Habermas’s writings comprise an important attempt to retrieve the normative content of self-constitution buried beneath Marx’s notion of self-objectifying subjectivity. Unfortunately, the move from a subject-centred to an intersubjective account of self-constitution leaves labour behind. This, however, creates a tension in Habermas’s account of modernity between the democratic principles of ‘discourse ethics’ and the ‘non-normative’ structures that steer the economy. In this chapter I want to explore this tension in relation to Habermas’s instrumental analysis of labour, beginning with his ‘redemptive critique of Marxism’.1

A redemptive critique of Marx?

In Knowledge and Human Interests (1972), Habermas argues that Marx’s writings contain two competing versions of ‘self-constitution’ – an instrumental one located in the purposive transformation of nature that expresses itself through the forces of production, and a social one located in the relations of production that expresses itself in class struggle. To this extent, argues Habermas, ‘the self-constitution of the species takes place not only in the context of men’s instrumental action upon nature but simultaneously in the dimension of power relations that regulate men’s interaction among themselves’ (Habermas 1972, p. 51). Thus, while the ‘species’ owes its emancipation from ‘external forces of nature’ to the development of ‘technically exploitable knowledge’, it owes its emancipation from ‘the compulsion of inner nature’ to ‘the revolutionary
activity of struggling classes’ (ibid., p. 53). Unfortunately, continues Habermas, Marx tends to subsume the latter within the former to the detriment of labour’s normative content.

This suggests the possibility of reclaiming the normative content of self-constitution buried beneath Marx’s instrumental account of labour. However, rather than attempting to do this on the basis of labour’s subsumption beneath an unaccountable economic system, Habermas argues that labour is an inherently instrumental activity which accounts for the system’s lack of normative content. Thus the more Habermas distances himself from Marx’s writings on class struggle the more he assimilates labour to a ‘production paradigm’ that eschews normative redemption, finally concluding that Marx’s production paradigm ‘screens out of the validity spectrum of reason every dimension except those of truth and efficiency. Accordingly, what is learnt in innerworldly practice can only accumulate in the development of the forces of production. With this productivist conceptual strategy, the normative content of modernity can no longer be grasped …’ (Habermas 1987b, p. 320). Habermas then rejects any attempt to reaffirm the normative content of labour on the grounds that ‘the production and useful employment of products has structure-forming effects only for the metabolic process between human beings and nature …’ (ibid., pp. 80–1). With this Habermas abandons labour to the system on the grounds that an ‘emancipatory perspective’ no longer proceeds ‘from the production paradigm, but from the paradigm of action orientated toward mutual understanding’ (ibid., p. 82).

Although Habermas argues on occasions that Marx ‘unmasked the humanistic self-understanding of modernity by suing for the normative content of bourgeois ideals’ (Habermas 1987b, p. 282), for the most part he views Marx’s ‘revolutionary praxis’ as an atavistic attempt to ‘bring the independent economic process back into the horizon of the lifeworld again, and free the realm of freedom from the dictates of the realm of necessity’ (Habermas 1987a, p. 352). To this end, Marx opposes a pre-capitalist conception of ‘concrete labour’ – grounded in the aesthetic-expressive nature of craftwork – to a capitalized conception of ‘abstract labour’ which is indifferent to ‘the particular kinds of activity as well as to the working individuals and their social situations’ (ibid., p. 341). Habermas criticizes Marx for failing to acknowledge the extent to which capitalism’s