It is noteworthy that Weber's name nowhere appears in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, even though it is impossible to imagine the book without him. Indeed, it is arguable that main points of his influence – his concept of rationalization, his account of the triumph of Zweckrationalität, his focus upon the role self-denial or an inner-worldly asceticism plays in this triumph, and his depiction of the "steel housing" created by bureaucratization – outweigh Horkheimer and Adorno’s borrowings from both Freud and Marx. No doubt their failure to give credit where credit is due is tied to both authorial pride and the anxiety of influence. But it is also tied to their insistence that Weber’s work expressed what Horkheimer (in *The Eclipse of Reason*) termed a "subjective" form of reason.

Subjective reason is a form of rationality that concerns itself solely with the selection of rational (efficient and cost-effective) means, having nothing to contribute to the rational understanding or judgment of ends. It is Zweckrationalität described in a way that allows it to be contrasted with what Horkheimer calls “objective” reason: the end adjudicating “Reason” appealed to by Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and the mainstream of the Western philosophical tradition. This tradition viewed reason as a faculty concerned with comprehending divergent ends and ranking them accordingly. Socrates, Plato et al. believed reason to be up to these tasks because they thought it was capable of revealing "a structure inherent in reality that by itself calls for a specific mode of behavior in each specific case" (Horkheimer, 1974: 11). Because it could grasp the objective order of Nature (physis) or Being (ousia), reason could also bring human practical and theoretical life into correspondence with that (pregiven) order.

The “Reason” of the Western philosophical tradition was, then, both emphatic and metaphysical. It was emphatic because of its robustly normative character: it passed “judgment on man’s actions and way of life” (Horkheimer, 1974: 9). It was metaphysical because it assumed that there is such a thing as an inherent or pregiven order of Being, and that reason can reveal it. It was this latter form of reason that Kant, the “all destroyer” (der Alleszermalmer), consigned to the ash heap of history with his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1784). Weber went beyond Kant by subjecting emphatically normative rationality to annihilating criticism in “Science as a Vocation” (1917). As Weber had earlier written in his “‘Objectivity’ in Social Science” (1903) essay,

The fate of an epoch that has eaten of the tree of knowledge is that it must know that we cannot learn the meaning of the world from the results of its analysis, be it ever so perfect; it must rather be in a position to create this meaning itself. It must
recognize that general views of life and the universe can never be the products of increasing empirical knowledge, and that the highest ideals, which move us most forcefully, are always formed only in the struggle with other ideals that are just as sacred to others as ours are to us.

(Weber, 1949: 57)

Neo-Kantian epistemology and the growth of the natural sciences expose the idea of a normative order of nature to be an illusion. Shorn of the “former illusions” fostered by the robust moral cognitivism of the tradition, we disenchanted moderns confront the fact that science – the embodiment of rational knowledge of reality for us – is incapable of giving an answer to the question of “What shall we do and how shall we live” (Weber, 1946: 143). Anyone who values intellectual integrity must acknowledge that, in questions concerning individual ethical conduct and the organization of a just society, no “objective” answers are out there waiting to be discovered by science, rational inquiry, or even “pure practical reason.” When it comes to ethical values and guiding political principles, Weber declares, “the individual has to decide which is God for him and which is the devil.” He must do this in full awareness of the fact that reason cannot and does not provide the kind of authoritative ranking of values so many yearn for (Weber, 1946: 148).

In The Eclipse of Reason, Horkheimer presents what he calls “Max Weber’s pessimism with regard to the possibility of rational insight and action” as “itself a stepping stone in the renunciation of philosophy and science as regards their aspiration of defining man’s goal” (Horkheimer, 1974: 6). Weber’s desire to face up to the epistemological and theoretical implications of a wide-ranging “disenchantment of the world” leads to a comprehensive formalization of reason and to the destruction of the normative content philosophers and theologians had traditionally assigned it. The unavoidable result, Horkheimer thinks, is that “the acceptability of ideals, the criteria for our actions and beliefs, the leading principles of ethics and politics, all our ultimate decisions are made to depend on factors other than reason.” Questions concerning ultimate values turn out to be “matters of choice and predilection,” of attitude, prejudice, and feeling. Moreover, it becomes “meaningless to speak of truth in making practical, moral, or esthetic decisions” (Horkheimer, 1974: 7–8).

As a general description of Weber’s position, Horkheimer’s remarks are more or less accurate. Weber does indeed repudiate moral cognitivism, at least the robust kind we find in the Western tradition. In and of itself, this repudiation is hardly shocking. For many of us, the appeal to an “objective order of value” does not open the door to arguments about which ultimate values should guide our lives; rather, it slams it shut. So long as dogmatically asserted orders of nature, Being, or divine purposes are not appealed to, we are free to consider a variety of ultimate values and ethical-political positions, and to engage in argument and debate about them. After Kant, Nietzsche, and Weber, we do this with an increased awareness that such arguments are unlikely – and probably unable – to produce a general consensus on the “correct” view of things, one which would establish peace among Weber’s “warring gods” and bring the debates to an end.

However, as we shall see, the Frankfurt School’s respective appeals to “critical reason,” “reflective” rationality, or “discourse ethics” as alternatives to subjective reason are predicated upon a caricature of Weber’s actual position. Horkheimer’s Eclipse of Reason is perhaps the most obvious example in this regard, but similar efforts are made by Adorno, Marcuse, and Habermas. This skewed reading of Weber – that he was a “decisionist” who, whether he intended to or not, encouraged political irresponsibility and irrationalism – is as constitutive of the Frankfurt School’s critical rationalism as it is for the “classical political rationalism” of the conservative thinker Leo Strauss (Strauss, 1953: 35–80).
Casting Weber as someone who embodies “subjective” reason and the decisionism that flows from it enables the Frankfurt School theorists to minimize the degree to which his rationalization paradigm provides the foundation and basic conceptual structure of much, if not all, of their work. It also enables them to frame Weber as the quasi-relativistic antipode to the Frankfurt School’s goal of establishing a critical theory of society that has firm normative foundations. Assuming we are willing to grant Horkheimer et al. their point in this regard, an obvious question arises: what, precisely, is their alternative to a “subjective” or formalized rationality?

Speaking broadly, the alternative they provide is something the Frankfurt School theorists call “reflective” reason. This form of reason is self-aware, critical in nature and dialectical in form. It views the technological-instrumental conquest of nature as the distorted expression of an unreflective or one-dimensional positivistic rationality, a rationality whose ultimate roots lie in the struggle for self-preservation. Unsurprisingly, reflective reason is premised on the rejection of the idea that science and technology provide the ultimate criteria of what is rational and what is not.

The inspiration for this distinction between reflective (philosophical and critical) reason and uncritical (scientific and technological) reason is Hegelian. It is found in those sections of the Phenomenology where Hegel criticizes the types of rationality the scientifically minded Enlightenment took as normative for the pursuit of knowledge. In Hegel’s view, the classifying rationality of a Linnaeus and the “reason as testing laws” approach of a Newton constitute the standpoint of the “mere understanding” (Verstand). This faculty analyzes the classes, structures, and causal connections that are to be found in what Kant famously called the “mechanism of nature.” These detemoralize and objectify the external reality confronting the subject-scientist.

Dialectical reason – as Hegel, Lukács, and the first-generation Frankfurt School conceived it – was premised upon three realizations. First, reality is neither as “fixed” nor “external” as the objectifying natural sciences presume. Second, all forms of knowledge – from the most naive empiricism to sophisticated scientific theories relying upon hypothesis, experiment, and verification – are viewed as historical in nature, each form generating criteria of truth that it is ultimately unable to fulfill. Third, concrete historical and social beings are seen as the active authors and creators of all forms of knowledge, rather than as contemplative or disinterested observers of a law-governed nature (Horkheimer, 1972: 197–201).

A dialectical form of rationality, then, is self-conscious in the sense that it reflects upon various forms of knowledge, viewing them as stages in the development of human consciousness rather than as more or less adequate reflections of a unitary object (nature, society) that stands opposite the knowing subject. Reason (Vernunft) recognizes that subject and object are dialectically intertwined. Evolving ideas of what genuine knowledge is – for example, the movement from Aristotelian to Newtonian physics – testify to an evolution not just in scientific understanding but in the character of humanity’s self-understanding. The intertwine-ment of the human subject with the various “objects” it studies means that all knowledge is, ultimately, a form of self-knowledge.

The Frankfurt School’s version of dialectical rationality appeals to thought’s ability to reflectively suspend the conquest of nature and step back from the project of scientific-technological mastery. Taking on a life of its own, this project has become increasingly unreflective and automatic, with little regard for the human, social, and environmental costs it entails. The step back from the conquest of nature allows us to see this project as but one (distorted) dimension of a larger and more significant struggle. This is the struggle to realize our distinctively human interest in autonomy, to reconcile ourselves with nature, and to create a domination-free or “emancipated” society.
From the perspective of Horkheimer et al., our overall failure to reflect upon the implications of the conquest of nature means that thinking has been reduced to a sequence of logical, mathematical, and task-oriented operations; to what is, in essence, a more or less sophisticated form of calculation. The sheer success of the technological-scientific project to conquer nature thus thrusts reason’s emancipatory potential – its capacity to question what we are doing and to keep the goals of autonomy, reconciliation, and a domination-free society alive – into oblivion. Forgetting the claims to truth, justice, and freedom articulated by the Enlightenment in its more critical phases, we orient ourselves increasingly to the smooth operation of the social machine.

This machine dominates both nature and human behavior, manipulating them with ever-greater efficiency thanks to advances in science and technology. The “system” that results no longer has any need to legitimate itself by means of the ideology of the “fair exchange of equivalents” that Marx had criticized. Instead, it legitimates itself by means of the ever higher standard of living it delivers to masses of ordinary working people. If we combine the rises in productivity, efficiency, and the standard of living late capitalism has achieved with the built-in administrative and functional demands of complex social systems, an ever more hierarchical social structure results, similar to the one prophesied by Weber.

Both “the masses” and “unreflective reason” (in the form of science, technology, and administrative rationality) take this hierarchy as necessary, justified, and totally uncontroversial, whereas, the “reflective” reason animating the Frankfurt School does not, for reasons sketched above. But here two further questions arise. First, assuming that there is such a thing as reflective or dialectical reason, on what grounds can it persuasively assert its superior self-awareness and truthfulness? What makes a “critical theory of society” not just normatively superior to “traditional” social theory but epistemologically superior as well? Second, what allows the Frankfurt School to claim that our interest in “emancipation” is something distinctively human and universal, rather than a theoretical anachronism born of a very particular (and hardly uncontroversial) nineteenth-century German tradition of philosophy and social thought?

The answer to the first question is found in the Frankfurt School’s contention that all “traditional theory,” Weber’s verstehende Soziologie included, is based upon a split between facts and values that is as methodologically untenable as it is politically suspect. Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, and Habermas all offer us variations on what has long been a standard critique of “positivist” social theory. The basic idea is that Weber – misguidedly pursuing a value-neutral (wertfrei) brand of social science – is forced to posit an epistemological abyss between the realm of facts and that of values. The philosophical roots of this abyss trace back to Hume and Kant, both of whom argued that no ought could be derived from true statements about what is. Weber updates and polemically reasserts this argument in his lecture “Science as a Vocation.” However, the Frankfurt School theorists point out that the possibility of making and maintaining such a split turns out to be an illusion. The “facts” are always already shaped by values that had (supposedly) been safely quarantined. Social scientific concepts and methods are both theory- and value-laden. This means that they will always be ideologically freighted, whether the “neutral” social scientist admits it or not.

Here I should note that Weber allowed – indeed emphasized – the knowledge-constitutive character of the broad historical and cultural perspective that lies behind the social scientist’s selection of topic and objects of investigation. As “Science as a Vocation” and the essay “Objectivity in the Social Sciences” make clear, what Weber objected to was not the presence of values as such. He thought the presence to be irreducible. Rather, what he objected to was the pretense that science or scholarship – Wissenschaft – could somehow reduce conflicting values and ways of life to a common denominator, measure their relative utility or rightness, and authoritatively guide us in the choice between them (Weber, 1946: 144–145).
Weber therefore drew a sharp distinction between the legitimate construction of ideal-type value concepts (which the social scientist employs to understand the meaning of complex social phenomena) and the ideologically guided advocacy of a particular moral, religious, or political agenda. In the latter case, the social scientist invariably picks and chooses among the facts at his disposal, ignoring those that are inconvenient for the ideological position he advocates but does not fully own up to.

Weber thought that nothing was more dishonest than the scientist, scholar, or professor presenting ideological conclusions as the simple and logical consequence of “letting the facts speaking for themselves.” From the perspective of the Frankfurt School, however, the theoretical abstinence preached by Weber in the name of intellectual honesty is itself deeply problematic. It fails to register the way value neutrality and “sticking to the facts” is itself an ideology, one based upon a static or functionalist view of sociocultural reality. Seen from this angle, the approach favored by Weber and traditional theory endows contemporary social reality with a bogus coherence, stability, and legitimacy. “Traditional” or “value-neutral” theory effaces the conflicts and contradictions that arise from inherent social tensions (on the one hand) and from the historical development of institutions, ideas, and practices (on the other). Moreover, the Frankfurt School sees value neutrality as the back door through which relativism and decisionism enter.

The answer to the second question is more of a moving target. In their respective responses to Weber’s value neutrality, Horkheimer, Adorno, and Habermas offer different accounts of the normative foundations of critical theory. The problem they all faced was how to demonstrate that their social criticism was not just another ideologically inflected perspective, but rather the expression of a reflective rationality grounded upon our distinctively human needs and interests. In The Eclipse of Reason, Horkheimer answers this demand by appealing to an apparently clear-cut alternative to “subjective” reason, namely, “objective” reason. This is a form of reason that transcends instrumental reason’s fixation on efficient means, and which focuses instead on the rational adjudication of ends. Like the metaphysical systems of old, “objective reason” is emphatically normative in character, capable of providing authoritative guidance when values or interests conflict. In contrast to the value bracketing of Weber’s “subjective” reason, Horkheimer insists that objective reason is grounded upon the truth of such principles as justice, equality, happiness, and freedom (Horkheimer, 1974: 20). But what, one might ask, does “truth” mean in this context?

In preceding centuries, Horkheimer argues, the principles of justice, equality, freedom, and happiness were “supposed to be inherent in or sanctioned by reason.” They were viewed not as subjectively posited “values,” but rather as aspects of an objective moral reality grounded in man’s nature as a progressive being capable of achieving freedom and autonomy. The rise of scientism and instrumental rationality plagues these constitutive dimensions of our humanity into oblivion, thereby depriving thinking of its “rational foundation” (Horkheimer, 1974: 28). Horkheimer acknowledges that the men of the Enlightenment were wrong to ascribe such principles to “Nature” and “Nature’s God.” However, they were not wrong in thinking that the principles of justice, equality, freedom, and happiness were somehow inherent in, and demanded by, reason itself.

Horkheimer’s turn to the past, not just to distinguish “subjective” from “objective” reason but to renew the promise of such an emphatic rationality, certainly looks like an exercise in nostalgia. In the opening chapters of The Eclipse of Reason, he apparently clings to the dream of Western rationalism – the idea of a value-ranking, end-defining Reason – while turning a blind eye to just how far the “disenchantment of the world” has actually progressed. And, truth be told, he never fully abandons this dream. Yet the rationalist rhetoric of The Eclipse of Reason, when combined with Horkheimer’s suggestion that an “objective” ethics might still be derived from some new form of ontology or prima philosophia, is more than a little misleading. In Chapter 5, “On the Concept of Philosophy,” Horkheimer writes,
Ontology, the heart of traditional philosophy, attempts to derive the essences, substances, and forms of things from some universal ideas that reason imagines it finds in itself. But the structure of the universe cannot be derived from any first principles in our own minds. There are no grounds for believing that the more abstract qualities of a thing should be considered primary or essential... [In fact] concepts ranked in the order of their generality mirror man's repression of nature rather than nature's own structure....Philosophical ontology is inevitably ideological because it tries to obscure the separation between man and nature and to uphold a theoretical harmony that is given the lie on every hand by the cries of the miserable and disinheritenced.

(Horkheimer, 1974: 181–182)

Nietzsche was right: reason and power, metaphysics and domination, have been linked ever since Plato and Aristotle spun out their concepts in logical-hierarchical order. In actuality, ideas like the “great chain of being” or Aristotle’s hierarchy of ends mirror the structures of social domination from which they arose and which formed their historical context.

If the great tradition and the attempts to derive practical from first philosophy are irreducibly tainted by power and domination, what is the point of invoking “objective” against “subjective” reason? The latter simply lays bare what was always contained in the former – a connection Horkheimer himself mercilessly draws out in his “excursus” on Sade and Nietzsche in Dialectic of Enlightenment. Yet the concept of philosophical truth found in the tradition – truth as the progressive “adequation of name to thing,” as the genuine reconciliation of the universal with the particular – contains traces of man's originally mimetic and non-dominating relationship to nature.

According to Horkheimer, critical theory preserves this idea of philosophical truth by means of its relentless critique of instrumental rationality and the false (“reified”) reality this rationality produces. Normatively speaking, it bases itself upon the idea of a domination-free society, which is an idea Horkheimer sees as written into civilization's great but distorted ideals: justice, equality, and freedom (Horkheimer, 1974: 182). The elucidation of this normative standard in undistorted form cannot, however, proceed by means of immanent critique alone. Horkheimer insists that the nature and extent of the distortions found in the “great ideals” can be fully revealed only through the theoretical articulation of the repressed (mimetic) relationship between man and nature.

The latter project is possible only if reason uses its reflective powers to penetrate to the primordial grounds of Western civilization, uncovering its repressed natural contents. According to Horkheimer, then, the normative grounds of critical theory/reflective reason are not to be found in the projection of a utopian future, nor are they found in emancipatory potentials somehow contained in late capitalist society. They are found, rather, in a naturalism whose roots trace to the young Marx's Feuerbachian-Romantic idea of “sensuous being” (an all-sided, undistorted human relation to nature) and to Nietzsche's hypotheses concerning the self-violence that results from civilization blocking the external expression of natural drives (Marx, 1978: 70–101; Nietzsche, 1989: 120–130). They are found, in other words, in a naturalism that is grounded upon a speculative anthropology – nothing more, nothing less.

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Adorno’s negative dialectics offers an alternative approach to the question of critical theory’s normative foundations, one that is clearly distinct from Horkheimer’s mix of anthropological speculation and philosophical nostalgia. These “methodological” differences substantially impact how Adorno answers the question of where to ground our interest in human emancipation and autonomy.
For Adorno, it is imperative that the dialectical employment of critical reason avoids bogus reconciliations of the universal with the particular. The latter abound in Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*, a text which assures us that “what is rational is actual and what is actual is rational.” While Hegel’s approach to politics and society is dialectical, his *affirmation* of the status quo flows directly from the assumptions built into his idealist philosophy of identity (the identity of thought and being, concept and reality). In asserting the “identity of identity and difference” as both the *conditio sine qua non* and final end of dialectical thinking, Hegel sets in motion a pattern by which the universal (society, the state, general concepts) repeatedly subsumes the particularity of the concrete individual person or thing. But, contra Hegel, Adorno insists that this subsumption of the particular by the universal is hardly the negation, preservation, and genuine synthesis that Hegel claims it is. Rather, the dialectical moment of subsumption effectively obliterates the whole dimension of concrete particularity, casting it aside as worthless “existence.”

As a philosopher of nonidentity – that is, as a thinker who insists upon the *irreducible gap* between the *abstractness* of general concepts or entities (on the one hand) and the *concreteness* of particular phenomena or persons (on the other) – Adorno is perfectly aware that he can hardly combat Hegel’s affirmative stance by falling back upon the rationalist groundings of justice and human freedom Horkheimer cites in *The Eclipse of Reason*. Rigorously applied, negative dialectics must show how every philosophical attempt to complete the journey from the abstract (concept) to the concrete (thing) entails the effacement of the particular. This conceptually driven effacement has its social *doppelgänger* in the absorption of the individual by the “coercive collective.” From Adorno’s perspective, the specific *form* that this collective takes barely matters. The “totally administered society” born of monopoly capitalism absorbs and negates the individual just as completely and effectively as does the fascist *Volksgemeinschaft*.

No liberal would countenance the latter conclusion, no matter how much he or she might endorse Adorno’s general defense of the individual against the collective. Adorno reaches this dubious conclusion in part because his defense of the individual cannot be separated from his indictment of the logic of conceptual rationality as such. As he observes in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the latter *always* operates by subsuming a particular under the universal, “amputating” the incommensurable and effacing the very qualities that make a given particular or individual unique (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002: 9). This effacement of qualities reaches its apogee in the mathematizing science of Descartes, Newton, and the Enlightenment. The radical turn away from quality to quantity thus facilitates the schematization of both natural and social reality. This in turn paves the way for the manipulation and domination of both realms by instrumental rationality, whether in the form of technological or administrative-bureaucratic reason. The point is that such developments are hardly contingent, since conceptual rationality – and its violently formalizing logic – was rooted in the project of subjugating nature from the very beginning.

Adorno’s critique of conceptual rationality and deductive logic, as well as his description of the positivistic Enlightenment as “totalitarian” in nature, takes Weber’s rationalization thesis and radicalizes it to a point where it is almost unrecognizable. For Weber, “rationalization” was a process inextricably linked to modernization and the rise of industrial capitalism. For Adorno, “rationalization” is a process that reaches back to the pre-Socratic Greeks and beyond, to the very roots of Western civilization. If we merge the “dialectic of enlightenment” narrative with Adorno’s developed critique of identity thinking, we get a genealogy of a power-rooted and power-centric *ratio* that more than matches Heidegger’s deconstruction of Western metaphysics in terms of sheer historical depth and inclusiveness.
Insofar as Western philosophy has fetishized deductive logic, the principle of noncontradiction, and the creation of encompassing metaphysical systems, it has contributed to—indeed, prefigured—a state of affairs in which a comprehensive universal (the “system”) absorbs, transforms, and accounts for the reality of every existent. Universal and particular are “reconciled” by the universal swallowing the particular. As Adorno observes, unity, not the preservation of particularity or differences, “remains the watchword from Parmenides to Russell” (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002: 5). The only way to escape the chalk circle created by discursive thought, Adorno suggests, is by being open to a non-objectifying form of aesthetic rationality. Such rationality is immanent in artworks, which preserve the concreteness of the particular and encourage a contemplative form of reflection. As Adorno notes in his posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory*,

Reason in artworks is reason as gesture. They synthesize like reason, but not with concepts, propositions, and syllogisms—where these forms occur in art they do so only as subordinated means—rather, they do so by way of what transpires in the artworks. Their synthetic function is immanent: it is the unity of their self, without immediate relation to anything externally given or determined in some way or other; it is directed to the dispersed, the aconceptual, quasi-fragmentary material with which in their interior space artworks are occupied.

(Adorno, 1997: 30)

For Adorno, critical theory’s superiority to traditional theory is not simply found in its awareness of the practical interests driving nomological scientific and sociological knowledge. More importantly, it is found in critical theory’s ability to dissolve all “reified” products of thought and discover (abstract) images of a reconciled condition, usually in contemplation-inducing works of avant-garde art. The human interest in emancipation is grounded less upon the testimony of the Western philosophical tradition than it is upon a deeply rooted human longing for reconciliation with both external and internal nature—that is, for an unalienated and unfragmented condition.

Obviously, such a longing would predate the process of capitalist rationalization. It would, in fact, be a reminder of the wound civilized man endlessly inflicts upon himself. An important consequence of this view is that utopia should not be viewed as forming its material preconditions within the shell of a fully developed capitalist order. Contra Marx, man’s reconciliation with nature, self, and society is by no means “immanent” in the historical process. Rather, its possibility is indirectly testified to by the sheer violence, pain, and alienation of our “unreconciled” condition. This is a condition in which the conquest of nature and the advance of technological civilization regularly produce barbarism, the industrial production of corpses in the death camps and world-annihilating nuclear weapons being only the most obvious examples. The human interest in emancipation is thus grounded in civilization’s ceaseless reproduction of suffering and in the horror of a completely rationalized world.

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In *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), Marcuse developed many of the thought-trains contained in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, applying them to a specific object: the technologically advanced and economically booming society of Cold War America. Again, Weber’s rationalization thesis provides the indispensable background, enabling Marcuse to present advanced industrial society as a “technological universe” which is also, at the same time, a “political universe.”
“Today,” Marcuse states, “domination perpetuates and extends itself not only through technology but as technology”:

In this universe, technology... provides the great rationalization of the unfreedom of man and demonstrates the “technical” impossibility of being autonomous, of determining one’s own life. For this unfreedom appears neither as irrational nor as political, but rather as submission to the technical apparatus which enlarges the comforts of life and increases the productivity of labor. Technological rationality thus protects rather than cancels the legitimacy of domination and the instrumentalist horizon of reason opens on a rationally totalitarian society.

(Marcuse, 1964: 61)

As Habermas observes, in this passage, Marcuse presents Weberian rationalization not only as “a long-term process of the transformation of social structures” but also as a “rationalization” in the Freudian sense, one which serves to conceal the “perpetuation of objectively obsolete domination” by invoking purposive-rational imperatives (Habermas, 1970: 85). Our human interest in freedom and autonomy, in leading a self-determining life, takes a back seat to the supposedly unavoidable technical-hierarchical requirements of manipulating and controlling nature.

Two points are notable in this regard. First, Marcuse retreats from Adorno and Horkheimer's more radical pronouncements about the nature of conceptual rationality, the better to focus his critique on an out-of-control technical rationality. Second, Marcuse tacitly assumes that the model of the “all-sided” (or “three-dimensional”) individual promoted by Schiller, Humboldt, and the young Marx is the correct one. Our “interest” in emancipation and a domination-free society is universal because thinkers like Schiller, Humboldt, and Marx saw it as an irreducible component of our essential humanity. Far more than either Horkheimer or Adorno, Marcuse assumes this idealist-romantic model of the individual to be normatively binding. In his view, it is definitely not just another contingent historical product of the post-Enlightenment cultural constellation.

But if the interest in emancipation and autonomy is constitutive of our humanity, how is it that technological society has been so successful in muting it? The answer is found in consumer culture, and in the lulling simulacrum of freedom it creates. Like Horkheimer and Adorno, Marcuse assumes that the working classes have been totally pacified by the comfortable and secure “administered life” that a consumer society is able to provide, thanks largely to advances in technology. Autonomy and self-direction give way to “free” choices between commodities and entertainments that fleetingly satisfy factitious appetites. Thanks to a structure of domination that erodes his humanity, “one-dimensional” man winds up lacking both the motivation and capacity to resist.

Given the ability of the “system” to neutralize or co-opt oppositional energies, it is not surprising that Marcuse shifts his critical focus from the spheres of technology, production, and consumption to the cultural realm. Here, perhaps, one could find a breeding ground for oppositional energies and social critique. This may seem counterintuitive, at least from a Marxist point of view. However, as Marcuse points out, the literature and high art of bourgeois Europe in the nineteenth century filled precisely this role. The result was a “two-dimensional culture” in which the aesthetic realm maintained a relative autonomy vis-à-vis the economic sphere.

Literature and art in this period “were essentially alienation, sustaining and protecting the contradiction – the unhappy consciousness of the divided world, the defeated possibilities, the hopes unfulfilled, and the promises betrayed.” However, the advent of mass culture in the twentieth century effectively neuters this critical power: “Higher culture becomes part
of the material culture. In this transformation it loses the greater part of its truth” (Marcuse, 1964: 61). The resulting “flattening out of the antagonism between culture and social reality” means not just a loss of critical power, but also the “obliteration” of the “transcendent elements” – the images of a reconciled, unalienated condition – previously found in high culture.

The absorption of the very sphere in which Adorno had placed his admittedly slim hopes means that technological society can uninterruptedly churn out one-dimensional men with a “happy consciousness.” Incapable of seeing anything wrong with a society that provides a higher standard of living as well as myriad possibilities for entertainment and relaxation, one-dimensional man is the abstract negation of the “all-sided” individual. But he is also the ultimate product of a rationalization process that knows no bounds. Since he no longer views society in terms of hierarchical structures of authority, one-dimensional man achieves a level of social integration that exceeds that of Weber’s Ordnungsmenschen.

Marcuse’s updating of Weber’s rationalization thesis thus winds up in the same theoretical cul-de-sac as Adorno’s. The criticism of a crypto-totalitarian social form leads both of them to reject immanent critique and to insist that potential for opposition and resistance is to be found only in the interstices of advanced capitalist society or beyond its boundaries. For Adorno, this potential is found in high modernism and avant-garde art. For Marcuse, the hope is that it is to be found among the “outsiders and outcasts” of society. And, if this potential is not found there, perhaps it can be found at the margins of the capitalist West, in the Third World.

Viewed retrospectively, Adorno and Marcuse’s dismissive attitude toward established liberal democratic institutions looks like a recipe for political impotence. The point to be stressed here is that this dismissive attitude is hardly arbitrary. It flows from their unblinking working out of the political, economic, and cultural implications of the rationalization process as they understood it. It was precisely the despairing political implications born of this understanding that led Habermas to formulate his theory of communicative action.

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While Weber’s work provides the indisputable backdrop for The Eclipse of Reason, Dialectic of Enlightenment, and One-Dimensional Man, only Habermas’s Theory of Communicative Action is framed explicitly as a critique and reconstruction of Weber’s theory of rationalization. This move from background to foreground had several important consequences. First, it enabled Habermas to engage Weber in a critical dialogue of the sort the first generation of Frankfurt School theorists had simply passed up. Second, it facilitated a rethinking of the normative foundations of a critical theory, foundations that were in danger of dissolving in a haze of anthropological speculation and romantic-utopian notions of a fully “reconciled” or unalienated condition. Third, it enabled Habermas to recover and systematically address ideas of praxis, practical reasoning, and the public sphere that had been obscured by the work model of action that underlay both Marx’s social theory and the Frankfurt School critique of instrumental rationality (Habermas, 1973: 41–81).

The general argument of The Theory of Communicative Action is well known. Beginning with a systematic reconstruction of Weber’s theory of rationalization, Habermas detects a tension or paradox within it that points the way out of the corner Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse had painted themselves into. On the one hand, Habermas argues, Weber presents capitalist modernity as characterized by the hegemony of zweckrational over wertrational action. This hegemony accelerates bureaucratization, facilitating the integration of economic forces with the political-legal institutions of the state and with the scientific-technological resources found in universities and research institutes. However, on the other hand, Weber sees
an internal connection between the process of rationalization and what many of us would call the secularization of society. This second dimension of rationalization falls under the broad rubric of “the disenchanted world.” According to Weber, this is a millennia-long process, the modern phase of which dissolves the legitimating power of tradition, the Church, and Nature (the latter conceived as a teleological structure of normative ends or “perfections”).

In his own social theory, Weber emphasized how this process of “intellectualization” stripped the world and cosmos of the God- or Nature-given meaning they were once assumed to possess. The dissolution of theological-metaphysical accounts of the world’s supposedly teleological structure forced modern man to confront the reality that meaning cannot – at least not honestly – be discovered in the world by any rational means, whether these be scientific or philosophical in nature. Rather, it must be created by the value-positing and value-affirming activities of human beings themselves. Should this project collapse or fail to be taken up in the first place, an overwhelming sense of meaninglessness will afflict the now disenchanted Occident.

This pessimistic analysis carried over to the first-generation Frankfurt School theorists, whom Lukács memorably accused of taking up residence in “the Grand Hotel Abyss.” In contrast to Horkheimer et al., Habermas does not view Weber’s disenchanted thesis as a one-way ticket to a nihilist hell born of the universal triumph of instrumental rationality. Rather, he sees it as expressive of a sociocultural learning process, one that is intertwined with the process of secularization and that occurs over the centuries leading up to the modern period. This learning process leads Occidental man to increasingly dispense with such pre-discursive grounds of authority and legitimacy as “divine right,” God’s will, or Providence. It leads Occidental man to increasingly endorse the principle that the validity of claims regarding the truthfulness, sincerity, or rightness of a proposition can be “redeemed” only through intersubjective dialogue taking the form of argument and the giving of reasons and evidence. When it comes to collective action and decision, the “unforced force of the better argument” gradually usurps the legitimating power previously associated with God or a teleologically structured Nature. Once articulated and dispersed across society, the “right to justification” – that is, the right to justification by means of rational argumentation and the weighing of evidence – can never be legitimately denied or suspended, however much clerical and political authorities might wish it could.

If, as Habermas suggests, disenchancement embodies such a collective-historical learning process, then it turns out that rationalization has not one but two tracks (Habermas, 1970: 118–119, 1981: 144–145). The first track is the one Horkheimer et al. had focused upon, namely, the rationalization of society in terms of greater integration of state and economy, increased efficiency in production and administration, and an overall improvement in systemic coherence and performance. The second track – overlooked by the early Frankfurt School and, indeed, by Weber himself – is a process of communicative rationalization. In contrast to the first form of rationalization – in which the growth of productive forces and technological advances combine to make a hierarchical social structure appear necessary – the effects of the second form are benign and, Habermas thinks, in principle democratic.

Communicative rationalization occurs not at the level of the economic-technological “system,” but rather in the “lifeworld” of everyday communicative interaction. It was in this latter sphere that questions of morality and the “good life” had traditionally been dealt with, albeit in a mystified (theological-metaphysical) way. However, as Habermas, once again following Weber, points out, the early modern age witnesses a growth in the autonomy of law and morality. The modern separating out of life-spheres brings about a detachment of moral-practical insights, of ethical and legal doctrines, of basic principles, of maxims and decision rules, from the [theological and cosmological] world-views in which they were at first embedded” (Habermas, 1981: 162).
With this separating out of the legal, moral, and political spheres, the justification of norms, laws, and enactments undergoes a seismic shift in grounds. The appeal to tradition, God, or the teleological structure of nature is dropped in favor of an appeal to popular consent and rational agreement. This shift is manifest in the rise of modern natural law doctrines (which emphasize the principles of equality and universality) as well as in the social contract theories of thinkers like Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau (who make legitimate political power and obligation hinge upon the principles of agreement and consent). It is also manifest in the rise, during the first half of the eighteenth century, of what Habermas had earlier dubbed the “bourgeois public sphere.” Confined, at first, to such informal social sites as coffeehouses, salons, Masonic lodges, and Tischgesellschaften, the bourgeois public sphere provided spaces in which private individuals could come together without regard to status in order to debate literary and cultural affairs. Through such semipublic debate and deliberation, the European middle classes gradually learned the art of critical-rational judgment (Habermas, 1989). In these proto-public spaces, the prerogatives of social rank were suspended, parity reigned, and all were agreed that the “force of the better argument” should carry the day.

According to Habermas, then, Weberian “disenchantment” entails a process of cultural rationalization that leads, in turn, to communicative rationalization. This rationalization is concretized in the growing hegemony of the principle that the only legitimate way to redeem validity claims is “discursively” – that is, through processes of rational argument that aim at mutual understanding and (ultimately) agreement. Pre-discursive forms of authority (Divine Will, tradition, etc.) are stripped of the public power they previously possessed. The ultimate result of communicative rationalization would be the universal recognition, by both governors and governed, of the idea that public-political institutions and actions are subject to the principle of “the discursive redemption of validity claims” and to the “right to justification” that grounds it.

In Habermas’s view, such recognition would have produced a wide-ranging democratization of the social and political spheres, were it not for the creeping colonization of the lifeworld by the logic and instrumental rationality of the economic-administrative “system.” The fact that communicative rationalization (and the democratization it implies) seems to be giving way to system rationalization should not obscure the fact that – contra Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse – rationalization does indeed have two faces. Communicative rationalization, Habermas argues, has already had enormous impact on the political world (for example, in acceptance of the idea of government by consent of the governed) as well as upon our ideas of what persuasive moral and political arguments look like. The widespread tendency to assert the prerogatives of economic efficiency, the logic of complex systems, and technocratic expertise across virtually all spheres of life ought not blind us to the fact that there is an escape from the “iron cage,” one that was more or less built into the process of rationalization as Weber conceived it.

In making this argument, Habermas is clearly trying to recover the critical, antiauthoritarian core of Enlightenment reason. This core had been obscured by Weber’s failure to fully stress the dual character of rationalization, as well as by Horkheimer and Adorno’s relentless focus upon the positivistic, dogmatic, and nature-conquering side of the Enlightenment.

We can trace the impetus behind Habermas’s view of communicative rationalization back to a declaration Kant made in a footnote to the first preface to The Critique of Pure Reason. “Our age,” Kant wrote,

is the age of criticism, to which everything must be subjected. Religion, by its sanctity, and legislation, by its majesty, commonly try to gain exemption. But they then arouse a just suspicion against themselves, and cannot lay claim to the unfeigned respect which reason only grants to such things as have been able to sustain its free and public scrutiny.

(Kant, 1965: 9)
This is as pointed a formulation of the “right to justification” as one could wish for. Indeed, Kant’s description of the character of his own age registers the moment when the “discursive redemption of validity claims” became part and parcel of Western culture’s self-understanding. Communicative rationalization and the attainment of what Kant later terms Mündigkeit go hand in hand (Kant, 1970: 54–60).

In assessing Habermas’s overall contribution to the reorientation of critical theory, it is important to bear in mind one crucial difference between his earlier work and The Theory of Communicative Action. In The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, Habermas presented the eighteenth-century “rationalization” of the public sphere as essentially a historical process. To be sure, this historical analysis revealed the “parallel track” of rationalization, anticipating and correcting what Habermas later came to view as the biggest conceptual lacuna in Weber’s social theory. However, such an analysis contributed relatively little to the project of providing critical theory with a new and secure normative grounding. It was this later ambition, and the desire to make good critical theory’s earlier deficiencies, that drove Habermas to formulate the type of arguments he does in The Theory of Communicative Action.

In The Theory of Communicative Action, Habermas claims that the implicitly egalitarian, democratic, and agreement-focused aspects of communicative rationality are not – or at least not ultimately – grounded upon such contingent historical developments as the Enlightenment and the rise of the bourgeois public sphere. Rather, he views them as built into the pragmatic structure of communicative interaction or utterance as such. Habermas supported this assertion through a set of what he described as “quasi-transcendental” arguments, arguments which drew heavily from George Hebert Mead’s theory of linguistic behavior, Lawrence Kohlberg’s research into psychology and moral development, John Austin’s speech act theory, Piaget’s cognitive development studies, and Émile Durkheim’s idea of the “linguistification of the sacred.”

Habermas’s deployment of these and other diverse sources in support of his basic argument stands as an unsurpassed achievement in theoretical reconstruction and synthesis. Of course, both the sources and Habermas’s use of them are open to contestation, and Habermas has had to answer a broad range of criticisms. This is not the place to canvass these criticisms. I would like to conclude, instead, by noting the major achievements and deficits of Habermas’s reconstruction of Weber’s theory of rationalization.

First, there is no denying that Habermas was successful in thematizing a “second track” of rationalization, one latent in Weber’s theory and barely developed by him. This thematization enabled him – and us – to escape the closed system of instrumental reason forecast by the first-generation Frankfurt School theorists. Second, Habermas’s deployment of a basic distinction between work and interaction (or between instrumental action and communicative action) enabled him not just to tease out the Janus-faced quality of rationalization but also to rid critical theory of the last vestiges of the demiurgic subject – humanity in the form of the proletariat – bequeathed it by Marx. While Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse no longer viewed proletarian revolution as the way to create or “make” a new world, they did follow the young Marx in emphasizing the need for a reconciliation between humanity as subject and nature as a repressed and exploited “object.” The result was a single-sided focus upon a diremption-healing naturalism rather than a confrontation with the question of how to contain purposive-healing rationality within its proper bounds, thus preserving and protecting free political institutions.

Third, Habermas effected a paradigm shift within critical theory. While Adorno correctly pointed out the deficits of an identity philosophy, he failed to fully extricate himself from the modern philosophy of the subject (or consciousness). From Descartes and Kant through Hegel and Nietzsche, modern philosophy had framed reason – and the critique of reason – in
terms of a faculty or power exercised by the knowing or willing subject. Habermas breaks free of
this paradigm by presenting reason as a communicative practice, one exercised intersubjectively rather than
monologically. The shift from a philosophy-of-consciousness paradigm to a paradigm of intersubjectivity allows a re-grounding of ethical norms in communicative structures and practice. Reason is no longer a faculty implanted in us by nature or God, nor
are ethical norms derived from within, through “right reason’s” self-examination.

Impressive as these achievements are, Habermas’s success is limited by deficits in his theory
of communicative action and his attachment to a “weak” form of foundationalism.

First, the “paradox” of rationalization Habermas isolates in his Theory of Communicative Action is, perhaps, a bit less saving than he thinks. Yes, Weberian “disenchantment” points to
a historical-ethical learning process, one that could well be hypothetically reconstructed in
terms of Kohlberg’s three-stage theory of moral maturation. However, this “learning process”
and the communicative rationalization it implies have clearly been overstated by Habermas.
After all, we live in a world where “pre-discursive” sources of authority retain a good deal of
validity and strength. A great number of people, perhaps even the majority, have yet to buy
into the “linguification” of the sacred. Contrary to Habermas’s appropriation of Weber’s
disenchantment of the world theme, religion retains a monopoly on morality and dictates
the criteria of ethical behavior for many millions, if not billions, worldwide. This suggests
that Habermas and the rest of the Frankfurt School have put the Enlightenment cart before
the horse. This blind spot regarding religion is something Habermas has lately attempted to
correct, but it may well be a case of too little too late.

Second, while Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse can be criticized for locating the nor-
mative grounds of critical theory in anthropological speculation and an idealist-romantic
model of the natural, “all-sided” individual, Habermas’s intersubjective reformulation has its
own problems. Not being satisfied with the recovery of the Enlightenment values the earlier
 generation had put in question, Habermas attempts to ground these values in the pragmatic
structure of communication as such. This stab at a transcultural basis for dialogical norms
and the “right to justification” might well be seen as an instance of reification and bogus
universalization. For what Habermas has done is not so much to reveal dialogical norms
built into the pragmatic structure of speech as utterance, as project a culturally and histori-
cally specific set of norms and values back upon the structure of communicative action. The
norms and values are taken from the Socratic inheritance of the West and from the Enlight-
enment’s conception of reason’s critical role in the public sphere (a conception fully fleshed
out in Kant’s essay, “An Answer to the Question ‘What is Enlightenment?’”).

Third, while Habermas gave up on the robust form of moral cognitivism he voiced in
Legitimation Crisis, he has remained leery of the idea that politics is the realm of opinion and
that compromise is and must be the appropriate way of coming to a decision. Compromise
is, for Habermas, an essentially “liberal” idea, one which suggests a modus operandi for a plu-
ralist society riddled with conflicting interests. In the liberal paradigm, Habermas contends,
divergent particular interests clash, but they are never genuinely mediated by a deliberative
process and (thereby) raised to a higher level of generality. In fact, at the end of the political
process, these interests have pretty much the same character as they did at the beginning.
The clash of interests thus produces a resultant force vector – the compromise – but is inca-
pable of actually generalizing interests.

In contrast, Habermas thinks, rational will formation should take the form of a deliber-
ate process capable of transferring the Kantian test of universalizability from the inner
domain of consciousness into the three dimensionality of a discursive public sphere. While it
may be mistaken to think that democratic debate can produce the “correct” or “true” answer
to a policy question, it is not mistaken to think that properly structured public deliberation
serves to mediate and transform particular interests, working them over and purifying them
so that they might become the raw material of a truly general (democratic) process of will formation. Democratic or rational consensus has a completely different (and higher) moral and epistemological status than does a compromise between interests.

While Habermas is correct in suggesting that the general interest or common good can never result from the mere aggregation of particular interests, he is wrong to suggest that the general interest or common good is, in principle, univocal and potentially uncontroversial. As Thomas McCarthy has suggested, Habermas has never really taken on board the “liberal” idea that even rational people of good will can fundamentally disagree about the nature and shape of the common good (Calhoun, 1992: 66). The bracketing or mediation of particular interests does not necessarily produce a harmonious convergence of opinions. On the contrary, such bracketing or mediation enables us to see our fundamental philosophical differences more clearly.

To leave it at this – to say that no clear and univocal general interest arises from the bracketing or mediation of particular interests – would, in Habermas’s view, land us back on the terrain of Weber’s “warring gods” and commit us to the “decisionist” politics that supposedly flows from it. Yet this is simply not the case. True, Weber did stress the dimensions of struggle and conflict in his political thought, but he did so in a largely metaphorical way, one commensurable with the electoral agon familiar to citizens of advanced Western democracies. Moreover, the moral pluralism implied by his theory of the disaggregation of life-spheres does not point so much to the rational irreducibility of ideological differences as to a tragic view of the realm of value itself. While he denied that Weber had a shaping influence on his thought, Isaiah Berlin’s “objective moral pluralism” articulates the Weberian position on these issues with far greater accuracy than the Frankfurt School brickbat of “irrationalist decisionism.”

For Berlin as for Weber, values can and do conflict, not just between cultures but within them. Thus, to take an obvious example, the values of freedom, equality, and justice in a liberal democratic society can be, and often are, in tension with each other. And there are times when they are in outright conflict (Berlin, 1969: 118–172). Contrary to what Habermas implies, there is no form of discourse or common denominator that will enable us to weigh and rank these values according to a single lexical or “rational” scale. When we confront instances where the tension between these values has tipped over into conflict, the “solution” is not a retreat to a theoretically umpired discourse situation which aims at producing agreement. It is, rather, a willingness to compromise and to make painful trade-offs. This, and not a political version of Kierkegaard’s “leap of faith,” is what Berlin and Weber mean when they insist that, at the end of the day, one simply has to make a choice. In other words, the alternative to a “rational will consensus” achieved through a deliberative decision procedure is not the obstinate (“irrational”) soldiering on for one’s cause, without concern for costs or consequences. It is, rather, the practice of a politics of trade-offs and compromise between plural actors whose ideas of the good life and the just society inevitably – and, I should stress, legitimately and irreducibly – conflict.

References


