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Understanding Habermas's methods of reasoning

W. BALDAMUS

1 THE PERILS OF READING HABERMAS

Jürgen Habermas's *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* (henceforth *TCA*) was published in October 1981. It was printed in two volumes of equal size with a total of nearly 1200 pages and selling at the rate of 10,000 copies in the first month of its publication. I received a free copy of the paperback edition in early 1982. My first reaction, after a quick glance at the table of contents, was a mixture of approval and uneasiness. Certainly it was gratifying that at long last Habermas had abandoned his persevering concern with analytical philosophy. Yet the alarming bulkiness of the two volumes, seen in the light of his renowned aptitude for sophisticated philosophical arguments, raised doubts in my mind as to whether he had now succeeded, as promised in the Preface, in replacing his 'misguided' philosophical intentions by making 'a new beginning': 'I have written this book for those who have a professional interest in the foundations of sociological theory [*Gesellschaftstheorie*]' (*TCA*, 1981: 10). To explain my doubts it may help to analyse the table of contents of the English translation.

Surprisingly the number of prominent names in this table amounts to only seven. Put in alphabetical order they are *Adorno*, *Durkheim*, *Lukács*, *Marx*, *Mead*, *Parsons* and *Weber*. The sequence in which they appear in the headings of the eight chapters of the two volumes is as follows:

- Chapter II 'Weber's Theory of Rationalisation'
- Chapter IV 'From Lukács to Adorno: Rationalisation as Reification'
- Chapter V 'The Paradigm Shift in Mead and Durkheim'
- Chapter VII 'Talcott Parsons: Problems of Construction in Social Theory'
- Chapter VIII 'Conclusion: From Parsons via Weber to Marx'

(The headings of Chapters III and VI, called 'Intermediate Reflections', contain no names.)

It took Habermas four years to repress his earlier highflown philosophical ambitions in order to conquer the infinitely more recalcitrant substance of *sociological* inquiry. His selection of just *seven* supreme figures must have been the longest and hardest venture he ever undertook (the long-term project of building a *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* was announced in 1973 in the Preface of *Legitimationsprobleme im Spatkapitalismus*). Looking back, what intrigued me most was whether his choice of reputable figures was guided by some sort of implicit ranking order, and if so, how did he reconcile his own idiosyncratic preferences with the impenetrable *history* of institutionalized reputations and 'paradigms'?¹ There can be no doubt that Habermas was aware of this dilemma, as the following remark shows:

The path of a theory-history [*Theoriegeschichte*] with systematic intention does by no means recommend itself on account of a *false* convenience which always creeps in whenever we are not yet able to tackle a problem frontally. I believe that this alternative – the evasion into theory-history vs. systematic foundation – is based on a false assessment of the status of social theory [*Gesellschaftstheorie*]. . . . The competition between paradigms in the social sciences has a different standing as compared with modern physics, because the originality of the great social theorists like Marx, Weber, Durkheim and Mead has been achieved by creating paradigms which in some way *continue* to compete on an *equal* level of prestige. These theoreticians have remained contemporaries and in any case have not become 'historical' as happened with Newton, Maxwell, Einstein or Planck who accomplished advancements inside a single fundamental paradigm. (Vol. I: 201)

Theory-history, in other words, is something like a contingent category: elusive, deceptive and subject to fatal misjudgements.

At this point it may be instructive to the uninitiated reader of Habermas if we take a glance at the development of his *own* thought over the past thirty years. I am quoting from a brilliantly succinct review by David J. Levy, called 'Voyage to Ithaca' (1989: 21):

The difficulties which have attended Habermas' task are evident in the . . . history of his work, marked as it is by massive changes of tack that seem at times to amount to attempts to begin the voyage anew. His Ithaca remains what it always was, a historically attainable universe of reason and freedom first sighted by Enlightenment rationalism but never yet attained. Over the years Habermas has sketched several more or less detailed maps of the area and proposed successive, increasingly complicated routes of approach – of which the *Theory of Communicative Action* is the latest but, judging by the

record, by no means likely to be the last. . . . Habermas has always been a voracious reader – an apparently eclectic or, more flatteringly, open-minded theorist ever ready to use, more or less selectively but usually with due acknowledgement, the ideas of other men in the furtherance of his own. This is as it should be and no criticism is intended in pointing it out. There are however times, and these sometimes at critical moments in the argument, when one catches a distinct whiff of intellectual opportunism in the air.

(Here I must add that such opportunism is almost unavoidable in the present flood of an irreversible proliferation of printed or duplicated writings.)

When I started reading the *TCA* my main concern was to reduce the time and labour which it demands as much as possible. I tried numerous short-cuts but only a few were effective. For example, I began with a series of zig-zag sampling tests by comparing what seemed to be the message of the first pages of the introductory chapter with that of the last pages of the concluding chapter and thereafter gradually reducing the span between the page numbers. Thus – hopefully – I would locate the centre of the paradigm somewhere in Chapter V. This was plausible because its subtitle says: ‘*Von der Zweckätigkeit zum kommunikativen Handeln*’ [From Purposeful Activity to Communicative Action] while no other heading contains the term ‘communicative action’.

But when I proceeded to explore Chapter V (which deals at great length with Mead and Durkheim), in the light of the relevant sources which are shown in the author index and the bibliography, I realized that I was on the wrong tack. Although in Habermas’s opinion Mead and Durkheim are historically important, they do not compare with Weber and Parsons who finally emerge as the most crucial creators of new paradigms. To account for my initial misreading it should be borne in mind that throughout the book Habermas’s procedure is always *double-edged*: a selected contribution of a particular author is first narrated in the form of an extensive and sophisticated *positive* evaluation; then follows a new paragraph which begins with such untranslatable expressions as *allerdings* or *freilich* (roughly meaning ‘on the other hand’, ‘admittedly’, or ‘nevertheless’) and intonates a *negative* account. Typically *both* viewpoints are presented in a remarkably gentle and tentative manner. Thus each of the chosen figures is covered by a long succession of alternating favourable and critical interpretations.

After wrestling for weeks with the mounting difficulties of one sort or another, I decided to use Lazarsfeld’s invention of a ‘content analysis’ (1973: 48) as a means of exploring the impressively large index of names of the two volumes. In the natural sciences the recourse to quotation scores is simple enough. However, its extension into the realm of Habermas’s intermingled sociological and philosophical undertakings may appear too crude to be interesting. Fortunately the whole perspective of his reinterpretations of renowned figures is

Table 1. Quotation scores of *TCA* (1981)

Parsons, T.	180	Rousseau, J. J.	4	Berger, P.	1
Weber, M.	140	Skjervhaim, H.	4	Bernstein, R. F.	1
Durkheim, E.	76	Dobert, R.	3	Black, M.	1
Mead, G. H.	75	Eder, K.	3	Blum	1
Marx, K.	69	Frazer, J. G.	3	Blumenberg, H.	1
Horkheimer, M.	60	Frege, G.	3	Blumer, H.	1
Adorno, T. W.	54	Fromm, E.	3	Boas, F.	1
Lukács, G.	48	Grice, H. P.	3	Brentano, L.	1
Hegel, G. W. F.	37	Kirchheimer, O.	3	Campbell, B. G.	1
Kant, I.	34	Kreckel, M.	3	Cicourel, A.	1
Schütz, A.	26	Löwenthal, L.	3	Cimabue	1
Wittgenstein, L.	23	Moore, G.	3	Comte, A.	1
Piaget, E.	19	Neumann, F.	3	Dalton, R.	1
Husserl, E.	18	Nietzsche, F.	3	Davidson, D.	1
Luhmann, N.	18	Smith, A.	3	Descartes, R.	1
Austin, J. L.	17	Adler, M.	2	Dewey, J.	1
Winch, P.	17	Bellah, R. N.	2	Dubiel, H.	1
Freud, S.	14	Bendix, R.	2	Eichendorff, J. v.	1
Tugendhat, E.	14	Danto, A. C.	2	Einstein, A.	1
Hobbes, T.	11	Engels, F.	2	Francesca, P. de la	1
Searle, J. R.	11	Feuerbach, L.	2	Freyer, H.	1
Toulmin, S.	11	Foucault, M.	2	Galilei, G.	1
Evans-Pritchard, E. E.	10	Feyerabend, P.	2	Giddens, A.	1
Henrich, D.	10	Frankenberg, G.	2	Giotto	1
Luckmann, T.	10	Gehlen, A.	2	Gluckmann, M.	1
Heidegger, M.	9	Godelier, M.	2	Groethuysen, B.	1
Marcuse, H.	9	Hartmann, N.	2	Gulliver, P. H.	1
Popper, K.	9	Hesse, M.	2	Heller, H.	1
Dilthey, W.	7	Kautsky, K.	2	Herder, J.	1
Gadamer, H. G.	7	Kuhn, T.	2	Hildebrandt, K.	1
Garfinkel, E.	7	Lakatos, I.	2	Himze, O.	1
Horton, R.	7	Lask, E.	2	Honneth, A.	1
Münch, R.	7	Leach, E.	2	Humboldt, W. v.	1
Schluchter, W.	7	Malinowski, B.	2	Hume, D.	1
Aristotle	6	Meyer-Fortes	2	Implehart, R.	1
Bühler, K.	6	Morris, C.	2	Jakobson, R.	1
Condorcet	6	Offe, C.	2	Kaase, M.	1
Dubin, R.	6	Pollner, M.	2	Kenny, A.	1
Jarvie, I. C.	6	Simmel, G.	2	Keynes, J. M.	1
Locke, J.	6	Strawson, P.	2	Laing, R. D.	1
Pierce, C. S.	6	Windelband, H.	2	Lange, E. M.	1
Baum, R. C.	5	Abel, T.	1	Lash, C.	1
Benjamin, W.	5	Alexander, G.	1	Leibniz, G. W.	1
Dummet, M.	5	Apel, K. O.	1	Leist, A.	1
Lohmann, G.	5	Augustine	1	Lepsius, R.	1
Lukes, S.	5	Baldwin, J.	1	Levy-Bruhl, L.	1
MacIntyre, A.	5	Bales, R. F.	1	Lewis, D.	1
Newton, I.	5	Barnes, S. H.	1	Lidz, C. W.	1
Gellner, E.	4	Basaglia, F.	1	Litt, T.	1
Goffman, E.	4	Baudelaire, C.	1	Lohmann, G.	1
Klein, W.	4	Bauer, O.	1	Loubser, J. J.	1
Lévi-Strauss, C.	4	Baxter	1	Luxemburg, R.	1
Lidz, V. M.	4	Bell, D.	1	McHugh, P.	1
Plato	4	Bennet, J.	1	Maxwell	1

Table 1.—continued

Menzies, K.	1	Reichenbach, H.	1	Stammler, O.	1
Mill, J.	1	Renner, K.	1	Stenius, E.	1
Millar, J.	1	Riesmann, D.	1	Strauss, A.	1
Mills, C. W.	1	Rose, A. M.	1	Thomas, W. I.	1
Misch, G.	1	Rothacker, E.	1	Thompson, E. P.	1
Mohl, R. v.	1	Rotteck, K. v.	1	Tillich, P.	1
Mommsen, W.	1	Saussure, F. de	1	Tönnies, F.	1
Morgenstern	1	Savigny, F. W. J. v.	1	Troeltsch, E.	1
Needham, J.	1	Schiffer, S. R.	1	Turner, R. H.	1
Norman, R.	1	Schiller, F.	1	Taylor, E. B.	1
Olbrechts-Tyteca, L.	1	Schmitt, C.	1	Uexkull, J. v.	1
Orwell, G.	1	Schumpeter, J. A.	1	Vanini, L. da	1
Perelman, C.	1	Shapera (Schapera, I.)	1	Wehler, U.	1
Pischas, R.	1	Smend, R.	1	Weiss, J.	1
Planck, M.	1	Sohn-Rethel, A.	1	Whitehead, A. N.	1
Polanyi, K.	1	Socrates	1	Wright, G. H. v.	1
Pollock, F.	1	Spinoza, B. de	1	Wunderlich, D.	1
Ranke, L. v.	1	Stahl, F. J.	1	Zimmermann, D. H.	1
Rawls, J.	1				

affected to such an extent by the curious delicacy of successive positive and negative evaluations, that the crucial *differences* between the quoted authors tend to *diminish* in the reader's reception of the text, no matter whether they originate primarily from cultural, ideological, or disciplinary factors.

The total score of the authors quoted in the index of the 1981 edition amounts to 220. In comparing the scores for different names it should be noted that, on many occasions, the printed numbers are *understated*, because numbers followed by 'ff.' omit those pages where the text implies, but does not name, the author in question. The upper range of the table accentuates the familiar eclectic blend of Habermas's most favoured sources. We can see now that it is Parsons (180), rather than Weber (140), who has the highest rank. Durkheim (76), Mead (75) and Marx (69) follow at quite a distance, with Horkheimer (60), Adorno (54) and Lukács (48) on a still lower level of the scale. The common feature of these names is their distinctive relevance for *sociological* inquiry. Prestigious *philosophers*, on the other hand, show somewhat lower scores: Hegel (37), Kant (34) and Wittgenstein (23). Marginally important philosophers, such as Heidegger, Dilthey, Aristotle and Locke, emerge in the table below the level of 10 scores.

Equally surprising is the following result. While in a conventional content analysis it is common practice to disregard the lowest level of scores, the plain fact that there are no fewer than 125 *single-page* scores cannot easily be ignored, for they include Augustine, Descartes, Humboldt, Hume, Leibniz, Rawls and even Socrates: 'Knowing that one does not know has, since Socrates, rightly been regarded as the basis of self-knowledge' (TCA, 1987: 75). As one would expect, such off-hand citations are addressed to an audience of professional philosophers who are familiar with the concept of 'self-knowledge' and therefore tend to argue

that there is virtually no difference between the ancient and the modern forms of logical or semantic paradoxes.²

Finally, apart from demonstrating the unprecedented scope of Habermas's intellectual interests, extending from classical and linguistic philosophy to formal logic, economics, law, classical physics, theology, literary criticism and so on, the abundance of single-page scores raises the difficult issue of what I propose to call 'significant omissions'. There are *five* undoubtedly important sociologists who are never mentioned *at all*, not even in the single-page column: *Mannheim, Elias, Lazarsfeld, Merton* and *Dahrendorf*! As regards Mannheim and Elias we have to remember that during the heydays of the old 'Critical Theory' at Frankfurt University in 1930–3 there existed a silent, yet deeply rooted *ideological* hostility between Horkheimer and Adorno on the one hand, and the Mannheim circle – which included Norbert Elias, Adolph Löwe and Hans Gerth – on the other.³ More difficult to explain is the omission of Lazarsfeld, Merton and Dahrendorf. My guess is that in Habermas's view their achievement in sociological theory is to such an extent based on *empirical* studies that they cannot be accommodated within his double-edged system of evaluation. That is to say, the *negative* part of the assessment would have to be elaborate and forceful rather than discursive and open-minded.

2 THE INTUITIVE SOURCES OF HABERMAS'S SCHEMES

In contrast to the foregoing biographical approach, the following section aims at an analysis of the logical foundations of the *TCA*. More specifically, I shall examine the method by which the graphical diagrams, vaguely called 'conceptual schemes', have been constructed. In the secondary literature⁴ it is widely assumed that the diagrams are used for *didactic* purposes, i.e. to make the sophisticated verbal text accessible to undergraduates. But this is a mistake. The truth is that without the diagrams the whole theory would break down. What is obscure is the *method* through which its construction has been worked out. On a closer scrutiny it will be seen that this method derives from a set of statements which philosophers of mathematics call '*intuitive* knowledge' (Steiner, 1975: 122–30). It manifests itself in two forms: our knowledge of *numbers* (i.e. counting) and of geometrical (i.e. two-dimensional) *space*. In each case the philosophical problem is to explain how we ever obtain such knowledge without recourse to empirical sense experience. Putting the technical issue of numbers aside for the moment, there can be no doubt that Habermas's graphical diagrams are created intuitively. Ironically, in his own terminology this means they have no 'rational' foundation, although in logical terms their credibility may be unquestionable.

Before I proceed to a more technical discussion, I want to spell out four

implications of the mathematical point of view which are likely to be overlooked by sociological theorists.

1. The systematic use of visual schemes implies a *much higher level of abstraction* than we commonly associate with a general, classical, or critical theory presented in verbal statements.
2. As all of Habermas's schemes are *timeless*, they cannot encompass any form of cultural, historical, or ideological differentiation.
3. The timelessness of the *TCA* schemes makes it logically impossible to replace or supplement the drawings by a *tabular* presentation of concepts, for the use of numbers inevitably invokes a temporal sequence.
4. A timeless theory can be neither disproved, nor supported, by empirical observations.

Advanced students of social theory will probably at first adopt a sceptical attitude towards the diagrams, but soon realize that they are indispensable to the validity of the whole project. After all, there are 40 of them, and they are numbered consecutively: Figures 1–19 are shown in the first volume and Figures 20–40 in the second. Could there be an implicit element of progression in the sequence? We can see that Volume I begins with a *4-cell* scheme and ends with a *12-cell* scheme, while Volume II eventually arrives at a *32-cell* scheme. However, apart from the obvious drift towards increasing complexity (which Habermas connects with the growing 'differentiation' of social systems), there are also important, yet unexplained, changes in the lineal composition of the schemes. In order to identify these, we have to look first of all at the *verbal* text which accompanies the drawings.

The 4-cell scheme of Figure 1 is introduced on p. 4 (Vol. I) in a seemingly tentative manner: 'If I may – for illustrative purposes and, for the time being, without further elaboration – refer to the schema of functions proposed by Parsons . . .'. This statement is followed by a simplified drawing of Parsons' famous 1953 *AGIL* diagram, representing four main 'functional problems' of social systems, i.e. Adaptation, Goal-attainment, Integration and Latency.⁵ Although the Parsonian method of (multiple) *dyadic* diagrams is frequently used throughout the two volumes, its logical derivation is never discussed. As a first

Table 2. Combination of two dichotomies in the *Parsonian* method

		<i>Instrumental</i>	<i>Consummatory</i>	
	A			G
External		Adaptation	Goal-attainment	
Internal		Latency	Integration	
	L			I

step, the combination of just two dichotomies, external vs. internal and instrumental vs. consummatory, can be shown without recourse to a diagram (Table 2). The graphical reproduction (Figure 1) is quoted from Brownstein (1982: 56–7; emphases added).

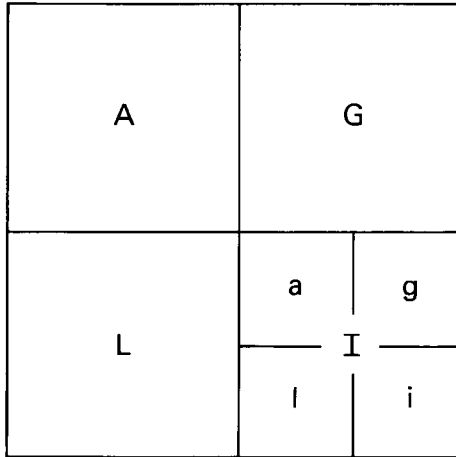


Figure 1. Box diagram of the levels of subsystem relations, illustrating Brownstein's description of the central guiding metaphor of Talcott Parsons' general theory of action: A, Adaptation, G, Goal-attainment, L, Latency, and the subdivided I, Integration (after Brownstein, 1982: 56–7).

. . . to grasp the central guiding metaphor of Parsons' general theory of action, it is necessary to appreciate the role that the subsystem hierarchy . . . plays in this more general framework. The fundamental structure of the subsystem hierarchy is conceived to be that of a tree, generated by a set of decomposition functions. . . [Readers] acquainted with Parsons' work will no doubt have encountered his ubiquitous box diagrams [illustrated in Figure 1]. The largest box has been subdivided into quadrants, labelled A, G, I and L, respectively. The I quadrant is further subdivided and this also into quadrants, labelled a, g, i and l. . . For technical reasons, Parsons' box diagram can be replaced, without loss of generality, by what are called '*tree diagrams*' with dots playing the role of the boxes, as shown [in Figure 2]. The topmost dot in this diagram corresponds to the largest (that is, the most *inclusive*) box in the box diagram.

Brownstein's discovery of the hidden *hierarchical* 'tree' structure underlying the Parsonian method of dyadic schemes has important epistemological consequences for a critical evaluation of the way in which Habermas has used a similar method for his own graphical diagrams. The evident resemblance of the

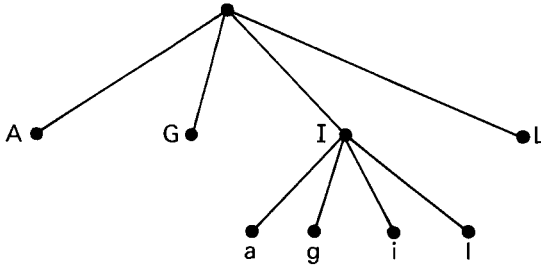


Figure 2. Tree diagram of the levels of subsystem relations, illustrating the tree structure underlying Parsons' method of dyadic schemes (after Brownstein, 1982: 56–7).

framework of Habermas's theory of communicative action to that of Parsons' general theory of action tells us that both projects are equally confined to *timeless* two-dimensional compositions. No matter how complex or differentiated the schemes become as a result of successive subdivisions, they can never capture developmental (or 'evolutionary') processes. And this means they are unable to encompass cultural, ideological and institutional changes over time (Baldamus, 1976: 114; 1988: 248).

It is therefore hardly surprising that both Parsons and Habermas employ additional *intuitive* devices to bypass the stationary horizon of two-dimensional schemes. Parsons – who, unlike Habermas, is aware of these limitations – adheres explicitly to a fixed *sequential* order of the AGIL pattern: A comes before G, G before I, and I before L. Another non-stationary device is the insertion of horizontal and vertical *arrows* into his 16-cell and 24-cell AGIL diagrams (see Hamilton, 1983: 120). Habermas's attempts to escape from the void of timeless figures are more complicated, although, unlike Parsons, he is less concerned about the excessive abstractness of his method. After all, his long-term goal is to lay the foundations for a social theory with *universal* validity claims. There are several methodological innovations by which he tries to eliminate the stationary boundaries of the AGIL conception.

Thus in all his major diagrams he replaces Parsons' multiple dyadic cells by a *single basic* dyad. This has the shape of a 'frame' in which the most crucial element is a rectangle (or square), located in the left upper corner, that is divided *diagonally* into two triangles. The first example of the two-branch tree diagram is his Figure 2 (Vol. I: 204) entitled 'Religious-Metaphysical Worldviews According to Their Typical Contents'. To get hold of the immediate visual impact of this figure, we should ignore the verbal inscriptions and focus on the shape of its construction.

The most evident message of this diagram (Figure 3) is the fact that the nine quadrangles are of equal size and hence of equal importance to its explanatory purpose. It is also obvious that changing the overall size of the drawing would not affect the equality of the nine components. Nor would it make any difference

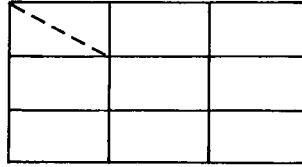


Figure 3. Underlying construction of Habermas's single basic dyad frame (after *TCA*, Vol. I: Figure 2).

if the quadrangles were arranged vertically instead of horizontally. Furthermore, in the case of lengthy inscriptions, one could replace them by letters or symbolic notations. Yet, all these characteristics can be altered by one very simple (and seemingly trivial) operation, that is, by inserting a *diagonal* into the left upper quadrangle and thereby splitting it into two *triangles* of equal size. In the next drawing (Figure 4) I have marked these triangles as A and B, and this signifies that A *defines* the nature of the two adjoining *horizontal* quadrangles a and b, while B refers to the *vertical* quadrangles x and y. In other words, we are now looking at a 'tree' diagram in which A and B represent two 'branches'. Alternatively the two imaginary axes may be visualized as a (conceptual) 'frame'. The remaining four boxes inside that frame are marked c, d, e and f. To highlight the contrast between the A/B frame and the innermost boxes I have used broad and fine lines (Figure 4).

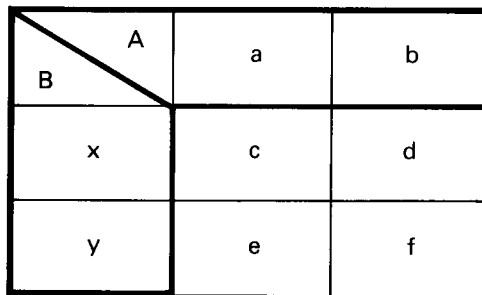


Figure 4. Structure of the A and B branches of Habermas's tree diagram (after *TCA*, Vol. I: Figure 2).

There can be little doubt that Habermas's invention of the diagonally divided quadrangle ranks among his most daring ventures. The immediate effect of the triangular division is to undermine the *spatial* properties of the frame, because the conceptual inclusiveness of the triangles A and B is now only one half of a, b, x, or y. But it is also possible to remove the spatial nature of the triangles altogether by treating them as no more than a notational addendum. At this point we have to scrutinize the *verbal* content of the diagram (Figure 4, *TCA*, Vol. I: 204, reproduced here as my Figure 5).

Conceptual strategies Evaluation of the world as a whole	Theocentric	Cosmocentric
World affirmation	—	Confucianism Taoism
World rejection	Judaism Christianity Islam	Buddhism Hinduism

Figure 5. Religious-metaphysical world-views according to their typical contents (after *TCA*, Vol. I: Figure 4).

Undoubtedly, the key word of the title is the concept of 'World-views'. On the next lower level of abstraction we find 'Conceptual strategies' and 'Evaluation of the world as a whole'. Then follow the two dyads, 'Theocentric' vs. 'Cosmocentric' and 'World affirmation' vs. 'World rejection'. The remaining four cells (Confucianism, etc.) represent the lowest degree of abstractness. Surprisingly, one of these is empty; that would have to be a world-view in which a *Theocentric* strategy is combined with an *Affirmative* evaluation. Should it be the case that such a denomination is unlikely to exist (or even unthinkable), then the logical construction of the whole scheme might be questionable. For an adequate treatment of the problem we have to take notice of its – impenetrable – *Weberian* background. The text which surrounds the scheme is entitled 'The Disenchantment of Religious-Metaphysical Worldviews and the Emergence of Modern Structures of Consciousness' and this section forms the second part of Chapter II, called 'Weber's Theory of Rationalisation'. It is well known that Weber's extensive, fragmented and unfinished exploration of the *history* of ancient religions turned out to be too ambiguous and unwieldy to fit his methodological and theoretical pursuits and I see no need to revisit these issues. But there is one remarkable characteristic of Weber's religious work which might account for the empty box seen in my Figure 5. That is the extraordinary *concreteness* of his empirical description of the ways and means through which religious sentiments encroach on particular institutional, cultural, economic, political and military developments. Though all of this would be potentially relevant to any mode of theocentric world affirmation, it is far too complex to be incorporated into the scheme, not even on its lowest level of abstraction (cf. Gerth and Mills, 1947: Chapter XIII, 323 ff.).

3 HOLISTIC TRIADS: A BLIND ALLEY

A cursory glance at the 40 diagrams may give the impression that Habermas, like Parsons and his followers, constructed his schemes solely by using *dyadic* divisions and subdivisions. But this is not the case. There are *three* (interlocked) diagrams (*TCA*, Volume II: Figures 21, 22, 23) which are distinctly *triadic*. Each one has a frame of three horizontal and three vertical quadrangles, resulting in a total of 27 boxes! Together they depict an (undefined) phenomenon which is called 'the Lifeworld'. As usual, he refrains from giving the reader any account of his method of construction. Hence it seems appropriate to offer a few guidelines before I discuss the methodological implications of this invention. It is common practice in classical mathematics to define a triad as '*holistic*' when it presents an entity '*that is larger than the sum of its parts*' (cf. Hofstadter, 1979: 254, 284, 311–36; Steiner, 1975: 123–30). A persistent tendency towards arguing by recourse to such triads is called 'holism', in contrast to the 'reductionist' addiction to dichotomies. The vivid vocabulary of 'life', 'world' and 'lifeworld' (which is rooted in the phenomenological tradition of Husserl and Schütz) seems ideally suited for expressing holistic persuasions.⁶ Yet there are problems, as will be seen in a moment.

Owing to the striking prevalence of triadic patterns, it is easily overlooked that the basic *frame* of the three Lifeworld schemes *still* adheres to the *dyadic* split of the left upper quadrangle. In each scheme the *horizontal* branch is labelled 'Culture', 'Society' and 'Personality'. These concepts represent the '*Structural components*' of the lifeworld. The *vertical* branch contains the corresponding '*Reproduction processes*' of the lifeworld: 'Cultural reproduction', 'Social integration' and 'Socialisation'. In the three successive drawings (pp. 142, 143 and 144) the two-branch construction is accentuated by highlighting three quadrangles across the diagonal of *each* scheme (as in my Figure 6).

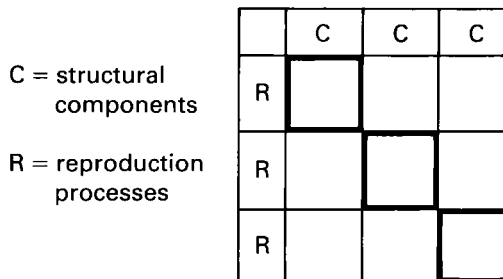


Figure 6. The two-branch construction of Habermas's triadic diagrams (see *TCA*, Vol. I: Figures 21–3).

Certainly the aesthetic symmetry and the captivating novelty of this invention come as a relief after the preceding thirty pages of difficult epistemological reflections on the concept of the lifeworld. Here we are assured that ‘the formal-pragmatic analysis aims at structures that, in contrast to the historical shapes of particular lifeworlds and life-forms, are put forward as *invariant*. . . . Thus we can take up questions that have previously been dealt with in the framework of transcendental philosophy’ (p. 119; emphases added). Even so the task of grasping the relevance of ‘pragmatic’ designations to their location in the formal apparatus of the diagrams does not come easy. The first step along this path is to compare the *titles* of the three schemes: Figure 21, ‘Contributions of *Reproduction* Processes to Maintaining the Structural Components of the Lifeworld’; Figure 22, ‘Manifestations of *Crisis* when Reproduction Processes are Disturbed’; Figure 23, ‘Reproductive Functions of *Action* Oriented to Mutual Understanding’ (emphases added). This shows that each scheme deals with the reproduction of lifeworlds even when the term lifeworld is not explicitly mentioned, while the focal difference between the titles is indicated by the keywords ‘Reproduction’, ‘Crisis’ and ‘Action’. The next step is to obtain the connections between the 27 descriptive boxes and the surrounding frame. Since most of the descriptive terminology is suggestive rather than explanatory, it takes a certain amount of practice in getting used to the tacit interplay of different levels of abstraction. Moreover there is one quite extraordinary complication that no amount of practice can possibly cope with. This is caused by the silent addition of a *third* branch to the dyadic frame! The new branch emerges as a vertical column on the right-hand side of the *Crisis* diagram (my Figure 7).

Components Disturbed reproduction	Culture	Society	Person	? Impaired evaluation
Disturbed cultural reproduction	Loss of meaning	Withdrawal of legitimation	Crisis in orientation and education	Rationality of knowledge

Figure 7. The addition of a third branch to Habermas’s triadic diagrams (see *TCA*, Vol. I: Figure 22)

The first difficulty which this operation creates is its inevitable repercussion on the entire system of fundamentally dyadic schemes. As we have seen before, *all* the geometrical diagrams are two-dimensional. Do we now have to face the methodological perils of a *three-dimensional* topology? Above all, how do we cope with the problem of cultural *temporality*? No longer will it be possible to make do with a *tacit* conception of temporal processes like ‘crisis’, ‘reproduction’, ‘maintenance’, ‘integration’, ‘socialization’, etc. As far as I can tell, only one critic of the *TCA* has taken notice of the *empty* triangle in the Crisis diagram (Figure 7): in his delightfully whimsical elaboration of the lifeworld ‘thicket’, Ulf Matthesen (1985: 165, n. 21) suggests that the ‘empty box’ of the Crisis scheme indicates not merely a description of observable minor disturbances in cultural reproduction, but a *validity* crisis of *all* cross-tabulation schemes.

Matthesen’s suggestion is the product of an epistemological critique of Habermas’s (1981) sociological lifeworld thesis, derived from Husserl’s renowned phenomenological philosophy of the late 1930s. Interestingly, the leitmotiv of this elaborate undertaking is the triad ‘Krisis, Kritik und Welt’ (pp. 16–19). An alternative *sociological* analysis can be obtained by applying the notion of ‘crisis’ specifically to the *academic* lifeworld, in contrast to the conventional lifeworld of ordinary people. Along this path of a pervasive *self-awareness* the empty upper triangle of the Crisis scheme should be labelled ‘Cultural components’ and the lower triangle ‘Disturbed evaluation’, in the sense of the growing fragmentation and dissolution throughout the academic community.⁷ The most illuminating clue for confronting the current situation consciously is the term ‘Rationality of knowledge’ in the vertical column of the diagram (Figure 7), because this can now be understood as a latent impairment of cognitive rationality throughout modern science. However, to expose the problem adequately, Habermas’s misadventure into holistic triads will have to be replaced by a *dichotomous* perspective which can be focused on the interdependence between cumulative *cognitive* and *institutional* differentiation processes.

4 COVERT SPATIO-TEMPORAL PERCEPTIONS

A backward glance at the most characteristic features of the *TCA* shows that it is above all the pervasive use of dyadic conceptual frames which is bound to appeal to sociological theorists. Without this elaborate and aesthetically pleasing groundwork, an effective communication between Habermas and a non-philosophical audience would be impossible, if only on account of the insuperable complexities of his verbal reasoning. Yet – as we have seen – the inevitable drawback of this excessively abstract procedure is the *timeless* horizon of two-dimensional schemes. It is therefore important to realize that, paradoxically, all of Habermas’s paradigmatic concepts are covert *spatio-temporal* expressions (cf. the index of Volume II: 439–47) reproduced here as Table 3.

Table 3. Paradigmatic concepts of *TCA* (1987)

bureaucratization of capitalism	legitimation of normative structures
colonization of the lifeworld	legitimation of power
communicative action in formal organizations	lifeworld technicizing
cultural reproduction	linguistification of the sacred
deinstitutionalization of formal intercourse	loss of freedom
de-worlding (<i>Entweltlichung</i>) of communicative action	loss of meaning
differentiation of the lifeworld	monetarization of labour power
differentiation of systems	pacification of class conflict
differentiation of validity claims	rationalization of the lifeworld
emergence of steering media	reification in welfare state
institutionalization of steering media	secularization of moral consciousness
internalization of cultural values	socialization
juridification of law	system differentiation
	system integration
	systemic crisis

The intuitive source of this terminology manifests an opaque image of *imperceptibly* slow changes over time of what is broadly called 'postmodern', 'postliberal', 'posttraditional', 'postconventional' or 'late capitalist' society. In my judgement it is precisely the *slowness* of all those spatio-temporal processes which accounts for much of the apparent plausibility of the fictitious two-dimensional schemes.

One way of exposing the concealed temporality of the relevant expressions is to consider their long-term *directionality*. However elusive the idea of 'rational' conduct or thought may be when it is applied to a single person, it is clear that the collective process of rationalization is *directed* towards an overall *increase* in rationality. A lasting decline, reversal, or disappearance of this attribute of modern society is unthinkable for Habermas. Equally irreversible is the phenomenon of differentiation in its various forms (lifeworlds, systems, subsystems, etc.). And as regards the more conventional concepts like bureaucratization, institutionalization, juridification, secularization and socialization, the directional force and long-term continuity of such processes is undeniable. Why then is it so desperately important to Habermas's project to employ a strategy which *conceals* the basic temporality of any societal process of change? A systematic treatment of this question in the manner of a historical inquiry would probably end with several answers, reflecting the trend of Habermas's interests. For the moment the most palpable and relatively simple answer is that an explicit concern with societal change has to include *empirically* observable processes.

Nevertheless, one should not overlook the fact that the main features of

Habermas's project originated twenty years ago; so now, even in his *own* view, they must be to some extent obsolete or out of date. A suitably revised second edition of the *TCA* is unlikely to be produced because it could not possibly cope with the massive growth and the confusing diversity of the secondary literature. This applies particularly to the laborious task of rearranging the graphical material of the two volumes wherever its validity has been disputed. If, for example, there has been a recurrent opposition, with good reasons, to holistic diagrams, they could not simply be left out of the new edition. Another problem which would have to be faced is the way in which the excessive abstractness of the *TCA* has been shaken by the underhand use of pragmatic spatio-temporal perceptions (e.g. 'bureaucratization', etc.). At least a glimmer of having recognized the *threat* of this vocabulary to the potential of timeless theorems seems to emerge from the last paragraph of the second volume (1987: 403; the emphases occur in the German original, but not in the English translation):

A theory of society that claims universality for its basic concepts, without being allowed simply to bring them to bear upon their object in a conventional manner, remains caught up in the self-referentiality that Marx demonstrated in connection with the concept of abstract labor. . . . The theory of modernity that I have here sketched in broad strokes permits us to recognize the following: In modern societies there is such an expansion of the scope of contingency for interaction loosed from normative contexts that the inner logic of communicative action 'becomes practically true' in the deinstitutionalized forms of intercourse of the familial private sphere as well as in a public sphere stamped by the mass media. At the same time, the systemic imperatives of autonomous subsystems penetrate into the lifeworld and, through monetarization and bureaucratization, force an assimilation of communicative action to formally organized domains of action. . . . It may be that this provocative threat, this challenge that places the symbolic structures of the lifeworld *as a whole* in question, can account for why they have become accessible *to us*.

Of course the phenomenal slowness of long-term change is bound to create new epistemological problems for the status of sociology. The most pressing issue is to explain the apparent slowness of *reputational obsolescence*, in contrast to the fast growth of theoretical innovations. Habermas – as we have noted on p. 101 above – captures this obscure difference by comparing the enduring reputation of Marx, Weber, Durkheim and Mead with the fading prestige of mathematical physicists (from Newton to Planck). Ironically, Weber himself would never have agreed with this optimistic vision of the future:

In Science, each of us knows that what he has accomplished will be antiquated in ten, twenty, fifty years. That is the fate to which science is subjected; it is the very *meaning* of scientific work. . . . Every scientific 'fulfilment' raises new 'questions'; it *asks* to be 'surpassed' and outdated.

(‘Science as a Vocation’, lecture at Munich University, 1918; translated by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, 1947)

NOTES

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- 1 Habermas uses the term ‘paradigm’ without any compunction about its dubious career. Invented by Ludwik Fleck in 1935 (see Baldamus, 1976: viii–x), it was appropriated by Thomas Kuhn in his *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) (cf. Kuhn, 1979: vii–xi), but remorselessly abandoned in 1985 (see Scott, 1985: 11–12).
- 2 For a brief account of the role of logical paradoxes in the history of mathematics see Stewart (1987: 54–63) and Wilder (1981: 81 f.). A more comprehensive treatment of paradoxical ‘self-knowledge’, ‘self-reference’, ‘self-replication’, etc., is offered by Hofstadter (1979: 316 f., 384–8, 431–7 and passim).
- 3 The precarious position of Norbert Elias *inside* the Mannheim circle from 1928 onwards is vividly traced by Korte (1988: 99 ff.). This study is also a landmark as a historical investigation of the political situation at Frankfurt University during the Nazi era.
- 4 See: Alexander (1985), Brand (1990), Honneth (1986), Matthiesen (1985), Misgeld (1984), Pusey (1987), Rockmore (1989), Thompson and Held (1992), Weymann (1990), and White (1988).
- 5 cf. Hamilton (1983: 107).
- 6 On the history of holism cf. Koestler (1972: 233–48), Köhler (1971), Smuts (1926/1978).
- 7 See Barnett (1991: 16), Lazarsfeld (1973: 36 f., 57–64), Matthiesen (1985: 165 f.), Stehr and Meja (1984: 1–18), Tenbruck (1975: 19–47), Williams (1990: 49–51). Although today Tenbruck’s ‘law’ of cognitive trivialization may seem overstated, one must not overlook that he applied it primarily to the *natural* sciences.

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