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<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-020-00563-2>

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Social pathologies and ideologies in light of Jürgen Habermas: a new interpretation of the thesis of colonisation

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This paper analyses the role that the critique of ideologies plays within Jürgen Habermas' Critical Theory. I offer a reinterpretation of the thesis of colonisation of lifeworld in light of a specific reading of the critique of ideologies, trying to show that this thesis can be interpreted as a case of critique of ideologies. To do so, I firstly present a brief general map of the different forms of social critique present today in social philosophy by placing special emphasis on the critique of ideologies. Secondly, I briefly state Habermas' diagnosis on the colonisation of lifeworld by differentiating the two levels of critique which are, in my view, contained within the theory of communicative action: critique as the discursive redemption of validity claims by participants and critique as an observer's social diagnosis. Lastly, I confront these two levels of critique with the form of critique of ideologies analysed in the first point and conclude that we can refer to the second level as a case of a critique of ideologies.

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Introduction

One of the most characteristic features of philosophical activity is its uninterrupted introspection. In a gesture of self-reflection that is certainly absent in many other disciplines, philosophy thematises itself as a field of study of philosophy itself. Although this gesture runs through the whole history of philosophy, it has in recent times reached a truly astounding level of stylisation in the social philosophy field, particularly extensive within the so-called Critical Theory of society. Without abandoning its traditional study areas, namely institutions, social practices, and its pathological developments, Critical Theory turns, so to speak, towards itself by operating an interesting shift from critique of society to the social philosophy of critique (Boltanski and Honneth, 2009; Celikates, 2006).

This pivot to philosophical reflection has triggered stimulating debate about the current meaning of “critique” among the critical theorists close to Frankfurt tradition. This discourse has resurfaced with renewed urgency, and in a more or less unexpected way, after the gradual withdrawal of Critical Theory from Marxist origins, a particular form of critique that we call “critique of ideologies”. Although the return of the critique of ideologies to current social philosophy does not typically take Habermas’ contribution to Critical Theory into account, given that Habermas always suspected the possibility of talking about “false consciousness” from an epistemologically privileged position, I believe that a deep analysis of his thought could shed light on the connections between the theory of communicative action and critique of ideologies.

The aim of this paper is, therefore, to analyse the role that critique of ideologies plays within Habermas’ Critical Theory. Specifically, I intend to offer a reinterpretation of the colonisation of lifeworld thesis in light of a specific reading of critique of ideologies by showing that this thesis can be interpreted, with the appropriate precautions, as a case of a critique of ideologies. To do so, I firstly present a general map of the different forms of social critique. Within this general landscape, I place special emphasis on the critique of ideologies by defending a specific definition of this figure. Secondly, I briefly state Habermas’ diagnosis of colonisation of lifeworld by differentiating between the two levels of critique which I believe are contained in the theory of communicative action: critique as a discursive redemption of validity claims by participants; and critique as an observer’s social diagnosis. Lastly, I contrast these two levels of critique with the critique of ideologies analysis raised in the first point by inquiring if we can refer to some of these levels as a case of a critique of ideologies.

On various contemporary models of social critique

In a series of lectures given in the mid-1980s, Michael Walzer offered a categorisation of various modes of social critique that may serve as a starting point to understand current debates in social philosophy. Walzer notes the existence in moral philosophy of three main ways, to which he links three forms of social critique: the “discovery” of objectively existing moral values which would be, so to speak, “there, waiting to be enforced” (Walzer, 1993, p. 7), the “invention” or “construction” by a rational and fair procedure of a moral world that does not yet exist, and the “interpretation” of some normative horizons already given. While the way of discovery creates a form of critique based on protest against a social reality that is not in accordance with the moral principles discovered by the “philosopher king”, who claims for himself access to moral truth based on an irritating “epistemological authoritarianism” (Cooke, 2009), the way of invention creates a form of external or transcendent critique based on distancing from the criticised society. Against both of these

models, the “local judge” figure, claimed by Walzer, exercises a form of hermeneutic social critique linked to the criticised society, of which he recognises himself as a member (Walzer, 1993, p. 34).

Axel Honneth bases himself on this suggestive categorisation to define the kind of social critique practiced by the Frankfurt School. Honneth starts with the differentiation between a “weak critique”, which affirms the normative horizons of the society in which it is located, and a “strong critique”, which strives to transcend such horizons to find universal points of view from which to justify its diagnoses. The former, which corresponds to what Walzer calls “interpretative critique”, would include forms of communitarianism and pragmatist critique carried out by Taylor, Walzer or Rorty. The latter, which corresponds to what Walzer calls “construction” and to what we today call “transcendent” or “external” critique, would include the universalistic models of Habermas or Rawls. However, Honneth looks for a “strong critique” form which, in turn, gives up the form of “view from nowhere”. To that end, he replaces the “interpretative critique” category used by Walzer with the normatively more demanding “reconstructive critique” concept¹. With this approach, which refers to what we today call “immanent critique” (Romero-Cuevas, 2014), the critical theorist reconstructs, from within a certain social order, “those normative aspirations whose transcendent character then will allow to subject the social order to a well-founded criticism” (Honneth, 2007, p. 58). In Honneth’s view, this differentiation among constructivist-external, hermeneutic-internal and reconstructive-immanent critique does not exhaust the kind of critique practiced by the Frankfurt School. In his interpretation, there is still another critique form that he calls “genealogical critique”, which does not appeal to normative constructions from which to criticise the existing society, but does not think it possible to gain immanent normative ideals to the criticised society either. Rather, the genealogical critique strives to show that the normative ideals of the given society have historically legitimated a “repressive praxis”. Within the specific Frankfurt School frame, such a genealogical critique only appeared with the shift from the enlightened critique of ideology practiced still in the 1930s (Horkheimer, 1936, 1937; Marcuse, 1937) to the radical self-criticism of reason that arose after experiencing the National Socialist regime (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2003; Horkheimer, 2004; Marcuse, 1964). The genealogical critique arose with the Nietzschean attempt, which was later recovered by Foucault, to deny moral values, practices and existing social institutions in light of a historiographical narration about their repressive origins (Saar, 2009).

Although these conceptual divisions have been formulated to categorise the kind of critique practiced by classic social philosophers in the last century—from Horkheimer to Honneth through Marcuse, Adorno, Habermas, Foucault, Rorty or Taylor—the truth is that there are currently a multitude of epochal diagnoses that are more or less explicitly part of all these models. Just to mention a few, Hartmut Rosa has linked his studies on “social acceleration” (*Beschleunigung*) with this sociology of critique by proposing the model of an immanent critique of temporal relations (*Zeitverhältnisse*). Rosa rests his model on a form of immanent critique that remains faithful to the normative promise of modernity, namely the actualisation of a self-determined and authentic form of life. This promise is now threatened, such is Rosa’s suggestive thesis, by the social pathologies arising from social acceleration processes. Social acceleration, and the associated invisible coercions, carry out alienation processes; that is, processes involving loss of ability to steer one’s own life autonomously, which have to do with failed ways of relations with the objective, social, and subjective world (Rosa, 2005, 2009, 2013). Rainer Forst outlines a new form of

social critique based on his fruitful idea of “right to justification”. Forst starts with an ideal normative dimension grounded on the concept of “human dignity”, which constitutes the true criterion of any social critique form. The foundation of this criterion is based on a normative and non-religious comprehension of the person as a “justification being (*rechtfertigendes Wesen*); that is, a being who needs justifications” (Forst, 2009, p. 151). With this scheme, which was developed in the influential work *Das Recht auf Rechtfertigung* (Forst, 2007), Forst defines loss of dignity as to “be omitted” from justification orders (*Rechtfertigungsordnungen*); that is, as a negation of the basic moral status of the person as a subject who has a basic right to justification. For “right to justification”, Forst means the assurance of conditions of participation, for all human beings, in discussions on the normative orders governing their society. Structural violence, the subject of a critical theory of society like that of Forst, arises when justification claims are denied and supplanted through other steering media. Social critique adopts the convincing shape of a critique of relations of justification (Forst, 2010). Rahel Jaeggi reacted to the debate between “internal critique” and “external critique” from a more or less opposed perspective to that of Forst by, that is, moving away from the theory of justice models that focused on the *Moralität*. Jaeggi proposes a social critique form as “critique of forms of life”, which operates immanently. With her critique, Jaeggi attempts to overcome the “ethical abstinence” or “liberal neutrality” of the ethical content of forms of life, represented mainly by Rawls and Habermas. Jaeggi understands forms of life as “complex bundles (or ensembles) of social practices geared to solving problems that for their part are historically contextualised and normatively constituted” (Jaeggi, 2018, p. 29). The rationality or success of such complex bundles of social practices, and therefore the possibility of formulating social diagnoses about their failure, aims at the dynamics of developing those forms of life in its core task, namely the practical problem-solving and learning that derive from this process. Finally, Benno Herzog carried out today a critical theory of invisibility by analysing both the invisibility of suffering and the suffering from invisibility (Herzog, 2020).

All the above-mentioned models of social critique establish a certain connection with a very specific kind of social critique that I have not explicitly thematised to date. I refer to the critique of ideologies figure, inaugurated by Marx. In his *Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie*, Marx shows how religion, by expressing the contradiction of a world governed by injustice and by promising a future where such a contradiction would have to be overcome, becomes the appropriate instrument to perpetuate the existing state of things (Marx, 1981). The ideology concept that is implicit in this first formulation, which Marx gradually refined while he was advancing in his studies on political economy, was expressed in a completely explicit way in what remains today a very well-known passage of *Die deutsche Ideologie*:

For each new class which puts itself in the place of one ruling before it, is compelled, merely in order to carry through its aim, to represent its interest as the common interest of all the members of society, that is, expressed in ideal form: it has to give its ideas the form of universality, and represent them as the only rational, universally valid [allgemein gültigen] ones (Marx and Engels, 1978, p. 47).

As we can see, ideology constitutes a kind of distorted schema of reality, which the ruling class maintains in order to preserve, with the appearance of legitimacy, its very domination². The idea of the appearance of legitimacy is decisive as ideologies transform direct forms of *force* into forms of *fraudulently* rationalised coercions. In the context analysed by Marx—liberal capitalism in the mid-19th century—this ideological function was carried out

by a bourgeois law system that reduced the idea of freedom to the contractual relations between capital and labour power (Marx, 1962; Casuso, 2018). In this sense, the second and most important form of critique of ideologies is what we could call “critique of political economy”. According to Marxist theory of exploitation, the capitalist pays for the labour power the amount of money that the worker needs for his survival. However, by using this labour power in the production process, the capitalist does not get the amount of value that is necessary to provide the worker with his means of subsistence—salary—but a larger amount. The difference between the cost of capital and the total value created is the surplus value. For this process to occur in a systematic way, the capitalist would have to be able to find a group of people that would be willing to work longer than the time needed to their survival. The existence of this group of people (proletariat) presupposes certain social, legal and political conditions, and this is where critique of political economy becomes ideological critique of formal law. In order for the owner of money to find the labour power within the market as a commodity, the worker has to be able to *freely* own his very labour power. At the same time, both the owner and the buyer of such labour power have to be juridically equals individuals. Of course, the difference between seller and buyer, both free and juridically equals, is that the seller-worker is in addition *free* in a less convenient sense: “on the one hand, as a free man he can dispose of his labour power as his own commodity; on the other hand, he has no other commodity for sale, is short of everything necessary for the realisation of his labour power” (Marx, 1962).

Of course, historic changes and the emergence of new social conflicts led to practice critique of ideologies in many different ways through various Critical Theory stages. During the 1930s, the critique of political economy became, within the framework of the *Institut für Sozialforschung*, a theory of fascism. Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse’s criticisms were also directed, as in the case of Marx, against the capitalist mode of production. However, the aim of these authors was not to explain the pathological character of such a mode of production, but rather to understand the new form of ideologies that, by substituting bourgeois formal law, succeeded in maintaining the class struggle in a latent state (Horkheimer, 1932, 1935; Marcuse, 1934). This new form of ideology, which is proper to the National Socialist society, resorted to anti-liberal elements as the exaltation of the people (*Volk*) and nation, the glorification of the “great personality” or the advocacy of personal sacrifice in favour of irrational elements as the *Blut-und-Boden*. With the defeat of fascism and the emergence of welfare democracies, the first generation of Frankfurt School substituted in turn this form of critique of ideologies for a critique of “culture industry” aimed at showing the forms of ideological consciousness within the totalising mass culture. Within mass societies, as elaborated in the theses of Adorno and Marcuse, the critical-negative role of art was tending to disappear in favour of its role of stabilising domination. Within this premature and one-sided reconciliation, mass media and techno-science—as the primary productive force of advanced capitalist societies—played a central role (Adorno, 1963; Marcuse, 1964).

It is precisely the last aforementioned element, techno-science, that was used by Habermas in his early critique of ideologies. It is important to note that, from the very beginning, Habermas always rejected the kind of “epistemic asymmetry” and paternalism which seems to be inherent to critique of ideologies. Habermas’ social theory “does not deploy the self-defeating strategy of attributing widespread error and irrationality to agents as a putative explanation for why they tolerate and perpetuate oppressive social institutions and practices” (Finlayson, 2005, p. 58). Instead, he tries to explain this perpetuation in terms of

“hidden strategic and instrumental aims that are inherent in the system” (Finlayson, 2005, p. 58). In *Technik und Wissenschaft als „Ideologie“* Habermas relies on Marcuse’s theses on technocratic ideology to offer a new model of critique of ideologies. In his interpretation of Marcuse, Habermas starts with two main theses: first, that Marcuse is right to track down in the institutionalisation of scientific and technical progress the ideological core of late capitalism; second, that he is wrong to suggest a “qualitatively different” model of science and technic as the best way to combat such ideology. After showing the unviability of this qualitatively different model of science and technic—given that in his view science and technic, in their current form, constitute the very essence of labour or purposive-rational (*zweckrational*) action—Habermas reinterprets the issue of late capitalist ideology from his own categories. Firstly, Habermas proposes a distinction between *labour* and *interaction*. *Labour* means for Habermas either instrumental or rational choice; *interaction* means a symbolically mediated action, which is oriented according to existing norms. Secondly, Habermas differentiates two social spheres: the *institutional framework* of lifeworld, which is composed of norms; and the *system*, which includes both economic and administrative subsystems. In this way, Habermas arrives to an original definition of late capitalist ideology, which he calls “technocratic ideology”: within advanced industrialised societies, the democratic formation of will pertaining to *practical* issues is replaced by *technical* decisions: “the concealment of this difference proves the ideological power of the technocratic consciousness” (Habermas, 1968a). Furthermore, in others early stages of his thought, Habermas used the critique of ideologies figure. In *Erkenntnis und Interesse*, he resorts to Freud and the “self-reflection” idea to equate the “deep hermeneutics” and the “removal of the barrier of the consciousness” with critique of ideologies as the subjective liberation of the dependence of hypostatised powers (Habermas, 1968b).

The critique of ideologies figure, regardless of the various above-mentioned versions, has once again aroused the interest of some authors of current Critical Theory, who attempt to offer a reinterpretation of the model that is able to escape from the obvious risks of “epistemic asymmetry”. For example, Axel Honneth has devoted interesting work towards interpreting ideologies as a kind of false recognition (Honneth, 2004). Rainer Forst defines ideologies as a “complex of justification” that are naturalised and disconnected from critical questioning (Forst, 2009). Gustavo Pereira rests on his “anonymous injustice” concept to speak about a “besieged imagination” that prevents the anticipation of different scenarios (Pereira, 2018). Hartmut Rosa understands ideology in terms of non-thematised temporal norms. Finally, Rahel Jaeggi characterises critique of ideologies as a decipherment of the mechanisms of domination that operates as either “naturalisation” of social relations, which prevent affected subjects from understanding the historic and modifiable character of the forms of oppression they suffer, or the “universalisation” of particular interests, which directly connects with the Marxian definition in terms of critique of formal law (Jaeggi, 2009, pp. 269–270).

Whilst I agree with the two features of ideology referred to by Jaeggi, in my opinion, a definition of ideology that stands up to present-day challenges should be characterised by at least two additional features. The first element is the strategy, perpetuated by the current neoliberal ideology, of the individualisation of the responsibility of failure. This individualisation, which operates in, for instance, the so-called “self-help books” by depositing the responsibility of biographical success only to the willingness of the individual subject, and by glorifying the “natural-born leader”, neglects the structural and material causes of failed lives. This individualisation could lead, as Axel Honneth has shown, to the

elimination of the conditions of an articulation of experiences of oppression that are specific of class societies (Honneth, 1990). The second element is the idea, which is embodied in the technocratic consciousness of late capitalism, of “lack of discursive articulation” (*Diskursivierung*) on certain topics. Honneth shows that late capitalism societies manifest a limitation of the possibilities of symbolic expression on certain injustices (Honneth, 1990). Obviously, not every form of ideology contains the four features. On the other hand, my enumeration is not intended to be exhaustive, so there can be forms of ideology which contain a variety of properties. In any case, for the purposes of this paper I would like to focus on the last feature, which will be of much interest for interpreting Habermas’ thesis of colonisation as a critique of ideologies.

In my view, within Karl-Otto Apel’s thought we can find some interesting considerations on the element of “lack of discursive articulation”. Immersed in the debates of the late 1960s on the “technocratic thesis”, positivism, and hermeneutics, Apel offered a critique of ideologies grounded philosophically on his transcendental pragmatics. Apel bears in mind the highly controversial figures of “mentor–disciple” and “therapist–patient” relationships to explain the kind of mechanism that operates in critique of ideologies. Thus as Habermas has shown with his criticism to Gadamer (Habermas, 1973; Gadamer, 1971; Conill, 2006), a communication fully purged of distortions that would allow a purely hermeneutical understanding is not possible in existing societies, an “empirical-analytical objectification” or “temporary suspension” of communicative interaction must be introduced to explain behaviour according to an ideology. Such an objectification or critique of ideologies can, however, only avoid its paternalistic aura if the aim of suspending communicative interaction is merely to “provoke a process of reflection through which the subject becomes aware of the non-transparent motives, and therefore gives him access to an authentic intersubjective discussion” (Apel, 1970). By extrapolating this form of individual therapy to society’s emancipation, Apel can define the critique of ideologies function as a provocation of the self-reflective and communicative processes that “transform the unconsciously motivated behaviour into a consciously responsible action” (Apel, 1970). This unconsciously motivated behaviour operates as a systematic blockade of discursivity around a problem, which can be overcome through the process of reflection.

In the same vein, Matthias Kettner has used this fruitful connection between psychoanalysis and critique of ideologies, whose first version dates back to the Freudo-Marxists studies of Erich Fromm and Herbert Marcuse, to gain a renewed critique of ideologies model focused precisely on the fourth element referred. Critique of ideologies would thus operate as an “interpretative practice” that aims to dissolve (*auflösen*) the self-reification of human beings and their social relations (Kettner, 1994). As the cause of “the ideological” (*Ideologizität*) lies in “lack of discursive articulation” on certain topics, that is, in the existence of “hegemonic discourses” which are taken away from thematisation³, critique of ideology operates by externally introducing communication that addresses the very actors made to distance themselves from their social history to carry out communication that now operates without distortions.

I think that this fourth feature of ideology, lack of discursive articulation, constitutes a very interesting key from which to reinterpret Habermas’ thesis on colonisation of lifeworld. By focusing on this feature, we will also be able to show the connection between the hidden critique of ideology in *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* and Habermas’ early critique of technocratic ideology. For this reinterpretation, however, we must firstly analyse some of the core elements of the theory of communicative action.

On the two levels of critique in the theory of communicative action

Although Habermas' Critical Theory was only systematised in the 1981 work *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, the truth is that this book can only be understood as the result of a process of learning which Habermas began in the late 1950s. One of the most important landmarks of this process, apart from disputes on positivism (Habermas, 1982b) or the theory of cognitive interest (Habermas, 1968b), is without doubt the theory of communicative competence or "formal pragmatics" (Habermas, 1984; Apel, 1976; Cortina, 1986). Through this theory, Habermas and Apel attempt to bring to light the transcendental assumptions of argumentation. Based on this theory, and as with Western Marxism's contributions, Parsons's systems theory, Mead's social psychology and Durkheim's sociology of religion, Habermas developed an influential reinterpretation of the Weberian theory of social rationalisation. With this reinterpretation, Habermas also substitutes the disappointing normative foundation of the first Critical Theory after its "pessimistic turn" for a foundation that endorses the *normative content of Modernity*.

By relying on his studies into universal pragmatics, Habermas differentiates between teleological rationality, whose aim is to modify something in the external world, and communicative rationality, which aims to achieve linguistic understanding between at least two individuals. Both these forms of rationality correspond to forms of social action: strategic action and communicative action. Social actions can be distinguished by their respective medium for coordination through either interlinked interests or understandings (*Einverständnis*). In communicative action, Habermas distinguishes, in turn, four validity claims that speakers can address to listeners in their utterances: propositional truth (*Wahrheit*); normative rightness (*Richtigkeit*); sincerity (*Wahrhaftigkeit*); and understandability (*Verständlichkeit*). With this background, Habermas defines communicative rationality as the "discursive redemption" (*diskursive Einlösung*) of the validity claims that can be criticised; that is, as an attempt by speakers to argumentatively convince listeners that their utterances are valid.

This theory of action and rationalisation can only be linked with the aims of theory of society by making explicit the relation between forms of action/rationality and the structural spheres of action which, in Habermas' view, make up society, namely system and lifeworld: communicative action operates in the lifeworld on the one hand, and strategic action operates in the system on the other hand.

Communicative action consists of a cooperative interpretation process in which at least two individuals agree on a problematic situation relating to the objective, social or subjective world. In this cooperation however, subjects implicitly refer to a frame of common interpretations that they cannot get rid of. Such a frame of self-evidences is what Habermas calls, by adopting Husserl's original concept, "lifeworld" (*Lebenswelt*). When a fragment of this frame is thematised by some participants, it loses its unquestioned character to become a fact, a norm, or experience whose validity, already called into question, may only be restored by achieving a new understanding.

Although *cultural* evidence is thematised against the lifeworld background, it itself is not composed of only such cultural evidence. In Habermas' model, lifeworld is composed of three structural elements: culture (science, law, moral and art), society (socially accepted practices, accredited forms of solidarity) and personality (individual skills and competences). From the perspective of the *participant* in the lifeworld, and given that there are three structural elements, the symbolic reproduction of society as a lifeworld or rationalisation is divided into three parallel processes: cultural reproduction or transmission and renewal of cultural knowledge; social integration or establishing

the identity of groups through shared norms and institutionalised values; and socialisation or development of personal identities. During the lifeworld rationalisation process, these three processes are disconnected from a traditional consensus and are placed in the guiding light of communication. Cultural reproduction takes to culture models of interpretation, to society legitimations for existing institutions, and to personality patterns of behaviour that are effective for identity formation. Social integrations take to culture feelings of moral obligation, to society legitimately ordered around intersubjective relationships, and to personality feelings of social belonging. Lastly, socialisation takes to culture interpretative ability, to society motivations for acting according to norms, and to personality interaction ability and personal identity (Habermas, 1988, p. 214).

Lifeworld is, nevertheless, just one of the *two* structural elements of Habermas' theory of society. According to Habermas, society should be understood from two different perspectives: from the perspective of a "participant" in the lifeworld; and from the perspective of an "observer" of a system. Research into the structures and rationalisation process of lifeworld has been carried out from the theory of action viewpoint, whereas research into the structures and rationalisation process of the system has to be done from a functionalist system theory point of view. Within this functionalist frame, "system" is defined as "an ordered set of elements that tended to maintain existing structures" (Habermas, 1988). Based on the biological model of the organism and its environment, functionalism argues that the system maintains its own limits and internal organisation by reducing the complexity of the environment through functional imperatives. Unlike action coordination in the lifeworld, action coordination in the system does not operate by the mechanism of mutual understanding and the harmonisation of the action orientations of participants, but through a "functional inter-meshing of action consequences that remain latent; that is, they can go beyond participants' horizon of orientation" (Habermas, 1988). In the system, Habermas differentiates between an economic and an administrative subsystem. Money and power, the two "steering media" thematised by Talcott Parsons in his theory of society, operate, respectively, in the capitalist market and modern State Administration.

Only by using a society concept articulated at these two levels, such as the system and as lifeworld, can Habermas rightly understand the *kind* of problems that arise from the social integration and system integration interaction. That is, only now does his theory of society take the form of a *critical* theory of society; a society, therefore, charged with diagnosing the pathological processes that derive from rationalisation⁴. Such a theory is developed as a new version of Lukacs' theory of reification. The paradoxical Western rationalisation, which Adorno and Horkheimer had diagnosed through their dialectic of Enlightenment, is now reformulated in the famous thesis of the colonisation of lifeworld by systemic imperatives. The result of this colonisation is to substitute understanding for money and power as ways of coordination action *in* the lifeworld:

In the end, systemic mechanisms suppress forms of social integration even in those areas where a consensus-dependent coordination of action cannot be replaced, that is, where the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld is at stake. In these areas, the mediatization of the lifeworld assumes the form of a colonization (Habermas, 1988).

This colonisation has pathological effects on the three symbolic reproduction processes of lifeworld. When it comes to cultural reproduction, colonisation has loss of meaning, legitimization crisis and orientation crisis as effects. As regards social integration, its crisis appears as anomie, insecurity of collective identity and

alienation. Regarding socialisation, colonisation produces pathological effects, such as the destruction of traditions, the elimination of motivations, and a psychopathological crisis. Although the common pattern of these pathological processes is to substitute understanding for money and power as ways of coordinating action in the lifeworld, the truth is that Habermas does not thoroughly analyse how such substitution operates in the above-mentioned crisis (Kettner and Jacobs, 2016), but he is limited to empirically prove his thesis by resorting to the general phenomena of bureaucratisation, monetisation, and juridification of social relations⁵.

Be that as it may, in this Critical Theory model it is important to differentiate between “shape” and “foundation”. Shape refers to criticism about a contradictory social rationalisation process, which promotes the hypertrophic increase of an economic and political system that ends up instrumentalising the lifeworld in which they emerged. The normative foundation on which such a diagnosis stands refers to the idea of an extended comprehension of rationality, precisely that communicative rationality of the lifeworld that is destroyed by the system’s colonising dynamics. The anticipation of a rational society, the essential critique-normative core for any version of Critical Theory, refers in this sense to a communicative organisation of cultural reproduction, social integration and socialisation processes.

If I interpret correctly, the variables “shape” and “foundation” describe a duality in the ways of understanding what critique actually means. With regard to the “shape” of the theory, critique means denouncing the colonisation process of lifeworld. Regarding its “foundation”, it means a discursive redemption (*Einlösung*) of problematised validity claims. With the first level of critique, Habermas adopts the third-person perspective of an *observer*. With the second level, he adopts the perspective of the *participant* social actor. Both levels of critiques thus refer to a certain epistemological perspective and, therefore, Habermas operates permanently “between hermeneutics and system theory” (Romero-Cuevas, 2011). I will call the first level “critique as a diagnosis”, and the second one “critique as discursive redemption”⁶. The thematisation and discursive redemption of validity claims not yet questioned have to do with the cultural learning processes that occur in the lifeworld, while the thematisation of these systemic mechanisms that colonise the lifeworld and succeed in paralysing the very problematisation of validity claim have to do with the Critical Theory of society. These mechanisms substitute the media of action coordination of “understanding” for the steering media of “money” and “power”. The theory of communicative action rests normatively on the second level of critique, as it is *this form of life*, the form of life that makes coordinating actions and tradition renovations dependent on the exchange of arguments. Considering the normative horizons that remain buried after colonisation, the truth is that only to the extent that the theory of communicative action operates at the first level is it per se a Critical Theory of society.

While the critique as a diagnosis is convincingly explained in *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, the critique as discursive redemption is the subject of study of three main knowledge fields addressed by Habermas in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s: the consensus theory of truth, the discourse ethics, and the discourse theory of law and democracy. Habermas attaches to the participants of modern lifeworlds the curious ability of turning *the whole spectrum of culture* as a structural element of the lifeworld into a *fragment* that likely moves towards problematisation. Such a gesture happens when one of the participants calls into question the validity claims of an utterance formulated by another participant—regardless of this utterance referring to science, morals, law or art. When tradition does not suffice to restore an agreement that is no longer evident, the re-establishment of the

threatened consensus has to depend on the possible discourse redemption of the problematised validity claims.

Something different happens at the level that I call “critique as a diagnosis”. In this case, agents of critique are not those participants of the lifeworld who thematise doubtful validity claims. Rather the agent of critique is a sociological observer who somehow has to make the proper distance in order to diagnose a pathological rationalisation process. When this happens, the critical theorist “Jürgen Habermas” realises that there is a pathological rationalisation process: at the same time as the lifeworld rationalisation, based on differentiating among three formal world concepts, a linguistification of the normative consensus becomes possible; that is, at the same time that the diagnosis makes the emergence of the *second level of critique* possible, it paves the way for formally organised systems of action to appear which, in a further step, end up instrumentalising the communicative spaces of the lifeworld.

Is Habermas’ critique a critique of ideologies?

Based on the above differentiation, we can now return to the issue raised in the “Introduction” section to answer two different questions. Firstly, which form of critique does Habermas use at both these two levels according to the scheme sketched in the second section? Secondly, is one these two levels or both likely to be read as a critique of ideologies?

For the first question, I think that a lack of differentiation between the levels “critique as a diagnosis” and “critique as discursive redemption” has led to a certain misunderstanding in this debate. The placement of Habermas as the chief representative of “external” or “transcendent” critique, a placement that is usually specific among communitarianism critics (Walzer, 1993), makes sense when it comes to the second level. Here, critique does indeed mean the problematisation of scientific statements, moral norms, or legal norms from the transcendent point of view of rational discourse in which we assume an ideal speech situation. To the extent that this assumption always operates in discursive redemption processes, the categories of “transcendent” or “external” do not do full justice. So we should rather use the idea of a “reconstructive critique” that, it is true, *transcend* contexts. However, when it comes to the first level of critique, critique as an observer’s diagnosis, we face a slightly different issue. Actually, a moment of distancing is needed in any form of social critique because, without it, critique would simply be impossible. The point is if, based on a certain degree of distancing, the formulated diagnosis claims an “immanent” or “transcendent” normative basis for itself. To the extent that Habermas does not lay his diagnosis on idealisations, but on the very normative basis of Modernity; to the extent that reconstructed normative content “comes inscribed in the facticity of the observable political processes” (Habermas, 1994, p. 349), Habermas does not operate in the manner of an external critique who is disconnected from the horizons of interpretations in which he lives. Rather horizons of interpretations, which Habermas calls “lifeworld”, nurture the critical theorist with the needed sources from which to proceed to immanent critique. The new foundation for Critical Theory constitutes, as noted also by Titus Stahl, a “novel and innovative form of immanent critique” (Stahl, 2013).

As for the second question, the question on the role that critique of ideology plays in Habermas’ *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, the issue can be addressed from different perspectives. If I understand rightly, Habermas contended with the possibility of critique of ideologies especially as regards the so-called “evaluative and expressive illocutionary speech act”, where speakers proceed to express experiences with a claim of sincerity. When this claim is rejected by the listener, this confers the speaker a

“self-deception”, “insincerity” or “false interpretation” of his/her desires and needs, which can be solved with therapeutic dialogue or aesthetic critique which, by operating in the manner of a “form of argumentation aimed to the enlighten on systemic self-deceptions” (Habermas, 1982a, p. 43), is strikingly reminiscent of critique of ideologies (Sonderegger, 2009). Although Habermas seems to see here ideology critique as a kind of questioning about the sincerity of speakers’ speech acts, it is clear that not every insincere expression can be considered as ideological. In my view, only when there is a “false interpretation” of the speaker’s own desires or needs it makes sense to use the term “ideology”. It does not make sense to do it, then, with regard to insincere participation in discourses. Also to the case of those subjects oriented to their own success (strategy), but by “making believe to the rest of people that they meet the assumptions of communicative action” (Habermas, 1982a, p. 445), Habermas speaks of a “deliberate manipulation” that may be linked with ideology. As we can see, in both cases Habermas operates with a different model from that of the “systematically distorted communication”.

However, I would like to address the issue from a different point of view. With the model defended in the section “On various contemporary models of social critique” of this paper, ideology is not only a “naturalisation of the social”, a “universalisation of the particular” or an “individualisation of the responsibility of failure”, but is also an “elimination of the discursive articulation”. Critique of ideologies would then operate in this sense as denouncing against the non-articulation of certain validity claims or “hegemonic discourses”. If this were indeed the case, then I think that it would be possible to defend that Habermas’ thesis on the colonisation of lifeworld would imply a critique of ideologies moment. Yet at which of the two levels of critique would that be possible? I defend that this would only be possible at the “critique as a diagnosis” level.

In certain steps of his argumentations, Habermas seems to choose the contrary option. Readers gain such an impression when, for instance in his discussion with Niklas Luhmann, Habermas analyses in terms of universal pragmatics why the lifeworld can rest on a set of yet unquestioned validity claims. In such a context, universal pragmatics would attempt to explain the thematisation process of validity claims taken to date from public discussion and would, in this sense, surprisingly assimilate them to the critique of ideologies task. However, although the confidence in validity claims that, not only *to date*, but *at all* can be discursively articulated as they defend particular interests, comes over as a kind of false consciousness, it is not the explanation about the thematisation processes of validity claims, that is, the task of universal pragmatics, that plays the role of critique of ideologies, but rather a theory of society that realises the distortion of communicative processes. The validity claims that are impossible to thematise, the naturalised hegemonic discourses, indeed act ideologically. Yet despite critique of ideologies apparently being directly equated to the thematisation of unquestioned validity claims, the truth is if we follow Habermas’ analysis, its function would have to be to rather unveil the power structures that restrict the very possibility of thematising validity claims. Critique of ideologies, such is my thesis, is not the thematisation of validity claims that, as Marx says, “give its ideas the form of universality”; instead critique of ideologies is the thematisation of the systematic impossibility of thematising such validity claims. This impossibility is not the subject of study of universal pragmatics, but of the theory of communicative action as a critical theory of society, that is, of the first-level critique.

The “critique as a diagnosis” explains, and I believe convincingly, the mechanisms that contribute to distort the communicative processes of lifeworld. To do so, it resorts to the idea of substituting the understanding for money and power as forms of

action coordination. The aim of critique of ideologies is, to use Habermas’ felicitous expression, the phenomenon of a “systematic distortion of communication”: “the subjective non-perception of systemic coactions (*systemischen Zwängen*) which instrumentalize the communicative structure of lifeworld takes the character of an illusion, of an objectively false consciousness” (Habermas, 1988, p. 278). A little later: “a systematic restriction of communication is needed so that the appearance of discursive redemption of validity claims can become an objective power (*objektiven Gewalt*)” (Habermas, 1988, p. 350). Although ideologies are not per se social pathologies, rather mechanisms that contribute to veil (and legitimate) the social causes of such pathologies⁷, what happens is that the social pathology that Habermas diagnoses as the “colonisation of lifeworld” produces ideological effects itself. Colonisation of lifeworld is a social pathology that consists of eliminating understanding as a way of action coordination; that is, a social pathology that consists in eliminating thematisation. In line with the interpretation offered in the second section, as the elimination of thematisation is one of the possible modes of ideologies, colonisation of lifeworld is a social pathology and an ideology at the same time. And the critique against this colonising process, the critique against substituting linguistic understanding as a way of action coordination, thus adopts the range of a critique of ideologies.

To prove the feasibility of this interpretation, we can now resort to one of Habermas’ examples of colonisation: the juridification within family-law. Here juridification involves, just like the monetisation, the substitution of symbolic reproduction of lifeworld by a systemic reproduction. As a result of this juridification, action coordination within a typical context of lifeworld as is the family is released from understanding and seated on the steering media “power”. The introduction of law within family firstly, plays an emancipatory role, to the extent that removes the “traditional patriarchal power relation (*naturnwüchsigen patriarchalischen Gewaltverhältnisses*) in the family” (Habermas, 1988, p. 540). However, the juridification also means, for the family members, a reification of the family life, which is now formally regulated. The pathological character of this process lies in the substitution of a social integration through values, norms and understanding by a systemic integration. That is to say, lies precisely in lack of discursive articulation. Habermas’ critique of this process can be interpreted, in this sense, as a critique of the trend toward phasing out thematisation and discursive articulation as ways of action coordination within family. That is to say: as a critique of ideologies, if we understand ideology precisely as non-thematisation.

If I am not wrong, such a version of critique of ideologies, which in my view is hidden in *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, does not represent a break with Habermas’ early critique of technocratic ideology. If we remember, in *Technik und Wissenschaft als “Ideologie”* Habermas arrived to an original definition of late capitalist ideology, which he called “technocratic ideology”: the replacement of the democratic formation of will regarding *practical* issues by *technical* decisions. Such a replacement is not far from the idea of a substitution of understanding by steering media as way of action coordination within lifeworld.

Conclusions

The previous considerations allowed us to conclude something that is a priori surprising: the colonisation of lifeworld thesis, which represents the great diagnosis of Critical Theory after its “communicative turn”, contains within itself an element of critique of ideologies, even when this form of critique has always been suspected to break the relation of horizontal intersubjectivity—as always claimed by Habermas—in favour of a paternalistic

“subject–object” relation. This conclusion ceases to be surprising when we bear in mind a certain interpretation of critique of ideologies, whose aim is to precisely denounce lack of discursive articulation and to re-establish “normal” communicative processes. Such an interpretation has been developed in the section “On various contemporary models of social critique” of this paper within the framework of a general map of the various modes of social critique operating today in critical social philosophy.

We conclude that colonisation of lifeworld is a very peculiar social pathology because, to the extent that it consists of eliminating understanding as a way of action coordination, it is an ideology at the same time. Yet according to this interpretation, critique of colonisation adopts the consistent form of critique of ideologies. However, we must acknowledge the modest nature of this ideological critique exercise. If Habermas would proceed to a radical critique of ideologies, a form of critique that we can find in Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s *Dialektik der Aufklärung* or in Marcuse’s *One-Dimensional Man*, then his diagnosis would be more or less shaped as follows: as “totally administered society”, colonisation of lifeworld would extricate itself to critical thematisation, and in such a way that it would operate as social pathology that inevitably hides itself. Yet this is not the case. Habermas is not a radical critic of ideologies, but a critical theorist who still trusts the normative potentials of everyday communication. Habermas knows that “understanding” cannot be entirely eliminated as way of action coordination within lifeworld. One can indeed interpret new social movements as arising as soon as participants figure such elimination of thematisation out and try to reverse the process of colonisation in the form of a “re-conquest” of lifeworld. There is no theory of “totally administered society” within Habermas’ model of Critical Theory, which would mean: a society that has fully eliminated the way of action coordination that Habermas calls “understanding”. That is why Adorno, Horkheimer or the later Marcuse, but not Habermas, have to solve the paradoxical results of such a critique of reason and society that it ends by violating its own foundations. It is in the structure of communication, which is still not buried by systemic imperatives, where still lies the promise of an emancipated society.

Data availability

All data generated or analysed during this study are included in this published article.

Received: 28 May 2020; Accepted: 30 July 2020;

Published online: 24 August 2020

Notes

- 1 José Manuel Romero-Cuevas has formulated a meta-critique of this reconstructive critique, which he embodies in the models, which he believes excessively abstract, of Habermas and Honneth. Romero-Cuevas instead suggests, and clearly in connection with the young Marcuse, a form of radical critique that becomes aware of its own historicity and hermeneutical starting position. See Romero-Cuevas, 2016.
- 2 Robert Merton masterfully explains the underlying logic of ideology in his 1938 paper on the anomie. Merton uses the case of the cultural emphasis on success in late capitalism societies. The case of the “office-boy-to-president” helps him to exemplify the legitimising function of the *statu quo* characteristic of ideologies (see Merton, 1938).
- 3 In a discussion held at the Witten/Herdecke Universität, Matthias Kettner suggested I include the so-called “discourse of the experts”, whose complexity produces discouraging effects among citizens to thematise some topics within these “discourses subtracted from discursive articulation”.
- 4 In this point I defend Axel Honneth’s thesis, according to which the diagnosis of social pathologies makes up the authentic core of critical social philosophy (Honneth, 2000). Although the origins of this idea, which today operates a very convincing “decentration” of the biomedical approach on illnesses towards a socio-cultural point

of view (Kettner and Jacobs, 2016), may lie in Rousseau’s critique of civilisation (Neuhouser, 2012, 2014), the truth is that it can be more or less explicitly found in many social philosophers, from Hegel to current Critical Theory, through to Marx, Nietzsche, Foucault or Taylor.

- 5 In *Faktizität und Geltung*, Habermas gives up this dichotomic scheme as he introduces communicative coordination of actions *also* in the political subsystem by offering a discourse theory of law and democracy (Habermas, 1994; Baxter, 2011). It would really be worthwhile to speculate about the aspect that such a categorisation of pathological effects deriving from colonisation would have once that “power” is considered not only to be “steering media”, but to be a “communicative power”.
- 6 The differentiation between these two levels of critique has to do with the two aspects of critique differentiated by Seyla Benhabib: the “explanatory-diagnostic” aspect, “through which the findings and methods of the social sciences are appropriated in such a way as to develop an empirically fruitful analysis of the crisis potential of the present”, and the “anticipatory-utopian” aspect, which constitutes the properly normative aspect of critique (Benhabib, 1986, p. 226).
- 7 It appears somewhat differently from the (fruitful) categorisation of Axel Honneth’s social pathologies that Christopher Zürn carried out in terms of “second-order disorders” because Zürn identifies ideology and “ideological recognition” as a case of social pathology (see Zürn, 2011). If we follow this definition of social pathologies as “second-order disorders”, and we follow my interpretation of ideologies as an instrument for masking social pathologies at the same time, then ideologies would not be a “second-order disorder”, rather a “third-order disorder”.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor Matthias Kettner for the long discussions on "social pathologies" and "critique of ideologies" held at the Witten/Herdecke Universität during the 2019 Spring Semester. This paper could not have been prepared without his suggestions, his critical comments and his kind readiness for dialogue. A sincere thank you to Roger Cortes for the careful English revision of the manuscript.

Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.

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