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JÜRGEN HABERMAS ON LINKING SYSTEMS AND ACTION THEORY

Abstract

Theoretical discussions have served to bridge the gap separating systems- and action-theoretical approaches; however, the question of their basic compatibility has rarely been raised. This paper takes up the effort of Jürgen Habermas at linking systems and action theory. Habermas seeks to overcome the limits of the theory of action by widening its scope in systems-theoretical terms. Successful synthesis eludes this effort: too much emphasis is placed on the systemic aspect, reducing actors to the mere executing agents of systemic needs. The combination of theories of structure and action provides a way out of this dilemma.

During the postwar period, an irreconcilable antagonism existed in sociology between action-theoretical and systems-theoretical approaches. In the last decades a greater readiness for discussion across this divide exists (Knorr-Cetina and Cicourel 1981; Alexander, Giesen, Münch and Smelser 1987; Schimank 2000; Schwinn 2007; Greve, Schnabel and Schützeichel 2008). In moving from reduction to linkage, microsociological approaches seek connections to "higher-level" phenomena, and an actor-oriented perspective finds a place within systems-theoretical, functionalist approaches. As important as the macro-micro link may be, it should not be forgotten that fragments from theories originating in different sociological traditions cannot be combined arbitrarily. The effort undertaken by Jürgen Habermas to integrate elements of systems functionalism into action theory is subject to critical examination here. He seeks to overcome the inadequacies of action theory by supplementing it with systems theory. The present study comes to the conclusion that he doesn't succeed in discovering a consistent way to link the two heterogeneous theoretical components. A successful micro-macro link can only be achieved by combining a theory of action and a theory of structure and not by combining action and systems theories, for this latter combination does not allow either of the two sides to be adequately conceptualized.

1. *The "Failed Marriage" of Systems and Action Theory*

Jürgen Habermas has been involved in a dialogue with systems theory from the time of his earliest writings (1970, pp. 176ff.; 1971; 1973; 1981; 1985, pp. 417ff.; 1992, pp. 67ff. and 415ff.). Habermas proceeds from the theory of action and believes it necessary to incorporate systems functionalism within his theory. How is this incorporation justified?

Habermas ascribes fundamental limits to what a theory of action can provide. In this context, Niklas Luhmann's theoretical approach holds a certain degree of persuasive force for Habermas. Luhmann's early works develop the basic concepts of systems theory in close conjunction with the sociology of organizations. Habermas refers to Luhmann's critique of Weber's purposive model of the organization (Habermas 1987, pp. 306ff.). The purposive model cannot explain why organizations are unable to resolve their system-maintenance problems chiefly by means of the purposive-rational (i.e., rational, means-ends based) conduct of its members. There is no linear dependence between the means-ends or purposive rationality of action of the individual and the rationality of the organization. And this consideration, in Habermas's view, is all the more applicable on the level of overall societal analysis. As complexity increases, a rupture occurs between the rationality of action and the functional rationality of social systems (Habermas 1981, vol. II, pp. 347ff., 447 and 461; 1991, pp. 253-254). On the level of simple interactions, the temporal, spatial, material, and social conditions of action and the intermeshing of the consequences of action are comprehensible for the actors taking part. Thus, in simple, archaic societies, there is no break, no rupture, between the intentions of action and functional constellations (Habermas 1987, pp. 156 and 164). As the complexity of the aggregate effects of cooperative actions increases, the consequences of action escape their underlying intentions. This is the point at which action theory reaches its limits. The consequences of aggregate action, which attain a functional stability, can no longer be encompassed by means of categories of subjectively meaningful action. They are only accessible by means of a systems-theoretical explanation.

This is a radical step, and it has sparked much of the criticism found in the secondary literature. The transition to systems theory does more than just postulate that the consequences of action can no longer be comprehended by actors from a certain level of complexity onwards. The claim underlying the genuinely systems-theoretical argument is *that the consequences of action intermesh to form an objectively meaningful functional constellation, a functional rationality, in a self-activating way without the incorporation of intentions.*

"What Habermas refers to as the contribution made by the consequences of patterns of action to the maintenance of the social system cannot of themselves explain why these patterns exist. If the functional consequences are manifest (intended), the explanation presents no particular problems; but if they are latent (unintended, unrecognized), we still have to wonder why such a useful pattern of activity ever arose and why it continues to exist. The systems theorist has an answer ready: Like any cybernetic process, social processes have their "feedback loops," through which the results of each stage of a cycle are the causes of the next" (McCarthy 1991, pp. 135-136).

By adopting systems theory, Habermas subjects himself to its objectivism[1]. System integration does not require "that participants be responsible actors" or any reference to action orientations, since it "reaches right through them" (Habermas 1987, pp. 150, 184, 263 and 311). In this way, Habermas demonstrates his conviction that one cannot

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[1] Habermas 1987, p. 232: "these complexes of action can be stabilized functionally, that is, through feedback from functional side effects." Giddens (1977; 1979, pp. 210ff.) provides telling criticism of Merton's use of this form of argument.

dispense with precisely those aspects of systems theory that have been expressly noted as the weak points of Talcott Parsons's theory, the founder of the sociological systems theory (Alexander and Colomy 1985; Colomy 1990): Social processes are not self-regulating processes of system creation; rather, the relevant actors have to be identified in all of their phases and on all of their levels. Systemic processes are not self-activating and they do not reach right through action orientations; rather, one has to make recourse to responsibly acting participants.

Habermas would like to extend the action-theoretical model by means of a systems-theoretical model. The outcome of this is the system-lifeworld conception that dichotomizes Habermas's entire categorial and conceptual apparatus. Functional analysis, of aggregated consequences of action that can no longer be comprehended by the actors themselves, is not valid for all types of actions; it is applicable only to that type involved in the societal task of material reproduction (Habermas 1981, vol. II, pp. 226, 347ff. and 447). In order to analyze this task field, a change from the perspective of the participant to that of the observer is also necessary.

"*Social integration* presents itself as part of the symbolic reproduction of a lifeworld that, besides the reproduction of memberships (or solidarities), is dependent upon cultural traditions and socialization processes; by contrast, *functional integration* is equivalent to a material reproduction of the lifeworld that is conceived as system maintenance. The transition from one problem area to the other is tied to a change of methodological attitude and conceptual apparatus. Functional integration cannot be adequately dealt with by way of lifeworld analysis undertaken from an internal perspective; it only comes into view when the lifeworld is objectified, that is to say, represented in an objectivating attitude as a boundary-maintaining system" (Habermas 1987, pp. 232-233).

The terms involved in several conceptual oppositions are dichotomized and grouped together here: on the one hand, the unintended consequences of action, material reproduction, and the observer perspective are equated with systems analysis; on the other, intentions, symbolic reproduction, and the participant perspective are equated with lifeworld analysis. Habermas has since rejected this strict dichotomization (1991, pp. 253-254). All phenomena can be described in systems- and action-theoretical terms, though there is a difference in their respective "depth of field." Thus, lifeworld actions stand in a relation of exchange with their material environment. For the actors, material conditions appear as situational limits and restrictions on their effort to realize their plans of action. In simple social relations, material reproduction occurs in terms of comprehensible dimensions, allowing it to be presented as the intended outcome of collective cooperation (Habermas 1981, vol. II, pp. 244ff. and 347-348). As a society becomes increasingly differentiated, these processes become so complex and incomprehensible that the way they are perceived becomes "illegitimately narrowed" when seen from a participant perspective. The systems-environment model allows for a more adequate explanation of these processes from the perspective of the observer. "With regard to the aspect of system, societies as a whole constitute what Marx termed materialistically society's 'metabolic processes' with nature. This metaphor suggests that we should conceive of society in terms analogous to one large organism which reproduces itself via interchange with its organic and inorganic environment" (Habermas 1991, p. 255).

Let us take a close look at what is being claimed here. In the *methodological change in perspective* from participant to observer, the *quality of the object studied* also changes. It is one thing to determine that from a certain level of complexity onwards, the consequences and interdependencies of actions can no longer be comprehended by participants; it is quite another thing to claim that these more complex consequences of action obey self-regulating system dynamics. The latter claim, a presumption about the quality of social phenomena, has been slipped in along with the change in perspective, but it has not been demonstrated. "The systems model is no mere artifact in this context" (Habermas 1987, p. 233). In contrast to the universality claim of systems theory in Luhmann – in which every social contact has to be understood as system, from the smallest all the way to the society as a whole (Luhmann 1984, p. 33; Schwinn 1995a and 2013) – Habermas reserves the systemic for complex social interconnections, where action theory presumably reaches the upper end of its reach. This presents a genetic problem: it has to be shown that, starting from comprehensible intentional actions, these gradually turn into systemically self-regulating processes as the degree of complexity increases. Only if Habermas can demonstrate the systemic in terms of the object itself will he be able to avoid the accusation that he simply slipped it into analysis along with the change in perspective.

This leads to Habermas's central problem: How can the two conceptual strategies of action and systems theory be linked? The adoption of systems theory is justified in terms of the limits of what action theory can provide. Conversely, there are fundamental weaknesses in systems theory that do not allow it to emancipate itself completely from action theory. Even in his earlier writings, the positive response to systems theory was always accompanied by a critical discussion of its merits. This involves the definition of the maintenance of social systems (Habermas 1970, pp. 175ff. and 306; 1971, pp. 151ff. and 163-64; 1973, pp. 12ff.). In distinction to biological systems, social systems do not have a clearly marked date of death. The preconditions of their existence (or maintenance) cannot be descriptively grasped from the observer perspective. Social systems do not reproduce objectively observable naked life, but rather culturally defined life. States of equilibrium and target values for the maintenance of social systems are thus secondary problems, contingent upon cultural patterns that vary historically and from society to society. And these latter patterns can only be accessed via an understanding of the actors' own interpretations. This accounts for the methodological primacy of the theory of action or of the analysis of the lifeworld (Habermas 1981, vol. II, pp. 223ff.; 1991, pp. 251ff.). Systems analysis cannot yield definitions of the maintenance of social systems from within the framework of its own theory; instead, it has to allow them to be provided by an analysis that takes up the perceptual and interpretive processes of social participants.

"However, the conceptualization of societies cannot be so smoothly linked with that of organic societies, for, unlike structural patterns in biology, the structural patterns of action systems are not accessible to [purely external] observation; they have to be gotten at hermeneutically, that is, from the internal perspective of participants. The entities that are to be subsumed under systems-theoretical concepts from the external perspective of an observer must be identified *beforehand* as the lifeworlds of social groups and understood in their symbolic structures. The inner logic of the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld, which we discussed from the standpoints of cultural reproduction, social integration,

and socialization, results in *internal limitations* on the reproduction of the societies we view from the outside as boundary-maintaining systems. Because they are structures of the lifeworld, the structures important for the maintenance of a [social] system, those with which the identity of a society stands or falls, are accessible only to a reconstructive analysis that begins with the members' intuitive knowledge" (Habermas 1987, p. 151).

Here, the imperatives of system maintenance are bound to criteria posited by the lifeworld; these imperatives have to "fulfill conditions for the maintenance of sociocultural lifeworlds" (Habermas 1987, p. 152). Habermas attempts to demonstrate this methodological primacy of the lifeworld by means of evolutionary theory. The definitions of the maintenance of social systems are dependent upon the structural transformation of patterns of interpretation (1971, p. 164; 1973, pp. 18ff.; 1976, pp. 12ff., 160ff. and 228ff.; 1981, vol. II, pp. 223ff.). Variation among the ideal values of social systems are limited by the developmental logic of worldviews (*Weltbilder*), that is, collectively shared structures of consciousness. The imperatives of system integration themselves have no influence on this developmental logic. The lifeworld establishes the structural possibilities and limitations within which systemic processes can run their course.

Evolutionary theory is supposed to provide a genesis for systemic processes. Society first differentiates itself in the course of its evolution as lifeworld and as system (Habermas 1987, pp. 152-54). In this context, Habermas seeks to give an account of the methodological dualism of participant and observer perspectives in terms of the factual dualism of system and social integration (Honneth 1985, p. 324). The rationalization of action in the lifeworld gradually permits an increase in the complexity of systemic processes. In the early phases of social evolution, in tribe-based societies, system and social integration are still interlinked (Habermas 1987, p. 163). Or more precisely: at the beginning there was only a lifeworld. Thus, for instance, economic transactions have no system-formative effects at this stage. At the same time, the exchange of objects fulfills important tasks of social integration. The exchange mechanism remains bound to normative contexts; there is no clear separation between economic and noneconomic values. The quality of the object of analysis is reflected on the methodological level. There is no need to shift from the participant perspective to the observer perspective, since functional interconnections or interdependencies remain transparent for participants, being accessible from the perspective of everyday practice (*ibidem*, p. 164). It is neither possible nor necessary in this context to present the intermediate stages of evolution that lead to modern society (Habermas 1976, pp. 150ff.); just the basic idea is important for us.

Habermas conceives of the rationalization of the structures of consciousness of the lifeworld as a collective learning process in analogy to the ontological developmental psychology of Jean Piaget. Max Weber's sociology of religion is taken as the historical illustration of this abstract model. Development in Weber as in Piaget is an increasing process of generalization and differentiation of structures of consciousness and of worldviews according to various criteria of rationality. By means of this process of generalization, systemic mechanisms gradually free themselves from their lifeworld contexts. Value generalization allows action to free itself from particular, traditional, normative patterns of conduct. This is accompanied by a differentiation of culture

according to various criteria of rationality. The separation of purposive-rational (or means-ends rational) and normative aspects is seen by Habermas as the most consequential evolutionary process for the course of future development. It was the process that first provided the freedom of movement required for system formation.

"This polarization reflects an uncoupling of system integration from social integration, which presupposes a differentiation on the plane of interaction not only between action oriented to success and to mutual understanding, but between the corresponding mechanisms of action coordination – the ways in which ego brings alter to continue interaction, and the bases upon which alter forms generalized action orientations. On the basis of increasingly generalized action orientations, there arises an ever denser network of interactions that do without directly normative steering and have to be coordinated in another way" (Habermas 1987, pp. 180-181; emphasis added).

Steering media represent the "other way". Habermas attempts to make autonomic systemic processes plausible by means of media theory (Honneth 1985, p. 326). In the "unhappy marriage" (Joas 1991) of action and systems theory, these media represent the means by which the theory of action says "I do" to systems theory. With advancing generalization of motivations and values, the realms of the unproblematic shrink. The pressure of rationality on the now problematic lifeworld increases and thus brings about the need for intersubjective agreement (Habermas 1987, p. 183). The increased need for interpretation heightens the risk of dissent. These dangers can be brought under control by means of the communications media. Media make it possibly to simplify complex situations of interaction and to reduce them to stereotypes. In this way, they become accessible to action as simple orientation patterns, without necessitating fundamental acts of reflection or the working through of all of the preconditions and consequences of a possible course of action. These special codes deviate from normal language by removing specific action-coordinating mechanisms from the lifeworld's totality to which communicative action remains bound up. These codes are tailored to standard situations and "on the basis of a built-in structure of preferences, condition action decisions without resort having to be made to the resources of the lifeworld" (Habermas 1991, p. 258). How does this process of systemic conditioning work? The basic problem for media theory is why alter should adopt the selections of ego (Jensen 1980). What is the basis for the regularity or chance of repetition of specific selections? Habermas answers this question in terms of the prototype for all media, money. Money encodes a means-ends rational (purposive rational) treatment of calculable amounts of value and enables one to exert generalized, strategic influence on the decisions of other interactional participants while bypassing prolonged processes of consensus-building.

Habermas attempts to provide a microsociological or action-theoretical derivation and grounding of systems theory by means of media theory. All of the components of the conceptual fusion with which the system is characterized can also be found on the level of media: unintended, norm-free, means-ends (purposive) rational. Organizations, as the cores of systems, are also assimilated into the media conception (Habermas 1981, vol. II, pp. 230-231, 257 and 455ff.). In this context, Habermas finds plausible Luhmann's organizational model, which shunts the motives of actors into the organizational environment. The decisive question is: Does he succeed in providing a genetic derivation of systemic processes from the categories of action with which the media

theory continues to work in a certain sense? One can accept his thoughts on media theory up until the point at which he allows media-mediated actions to turn into systems, at which this un- and decoupling process is supposed to occur. In the media process, it comes to "an objective inversion of the ends set and the means chosen, for the medium itself is now the transmitter of the respective subsystem's system-maintaining imperatives" (Habermas 1991, p. 258).

Though it is correct that the medium of money can bring about a reversal of means and ends in subjects in which money is transformed from a means to an end in itself, this still does not substantiate the claim that money has now turned into a medium of a system's self-maintenance motives. There is no argumentative support for the step from a *medium of interaction*, which strengthens the likelihood (Jensen 1980, p. 33) of the adoption and repetition of specific selections by actors, to an *objective medium* that is supposed to transmit the selections of a given system. This is supposed to be the way in which the accountability (responsibility) of interactional participants comes to disappear by means of "relieving interaction from yes/no positions on criticizable validity claims – which actors themselves have to defend and for which they hold one another accountable" (Habermas 1987, p. 263; also *ibidem*, p. 184).

It is necessary here to indicate exactly *what* interaction is being relieved *from*. System formation refers to the release of specific domains of action from "*the lifeworld's totality*" (Habermas 1991, p. 258, emphasis added). This release from the diffuse pressure of the normative sanctions of the contexts of everyday life certainly means that an interactional participant who acts in this field cannot be held "accountable" for many aspects of his or her actions. Economic action within the framework of a business operation attains its specific rationality precisely from the fact that it is released from many of the "validity claims" of other rationality criteria. However, this does not mean that "accountability" per se disappears – quite the contrary. Habermas himself emphasizes that the transfer of action over to steering media produces "both […] a relief from the expenditures and risks of communication and [...] a conditioning of decisions in expanded fields of contingency" (Habermas 1987, p. 281; *ibidem*, p. 183), which increases the degrees of freedom of success-oriented action (*ibidem*, p. 263). The expansion of the freedom and scope of action produced by releasing it from diffuse normative pressures has to be accompanied by the increased accountability of actors with regard to the specific criterion of action applicable. For precisely this reason, money or economic rationality has become one of the most important steering media in modern societies not of systems but of the actors and agencies involved in planning, since one can reckon with a high degree of specific action rationality among any population targeted by steering media.

Habermas is certainly correct in observing that the release from manifold validity claims makes interactional processes in certain limited areas more permeable, making it possible to interlink interactions into increasingly complex networks (Habermas 1987, pp. 181 and 263). At the same time, though, he suppresses the fact that this is only possible on the basis of a parallel increase in actor rationality and is anything but

equatable with objective, systemic dynamics[2]. Action rationality and the ability to establish social order are mutually conditioning (Schwinn 1993a, pp. 63ff.; 1993b). The more complexly woven interactional network certainly can and will evade the intentions of those involved. Unintended consequences, though, are not the same thing as the transition to systemic processes based on functional rationality. Only partial domains or aspects of structure and the consequences of action go beyond the horizon of intentions, and this process can assume various degrees of independence. Thus, some things can be integrated into one's intentions once a new cycle of actions begins. These complex interconnections and interdependencies are accessible to a combination of action and structural theory, but not to the "unhappy marriage" of action and systems theory.

The distinction between the concepts of system and lifeworld is gradual rather than strict. The economy, which differentiated itself on the basis of the medium of money, is the only sphere that Habermas conceives of as a system in the strict sense of the word. Power and especially the media of influence and value commitment remain dependent upon consensus-building processes within the lifeworld and thus upon accountable (responsible) actors (Habermas 1981, vol. II, pp. 269ff., 404ff., 412-413 and 418-19). Whereas money and power replace language-based understanding, they only "condense" and simplify the other media. Moreover, there is a fundamental asymmetry between money and power. Power needs legitimation and thus has to be more deeply anchored in the lifeworld than money. The domains of action that have devolved (or become differentiated) on the basis of these media thus attain different degrees of systemic autonomy (Habermas 1991, p. 293, n. 89). However, all share the need to anchor systemic mechanisms in the lifeworld by means of institutionalization (Habermas 1981, vol. II, pp. 230, 249, 258-259 and 536ff.). In social-theoretical terms, the methodological primacy of the lifeworld is secured by means of law. Law serves to join or articulate system and lifeworld. It guarantees intentional and normative input in relations of systemic interdependency. Lifeworld materials can be effectively operationalized to affect behavior by being translated via law into systemic media codes:

"Law functions, as it were, as a transformer that first guarantees that the network of social-integrative, overall societal communication does not break down. Only in the language of law can normatively substantial messages be circulated through the society as a whole; if they were not translated into the complex legal code, which is equally open to both lifeworld and system, they would fall upon deaf ears in the media-steered domains of action" (Habermas 1992, p. 78).

In his theory of law, Habermas summons up motifs from his early critique of systems functionalism. The existence and reproduction of the system is not a self-purposive, objective process, but is dependent upon instructions provided by actors and their participation. Habermas rejects the claim of more recent autopoietic systems theory to

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[2] Jensen (1984, pp. 155ff.) also emphasizes the sanctioning aspect of media. The two media components of sanctioning and motivation lend support to the claim that media-mediated selections cannot be understood without the calculating weighing of possibilities on the part of those involved. In Weber's terms: they only possess a probable character (and thus not one independent of the calculations of subjects).

comprehend functional systems as institutions that exist for their own sake and that have to be granted the same constitutional lights of autonomy as individuals themselves.

"For this reason, damage is done to the idea of a state ruled by laws when the functional systems of society are released, in terms of constitutional law, from their instrumental role and are promoted to "ends in themselves". For then the "autonomy and differentiatedness" of citizens has to compete with those of the systems for legal protection even within the "official" realm of power. The political system can only maintain its constituted character under the rule of law if authorities assert their asymmetric position vis-à-vis incorporated negotiating partners that results from their obligation to represent the crystallized will of the currently nonparticipating citizens found in their legal mandate. The bond of delegated decision-making powers must also not be broken in voting procedures. Only in this way can the link to the public made up of citizens of the state be maintained, who are both entitled and *in the position* to perceive, identify, and publicly discuss the social unacceptability of functional systems. These systems, however, first need to learn in their corporatist arrangements to overcome their specific forms of blindness and to view themselves as subsystems of a larger system. For this reason they are dependent upon the instruction provided by affected clients, in their role as citizens of the state, with regard to the costs they cause their external surroundings and to the consequences of their internal failures" (Habermas 1992, pp. 425-426).

Habermas would like to trim back the excesses of systems theory, manifest in its universality claim, leaving untouched the relative legitimacy of systems theory. It is apparent, though, that the reasons that Habermas gives for adopting the systems model are rescinded by those that he employs in criticizing this theory. The upper limits of the theory of action (its "reach") are supposed to result from the complexity of the consequences of action, which form networks of systemic, self-regulating processes that no longer require accountable actors. This would mean, however, that the definition of system maintenance could be grasped from the perspective of the observer, without any longer needing to understand the interpretations of those involved and without being accessible any longer to these persons (Habermas 1981, vol. II, pp. 232, 240, 258 and 277). The methodological primacy of lifeworld analysis cannot allow for this, however, because, as has been seen, systems analysis is not autarkic in the determination of the conditions of self-maintenance of subsystems (Habermas 1981, vol. II, pp. 223, 258 and 293). If systems are unable to emancipate themselves from the cultural understandings/interpretations of their participants, it has to remain Habermas's riddle as to how they can nonetheless be systems, that is, be processes that are unaffected and delinked from the intentions of their participants.

His critique of Parsons's conception of system can be turned against himself. He criticizes the fact that Parsons's systems draw their controlling force and central parameters from an ideal, nonempirical *environment*.

"But this latter concept is foreign to systems theory, which conceives of *self*-regulated system maintenance in such a way that the boundary of the system is threatened in basically *the same way* on *all* fronts, and has *everywhere* to be defended against invasions from hypercomplex environments. Processes of system maintenance are controlled exclusively by values intrinsic to the system itself; *outside* of the system's boundaries there are only conditioning – not steering – variables" (Habermas 1987, pp. 249).

However, in Habermas himself, the lifeworld is a similar alien entity for systems theory, since it also represents environment for the system and is nevertheless supposed to be

the origin for the central definitions of system maintenance. Whereas Parsons understood the ideal-nonempirical sphere and its link to other areas as a universal, systemic context (Schwinn 1993a, pp. 269ff.; 1995b), the linkage problematic becomes all the more aggravated in Habermas, since the systemic only ekes out an enclavelike existence in the midst of a fundamentally differently conceived environment.

This social-theoretical confusion has a methodological counterpart. Instead of a methodologically regulated change in perspective, a confusion of perspectives emerges. The complexity of consequences of action that form systemic networks demands a change from the perspective of the participant to that of the observer; on the other hand, the fundamental parameters of this "systemic process" are supposedly only accessible via the perspective of the participant, due to the methodological primacy of the lifeworld. These claims are not mutually compatible.

Habermas is unable and unwilling to maintain system and lifeworld as strictly divisible concepts. The basic problem that arises for his linkage of action and systems theory manifests itself in various ways: in the definition of the relation between the intentions and consequences of action and between the perspective of the participant and that of the observer, in the gradual system-building abilities of various media, and in the articulatory function of law. At none of these theoretical "construction sites" has Habermas succeeded in consistently linking systems and action theory.

Habermas was certainly right that, starting from a certain level of complexity, the consequences of action become more difficult to comprehend and it becomes necessary to shift to the perspective of the observer. It is, though, an *empirical question* whether a form of order emerges from the unintended consequences of action and to what extent, for how long, and for which actors these interconnections remain inaccessible. The processes that are comprehensible only to a given observer at point of time t_1 may have already been incorporated into the intentions of at least some participants by point of time t_2, after a new cycle of action has already run its course (Schwinn 1993a, pp. 90ff.; 1993b). Moments that play a role in such a model of structuration, that is, intentions and unintended courses of development, are torn from their context by Habermas and reified in the form of independent conceptual strategies. In this way, neither of these two moments can be consistently conceived of any longer.

This is also the basic drift of the critique of the two-level model of society (Honneth 1985, pp. 321ff.; Joas 1991; McCarthy 1991; Greve 2009, pp. 124ff.). The symbolic reproduction of society cannot be grasped in purely intentional terms by means of comprehensible interrelations of action; nor can its material reproduction be grasped exclusively in terms of systemically networked, unintended consequences of action. Thus, organizations, for example, which Habermas conceives of as the cores of societal systems, are not as independent of the orientations and motives of their participants as the adoption of the systems-theoretical sociology of organizations implies[3]. One runs into such mixed forms in all social phenomena. A conception of structuration has to

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[3] The works of Wolfgang Streeck (1981 and 1987) put special emphasis on the degree to which the maintenance of an organization today is dependent upon the constant adaptive and redesigning efforts of its actors.

take the place of lifeworld and system. The conclusion to this paper will provide a brief sketch of this notion.

2. *From Action-Systems Theory to Action-Structure Theory*

The work of Jürgen Habermas represents an interesting attempt to combine theories of action and order. Systems theory is unable to answer one of its own core questions: that of the definition of the maintenance of social systems. The efficiency or inefficiency of institutions cannot be defined with reference to any abstract systemic entity, but only on the basis of the values and interests of the actors involved. Habermas has repeatedly emphasized, starting with his early critique of functionalism, that system maintenance is not a matter of objectively statable parameters, but is instead established in processes of cultural definition by actors in the lifeworld. These important insights must be kept in mind in all future work on the micro-macro problem.

"Functional imperatives" and tensions are not independent of perceptions and interests, and actors, groups, and organizations are not altruistic agents of improved systems adaptivity. They pursue value- and interest-oriented institutionalization strategies. On the other hand, social processes cannot be reduced to actors' intentions. What is decisive here is how one grasps these objective, nonintentionalist, social aspects. Habermas believes that it is impossible to leave systems theory completely out of the picture, and he resorts to the idea of self-regulating social processes. But it is exactly this conception that is incommensurable with his insight that "systems" – with regard to their maintenance and their functions – are dependent upon the definitions of participating actors, and for this very reason cannot be self-regulating. In this way he maneuvers himself into a dilemma: either the status of action aspects is so enhanced that the systemic whole and its functional imperatives practically vanish, or too much emphasis is placed on the systemic aspect, reducing actors to the mere executing agents of systemic needs. When systems and action theories are combined, one or the other always winds up with a residual status.

Action and systems theories conceptualize social reality in different ways: in one case ascribing it to actors and in the other to self-regulating systems. By making use of both theories, Habermas breaks social reality apart, opposing system to lifeworld without being able to recombine them coherently. The combination of action and structural theory provides the only way out of this dilemma. Here it is important not to equate the distinction between action and structural theory with the micro-macro distinction. The understanding of any micro situation presupposes cooperation between action and structural theories: it has to do with frame-setting, that is, structural, conditions within which actors define the course of action by means of their abilities to develop situational definitions and strategies. The explanatory model for the microlevel must also hold for the macrolevel, since the latter also has to be explained in terms of the interaction of action and its structural conditions.

I would like to provide a brief sketch of this in terms of differentiation theory, the main conceptual frame in sociology for analyzing the structure of modern societies and long lasting historical processes. The action-structure model must hold for the

interaction of several differentiated social macro orders. Such social orders do not run their course in a functionally, reciprocally determining process "in their own right", which is regulated in terms of a societal system. Instead, the individual social orders mutually set limiting and facilitating structural framework conditions for one another, which the actors specific to each order have to take into account in their actions. Thus, politicians – in their efforts to bring about their programs and measures – have to bear in mind the financiability (the tax issue) and that means the economic conditions of their actions; entrepreneurs are dependent – in the manufacture of a new product – upon political and legal conditions and upon scientific knowledge; a scientist who would like to carry out an experiment has to bear in mind whether this is permitted by the political and legal framework and whether it can be financed; and so on. Via this combination of action-based and structure-based components, social orders are constituted and reproduced in their interaction. There is no more need for another level, a systemic problem-solving model for the macrolevel than there is for the microlevel.

One possible reason why Habermas holds fast to the concept of system may be that he posits differentiation to be the primary tendency of social evolution. At first glance, this appears to be an area in which action theory possesses little power of persuasion. Differentiation as the long lasting historical development to modern societies seems to suggest a systems model, since this process as a whole is neither planned nor intended by actors, but appears rather to be systemically determined. Upon closer analysis, however, this assumption also proves to be unsound. Just as in the *synchronic* interaction of social orders, for the *diachronic* analysis of the differentiation process, the action-structure model has to be taken into account. If one breaks down the process of differentiation into sequential historical phases, it becomes clear that every subsequent phase must be explained in terms of the interaction of structural and cultural starting conditions and in terms of the corresponding actors' strategies in the preceding phase. Events and processes relevant to differentiation can be assigned relatively precise times, places, conditions, and actors. One could take, for example, the investiture conflict in the eleventh century, which played a decisive role in the separation of Church and State in the West. Where the systems theoretician generously finds systemic tendencies ex post facto, a more precise historical analysis uncovers a series of historical phases that follow one another in a nondeterministic fashion (Schluchter 1996, pp. 179-243). We prefer not to see our future as already systematically determined by the present, which would leave us disempowered as actors. In the same way, the process of differentiation that has preceded us did not run a systemically independent course, but arose instead in successive historical phases of interaction between structures and actors. Differentiation studies that compare countries and proceed historically increase our sensibility in this regard. For the same analytic model must hold for both synchronic and diachronic macro processes of the differentiation phenomenon as holds for each and every micro situation. Neither can be reduced either to intentions or to a systemically determined course of events. Systemic processes take place, by definition, behind the backs of the actors involved and cannot be reconstructed in terms of the intentions and actions they incorporate. The advantage of the concept of structure is that it allows precisely this reconstruction without being reduced to voluntaristic aspects. This insight is

undoubtedly present in Habermas writings; however, it is repeatedly blurred by unnecessarily dragging along the concept of system.

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