The relationship between members of the Frankfurt School and Heidegger is notoriously uneasy and ambivalent. A major explanatory factor is Heidegger’s involvement with National Socialism (e.g., as rector of Freiburg University from 1933 to 1934) and his refusal to publicly distance himself from the Nazi regime after the war. This relationship is especially fraught for Frankfurt School figures such as Herbert Marcuse and Jürgen Habermas who were avowed Heideggerians during early and formative periods as philosophers. Naturally, Heidegger’s political involvement raises questions about whether there is an internal connection between his philosophy and political ideology. Yet, Marcuse and Habermas only began to reexamine Heidegger’s philosophy after his association with Nazism became known (Marcuse) and after his refusal to distance himself from the Nazi regime after the war (Habermas). It was therefore too late to fully extricate his influence from their philosophical development. There is a fascinating and ample literature exploring the many connections between Heidegger’s philosophy and the work of major figures within the Frankfurt School tradition such as Walter Benjamin, Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse and Jürgen Habermas. This literature analyzes a variety of connections ranging from the parallel development of similar philosophical interests and ideas (e.g., the critique of technology, the philosophical significance of art) to some remarkable convergences in philosophical views (e.g., the critique of Western rationality as instrumental rationality), despite their disparate philosophical approaches. A comprehensive exploration of these connections is beyond my scope here, as many of these affinities resulted from the general Zeitgeist rather than from any direct influence by Heidegger. I shall focus here on the narrower question of how Heidegger’s philosophy made a systematic contribution to critical theory. Two developments stand out: Herbert Marcuse’s early attempt to articulate a “Heideggerian Marxism” and Jürgen Habermas’s creative incorporation of hermeneutics into his distinctive approach to critical theory. The latter influence has undoubtedly had more of a lasting impact upon critical theory than the former, as Marcuse’s early project was soon abandoned. Nevertheless, Marcuse’s critique of the shortcomings of Heidegger’s philosophy, which motivated his attempt to integrate it with Marxism, remains important because it illuminates the complex relation between hermeneutics and critical theory.

Marcuse’s Heideggerian Marxism

Herbert Marcuse was an avowed Heideggerian working with Heidegger in Freiburg from 1928 to 1932. In fact, reading Being and Time is what prompted him to leave Berlin for Freiburg and return to university to study philosophy. Prior to the 1927 publication of Being
and Time, the study of philosophy at German universities was dominated by traditional philosophical approaches (neo-Kantianism, neo-Hegelianism and positivism). These approaches had only survived the upheavals of World War I at the price of being reduced to exercises of scholastic exegesis unable to connect with (and speak to) the experiences and traumas of the younger generation of postwar students. This had led Marcuse to leave the university in a kind of self-imposed “inner emigration” (Wolin 2005: xii). He continued reading the early Marx as well as important works in the tradition of Hegelian Marxism, most notably Lukács’ History and Class Consciousness—which appeared in 1923 and tremendously influenced his later work. However, he was also deeply dissatisfied with the anti-philosophical, overly naturalistic, deterministic and scientific interpretations of Marxism that prevailed at the time (i.e., before the publication of Marx’s Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts in 1932). In that philosophically barren context, the publication of Being and Time was quite an extraordinary event. As Marcuse described it many years later,

Heidegger’s work [Being and Time] appeared as a new beginning: we experienced his book (and his lectures, whose transcripts we obtained) as, at long last, a concrete philosophy; here there was talk of existence [Existenz], of our existence, of fear and care and boredom, and so forth.

(Marcuse 1977: 162)

Moreover, Heidegger’s philosophy of existence as a form of “concrete philosophy” shared a deep affinity with key Marxist motives such as the critique of reification, the priority of practice over theory, the attempt to break with German idealism, the rejection of the subject-object (S-O) paradigm and so forth. Thus, in Marcuse’s estimation, Heidegger’s existential philosophy offered the ideal conceptual framework and philosophical foundation to overcome the anti-philosophical, official interpretation of Marxism and reconnect it with the concrete concerns of human existence. As Marcuse put it, “Being and Time… seems to represent a turning point in the history of philosophy: the point at which bourgeois philosophy unmakes itself from the inside and clears the way for a new and ‘concrete’ science” (Marcuse 2005: 10–11). Indeed, as Marcuse explained it in a later interview, at the time he was convinced that “there could be some combination between existentialism and Marxism, precisely because of their insistence on concrete analysis of actual human existence, of human beings, and their world” (Marcuse 2005: 166).

Obviously, the project of combining both approaches only makes sense if there are some shared affinities. At the same time, the need to combine both approaches also suggests that each side contributes something that the other side lacks. The complementarity between Marxism and Heidegger’s philosophy that inspired Marcuse to articulate a Heideggerian Marxism is succinctly characterized by Wolin:

Since a critical thematization of “lived experience” played such a prominent role in Heidegger’s fundamental ontology, at the time Marcuse surmised that it might provide the philosophical stimulus necessary to revivify an orthodox Marxist discourse that had lapsed into advanced senescence. Marxism tried to diagnose the “objective,” economic preconditions of capitalism’s collapse, but it seemed to neglect the “subjective” side of the equation, working-class consciousness. Conversely, whereas Heidegger’s philosophy excelled at describing the phenomenological structure of being-in-the-world, its weakness lay in its incapacity to address those aspects of the contemporary crisis that were social and historical as opposed to timeless and ontological.

(Wolin 2005: xvii)
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In fact, in the interview cited above Marcuse notes that he believed Heideggerian existentialism and Marxism could be combined “precisely because of their shared insistence on concrete analysis of actual human existence.” Yet, he immediately qualifies this:

But I soon realized that Heidegger's concreteness was to a great extent a phony, a false concreteness, and that in fact his philosophy was just as abstract and just as removed from reality, even avoiding reality, as the philosophies which at that time had dominated German universities, namely a rather dry brand of neo-Kantianism, neo-Hegelianism, neo-Idealism, but also positivism.

(Marcuse 2005: 166)

Even in his early writings from the 1930s, Marcuse was already complaining that an existential analytic of Dasein would amount to an exercise of empty abstraction if it failed to incorporate an analysis of the historical and social conditions of Dasein's actual existence—the material conditions of historical existence that Heidegger dismissed in Being and Time as merely ontic analysis. Nevertheless, despite such complaints, his diagnosis at the time was ambiguous. It is unclear whether he thought the failure to incorporate the analysis of the actual historical and material conditions of Dasein's existence was a failure that a proper philosophical interpretation of authentic human existence could and should overcome or whether it marked the limits of philosophy as such, that is, the need to transcend philosophical analysis in the direction of a political transformation of the reified socioeconomic conditions of existence (McCarthy 1991: 91–92).

Be that as it may, there is a systematic methodological difficulty lurking behind Marcuse's criticism of Heidegger for failing to integrate an ontic analysis of the material conditions of authentic existence into his existential analytic of Dasein. The methodological individualism that an analysis of authentic existence requires would seem to be a major impediment to the analysis of actual historical, social and economic conditions. For these conditions affect human beings not as individuals but as members of different groups, classes and political communities. As McCarthy expresses Marcuse's point, “the individual is not the proper unit of sociohistorical analysis and political practice” (McCarthy 1991: 91). However, the first-person perspective of the individual seems irreducible in an analysis of authentic existence. If so, it would need to be incorporated (rather than transcended) if the resulting theory is to provide a robust basis for a critique of alienation and reification in capitalist societies—precisely the kind of theory that Marcuse was aiming at and tried to articulate in later works such as One-Dimensional Man and Eros and Civilization.

Seen from this methodological perspective, Marcuse's criticisms of Heidegger's existential philosophy in the late 1920s and early 1930s actually pinpointed a fundamental problem that members of the Frankfurt School tradition themselves grappled with in their attempts to articulate a critical theory of society. Indeed, the methodological difficulty of combining, in a single theoretical approach, the “subjective” side of human existence in the search for authenticity and the “objective” socioeconomic and historical conditions that affect individuals behind their backs and without their awareness is hardly a peculiar shortcoming of Heidegger's existential philosophy or even a limitation of philosophy as such. It is a fundamental methodological problem that philosophy shares with all the human sciences. The issue is how to close the gap between the objective and subjective perspectives. More specifically, how can a single explanatory paradigm combine the “functionalist” or “observer” perspective which provides empirical knowledge of the material (social and economic) circumstances of the reproduction of society with the “internal” or “participant” perspective of human beings who engage in shared normative practices while also developing their (authentic) life projects? This methodological difficulty is also at the center of Habermas's reception of Heidegger's philosophy.
Heideggerian Hermeneutics and Habermas’s Critical Theory

In 1953, Habermas published a newspaper article in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung entitled “Thinking with Heidegger and against Heidegger: On the publication of Lectures Dating from 1935” (Wolin 1992: 186–197). In that article, Habermas criticizes Heidegger’s decision to republish his lectures from 1935 in which he spoke about “the internal truth and greatness” of National Socialism, without adding any commentary or expression of regret or apology for his involvement with Nazism. But beyond the reproach directed to Heidegger the person, Habermas also focuses on the difficult question of the internal relationship between Heidegger’s moral failure as a person and the structure of his philosophical work. This is a question that Habermas has confronted and answered in slightly different ways in several publications over the past four decades (see Habermas 1953, 1959, 1985, 1988). A constant element of his different analyses is the suggestion that the particular route that Heidegger took in his famous Keihre was motivated by external elements related to Heidegger’s political involvement with Nazism rather than by the internal development of his philosophical project as originally conceived in Being and Time. This diagnosis makes Habermas’s strongly critical attitude toward Heidegger’s late philosophy compatible with another element of his evaluation of Heidegger that has equally remained constant, namely, his claim that Being and Time is the “most significant philosophical event since Hegel’s Phenomenology.” Although it is not always easy to infer from Habermas’s critical analyses why exactly he thinks so highly of Being and Time, it is clear that if he didn’t the self-imposed task of “thinking with Heidegger and against Heidegger” would make no sense. In that case, the comparatively simpler alternatives of just thinking against Heidegger rather than with him or ignoring his philosophy altogether would seem more appropriate.

Certainly, the appropriateness of the task could be explained in purely historical terms. On the one hand, the influence of Heidegger’s master work inside and outside Germany was already undeniable in the 1950s and only became clearer as time wore on. Moreover, its influence in Habermas’s own philosophical development is equally undeniable. As Habermas has pointed out repeatedly, he was a “thoroughgoing Heideggerian” until 1953 (Dews 1986: 194). Just a brief look into Habermas’s dissertation on Schelling suffices to confirm that claim. However, I am not exploring here the biographical aspects of the influence of Heidegger’s philosophy in Habermas’s intellectual development, but rather the systematic question that this biographical fact raises, namely, the nature and extent of the internal relationship between Heidegger’s and Habermas’s philosophy. Taking Habermas’s self-imposed task as a guide, I will identify first what I consider to be the most significant overlapping elements of both approaches. Once it becomes clear how far Habermas’s “thinking with Heidegger” goes, it will be possible to address, in a second step, the question of how far his “thinking against Heidegger” succeeded. Needless to say, with such philosophically complex approaches as Heidegger’s and Habermas’s, it would be hopeless to aim at a complete account of their interconnections. Thus, I am going to focus exclusively on some core elements that, in my opinion, are particularly significant to the extent that they have directly influenced the development of Habermas’s own approach.

One of the most significant innovations of Habermas’s distinctive approach to critical theory is due to his early endorsement of the linguistic turn. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Habermas became convinced that the methodological deficiencies of the philosophical paradigm of mentalism were partly responsible for the major shortcomings he identified in the work of the first generation of Frankfurt School’s critical theorists (Habermas 1981, chapter 4). However, the importance of language and communication in Habermas’s work cannot be adequately understood by simply situating it among those philosophical approaches that contributed to the linguistic turn in the twentieth century. Although Habermas embraced the
linguistic turn partly because of the methodological advantages of the paradigm of language over the paradigm of mentalism, the significance of his analysis of language and communication is not just methodological, but substantive. In the communicative use of language, Habermas discovers a genuine kind of rationality ("communicative rationality") that—as he contends—is irreducible to instrumental rationality. This finding enables him to carry out two fundamental tasks that, in his opinion, the first generation of critical theorists had not been able to accomplish, namely, to overcome the narrow concept of instrumental rationality dominant in the social sciences and to explain how social order is possible. These tasks are carried out in his monumental work *The Theory of Communicative Action*.

The key to Habermas's development of his theory of communicative rationality lies in his early appropriation of the conception of language of the hermeneutic tradition—the conception of language elaborated by the Haman-Herder-Humboldt tradition and further developed by Heidegger and Gadamer. Indeed, it is this conception of language that enables both Heidegger and Habermas to articulate an alternative to the philosophical paradigm of mentalism (i.e., what Heidegger calls the S-O model and Habermas the paradigm of the philosophy of consciousness). It is explicitly to this end that phenomenology undergoes a hermeneutic transformation in *Being and Time*, whereas in the *Theory of Communicative Action* critical theory undergoes a shift toward communication theory. As I have argued elsewhere (Lafont 1999), the key to both transformations is the conception of language as constitutive of our experience or as world-disclosing (see also Taylor 1977, 1980, 2005). Since this may be more obvious regarding Heidegger's philosophy after the *Kehre*, let me first of all indicate very briefly why this is already the case in *Being and Time* (see Lafont 2000). This will also be helpful in elucidating its deep commonalities with Habermas's own linguistic turn.

In order to break with the predominance of the S-O model characteristic of traditional philosophy, in *Being and Time* Heidegger generalizes hermeneutics from a traditional method for interpreting authoritative texts (mainly sacred or legal texts) to a way of understanding human beings themselves. As a consequence, the hermeneutic paradigm offers a radically new conception of what is distinctive about human beings: to be human is not primarily to be a rational animal, but first and foremost to be a self-interpreting animal (Taylor 1977). It is precisely because human beings are nothing but interpretation all the way down that the activity of *interpreting a meaningful text* offers the most appropriate model for understanding any human experience whatsoever (Lafont 2005). This change of perspective amounts to a major break with traditional philosophy, which has been guided, for the most part, by a diametrically opposed impulse to model human experience on our perception of physical objects. Heidegger confronts this attempt with two major objections. First, Heidegger argues that by trying to model human experience on the basis of categories taken from a domain of objects radically different from human beings (i.e., physical objects), traditional philosophy provides an entirely distorted account of human identity. To show this, Heidegger articulates an alternative, hermeneutic model that makes it possible to understand human beings as essentially self-interpreting creatures. Second, Heidegger argues that by focusing on perception as the private experience of an isolated subject, the S-O model incorporates a methodological individualism (even solipsism) that entirely distorts human experience (giving rise to nothing but philosophical pseudo-problems such as the need to prove the existence of the external world). To defend this claim Heidegger offers an alternative, hermeneutic account of our experience that makes it possible to understand human beings as inhabiting a symbolically structured world in which everything they encounter is already understood as something. As a consequence, the central feature of Heidegger's hermeneutic turn lies in the introduction of a new notion of world. After the hermeneutic turn, the world is no longer the totality of entities, but a totality of significance, a web of meanings that structures Dasein's understanding of itself and of everything that can show up within the world.
A central feature of the hermeneutic notion of world is that it is intersubjectively shared. As Heidegger remarks in *Being and Time*, “the world is always the one that I share with Others. The world of Dasein is a with-world” (Heidegger 1927: 118). This phenomenological fact, however, cannot be accounted for within the constraints of the methodological individualism characteristic of the S-O model, since the public world can neither be identified with the totality of objects nor with the private sphere of the mental acts of an isolated subject. The specific relationship that Dasein has with others in virtue of sharing a public world cannot be modeled on the relationship of a subject either to itself or to objects different from itself. This, however, poses an important challenge to *Being and Time* as well. In view of the rigid dichotomy established between Dasein and all other entities (for methodological reasons), the world is a difficult phenomenon to situate. On the one hand, *Being-in-the-world* is a fundamental structure of Dasein, so “the one” as an element of this structure is an existentiale, an ability of Dasein (the ability to take the community’s perspective of the “generalized other,” in G.H. Mead’s terms). But, on the other hand, the articulation of the world precedes each and every individual Dasein (Heidegger 1927: 364). If it did not, if it were just the product of the meaning-conferring acts of an individual subject, the S-O model would be reestablished. Yet, if “the one” is prior to any individual Dasein and is neither an occurrent entity nor a “transcendental subject,” how is it constituted? Where is it situated? In direct answer to this question Heidegger remarks in *Being and Time* that “the ‘one’ is constituted by the way things have been publicly interpreted, which expresses itself in idle talk” (Heidegger 1927: 252). This is the most important feature of the hermeneutic notion of world: the world is always intersubjectively shared because it is linguistically articulated. It is by virtue of sharing a natural language that Dasein can share the same world with others.

In this context, it is important to keep in mind one of the crucial differences between the traditional and hermeneutic notions of world. Whereas the former is supposed to refer to a single objective world (to the extent that everything is supposed to be under the same causal laws), the latter admits of a plurality of worlds. Cultural lifeworlds as totalities of significance are plural. This plurality of worlds opens an issue that has no equivalent in the framework of the traditional notion of world. In order for the hermeneutic notion of world to be plausible, one must first be able to explain how a particular Dasein can be said to share the same world with others.

As Heidegger explains in *Being and Time*, it is in virtue of sharing a language that speakers and hearers can talk about the same things even if those things are not equally accessible to all of them:

> In the language which is spoken when one expresses oneself, there lies an average intelligibility; and in accordance with this intelligibility the discourse which is communicated can be understood to a considerable extent, even if the hearer does not bring himself into such a kind of being towards what the discourse is about as to have a primordial understanding of it… We have the same thing in view, because it is in the same averageness that we have a common understanding of what is said. (Heidegger 1927: 212; italics in the original)

If this claim is right, if subjects come to share a common world of objects only to the extent that they previously share a common understanding of those objects, the explanatory priority of perception that underlies the S-O model can be shown to be wrong. Heidegger explains,

> This way in which things have been interpreted in idle talk has already established itself in Dasein. (...) This everyday way in which things have been interpreted is
one into which Dasein has grown in the first instance, with never a possibility of extrication. In it, from out of it, and against it, all genuine understanding, interpreting and communicating, all re-discovering and appropriating anew, are performed. In no case is a Dasein, untouched and unseduced by this way in which things have been interpreted, set before the open country of a ‘world-in-itself’ so that it just beholds what it encounters. The dominance of the public way in which things have been interpreted has already been decisive even for the possibilities of having a mood … The ‘one’ prescribes one’s affectivity, and determines what and how one ‘sees.’ (Heidegger 1927: 213; my italics)

It is precisely this hermeneutic model of a linguistically articulated and intersubjectively shared lifeworld that will allow Habermas to break with the priority of the philosophy of consciousness that he identified as the major methodological flaw of the first generation of critical theory. As he points out in an interview with Peter Dews, within the theoretical framework of the first generation of Frankfurt School critical theory, “there was no room for ideas of the life-world or of life-forms… So they were not prompted to look into the human’s-land of everyday life” (Dews 1986: 196). Consequently, they were not interested in linguistic communication as the mode of reproduction of the lifeworld (Habermas 1967: xiii).

In an article entitled “The logic of the social sciences,” Habermas explicitly underscores the superiority of the view of language of hermeneutics over two others, the phenomenology of the lifeworld articulated by A. Schutz from a Husserlian point of view, and the “positivist analysis of language” that at the time he saw exemplified by the early and later Wittgenstein (Habermas 1967: 89–170). Whereas the latter conceptions share an instrumental view of language as a mere tool for communication, the hermeneutic conception articulates a constitutive view of language as world-disclosing. According to Habermas, the crucial methodological difference between these conceptions is that the Husserlian and positivist approaches rely on the possibility of adopting an observer or external perspective from which language can be objectified (i.e., become the object of analysis), whereas hermeneutics recognizes the impossibility of adopting such a perspective. As Habermas indicates in a later article entitled “The Hermeneutic Claim to Universality,” “hermeneutics has taught us that we are always a participant as long as we move within the natural language and that we cannot step outside the role of a reflective partner” (Habermas 1970: 191). At the same time, however, Habermas is totally aware of the difficulty that this claim poses for any attempt to combine the internal perspective of a participant in a linguistically articulated lifeworld with the external perspective of a social critic that the project of a critical theory requires. It is precisely this methodological difficulty that motivates Habermas’s criticism of the hermeneutic claim to universality, which is the main target of his article as a whole. We can distinguish two slightly different problems involved in this methodological issue, problems he had already identified in this article and has continued to elaborate in the following decades. One is descriptive, the other normative.

At the descriptive level, there is an unavoidable explanatory limitation built into the hermeneutic approach, since speakers, as participants in a shared cultural lifeworld, do not have access to the type of external empirical knowledge that reconstructive sciences provide. Hermeneutic self-reflection, as Habermas indicates, “throws light on experiences a subject makes while exercising his communicative competence, but it cannot explain this competence” (Habermas 1970: 186). This explanatory deficit is not only obvious with regard to the reconstructive sciences that Habermas discusses in this context, such as linguistics and developmental psychology, but equally the case with regard to most of the causal knowledge provided by the empirical sciences, including the social sciences. In particular, as Habermas will argue in his Theory of Communicative Action, systemic mechanisms that affect
the lifeworld from the outside are inaccessible from the participants’ perspective. Access to them requires that the social theorist adopt an external perspective, as articulated in the broad tradition of functionalism by authors such as Marx, Parsons or Luhmann. From this point of view, Habermas’s criticism of hermeneutics’ structural blindness toward the material (social and economic) circumstances of the reproduction of the lifeworld echoes the main arguments against Heidegger’s approach that, as we saw above, Marcuse articulated in the 1930s. Of course, recognizing the need to integrate the hermeneutic and the functionalist perspective is one thing, providing a coherent account of society as constituted by both self-sufficient systems and the lifeworld is another. But I will not focus on this issue here, since this is clearly the side of critical theory less related to Heidegger’s philosophical hermeneutics. Instead, I would like to focus on another difficulty, a normative one, which arises specifically in the attempt to integrate hermeneutics and critical theory.

Whereas the explanatory limits just mentioned point to a clear deficit of the hermeneutic approach and thus speak in favor of expanding it to integrate the empirical knowledge provided by the social sciences, the same cannot be said of the normative limits that the hermeneutic approach imposes on the critical aims of the theorist. Recognizing that “we are always a participant as long as we move within the natural language and that we cannot step outside the role of a reflective partner” poses a normative challenge to the authority claimed by the theorist to criticize the prevalent societal understanding as ideological. As Gadamer pointed out in his famous debate with Habermas (see Gadamer 1966, 1967, 1971), in adopting an external perspective the social theorist engaged in the critique of ideologies breaks the symmetrical dialogue among participants and, in so doing, can only impose her own views about the good society on the basis of a self-ascribed knowledge monopoly or privileged access to truth. Thus, the critical theorist becomes, willy-nilly, a “social technocrat” in disguise (Gadamer 1967: 274). In a critical theory of these characteristics, the emancipatory interest of the critical theorist just collapses into the technical interest of a “social engineer” who prescribes without listening. In sharp contrast to this conception, Gadamer argues, the hermeneutic perspective of a symmetrical dialogue oriented toward understanding prohibits its participants from ascribing to themselves a superior insight into the “delusions” of other participants that would eliminate the need of validation of their own views through dialogue with them. Seen from this perspective, the normative limitation of the hermeneutic approach poses a real challenge to the aspirations of critical theory. Any departures from the symmetrical conditions of dialogue among equal participants automatically raise questions concerning the legitimacy of the theorist’s criticisms as well as their right to impose their conception of the good society upon others. Looking back, Habermas’s theory of communicative rationality presents two main strategies for confronting this challenge without giving up on the possibility of a critical theory. Moreover, these two strategies constitute the original core of Habermas’s distinctive approach to critical theory.

The first strategy concerns the very core of the hermeneutic approach, namely, the view of language as constitutive of the lifeworld. In this context I cannot discuss in detail Habermas’s account of communication, but I will indicate very briefly what I consider to be the crucial point of departure vis-à-vis the hermeneutic approach. As I have argued elsewhere (Lafont 1999, chapter 5), the main innovation of the Habermasian approach lies in its ability to incorporate externalism in an account of linguistic communication (Habermas 1996, 1999).

As we saw before, according to Heidegger, dialogue is only possible if one and the same world is disclosed to all speakers so that they can talk about the same things. For, as he argues in Being and Time, “only he who already understands can listen” (SZ, 164). Therefore, speakers can come to share a common world of objects only insofar as they already share a
common linguistic understanding of those objects. A shared linguistic world-disclosure or, in Gadamer’s terminology, a common tradition, is the precondition for any understanding or agreement that speakers may bring about in conversation (Gadamer 1960). Once this is accepted, however, it becomes unclear how speakers can ever question or revise such a factually shared world-disclosure or communicate with those who do not share it. Our linguistic world-disclosure seems unrevisable from within and inaccessible from without. This conception of the world-disclosing function of language has extremely counterintuitive consequences. The most notorious of them can be found in Heidegger’s writings on language after the Kehre, where he provocatively claims that “there is no thing when the word is lacking” (Heidegger 1959: 163) or that “language speaks” and thus is “the master of man” (Heidegger 1953: 184). It is in view of these claims that charges of linguistic idealism and of reification of language are a commonplace among interpreters of Heidegger’s later works, Habermas included.

In order to avoid these counterintuitive consequences in his debate with Gadamer, Habermas rejects the hermeneutic claim that understanding is only possible on the basis of a factual agreement among speakers with a shared linguistic world-disclosure. Instead, Habermas claims that understanding depends on a “counterfactual agreement” that all speakers share just in virtue of their communicative competence. This agreement is based on formal presuppositions and thus does not depend on shared content or a shared world-disclosure among participants in a conversation. Habermas characterizes the essential difference between his position and Gadamer’s as “the questioning of the ontological self-understanding of the philosophical hermeneutic which Gadamer propounds by following Heidegger” (Habermas 1970: 203). In that context, he remarks,

Gadamer turns the context-dependency of the understanding of meaning, which hermeneutic philosophy has brought to consciousness and which requires us always to proceed from a pre-understanding that is supported by tradition as well as to continuously form a new pre-understanding in the course of being corrected, to the ontologically inevitable primacy of linguistic tradition. Gadamer poses the question: ‘Is the phenomenon of understanding adequately defined when I state that to understand is to avoid misunderstanding? Is it not, rather, the case that something like a ‘sustaining consensus’ precedes all misunderstanding?’ We can agree on the answer, which is to be given in the affirmative, but not on how to understand this preceding consensus.

(Habermas 1970: 203; my italics)

Seen in retrospect, his explanation of the essential difference between Gadamerian and critical hermeneutics anticipates the main features of the theory of communicative rationality that he articulated in the following decades. He explains,

It would only be legitimate for us to equate the sustaining consensus which, according to Gadamer, always precedes any failure at mutual understanding with a given factual agreement, if we could be certain that each consensus arrived at in the medium of linguistic tradition has been achieved without compulsion and distortion…. A critically enlightened hermeneutic that differentiates between insight and delusion… connects the process of understanding to the principle of rational speech, according to which truth would only be guaranteed by that kind of consensus which was achieved under the idealized conditions of unlimited communication free from domination and could be maintained over time…. It is only the formal anticipation of an idealized dialogue… which guarantees the ultimate sustaining and counterfactual
agreement that already unites us; in relation to it we can criticize every factual agreement, should it be a false one, as false consciousness. To attempt a systematic justification, we have to develop... a theory which would enable us to deduce the principle of rational speech from the logic of everyday language and regard it as the necessary regulative for all actual speech, however distorted it may be. 

(Habermas 1970: 205–207; my italics)

According to Habermas's theory of communicative rationality, speakers who want to reach an agreement about something in the world have to presuppose the truth of what they are saying, the normative rightness of the interaction they are establishing with the hearer through their speech acts and the sincerity or truthfulness of their speech acts. Complementary to these three validity claims (truth, normative rightness and truthfulness), speakers must also share the notion of a single objective world that is identical for all possible observers. As Habermas points out in *The Theory of Communicative Action*, “actors who raise validity claims have to avoid materially prejudicing the relation between language and reality, between the medium of communication and that about which something is being communicated.” This alone makes it possible for “the contents of a linguistic worldview [to become] detached from the assumed world-order itself” (Habermas 1981: 50–51). Obviously, if participants in communication are to evaluate whether things are the way they think they are or are as someone else believes, they cannot at the same time dogmatically identify their own beliefs with the way the world is. This is why communication oriented toward understanding requires that the participants distinguish, however counterfactually, between everyone's (incompatible) beliefs and the assumed world-order itself. Put in Habermas's own terms they have to form “a reflective concept of world.” The formal presupposition of a single objective world is just a consequence of the universal claim to validity built into the speakers' speech acts. It is just an expression of the communicative constraint that makes rational criticism and mutual learning possible, namely, that from two opposed claims only one can be right. Thus, the formal notion of world and the three universal validity claims build a system of coordinates that guides the interpretative efforts of the participants in communication toward a common understanding, despite their differences in beliefs or worldviews. This formal framework allows speakers to assume that they are referring to the same things even when their interpretations differ. As a consequence, they can adopt the externalist attitude necessary for disagreement and criticism without ever having to leave their shared communicative situation.

Now, to the extent that such an externalist perspective is equally accessible to all participants in communication, Habermas can reject Gadamer’s claim that the critical theorist, in order to carry out her critique, has to break the symmetry of communication oriented toward understanding and become a “social technocrat” in disguise. In the *Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas remarks,

in thematizing what the participants merely presuppose and assuming a reflective attitude to the interpretandum, one does not place oneself outside the communication context under investigation; one deepens and radicalizes it in a way that is in principle open to all participants.

(Habermas 1981: 130)

In this remark, we can already identify the other major strategy that Habermas has followed to confront the hermeneutic challenge.

By identifying the possibility of adopting an externalist perspective as a structural element of any communication oriented toward understanding, Habermas can reject the charge of
paternalism that Gadamer had raised against his approach to critical theory back in the 1970s. At the same time, however, it becomes clear that this strategy is based on the acceptance of the criterion of legitimacy that underlies the charge, namely, that the ultimate criterion of validation of any criticism or proposal for social change is the actual dialogue among all participants involved. Thus, no matter how superior the empirical and theoretical knowledge of the critical theorist may be, she must situate herself as a discourse participant among equals to validate her criticisms and proposals through actual dialogue (Habermas 1983: 122, 1992: 172).

This is indeed the most distinctive element of Habermas's approach to critical theory. As he sees it, the critical theorist is not supposed to base her criticisms of current societies on her particular conception of the good society, but is supposed to leave space for the citizens themselves to determine and develop their different collective and individual life projects (Habermas 1992: 107, 110). To that extent, critical inquiry does not seek to achieve specific ends but to bring about those social conditions in which its insights and proposals might be validated or falsified by citizens themselves (Bohman 2001). This decidedly democratic turn of critical theory makes it possible to justify the claim that the evaluations on which the theorist's criticisms are based do not illegitimately constrain the space of citizens' political self-determination, and thus do not amount to a tendentious attempt to advance the critics' own political preferences concerning the good society under the aegis of their self-proclaimed epistemic authority.

With this proposal, critical theory definitively breaks with the paternalistic tendencies of the Marxist tradition and emphasizes the normative importance of citizens' political self-determination. In so doing, however, it does not give in to the hermeneutic temptation to cede to the participants and their traditions the only say about the significance of the social practices they engage in. The theoretical reconstruction of the communicative and social conditions under which any political proposals could be validated or falsified by citizens themselves provides the critical theorist with a powerful criterion for measuring current social conditions and criticizing those responsible for the perpetuation of injustices. At the same time, insight into the validity of such a criterion does not derive from any privileged access to truth on the side of the critical theorist, but it is anchored in the communicative practices that discourse participants already share. Consequently, this kind of criticism is not only open to all participants but also publicly addressed to them.

It remains an open question whether the Habermasian approach to critical theory can succeed in its goals and thus offer a solid basis for a fruitful research program. This is particularly the case regarding the two elements that I have identified here as central to Habermas's attempt to think “with Heidegger and against Heidegger.” On the one hand, the prospects of successfully incorporating externalism in an account of linguistic communication will need to be assessed in light of the results of current discussions on theories of meaning in the philosophy of language. On the other hand, the prospects of the democratic turn in critical theory will need to be assessed in light of the results of current discussions on deliberative democracy in political philosophy. Be that as it may, it is clear that Habermas's distinctive approach to critical theory represents a genuine alternative to Heideggerian hermeneutics precisely because it came about by thinking with Heidegger and against Heidegger.

Notes

1 A selected sample of such works is listed at the end of this piece as suggestions for further reading. For a brief overview of the relationship between each of the main figures of the Frankfurt School and Heidegger, see Thomä 2003: 361–368.

2 For some textual evidence from Being and Time against this interpretation, see Fritsche 1999.
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References


Further Reading