

## The Antinomies of Habermas' Reconstruction of Historical Materialism: Towards A Dialectical Renewal of Critical Social Theory's Historical Perspective

As antinomias da reconstrução habermasiana do materialismo histórico: para uma renovação dialética da perspectiva histórica da teoria social crítica

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### Abstract

There are few attempts to reformulate the historical perspective of classical sociological theory comparable to that of Jürgen Habermas' reconstruction of historical materialism. Habermas considered historical materialism to be principally a theory of social evolution and he sought to revise its conception of historical development. In Habermas' opinion, the logic of the development of normative structures, social identities and cultural understandings differs from that of material production and the organizational complexity of social systems. My analysis reveals how the major innovation of Habermas' reconstruction of historical materialism is the ensuing conceptualizations of the social relations of production as forms of social integration and the function of systematically distorted communication in their historical institution. Despite the significant implications of this supplementation of the paradigm of production with a theory of communication, Habermas' reconstruction of historical materialism is shown to be limited by its inflexible logic of development and disengagement from the conflicts internal to processes of material production. It is proposed that the historical perspective of other strands of contemporary social theory may rectify these limitations through their concern with social creativity, institutional variations and the dialectics of social struggle.

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## Resumo

Há poucas tentativas de reformular a perspectiva histórica da teoria sociológica clássica comparáveis àquela realizada por Jürgen Habermas em sua reconstrução do materialismo histórico. Habermas considerou o materialismo histórico principalmente uma teoria da evolução social e buscou revisar sua concepção do desenvolvimento histórico. Na visão de Habermas, a lógica de desenvolvimento das estruturas normativas, das identidades sociais e das compreensões culturais difere daquela característica da produção material e da complexidade organizacional dos sistemas sociais. Minha análise revela como a maior inovação da reconstrução habermasiana do materialismo histórico consiste nas conceitualizações sobre as relações sociais de produção como formas de integração social e sobre a função da comunicação sistematicamente distorcida em sua instituição histórica. Apesar das significativas implicações dessa suplementação do paradigma da produção com uma teoria da comunicação, a reconstrução habermasiana do materialismo histórico se mostra limitada por sua lógica de desenvolvimento inflexível e seu desengajamento em relação aos conflitos inerentes aos processos de produção material. Proponho que a perspectiva histórica de outras correntes da teoria social contemporânea pode retificar tais limitações por meio de uma atenção à criatividade social, às variações institucionais e à dialética da luta social.

## Introduction

The ambitions of contemporary social theory appear to have diminished. During the period of the renewal of social theory in the second half of the twentieth century and the systematic reconsideration of its classical heritage, social theory sought to account for the then current tendencies of capitalist society in terms of long-term historical development. Even the perspectives that challenged the dominant images of historical development and its often functionalist and evolutionary conceptualisation in the sociological theory of that

period, presented alternative approaches to historical formations of society and arguments about historical transitions (GIDDENS, 1981). There are some highly significant exceptions to this tendency in social theory, notably the civilizational approach that is associated with the multiple modernities perspective and the framework of global modernity associated principally with the work of Peter Wagner and José Maurício Domingues (BROWNE, 2017a). Yet, these perspectives have in no small part been shaped by the historical transformations of the past half century that would appear to pose insurmountable challenges to traditional liberal modernization theories and the Marxist standpoint of historical materialism. Jürgen Habermas' 'reconstruction of historical materialism' remains the major contemporary reformulation of the long-term historical approach of classical social theory (HABERMAS, 1979a). The fact that it contradicts influential strands of subsequent social theory has, no doubt, conditioned its reception, but the underlying questions that it addresses are of the utmost importance.

Habermas sought to take the theory of historical materialism apart and to reassemble it in order to better achieve its objectives. There are Marxist perspectives that believe that the validity of its original theory of history has never been in doubt and that a reconstruction is unnecessary. It is possible to claim that the modifications in the relations of capitalist core and peripheral nation states that are associated with historical developments as disparate as the collapse of Eastern European state socialism, rapid East Asian and Chinese development, and the new network capitalism are consistent with the main theses of historical materialism, such as that they evidence that the capitalist mode of production cannot be transcended until it has exhausted the forces and resources available to it and that it is the system of production that is the main determinant of social transformation. Beside the limited value of the assumption that the capitalist mode of production will only be surpassed when it is transcended and the foreclosure of alternatives that is implied by this contention, this claim discloses the extent to which historical materialism is a theory tied to projections about future developments. This means that it is threatened by social developments that it did not anticipate or predict. Habermas' endorsement and defense of the project of

modernity after his ‘reconstruction of historical materialism’ is then consistent with the anticipatory dimension of historical materialism, although it represents in other respects a considerable departure from the dominant interpretation of its conceptual paradigm and historical details (HABERMAS, 1987b; HABERMAS, 1979a).

The shifts in the interests and agendas of sociological theory that led to a disengagement from many of the concerns of historical materialism have to a large extent had the same effect upon Habermas’ proposed reconstruction of it. Beside the retreat into the present that David Inglis has highlighted as a consequence of conceptions of a rupture and transition to late modernity, there are the effects of Michel Foucault’s arguments for an alternative approach to history and his emphasis on discontinuity, the plurality of histories involving a nexus of power and knowledge, and questioning of the notions of progress and development (INGLIS, 2013; FOUCAULT, 1977; 1980). Foucault’s later work moved away arguably from its earlier structuralist episteme and more contemporary theoretically-informed sociological analyses have prioritised the actor in a way that is opposed to the structural framing of historical materialism (see WAGNER, 2012). The revival of historical sociology similarly involved considerable engagement with the concerns of historical materialism, but the predominant recent tendencies have diverged from it in two ways (SMITH, 1991). On the one hand, the notions of power and culture have provided the theoretical underpinnings of the most influential recent historical sociological work (MANN, 1986; ARNASON, 2005). These approaches tend to either enfold material production within an overarching conception of power or treat it as a factor of equivalent significance in the constitution of social formations as that of culture and power. On the other hand, there has been stronger emphasis on the contingencies and concrete exploration of historical processes, partly reflecting the foregrounding of power and agency, as well as the greater concern with violence as a constitutive factor in its own right (JOAS and KNÖBL, 2013).

Although it is not inevitable, these emphasises can lead to significant divergences from historical materialism’s general categorical framing. This owes to historical materialism’s employing abstract notions like modes of production and

social formations, and its commitment to an overarching perspective on historical development. Marx's original statements on the Ancient, Feudal, and Capitalist progressive formations in the historical development of society is indicative of this commitment (MARX, 1970). There is another reason why the perspective and themes of historical materialism are less prominent than they once were in social theory. This is the contention that no matter how much historical materialism is revised, it remains shaped by theoretical assumptions derived from discredited approaches, especially the philosophy of history and theories of social evolution. Further, these approaches and their sequels are regularly considered to be empirically refuted and inherently Eurocentric in their outlook. The latter view is slightly ironic insofar as strands of anti-colonial and post-colonial criticism were inspired by Marxism (JAMES, 2017; AGUILAR, 1968; CABRAL, 1972; AMIN, 1977; SPIVAK, 1999).

More significantly, the fact that the Marxist theory of history played a role in anti-colonial struggles for national liberation points to a different line of criticism of historical materialism's practical applications. That is, that historical materialism served to legitimise the oppressive practices of political elites, since they drew upon Marxism's historical conception to delineate the direction and limitations of change, as well as to justify their position of authority and to explain the failures of revolutions. It is almost needless to mention that, no matter how discrepant state socialist societies may have been from Marx's intentions of a socialist formation, the collapse of state socialist regimes cannot be ignored entirely; it undoubtedly impinges on how historical materialism is approached in the contemporary period. Indeed, some of the most famous statements of historical materialism were put forward by socialist political leaders, most notably Stalin, Bukharin, Kautsky and Engels to begin with. These statements demonstrate that the social theory of historical materialism is overlain with practical-political considerations and that there is a political significance attached to assertion that historical materialism is a science. From Engels' speech at Marx's grave, historical materialism has been depicted as a science in much the same way as Darwin's theory of evolution. Habermas rejects the claim that historical materialism is a

science in this sense and sources the positivist outlook that informs it back ultimately to Marx's 'misunderstanding' of his own social theory's epistemological grounding (HABERMAS, 1978; 1988).

The main issues concerning historical materialism emerged immediately from the time of its first attempted systematic presentation by Friedrich Engels (1954). The centrality of historical development and historical transitions to the theory is unequivocal and the materialist concern with the actual conditions of the production and reproduction of social life is equally integral to the perspective. The complications emerge from the precise meaning of the underlying perspective of the paradigm of production, the conceptualization of the core categories of historical materialism and their interrelationship with one another, and the indeterminate position on the conditions for its revision (MARKUS, 1986). For most theories of society these complications are not unusual and quite normal, but in the case of Marxism there has always been more at stake, including the question of revolution. In one sense, the history of Marxist theory and practice has resolved or, more properly delineated the parameters for addressing, these considerations. The development of Western Marxism in opposition to the predominant interpretation of historical materialism disclosed the basic division between an objectivist conception of historical development that was modelled on the natural sciences and a philosophically enriched perspective that viewed the objectivist conception as limited and in tension with some of the broader intentions of Marxian theory.

It is surprising then that Habermas proposed a reconstruction of the standard version of historical materialism: an evolutionary theory of the stages in the historical development of social formations. Of course, Habermas' reconstruction involves the incorporation of new dimensions and its guiding idea is that communication's normative implications and significance to culture cannot be properly grasped by the Marxian paradigm of production (see HABERMAS, 1987b). Instead, a new framework is required that is able to articulate the different logics of the historical development of material production and that of the normative patterns of social integration deriving from intersubjective communication, as well as the interrelationships between production and culture. Habermas considers that

questions of historical development are inevitable in social theory and that where they are not explicitly addressed then answers to them are nevertheless implicitly presumed. This is particularly the case for the evaluations proposed in social theory and sociological assessments of the prospects for progressive change and determinations of the effects of unfolding developments. For instance, it would be difficult not to engage with these kinds of considerations in assessing the European Union.

More controversially, Habermas distinguishes between narrative history and theories of social evolution. In his opinion, the purpose of theories of social evolution is to be an informant of 'practical discourse', rather than historical writing (HABERMAS, 1979b). This application is the practical extension of an interpretation of development. Evolutionary social theory, like historical materialism, should enable the delineation of progressive and regressive alternatives that are publicly discussed and debated. Habermas argues that by separating the analysis of the evolution of structures from the narration of events "we need assume neither unicity, nor continuity, nor necessity, nor irreversibility of the course of history" (HABERMAS, 1979b, p.42). These qualifications are considered sufficient grounds for dispensing with theories of social evolution altogether by other contemporary social theorists (see GIDDENS, 1981). The downplaying of the historicity of social processes is compounded in Habermas' 'reconstruction' by other conceptual distinctions, especially by that between the logic of development and the dynamics of development. Similarly, his approach to production in the systems theory terms of increasing complexity was heavily influenced by the development of technocracy (HABERMAS, 1976; LUHMANN, 1982; 1992). Yet, it leads to a substantial regression compared to Marx's original formulation of the dialectic of labour. The effect is, as Johann Arnason comments, "a whole complex of analytical distinctions, the main outlines of which were traced by Marx, is discarded without any sustained argument (ARNASON, 1979a, p.207)."

My analysis will seek to show how these problems and limitations of Habermas' reconstruction of historical materialism can be addressed through

revisions derived from strands of contemporary social theory that were inspired by other dimensions of the broad Marxian *problematique* of historical practice, particularly the dialectics of conflict and social creativity. It begins by disclosing the key conceptual innovation of Habermas' reconstruction of historical materialism, and which is indebted to his foregrounding of the role of communication in social evolution. Habermas contends that the normative patterns of social integration are the primary organizing principle of social formations and that these normative structures are a major determinate of the social relations of production. In the section that follows on 'the logic of ideological development', Habermas' interpretation of how the long-term processes of social evolution have been configured by the rationality of communication is explored and its restrictive implications highlighted. Habermas' theory of history is founded on a notion of constructive learning and this notion underpins the progressive character of the logic of development. While acknowledging that Habermas' reconstruction contains important innovations and is equivalent to the original version of historical materialism in its scope, the next section considers the implications of its antinomies and paradoxes. The most important subsequent historical perspectives in social theory elaborated alternatives to Habermas' rigid conception of development and subordination of developmental dynamics. These perspectives attribute greater importance to social conflicts, collective subjectivities, and cultural innovation. In this way, their proposals have either been directly influenced by Cornelius Castoriadis' theory of the social imaginary or exhibit decided parallels with it. The conclusion seeks to show how a synthesis of these arguments would contribute to the dialectical renewal of critical social theory's historical perspective.

### **Social Integration and Systems of Production**

For Habermas, the standard version of historical materialism is a theory of social evolution centred on the category of modes of production. Marx and Engels



attributed paradigmatic significance to social labour and considered the distinguishing feature of the human species to be its capacity to transform the conditions of existence through production. Historical development takes place through the succession of modes of production and Habermas' exposition stresses the congruence and compatibility between the forces of production and the social relations of production. The historical transition to a new mode of production is a consequence of a disjuncture between these two constituents of a mode of production and their recombination. In terms of the theory of evolution, the major difference of Habermas' reconstruction is that it seeks to provide an alternative to the schematic classification of social formations according to modes of production. It aims to demonstrate, by way of the heuristic application of genetic psychology's reconstruction of the phases of individual development to the collective level of society, that progressive transitions have occurred in the dimension of normative structures and that these developments have been of universal significance.

The explanatory requirements of this version of historical materialism, with its explication of progressive normative development, necessitates an expanded framework. Habermas argues that Marxists have usually underestimated the level of generality required to capture the 'universals of societal development' (HABERMAS, 1979a, p.152). The notion of mode of production is insufficient for this task and this justifies his introduction of the more abstract analytical category of 'organizational principle': "A principle of organization consists of regulations so abstract that in the social formation which it determines a number of functionally equivalent modes of production are possible (HABERMAS, 1979a, p.153)." It is not difficult to recognise that the basic supposition informing this conception is a quasi-functional view of social cohesion, as presupposing a correspondence between different institutions. The organizational principles determine the correspondence between social structures and limit the scope of change. For example, at different developmental stages only certain variants of the forces of production and the social relations of production have proven compatible with one another. Social integration, however, occupies a privileged position in defining 'organizational principles', because the developmental stage of normative

structures and forms of social identity are constitutive of the social relations of production. In premodern societies, worldviews have primarily articulated organizational principles.

Habermas' reconstruction of historical materialism's major theoretical innovation is this conceptualization of the social relations of production as relations of intersubjective communication. The normative structures constitutive of the social relations of production are subject to revision through practices of communication and the rationalization of communication occurs according to principles that are distinct from that of labour and production. In part, this contention concerning the development of communication and its translation into normative structures that become institutionalised results from Habermas' restrictive conception of processes of material production. It means that his proposal can explain changes in the normative principles of social integration but that it is weak with respect to the dynamics of power and conflict involved in the social relations of production and the division of labour. Habermas' main concern is the specification of socio-cultural learning; it supplies the criteria and index of development. After Parsons, Habermas understands institutionalization as a selective process. Only a segment of the norms and values of the overall culture is constitutive of the pattern of societal integration (HABERMAS, 1979a, p.111).

The connections between social integration and the organizational principles of historical social formations are particularly consequential. According to Habermas, it is language that offers more complex possibilities for human learning than production. Language has a certain genetic primacy in the transition from natural to social evolution: the "linguistically established intersubjectivity of understanding marks that innovation in the history of the species which first made possible the level of socio-cultural learning" (HABERMAS, 1979a, p.99). Habermas' reconstruction therefore diverges from Marx and Engels' contention that it is production that instigates the major developments of human society and that the division of labour originates in the family (MARX and ENGELS, 1976). Rather, Habermas (1979<sup>a</sup>, p.135) claims that the earlier hominids developed a system of social labour, but hominid society "did not yet know a family structure". The

family structure could only emerge from more complex forms of linguistic communication and not from the instrumental activity of labour. The experience of reciprocity inherent in linguistic communication and its establishment of meanings that transcend immediate contexts of interaction facilitated the ‘moralization of motives for action’ and the recognition of valid norms (HABERMAS, 1979a, p.136, p.99). Normative learning achievements enabled the institution of social roles in the family and, more generally, for action to be influenced by means other than the threat of force.

In Habermas’ conception, culture plays a pivotal role in social evolution and this is one of the major rationales for the communication theory revision of historical materialism. He argues that it is the developmental approach to culture which makes it consistent with the tenets of historical materialism and that cultural rationalisation is a process of historical learning. Learning derives from making the validity of beliefs dependent upon discursive reasoning: “In the development from myth, through religion, to philosophy and ideology, the demand for the discursive redemption of normative-validity claims increasingly prevails (HABERMAS, 1976 p.11).” The direction of evolution can then be discerned initially in the transformation of the logical structures of reasoning encapsulated in worldviews. Worldviews are partly constituted out of the relationship between the domains of material production and social interaction, but worldviews have a significance in their own right and they organise the connections between social integration and system integration. Worldviews project the normative identity of a society and the pattern of development can be located in how they culturally manifest the ‘organizational principles’ of a society. “In the concepts of historical materialism this means that the dialectic of the forces and relations of production takes place through ideologies (HABERMAS, 1979a, p.169).”

It should be evident that the upgrading of culture is opposed to the ‘economism’ of Marxist accounts of a dependency of the political and cultural superstructure on the material base of production (HABERMAS, 1979a, p.143). Although the developmental logic of cultural rationalization is grounded in communication, there is nevertheless an interplay between system problems, such

as crises of material production, resource distribution and organization, and normative learning in historical change. Habermas claims that Marx only applied the concepts of base and superstructure to periods of historical transition. Consequently, the relationship of base and superstructure is more a matter of developmental dynamics. The reason for this, in particular, is that Habermas defined the social relations of production principally in terms of their function in social integration, rather than through their connection to the processes of production. The implication is a different approach to exploitation, conflict, and domination to that of Marx. Habermas argues that the base was not an economic system until the capitalist mode of production and that kinship systems and, then, systems of political domination were the 'base' at different stages of social evolution. The social relations of production in precapitalist systems were different institutionalizations of the normative structures and identity-defining belief systems of worldviews. This shows, significantly, how "the relations of production can make use of different institutions" (HABERMAS, 1979a, p.144). Now, this assertion is critical to the historical grounding of the reconstruction's divergence from the Marxist paradigm of production.

Habermas does not define the relations of production principally in terms of the privileged appropriation of social wealth and the establishment of private property (ARNASON, 1979a; GIDDENS, 1981) Instead, it is the institutionalization of a system of regulations that defines the relations of production. What this means is that access to the means of production and the distribution of social wealth are not constituted in and by the process of production, rather, as we have seen, they are determined by the institutionalized normative structures and culturally constituted identity of a society. The fact that the social relations of production are grounded in symbolically mediated interaction and intersubjective communication distinguishes the structure of action and the cognitive orientation applied in them from those prevalent in the forces of production: instrumental-strategic action and objectifying cognition. Habermas' early formulation of the distinction between work and interaction had been subject to sustained criticism and he has been similarly criticised for equating the Marxist distinction between the forces and

relations of production, as well as the distinction between social and system integration, with types of action (GIDDENS 1982; JOAS 1993). It is, however, not as though Habermas is unaware of the approach of the paradigm of production. He argues that it elides the fundamental differences and conceptualises the production process as “so unified that the relations of production are set up in the very process of deploying the forces of production” (HABERMAS 1979a, p.145).

Marx understood the forces and relations of production as a complex totality and considered the actual processes of production relevant to all its aspects. By contrast, Habermas circumscribes the forces of production against the social character of the relations of production, so that the integrity of a mode of production depends on the communicative constitution of social relations. The observation that “strategic action must be institutionalized, that is, embedded in intersubjectively binding norms that guarantee the fulfillment of motivational conditions” clearly evidences this construction (HABERMAS, 1979a, p.118).

In Habermas’ conception, the rationalization of production develops through the cognitive objectification of the world and increasing technical domination and control over nature; knowledge is strategically applied according to the purposive rational criteria of efficiency, it is embodied in labour and converted into the forces of production: resources, technology and organization. Arnason (1979) rightly notes that Habermas’ conception presupposes a universal and invariant problem. It excludes the possibility of production having a different relation to nature. Similarly, the socialisation of subjectivity in the process of production has almost no relevance to Habermas’ reconstruction of the rationalisation of technical and organisational knowledge. The result of this approach is a decidedly closed and limiting framework. Habermas’ critique of Marx’s failure to distinguish between the rationalization of normative structures and the rationalization of the forces of production in delineating the socializing tendencies of the capitalist system of production bears out this closure. It shows why Habermas is unable to satisfactorily engage with the ‘dialectic of control’ that is intrinsic to the processes of production (BROWNE, 2017b). For instance, he argues that a developmental sequence of forms of cooperation can only be depicted in the case of capitalist

production and hence “social evolution cannot be reconstructed in terms of the organization of labour power (HABERMAS, 1979a,p.149).” Marx’s position that the rationalisation of the social relations of production is driven by conflict, as well as by cooperation, is not considered by Habermas to be a suggestion worth developing.

There is little consideration in Habermas’ conception then of the internal mechanisms and dynamics of ‘system integration’. The implications of changes in the labour process are apriori determined by the instrumental logic of rationalisation. System differentiation represents an advance in complexity, but there can be no fundamental reorganisation of the underlying structure of development. Rather, the innovative learning that initiates a transition in social formations is of a different order to that applied to system problems and the control of nature. These contentions do not just reflect Habermas’ lower expectations concerning the emancipatory potential of changes in production. He does not specify the actual process of the extraction of surplus as a significant determinant of the social relations of production and forms of resistance in the domain of production appear marginal to its basic organisation. The consideration of workers’ experience of the labour process is not really essential to Habermas’ standpoint (HONNETH, 1995b, p.47). He is, of course, aware of the conflicts and exploitation of modes of production, but these conflicts do not have a systematic importance in his account of the dynamics of production. It means that Habermas overlooks the dialectic of control and that he cannot explain developments that may enhance his critique of injustice, like the tensions and struggles that are involved in the turning of intersubjective social relations of interdependency into instrumental and strategic interactions. This omission contrasts with Giddens’ conception of the significance of the dialectic of control manifested in conflicts over the intensity of labour and the extraction of surplus to the structuration of capitalist production (GIDDENS, 1981).

## **The Logic of Ideological Development**

The underlying intuition of Habermas' entire theory, I contend, is that the communicative constitution of social identity makes possible a rational reconciliation of the universal and the particular (see BROWNE, 2017a; BIALAKOWSKY, 2018). The corresponding conception of the social is oriented to distribution and exchange, rather than the process of production. In Habermas' extrapolations of his core intuition, distribution and exchange are open to being determined by practical discourse in a way that is precluded by the instrumental-technical orientation of production. The constitution of identity through mutual understanding has a direct connection to the problem in sociological theory of action coordination. The effects of this conceptual strategy are evident in Habermas' revision of the notion of the relations of production. These are "reduced to an external framework, affecting the input and output of the process of production, but not its internal organisation"; "the relations of production are seen as *preconditions* rather than as *components* of the process of production; they determine *access* and *control* rather than *organization* (ARNASON, 1979, p.207; p.206)." This concern with the 'external coordination' of production in accordance with the normative principles of social integration is one of the reasons why Habermas' core intuition leads to a concentration on law and the legal regulation of systems of production. A key historical argument of *The Theory of Communicative Action* is that formal law institutionalises the distinction between the lifeworld and the social system (HABERMAS, 1984; 1987a).

Habermas' position is basically that developments in moral consciousness, and therefore the normative structures conditioning the relations of production, are inexplicable from the perspective of the paradigm of production. Production, according to Habermas, is founded on the dialectic of subject and object, rather than the reciprocally constitutive social relations of subjects engaged in communicative action oriented to mutual understanding. Marx's integration of both of these types of relations in the notion of the division of labour was therefore mistaken. It obscured the difference between them and reduces the latter to the structure of the former. Similar to the position he took on Marx's conception of the socialising implications and potential of cooperation, the organizational knowledge

that is part of developments in the control of nature affects only the external parameters of cultural learning in this model. “The rules of communicative action do develop in reaction to changes in the domain of instrumental and strategic action, but in doing so they follow *their own logic* (HABERMAS, 1979a, p.148).”

The logic of socio-cultural rationalization is a matter of cognitive advances that lead to a disassociation of types of knowledge claims. Knowledge claims correspond to the separate types of validity conditions of linguistic communication, which Habermas specifies as those of truth claims applied to an objective world of facts, normative claims regarding appropriate behaviour and regulations, and claims about the truthfulness or authenticity of subjectivity. Like the maturing individuals’ cognitive differentiation between domains or ‘worlds’, collectively-held structures of consciousness become increasingly ‘decentred’ during evolution. Habermas (1979a; 1985) argues that magical and mythical modes of thought involve a fusion of domains, like those between the natural and the cultural. Although processes of development are limited by the historical conditions of practices, the long-term and logical outcome of development is consistent with the differentiated ‘world-relations’ present in the structures of communication (HABERMAS, 1979a, pp.103-105; 1984a, pp.43-74). Similarly, intersubjective communication is constitutive of individual and group identities and this generates a similar or homologous pattern of development. In particular, the abstraction involved in learning processes is integral to the progressive development of structures of consciousness and the institution of corresponding modes of social integration:

“Piaget, linking up with Durkheim and in a certain agreement with Freud, has conceived the ontogenetic development of moral consciousness as a progressive universalization and internalization of value systems. From these viewpoints the ethics of the state is also the ‘more developed’ form in relation to the familial ethos. It is ‘more abstract’ because the realm of application of the internal morality is expanded beyond the limits of kinship systems toward the sphere of interaction of the large group. It is no longer the relative in a nuclear family, an extended family, or a tribe that is the morally obligatory reference person that is relevant, but the citizen of the state (HABERMAS, 1983, p.116).”



The historical sequence of structures of consciousness and social formations that Habermas sketches is in not unusual. It commences with a pre-civilizational phase of Neolithic tribal and nomadic societies. The early archaic identity of Neolithic societies is founded on mythological narratives and this is followed by polytheistic belief systems that emphasise local and particular features of identity. Early civilizations coincided with the beginning of state institutions and these political societies are distinguished from the preceding phase by being class stratified. During this period, there developed the universalistic structures of consciousness of major religions. This cognitive advance was initially associated with the formation of large-scale empires. Habermas considers the transition to the universalism of world religions particularly significant, because it represents major progress in the normative conditions of legitimation and justification. However, the practical application of the universalistic moral consciousness harboured by these religions was constrained by political orders of domination and their need for legitimation. Feudal social formations developed after early civilizations and their 'organizational principle' would be replaced by that of modern capitalism. A fully universally oriented identity was established at the stage of modernity, as fixed points of reference are overtaken by more abstract principles and there is a growing consciousness of the means by which an identity is constituted (HABERMAS, 1979a).

A basic tension concerning the institutionalization of normative structures is critical to Habermas' entire thesis. It shapes the historical dialectic of ideological development. On the one hand, the relations of domination have historically inhibited communication and circumscribed its role in social reproduction to the requirement of maintaining prevailing forms of social integration. In other words, the potential of communication has been constrained by the need to legitimate systems of class domination and exploitation. On the other hand, Habermas contends that communicative action is not reducible to its integrating function and that it comprises a rationality potential capable of negating and transcending forms of social integration. In the developmental sequence just outlined, the universalism of world religions heightened the discrepancy between the conditions of

legitimation and the existing social structure, even though it was not until the advent of modernity that 'post-conventional' universalistic structures of consciousness obtained institutional embodiment (HABERMAS, 1979a; 1984). The historical rationalisation of structures of consciousness is logically associated with the releasing of communication from its distortion by domination:

“Rationalisation here means extirpating those relations of force that are inconspicuously set in the very structures of communication and that prevents conscious settlement of conflicts, and consensual regulation of conflicts, by means of intrapsychic as well as interpersonal communication barriers. Rationalisation means overcoming such systematically distorted communication in which the action supporting consensus concerning the reciprocally raised validity claims . . . can be sustained in appearance only, that is, counterfactually. The stages of law and morality, of ego-demarcations and worldviews, of individual and collective identity formations, are stages in this process. (HABERMAS, 1979a, pp.119-120).”

The preceding discussion highlighted the deficiencies ensuing from Habermas' conceptual subordination of the appropriation of surplus and exploitation in the process of production to the conditions of social integration. It means that the evaluation of the injustices of distribution and appropriation are defined in terms of the developmental stage of the communicative rationalisation of normative structures. For this reason, systems of political domination and the capitalist economy involve different ideological means of stabilising and maintaining class domination. Habermas considers that class domination, in the form of a privileged minority's appropriation of the socially produced surplus, is always conditioned by the need for normative and motivational anchoring in the predominant form of social integration. Since class domination contradicts the normative principles of social integration and is not amenable generally to explicit justification, class domination should therefore be simultaneously conceived of as 'systematically distorted communication' (see WELLMER, 1976; McCARTHY, 1978; ARNASON 1982).

Systematically distorted communication facilitates a deceptive consensus concerning the normative and value orientations of a society; it satisfies the need

for the social integration of subjects in accord with the society's normative identity. Yet, it does this in a manner that impedes the communicative thematization of the antagonistic distribution of wealth and power. The rationalization of normative structures then clarifies some of the major historical obstacles to undistorted communication. The ideological fabrications of systems of political domination involve making particular interests look like the universal interest of society and this legitimation process represents the 'pseudo-rationality' of worldviews. Worldviews draw on the rationality of communicative action and its orientation towards mutual understanding and agreement, but the historically institutionalised social relations of domination systematically distort it. In particular, "the universalistic structures of world views have to be made compatible with the traditionalistic attitude toward the political order that predominates in ancient empires. This is possible above all because the highest principles to which all argumentation recurs, are themselves removed from argumentation and immunised against objections (HABERMAS, 1979a p.105).'

The account of historical transitions has so far been explained in terms of the logic of development. In a sense, this reflects Habermas' relative subordination of the dynamics of development and the fact that the outcomes of the dynamics of development are changes consistent with the structurally defined logic of development. Of course, there is scope for variations in the realisation of these structures, but dynamics do not alter the logic of development. Nevertheless, without a framework for explaining historical transitions, Habermas would not have satisfied the explanatory requirements of historical materialism. The dynamics of historical transitions that he sketches likewise evidences the influence of the pragmatist philosophy's conception of constructive learning in response to challenges to established knowledge and the institutionalization of change through the practical testing of innovative alternatives.

The difference between the development of normative structures and progress in technical-objectivating knowledge is basic to the reconstruction of historical materialism, however, the interplay between them conditions the dynamics of historical transitions. Moral learning achievements do not immediately

transform social relations of domination, rather, they are initially only latently available in a society. New stages of consciousness are superior because of the formal structure of reasoning they embody and this 'cognitive surplus' is stored in worldviews and belief systems. Habermas argues that it is only drawn upon when problems and disturbances afflict the material reproduction of society. The actualising of the cognitive potential encoded in ideologies and world views is conditional on class struggle and the agency of social movements. The institutionalization of superior forms of social integration deriving from more advanced normative and legal structures then condition the implementing of developmentally superior forces of production. In other words, the actualising of the initially only 'latently available' normative advances create the 'latitude' for rationalizing the productive forces and institutionalizing historically new levels of objectifying, technical and organizational knowledge, 'as well as making possible a heightening of social complexity'.

In this conception of historical transition, the learning achievements that initiate the emergence of new forms of social integration precede advances in technology, industry and the organization of labour (HABERMAS, 1979a, p.123). Habermas (1979a, p.120) "would even defend the thesis that the development of normative structures is the pacemaker of social evolution". Despite its attempt to avoid the problem of the 'logification' of history, this thesis does not rectify the imbalance between the logic of development and the dynamics of development in Habermas' reconstruction of historical materialism. It implies that class struggle and social movements constitute important mechanisms of socio-cultural evolution, but that their role in bringing about change is restricted by the developmental level of normative structures. It is these structures that determine the range of variation possible in changing and institutionalising new frameworks of social integration. Habermas' explanation of historical dynamics entails a marginalising of learning in the practical processes of struggles to change repressive social relations of domination, because the scope for creativity and innovation is limited and their parameters are defined by the logical development of normative structures (HONNETH and JOAS, 1988, pp.165-166; ARNASON, 1979; 1982; HABERMAS, 1982).

Similarly, social movements are constrained in their role to that of responding to system problems rather than being in themselves the initial catalyst for change. In fact, Habermas (1979a, p.123) traces the initial innovative learning processes to individuals rather than to collective experience.

Even though Habermas conception of the problem-solving character of historical transitions appears plausible in a general sense, it may not avoid the problem of its being a tautological mode of explanation, which is seen as a typical deficiency of functionalism (GIDDENS, 1979; 1981). It can only retrospectively reconstruct the pattern of change and compartmentalise it in a manner that confirms its framework of historical transition.

The key supposition of Habermas' conception of transitions is that new levels of learning do not emerge from system problems and, hence, that crises do not contain the cognitive requirements for their solution. The potential for historical transitions that transcend the system problems that 'overload the steering capacity of society' has to be sought in the realm of normative development. In Habermas' opinion, the limitations of the opposite approach are evident in most Marxist accounts of the evolutionary change that led to the formation of political class society, like those which explain this transition in terms of subjugation, the division of labour, unequal distribution, large scale irrigation, and population density (HABERMAS, 1979a, pp.158-163). These, he argues, cannot explain how the step to a new level of development was taken, because the specification of the problems of material production and system integration are insufficient for explaining the institutionalization of new structures. The lack of a notion of learning means that these Marxist explanations derive the new level of development from the conditions that generated system problems, rather than discerning innovations that enable their solution.

The limitations of the standard Marxist explanations of historical transitions are further due to an alleged failure to distinguish between the logics of development. Habermas argues that crises threatening the 'institutional core' of the relations of production are disturbances in the reproductive and adaptive capacity of society; they are experienced as crises of social identity in the domain

of social integration, rather than just failures in material production and organization. It is this process that constitutes the developmental dynamic for drawing on moral-practical learning and leads to innovations that alter the form of social integration. These alterations then enable significant advances in the forces of production. Habermas' conception of historical transition is meant to be universal in its application, but it very much fits the model he sketched of late-capitalist legitimation and motivational crises (HABERMAS, 1976). There are strong grounds for questioning whether this conception can be generalized, particularly when one considers the subsequent history of late-capitalist society and its tendencies of regression, as well as progression (see BROWNE, 2017b). Be that as it may, this explanation of historical transition corrects the misconception that socialism could be a direct outcome of the system crises of late-capitalism. Rather, socialism, or an emancipated society, could only be the outcome of progressive learning achievements in moral-practical knowledge and the democratising of social interaction (HABERMAS, 1979a p.124).

The key supposition of Habermas' theory of development is that constructive learning is the socio-cultural equivalent of the principle of adaptation that has driven change in the natural evolution of the species. It leads to Habermas' substantial reflection on how the learning achievements that enable the solution of major societal problems in the course of historical development generate an awareness of a new scarcities and forms of injustice: "Suffering from the contingencies of an uncontrolled process gains a new quality to the extent that we believe ourselves capable of rationally intervening in it (HABERMAS, 1979a, p.164)." He proposes that the 'constitution of a socio-cultural form of life with the introduction of the family structure' gave rise to "the problem of demarcating society from external nature". In early tribal societies, the sense of powerlessness relative to external nature was "interpreted away in myth and magic". Subsequently, "there arose the problem of the self-regulation of the social system" with the formation of a "collective political order", and hence that legal security came to "consciousness as a scarce resource" (HABERMAS, 1979a, p.165). Lastly, modern society's enhanced capacity for the self-regulation then generates an

awareness of the problems this can create in the relation to external nature and, more recently, the psychic demands that are made on the ‘internal nature’ of individuals.

The process of historical development can involve an intensification of exploitation and domination, since this would appear to have been the case with the formation of the state after archaic tribal societies and later during the initial phase of capitalism compared to feudalism. Habermas’ implicit thesis concerning these instances of regression is that they are readily recognisable as illegitimate on the basis of the achieved normative structures and that they are inconsistent (it is hard to see how they could be viewed as incompatible) with the level of the rationalisation of production and organisation. It should be clear from the preceding discussion that Habermas’ reconstruction of historical materialism is entirely dependent on the assumption that the benefits and attractions of rationality outweigh those of the cognitive structures of earlier phases of development. No doubt, there is something irrational and a ‘performative contradiction’ involved in arguing against this assumption, yet it does appear to be an instance of the ‘ontogenetic fallacy’ of extrapolating from the individual to society. There is the significant problem, as Habermas recognised, of the practical instantiation of the rationality of these learning achievements. As we saw, he argues that in premodern societies the instantiation of rationality is curtailed by domination.

There is a similar contemporary practical application of the notion of the logic of historical development and, in one way or another, this shaped Habermas’ subsequent work and the main line of discussions inspired by it. The logic of development reveals in the contemporary context that “the rationality structures that *became* accessible in the modern age have *not yet* been exhausted and that they allow for a comprehensive institutional embodiment in the form of extensive processes of democratization (HABERMAS, 1979a, p.129).”

### **Beyond the Paradoxes of Habermas’ Reconstruction of Historical Materialism**

Habermas' theory constitutes the most elaborated formulation of an alternative paradigm of historical materialism and, to this extent, it amounts to a major reconstruction, even though it consists of a framework requiring considerable application and refinement. This is the case in spite of the fact that this framework shaped Habermas' subsequent major work: *The Theory of Communicative Action*. Reconstructive sciences are 'fallible' research programs. It would be fair to contend that the later work did not overcome the *reconstruction's* limitations but tended to give expression to them. The methodological reliance on the congruence of the formal structures of individual and social consciousness and action, the subordination of cultural creation, and the implicit functionalism of its conception of social integration are three limiting conditions that were carried over. The first has been labelled the 'ontogenetic fallacy' and questions persist over whether individual development constitutes a pattern for analysing processes which are subject to cultural alteration and changes in social structure (STRYDOM, 1992). Habermas accepts that individual learning is dependent on the phylogenetic development of structures of consciousness and that individuals acquire competences 'by growing into the symbolic structure of their lifeworlds' (HABERMAS, 1979a,p.154; 1984; 1987a). Nevertheless, he attributes innovative learning initially to individuals, despite these being generated by the communicative practices of social interaction.

The alternative of an intrinsically social approach to learning has been put forward by other social theorists in response to Habermas. Klaus Eder and José Maurício Domingues contend that forms of collective learning processes are engendered by association and cooperation. This learning occurs in connection with the struggles of social movements and collective subjectivities (EDER, 1996; 1999; DOMINGUES, 1995; 1999; STRYDOM, 1987; 1993). In a sense, this approach is more consistent with an intersubjective paradigm, except that it could be regarded as suggestive of a supra-individual subjectivity that Habermas rejects. The nexus of historical development and individual competences that he proposes as an alternative to the Marxian perspective of praxis likewise results in a position at cross-purposes with his intended critique of functionalist reason. The historical



tendency that *The Theory of Communicative Action* depicts is one in which the weight of the social shifts from collective forms to the interaction of individual subjects. That is, it details a general historical movement from the collective modes of symbolic and ritualistic social integration to those based on the intersubjective interaction of individuals. The paradox is that this formulation extends the sociological scope of the functionalist analysis of systems theory, because it exposes the limitation of communicative action as a mechanism of social coordination through underlining an increase in the contingency of interaction and the effort necessary to overcome the probability of disagreement. Habermas argues that the ‘delinguistified ‘steering’ media of system integration, money and bureaucratic power, are appropriate to complex social relations that overburden the capacity of communication (HABERMAS, 1987a).

According to Arnason (1991), the trajectory of Habermas’ theoretical project was towards a position of increasing historical closure; it results in a rather rigid and inflexible pattern of rationalization. Arnason argues that Habermas’ theory of evolution precludes alternative developments and emancipatory possibilities, because the “internal history of the mind is devoid of creativity. It is restricted to the clarification and rationalization of its original context, ie. the natural and social correlates of action (ARNASON, 1979, p.217).” The historical closure is likewise evident in *The Theory of Communicative Action’s* reworking of Weber’s theory of the rationalization of modernity in terms of the formal structures of consciousness and the pattern of objective, normative and subjective world-relations inherent in language. In part, these criticisms ensue from the overall orientation of Habermas’ reconstruction of historical materialism. The more agonistic features of Marx’s perspective, whether with respect to the dynamic of class struggle or the development of the forces of production, are subordinate components of its conceptualization. Habermas’ opposition to the concept of production as a general notion of social constitution and therefore of material production as a project inhabited by different world orientations contributes to his exclusion of a more open historical dialectic (HABERMAS, 1987b; 1971; 1979a). The

latter approach has received its most complete contemporary expression in the work of Cornelius Castoriadis.

Castoriadis' conception similarly originated from the critique of historical materialism and an intended break with the principle of determination and the paradigm of production. He argues that historical transformations are the result of the work of the social imaginary in its capacity for social creation and its instituting of radically new meanings and forms, such as in the case of the capitalist imaginary or the imaginary significations of religions (CASTORIADIS, 1987). Castoriadis considers that creation is central to history, because 'constant causes' cannot give rise to the variable effects that are evidenced by the diversity of the social-historical institution (CASTORIADIS, 1987). Despite its delineation of a significant line of progressive historical development, Habermas' theory of cultural rationalization through communicative action is less complex in its overall framing of social dynamics than the notion of the social imaginary. The notion of the imaginary encompasses the combination of 'affect, intention and representation', as well as the 'magma' of creation and the associative or connecting quality of social imaginary significations, including the positing of the connection between concepts and referents. Habermas' interpretation of cultural rationalization has difficulty accounting for variations and while it is strong in its capacity for defining historical regression, it is less capable of explaining it, except in terms of factors external to communication. These limitations partly reflect Habermas' depiction of the historical process, as one leading from comprehensive worldviews to communicative action and the compartmentalising of culture with the separation of functionally and formally organised system from the lifeworld (HABERMAS, 1987a). The notion of the social imaginary enables the elucidation of radically different 'world orientations' or ontologies.

The more recent social theory programs of multiple modernities, civilizational analysis, and global modernity have to varying degrees incorporated some notion of 'latently available' cultural horizons of meaning and world orientations (ARNASON, 2002; EISENSTADT, 1999; 2000; 2007). Yet, these approaches' deployment of this notion is associated more with the categories of

the imaginary and creativity than with the idea of rationality. Beyond any scepticism concerning rationality, more widely found in post-structuralist and post-modernist approaches, there are a number of reasons for this orientation towards creativity and the imaginary. First, these perspectives retain a stronger sense of collective agency and its capacity for innovation than Habermas' theory. Second, the imaginary is more relevant to the sense of projection and 'transcendence' than the notion of communicative rationality, which accentuates formal procedures and rational elaborations of existing learning, whereas the imaginary's greater sense of openness and indeterminacy appear more apposite. Third, the notion of the imaginary intersects more with the motivations of social individuals, particularly the motivations of struggling agents, than does the notion of communicative rationality. This criticism has been developed by Axel Honneth of Habermas' theory of communication from the standpoint of the 'struggle for recognition' and he highlights the experience of injustice rather than of the distortion of the formal structures of communication (HONNETH, 1995a; 1995b). Similarly, the notion of the imaginary seems better able to encompass ambivalence and the vicissitudes of psychic life more generally.

Fourth, the limitations of Habermas' conception of cultural rationalization with respect to variations and regression has already been remarked upon. Habermas' reconstruction of the logic of development is not intended to comprehend cultural encounters and the effects of these intersections. Similarly, the variations in what Goran Therborn terms the 'routes to' modernity have not been explored by Habermas. From the perspective of global modernity, Therborn outlines four 'routes to' modernity and this background shapes different 'routes through' modernity (THERBORN, 1995). It could be argued that the different routes to and through modernity have become a larger and more complex topic since the formulation of Habermas' reconstruction of historical materialism, particularly with the processes of South East Asian and Chinese modernization. Fifth, these reasons all indicate a further preference for conceiving of the realising of socio-cultural potentials in terms closer to that of Castoriadis' conception of the tension between instituted and instituting. In some respects, Habermas' notions of the separate

rationalisation of the competing principles of social and system integration can be rendered compatible with this dialectic of instituting and instituted. Yet, the functionalist suppositions of Habermas' diagnosis of modernity's unbalanced institution of communicative and functionalist rationality limits the exploration of different instantiations of antinomies and tensions (see BROWNE, 2017a; 2017b).

## Conclusion

Although it may appear surprising, Habermas' reconstruction of historical materialism constitutes a research program that actually remains underdeveloped. It did lead to his subsequent discourse theory of justice and the never completely realised project of a social scientific critique that was not simply that of ideology critique. However, the aspects of the reconstruction that were pursued were those that depended least on the theory of history (HABERMAS, 1990; 1996). The discourse principle sits at the apex of the logic of development and the central tenant of Habermas' discourse theory of justice, law and democracy is participants' adherence to the procedures and universalism of the discourse principle: "Just those action norms are valid to which all possibly affected could agree as participants in rational discourse" (HABERMAS, 1996, p.107). The logic of development demonstrates that subjects' competences and institutionalised normative structures are consistent with the discourse principle, but this does not mean that it is enacted in practice. It is not coincidental that the discourse theory is viewed as indicative of a tendency in Habermas' work to move away from the Hegelian historical dialectic to a more Kantian ahistorical approach to transcendental reason. The theory of modernity detailed in *The Theory of Communicative Action* represents a specific application of the thesis concerning the 'pacemaker' role of normative learning in historical transitions (HABERMAS, 1984; 1987a). Yet, it displays many of the reconstruction of historical materialism's flaws; notably, its conception of the distinction between system and lifeworld is at cross-purposes with its intended critique of functionalist reason.

Nevertheless, recent social and political developments highlight the relevance of aspects of Habermas' theory that have been complacently

disregarded. Habermas' commitment to rationality is clearly contrary to the current normative and political regression in liberal democracies. It may not explain these tendencies, but it would be difficult to overcome them without rational communication. Similarly, Habermas' reconstruction of historical materialism presumes that the development of more complex social structures requires equivalent advances in the forms of moral consciousness and practical competences in general. The negative implications of social regression, from unrestrained ecological destruction, reactionary racism, religious fundamentalism through to institutional paralysis and arbitrary violence, evidence the effects of discordances between the different processes of rationalization and established competences and social learning. If Habermas is right, then these regressions are likely to collapse under the weight of their own failure or they will persist only through forced repression and the closing down of discourse.

It is likewise the case that Habermas' reconstruction of developmental advances is able to clarify false conceptions of emancipation. Significantly, his reconstruction is a substantial counterpoint to unreconstructed revivals of Marxian political economy, on the one hand, and conceptions of cultural practices that neglect historical conditioning and the structural constraints upon them, on the other hand. Indeed, the critical implications of his 'internal history of the mind' may even apply to Habermas' own later arguments on the 'post-secular' and its account of the enduring value of the meanings of religious discourse (HABERMAS, 2008). For all of that, it could be argued that these considerations can be formulated without reference to the reconstruction of historical materialism and a theory of evolution, in particular. Even so, it is worth keeping in mind that the 'reconstruction of historical materialism' is one of the few contemporary approaches in social theory that establishes conditions for discerning regression and criteria for assessing and delineating tendencies for social progression, especially relating to democratization, the normative of overcoming of injustice, rational discourse, reflexive identities, and mutual autonomy.

The preceding analysis has clarified many of the prerequisites for rectifying the failings of Habermas' reconstruction of historical materialism. A greater

synthesis of its intentions with elements of the Neo-Marxian perspective of praxis philosophy and its sequels may be a means by which a stronger sense of historicity could be achieved and the weaknesses of the distinction between logics and dynamics of development overcome. Similarly, this synthesis would enable a greater appreciation of social creativity and collective forms of constructive learning, such a perspective can draw on the work of social theorists that have pursued aspects of this agenda, like Johann Arnason and José Maurício Domingues. Further, the notion of the dialectic of control, which has its roots in the Hegelian and Weberian sources of critical social theory, enables a more complex elucidation of the interconnections between domination and morality, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, represents a constructive alternative approach to material reproduction to that derived from systems theory and its notion of complexity (BROWNE, 2017b). Likewise, there is clearly a need for conceptual refinements that enable the explication of diverse and intersecting trajectories of global development. In one sense, Habermas' conception of structures of learning is more broadly framed, yet this means that the theory of evolution has limited explanatory value. Consequently, it would be preferable to preserve a greater sense of openness concerning potential transformations and innovation, as suggested by the notion of social imaginaries, rather than the strong tendency towards social-historical closure of Habermas' reconstruction of historical materialism.

The broad logic of the development of moral consciousness and identity that the reconstruction of historical materialism proposed implies that constructive learning in the contemporary period should involve a transition from national identification to a cosmopolitan standpoint that has yet to be fully institutionalised. The normative appeal of this vision need not veil the fact that the injustices of contemporary capitalism are contrary to its conception of progress and that cultural learning is vitiated by systematically distorted communication. It can nonetheless contribute to the disclosure of this discrepancy between the existing potential for emancipation and the actuality of social domination and injustice.

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