Chapter 4
Society as Lifeworld and System

Drawing on various developments in twentieth-century philosophy and social theory since Weber—the painstaking analysis of language, the culturalist turn of Western Marxism, systems theory—and reflecting on the course of postwar capitalist society, Habermas approaches the issue of social rationalization anew. His social theory culminates in a “dualistic” reconceptualization of contemporary society. As mentioned, in order to comprehend the dynamic of social life, society must be conceived as both a meaningful whole (from the standpoint of the participants) and as a self-maintaining system constituted of subsystems fulfilling various functions (an observer perspective). From the first viewpoint, society is a “lifeworld” in which participants are immersed and which they reproduce in a characteristic way. The coherence of the lifeworld depends on maintaining cultural continuities, sustaining social relations the legitimacy of which is grounded in background assumptions and tested by experience, and the socialization of succeeding generations in such a way that they can construct coherent life histories by participating in social life. Reproduction of the lifeworld therefore revolves around the three structural components of “culture,” “society” (a word Habermas uses in a specific as well as the more familiar general sense), and “personality.”

On the other hand, in order to grasp the functional imperatives necessary for survival, society must be conceived as a self-maintaining system that is integrated through processes that occur “behind the backs” of society’s members. We need both approaches if we are to comprehend the multiple ways in which modern society is reproduced and, thereby, be in a position to trace the contemporary sources of social conflict. Simply, there are two distinct integrative processes of society, “social” and “systemic,” and these two modes of integration are irreducible to each other.

J. F. Sitton, Habermas and Contemporary Society
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In order to formulate his own theory of cultural and social rationalization Habermas employs a conception of society as a lifeworld. The “lifeworld” is another key concept of twentieth-century philosophy. It is a philosophical concept for organizing investigations into how the world immediately presents itself to us, that is, a “phenomenology” of the world. Fred Dallmayr gives a good overview of the importance and use of this investigatory strategy in contemporary philosophy. However Habermas alters the traditional concept of the world as lifeworld in two ways. First, he stresses the importance of language in structuring and reproducing the lifeworld rather than conceiving the lifeworld as more ambiguous fundamental structures of consciousness. Second, he expands the concept beyond a mere reference to culture so as to make it more useful for sociological analysis.

For several reasons the conception of society as a lifeworld enjoys a certain priority over the systems conception. First of all, the systemic aspects of social life only emerge historically because of cultural changes in the lifeworld. Second, key systemic processes must always be in some way “anchored” in the lifeworld if they are to be regarded as legitimate processes of social life. Finally, the ultimate identification of one “society” depends on the understandings of society’s participants, which take place in the lifeworld. Therefore we need to examine this conception of society first.

In articulating the idea of society as a lifeworld, Habermas is engaged once again in what he calls a “reconstruction.” That is, Habermas begins with the “astonishing lifeworld fact of social integration” without violence and asks how this is possible, how so much social coordination of the “action plans” of individuals can unfold without threats of coercion. He consistently rejects the view, associated with rational choice theory, that a society of merely self-interested individuals could be sustained. Habermas argues that a society of strategic actors cannot be stabilized because, qua strategic actors, they have no commitment to rules. Strategic or instrumental actors regard rules as obstacles to doing what one wants, to be evaded if possible. But without a generalized commitment to rules, institutions that bring people together cannot be sustained over time. Strategic actors therefore cannot reproduce the very institutions that give them an arena of action. Referring specifically to democratic theory, “if rational citizens were to describe their practices in empiricist categories, they would not have sufficient reason to observe the democratic rules of the game.” Simply put, pure strategic actors would treat everyone else as mere