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The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

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Volume 46  
Issue 3 September

Article 4

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2019

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Stephanie A. Bryson  
Portland State University, sbryson@pdx.edu

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### Recommended Citation

Bryson, Stephanie A. (2019) "Can the Lifeworld Save us From Neoliberal Governmentality? Social work, critical theory, and Habermas," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 46 : Iss. 3 , Article 4.  
Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol46/iss3/4>

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# Can the Lifeworld Save Us From Neoliberal Governmentality? Social Work, Critical Theory, and Habermas

Stephanie A. Bryson  
*Portland State University*

*Two years have passed since the 2016 election of Donald J. Trump, and U.S. social work is revisiting its radical stirrings and grappling with its conservative moorings. In this paper, I will argue that as U.S. social work appraises the adequacy of its intellectual leaders, the cultural relevance of its practice models, and its stance toward the Enlightenment ideals of reason, truth, and justice, it might usefully re-examine its relationship to the critical theory legacy of the Frankfurt School, especially the thinking of Jürgen Habermas. My goal in this essay is to suggest ways in which Habermasian thinking could provide social work more viable solutions than those offered by the idea of neoliberal governmentality.*

*Key words: Critical theory, Habermas, neoliberal governmentality, social work*

## Introduction: Social Work and Critical Theory

In light of twin impulses now sweeping the globe—the expansion of human rights in some places, the retrenchment of nationalism in others—U.S. social work is revisiting its radical stirrings and grappling with its conservative moorings. At a moment in which U.S. social work is both celebrated and vilified for embracing positivism in its structural equation models and managerialism in its tightly constricted educational competencies, the profession faces great, if not grand, challenges (American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare, 2019). Not least among these challenges is social work's coherent and long-term response to the peculiarly American brand of nativism and corporate oligarchy potentiated by the 2016 election.

In this paper, I will argue that as U.S. social work appraises the adequacy of its intellectual leaders, the cultural relevance of its practice models, and its stance toward the Enlightenment ideals of reason, truth, and justice, it might usefully re-examine its relationship to the critical theory legacy of the Frankfurt School, especially the thinking of Jürgen Habermas. My goal in this essay is to suggest ways in which Habermasian thinking could provide social work a conceptual atoll in a rising sea of neoliberalism, professionalization, and criminalization (Mehrotra, Kimball, & Wahab, 2016).

### The Critical Theory Legacy of the Frankfurt School

Before they were forced by Nazis in 1933 to close the Marxist Institute for Social Research (*Institut für Sozialforschung*) in Frankfurt, first generation critical theorists Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Walter Benjamin, Friedrich Pollock, Leo Lowenthal, and Eric Fromm wrote widely against Nazism in Germany, fascism in Europe, and Stalinism in Russia. Under the leadership of Max Horkheimer, Frankfurt School theorists reinterpreted classical Marxist philosophy, giving greater weight than Marx to the role and function of ideology (the "superstructure") vis-a-vis materialist forces of production (the "base"). Perhaps best known among the Frankfurt School in the U.S. were Horkheimer and Adorno, whose incendiary *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944) indicted "the culture industry"

they observed after fleeing Germany and taking up residence near Los Angeles, California.

On the whole, the Frankfurt School's first generation denounced the unanticipated consequences of modernity—the violent deployment of technology, the calculating and bureaucratic contortion of Enlightenment reason, and the licentious exploitation of workers under increasingly veiled forms of capitalist production. Since the 1940s, several generations of critical theorists have built upon and modernized the ideas of the Frankfurt School. These include Jürgen Habermas, leader of the second generation, who carried on the school's legacy in an era deeply preoccupied with the radical democratization of society through social movements.

Because Habermas is concerned with democratic engagement, his thinking has been taken up by social work scholars in the last 25 years. Notable examples include Henkel's (1995) caution about the danger of an "aspiration to consensus" in the Habermasian ideal speech situation; Blaug's (1995) concern about colonization in social work communication; Ashenden's (2004) use of Habermas to understand "crises of legitimation" in child welfare practice in the UK; and Houston's summative review of key Habermasian concepts (2013).

Like Freud, whose ideas traversed the Enlightenment and Romantic eras, Habermas is something of a transitional figure between modernity and postmodernity. With Marx, Weber, and Marcuse, Habermas shares a critique of technical or instrumental rationality, positivism, bureaucracy, capitalism, ideology, and domination. With Foucault, Lacan, and Derrida, Habermas recognizes the importance of language and meaning-making. What distinguishes Habermas from classical and contemporary social theorists alike is that he retains a belief in political consensus forged on the basis of collectively negotiated and legitimated values. In short, Habermas seeks to salvage the Enlightenment project—human emancipation through reason, law, and justice—by wresting reason from the lair of the technical and bureaucratic and uniting it with language and the realm of sensual, interpretive, lived experience. In my view, Habermas' reconciliation of Enlightenment reason and postfoundational critique could offer social work practical and conceptual strategies for resisting repression within and beyond the profession.

To sharpen the contours of Habermas' thinking, I first compare and contrast his views with those of Foucault, Marx, Weber, Marcuse, and with contemporary theorist Wendy Brown. After a brief review of foundational theories culminating in the Foucauldian idea of governmentality, I take up three of Habermases' ideas—*system and lifeworld*, *legitimation crisis*, and *communicative action*—and argue that these ideas could enliven social work's response to the global phenomenon of neoliberal rationality.

## Review: Structuralism vs. Poststructuralism

Although social work has incorporated "critical theory" into its lexicon (Fook, 2003; Healy, 2001; Pease & Fook, 1999), some scholars have lamented the imprecision with which this term is used. For example, Gray and Webb (2009) have characterized some critical social work as "largely impressionistic, with the [use] of the term 'critical' being casual and loose" (p. 78). It is fair to say that critical social work has struggled to reconcile, in the words of Wendy Brown (2016), an "indispensable but non-trivial incongruence in the formulations of power, of agency, of truth, and of historical change" between theories that derive from Marxist vs. Foucauldian thinking.

To her credit, Jan Fook acknowledged in early work that attempts to unite "structural" and "poststructural" perspectives under the banner "postmodern critical social work" (Pease & Fook, 1999) were fraught with epistemological and methodological challenges:

[C]urrently it is possible to identify two major perspectives in critical social work that can roughly be differentiated as the structural and poststructural. In broad terms the former is based on Marxist analysis...emphasizing the role of social structure in the determination of class and power differences. The latter approach tends to incorporate more Foucauldian analysis...which involves recognizing more personal, dynamic, and multiple ways in which power differences are created and maintained...[I]t is worthwhile noting that each perspective entails quite divergent implications regarding the nature of knowledge and knowledge creation. (2003, p. 125)

As Habermas occupies a territory between structuralism and poststructuralism, and as these terms continue to create more confusion than clarity, these divergent implications deserve further scrutiny. First, we must consider whether Marx and Foucault merit these characterizations at all.

### *Structuralism*

To begin, Foucault's analyses of the origins of modern medicine, psychiatry, and systems of classification in *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963/1973), *The Order of Things* (1966/1970), and *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969/1972), though widely debated, are often considered "high structuralist" (Elliot, 2009). Although they are unwilling to call Foucault a structuralist, Dreyfus and Rabinow allow that Foucault's attempt in the *The Birth of the Clinic* "to find the silent structure which sustains practices, discourse, perceptual experience (the gaze), as well as the knowing subject and its objects" indeed "represents Foucault's extreme swing towards structuralism" (1983, p. 15). Thus, Foucault's early work can perhaps be considered "holistically" versus "atomistically" structuralist (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983).

Within social theory, structuralism *per se* is typically associated with de Saussure and later Barthes and Levi-Strauss, whose work sought to examine the linguistic rules governing language and speech (or food, or fashion). In Fook's quote, above, Marxist analysis is considered structuralist, but mainly in opposition to poststructuralist. This is an ironic conceit à la Saussure, who maintained that meaning is always forged through the difference or opposition between signifiers.

In this case, the immense impact of cultural studies, which retooled essentialist and vanguardist Marxist assumptions about power, agency, truth, and historical change (cf. Grossberg, Nelson, & Treichler, 1993; Hall, Held, Hubert, & Thompson, 1996) and achieved a durable, nuanced, and historical materialist but postfoundational version of Marxism, is ignored. Having said that, it is important to acknowledge that French post-Marxism made important contributions to structural Marxism, notably, the idea that the state rather than the bourgeoisie reproduces capitalism in its legal, economic, and political institutions or "ideological state apparatuses" (Althusser,

1971). In sum, Marxism is not a monolithic category belonging exclusively to the domain of structuralism, nor is Foucault exclusively a poststructuralist.

### *Poststructuralism*

Moving on with amplification of the structural/post-structural binary, poststructuralism is typically associated with the continental philosophy of Lacan, Derrida, Kristeva and others who pushed the limits of structuralism by questioning the immediacy of meaning inherent in sign-signifier pairings. As Anthony Elliot (2009) describes succinctly, Lacan argued that meaning is always suspended, whereas Derrida argued that the “absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification indefinitely,” (p. 92). In other words, meaning derives from a potentially eternal play of signs and signifiers and extends beyond the closed and purportedly stable system of sign-signifier proposed by structuralism to wider political and cultural social phenomena like gender and race.

In the past 30 years, variations of deconstruction have been taken up widely by feminist, queer, and postcolonial scholars to reveal the latent contradictions present in unstable signifiers like “woman,” for example. In the process, scholars too numerous to cite have followed on early attempts to de-center categories like identity and nationality (Bhabha, 1994); the colonial subject (Spivak, 1988); and gender (Butler, 1990, 1991, 1993, 2004; Cixous, 1981).

Returning for a moment to the characterization of Foucault’s concept of power as “personal” in the above quote about critical social work, one might argue that *Marx* rather than Foucault entertained something akin to notion of personal power in the 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte: “Men [sic] make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past” (Marx, 1852, p. 6). In this sentiment, Marx both grants and checks individual agency against the historical materialist forces of production. To the contrary, and this is central to my argument against neoliberal governmentality, while Foucault’s idea of governmentality describes “the ways in which one might

be urged and educated to bridle one's own passions, to control one's own instincts, to govern oneself" (Rose, 1999, p. 3), his reliance on discourse diminishes human agency.

As Elliot maintains about Foucault's theory of sexuality, perhaps Foucault's most poststructural work,

[I]t is discourse which produces human experience rather than experience (individual dispositions, emotional desires, personal biographies) producing discourse. The strength of Foucault's position is that he underlines the extent to which individuals, in defining themselves as sexual subjects, become fixed in relation to symbolic discourses and social prohibitions. The making of sexual identities, says Foucault, is always interwoven with a mode of social control. However, the weakness of this standpoint is that it bypasses the complexity of individual agency. Thus, Foucault's work often implies a one-way movement of power over and above the individual. (2009, p. 86)

Although the notion of capillary power for which Foucault has become known may suggest a kind of personal power, it would perhaps be more accurate to say that Foucault's rendering of power is more nuanced and less unidirectionally freighted than structural-functionalist versions of power. However, it is a version of power nonetheless constrained by discourse, which I will argue limits its utility for praxis.

## Habermas' Contributions to Critical Theory

### *Rational or Instrumental Action*

To understand Habermas' conceptual revision to classical social theory, we must first review the notion of rational or instrumental action—that is, action undertaken explicitly to reach a desired end. As Habermas (1987) argues in *Theory of Communicative Action*, Durkheim, Marx, and Weber, to varying degrees, ignore or misconstrue potential sources of liberation and mass resistance in late modernity, as against "traditional," pre-industrial society.

The counter-Enlightenment that set in immediately after the French Revolution grounded a critique of modernity that has since branched off in different directions. Their common denominator is the conviction that loss of meaning [Weber], anomie [Durkheim], and alienation [Marx]—the pathologies of bourgeois society, indeed of posttraditional society generally—can be traced back to the rationalization of the lifeworld itself. (p. 148)

According to Habermas, orthodox Marxism subsumed reason within instrumental action, dismissing any emancipatory potential it offered. Moreover, historical materialism relegated all liberation to the realm of material production, thereby ignoring the role of the lifeworld, a concept to which I will return. Similarly, Durkheim lamented the loss of cohesion in anomic (post-traditional) society, but he underestimated the role that reason could play in negotiating shared meaning and values. And finally, according to Habermas, Weber conflates reason with technocratic rationality and loss of meaning. Chronicling the historical process by which the rationalized worldview of Puritans came to dominate modern society, Weber describes an “iron cage” of Fordist production and bureaucratic rationality.

The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so. For when asceticism was carried out of monastic cells into everyday life, and began to dominate worldly morality, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order. This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which to-day determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition, with irresistible force. (1930, p. 181)

Chiefly, Habermas takes issue with Weber’s gloomy conclusion: that rationalization means an iron cage from which there is no escape. He also admonishes Weber for failing to demonstrate how Western rationality can be seen as universal. In practice, Habermas introduces his own notions of rationalization, insisting that the imperatives of “functionalist systems maintenance” rather than “instrumental reason gone wild” are more to account for the particular ways rationalized values get superimposed onto peoples’ psyches and wills. Habermas’ notions of

social evolution through system and lifeworld will further explicate his critiques of Durkheim, Mead, Marx, and Weber.

### *System and Lifeworld*

In *Volume II of the Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas describes the fundamental problem of social theory with which theorists have been grappling since Marx: "...how to connect in a satisfactory way the two conceptual strategies indicated by the notions of 'system' and 'lifeworld'" (1987, p. 151). In this quote, Habermas is suggesting that a theory of society which fails to appreciate both material and symbolic reproduction, and indeed structure and agency, is fundamentally constrained in its explanatory power.

The lifeworld, in Habermas' view, "preserves and transmits the interpretive work of preceding generations. It forms the symbolic space...within which cultural tradition, social integration, and personal identity are sustained and reproduced" (Thompson, 1983, p. 285). In contrast, the systems which maintain society and reproduce its "material substrata" are collectively known as "the system." The internal logic of the system is calculated self-interest, power, and profit. By contrast, the lifeworld is the realm of day-to-day life apart from the narrow interests of organizations and institutions. It is the realm of language and meaning; identity and embodiment; love, sensuality, and altruism; and social and cultural values.

David Ingram (1987) explains that the lifeworld is divided into private and public sectors. The nuclear family, in Habermas's thinking, serves an important function with regard to socialization and intimacy and makes up the core of the private sector. The public sector includes a "network of cultural institutions in which public opinion is shaped and social identity cultivated" (pp. 149–150). Importantly, the public sector of the lifeworld fosters "social dialogue necessary for generating the shared values and interests that undergird social integration" (1987, pp. 149–150).

Before going further, it is necessary to acknowledge criticism of this heuristic bifurcation in Habermas' thinking. Feminist political theorists (e.g., Fraser, 1990) have questioned the masculinist idealization of bourgeois public sphere in

Habermas' system/lifeworld dichotomy. Others (Ingram, 1987) have pointed out the deeply problematic reinscription of a widely discredited public/private split which effectively ignores the profoundly gendered and material functions of the family and at the same time underestimates the symbolic reproductive functions of employers in the paid segment of the labor force. Ingram provides a distinction that is helpful in considering the ideas of system and lifeworld: "It might be best, then, to think of lifeworld and system as relating to logically distinct functions that overlap within institutions" (1987, p. 116). This corrective allows us to theorize the conjoined aspects of carework and domestic labor, for example, as both intimate and economic, personal and political.

Perhaps the pivotal idea on which the system and lifeworld distinction turns is something Habermas refers to as "colonization of the lifeworld." It is the recognition that the lifeworld cannot be conceptualized exclusively in instrumentally rational terms without grave, socially "pathological consequences." When the system oversteps its "mediating roles and penetrate[s] those spheres of the lifeworld which are responsible for cultural transmission," (Ingram, 1987, p. 385) inner colonization, or rationalization, of the lifeworld results. Writes Habermas, "Deformations of the lifeworld take the form of reification of communicative relations." He goes on to describe the consequences: "Spheres of action of employees and of consumers, of citizens, and of clients of state bureaucracies" become thoroughly monetarized and bureaucratized (1987, p. 386). This is the pathological condition of technocratic domination in late modern society, a phenomenon which has been described elsewhere as neoliberalism.

Take, for example, the striking parallels between colonization of the lifeworld and Brown's (2005) description of neoliberal rationality, which is worth quoting at length:

Neoliberal rationality, while foregrounding the market, is not only or even primarily focused on the economy; it involves extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action, even as the market itself remains a distinctive player...The political sphere, along with every other dimension of contemporary existence, is submitted to an economic rationality; or, put the other way around, not only is the human being configured exhaustively as *homo*

*œconomicus*, but all dimensions of human life are cast in terms of a market rationality. (p. 40)

The crucial distinction between the account of monetarization and bureaucratization offered by Brown, which relies on Foucault's idea of governmentality, versus the account offered by Habermas, which posits colonization of the lifeworld, is the submerged element of *agency*.

Brown goes on to describe the way in which neoliberal governmentality subjects "every action and policy to considerations of profitability...conducted according to a calculus of utility, benefit, or satisfaction against a microeconomic grid of scarcity, supply and demand, and moral value-neutrality" (p. 40). By contrast, Habermas is quick to point out that while class conflict has been institutionalized in late modernity and classes mollified, his notion of system and lifeworld actually predicts "new" antagonisms not organized along class lines:

The fact that in welfare state mass democracies class conflict has been institutionalized and thereby pacified does not mean that protest potential has been altogether put to rest. But the potentials for protest emerge now along different lines of conflict—just where we would expect them to emerge if the thesis of the colonization of the lifeworld were correct...The new problems have to do with quality of life, equal rights, individual self-realization, participation, and human rights. (1987, p. 392)

While not entirely autonomous, the lifeworld, as a concept, contains the nucleus of potential political action. It allows subjects a measure of sovereignty, a kind of counter-rationality against the relentless economization and bureaucratization of life. While Habermas' notion of the lifeworld is admittedly too unified, idealized, and binarized, it nonetheless provides an epistemological archipelago, not unlike a collective "self-observing ego" or a political "wise mind." Through communicative action, the next topic of this essay, publics can theoretically consolidate and promote shared values generated within the lifeworld—values like love, justice, and care—and mobilize these ethics to oppose the colonization of the lifeworld by the system.

*Critical Consciousness and Communicative Action*

Embedded in Habermas' idea of the rationalization of the lifeworld is the concept of *communicative action*. Through *legitimation crisis*, in which publics lose confidence in leaders, institutions, or administrative functions, rational subjects become aware of, or "thematize" their location within problematic social relations and display their opposition by organizing and protesting politically or by otherwise expressing their discontent. According to Habermas, through reason and communication—that is, self-reflexivity and engagement in public discourse—late modern subjects can and do defy the full colonization of the lifeworld. In the U.S., recent examples include mass protest of the Trump administration's travel ban on Muslim countries; local, state, and federal opposition and outright refusal to enact draconian immigration and healthcare policies; the largest one-day public demonstration in the history of the U.S. in the women's march; and recent groundbreaking elections of women and people of color in the 2018 mid-term elections.

Returning for a moment to classical Marxist thought, we see that Habermas differs appreciably from Marx in his emphasis on both symbolic and material production. This allows Habermas to make sense of social movements organized along the lines of identity rather than class-based antagonism, as social movements which are not labor-based—and thus *system*-based—arise in resistance to the system domination of the lifeworld but along different vectors of oppression than those conceptualized by Marx.

Moreover, recently thematized arenas of concern make visible problematic social relations which were tacitly condoned by an orthodox Marxist embrace of positivism in promoting "scientific socialism." These include indigenous communities' environmental resistance to continuing expropriation of land by the oil industry; radical intellectual disability scholarship that embraces the notion of "animacy" for people labelled with intellectual disability (Chen, 2012); and queer and transgender erosion of a stubbornly persistent gender binary. In recognizing the liberatory potential of crises of legitimation organized around identity and group-based rights, Habermas is more closely aligned with Marcuse's theory of one dimensionality, which I will now review briefly so as to delineate the contours

of Habermas' arguments. In the final section of the paper, I will consider the potential of Habermas' thinking for social work.

*Marcuse and One Dimensional Man*

Akin to Habermas' inner colonization of the lifeworld is Marcuse's theory of one-dimensionality. Marcuse, who fled Nazi Germany and engaged in anti-fascist work in the U.S. from 1942 until the early 1950s, held that in the advanced industrial societies of the mid-twentieth century, "a comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom prevails...a token of technical progress" (Marcuse, 1964, p. 1). In such a society, and owing to the seemingly neutral operationalization of the scientific method, needs become homogenized to such an extent that people are unaware that they are unhappy with structures of wealth inequality and corporate dominance, for example. Moreover, technological rationality and mass production work to contain antagonisms by appropriating any revolutionary tendencies that might arise. Thus, little difference exists between the quantitative dimensions of life (the *system* in Habermas' thinking) and sensual satisfaction (an element of the *lifeworld*).

According to Marcuse, modern forms of social organization, in creating and meeting the material needs of the populous, rob people of the capacity for critical theorizing and constrain the "negative dialectic." "Independence of thought, autonomy, and the right to political opposition are being deprived of their basic critical function in a society which seems increasingly capable of satisfying the needs of individuals through the way in which it is organized" (1964, p. 1). Through the rationalization of all spheres of life, only the given, "objectively" determined reality exists. Thus, subjects are stripped of their subjectivity. Knowledge of oneself as part of a political and economic structure, and as an object of positivist science, is collapsed.

According to Marcuse, in late modernity, certain features of late industrial society—centralized economic planning, the automation of labor, the bureaucratization of all spheres of life, and the standardization and mass production of the culture industry—all combine to subdue citizen protest. "With the increasing concentration and effectiveness of economic, political, and cultural controls, the opposition in all these fields has been

pacified, co-ordinated, or liquidated" (1964, p. xxiv). People become one-dimensional, incapable of self-reflection and thus incapable of instigating meaningful social change.

Among critical theorists, Marcuse may be read as generally more resigned to the notion of pervasive false consciousness, which he refers to as "happy consciousness," a thin veil of pseudo-contentment which conceals deeper class unrest and potential political rupture. Updating Marcuse's work from the 1950s, advisedly, we might say late modern subjects under the reign of corporate oligarchy have become time-fixated, sound-bite saturated, socially media(ted) consumers who document life in a series of selfies and Tweets, between increasingly long and intrusive hours of work. Preoccupied by Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram, they pose only insignificant threats to the social order, so consumed are they with economic survival after decades of declining real wages and ever widening economic inequality (Reich, 2010). Self-celebration through social media is the new token economy in which the promise of "going viral" serves to quell outright political and economic unrest.

Despite pessimism about the persistence of false consciousness, Marcuse is somewhat more optimistic about liberation through what he calls "non-repressive desublimation," the process by which modern subjects forge a critical dialectic that interrogates the one-dimensional conformity of consumption and repression. Just as Freud postulated that sublimation allowed civilization to exist by siphoning off libidinal and aggressive impulses through creative and philosophic expression, Marcuse holds that "autonomous art," which was imbued with a critical sensibility toward conformity, could unfetter the political libido of 1950s America.

While Marcuse posits "the Great Refusal" of the status quo through avant garde or "autonomous" art, Habermas believes that a new consciousness can arise from a new form of action which is not fundamentally instrumental and rational. Through *communicative action*, publics can critically evaluate the deleterious effects of modernity while retaining certain beneficial elements of rationality, but a form of rationality that is based in the sensual embodied and daily experience of the lifeworld—not altogether different from Marcuse's embrace of desire as the basis of art. Marcuse concludes *One-Dimensional Man* (1964) with a

call to discard false consciousness through the embrace of reason not unlike the reason embraced by Habermas in his theory of communicative action. Both essentially call on citizens to embrace "Reason...[which] promote[s] the Art of life." In short, like Habermas and other critical theorists, Marcuse urges the developmental of a new kind of reason not conflated with the deleterious effects of technological rationality, but rather, with critical thinking and ultimate liberation. This is the sort of thinking I believe we need, pressingly, in social work.

## Habermas's Contribution to Social Work

Thus far in this essay, I have reviewed three central Habermasian ideas: system and lifeworld, legitimation crisis, and communicative action. I will now apply these concepts to social work and suggest, provisionally and advisedly, how social work as a project and social workers as citizen-workers can: (1) resist the technicization of social work practice, policy, and research; (2) democratize citizen/clients by leveraging legitimation crises; and (3) catalyze communicative action in communities.

### *Colonization of the Lifeworld by the System, Redux*

To understand the technicization of social work, we must review Habermas' idea of the colonization of the lifeworld by the system. Habermas conceives "of societies simultaneously as systems and lifeworlds" (Habermas, 1989a, p. 118). Let us first discuss the lifeworld.

*The Lifeworld.* Borrowing from Husserl, Habermas describes the lifeworld as the social "horizon within which communicative actions are 'always already' moving" (Habermas, 1987, p. 119). He says that "language and culture are constitutive for the lifeworld itself" (Habermas, 1987, p. 125) and goes on to describe the ways in which lifeworlds shape and are shaped by social actors in a dialectical feedback loop of structure and agency.

Like poststructuralists, Habermas recognizes that language/culture does not merely *reflect* reality but actively *constitutes* it. Perhaps he would even agree with the poststructuralist insight that language is a series of arbitrary signs and signifiers with no transcendental signified. That is to say that within sign/signifier

pairs, there can never be a stable or fixed meaning with which all human subjects would agree. Indeed, there remains the possibility that a given connotation will be appropriated and re-inflected to serve a political or economic interest. For example, *social justice* cleaves consistently to no intrinsic political essence. One has only to search YouTube to find video after video featuring the right wing insult du jour, *social justice warrior*, aimed at sanctimonious progressives.

The mechanics of meaning aside, in focusing *not on the text that is produced but rather, on its production*, Habermas underscores the importance of praxis. He posits that the *activity of communicating*, which requires modern subjects to referee reality literally hundreds of times each day, is the very basis of consensus in democracy. Within a functioning, robust lifeworld, publics can negotiate an acceptable working version of consensus. In short, they can govern themselves:

The structures of the lifeworld lay down the forms of the intersubjectivity of possible understanding. The lifeworld is, so to speak, the transcendental site where speaker and hearer meet, where they can reciprocally raise claims that their utterances fit the world (objective, social, and subjective), and where they can criticize and confirm those validity claims, settle their disagreements, and arrive at agreements. (Habermas, 1987, p. 126)

Habermas does not succumb to postmodern skepticism about modern subjects' abilities to articulate shared human values. In a post-truth epoch, this belief seems almost radical. Indeed, according to Habermas, the challenge to lifeworlds is not that posed by the displacement of the grand narratives of truth, justice, and freedom under postmodernism. Rather, it is the challenge of regulating society through markets and bureaucracies, to which we now turn.

*The System.* As lifeworlds grow more complex, they enlist "steering media" to organize their day-to-day functions. These steering media, notably money and power in post-agrarian societies, are enlisted to coordinate political and economic activity and comprise the system in Habermas' thinking. The system holds "a purposive-rational attitude toward calculable amounts of value...while bypassing processes of consensus-oriented

communication” (Habermas, 1987, p. 183). Unlike the lifeworld, the system is not governed by consensus. In fact, Habermas contends that the twin logics of marketization and bureaucratization actively undermine democratic consensus:

Between capitalism and democracy there is an indissoluble tension; in them two opposed principles of societal integration compete for primacy. If we look at the self-understanding expressed in the basic principles of democratic constitutions, modern societies assert the primacy of a lifeworld in relation to the subsystems separated out of its institutional orders...On the other hand...the propelling mechanism of the economic system has to be kept as free as possible from lifeworld restrictions...The internal systemic logic of capitalism [is that its needs will be met], if need be, even at the cost of technicizing the lifeworld. (Habermas, 1987, p. 345)

“Technicization” of the lifeworld is what Habermas means when he refers to its “colonization,” a state that occurs when “the imperatives of autonomous subsystems” (bureaucracies and markets) “make their way into the lifeworld from the outside—like colonial masters coming into a tribal society” and forcing “assimilation” (Habermas, 1987, p. 355). Under the reign of technicization, human interactions and activities are submitted to a thoroughgoing assessment of their efficiency and effectiveness. In social life, a means-ends rationality subsumes considerations based on kindness, love, fairness, or altruism.

### *Resisting Technicization: Implications for Social Work*

Applied to organizations and sub-systems which comprise the social work field (e.g., welfare, child welfare, health, mental health, justice, disability, education), the consequences of technicization, or colonization, are grim. In this circumstance, “Efficiency overrides all other values, such as justice, honesty, fairness, and mutual consent” (Bausch, 1997, p. 323). The people who work within these systems “lack vitality in their lifeworlds...lose contact with their cultural traditions...lack a sense of personal and social meaning...[and] feel ineffective.” In short, they become Weber’s (1930) iron cage bureaucrats: “specialists without spirit” and “sensualists without heart” (Bausch, 1997, p. 323).

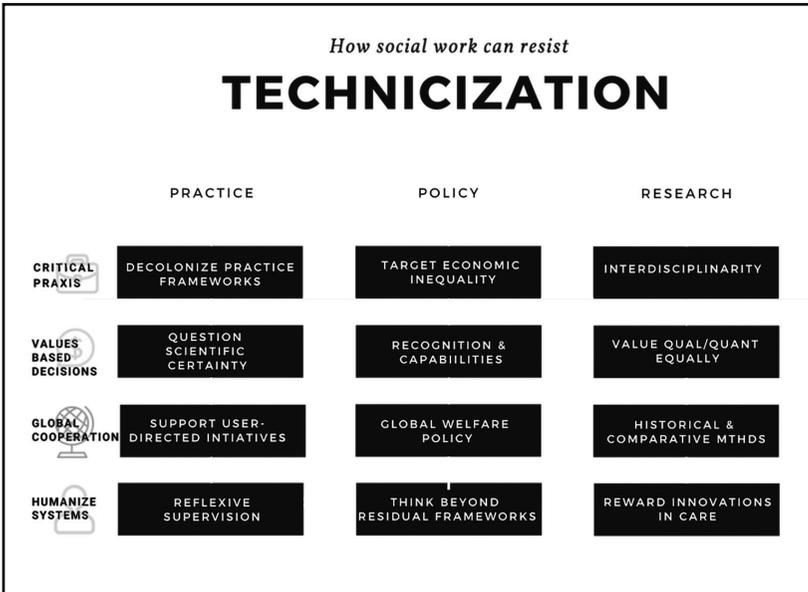
In Figure 1, I suggest heuristic applications of these ideas to social work practice, policy, and research. These are by no means exhaustive and are open to interpretation, reinvention, and improvement. However, to resist technicization of the life-world, social work might embrace the following four principles: *critical praxis*, *values-based decisionmaking*, *global cooperation*, and *systems humanization*. By critical praxis, I mean an orientation to social work guided by critical theory in which social work practitioners and researchers “seek to produce practical, pragmatic knowledge that is cultural and structural, judged by its degree of historical situatedness and its ability to produce praxis or action” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 160).

By values-based decisionmaking, I am suggesting that social work practitioners and scholars scrutinize the seductions of this particular moment, like faith in scientific or actuarial certainty. This includes a broad range of considerations: regarding neuroimaging as the most promising approach to mental health research; to the ubiquitous rankings and ratings of schools, programs, and scholars; to the pervasive seductions of criminalization, professionalization, and neoliberal marketization (Mehrotra et al., 2016).

As a hedge on policy and practice insularity, I maintain that U.S. social work should continue to nurture meaningful global collaborations and explicitly support historical and comparative research. Finally, I suggest that social work should promote an ethic of care in its systems and institutions. This would require high quality supervision and mass resistance to Fordist-derived production principles applied to human need. Following are more in-depth examples of these activities.

Reading across the first row, if social work adopted a *critical praxis* perspective, one practice implication is the use of decolonizing or anti-oppressive practice (AOP) frameworks. Anti-oppressive practice is “a social justice-based, anti-discriminatory approach to social work in the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and other European countries” not yet widely adopted in the U.S. (Morgaine & Capous-Desyllas, 2015, p. 24). Informed by feminist, queer, anti-racist and other critical theoretical traditions that attend to the distribution of power in societies, AOP “addresses social divisions and structural inequalities in the work that is done with people whether they be users (‘clients’) or workers” (Dominelli, 1996, p. 170).

Figure 1: How Social Work Can Resist Technicization



Although anti-oppressive and decolonizing frameworks invite scrutiny of micro-focused interventions rooted in individualizing biomedical formulations that are exclusively premised on positivist ideals, they do not entrain a reflexive rejection of evidence-based practice. Rather, clinical social workers practicing from an anti-oppressive practice stance, for example, could make an explicit commitment to select therapeutic interventions with demonstrated effectiveness among marginalized and historically underrepresented service users. For example, when serving Asian men, who contend with high rates of mental health stigma (Livingston et al., 2018) and treatment disparities (Abe Kim et al., 2007), social workers might adopt the fourth wave CBT *Acceptance and Commitment Therapy*, which has shown promise of cultural relevance and treatment efficacy with this group (Nagayama Hall, Hong, Zane, & Meyer, 2011).

In the policy arena, social workers would center meaningful efforts to eradicate economic inequality. After a half century of social science research, we know that poverty and economic inequality, much of it due to ongoing colonial and carceral

processes like slavery and settler colonialism, are at the root of health disparities, child maltreatment rates, and educational disparities (Gil, 2013), to name just a few sequelae of an economic order buttressed by the gendered and racialized maldistribution of resources. A critical praxis approach to policy would resist the liberal welfare state status quo in which structural inequalities are displaced onto individuals through stigmatizing, pathologizing practices (Bryson, 2016).

Finally, if social work embraced critical praxis, it would seek *interdisciplinary collaboration* as a way to interrogate taken-for-granted conceptions of health, violence, and disability, for example. Engagement with other disciplines, especially newly emerging disciplines like critical disability, could trouble some of social work's assumptions about psychiatric disability and neurodiversity, which are reinscribed in current social work scholarship/research, pedagogy, and accreditation standards around professional suitability, sensory capacities in the classroom, and social/interpersonal skills.

Reading down the first column of Figure 1, resisting technization of social work practice would invite us to *question the scientific certainty* of this era's scientific truths like biomedicalization, neuropsychiatry, psychopharmacology, actuarial risk assessment, and genetic engineering. As mentioned, we would "challenge the notion that the solutions reside solely in the state or the science" (Mehrotra et al., 2016, p. 159).

Continuing down the first column, in keeping with a desire to *support user-directed initiatives and actions*, we might forthrightly acknowledge that all social work relationships are embedded in a complex web of intersectional and structural realities that profoundly able-ize, racialize, normalize, and class and gender the intersubjective space between social worker and citizen. Using Habermasian insights about the lifeworld, we could identify and subvert those discursive and institutional practices that monetize and financialize every aspect of our and service users' waking and sleeping hours. As a profession, we would refuse the colonial logic of the inquisition in our dealings with service users and work to dismantle institutional processes of surveillance in favor of co-constructing rather than extracting narratives deployed to gain access to services or resources.

Finally, as professionals, we might engage in *reflexive supervision* and forego our preoccupation with professional conventions, often borrowed from professions like psychiatry, psychology, and public health, which embody no particular commitment to social justice nor to fundamental social change. We would perhaps begin to imagine, with uninhibited creativity, ways of being professional that do not reinscribe a subject-object split between ourselves and service users.

*Democratizing Citizen/clients by Leveraging Legitimation Crises*

While I've hinted at the next implication of Habermasian thinking for social work, I wish to make explicit the need for social work to appreciate the submerged or invisibilized citizen in every patient or client. If we take an example from the current moment, the Trump presidency represents the legitimation crisis of global neoliberalism and its turn toward regressive nationalism. On the other hand, the Trump presidency has itself produced a legitimation crisis across the globe, an unprecedented in vivo test of liberal democracy's mettle. Evidence of legitimation crises can be found in public protest, among other things.

If we look solely at protest, the election of Donald Trump spawned the largest single-day mass protest (The Women's March) in U.S. history, drawing somewhere between 3,267,134 and 5,246,670 protesters, more than twice the entire combined U.S. military (Chenoweth & Pressman, 2017). Following Habermas' logic, the self-reflexivity present in the lifeworld catalyzed this growing crisis of legitimation. In other words, given the link between the lifeworld and carework, paid and unpaid, it is not an accident that the largest march was a women's march. The lifeworld sustains us, and at least on occasion, it resists ruthless and craven, rationalized and official misogyny. Whether we can nourish ongoing protest remains an unanswered question of our era.

As for social work's role in nourishing and protecting the lifeworld, Habermas is fairly unequivocal that welfare states "grant a degree of need gratification to capitalism's underprivileged" and in so doing, "make the capitalistic system secure amid the conditions of radical social inequality" (Bausch, 1997, p. 322). About the welfare state's "clients," Habermas writes,

“Clients are customers who enjoy the rewards of the welfare state; the client role is a companion piece that makes political participation that has been evaporated into an abstraction and robbed of its effectiveness acceptable” (1987, p. 350).

To counter the neutralization of the citizen role and the concurrent expansion of the client role in late modernity, social work could incorporate social and political action into all encounters and social work interventions—not just community organizing or other macro-focused activities. Each time social work frames a problem in terms of individual responsibility or pathology, promotes the language of client/consumer, or fails to attend to the larger structural forces shaping people’s lives and the very worker-citizen relationship, it contributes to the evaporation of political participation among the citizenry. If social work cannot resist biomedicalization, neoliberalization, and professionalization, how is it different from psychology, nursing, or other health professions?

In her book on cultural citizenship and immigrant community identity development, Hye-Kyung Kang (2010) identifies multi-level interventions which encourage immigrant subjects to generate counter-discourses of citizenship by taking part in political action (along with traditional counseling, for example). The particular political action may vary. However, to resuscitate liberal democracy, social work should examine the ways in which it unwittingly contributes, through naturalized professional practices, to the denaturalization of citizens.

### *Catalyzing Communicative Action*

Finally, I wish to consider the implications of communicative action for social work. In the *Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas (1987) explains,

Communicative action relies on a cooperative process of interpretation in which participants relate simultaneously to something in the objective, the social, and the subjective worlds...Coming to an understanding [Verständigung] means that participants in communication reach an agreement [Einigung] concerning the validity of an utterance; agreement [Einverständnis] is the intersubjective recognition of the validity claim the speaker raises for it. (p. 120)

At few junctures in U.S. history has an electorate been so bitterly divided and so unwilling to grant the “validity of an utterance” to a person of the opposite political party. In my mind, this signals the need to attempt even potentially futile macrolevel efforts to bring together factions and publics to sustain reasoned dialogue. William Scheuerman offers an important apologetic for critics who have dismissed the Habermasian idea of communicative action as naïve with regard to power:

For Habermas, if we interpret democracy as a way of life where people make binding decisions based on arguments, we need to grasp how deliberation works, and how best to delineate reasonable and legitimate from unreasonable and illegitimate public exchange. Real-life democracy hardly looks like the idealized communication community Habermas describes. Yet absent some sense of that ideal community, we can neither distinguish manufactured from independent public opinion, nor deepen democracy. (2017, para. 13)

If we consider the cadre of trained social workers, a legion of more than 649,300 communication technologists (Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, 2017), we immediately see the potential for social workers to become leaders in the promotion of communicative rationality, citizen subjects, and political consensus, not just microlevel therapy and ongoing welfare state bureaucracy. One promising strategy is intergroup dialogue, “a public process designed to involve individuals and groups in an exploration of societal issues such as politics, racism, religion, and culture that are often flashpoints for polarization and social conflict” (Dessel, Rogge, & Garlington (2006, p. 303). Dessel et al., conclude that while ongoing research is needed to establish the efficacy of intergroup dialogue in promoting behaviors and social change, existing “evidence appears sufficient to warrant social workers’ investment in exploring the approach” (2006, p. 306).

And here, I would push the implication of communicative action to its dialectic edge: Adopting an anti-oppressive practice stance is not enough. Arguing in agency or faculty meetings about how to decolonize social work or how best to center racial equity is certainly a beginning. However, for communicative action to repair fissures in the lifeworld, it must move beyond

rhetoric and beyond the academy. It must move *away* from a stance of “innocence” and *toward* engagement with family members, conservatives, and colleagues who are less “woke.” It must step into the void of democratic consensus and take up residence there, knitting communities together until they are familiar neighbors who remain in relationship despite perhaps fundamental and irreconcilable disagreement about the nature and function of the nation state, social entitlements, freedom, and power.

*Conclusion: Critical Theory in These Times*

In the conclusion to her essay on neoliberalism and the end of democracy, Wendy Brown (2005) calls for the Left to challenge neoliberal governmentality “with an alternative vision of the good, one that rejects *homo oeconomicus* as the norm of the human” (p. 59). Her goals are modest but profound: “In its barkest form, this would be a vision in which justice would center not on maximizing individual wealth or rights but on developing and enhancing the capacity of citizens to share power and hence to collaboratively govern themselves” (p. 59).

In my mind, neoliberal governmentality provides the diagnosis but not the cure and cannot meaningfully provide a vision of shared power or collective governance. Its main epistemological foreclosure is that it relies on discourse, and, as we have seen, in Foucault’s formulation “it is discourse which produces human experience rather than experience ... producing discourse” (Elliot, 2009, p. 86). By contrast, and through my avowedly heuristic interpretation, the Habermasian notion of lifeworld reverses this prescription so that human experience becomes the ground of discourse. In this vision, political discourse is inaugurated by lived, embodied, human actors whose deliberative democracy is enlivened by passion and logic, reason and emotion.

In this essay, I have argued that revisiting critical theory in its original instance could move U.S. social work closer to an engagement with liberal democracy, whose prognosis and vital signs remain unstable at this time. The contributions of Jürgen Habermas and the Frankfurt School could inspire social work to embrace a version of reason in this historical moment which

challenges the means-ends calculus of late advanced capitalism and the unremitting monetarization and bureaucratization of work and life. In reclaiming the metaphoric potential of system and lifeworld, legitimation crisis, and communicative action, social work could seize opportunities for radical resistance at a moment in which the typically obfuscated state sanction of greed, avarice, and vice have been made legible to an entire globe. Finally, Habermas and the Frankfurt School could assist social work in its ongoing struggle to unite interpretation and empiricism and to emancipate the “critical soul of science” and the “scientific soul of criticism,” (Held, 1980, p. 250) which is perhaps *the* task of this modern century.

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