
Legitimation Crisis

by JÜRGEN HABERMAS

translated by Thomas McCarthy

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PART I. A Social-Scientific Concept of Crisis

Chapter 1. *System and Life-World*

To use the expression "late capitalism" is to put forward the hypothesis that, even in state-regulated capitalism, social developments involve "contradictions" or crises.¹ I shall therefore begin by elucidating the concept of crisis.

Prior to its employment as a social-scientific term, the concept of crisis was familiar to us from its medical usage. In that context it refers to the phase of an illness in which it is decided whether or not the organism's self-healing powers are sufficient for recovery. The critical process, the illness, appears as something objective. A contagious disease, for example, is contracted through *external* influences on the organism; and the deviations of the affected organism from its goal state [*Sollzustand*]*—*the normal, healthy state*—*can be observed and measured with the aid of empirical parameters. The patient's consciousness plays no role in this; how he feels, how he experiences his illness, is at most a symptom of a process that he himself can scarcely influence at all. Nevertheless, we would not speak of a crisis, when it is medically a question of life and death, if it were only a matter of an objective process viewed from the outside, if the patient were not also subjectively involved in this process. The crisis cannot be separated from the viewpoint of the one who is undergoing it*—*the patient experiences his powerlessness *vis-à-vis* the objectivity of the illness only because he is a subject condemned to passivity and temporarily deprived of the possibility of being a subject in full possession of his powers.

We therefore associate with crises the idea of an objective force that deprives a subject of some part of his normal sovereignty. To conceive of a process as a crisis is tacitly to give it a normative meaning*—*the resolution of the crisis effects a liberation of the subject caught up in it.

This becomes clearer when we pass from the medical to the

dramaturgical concept of crisis. In classical aesthetics, from Aristotle to Hegel, crisis signifies the turning point in a fateful process that, despite all objectivity, does not simply impose itself from outside and does not remain external to the identity of the persons caught up in it. The contradiction, expressed in the catastrophic culmination of conflict, is inherent in the structure of the action system and in the personality systems of the principal characters. Fate is fulfilled in the revelation of conflicting norms against which the identities of the participants shatter, unless they are able to summon up the strength to win back their freedom by shattering the mythical power of fate through the formation of new identities.

The concept of crisis developed in classical tragedy also has a counterpart in the concept of crisis found in the idea of history as salvation.² This figure of thought entered the evolutionary social theories of the nineteenth century through the philosophy of history of the eighteenth century.³ Thus Marx developed, for the first time, a social-scientific concept of system crisis;⁴ it is against this background that we speak today of social or economic crises. When, for instance, we mention the great economic crisis of the early thirties, the Marxian overtones are unmistakable. But I do not wish to add to the history of Marxian dogmatics yet another elucidation of his crisis theory.⁵ My aim is rather to introduce systematically a social-scientifically useful concept of crisis.

In the social sciences today a systems-theoretic concept of crisis is frequently used.⁶ According to this systems approach, crises arise when the structure of a social system allows fewer possibilities for problem solving than are necessary to the continued existence of the system.⁷ In this sense, crises are seen as persistent disturbances of *system integration*. It can be objected against the social-scientific usefulness of this concept that it does not take into account the *internal* causes of a "systematic" overloading of control capacities (or of a "structural" insolubility of control problems). Crises in social systems are not produced through accidental changes in the environment, but through structurally inherent system-imperatives that are incompatible and cannot be hierarchically integrated. Structurally inherent contradictions can, of course, be identified only when we are able to specify structures important for continued existence. Such essential structures must be distinguish-

able from other system elements, which can change without the system's losing its identity. The difficulty of thus clearly determining the boundaries and persistence of social systems in the language of systems theory raises fundamental doubts about the usefulness of a systems-theoretic concept of social crisis.⁸

For organisms have clear spatial and temporal boundaries; their continued existence is characterized by goal values [*Sollwerte*] that vary only within empirically specifiable tolerances.⁹ Social systems, on the contrary, can assert themselves in an hypercomplex environment through altering either system elements or goal values, or both, in order to maintain themselves at a new level of control. But when systems maintain themselves through altering both boundaries and structural continuity [*Bestand*], their identity becomes blurred. The same system modification can be conceived of equally well as a learning process and change or as a dissolution process and collapse of the system. It cannot be unambiguously determined whether a new system has been formed or the old system has merely regenerated itself. Of course, not all systemic alterations in a social system are also crises. The range of tolerance within which the goal values of a social system can vary without critically endangering its continued existence or losing its identity obviously cannot be grasped from the objectivistic viewpoint of systems theory. Systems are not presented as subjects; but, according to the pre-technical usage, *only* subjects can be involved in crises. Thus, only when members of a society experience structural alterations as critical for continued existence and feel their social identity threatened can we speak of crises. Disturbances of system integration endanger continued existence only to the extent that *social integration* is at stake, that is, when the consensual foundations of normative structures are so much impaired that the society becomes anomic. Crisis states assume the form of a disintegration of social institutions.¹⁰

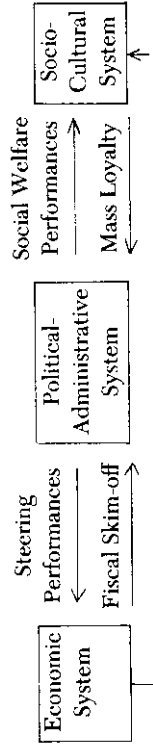
Social systems too have identities and can lose them; historians are capable of differentiating between revolutionary changes of a state or the downfall of an empire, and mere structural alterations. In doing so, they refer to the interpretations that members of a system use in identifying one another as belonging to the same group, and through this group identity assert their own self-iden-

tity. In historiography, a rupture in tradition, through which the interpretive systems that guarantee identity lose their social integrative power, serves as an indicator of the collapse of social systems. From this perspective, a social system has lost its identity as soon as later generations no longer recognize themselves within the once-constitutive tradition. Of course, this idealistic concept of crisis also has its difficulties. At the very least, a rupture in tradition is an inexact criterion, since the media of tradition and the forms of consciousness of historical continuity themselves change historically. Moreover, a contemporary consciousness of crisis often turns out afterwards to have been misleading. A society does not plunge into crisis when, and only when, its members so identify the situation. How could we distinguish such crisis ideologies from valid experiences of crisis if social crises could be determined only on the basis of conscious phenomena?

Crisis occurrences owe their objectivity to the fact that they issue from unresolved steering problems.¹¹ Identity crises are connected with steering problems. Although the subjects are not generally conscious of them, these steering problems create secondary problems that do affect consciousness in a specific way—precisely in such a way as to endanger social integration. The question then is, when do such steering problems arise? A social-scientifically appropriate crisis concept must grasp the connection between system integration and social integration. The two expressions “social integration” and “system integration” derive from different theoretical traditions. We speak of social integration in relation to the systems of institutions in which speaking and acting subjects are socially related [*vergesellschaftet*]. Social systems are seen here as *life-worlds* that are symbolically structured.¹² We speak of system integration with a view to the specific steering performances of a self-regulated system. Social systems are considered here from the point of view of their capacity to maintain their boundaries and their continued existence by mastering the complexity of an inconstant environment. Both paradigms, life-world and system, are important. The problem is to demonstrate their interconnection.¹³ From the life-world perspective, we thematize the normative structures (values and institutions) of a society. We analyze events and states from the point of view of their dependency on functions

of social integration (in Parsons's vocabulary, integration and pattern maintenance), while the non-normative components of the system serve as limiting conditions. From the system perspective, we thematize a society's steering mechanisms and the extension of the scope of contingency.¹⁴ We analyze events and states from the point of view of their dependency on functions of system integration (in Parsons's vocabulary, adaptation and goal-attainment), while the goal values serve as data. If we comprehend a social system as a life-world, then the steering aspect is screened out. If we understand a society as a system, then the fact that social reality consists in the facticity of recognized, often counterfactual, validity claims is not taken into consideration.

To be sure, the conceptual strategy of systems theory encompasses normative structures within its language; but it conceptualizes every social system from the point of view of its control center. Thus in differentiated societies, the political system (as a separate control center) assumes a superordinate position *vis-à-vis* the socio-cultural¹⁵ and economic systems. The following schema is taken from a working paper.¹⁶



Pre-Political Determinants of the Normative Systems

In the analytic framework of systems theory, social evolution (which takes place in three dimensions: development of productive forces; increase in system autonomy—power; and change in normative structures) is projected onto the single plane of the expansion of power through the reduction of environmental complexity. This projection is seen in Niklas Luhmann's reformulation of fundamental sociological concepts. I have attempted elsewhere¹⁷ to demonstrate that validity claims constitutive for the cultural reproduction of life—such as claims to truth and to correctness/

appropriateness [*Richtigkeit/Angemessenheit*]*—*forfeit the sense of discursive redeemability [*Einlösbarkeit*] if they are comprehended as control media and placed on the same level with other media such as power, money, confidence, influence, etc. Systems theory can allow only empirical events and states into its object domain and must transform *questions of validity* into *questions of behavior*. Thus Luhmann always initiates the reconceptualization of such motions as knowledge and discourse, action and norm, domination and ideological justification, below the threshold of a possible differentiation between the performances of organic systems and of social systems. (In my opinion this is true even of Luhmann's attempt to introduce "sense" and "negation" as differentiating fundamental concepts.) The advantages of a comprehensive conceptual strategy turn into the weaknesses of conceptual imperialism as soon as the steering aspect is rendered independent and the social-scientific object domain is narrowed to potentials for selection.

The conceptual strategy of action theory avoids these weaknesses. However, it produces a dichotomy between normative structures and limiting material conditions.¹⁶ At the analytical level, to be sure, there exists among the subsystems a rank order of socio-cultural, political, and economic systems; but within each of these systems the normative structures must be distinguished from the limiting substratum.

<i>Subsystems</i>	<i>Normative Structures</i>	<i>Substratum Categories</i>
Socio-cultural	status system; subcultural forms of life	distribution of privately available rewards and rights of disposition
Political	political institutions (state)	distribution of legitimate power (and structural force); available organizational rationality
Economic	economic institutions (relations of production)	distribution of economic power (and structural force); available forces of production

This conceptualization requires supplementing the analysis of normative structures with an analysis of limitations and capacities relevant to steering. "Supplementing" is, of course, too weak a requirement for crisis analysis, since what is demanded is a level of analysis at which the *connection* between normative structures and steering problems becomes palpable. I find this level in a historically oriented analysis of social systems, which permits us to ascertain for a given case the range of tolerance within which the goal values of the system might vary without its continued existence being critically endangered. The boundaries of this range of variation are manifested as boundaries of historical continuity.¹⁹ Of course, the flexibility of normative structures—that is, the range of variations that can occur without causing a rupture in tradition—does not depend solely, nor primarily, on consistency requirements of the normative structures themselves. The goal values of social systems are the product, on the one hand, of the cultural values of the constitutive tradition and, on the other, of the non-normative requirements of system integration. In the goal values, the cultural definitions of social life and the survival imperatives that can be reconstructed in systems theory, are connected. Adequate conceptual tools and methods have hitherto been lacking for an analysis of this connection.

Ranges of variation for structural changes obviously can be introduced only within the framework of a theory of social evolution.²⁰ To do this, the Marxian concept of social formation [*Gesellschaftsformation*] is helpful. The formation of a society is, at any given time, determined by a fundamental principle of organization [*Organisationsprinzip*], which delimits in the abstract the possibilities for alterations of social states. By "principles of organization" I understand highly abstract regulations arising as emergent properties in improbable evolutionary steps and characterizing, at each stage, a new level of development. Organizational principles limit the capacity of a society to learn without losing its identity. According to this definition, steering problems can have crisis effects if (and only if) they cannot be resolved within the range of possibility that is circumscribed by the organizational principle of the society. Principles of organization of this type determine, firstly, the learning mechanism on which the develop-

ment of productive forces depends; they determine, secondly, the range of variation for the interpretive systems that secure identity; and finally, they fix the institutional boundaries for the possible expansion of steering capacity. Before I illustrate this concept of an organizational principle with a few examples, I would like to justify the choice of the concept with reference to the constituents of social systems.

Chapter 2. Some Constituents of Social Systems

To begin with, I shall describe three universal properties of social systems:

a) The exchange between social systems and their environments takes place in production (appropriation of outer nature) and socialization (appropriation of inner nature) through the medium of utterances that admit of truth [*wahheitsfähiger Äusserungen*] and norms that have need of justification [*rechtfertigungsbedürftiger Normen*]*—that is, through discursive validity claims* [*Geltungsansprüche*]. In both dimensions, development follows rationally reconstructible patterns.

b) Change in the goal values of social systems is a function of the state of the forces of production and of the degree of system autonomy; but the variation of goal values is limited by a logic of development of world-views [*Weltbilder*] on which the imperatives of system integration have no influence. The socially related [*gesellschaftsfaheten*] individuals form an inner environment that is paradoxical from the point of view of steering.

c) The level of development of a society is determined by the institutionally permitted learning capacity, in particular by whether theoretical-technical and practical questions are differentiated, and whether discursive learning processes can take place.

Re: a) The environment of social systems can be divided into three segments: outer nature, or the resources of the non-human environment; the other social systems with which the society is in contact; and inner nature, or the organic substratum of the members of society. Social systems set themselves off symbolically from their social environment. Unless universalistic morals are developed, this can take place in terms of the differentiation between in-group and out-group morality. This problem will not be taken up here. It is the processes with outer and inner nature that are decisive for the specific form in which socio-cultural life reproduces itself. These are processes of adapting to society [*Vergesellschaftung*] in which the social system "incorporates" nature. Outer nature is appropriated in production processes, inner nature in socialization processes. With developing steering capacity a social system extends its boundaries into nature both without and within. Control over outer nature and integration of inner nature increase with the "power" of the system. Production processes extract natural resources and transform the energies set free into use values. Socialization processes shape the members of the system into subjects capable of speaking and acting. The embryo enters this formative process, and the individual is not released from it until his death (if we disregard pathological cases of desocialization).

Social systems adapt outer nature to society with the help of the forces of production: they organize and train labor power; and develop technologies and strategies. In order to do this they require technically utilizable knowledge. The concepts of cognitive performance and of information that are normally employed in this context suggest too hastily a continuity with the intelligent performances of animals. I see as one of the specific performances of social systems their expansion of control over outer nature through the medium of *utterances that admit of truth*. Work, or instrumental action, is governed by technical rules. The latter incorporate empirical assumptions that imply truth claims, that is, discursively redeceivable and fundamentally criticizable claims.

Social systems adapt inner nature to society with the help of normative structures in which needs are interpreted and actions

licensed or made obligatory. The concept of motivation that appears here should not conceal the specific fact that social systems accomplish the integration of inner nature through the medium of norms that have need of justification. These imply, again, a validity claim that can only be redeemed discursively. To the truth claims that we raise in empirical statements there correspond claims of correctness or appropriateness that we advance with norms of action or of evaluation.

Social systems can maintain themselves *vis-à-vis* outer nature through instrumental actions (according to technical rules), and *vis-à-vis* inner nature through communicative actions (according to valid norms), because at the socio-cultural stage of development animal behavior is reorganized under imperatives of validity claims.¹ This reorganization is effected in structures of linguistically produced intersubjectivity. Linguistic communication has a double structure, for communication about propositional content may take place only with simultaneous metacommunication about interpersonal relations.² This is an expression of the specifically human interlacing of cognitive performances and motives for action with linguistic intersubjectivity. Language functions as a kind of transmitter; because psychic processes such as sensations, needs and feelings are fitted into structures of linguistic intersubjectivity, inner episodes or experiences are transformed into intentional contents—that is, cognitions into statements, needs and feelings into normative expectations (precepts and values). This transformation produces the distinction, rich in consequences, between the subjectivity of opinion, wanting, pleasure and pain, on the one hand, and the utterances and norms that appear with a *claim to generality* [*Allgemeinheitsanspruch*] on the other. Generality means objectivity of knowledge and legitimacy of valid norms. Both insure the *community or shared meaning* [*Gemeinsamkeit*] that is constitutive for the socio-cultural life-world. The structures of intersubjectivity are just as constitutive for experiences and instrumental action as they are for attitudes and communicative action. These same structures regulate, at the systems level, the control of outer and the integration of inner nature—that is, the processes of adapting to society that, by virtue of the competencies of socially related

individuals, operate through the peculiar media of utterances that admit of truth and norms that require justification.

The extension of system autonomy is dependent on developments in the other two dimensions—the development of productive forces (truth) and the alteration of normative structures (correctness/appropriateness). These developments follow rationally reconstructible patterns that are logically independent of one another. The history of secular knowledge and technology is a history of truth-monitored successes in coming to terms with outer nature. It consists of discontinuous but, in the long run, cumulative processes. To explain the world-historically cumulative character of scientific and technical progress, knowledge of empirical mechanisms is necessary but not sufficient. To understand the development of science and technology, we must also conjecture an inner logic through which a hierarchy of non-reversible sequences is fixed from the outset.³ Limits of a rationally reconstructible pattern of development are reflected in the trivial experience that cognitive advances cannot be simply forgotten as long as the continuity of tradition is unbroken, and that every deviation from the irreversible developmental path is experienced as a regression that exacts its price.

Less trivial is the fact that cultural life is just as little subject to arbitrary definitions. Because the adaptation of inner nature to society also operates through discursive validity claims, alteration of normative structures, as well as the history of science and technology, is a directional process. The integration of inner nature has a cognitive component. In the development from myth, through religion, to philosophy and ideology, the demand for discursive redemption of normative-validity claims increasingly prevails. Like knowledge of nature and technologies, so also world-views follow in their development a pattern that makes it possible to reconstruct rationally the following descriptively enumerated regularities:

- expansion of the secular domain *vis-à-vis* the sphere of the sacred;
- a tendency to develop from far-reaching heteronomy to increasing autonomy;

- the draining of cognitive contents from world-views (from cosmology to the pure system of morals);
- from tribal particularism to universalistic and at the same time individualistic orientations;
- increasing reflexivity of the mode of belief, which can be seen in the sequence: myth as immediately lived system of orientation; teachings; revealed religion; rational religion; ideology.⁴

The components of world-views that secure identity and are efficacious for social integration—that is, moral systems and their accompanying interpretations—follow with increasing complexity a pattern that has a parallel at the ontogenetic level in the logic of the development of moral consciousness. A collectively attained stage of moral consciousness can, as long as the continuity of the tradition endures, just as little be forgotten as can collectively gained knowledge (which does not exclude regression).⁵

Re: b) I cannot pursue here the involved interdependencies among possible developments in the spheres of productive forces, steering capacity, and world-views (or moral systems). However, there seems to me to be a conspicuous asymmetry in the form of reproduction of socio-cultural life. While the development of productive forces always extends the scope of contingency of the social system, evolutionary advances in the structures of interpretive systems by no means always offer advantages of selection. Naturally, a growing system autonomy and a corresponding increase in the complexity of the forms of organization of a society can burst normative structures which have become confining and destroy barriers to participation that have become dysfunctional from the point of view of control. This process can be observed today, for example, in the modernization of developing nations. But more problematic cases are also conceivable and require verification. Normative structures can be overturned directly through cognitive dissonances between secular knowledge—expanded with the development of the forces of production—and the dogmatics of traditional world-views. Because the mechanisms which cause developmental advances in the normative structures are inde-

pendent of the logic of their development, there exists *a fortiori* no guarantee that a development of the forces of production and an increase in steering capacity will release exactly those normative alterations that correspond to the steering imperatives of the social system. It is rather an empirical question, whether and to what extent the selection advantage, which a control of outer nature operating through truth claims yields by way of expanded selection potential, will be lost again—in the form of self-produced complexity—through the integration of inner nature operating through claims of correctness and appropriateness. We cannot exclude the possibility that a strengthening of productive forces, which heightens the power of the system, can lead to changes in normative structures that simultaneously restrict the autonomy of the system because they bring forth new legitimacy claims and thereby constrict the range of variation of the goal values. (I will later consider the thesis that precisely this has happened in advanced capitalism because the goal values permitted in the domain of legitimization of a communicative ethic are irreconcilable with an exponential growth of system complexity and, for reasons pertaining to the logic of development, other legitimations cannot be produced.) To the proposition that goal values of social systems vary historically must be added the proposition that *variation* in goal values is limited by a developmental logic of structures of world-views, a logic that is *not at the disposition* of the imperatives of power augmentation.⁶

With this situation is associated a further peculiarity of societies: inner nature does not belong to the system environment in the same way as outer nature. On the one hand, as we can study in the psychosomatics of disturbed organic processes,⁷ organic substrata of socially related individuals are not simply external to the social system; on the other hand, inner nature remains, *after* its integration into the social system, something like an inner environment, since socially related individuals resist, to the extent of their individuation, being absorbed without remainder into society. Socialization, the adapting of inner nature to society, unlike production, the adapting of outer nature to society, cannot be satisfactorily conceived of as a reduction of environmental complexity. While the freedom of movement of the system normally

expands with the reduction of environmental complexity, a progressive adaptation of inner nature to society rather narrows the scope of contingency of the system. With growing individuation, the immunization of socialized individuals against decisions of the differentiated control center seems to gain in strength. The normative structures become effective as a kind of self-inhibiting mechanism *vis-à-vis* imperatives of power expansion. In the framework of the logic of self-regulating systems, this can only be expressed as follows: inner nature is at once a system environment and a system element. His own nature is given to the subject capable of speaking and acting in the same paradoxical way—as body and as material substance.⁸ It is, of course, my opinion that these paradoxes indicate only the blurring of an overextended systems theory. They disappear when one chooses, not system and self-steering, but life-world and intersubjectivity as the superordinate point of view, and therefore conceives socialization *from the outset* as individuation. This connection can be conceived of in the theory of language, while it leads only to absurdities if one sticks obstinately to systems theory.⁹ Societies are *also* systems, but their mode of development does not follow solely the logic of the expansion of system autonomy (power); social evolution transpires rather within the bounds of a logic of the life-world, the structures of which are determined by linguistically produced intersubjectivity and are based on criticizable validity claims.

Re: c) If I have correctly described the constituents of social systems, steering capacity changes as a function of growing control over outer nature and of increasing integration of inner nature. Evolution in both dimensions takes place in the form of directional learning processes that work through discursively redeemable validity claims. The development of productive forces and the alteration of normative structures follow, respectively, logics of growing theoretical and practical insight.¹⁰ Of course, the rationally reconstructible patterns that collective learning processes follow—that is, the history of secular knowledge and technology on the one hand and of the structural alteration of identity-securing interpretive systems on the other—explain only the logically necessary sequence of *possible* developments. The *actual* developments,

innovations and stagnations, occurrence of crises, productive or unproductive working out of crises, and so on can be explained only with the aid of empirical mechanisms. It is my conjecture that the fundamental mechanism for social evolution in general is to be found in an automatic inability not to learn. Not *learning*, but *not-learning* is the phenomenon that calls for explanation at the socio-cultural stage of development. Therein lies, if you will, the rationality of man. Only against this background does the overpowering irrationality of the history of the species become visible.

Formal viewpoints for demarcating different levels of learning follow from the fact that we learn in two dimensions (theoretical and practical) and that these learning processes are connected with validity claims that can be discursively redeemed. *Non-reflexive learning* takes place in action contexts in which implicitly raised theoretical and practical validity claims are naively taken for granted and accepted or rejected without discursive consideration. *Reflexive learning* takes place through discourses in which we thematize practical validity claims that have become problematic or have been rendered problematic through institutionalized doubt, and redeem or dismiss them on the basis of arguments. The level of learning which a social formation makes possible could depend upon whether the organizational principle of the society permits (a) differentiation between theoretical and practical questions and (b) transition from non-reflexive (prescientific) to reflexive learning. From these alternatives there follow four possible combinations, of which, if I am correct, three have been historically realized.

	Theoretical and Practical Questions Are	
	Learning	Differentiated
Non-reflexive	X	—
Reflexive	X	X

This schema is, of course, inadequate, even for purposes of a rough approximation, because it carries over concepts developed in a logic of discourse (theoretical/practical)¹¹ into heterogeneous interpretive systems; in addition, it does not specify whether

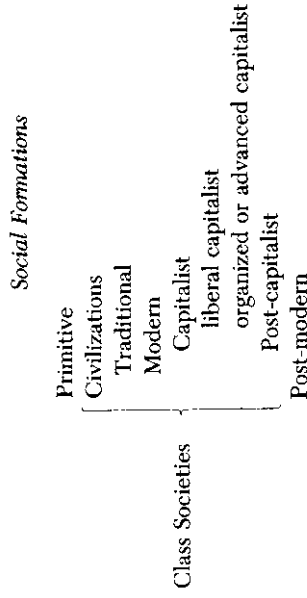
theoretical and practical questions remain unseparated only within the ruling interpretive framework or also in life-practice. From magical and animistic world-views, we can infer a life-practice that ignores this difference, while mythical world-views co-exist with secular knowledge that is assimilated and extended into spheres of social labor. Thus, in the latter case, the distinction between technically utilizable knowledge (admitting of theory) and the practically relevant interpretation of the natural and social life-world has actually already taken place. Furthermore, the schema does not delineate areas that are rendered accessible to institutionalized partial discourse. With the rise of philosophy, the elements of mythical traditions were for the first time freed for discursive consideration; but classical philosophy conceived and treated practically relevant interpretations as theoretical questions, while it devalued, as inaccessible to theory, technically utilizable knowledge. With the rise of modern science, on the other hand, precisely this sphere of empirical knowledge was drawn into reflexive learning processes. At the same time, in philosophy there prevailed a tendency, leading to positivism, to differentiate theoretical and practical questions according to their logical form; however, the aim was to exclude practical questions from discourse. They are no longer thought to be "susceptible of truth."¹² In contrast, the institutionalization of general practical discourse would introduce a new stage of learning for society.

If the determinations provisionally introduced in a) through c) define the constituents of social systems, then it seems sensible to look for organizational principles that determine the learning capacity, and thus the level of development, of a society—above all in regard to its forces of production and its identity-securing interpretive systems—and which thereby limit the possible growth in steering capabilities as well. Marx determined different social formations in terms of the command of the means of production, that is, as *relations of production*. He placed the nucleus that organizes the whole at a level at which normative structures are interlaced with the material substratum. If the relations of production are to represent the organizing principles of society, they may not, of course, be equated with the determinate forms of ownership at any given time. Organizational principles are highly abstract

regulations that define ranges of possibility. Moreover, to speak of the relations of production misleadingly suggests a narrow economic interpretation. Which subsystem can assume functional primacy in a society¹³—and thus the guidance of social evolution—is, however, first established by its principle of organization.

Chapter 3. *Illustration of Social Principles of Organization*

I think it meaningful to distinguish four social formations: primitive [*vorhochkulturelle*], traditional, capitalist, post-capitalist.¹ Except for primitive societies, we are dealing with class societies. (I designate state-socialist societies—in view of their political-elitist disposition of the means of production—as "post-capitalist class societies.")



The interest behind the examination of crisis tendencies in late- and post-capitalist class societies is in exploring the possibilities of a "post-modern" society—that is, a historically new principle of organization and not a different name for the surprising vigor of an aged capitalism.² I would like to illustrate what is meant by social principles of organization and how definite types of crisis can be derived from them in terms of three social formations. These loose remarks are intended neither to simulate nor to substitute for a theory of social evolution. They serve solely to introduce a concept by way of examples. For each of the three social formations I shall sketch the determining principle of organization, indicate the

possibilities it opens to social evolution, and infer the type of crisis it allows. Without a theory of social evolution to rely on, principles of organization cannot be grasped abstractly, but only picked out inductively and elaborated with reference to the institutional sphere (kinship system, political system, economic system) that possesses functional primacy for a given stage of development.

Primitive Social Formation. The primary roles of age and sex form the *organizational principle* of primitive societies.³ The institutional core is the *kinship system*, which at this stage of development represents a total institution; family structures determine the totality of social intercourse. They simultaneously secure social and system integration. World-views and norms are scarcely differentiated from one another; both are built around rituals and taboos that require no independent sanctions. This principle of organization is compatible only with familial and tribal morals. Vertical or horizontal social relations that overstep the bounds of the kinship system are not possible. In societies organized along kinship lines, the forces of production cannot be augmented through exploitation of labor power (raising the rate of exploitation through physical force). The learning mechanism, which is built into the behavioral system of instrumental action [*Funktionskreis instrumentalen Handelns*],⁴ leads, over long periods, to a seemingly ordered sequence of less fundamental innovations.⁵ At the stage of development of primitive society, there seems to be no systematic motive for producing more goods than are necessary to satisfy basic needs, even though the state of the productive forces may permit a surplus.⁶ Since no contradictory imperatives follow from this principle of organization, it is external change that overloads the narrowly limited steering capacity of societies organized along kinship lines and undermines the familial and tribal identities. The usual source of change is demographic growth in connection with ecological factors—above all, interethnic dependency as a result of economic exchange, war, and conquest.⁷

Traditional Social Formation. The *principle of organization* is *class domination* [*Klassenherrschaft*] in political form.⁸ With the rise of a bureaucratic apparatus of authority, a control center is differen-

tiated out of the kinship system. This allows the transference of the production and distribution of social wealth from familial forms of organization to ownership of the means of production. The kinship system is no longer the institutional nucleus of the whole system; it surrenders the central functions of power and control to the state. This is the beginning of a functional specification and autonomization, in the course of which the family loses all of its economic functions and some of its socializing functions. At this stage of development, subsystems arise that serve predominantly either system or social integration. At their point of intersection lies the legal order that regulates the privilege of disposition of the means of production and the strategic exercise of power, which, in turn, requires legitimation. To the differentiation between the authority apparatus and the legal order on the one side, and the counterfactual justifications and moral systems on the other, there corresponds the institutional separation of secular and sacred powers.

The new organizational principle permits a significant strengthening of system autonomy. It presupposes functional differentiation and makes possible the formation of generalized media (power and money) as well as reflexive mechanisms (positive law). But this latitude for growth in steering capacity is developed at the cost of a fundamentally unstable class structure. With private ownership of the means of production, a power relationship is institutionalized in class societies, which in the long run threatens social integration,⁹ for the opposition of interests established in the class relationship represents a conflict potential. Of course, within the framework of a legitimate order of authority, the opposition of interests can be kept latent and integrated for a certain time. This is the achievement of legitimating world-views or ideologies. They remove the counterfactual validity claims of normative structures from the sphere of public thematization and testing. The order of authority is justified by falling back on traditional world-views and a conventional civic ethic.

In spite of considerable vertical differentiation, the new organizational principle holds horizontal social relations through unpollitical exchange relations (local markets, city-country) within narrow limits. The political class rule requires a mediation of tribal morals through civic ethics that remain dependent on tradition—that is,

particularistic. It is incompatible with universalistic forms of intercourse. In a class system of social labor, the forces of production can be augmented through raising the rate of exploitation, that is, through organized forced labor. Thus a socially produced surplus product arises that is appropriated according to privilege. The enhancing of the productive force has its limits, to be sure, in the persistence of unplanned, nature-like development [*Naturwüchsigkeit*] of technical innovations. (Technically utilizable knowledge is not extended through reflexive learning.)¹⁰

In traditional societies the type of crisis that arises proceeds from internal contradictions. The contradiction exists between validity claims of systems of norms and justifications that cannot explicitly permit exploitation, and a class structure in which privileged appropriation of socially produced wealth is the rule. The problem of how socially produced wealth may be inequitably, and yet legitimately, distributed is temporarily solved through the ideological protection of counterfactual validity claims. In critical situations, traditional societies extend the scope of their control through heightened exploitation of labor power; that is, they augment power either directly through heightened physical force (of which the history of penal law gives good indicators), or indirectly through generalization of forced payments (in the sequence of work-, product-, and money-rents). Consequently, crises as a rule issue from steering problems that necessitate a strengthening of system autonomy through heightened repression. The latter leads in turn to legitimation losses, which for their part result in class struggles (often in connection with foreign conflicts). Class struggles finally threaten social integration and can lead to an overthrow of the political system and to new foundations of legitimation—that is, to a new group identity.

Liberal-Capitalist Social Formation. The principle of organization is the relationship of wage labor and capital, which is anchored in the system of bourgeois civil law. With the rise of a sphere, free of the state, of commerce between private autonomous owners of commodities—that is, with the institutionalization in independent states of goods-, capital-, and labor-markets and the establishment of world trade—"civil society" [*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*]¹¹ is

differentiated out of the political-economic system. This signifies a depoliticization of the class relationship and an anonymization of class domination. The state and the politically constituted system of social labor are no longer the institutional nucleus of the system as a whole. Instead, the modern rational state—whose prototype Max Weber analyzed¹²—becomes the complementary arrangement to self-regulative market commerce.¹³ Externally, the state still insures by political means the territorial integrity and the competitiveness of the domestic economy. Internally, the previously dominant medium of control, legitimate power, serves above all to maintain the general conditions of production, which make possible the market-regulated process of capital realization. Economic exchange becomes the dominant steering medium. After the capitalist mode of production has been established, the exercise of the state's power within the social system can be limited: (a) to the protection of bourgeois commerce in accord with civil law (police and administration of justice); (b) to the shielding of the market mechanism from self-destructive side effects (for example, legislation for the protection of labor); (c) to the satisfaction of the prerequisites of production in the economy as a whole (public school education, transportation, and communication); and (d) to the adaptation of the system of civil law to needs that arise from the process of accumulation (tax, banking, and business law).¹⁴ By fulfilling these four classes of tasks, the state secures the structural prerequisites of the reproduction process as capitalistic.

Although in traditional societies an institutional differentiation between spheres of system integration and social integration had already set in, the economic system remained dependent on the supply of legitimation from the socio-cultural system. Only the relative uncoupling of the economic system from the political permits a sphere to arise in bourgeois society that is free from the traditional ties and given over to the strategic-utilitarian action orientations of market participants. Competing entrepreneurs then make their decisions according to maxims of profit-oriented competition and replace value-oriented with interest-guided action.¹⁵

The new organizational principle opens a broad scope for the development of productive forces and of normative structures. With the imperatives of the self-realization of capital, the mode of

production sets in motion an expanded reproduction that is tied to the mechanism of innovations that enhance labor productivity. As soon as the limits of physical exploitation—that is, of raising the absolute surplus value—are reached, the accumulation of capital necessitates development of technical productive forces and, in this way, coupling of technically utilizable knowledge to reflexive learning processes. On the other hand, the now autonomous economic exchange relieves the political order of the pressures of legitimation. Self-regulative market commerce requires supplementation, not only through rational state administration and abstract law, but through a strategic-utilitarian morality in the sphere of social labor, which in the private domain is equally compatible with a “Protestant” or a “formalistic” ethic. Bourgeois ideologies can assume a universalistic structure and appeal to generalizable interests because the property order has shed its political form and been converted into a relation of production that, it seems, can legitimate itself. The institution of the market can be founded on the justice inherent in the exchange of equivalents; and, for this reason, the bourgeois constitutional state finds its justification in the legitimate relations of production. This is the message of rational natural law since Locke. The relations of production can do without a traditional authority legitimated from above.

Of course, the socially integrative effect of the value form may be restricted, by and large, to the bourgeois class. The loyalty and subordination of members of the new urban proletariat, recruited mainly from the ranks of the peasants, are certainly maintained more through a mixture of traditionalistic ties, fatalistic willingness to follow, lack of perspective, and naked repression than through the convincing force of bourgeois ideologies. This does not diminish the socially integrative significance of this new type of ideology in a society that no longer recognizes political domination in personal form.¹⁶

With the political anonymization of class rule, the socially dominant class must convince itself that it no longer rules. Universalistic bourgeois ideologies can fulfill this task insofar as they (a) are founded “scientifically” on the critique of tradition and (b) possess the character of a model, that is, anticipate a state of society whose possibility need not from the start be denied by a

dynamically growing economic society. All the more sensitively, however, must bourgeois society react to the evident contradiction between idea and reality. For this reason the critique of bourgeois society could take the form of an unmasking of bourgeois ideologies themselves by confronting idea and reality. The achievement of the capitalist principle of organization is nevertheless extraordinary. It not only frees the economic system, uncoupled from the political system, from the legitimations of the socially integrative subsystems, but enables it, along with its system integrative tasks, to make a contribution to social integration. With these achievements, the susceptibility of the social system to crisis certainly grows, as steering problems can now become *directly* threatening to identity. In this sense I would like to speak of *system crises*.

In an unplanned, nature-like [*naturwüchsig*] movement of economic development, the organizational principle sets no limits to the development of productive forces. The normative structures also obtain a broad scope for development, for the new principle of organization permits (for the first time) universalistic value systems. It is, of course, incompatible with a communicative ethic, which requires not only generality of norms but a discursively attained consensus about the *generalizability* of the normatively prescribed interests. The principle of organization transposes the conflict potential of class opposition into the steering dimension, where it expresses itself in the form of economic crises. For liberal capitalism, the fluctuation of prosperity, crisis, and depression is typical. The opposition of interests, which is grounded in the relation of wage labor and capital, comes to light, not directly in class conflicts, but in the interruption of the process of accumulation, that is, in the form of steering problems. A general concept of system crisis can be gained from the logic of this economic crisis.

The following schema sums up the connections between the organizational principles introduced as examples and the corresponding types of crisis.

In determining the possibilities for evolution in each of the three developmental dimensions (production, steering, and socialization), the principle of organization determines whether, and if so, (a) how system and social integration can be functionally differentiated; (b) when dangers to system integration must result in dangers to social

effective (at first for the middle class) for legitimation (rational-natural law, utilitarianism) become dependent on an ideology that is itself built into the economic basis—namely, the exchange of equivalents. In traditional societies, crises appear when, and only when, steering problems cannot be resolved within the possibility space circumscribed by the principle of organization and therefore produce dangers to system integration that threaten the identity of the society. In liberal-capitalist societies, on the other hand, crises become endemic because temporarily unresolved steering problems, which the process of economic growth produces at more or less regular intervals, as *such* endanger social integration. With the persistent instability of accelerated social change, periodically recurring, socially disintegrating steering problems produce the objective foundation for a crisis consciousness in the bourgeois class and for revolutionary hopes among wage laborers. No previous social formation lived so much in fear and expectation of a sudden system change, even though the idea of a temporally condensed transformation—that is, of a revolutionary leap—is oddly in contrast to the form of motion of system crisis as a permanent crisis [*Dauerkrise*].

The transfer of socially integrative functions to a subsystem that primarily fulfills system integrative functions is possible only because in liberal capitalism the class relationship is institutionalized through the labor market and is thereby depoliticized. Since the source of social wealth—that is, the labor power of the worker—becomes a commodity, and social capital is reproduced under conditions of wage labor, labor and exchange processes take on the double character analyzed by Marx: in producing use values, labor processes serve to produce exchange values. By regulating the allocation of labor power and of goods through the money mechanism, exchange processes serve the formation and self-realization of capital. The market thereby assumes a double function: on the one hand, it functions as a steering mechanism in the system of social labor, which is controlled through the medium of money; on the other, it institutionalizes a power relation between owners of the means of production and wage laborers. Because the *social power* of the capitalist is institutionalized as an exchange relation in

Illustration of Social Principles of Organization

Social Formations	Principle of Organization	Social and System Integration	Type of Crisis
Primitive	kinship relations: primary roles (age, sex)	no differentiation between social and system integration	externally induced identity crisis
Traditional	political class rule: state power and socio-economic classes	functional differentiation between social and system integration	internally determined identity crisis
Liberal-capitalist	unpolitical class rule: wage labor and capital	system integrative economic system also takes over socially integrative tasks	system crisis

integration, that is crises; and (c) in what way steering problems are transformed into dangers to identity, that is, what type of crisis predominates.

Chapter 4. System Crisis Elucidated Through the Example of the Liberal-Capitalist Crisis Cycle

In liberal capitalism, crises appear in the form of unresolved economic steering problems. Dangers to system integration are direct threats to social integration, so that we are justified in speaking of economic crisis. In primitive social formations, a similarly close association exists, for the familial principle of organization does not permit separation of system and social integration. Functional differentiation, which developed in traditional societies, is not revoked in the transition to the modern. But in liberal capitalism, there occurs a peculiar transfer of socially integrative tasks to the separate, unpolitical steering system of the market in such a way that the elements of tradition that are

the form of the private labor contract and the siphoning off of privately available surplus value has replaced *political dependency*, the market assumes, together with its cybernetic function, an ideological function. The class relationship can assume the anonymous, unpolitical form of wage dependency. In Marx, therefore, theoretical analysis of the value form has the double task of uncovering both the steering principle of commerce in a market economy and the basic ideology of bourgeois class society. The theory of value serves, at the same time, the functional analysis of the economic system and the critique of ideology of a class domination that can be unmasked, even for the bourgeois consciousness, through the proof that in the labor market equivalents are not exchanged. The market secures for the owners of the means of production the power, sanctioned in civil law, to appropriate surplus value and to use it privately and autonomously. Naturally, in its crisis-ridden course, the process of accumulation surrenders the secret of the "contradiction" embedded in this mode of production. Economic growth takes place through periodically recurring crises because the class structure, transplanted into the economic steering system, has transformed the *contradiction of class interests into a contradiction of system imperatives*. In choosing this formulation we employ the concept of contradiction in two different theoretical frameworks. In order to prevent misunderstandings, I would like to insert a conceptual clarification.

The concept of contradiction has undergone such attrition that it is often used synonymously with "antagonism," "opposition," or "conflict." According to Hegel and Marx, however, "conflicts" are only the form of appearance, the empirical side of a fundamentally logical contradiction. Conflicts can be comprehended only with reference to the operatively effective rules according to which incompatible claims or intentions are produced within an action system. But "contradictions" cannot exist between claims or intentions in the same sense as they can between statements; the system of rules according to which utterances [*Ausserungen*]*—that is, opinions and actions in which intentions are incorporated—*are produced is obviously different in kind from the system of rules according to which we form statements and transform them without affecting their truth value. In other words, the deep

structures of a society are not logical structures in a narrow sense. Propositional contents, on the other hand, are always used in utterances. The logic that could justify speaking of "social contradictions" would therefore have to be a logic of the employment of propositional contents in speech and in action. It would have to extend to communicative relations between subjects capable of speaking and acting; it would have to be universal pragmatics rather than logic.¹

We can speak of the "fundamental contradiction" of a social formation when, and only when, its organizational principle necessitates that individuals and groups repeatedly confront one another with claims and intentions that are, in the long run, incompatible. In class societies this is the case. As long as the incompatibility of claims and intentions is not recognized by the participants, the conflict remains latent. Such forcefully integrated action systems are, of course, in need of an ideological justification to conceal the asymmetrical distribution of chances for the legitimate satisfaction of needs (that is, repression of needs). Communication between participants is then systematically distorted or blocked. Under conditions of forceful integration, the contradiction cannot be *identified* as a contradiction between the *declared* intentions of hostile parties and be settled in strategic action. Instead, it assumes the ideological form of a contradiction between the intentions that subjects believe themselves to be carrying out and their, as we say, unconscious motives or fundamental interests. As soon as incompatibility becomes conscious, conflict becomes manifest, and irreconcilable interests are recognized as antagonistic interests.²

Systems theory, too, is concerned with the logic of a system of rules according to which incompatibilities can be produced. When more problems are posed in a given environment than the system's steering capacity can solve, logically derivable contradictions appear that require, on pain of ruin, an alteration of system structures—alteration or surrender of elements that up to that point belonged to its "structural continuity" [*Bestand*]. These "contradictions" are introduced with reference to problems of system maintenance [*Bestandserhaltungsprobleme*]. They are not, therefore, as are dialectical contradictions, related from the start to

communicative relations between subjects or groups of subjects capable of speaking and acting. Within the framework of systems theory, conflicts can be seen as the expression of unresolved systemic problems. But the continued employment of the term "contradiction" should not obscure the differences between the logic of self-regulated systems and the logic of ordinary language communication.

Conflicts that are described independently of communications theory or systems theory are empirical phenomena without relation to truth. Only when we conceive of such oppositions within communications theory or systems theory do they take on an immanent relation to logical categories. Problems of system integration admit of truth insofar as they are defined by a finite number of specificable (and functionally equivalent) solutions. Naturally the truth relation of steering problems exists primarily for the observer (or systems theorist) and not necessarily for the participants of the action system in question. Problems of social integration (as whose expression conflicts can be conceived) likewise admit of truth; for competing claims can be understood as recommendations of (and warnings against) commonly binding norms of action on whose competing validity claims judgment could be passed in practical discourse. But the truth relation of systematically produced conflicts of interest exists, in this case, not for the sociologist, but for the members of the action system under analysis. In contrast to systems analysis, then, critique is related to the consciousness of addressees susceptible of enlightenment.³

The class structure determines which contradictions follow from the privileged appropriation of socially produced wealth. In traditional societies, such contradictions are manifested directly at the level of opposition of the interests of acting parties. In liberal capitalism, the class antagonism is reflected at the level of steering problems. The dynamic aspect thereby comes to the fore. Since, in the capitalist mode of production, the society acquires the capability to develop the forces of production relatively constantly, economic crisis designates the pattern of a *crisis-ridden course of economic growth*.

The accumulation of capital is, if we follow Marx's analysis, tied to the appropriation of surplus value. This means that economic

growth is regulated through a mechanism that establishes and at the same time partially conceals a relation of social power. Because the production of value is controlled through the private appropriation of surplus value, a spiral of contradictions results that can be reconstructed within systems theory. The accumulation of total capital involves periodic devaluations of elements of capital. This form of development is the crisis cycle. *Under the aspect of the accumulation of capital*, the self-negating pattern of development is represented in such a way that, on the one hand, the mass of exchange and use values (that is capital and social wealth) accumulates by raising the relative surplus value, that is, by way of technical progress that is capital intensive and that, at the same time, cuts down expenses. But, on the other hand, at each new stage of accumulation, the composition of capital alters to the detriment of variable capital, which is alone productive of surplus value. From this analysis Marx derives the tendency to a falling rate of profit and the weakening impulse to continuation of the process of accumulation.

Under the aspect of the realization of capital, the same contradiction is represented in such a way that at each new stage of accumulation potential social wealth grows along with the increase in surplus value. On the other hand, however, the power of consumption of the masses, and therefore the chance to realize capital, can be strengthened to the same extent only if the owners of capital relinquish corresponding portions of their own surplus value. Hence, the process of accumulation must come to a standstill because of lack of possibilities of realization or because of lack of incentives to invest.

The interruption of the process of accumulation assumes the form of capital destruction. This is the economic form of appearance of the real social process that expropriates individual capitalists (competition) and deprives the laboring masses of their means of subsistence (unemployment). Economic crisis is immediately transformed into social crisis; for, in unmasking the opposition of the social classes, it provides a practical critique of ideology of the market's pretension to be free of power. The economic crisis results from contradictory system imperatives and threatens social integration. It is, *at the same time*, a social crisis in which the interests of

acting groups collide and place in question the social integration of the society.

The economic crisis is the first (and perhaps only) example in world history of a system crisis characterized in the following way: namely, that the dialectical contradiction between members of an interaction context comes to pass *in terms of* structurally insoluble system contradictions or steering problems. Through this displacement of conflicts of interest to the level of system steering, systems crises gain an objectivity rich in contrast. They have the appearance of natural catastrophes that break forth from the center of a system of purposive rational action. While in traditional societies antagonisms between social classes were mediated through ideological forms of consciousness and thus had *the fateful objectivity of a context of delusion* [*schicksalhafte Objektivität eines Verblendungszusammenhang*], in liberal capitalism, class antagonism is shifted from the intersubjectivity of the life-world into the substratum of this world. Commodity fetishism is both a secularized residual ideology and the actually functioning steering principle of the economic system. Economic crises thus lose the character of a fate accessible to self-reflection and acquire *the objectivity of inexplicable, contingent, natural events*. The ideological core has thus shifted to ground level. Before it can be destroyed by reflection, these events are in need of an objective examination of system processes. This need is reflected in the Marxian critique of political economy.⁴

Although the theory of value is also intended to fulfill the task of a critique of commodity fetishism—and of the derivative cultural phenomena of bourgeois society⁵—it is directly a systems analysis of the economic process of reproduction. The fundamental categories of the theory of value are thereby set up in such a way that propositions that follow from a theory of contradictory capital accumulation can be transformed into action-theoretic assumptions of the theory of classes. Marx holds open for himself the possibility of retranslating the economic processes of capital utilization, which take place within the bounds of class structure, into social processes between classes—after all, he is the author of the *Eighteenth Brumaire* as well as of *Capital*. It is precisely this sociological retranslation of an economic analysis that proceeds immanently

that gives rise to difficulties in the altered conditions of organized capitalism. I would like to take up the not-yet-satisfactorily-answered question Has capitalism changed?⁶ in the form: Is the fundamental contradiction of the capitalist social formation effective in the same way under the forms of appearance of organized capitalism, or has the logic of crisis changed? Has capitalism been fully transformed into a post-capitalist social formation that has overcome the crisis-ridden form of economic growth?