax sexual taboos

and lower the thresholds of emancipation). The end effect is a consciousness of the contingency, not only of the *contents* of tradition, but also of the techniques of tradition, that is, of socialization (*LC*, 72).

If these problems generated in the lifeworld are not resolved, it may prompt a legitimization crisis, in which citizens lose faith in public institutions, or else a motivation crisis, in which workers' commitment to productive employment begins to wane.⁸ Thus Habermas suggests that welfare-state capitalism is prone to four types of crisis, shown in Figure 5.

| Crisis type | Resource depleted | Output lost |
|--------------|--------------------------|------------------|
| economic | value | taxes/goods |
| rationality | administrative decisions | steering/welfare |
| legitimation | meaning | loyalty |
| motivation | meaning | labor |

Figure 5: Types of late-capitalist crisis

III. The Theory of Communicative Action

Habermas's analysis in *Legitimation Crisis* suffers from a number of obvious flaws, many of which are addressed in the *Theory of Communicative Action*. Two of the most noteworthy are as follows:

- The crisis thesis is unmotivated, because Habermas does not give any reason to suppose that there will be economic crises in the first place. The only argument he gives appeals to the old-fashioned Marxist doctrines of the falling rate of profit and the labor theory of value. Given that

⁸ A crisis theory of this latter type has been elaborated more fully by Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1975).

economic crises are supposed to touch off the entire sequence of events that lead to legitimization problems, explanations like the following seem hopelessly metaphorical:

Economic growth takes place through periodically recurring crises because the class structure, transplanted into the economic steering system, has *transformed the contradiction of class interests into a contradiction of system imperatives* (*LC*, 26).

In *TCA*, Habermas backs off from the macro perspective that forced him to derive crisis tendencies at a system level. He identifies action in subsystems with instrumentally rational action, which then allows him to use microeconomic and rational choice models to specify problems that will arise from systemic integration. This is part of a general shift in his sociological temperament away from system-theoretic toward action-theoretic modelling.

- In *Legitimation Crisis*, Habermas still identifies all aspects of cultural modernity with the *specific features of bourgeois society*. Max Weber argued that various features of modernization, including the development of a critical attitude toward authority and the problematization of received practices, must be understood as a process of societal rationalization.⁹ This new attitude allows agents to reorganize social institutions in such a way as to make them more efficient, systematic and predictable. This rationalization then creates the conditions for the development of capitalism, e.g. by establishing a bureaucratic legal apparatus that operates with enough regularity to permit rational investment planning.

⁹ See Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, 2 vols., eds. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

The standard Marxist response to this thesis, articulated paradigmatically by Georg Lukács, maintains that Weber inverted the correct explanatory order.¹⁰ First, the capitalist mode of production, through the introduction of the commodity form, creates the possibility for social relations to be conducted in completely alienated form. This reification permits each individual to take up an objectivating stance toward others, laying the groundwork for a broad-based instrumentalization of social relations. This instrumentalization, which can be considered a form of rationalization, is then just a superstructural reflection of underlying economic relations.

In *Legitimation Crisis*, Habermas is clearly wedded to the Lukácsian view. He treats a variety of changes in the lifeworld that would standardly be regarded as rationalization processes, e.g. the problematization of child-rearing practices and the development of curriculum planning (*LC*, 72), as exogenously generated by displaced economic crises. This is because he still regards the lifeworld in Parsonian fashion as a self-equilibrating socio-cultural system, i.e. immune to endogenous processes of social change. This leads him to lump together an incredibly disparate range of phenomena and treat them all as the effects of administrative planning of legitimation. There are a variety of problems with this view, which Habermas clearly recognizes, since between the time of *Legitimation Crisis* and *TCA* he simply switches from a Lukácsian to a Weberian view. This then leads him to distinguish between the rationalization of the lifeworld, and pathological disturbances thereof.

The most important change in *TCA* is that Habermas begins to treat the lifeworld, not as a differentiated socio-cultural subsystem, but as a comprehensive theoretical model of society. The lifeworld is given an *action-theoretic analysis*, in terms of the structural requirements for the maintenance and reproduction of social order. The development of functionally differentiated economic and political subsystems is also treated action-theoretically, in terms of the creation of

¹⁰ Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971).

spheres where agents are permitted to adopt instrumental, rather than norm-conformative orientations. The system model adopted from the later Parsons is retained as an optional theoretical perspective, but one that becomes increasingly fruitful as society reaches higher degrees of functional differentiation.

The social integration of the lifeworld, in this view, takes the form of direct normative integration, requiring a combination of socialization and social control. In the classic formulation, this means that orderly interaction is achieved when culturally shared values are *internalized in personality* (socialization) and *institutionalized in society* (social control). This suggests a tripartite symbolic structure underlying social order, consisting of culture, personality and society.¹¹

Habermas argues that these three structural components of the lifeworld are reproduced through what he calls communicative action. A complete explanation of this concept is outside the purview of this work. What is important for our purposes is to note that communicative action represents a generalization of norm-conformative action. Instead of being limited to following specific rules, in communicative action agents coordinate their action objectives through mutual agreement (in a broad sense of the term). Underlying all forms of communicative action is the basic category of speech acts, in which agents draw upon a reserve of shared linguistic meaning in order to achieve such agreement explicitly.

In Habermas's view, speech acts must be analyzed in terms of three basic notions familiar from philosophy of language: literal meaning, conventional use and speaker intention. These determine, respectively, the contribution of propositional content, illocutionary force and conversational implicature to the overall meaning of the speech act. An action-theoretic analysis of speech therefore requires an analysis of three corresponding pragmatic components of each utterance:

¹¹ Talcott Parsons, *The Social System* (New York: The Free Press, 1951).

As the medium for achieving understanding, speech acts serve: (a) to establish and renew interpersonal relations, whereby the speaker takes up a relation to something in the world of legitimate (social) orders; (b) to represent (or presuppose) states and events, whereby the speaker takes up a relation to something in the world of existing states of affairs; (c) to manifest experiences — that is, to represent oneself — whereby the speaker takes up a relation to something in the subjective world to which he has privileged access (*TCA*, 1:308).

Insofar as these three relations are successfully established, and mutual agreement is achieved, communicative action has the effect of reproducing the three structures of the lifeworld:

Under the functional aspect of *mutual understanding*, communicative action serves to transmit and renew cultural knowledge; under the aspect of *coordinating action*, it serves social integration and the establishment of solidarity; finally, under the aspect of *socialization*, communicative interaction serves the formation of personal identities. The symbolic structures of the lifeworld are reproduced by way of the continuation of valid knowledge, stabilization of group solidarity, and socialization of responsible actors (*TCA*, 2:137).

The reproduction of the lifeworld through communicative action ensures: the continuity of cultural traditions and the coherence of the knowledge required for everyday life; that actions are coordinated through legitimate interpersonal expectations and group identities; and that each new generation of individuals acquires the generalized competencies for accountable action and life-histories that are in harmony with collective forms of life (*TCA*, 2:140-1). When these reproduction processes are functioning correctly, they provide resources (meaning, solidarity and ego-strength) that contribute to the maintenance of all three lifeworld structures. For example, if

strong cultural traditions are able to meet the demands for valid knowledge, they will also provide legitimations for existing institutions and socialization patterns for the acquisition of generalized competencies. Similarly, agents with strong personal identities will be highly motivated to produce and maintain social coordination and cultural achievements.

Because of its dependence on communicative action, the reproduction of the lifeworld is subject to endogenous rationalization processes. This is what prompts the development of a more critical attitude among agents toward received traditions. The need to deal with environmental changes, increasing internal density and complexity, and a variety of other stimuli, places increasing pressure on the mechanism of communicatively achieved consensus. This additional burden requires on the part of agents a more rigorous and reflexive adherence to the standards of rationality that are built into the structure of linguistic understanding, e.g. logical inferences, modal contexts, pragmatic entailments, etc. But because communicative action operates simultaneously to reproduce all three structures of the lifeworld, rationality gains from any given source are generalized across the three dimensions of culture, society and personality.

This gives the rationalization of the lifeworld the following general characteristics:

In the relation of culture to society, structural differentiation is to be found in the gradual uncoupling of the institutional system from worldviews; in the relation of personality to society, it is evinced in the extension of the scope of contingency for establishing interpersonal relationships; and in the relation of culture to personality, it is manifested in the fact that the renewal of traditions depends more and more on individuals' readiness to criticize and their ability to innovate. The vanishing point of these evolutionary trends are: for culture, a state in which traditions that have become reflective and then set aflow undergo continuous revision; for society, a state in which legitimate orders are dependent upon formal procedures for positing and justifying norms; and for personality, a state in which a highly abstract ego-identity is continuously stabilized through self-steering (*TCA* 2:146).

This process of rationalization unfortunately places arduous demands upon agents.

Communicative action carries with it a permanent risk of dissensus. When combined with the increasing unwillingness among agents to take received cultural traditions for granted, this risk is dramatically increased (*TCA*, 2:183). The difficulty in reaching consensus under conditions of cultural modernity, insofar as it creates organizational problems, threatens the material reproduction of the lifeworld. Because of this, a persistent tendency has arisen in modern societies to solve these problems by transforming communicatively integrated domains of social interaction into appropriately structured subsystems of instrumental action. This has the effect of unburdening actors of the demanding requirements of communicative interaction, allowing them to take up the less cognitively and motivationally demanding instrumental orientation

However, because social order is not possible among agents who adopt purely instrumental orientations, society cannot shift organizational objectives over to systems of instrumentally rational action simply by abolishing normative controls. In order to harness the potential of instrumental rationality, it is necessary to *design a set of institutions* that will specifically channel and regulate these interactions. Habermas argues that the problem of introducing institutional constraints on systems of instrumental action is addressed at its most general level through introduction of the two situational *steering media*, money and power. But unlike Parsons, Habermas gives these media an action-theoretic interpretation. Because resources represented in these media can be easily quantified, agents can rely upon them as a substitute for utility in making their decisions. By making the information that agents require much more accessible, steering media create the possibility of sustained strategic interaction. But because these media are backed institutionally, they also provide a mechanism for external control of strategic interaction systems. Institutional sanctions, once expressed in media units, provide a very simple way of imposing parametric constraints on strategic interaction problems in order to privilege socially desirable equilibria.

In Habermas's terminology, *mediatization* occurs where interactions that were once coordinated through language are switched over to steering media (*TCA*, 2:183). Naturally, it is not possible for every sphere of social action to be mediatized. Since social order cannot be achieved in a purely instrumental context, certain types of interactions must remain socially integrated in order to maintain the institutions that guide and constrain the system. As Habermas puts it, steering media must be *anchored in the lifeworld*.

In this view, the *colonization* of the lifeworld occurs when spheres of action that are essential to the operation of normative integration, i.e. either socialization or social control, are switched over to instrumental action (*TCA*, 2:196). Of course, given the choice, people would not mediatize spheres of interaction that are essential to the reproduction of social order. The problem, according to Habermas, is that in order to keep the system running smoothly, it is often necessary to extend the scope of media-steered interactions. Lifeworld *pathologies*, in this view, arise when regions of social interaction that are essential to the reproduction of the lifeworld become instrumentalized. Since these reproduction processes contribute to the maintenance of all three structures of the lifeworld, these pathologies can be categorized as in Figure 6.

| Structure | Culture | Society | Personality |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Disturbance | | | |
| | | | |
| Cultural reproduction | Loss of meaning | Withdrawal of legitimization | Crisis in orientation and education |
| Social integration | Unsettling of collective identity | Anomie | Alienation |
| Socialization | Rupture of tradition | Withdrawal of motivation | Psychopathologies |

Figure 6: Lifeworld pathologies

The colonization thesis in many ways replaces the crisis theory as the focus of Habermas's critical theory. There are a number of significant ways in which it differs. First, it is important to note that the class component of Habermas's analysis has been dropped. System problems, in this view, can be generated in both the economic and political subsystems (*TCA*, 2:387), since they are caused by the use of instrumental action, not the repression of underlying conflict. This means that there is no longer any need to posit a single mechanism through which system problems are generated. Specific analyses of the effects of mediatization and instrumentalization can be given for each of the different realms in which an expansion of systemic integration can be observed. For instance, corporations are constantly trying to externalize costs, often in ways that are not easily accounted for in monetary terms, e.g. pollution, layoffs, exploitation of public resources, etc. In order to avoid socially undesirable consequences, the government must introduce new regulations, "costing" these outcomes in such a way as to restructure corporate incentives. But given that instrumentally rational actors have a constant incentive to find a way around any set of rules, there will be a constant increase in both the density and scope of regulation, and hence a constant expansion of media-steered interactions. Habermas gives as another example the phenomenon of juridification, or the spread of bureaucratic organization into informally organized spheres of social interaction like family life (*TCA*, 2:369). The point is that these problems are not generated by class conflict, but are merely unfortunate consequences of a general overreliance on instrumental rationality as a resource for social organization.

The main reason that colonization replaces the crisis thesis is that Habermas comes to view markets, and hence classes, as an inevitable feature of modern societies. Thus he is less inclined to look for sudden crises that will provoke the revolutionary transformation of society, and more inclined to diagnose the chronic discontents of modern societies, and seek out opportunities for improving conditions.

Despite this, the crisis thesis does not entirely disappear. In Habermas's view, both the economy and the polity maintain an uneasy balance between the private interests of instrumentally oriented participants, and the collective interest that the subsystem as a whole is intended to serve. The problem, in the end, stems from the attempt on the part of welfare-state societies to employ, simultaneously, two modes of social organization that logically preclude one another. This tension manifests itself in the form of a constant oscillation within these subsystems between laissez-faire and interventionist policies in the economy, and centralization and decentralization in bureaucracies. This has the effect of producing suboptimal performance in the long run. When system disequilibria push output "manifestly below an established level of aspiration" (*TCA*, 2:385) for an extended period, this provokes conflict and resistance in the lifeworld, posing a direct threat to social integration. This, according to Habermas, is a system-induced *crisis*.

Habermas argues that the three darkly outlined boxes in Figure 6 represent the core domains of social integration. They form the primary institutional order of the lifeworld, where the functionally differentiated subsystems are anchored. Because of this, before social conflicts threaten these core domains, they are pushed to the periphery. Thus a crisis in social integration, before threatening anomie, is displaced into the realm of cultural reproduction and socialization, creating a withdrawal of legitimization or motivation (*TCA*, 2:385). This produces *legitimation* and *motivation* crises.

These crises can be resolved only at the expense of generating other pathologies. Legitimation and motivation deficits can be averted by exploiting the resources of meaning and ego-strength generated by cultural reproduction and socialization. This has the effect of stabilizing society, but at the cost of weakening culture and personality in the long run. Thus the pathologies generated by system crises are shifted off the vertical axis in the table of pathologies onto the horizontal, resulting in alienation and the unsettling of collective identity. This movement is illustrated in Figure 7.

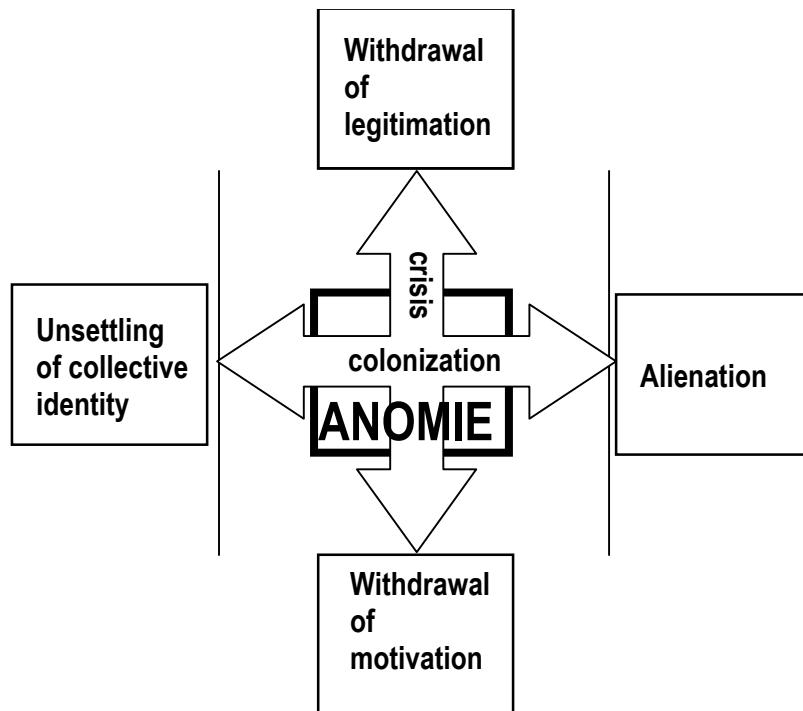


Figure 7. Crisis and colonization axes

This account is unsatisfactory, insofar as it does not specify the mechanism through which these crisis tendencies are “shifted” or “displaced.” Furthermore, since this action is supposed to be taking place among structures of the lifeworld, and since the lifeworld is explicitly designated as a realm of social interaction that defies functional analysis, it is unclear what the status of this mechanism is supposed to be. Habermas provides his explanation in explicitly functionalist terms, e.g. culture and personality come under attack “for the sake of” stabilizing society (*TCA*, 2:386). But this is an explanatory strategy that is ruled out by his own theoretical framework. Similarly, this model appears to illegitimately presuppose what amount to interchange relations between structures of the lifeworld.

It is perhaps because of these tensions that Habermas does not return to this intra-lifeworld model in his later work, but focuses his attention instead on the relationship between

legitimations, as a product of the lifeworld, and power, as a medium of the goal-attainment subsystem.

IV. Between Facts and Norms

The analytic framework of *The Theory of Communicative Action* provides the basis for identifying exactly the same crisis tendencies that were originally presented in *Legitimation Crisis*. The principal difference is that legitimation and motivation crises are no longer considered as output problems of a subsystem, but are considered pathological disturbances of the lifeworld. While this eliminates many of the peculiarities of Habermas's early formulation, it also creates some new difficulties. In particular, the *Legitimation Crisis* model treated legitimation as an *interchange relation* between the polity and the lifeworld (conceived of as a "socio-cultural system"). But once Habermas sharpens the opposition between system and lifeworld, it is no longer clear how they are supposed to interact. It is no longer possible to say that legitimations are exchanged for welfare performances in the way that, e.g. one can say that money is exchanged for power.

The problem concerns how legitimations, which arise in the medium of ordinary language, in socially integrated spheres of interaction, are related to administrative decisions, which are articulated in the steering medium of power, in the systemically integrated goal-attainment subsystem. The answer, Habermas argues, is that *law* provides an interface between these two qualitatively distinct modes of social organization and coordination. The attempt to articulate a theory of law that explains this function is what occupies much of Habermas's attention in *Between Facts and Norms*. This work does not change the *TCA* analysis in any substantive fashion; it attempts to explain more precisely the interaction between system and lifeworld.

Habermas describes the role of law as follows:

The lifeworld forms, as a whole, a network made of communicative actions. Under the aspect of action coordination, its society component consists of the totality of legitimately ordered interpersonal relationships. It also encompasses collectives, associations, and organizations specialized for specific functions. Some of these functionally specialized action systems become independent vis-a-vis socially integrated spheres of action, i.e. spheres integrated through values, norms and mutual understanding. Such systems develop their own codes — as the economy does with money and the administration with power. Through the legal institutionalization of steering media, however, these systems remain anchored in the society component of the lifeworld. The language of law brings lifeworld communication from the public and private spheres and puts it into a form in which these messages can also be received by the special codes of self-steered action systems — and vice versa.(*BFN*, 429)

Habermas's analysis turns on a distinction that he introduces between different types of power: social, administrative and communicative. Power — conceived of not as a steering medium, but as a social phenomenon — has a complex internal structure. As Parsons argued, attempts to define power purely in terms of an individual's capacity to attain ends or goals in social relations (e.g. “*A* has power over *B* to the extent that he can get *B* to do something that *B* would not otherwise do.”)¹²) are inadequate because they do not differentiate between the type of means employed to obtain these objectives, and the status of the agent's authorization to impose obligations.¹³ In particular, there are two types of channel through which this influence can be achieved. As we have seen, the agent can either control elements of the situation in which others

¹² This is the definition suggested by Robert Dahl, “The Concept of Power” *Behavioral Scientist*, 2 (1957) that Parsons criticizes.

must act, or she can attempt to alter their intentions independently of any changes in the situation.

Social power employs both of these channels simultaneously. In cases where power is based on social status or position, the agent can give commands that are *normatively authorized* (i.e. the agent's authority is a recognized feature of the social practice), and backed by the threat of *punitive sanctions* for non-compliance. In an informally organized social context, any form of power that did not combine these two elements would be deficient. If the command was not sanctioned, then the agent would be impotent in the face of disobedience, and so could not guarantee compliance. While the agent would still have power, this power would have only the weak motivating force of the underlying normative *reasons* for action. But if the command was not normatively authorized, then the agent would be limited to the sanctions that she alone could enforce, since she would not have any grounds for appealing to others for assistance in her sanctioning efforts. Once again, while the agent might still have power in some sense, it would depend entirely upon fortuitous and variable aspects of her situation.

Thus social power, although it involves disposal over sanctions, is internally related to the binding force of social norms. But despite this internal structure, one can well imagine a situation in which a particular form of power was *effective* purely through its control of one or the other channel. For instance, it could be the case that a particular command, although backed by normative agreement, was in fact always obeyed from fear of punishment, just as it could be obeyed only out of respect for its normative warrant. This allows Habermas to define *administrative* and *communicative* power as limit cases of this type, where administrative power is motivationally effective through the force of sanctions, and communicative power is effective only through the weak force of discursively achieved consensus.

Now, as we saw in the analysis of *Legitimation Crisis*, the distinction between system and social integration is drawn with reference to the channel through which integration is

¹³ Parsons, "On the Concept of Political Power," p. 298.

achieved. This means that within the specialized goal-attainment subsystem, in which actions are systemically integrated, action is principally coordinated through the force of sanctions. Thus the only form of power that can be effective in the goal-attainment subsystem is *administrative power*. This results in a differentiation of social power into two elements in modern societies, administrative power — the ability to make collectively binding decisions — located in the goal-attainment subsystem, and communicative power — the ability to act in concert, on the basis of achieved agreement — located in the lifeworld.

But because systems of instrumental interaction cannot be self-organizing, system integration can only be brought about through *institutionalized* steering media. This means that administrative power can be differentiated from communicative, but cannot be fully divorced. It still requires normative warrant. This is why the administrative system *requires legitimization*.

Law, in Habermas's view, provides the mechanism through which communicative power is translated into administrative (*BFN*, 222). Social power, despite its normative authorization, still takes the form of a particular individual's will. The employment of administrative power, on the other hand, is divorced from the will of an individual or sovereign, and bound to the rule of law. The legal system sets out the basic rules and authorizations under which collective goals can be sought, and provides citizens with actionable rights in cases where these rules are broken. But not only is law the means through which administrative power is exercised, it also provides legitimacy for the exercise of administrative power. Under its legislative aspect, the law makes a claim to represent an agreement that could be freely entered into by all. While initially this takes the form of appeal to an unquestioned background consensus of religious belief, in the modern period it is manifested in the doctrine of popular sovereignty underlying democratic institutions.

By loosening the requirements of normative authorization, in order to permit the development of "positive law" within the broader framework of legitimate legislative procedures, the modern legal form makes possible the development of far more complex patterns of social organization and regulation. It therefore represents an evolutionary advance over undifferentiated forms of legal-political power.

Habermas argues that the two dominant normative conceptions of democracy misunderstand the legitimization problematic by failing to distinguish between administrative and communicative power (*BFN*, 351-366). On the one hand, so-called “republican” models view democratic decision-making as a process of public deliberation in which society sets collective goals. This, he argues, involves treating goal-attainment as an exercise of communicative power. On the other hand, in the “liberal” view the state is seen as wielding only coercive power, while the normative content of democracy is found in the set of individual rights that protect the individual from incursions into the private sphere. This position has the effect of regarding all power as administrative.

In Habermas’s view, the republican model offers an unrealistic understanding of the operations of the modern state. In his view, the state operates in a quasi-autonomous fashion, not through collective goals that articulate a broader social consensus, but through functional directives of the political system that are backed by the sanctioning force of administrative power. But this administrative power is checked by the requirement that its exercise be legitimate, and this requires that it be grounded in the communicative power of the lifeworld. The normative content of democracy stems from its attempt to institutionalize the procedures through which communicative power is generated. Thus the role of deliberation is not the setting of collective goals, it is the production of communicative power. This is then translated through law into administrative power, which is used in the pursuit of collective goals.

As far as the legitimization problematic is concerned, the republican model of democracy makes it impossible to see how legitimization problems could arise within the context of a democratic society, while the liberal model makes it impossible to see why legitimization would even be required. Habermas attempts to articulate a position in which popular sovereignty provides the ultimate source of legitimacy, but where its reproduction and maintenance can nevertheless be disrupted within the framework of a democratic society. In this view, legitimization problems arise when the lifeworld mechanisms responsible for the production of communicative power are disturbed. This, he argues, can include the attempt to use

administrative power with the aim of producing discursive agreement in the lifeworld. Thus we find once again the famous crisis thesis, now articulated with respect to the conditions for the development of valid law:

The political system is vulnerable on both sides to disturbances that can detract from the effectiveness of its achievements and the legitimacy of its decisions, respectively. The regulatory competence of the political system fails if the implemented legal programs remain ineffective or if the regulatory and steering performances give rise to disintegrating effects in the action systems that require regulation... On the other side, the political system fails as a governor of social integration if its decisions, even though effective, can no longer be traced back to legitimate law. The constitutionally regulated circulation of power is nullified if the administrative system becomes independent of communicatively generated power, if the social power of functional systems and large organizations (including the mass media) is converted into illegitimate power, or if the lifeworld resources for spontaneous public communication no longer suffice to guarantee a noncoerced articulation of social interests. The independence of illegitimate power and the weakness of civil society and the political public sphere can sharpen into a 'legitimation dilemma' that in certain circumstances can combine with a steering trilemma and develop into a vicious circle. Then the political system is pulled into the whirlpool of legitimation deficits and steering deficits that mutually reinforce one another (*BFN*, 467).

V. Summary

We can see throughout Habermas's work a considerable continuity in his treatment of legitimation. The following are basic intuitions that underlie his view:

- The question of whether governments in complex societies can secure adequate legitimization is not equivalent to the question of whether they can in fact persuade citizens to support such-and-such policies or actions. The development of a specialized, differentiated administrative apparatus involves “a positivistic prolongation of the paths of justificatory reasoning” (*TCA*, 2:365), and hence a demand for more abstract justificatory resources. The ability of the society to produce such resources will depend upon certain structural features of the social system/lifeworld. This is what justifies treating legitimization problems at an abstract sociotheoretic level.
- Legitimacy is not guaranteed by democratic institutions, despite the fact that democratic decision-making procedures provide the only basis for legitimate law in a modern context. The ability to maintain legitimization of administrative subsystems, even when warranted in the abstract, is nevertheless a cultural *achievement*. It requires a robust mechanism for cultural reproduction and a reasonable level of social integration. If these cultural resources are undermined, the society can lose the ability to maintain differentiated forms of political power.
- Legitimacy problems can arise from a tension between capitalism and democracy (*TCA*, 2:345). The market economy provides a form of integration that does not satisfy the requirements for the reproduction of social order. It functions well because of institutional constraints that are not only sustained outside the logic of the market, but are opposed by this very logic. In cases where the market succeeds in undermining these institutional constraints, it places strains on the same cultural resources that are required for the legitimization of the polity.

The central question raised by Habermas’s reformulation of the legitimization crisis thesis is whether the basic project — that of providing a general mechanism to model the relation between legitimization levels and various other macrosocial phenomena — remains sound. Two considerations suggest that this question should be answered in the negative. First, Habermas

initially developed the thesis as a substitute for the orthodox Marxian theory of economic crisis. One of the central objectives of Marx's political economy was to show that the downfall of capitalism was inevitable. Although Habermas did not intend to demonstrate such an inevitability, he certainly was not hostile to the idea. This is at least in part because he was more enthusiastic at the time about the suggestion that a capitalist crisis might result in the revolutionary transformation of society. His later concession that markets, and hence classes, are an inevitable feature of modern societies, makes the business of predicting crises considerably less pressing. For this reason, the simple diagnosis of lifeworld pathologies may now be adequate to satisfy the "critical" component of Habermas's critical theory.

The second major reason that the crisis analysis has become suspect stems from Habermas's move away from Parsons. It was precisely because Parsons subsumed culture under a broader functionalist framework that his analysis could be appropriated to produce a crisis diagnosis of the quasi-mechanistic type that Habermas projected. As Habermas moves away from the characterization of the lifeworld as a "socio-cultural system," and represents it in terms of an autonomous developmental and reproductive logic, the functionalist framework becomes increasingly unsuitable as a model of the relationship between cultural and political spheres. Without the concept of interchange relations, crises can no longer be assigned any specific structural locus. This makes them quite unlike lifeworld pathologies, which show up when relatively invariant structures of socialization and social control are weakened or undermined. This means that the development of legitimation deficits in a polity may be the result of changes of a given lifeworld that cannot be characterized in any generalizable way — they may develop only in the context of traditions, values or resources particular to that society. The only appropriate analysis of such crises may then just be hermeneutic and contextual.

Naturally, these reservations about the crisis thesis do not undermine any of the three intuitions described above as basic to Habermas's analysis, they simply suggest that the phenomenon may not be susceptible to formal modelling in the way that Habermas envisioned.