

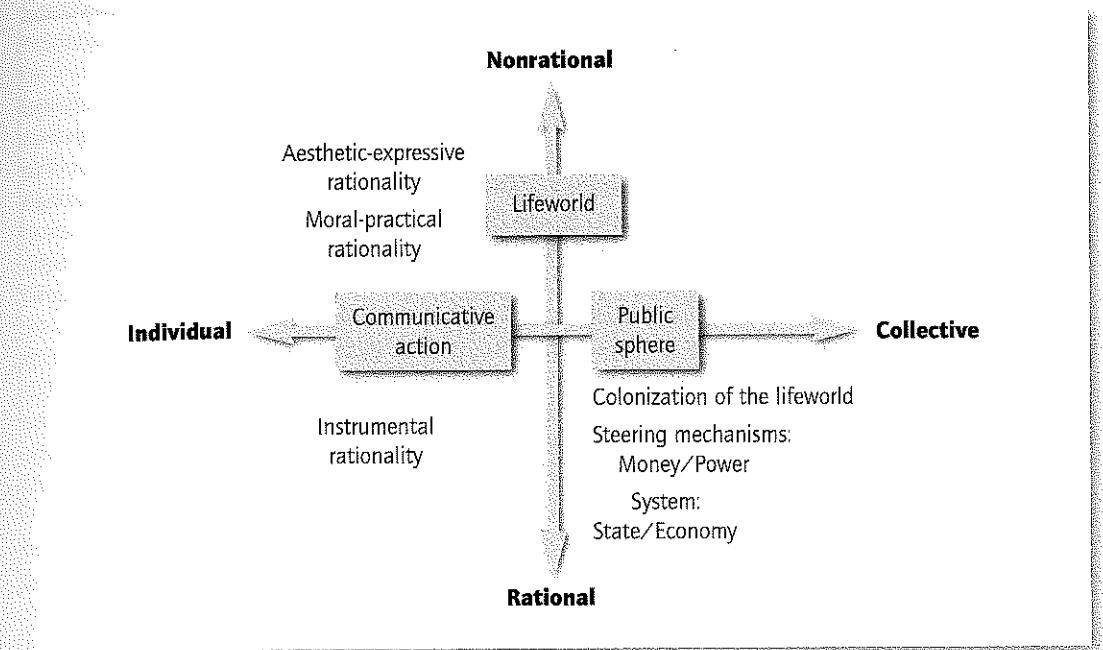
With regard to the issue of action, Habermas's multidimensional approach is most apparent in his discussion of rationality (see Table 3.1). This model clearly reflects that action can be motivated by a number of factors. First, instrumental rationality refers to the means/ends calculations in which individuals seek to optimize the benefits that are likely to be reaped from pursuing a particular course of action. This entails a rational or technical approach to the social and physical world that asks *how* a given goal can be achieved most efficiently. Conversely, Habermas's discussion of moral-practical rationality and aesthetic-expressive rationality speaks to nonrational motivating forces. A different set of motivating questions is raised to the extent that these forms of reasoning guide our actions. Instead of asking "how" or "if" a line of action can be profitably pursued, our behaviors are governed by normative considerations that lead us to ask *why* we should carry out a course of action. Our determinations of whether or not we *ought* to pursue a given line of conduct are grounded not in an evaluation of facts, but rather in normative prescriptions for behavior that are not subject to empirical proof. Such prescriptions are instead embedded in the traditions and customs of a given culture.

Habermas's notion of communicative action is premised on the conviction that human emancipation is not possible as long as one form of reasoning dominates another. In an ideal, democratic society, both rational and nonrational forms of reasoning would motivate an individual's actions. That is, in order to be truly progressive, our actions must satisfy technical requirements for efficiency as well as normative requirements for "rightness" and authenticity. Yet modern societies have fallen short of the democratic ideal of mutual understanding based on the full range of motivating forces. Individuals remain dominated by seemingly autonomous forces that have corrupted their capacity to reason.

In terms of the question of order (that is, "What accounts for the routines and patterns of behavior through which social life appears, and is experienced as, orderly and predictable?"), Habermas again devises a multidimensional approach. While he holds on to the promise of a future society ordered on the basis of individually negotiated communication action, this condition, as well as all other forms of interaction, is dependent on the evolutionary stage of the relationship between the system and the lifeworld. Thus, Habermas contends that the distortion of consciousness—the unfreedom—that plagues modern individuals is a result of the steering media of economic and political systems colonizing the lifeworld and its framework of shared meanings and norms. Economic and political systems operate according to their own impersonal logic that confronts individuals as an abstract, amorphous force that largely defies their ability to control their own destinies. In short, modern society is ordered less by the ongoing negotiation of meanings through which the world is made and remade than by the imperatives of collectivist structures that shape the nature of social interaction. Indeed, it is this very condition that Habermas seeks to dismantle through his reviving of critical theory and reinvigorating of the public sphere.

It is important to note, however, that Habermas's perspective by no means overlooks the individualist dimension. Incorporating both collectivist and individualist dimensions is an essential element in his theoretical system. His twin notions of system integration and social integration and his emphasis on the lifeworld are aimed precisely at understanding the (distorted) ways in which individuals construct their personal and collective identities, negotiate meanings, and, in the process, create and re-create the social order. The social order is produced and reproduced as individuals coordinate their actions through processes of reaching understanding mediated within the lifeworld. In providing the symbolic resources for making sense of the world, the lifeworld establishes a horizon of possibilities that places "internal limitations" on the reproduction of society. Such interpretive possibilities and limitations are formed within the minds of individuals and thus are not determined by the functional "needs" of the system. At the same time, however, actions are interconnected by system mechanisms that "are not intended by [individuals] and are usually not even perceived within the horizon of everyday practice" (1981/1987:150).

Figure 3.4 Habermas's Basic Concepts and Theoretical Orientation



## Readings

In the selections that follow, you are presented with two key works from Jürgen Habermas. The first is an essay entitled "Civil Society, Public Opinion, and Communicative Power," in which Habermas outlines the key characteristics of the public sphere, its role in promoting discussion and debate, and the forces that impair its efficacy and corrupt the communicative processes ushering from the lifeworld. The second selection, "The Tasks of a Critical Theory of Society," finds Habermas extending these ideas, exploring the growing tensions that emerge between the system and the lifeworld, and the colonization of the latter by delinguistified steering media rooted in the system. Together, these selections offer a set of ideas that examine the obstacles that jeopardize the realization of the emancipatory project embraced by Enlightenment thinkers, and a vision of hope for democracy in contemporary societies.

### Introduction to "Civil Society, Public Opinion, and Communicative Power"

In the essay "Civil Society, Public Opinion, and Communicative Power," Habermas investigates the connections among the public sphere, the formation of public opinion, and the effectiveness of democratic politics. The public sphere serves as a "sounding board" or "warning system" that alerts the political system to pressing social problems. It is not an organization or institution, but rather a "social space" or "network" that is created and reproduced through communicative action. These spaces can take the form of "episodic"

publics found, for instance, in cafés and on the street; “occasional” publics that meet for specific events, such as church group meetings, annual conventions, or political protests and rallies; or “abstract” publics consisting of isolated individuals who are “brought together” through their shared consumption of mass media.

As a space for opinion formation, the public sphere is not itself invested with political power, yet within its borders actors engage in a struggle over the ability to shape public opinion in order to catapult an issue into official, institutionalized political bodies. For public opinion to be transformed into effective political power it must first pass “through the filters of institutionalized *procedures* of democratic opinion- and will-formation and [enter] through parliamentary debates into legitimate lawmaking” (Habermas 1992/1996:371). These procedures are, in effect, “rules of a *shared* practice of communication” that determine the “quality” or “success” of public opinion. They require that consensus on an issue “*develops* only as a result of more or less exhaustive controversy in which proposals, information, and reasons can be more or less rationally dealt with” (ibid.:362; emphasis in original). As a result, not all opinions are equally qualified to *convince* the public of their relevance. The public sphere is thus a crucial space for fostering democracy, since its egalitarian public alone possesses the final authority to certify the salience and comprehensibility of publicly voiced opinions.

However, the democratic potential inherent in the public sphere is subject to distortion from at least two sources. First, money and organizational power are capable of manipulating the process of public opinion formation so long as their use remains hidden from public view. Once the general public becomes aware of a previously undeclared infusion of money and power, public opinions developed and made visible by such resources lose their credibility. Certainly, the public uproar sparked by news stories detailing the illicit actions of interest groups and lobbyists and the behind-the-scene efforts of corporations and government officials attempting to shape public opinion reminds us that “public opinion can be manipulated, but neither publicly bought nor publicly blackmailed” (ibid.: 364).

A second threat to the democratically formed public sphere stems from journalism and the mass media. In a mass media-dominated public sphere such as our own, journalists and media executives act as gatekeepers for the flow of information. Through their decisions about what is newsworthy, they determine the topics and the viewpoints that are disseminated to the mass audience. As a result, they have become increasingly powerful in the world of public opinion formation. Moreover, as the mass media become increasingly complex and expensive, avenues of communication become more centralized and consolidated within a few media conglomerates. Groups that are peripheral to the organized political system or that do not possess significant resources have become less able to influence media programming. As Habermas notes, this problem is compounded for those groups whose messages “do not fall inside the ‘balanced,’ that is, the centrist and rather narrowly defined, spectrum of ‘established opinions’ dominating the programs of the electronic media” (ibid.:377). In addition, the profit-driven market strategies that steer media programming lead to an oversimplification or watering down of information—infotainment—that “works to depoliticize public communication” (ibid.). Yet Habermas claims that despite the public sphere’s apparent undermining, as soon as a “crisis consciousness” develops within the public sphere, the balance of power shifts as actors press for solutions to relevant social problems.

The crucial question now is whether or not a crisis consciousness is capable of developing in light of political and legal events that have amplified the dangers posed by these two threats, further eroding what remains of the public sphere and our democracy. Perhaps most significant in this regard are the Federal Communications Commission’s December 2007 decision that overturned a 30-year restriction preventing media corporations from owning both a major TV or radio station and a major daily newspaper in one city, and the Supreme Court’s January 2010 ruling in *Citizens United* that struck down certain limits on corporate spending in political elections as violations of corporations’ First Amendment right to free speech. With the Court’s

new ruling, corporations now have the right as “individuals” to advocate directly for or against specific candidates through the unrestricted purchasing of advertising time and space. More recently, in 2014, the Court, in *McCutcheon v. Federal Election Commission*, struck down as unconstitutional a decades-old law that capped the total amount individuals can contribute to candidates for federal offices in a two-year election cycle. Previously, individuals were limited to contributing a total \$48,600 every two years for all federal candidates and \$74,600 to political party committees. Now, individuals who can afford to do so are free to spend as much as they like on elections. Such decisions suggest that the distortion of the democratic potential inherent in the public sphere is being championed by our own “democratic” government through its expansion of the role that corporate money and power can play in shaping the “will of the people.”

## “Civil Society, Public Opinion, and Communicative Power” (1996)

Jürgen Habermas

I have described the political public sphere as a sounding board for problems that must be processed by the political system because they cannot be solved elsewhere. To this extent, the public sphere is a warning system with sensors that, though unspecialized, are sensitive throughout society. From the perspective of democratic theory, the public sphere must, in addition, amplify the pressure of problems, that is not only detect and identify problems but also convincingly and *influentially* thematize them, furnish them with possible solutions, and dramatize them in such a way that they are taken up and dealt with by parliamentary complexes. Besides the “signal” function, there must be an effective problematization. The capacity of the public sphere to solve problems *on its own* is limited. But this capacity must be utilized to oversee the further treatment of problems that takes place inside the political system. . . .

I

The public sphere is a social phenomenon just as elementary as action, actor, association, or collectivity, but it eludes the conventional sociological concepts of “social order.” The public sphere cannot be conceived as an institution

and certainly not as an organization. It is not even a framework of norms with differentiated competences and roles, membership regulations, and so on. Just as little does it represent a system; although it permits one to draw international boundaries, outwardly it is characterized by open, permeable, and shifting horizons. The public sphere can best be described as a network for communicating information and points of view (i.e., opinions expressing affirmative or negative attitudes); the streams of communication are, in the process, filtered and synthesized in such a way that they coalesce into bundles of topically specified *public* opinions. Like the lifeworld as a whole, so, too, the public sphere is reproduced through communicative action, for which mastery of a natural language suffices; it is tailored to the *general comprehensibility* of everyday communicative practice. We have become acquainted with the “lifeworld” as a reservoir for simple interactions; specialized systems of action and knowledge that are differentiated within the lifeworld remain tied to these interactions. These systems fall into one of two categories. Systems like religion, education, and the family become associated with general reproductive functions of the lifeworld (that is, with cultural reproduction, social integration, or socialization). Systems like

SOURCE: “Civil Society, Public Opinion, and Communicative Power” from *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* by Jürgen Habermas, translated by William Rehg. Copyright © 1996 Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Reprinted with permission of The MIT Press.

science, morality, and art take up different validity aspects of everyday communicative action (truth, rightness, or veracity). The public sphere, however, is specialized in neither of these two ways; to the extent that it extends to politically relevant questions, it leaves their specialized treatment to the political system. Rather, the public sphere distinguishes itself through a *communication structure* that is related to a third feature of communicative action: it refers neither to the *functions* nor to the *contents* of everyday communication but to the *social space* generated in communicative action.

Unlike success-oriented actors who mutually observe each other as one observes something in the objective world, persons acting communicatively encounter each other in a *situation* they at the same time constitute with their cooperatively negotiated interpretations. The intersubjectively shared space of a speech situation is disclosed when the participants enter into interpersonal relationships by taking positions on mutual speech-act offers and assuming illocutionary obligations. Every encounter in which actors do not just observe each other but take a second-person attitude, reciprocally attributing communicative freedom to each other, unfolds in a linguistically constituted public space. This space stands open, in principle, for potential dialogue partners who are present as bystanders or could come on the scene and join those present. That is, special measures would be required to prevent a third party from entering such a linguistically constituted space. Founded in communicative action, this spatial structure of simple and episodic encounters can be expanded and rendered more permanent in an abstract form for a larger public of present persons. For the public infrastructure of such *assemblies*, performances, presentations, and so on, architectural metaphors of structured spaces recommend themselves: we speak of forums, stages, arenas, and the like. These public spheres still cling to the concrete locales where an audience is physically gathered. The more they detach themselves from the public's physical presence and extend to the virtual presence of scattered readers, listeners, or viewers linked by public media, the clearer becomes the abstraction that enters when the spatial structure of simple interactions is expanded into a public sphere.

When generalized in this way, communication structures contract to informational content and points of view that are uncoupled from the thick context of simple interactions, from specific persons, and from practical obligations. At the same time, context generalization, inclusion, and growing anonymity demand a higher degree of explication that must dispense with technical vocabularies and special codes. Whereas the *orientation to laypersons* implies a certain loss in differentiation, uncoupling communicated opinions from concrete practical obligations tends to have an *intellectualizing* effect. Processes of opinion-formation, especially when they have to do with political questions, certainly cannot be separated from the transformation of the participants' preferences and attitudes, but they can be separated from putting these dispositions into action. To this extent, the communication structures of the public sphere *relieve* the public of the *burden of decision making*; the postponed decisions are reserved for the institutionalized political process. In the public sphere, utterances are sorted according to issue and contribution, whereas the contributions are weighted by the affirmative versus negative responses they receive. Information and arguments are thus worked into focused opinions. What makes such "bundled" opinions into *public opinion* is both the controversial way it comes about and the amount of approval that "carries" it. Public opinion is not representative in the statistical sense. It is not an aggregate of individually gathered, privately expressed opinions held by isolated persons. Hence it must not be confused with survey results. Political opinion polls provide a certain reflection of "public opinion" only if they have been preceded by a focused public debate and a corresponding opinion-formation in a mobilized public sphere.

The diffusion of information and points of view via effective broadcasting media is not the only thing that matters in public processes of communication, nor is it the most important. True, only the broad circulation of comprehensible, attention-grabbing messages arouses a sufficiently inclusive participation. But the rules of a *shared* practice of communication are of greater significance for structuring public opinion. Agreement on issues and contributions

develops only as the result of more or less exhaustive controversy in which proposals, information, and reasons can be more or less rationally dealt with. In general terms, the *discursive level* of opinion-formation and the "quality" of the outcome vary with this "more or less" in the "rational" processing of "exhaustive" proposals, information, and reasons. Thus the success of public communication is not intrinsically measured by the requirement of inclusion either but by the formal criteria governing how a qualified public opinion comes about. The structures of a power-ridden, oppressed public sphere exclude fruitful and clarifying discussions. The "quality" of public opinion, insofar as it is measured by the procedural properties of its process of generation, is an empirical variable. From a normative perspective, this provides a basis for measuring the legitimacy of the influence that public opinion has on the political system. Of course, actual influence coincides with legitimate influence just as little as the belief in legitimacy coincides with legitimacy. But conceiving things this way at least opens a perspective from which the relation between actual influence and the procedurally grounded quality of public opinion can be empirically investigated.

Parsons introduced "influence" as a symbolically generalized form of communication that facilitates interactions in virtue of conviction or persuasion. For example, persons or institutions can enjoy a reputation that allows their utterances to have an influence on others' beliefs without having to demonstrate authority or to give explanations in the situation. "Influence" feeds on the resource of mutual understanding, but it is based on advancing trust in beliefs that are not currently tested. In this sense, public opinion represents political potentials that can be used for influencing the voting behavior of citizens or the will-formation in parliamentary bodies, administrative agencies, and courts. Naturally, political *influence* supported by public opinion is converted into political *power*—into a potential for rendering binding decisions—only when it affects the beliefs and decisions of *authorized* members of the political system and determines the behavior of voters, legislators, officials, and so forth. Just like social power, political influence based on public opinion can

be transformed into political power only through institutionalized procedures.

Influence develops in the public sphere and becomes the object of struggle there. This struggle involves not only the political influence that has already been acquired (such as that enjoyed by experienced political leaders and officeholders, established parties, and well-known groups like Greenpeace and Amnesty International). The reputation of groups of persons and experts who have acquired their influence in special public spheres also comes into play (for example, the authority of religious leaders, the public visibility of literary figures and artists, the reputation of scientists, and the popularity of sports figures and movie stars). For as soon as the public space has expanded beyond the context of simple interactions, a differentiation sets in among organizers, speakers, and hearers; arenas and galleries; stage and viewing space. The *actors' roles* that increasingly professionalize and multiply with organizational complexity and range of media are, of course, furnished with unequal opportunities for exerting influence. But the political influence that the actors gain through public communication must *ultimately* rest on the resonance and indeed the approval of a lay public whose composition is egalitarian. The public of citizens must be *convinced* by comprehensible and broadly interesting contributions to issues it finds relevant. The public audience possesses final authority, because it is *constitutive* for the internal structure and reproduction of the public sphere, the *only* place where actors can appear. There can be no public sphere without a public.

To be sure, we must distinguish the actors who, so to speak, emerge from the public and take part in the reproduction of the public sphere itself from actors who occupy an already constituted public domain in order to use it. This is true, for example, of the large and well-organized interest groups that are anchored in various social subsystems and affect the political system *through* the public sphere. They cannot make any manifest use in the public sphere of the sanctions and rewards they rely on in bargaining or in non-public attempts at pressure. They can capitalize on their social power and convert it into political power only insofar as they can advertise their interests in a language that can mobilize convincing



reasons and shared value orientations—as, for example, when parties to wage negotiations inform the public about demands, strategies, or outcomes. The contributions of interest groups are, in any case, vulnerable to a kind of criticism to which contributions from other sources are not exposed. Public opinions that can acquire visibility only because of an undeclared infusion of money or organizational power lose their credibility as soon as these sources of social power are made public. Public opinion can be manipulated but neither publicly bought nor publicly blackmailed. This is due to the fact that a public sphere cannot be “manufactured” as one pleases. Before it can be captured by actors with strategic intent, the public sphere together with its public must have developed as a structure that stands on its own and reproduces itself *out of itself*. This law-like regularity governing the formation of a public sphere remains latent in the constituted public sphere—and takes effect again only in moments when the public sphere is mobilized.

The political public sphere can fulfill its function of perceiving and thematizing encompassing social problems only insofar as it develops out of the communication taking place among *those who are potentially affected*. It is carried by a public recruited from the entire citizenry. But in the diverse voices of this public, one hears the echo of private experiences that are caused throughout society by the externalities (and internal disturbances) of various functional systems—and even by the very state apparatus on whose regulatory activities the complex and poorly coordinated sub-systems depend. Systemic deficiencies are experienced in the context of individual life histories; such burdens accumulate in the lifeworld. The latter has the appropriate antennae, for in its horizon are intermeshed the private life histories of the “clients” of functional systems that might be failing in their delivery of services. It is only for those who are immediately affected that such services are paid in the currency of “use values.” Besides religion, art, and literature, only the spheres of “private” life have an existential language at their disposal, in which such socially generated problems can be *assessed in terms of one's own life history*. Problems voiced in the public sphere first become visible when they are mirrored in

personal life experiences. To the extent that these experiences find their concise expression in the languages of religion, art, and literature, the “literary” public sphere in the broader sense, which is specialized for the articulation of values and world disclosure, is intertwined with the political public sphere.

As both bearers of the political public sphere and as *members of society*, citizens occupy two positions at once. As members of society, they occupy the roles of employees and consumers, insured persons and patients, taxpayers and clients of bureaucracies, as well as the roles of students, tourists, commuters, and the like; in such complementary roles, they are especially exposed to the specific requirements and failures of the corresponding service systems. Such experiences are first assimilated “privately,” that is are interpreted within the horizon of a life history intermeshed with other life histories in the contexts of shared lifeworlds. The communication channels of the public sphere are linked to private spheres—to the thick networks of interaction found in families and circles of friends as well as to the looser contacts with neighbors, work colleagues, acquaintances, and so on—and indeed they are linked in such a way that the spatial structures of simple interactions are expanded and abstracted but not destroyed. Thus the orientation to reaching understanding that is predominant in everyday practice is also preserved for a *communication among strangers* that is conducted over great distances in public spheres whose branches are quite complex. The threshold separating the private sphere from the public is not marked by a fixed set of issues or relationships but by *different conditions of communication*. Certainly these conditions lead to differences in the accessibility of the two spheres, safeguarding the intimacy of the one sphere and publicity of the other. However, they do not seal off the private from the public but only channel the flow of topics from the one sphere into the other. For the public sphere draws its impulses from the private handling of social problems that resonate in life histories. It is symptomatic of this close connection, incidentally, that a modern bourgeois public sphere developed in the European societies of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as the “sphere of private persons come

together as a public.” Viewed historically, the connection between the public and the private spheres is manifested in the clubs and organizational forms of a reading public composed of bourgeois private persons and crystallizing around newspapers and journals.

## II

This sphere of civil society has been rediscovered today in wholly new historical constellations. The expression “civil society” has in the meantime taken on a meaning different from that of the “bourgeois society” of the liberal tradition, which Hegel conceptualized as a “system of needs,” that is, as a market system involving social labor and commodity exchange. What is meant by “civil society” today, in contrast to its usage in the Marxist tradition, no longer includes the economy as constituted by private law and steered through markets in labor, capital, and commodities. Rather, its institutional core comprises those nongovernmental and non-economic connections and voluntary associations that anchor the communication structures of the public sphere in the society component of the lifeworld. Civil society is composed of those more or less spontaneously emergent associations, organizations, and movements that, attuned to how societal problems resonate in the private life spheres, distill and transmit such reactions in amplified form to the public sphere. The core of civil society comprises a network of associations that institutionalizes problem-solving discourses on questions of general interest inside the framework of organized public spheres. These “discursive designs” have an egalitarian, open form of organization that mirrors essential features of the kind of communication around which they crystallize and to which they lend continuity and permanence.

Such associations certainly do not represent the most conspicuous element of a public sphere dominated by mass media and large agencies, observed by market and opinion research, and inundated by the public relations

work, propaganda, and advertising of political parties and groups. All the same, they do form the organizational substratum of the general public of citizens. More or less emerging from the private sphere, this public is made of citizens who seek acceptable interpretations for their social interests and experiences and who want to have an influence on institutionalized opinion- and will-formation.

One searches the literature in vain for clear definitions of civil society that would go beyond such descriptive characterizations. . . . Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato, who have presented the most comprehensive study on this topic, provide a catalog of features characterizing the civil society that is demarcated from the state, the economy, and other functional systems but coupled with the core private spheres of the lifeworld:

- (1) *Plurality*: families, informal groups, and voluntary associations whose plurality and autonomy allow for a variety of forms of life;
- (2) *Publicity*: institutions of culture and communication;
- (3) *Privacy*: a domain of individual self-development and moral choice;
- (4) *Legality*: structures of publicity from at least the state and, tendentially, the economy. Together, these structures secure the institutional existence of a modern differentiated civil society.<sup>1</sup> . . .

The *constitution of this sphere through basic rights* provides some indicators for its social structure. Freedom of assembly and freedom of association, when linked with freedom of speech, define the scope for various types of associations and societies: for voluntary associations that intervene in the formation of public opinion, push topics of general interest, and act as advocates for neglected issues and underrepresented groups; for groups that are difficult to organize or that pursue cultural, religious, or humanitarian aims; and for ethnical communities, religious denominations, and so on. Freedom of the press, radio, and television, as well as the right to engage in these areas, safeguards the media infrastructure of public communication; such

<sup>1</sup>J. L. Cohen and A. Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), p. 346.

liberties are thereby supposed to preserve an openness for competing opinions and a representative diversity of voices. The political system, which must remain sensitive to the influence of public opinion, is intertwined with the public sphere and civil society through the activity of political parties and general elections. This intermeshing is guaranteed by the right of parties to "collaborate" in the political will-formation of the people, as well as by the citizens' and passive voting rights and other participatory rights. Finally, the network of associations can assert its autonomy and preserve its spontaneity only insofar as it can draw support from a mature pluralism of forms of life, subcultures, and worldviews. The constitutional protection of "privacy" promotes the integrity of private life spheres: rights of personality, freedom of belief and of conscience, freedom of movement, the privacy of letters, mail, and telecommunications, the inviolability of one's residence, and the protection of families circumscribe an untouchable zone of personal integrity and independent judgment.

The tight connection between an autonomous civil society and an integral private sphere stands out even more clearly when contrasted with totalitarian societies of bureaucratic socialism. Here a panoptic state not only directly controls the bureaucratically desiccated public sphere, it also undermines the private basis of this public sphere. Administrative intrusions and constant supervision corrode the communicative structure of everyday contacts in families and schools, neighborhoods and local municipalities. The destruction of solidary living conditions and the paralysis of initiative and independent engagement in overregulated yet legally uncertain sectors go hand in hand with the crushing of social groups, associations, and networks: with indoctrination and the dissolution of cultural identities; with the suffocation of spontaneous public communication. Communicative rationality is thus destroyed *simultaneously* in both public and private contexts of communication. The more the bonding force of communicative action wanes in private life spheres and the embers of communicative freedom die out, the easier it is for someone who monopolizes the public sphere to align the mutually estranged and isolated actors into a mass that can be directed and mobilized in a plebiscitarian manner.

Basic constitutional guarantees alone, of course, cannot preserve the public sphere and civil society from deformations. The communication structures of the public sphere must rather be kept intact by an energetic civil society. That the political public sphere must in a certain sense reproduce and stabilize itself from its own resources is shown by the odd *self-referential character of the practice of communication in civil society*. Those actors who are the carriers of the public sphere put forward "texts" that always reveal the same subtext, which refers to the critical function of the public sphere in general. Whatever the manifest content of their public utterances, the performative meaning of such public discourse at the same time actualizes the function of an undistorted political public sphere as such. Thus, the institutions and legal guarantees of free and open opinion-formation rest on the unsteady ground of the political communication of actors who, in making use of them, at the same time interpret, defend, and radicalize their normative content. Actors who know they are involved in the *common* enterprise of reconstituting and maintaining structures of the public sphere as they contest opinions and strive for influence differ from actors who merely use forums that already exist. More specifically, actors who support the public sphere are distinguished by the *dual orientation* of their political engagement: with their programs, they directly influence the political system, but at the same time they are also reflexively concerned with revitalizing and enlarging civil society and the public sphere as well as with confirming their own identities and capacities to act.

Cohen and Arato see this kind of "dual politics" especially in the "new" social movements that simultaneously pursue offensive and defensive goals. "Offensively," these movements attempt to bring up issues relevant to the entire society, to define ways of approaching problems, to propose possible solutions, to supply new information, to interpret values differently, to mobilize good reasons and criticize bad ones. Such initiatives are intended to produce a broad shift in public opinion, to alter the parameters of organized political will-formation, and to exert pressure on parliaments, courts, and administrations in favor of specific policies. "Defensively,"

they attempt to maintain existing structures of association and public influence, to generate subcultural counterpublics and counterinstitutions, to consolidate new collective identities, and to win new terrain in the form of expanded rights and reformed institutions:

On this account, the "defensive" aspect of the movements involves preserving and developing the communicative infrastructure of the life-world. . . . This is the sine qua non for successful efforts to redefine identities, to reinterpret norms, and to develop egalitarian, democratic associational forms. The expressive, normative and communicative modes of collective action . . . [also involve] efforts to secure *institutional* changes within civil society that correspond to the new meanings, identities, and norms that are created.<sup>ii</sup>

In the self-referential mode of reproducing the public sphere, as well as in the Janus-faced politics aimed at the political system and the self-stabilization of public sphere and civil society, the space is provided for the extension and radicalization of existing rights: "The combination of associations, publics, and rights, when supported by a political culture in which independent initiatives and movements represent an ever-renewable, legitimate, political option, represents, in our opinion, an effective set of bulwarks around civil society within whose limits much of the program of radical democracy can be reformulated."<sup>iii</sup>

In fact, the *interplay* of a public sphere based in civil society with the opinion- and will-formation institutionalized in parliamentary bodies and courts offers a good starting point for translating the concept of deliberative politics into sociological terms. However, we must not look on civil society as a focal point where the lines of societal self-organization as a whole would converge. Cohen and Arato rightly emphasize the *limited scope for action* that civil society and the public sphere afford to noninstitutionalized political movements and forms of political expression. They speak of a structurally necessary "self-limitation" of radical-democratic practice:

First, a robust civil society can develop only in the context of a liberal political culture and the corresponding patterns of socialization, and on the basis of an integral private sphere; it can blossom only in an already rationalized life-world. Otherwise, populist movements arise that blindly defend the frozen traditions of a life-world endangered by capitalist modernization. In their forms of mobilization, these fundamentalist movements are as modern as they are antidemocratic.

Second, within the boundaries of the public sphere, or at least of a liberal public sphere, actors can acquire only influence, not political power. The influence of a public opinion generated more or less discursively in open controversies is certainly an empirical variable that can make a difference. But public influence is transformed into communicative power only after it passes through the filters of the institutionalized *procedures* of democratic opinion- and will-formation and enters through parliamentary debates into legitimate lawmaking. The informal flow of public opinion issues in beliefs that have been *tested* from the standpoint of the generalizability of interests. Not influence per se, but influence transformed into communicative power legitimates political decisions. The popular sovereignty set communicatively aflow cannot make itself felt *solely* in the influence of informal public discourses—not even when these discourses arise from autonomous public spheres. To generate political power, their influence must have an effect on the democratically regulated deliberations of democratically elected assemblies and assume an authorized form in formal decisions. This also holds, *mutatis mutandis*, for courts that decide politically relevant cases.

Third, and finally, the instruments that politics have available in law and administrative power have limited effectiveness in functionally differentiated societies. Politics indeed continues to be the addressee for all unmanaged integration problems. But political steering can often take only an indirect approach and must, as we have seen, leave intact the modes of operation internal

<sup>ii</sup>Cohen and Arato, *Civil Society*, p. 531.

<sup>iii</sup>Cohen and Arato, *Civil Society*, p. 474.

to functional systems and other highly organized spheres of action. As a result, democratic movements emerging from civil society must give up holistic aspirations to a self-organizing society, aspirations that also undergirded Marxist ideas of social revolution. Civil society can directly transform only itself, and it can have at most an indirect effect on the self-transformation of the political system; generally, it has an influence only on the personnel and programming of this system. But in no way does it occupy *the position* of a macrosystem supposed to bring society as a whole under control and simultaneously act for it. Besides these limitations, one must bear in mind that the administrative power deployed for purposes of social planning and supervision is not a suitable medium for fostering emancipated forms of life. These can *develop* in the wake of democratization processes but they cannot be *brought about* through intervention. . . .

### III

. . . In complex societies, the public sphere consists of an intermediary structure between the political system, on the one hand, and the private sectors of the lifeworld and functional systems, on the other. It represents a highly complex network that branches out into a multitude of overlapping international, national, regional, local, and subcultural arenas. Functional specifications, thematic foci, policy fields, and so forth, provide the points of reference for a substantive differentiation of public spheres that are, however, still accessible to laypersons (for example, popular science and literary publics, religious and artistic publics, feminist and "alternative" publics, publics concerned with health-care issues, social welfare, or environmental policy). Moreover, the public sphere is differentiated into levels according to the density of communication, organizational complexity, and range—from the *episodic* publics found in taverns, coffee houses, or on the streets; through the *occasional* or "arranged" publics of particular presentations and events, such as theater performances, rock concerts, party assemblies, or church congresses; up to the *abstract* public sphere of isolated readers, listeners, and viewers

scattered across large geographic areas, or even around the globe, and brought together only through the mass media. Despite these manifold differentiations, however, all the partial publics constituted by ordinary language remain porous to one another. The one text of "the" public sphere, a text continually extrapolated and extending radially in all directions, is divided by internal boundaries into arbitrarily small texts for which everything else is context; yet one can always build hermeneutical bridges from one text to the next. Segmented public spheres are constituted with the help of exclusion mechanisms; however, because publics cannot harden into organizations or systems, there is no exclusion rule without a proviso for its abolishment. . . .

The more the audience is widened through mass communications, the more inclusive and the more abstract in form it becomes. Correspondingly, the *roles of the actors* appearing in the arenas are, to an increasing degree, sharply separated from the roles of the spectators in the galleries. Although the "success of the actors in the arena is ultimately decided in the galleries," the question arises of how autonomous the public is when it takes a position on an issue, whether its affirmative or negative stand reflects a process of becoming informed or in fact only a more or less concealed game of power. Despite the wealth of empirical investigations, we still do not have a well-established answer to this cardinal question. But one can at least pose the question more precisely by assuming that public processes of communication can take place with less distortion the more they are left to the internal dynamic of a civil society that emerges from the lifeworld.

One can distinguish, at least tentatively, the more loosely organized actors who "emerge from" the public, as it were, from other actors merely "appearing before" the public. The latter have organizational power, resources, and sanctions available *from the start*. Naturally, the actors who are more firmly anchored in civil society and participate in the reproduction of the public sphere also depend on the support of "sponsors" who supply the necessary resources of money, organization, knowledge, and social capital. But patrons or "like-minded" sponsors do not necessarily reduce the authenticity of the public actors they support. By contrast, the collective actors

who merely enter the public sphere from, and utilize it for, a specific organization or functional system have *their own* basis of support. Among these political and social actors who do not have to obtain their resources from other spheres, I primarily include the large interest groups that enjoy social power, as well as the established parties that have largely become arms of the political system. They draw on market studies and opinion surveys and conduct their own professional public-relations campaigns.

In and of themselves, organizational complexity, resources, professionalization, and so on, are admittedly insufficient indicators for the difference between "indigenous" actors and mere users. Nor can an actor's pedigree be read directly from the interests actually represented. Other indicators are more reliable. Thus actors differ in how they can be identified. Some actors one can easily identify from their functional background; that is, they represent political parties or pressure groups; unions or professional associations; consumer-protection groups or rent-control organizations, and so on. Other actors, by contrast, must first *produce* identifying features. This is especially evident with social movements that initially go through a phase of self-identification and self-legitimation; even after that, they still pursue a self-referential "identity politics" parallel to their goal-directed politics—they must continually reassure themselves of their identity. Whether actors merely use an already constituted public sphere or whether they are involved in reproducing its structures is, moreover, evident in the above-mentioned sensitivity to threats to communication rights. It is also shown in the actors' willingness to go beyond an interest in self-defense and take a universalist stand against the open or concealed exclusion of minorities or marginal groups. The very existence of social movements, one might add, depends on whether they find organizational forms that produce solidarities and publics, forms that allow them to fully utilize and radicalize existing communication rights and structures as they pursue special goals.

A third group of actors are the journalists, publicity agents, and members of the press (i.e., in the broad sense of *Publizisten*) who collect information, make decisions about the selection and presentation of "programs," and to a certain

extent control the entry of topics, contributions, and authors into the mass-media-dominated public sphere. As the mass media become more complex and more expensive, the effective channels of communication become more centralized. To the degree this occurs, the mass media face an increasing pressure of selection, on both the supply side and the demand side. These selection processes become the source of a new sort of power. This *power of the media* is not sufficiently reined in by professional standards, but today, by fits and starts, the "fourth branch of government" is being subjected to constitutional regulation. In the Federal Republic, for example, it is both the legal form and the institutional structure of television networks that determine whether they depend more on the influence of political parties and public interest groups or more on private firms with large advertising outlays. In general, one can say that the image of politics presented on television is predominantly made up of issues and contributions that are professionally produced as media input and then fed in via press conferences, news agencies, public-relations campaigns, and the like. These official producers of information are all the more successful the more they can rely on trained personnel, on financial and technical resources, and in general on a professional infrastructure. Collective actors operating outside the political system or outside large organizations normally have fewer opportunities to influence the content and views presented by the media. This is especially true for messages that do not fall inside the "balanced," that is, the centrist and rather narrowly defined, spectrum of "established options" dominating the programs of the electronic media.

Moreover, before messages selected in this way are broadcast, they are subject to *information-processing strategies* within the media. These are oriented by reception conditions as perceived by media experts, program directors, and the press. Because the public's receptiveness, cognitive capacity, and attention represent unusually scarce resources for which the programs of numerous "stations" compete, the presentation of news and commentaries for the most part follows market strategies. Reporting facts as human-interest stories, mixing information with entertainment, arranging material episodically,



and breaking down complex relationships into smaller fragments—all of this comes together to form a syndrome that works to depoliticize public communication. This is the kernel of truth in the theory of the culture industry. The research literature provides fairly reliable information on the institutional framework and structure of the media, as well as on the way they work, organize programs, and are utilized. But, even a generation after Paul Lazarsfeld, propositions concerning the *effects of the media* remain controversial. The research on effect and reception has at least done away with the image of passive consumers as “cultural dopes” who are manipulated by the programs offered to them. It directs our attention to the *strategies of interpretation* employed by viewers, who communicate with one another, and who in fact can be provoked to criticize or reject what programs offer or to synthesize it with judgments of their own.

Even if we know something about the internal operation and impact of the mass media, as well as about the distribution of roles among the public and various actors, and even if we can make some reasonable conjectures about who has privileged access to the media and who has a share in media power, it is by no means clear how the mass media intervene in the diffuse circuits of communication in the political public sphere. The *normative reactions* to the relatively new phenomenon of the mass media's powerful position in the competition for public influence are clearer. Michael Gurevitch and Jay G. Blumler have summarized the tasks that the media *ought* to fulfill in democratic political systems:

1. surveillance of the sociopolitical environment, reporting developments likely to impinge, positively or negatively, on the welfare of citizens;
2. meaningful agenda-setting, identifying the key issues of the day, including the forces that have formed and may resolve them;
3. platforms for an intelligible and illuminating advocacy by politicians and spokespersons of other causes and interest groups;

<sup>iv</sup>M. Gurevitch and J. G. Blumler, “Political Communication Systems and Democratic Values,” in J. Lichtenberg, ed., *Democracy and the Mass Media* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), p. 270.

4. dialogue across a diverse range of views, as well as between power-holders (actual and prospective) and mass publics;
5. mechanisms for holding officials to account for how they have exercised power;
6. incentives for citizens to learn, choose, and become involved, rather than merely to follow and kibitz over the political process;
7. a principled resistance to the efforts of forces outside the media to subvert their independence, integrity and ability to serve the audience;
8. a sense of respect for the audience member, as potentially concerned and able to make sense of his or her political environment.<sup>iv</sup>

Such principles orient the professional code of journalism and the profession's ethical self-understanding, on the one hand, and the formal organization of a free press by laws governing mass communication, on the other. In agreement with the concept of deliberative politics, these principles express a simple idea: the mass media ought to understand themselves as the mandatary of an enlightened public whose willingness to learn and capacity for criticism they at once presuppose, demand, and reinforce; like the judiciary, they ought to preserve their independence from political and social pressure; they ought to be receptive to the public's concerns and proposals, take up these issues and contributions impartially, augment criticisms, and confront the political process with articulate demands for legitimation. The power of the media should thus be neutralized and the tacit conversion of administrative or social power into political influence blocked. According to this idea, political and social actors would be allowed to “use” the public sphere only insofar as they make convincing contributions to the solution of problems that have been perceived by the public or have been put on the public agenda with the public's consent. In a similar vein, political parties would have to participate in the opinion- and will-formation from the public's own perspective, rather than

patronizing the public and extracting mass loyalty from the public sphere for the purposes of maintaining their own power.

#### IV

With this I return to the central question of who can place issues on the agenda and determine what direction the lines of communication take. Roger Cobb, Jennie-Keith Ross, and Marc Howard Ross have constructed models that depict how new and compelling issues develop, from the first initiative up to formal proceedings in bodies that have the power to decide.<sup>v</sup> If one suitably modifies the proposed models—inside access model, mobilization model, outside initiative model—from the viewpoint of democratic theory, they present basic alternatives in how the public sphere and the political system influence each other. In the first case, the initiative comes from office holders or political leaders, and the issue continues to circulate inside the political system all the way to its formal treatment, while the broader public is either excluded from the process or does not have any influence on it. In the second case, the initiative again starts inside the political system, but the proponents of the issue must mobilize the public sphere, because they need the support of certain groups, either to obtain formal consideration or to implement an adopted program successfully. Only in the third case does the initiative lie with forces at the periphery, outside the purview of the political system. With the help of the mobilized public sphere, that is, the pressure of public opinion, such forces compel formal consideration of the issue:

The outside initiative model applies to the situation in which a group outside the government structure 1) articulates a grievance, 2) tries to expand interest in the issue enough to other groups in the population to gain a place on the public agenda, in order to 3) create sufficient pressure on decision makers to force the issue onto the formal agenda for their serious

consideration. This model of agenda building is likely to predominate in more egalitarian societies. Formal agenda status, . . . however, does not necessarily mean that the final decisions of the authorities or the actual policy implementation will be what the grievance group originally sought.<sup>vi</sup>

In the normal case, issues and proposals have a history whose course corresponds more to the first or second model than to the third. As long as the informal circulation of power dominates the political system, the initiative and power to put problems on the agenda and bring them to a decision lies more with the Government leaders and administration than with the parliamentary complex. As long as in the public sphere the mass media prefer, contrary to their normative self-understanding, to draw their material from powerful, well-organized information producers and as long as they prefer media strategies that lower rather than raise the discursive level of public communication, issues will tend to start in, and be managed from, the center, rather than follow a spontaneous course originating in the periphery. At least, the skeptical findings on problem articulation in public arenas accord with this view. In the present context, of course, there can be no question of a conclusive empirical evaluation of the mutual influence that politics and public have on each other. For our purposes, it suffices to make it plausible that in a perceived crisis situation, the *actors in civil society* thus far neglected in our scenario *can* assume a surprisingly active and momentous role. In spite of a lesser organizational complexity and a weaker capacity for action, and despite the structural disadvantages mentioned earlier, at the critical moments of an accelerated history, these actors get the chance to *reverse* the normal circuits of communication in the political system and the public sphere. In this way they can shift the entire system's mode of problem solving.

The communication structures of the public sphere are linked with the private life spheres in

<sup>v</sup>R. Cobb, J. K. Ross, and M. H. Ross, “Agenda Building as a Comparative Political Process,” *American Political Science Review* 70 (1976): 126–38; R. Cobb and C. Elder, “The Politics of Agenda-Building,” *Journal of Politics* (1971): 892–915.

<sup>vi</sup>Cobb, Ross, and Ross, “Agenda Building as a Comparative Political Process,” p. 132.

a way that gives the civil-social periphery, in contrast to the political center, the advantage of greater sensitivity in detecting and identifying new problem situations. The great issues of the last decades give evidence for this. Consider, for example, the spiraling nuclear-arms race; consider the risks involved in the peaceful use of atomic energy or in other large-scale technological projects and scientific experimentation, such as genetic engineering; consider the ecological threats involved in an overstrained natural environment (acid rain, water pollution, species extinction, etc.); consider the dramatically progressing impoverishment of the Third World and problems of the world economic order; or consider such issues as feminism, increasing immigration, and the associated problems of multiculturalism. Hardly any of these topics were *initially* brought up by exponents of the state apparatus, large organizations, or functional systems. Instead, they were broached by intellectuals, concerned citizens, radical professionals, self-proclaimed "advocates," and the like. Moving in from this outermost periphery, such issues force their way into newspapers and interested associations, clubs, professional organizations, academies, and universities. They find forums, citizen initiatives, and other platforms before they catalyze the growth of social movements and new subcultures. The latter can in turn dramatize contributions, presenting them so effectively that the mass media take up the matter. Only through their controversial presentation in the media do such topics reach the larger public and subsequently gain a place on the "public agenda." Sometimes the support of sensational actions, mass protests, and incessant campaigning is required before an issue can make its way via the surprising election of marginal candidates or radical parties, expanded platforms of "established" parties, important court decisions, and so on, into the core of the political system and there receive formal consideration.

Naturally, there are other ways in which issues develop, other paths from the periphery to the center, and other patterns involving complex branchings and feedback loops. But, in general, one can say that even in more or less power-ridden public spheres, the power relations shift as soon as the perception of relevant social problems

evokes a *crisis consciousness* at the periphery. If actors from civil society then join together, formulate the relevant issue, and promote it in the public sphere, their efforts can be successful, because the endogenous mobilization of the public sphere activates an otherwise latent dependency built into the internal structure of every public sphere, a dependency also present in the normative self-understanding of the mass media: the players in the arena owe their influence to the approval of those in the gallery. At the very least, one can say that insofar as a rationalized life-world supports the development of a liberal public sphere by furnishing it with a solid foundation in civil society, the authority of a position-taking public is strengthened in the course of escalating public controversies. Under the conditions of a *liberal* public sphere, informal public communication accomplishes two things in cases in which mobilization depends on crisis. On the one hand, it prevents the accumulation of indoctrinated masses that are seduced by populist leaders. On the other hand, it pulls together the scattered critical potentials of a public that was only abstractly held together through the public media, and it helps this public have a political influence on institutionalized opinion- and will-formation. Only in *liberal* public spheres, of course, do sub-institutional political movements—which abandon the conventional paths of interest politics in order to boost the constitutionally regulated circulation of power in the political system—take this direction. By contrast, an authoritarian, distorted public sphere that is brought into alignment merely provides a forum for plebiscitary legitimization.

This sense of reinforced demand for legitimization becomes especially clear when subinstitutional protest movements reach a high point by escalating their protests. The last means for obtaining more of a hearing and greater media influence for oppositional arguments are acts of civil disobedience. These acts of nonviolent, symbolic rule violation are meant as expressions of protest against binding decisions that, their legality notwithstanding, the actors consider illegitimate in the light of valid constitutional principles. Acts of civil disobedience are directed simultaneously to two addressees. On the one hand, they appeal to officeholders and parliamentary representatives

to reopen formally concluded political deliberations so that their decisions may possibly be revised in view of the continuing public criticism. On the other hand, they appeal "to the sense of justice of the majority of the community," as Rawls puts it,<sup>vii</sup> and thus to the critical judgment of a public of citizens that is to be mobilized with exceptional means. Independently of the current object of controversy, civil disobedience is also always an implicit appeal to connect organized political will-formation with the communicative processes of the public sphere. The message of this subtext is aimed at a political system that, as constitutionally organized, may not detach itself from civil society and make itself independent vis-à-vis the periphery. Civil disobedience thereby refers to its own origins in a civil society that in crisis situations actualizes the normative contents of constitutional democracy in the medium of public opinion and summons it against the systemic inertia of institutional politics. . . .

This interpretation of civil disobedience manifests the self-consciousness of a civil society confident that at least in a crisis it can increase the pressure of a mobilized public on the political

system to the point where the latter switches into the conflict mode and neutralizes the unofficial countercirculation of power.

Beyond this, the justification of civil disobedience relies on a *dynamic understanding* of the constitution as an unfinished project. From this long-term perspective, the constitutional state does not represent a finished structure but a delicate and sensitive—above all fallible and revisable—enterprise, whose purpose is to realize the system of rights *anew* in changing circumstances, that is, to interpret the system of rights better, to institutionalize it more appropriately, and to draw out its contents more radically. This is the perspective of citizens who are actively engaged in realizing the system of rights. Aware of, and referring to, changed contexts, such citizens want to overcome in practice the tension between social facticity and validity. Although legal theory cannot adopt this participant perspective as its own, it can reconstruct the paradigmatic *understanding* of law and democracy that guides citizens whenever they form an idea of the structural constraints on the self-organization of the legal community in their society.

<sup>vii</sup>J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), p. 364.

## Introduction to "The Tasks of a Critical Theory of Society"

In this selection, Habermas extends his analysis of the public sphere into a more general theory of communication in modern societies. Central to the essay are several key concepts: system, lifeworld, uncoupling, the colonization of the lifeworld, and communicative action. In Habermas's account, all societies can be understood theoretically as composed of two primary components—the system and the lifeworld. The system is that set of interrelated social structures, like the state and economy, that form the primary basis for the organization of social life. The lifeworld is the arena of everyday, human interaction carved out of ongoing and negotiated interpersonal communication.

Habermas suggests that an optimally functioning society is one in which systemic processes are neatly coupled with the lifeworld dynamics of everyday communication and consensus formation. Such interrelations allow for rationalized and differentiated system-level structures to emerge that are grounded in and guided by the critical and communicative demands of the lifeworld. Habermas argues, however, that in the modern world, system and lifeworld have become "uncoupled," resulting in the emergence of "steering crises" and "pathologies in the lifeworld." The most striking disturbance has been within the lifeworld, which has been "colonized" by reified and increasingly self-insulated systemic processes.