1. Introduction

This chapter begins with some reconstruction of Habermas’s earlier works on the public sphere and legitimacy since a critical theory based on rational communication and democratic contestation clearly prefigures the systematic communications-theoretical work he began in the 1970s. Habermas proposed a theory of communicative rationality derived from an amalgam of the social historiography of ideas and normative theory by which he was able to abstract Kantian pragmatics from their historical situatedness and arrive at a theory of rational use of language as a theory of society and democracy where power is legitimated by the discursive challenges mounted by social subjects. The second part of this chapter is a discussion of some of the epistemological and pragmatic-theoretical problems of communicative action. It starts by considering the normative force and theoretical plausibility of the theory of universal pragmatics before proceeding to a discussion of the sociologically significant concept of the lifeworld and the epistemologically marked concept of intersubjectivity. The third part deals with uncertainty and postmetaphysical thinking in examining some of Habermas’s work in the 1990s, primarily Postmetaphysical Thinking (1998a) and Truth and Justification. It will be argued that a theory of uncertain communication can work with detranscendentalized accounts of understanding and interaction. It is further argued that Habermas performs a near-impossible task in seeking to reconcile his postmetaphysical reflections with formal or universal pragmatics and that a truly detranscendentalized account
needs to be given considerable epistemological revision. This revision, in turn, is bound to have an impact on theories of communication. Finally, it needs to be recognized that vast amounts of literature have been devoted to these very issues. However, rather less has been said about more recent work from the perspective of a critique of Habermas's epistemology, and it is hoped that the exploration of uncertainty will challenge a complex of epistemological, logical and interactional assumptions in a new way. It is also hoped that new questions will emerge from a discussion of new theories of logic, semantics and pragmatics, which will provide additional underpinning for a theory of uncertain communication and free communication theory from the leaden weight of universal presuppositions.

2. Modernity and critique

Habermas insists on the differences between modernity as a project and current-day administrative and economic modernization whose imperatives 'increasingly infiltrate the ecology of lifeforms, of the internal communication structure of the lifeworld' (Habermas, 1990a: 40 – my translation). It is particularly important to Habermas to recognize the unfinished reserves of modernity by differentiating it from modernization, just as he had distinguished rationality from rationalization. His fundamental argument is that technical-administrative modernization has become uncoupled from aesthetic modernity:

The multiple motives for ill-feeling and protest emerge where linear modernization, guided by criteria of administrative and economic rationality, penetrates spheres of life which seek out roles of cultural tradition, social integration and education and are therefore guided by different criteria, namely communicative rationality.

(Habermas, 1990a: – my translation)

The innovative potential of modernity is guaranteed by the fact that the project of subject-centred philosophy has taken precisely one route since Hegel. This also means that there is an alternative route which has not yet been explored, and the existence of such an alternative is the proof that modernity contains its own counter-discourse. In view of this, Habermas avoids clinging blindly to the philosophy of the subject and pursues the reconstruction of a rational project