

11 The Theory of Communicative Action and Theory of System and Lifeworld in Relational Practice

In this chapter I would like to inform our understanding of relational practice and sustainability by taking another set of ideas about communication and behaviour, which is slightly different to the Batesonian pragmatics of human communication used in the last chapter. Here I focus upon the critique of modern welfare-state capitalism to be found in the social theory of Jurgen Habermas and his associated working of behavioural communication. I first describe some key aspects Habermas' social theory (located within a line of critical theorists from the Frankfurt school following Marx) by introducing two main elements of his theory of communicative action - the theory of system and lifeworld and the theory of knowledge constitutive interests. Having introduced these ideas - in what is again quite a theoretically dense section - I then work with Habermas' theoretical constructs to engage in further reflection upon business-NGO relations and my own research/practice in the context of the modern welfare-state. More specifically, looking through the conceptual lenses of system and lifeworld, I suggest that perceptions of NGOs as being separate from the steering media of money and power have allowed the sector to engage in change efforts with powerful actors such as business. However, this distance is more perceived than real. As a result private sector engagement, whilst affording solutions to pressing problems, may seriously affect NGO legitimacy. I frame my own research/practice in terms of the system and lifeworld theory.

I think the explorations in this chapter demonstrate that the theory of communicative action is a powerful analytical tool in the context of a critical theory for modern welfare-state capitalism. However, I have found that there are also some limitations. In the next chapter (12) I discuss how such theoretical contributions to our understanding of agency and social structure can be made more useful in participatory practice towards creating change for sustainability.

11.1 Critical Theory and Communicative Action

Jurgen Habermas is perhaps the most prolific writer of the critical theorists coming from the Frankfurt School in Germany. The loose collection of individuals, which also includes Adorno, Marcuse, Horkheimer and Lukacs, have philosophical interests that centre around the works Kant, Hegel, Marx and Freud (Bowman, 1996; Craib, 1992). In this sense Habermas can be situated within the tradition of Western Marxism that has a primary concern with explicating

a moral and political philosophy, compared with engaging in a political programme aimed at specifying what is to be done to move to a classless society. As Bowman suggests it is a tradition which has forwarded a form of “Marxism without the proletariat” (1996).

The Frankfurt School points us towards the need for emancipation from the system of welfare-state capitalism, with a view that stepwise change and pragmatism will tend to entrench the capitalist system. It thus requires a radical re-orientation in order to free us from self-imposed alienation arising from the capitalist mode of production. According to the school a failure to recognise that this mode is an instrument of our own oppression marks our rationality with a “false consciousness”. However, for Habermas, “though our taken-for-granted views of it must be transformed, rationality can still provide hope for the non-violent construction of better worlds, established through communicative action aimed at mutual understanding and directed towards unforced agreement among people” (cited in Kemmis, 1993:39).

Habermas’ theory of communicative action feeds upon attacks against the philosophy of consciousness emanating from the analytic philosophy of language and psychological theory of behaviour. The philosophy of consciousness has been criticised for the way in which it “sees language and action in terms of a relationship between a subject and an object...[which] leaves us [with] instrumental reason (Craib, 1992) and for the reification of the subject. In avoiding the problem of the reification of the subject Habermas “clears the way for a communication concept of rationality” (Habermas, 1987b: 5) where we can “find a place for the subject within acts of communication that construct subjects as well as discourse” (Kemmis, 1993:49). In moving towards this position Habermas seeks to proffer a view of rationality based on the pragmatics of communication. Habermas’ post metaphysical philosophy, then, locates truth in discourse not in the mind of the individual human subject. Kemmis adds that this implies that “truth could only emerge in settings where all assertions are equally open to critical scrutiny, without fear or favour” (2000).

By developing a theory of communicative competence, where all assertion are theoretically open to this critical scrutiny, Habermas has sought to form a normative basis for critical theory. His attempts to develop theoretical underpinnings for claims to free speech draw upon the notion that the use of language equates to the following of rules. In developing this theoretical track Habermas suggests that all uncoerced and free communication would allow for positive or negative responses to three “criticizable validity claims”:

“Hearers can contest [an] utterance in three respects: depending on whether it is expanded to a statement of fact, an expression of feeling, or a command. They can call into question its truth, its sincerity, or its legitimacy...these are precisely the three basic modes available to communicative action” (Habermas, 1987b: 26).

He suggests, thus, that of any utterance one can ask “is it true (in the sense of accurate)?”, “is it sincerely stated?” and “is it right and morally-appropriate”. He develops the theory of communicative action - action oriented towards mutual understanding and unforced agreement - that accords with these validity claims and forms the theoretical basis for democratic discourse.

Habermas has extrapolated Wittgenstein’s rules of language in order to develop the above rules; whereas Wittgenstein considered learning-by-doing as the way to apprehend these rules, Habermas has been criticised for replacing learning-by-doing with the synthesis of a few meta-rules¹. There are numerous other sources of criticism of Habermas’ work, particularly from postmodern theorists attacking his attachment to modernist rationality as manifested in his conceptualisations of power and discourse; however, for the moment I shall side-step these and enter, perhaps slightly uncritically, into an exploration of the theory of system and lifeworld.

11.2 Theory of System and Lifeworld

Within the theory of communicative action Habermas develops the theory of the lifeworld and system. In trying to specify the relation between knowledge and human activity, he differentiates between communicative action - the use of language oriented towards understanding or action for intersubjective understanding of symbols - and strategic action - the use of language oriented towards producing effects or purposive rational action (Habermas, 1987b).

Habermas’ theory of system and lifeworld, like other recent theories of society, seeks to move beyond the fragmentation between theories of social action and theories of social structure. The relationship between social structure and agency has long been used as a matrix for making sense of social change in sociology (Craib, 1992). Giddens (1984) and Archer (1982) (as well as

¹ Personal communication Bjorn Gustavsen, January 2001. I am indebted to Bjorn for his thoughts regarding Habermas’ orientation to theory and practice, democratic dialogue and communicative action. I am also grateful to Robin Holt for his comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.

others) have sought to propose a dualism of agency and structure in which micro actions, when taken together, constitute the macro state or structure - a state that then holds forth the space for the further actions. In this way action and structure are said to co-create each other through processes of structuration (Giddens) and morphogenesis (Archer).

These theories, then, have been attempts to move away from previous theoretical stances of social action, such as the functionalism of Parsons, which seemed to isolate the agency of the individual from a wider social system and so rendered individual action largely impotent. In doing so they have drawn upon theories of social structure, such as structuralism. Authors such as Barthes, with his wonderfully engaging *Mythologies* (1972), were among the pioneers who drew upon the emerging field of semiotics. The structuralists used language as a metaphor to propose a view of society as being constituted by individual actions; nevertheless, these early language-oriented theorists still maintained a heavy focus on the constraints of the social structure upon social action (Hawkes, 1977). Most recently postmodernism and post-structuralism have enabled (required?) the adoption of a form of sense making in which social action and social structure are mutually constitutive (Sarup, 1993). Habermas has also developed a sense of dialectical interplay between agency and structure through the theory of system and lifeworld. In what is perhaps a subtle twist, he moves to conceive of societies simultaneously as “system” and “lifeworld”. In doing so he indicates that social situations are encountered where the setting can be experienced from both a system perspective and a lifeworld perspective.

The term lifeworld, or *Lebenswelt*, draws upon Husserl’s reference to the ‘world as given in experience’ prior to operations in science or phenomenological philosophy. Habermas uses this term to suggest that “societies reproduce themselves by continuing the interpretive acts of proceeding generations in which members intersubjectively exchange world orientations and situational definitions stored up in the lifeworld” (*Critical Theory of Jurgen Habermas*, 1997). Habermas adds that, with the conditions of capitalism in the modern welfare-state, the values of these two perspectives - system and lifeworld - seem to collide with greater frequency in such a way as to create frequent experiences of “boundary crises”. These collisions that affect the lifeworld reproduction process or the “intersubjective exchange of world orientations”.

Kemmis suggests that from the system perspective,

“modern society encompasses organisational and institutional structures (including work roles and rules) and the functioning of these structures...systems operate

through rational purposive action - that is (instrumental, means-ends) action oriented towards success)...since it is circumscribed by system structures and processes, and oriented towards achieving outcomes defined in terms of system goals, its central concerns are with systems functioning” (Kemmis, 2001: 94)

I have found Kemmis’ suggestion that the distinction between “social integration” and “system integration” parallels the distinction between system and lifeworld a useful one in developing my understanding. Briefly, social integration refers to the integration of an individual, qua specific personality, in face-to-face relationships in groups. System integration is, on the other hand, the integration of an individual into a social system in terms of relationships based upon the roles and functions required of the individual as per the operation of the social system, thus involving “reciprocity between people not as unique individuals but as incumbents of roles” (Kemmis, 2001).

11.2.1 Lifeworld

In contrast to the functional rationality of society when considered from a systems perspective, the sphere of lifeworld, where systems are ultimately anchored (Crossley, 1996), is the context for the evolutionary development the three spheres of the lifeworld: “culture”, “society” and “personality”. Habermas uses :

“the term culture for the stock of knowledge from which participants in communication supply themselves with interpretations as they come to an understanding about something in the world...

“...the term society for legitimate orders through which participants regulate their memberships in social groups and thereby secure solidarity”

and the term personality for the “competences that make a subject capable of speaking and acting, that put him in a position to take part in processes of reaching understanding and thereby to assert his own identity” (Habermas, 1987b: 138)

Communicative action, as a form of orienting, predominates as the way to secure and reproduce these three structural nuclei of the lifeworld - culture, society and personality. The structural nuclei are “made possible” by three interacting processes of “cultural reproduction”,

“social integration” and “socialisation”. These reproduction processes take place in three dimensions of the lifeworld “in the *semantic* dimension of meanings or contents (of the cultural tradition) as well as in the dimensions of *social space* (of socially integrated groups) and *historical time* (of successive generations)” (Habermas, 1987b:137-138).

Thus, in the “semantic” dimension “cultural reproduction” of the lifeworld produces a store of “valid knowledge”, where interpretive schemes are fit for consensus; so, for example, “in coming to an understanding of one another about their situation, participants in interaction stand in a cultural tradition that they at once use and renew” (Habermas, 1987b: 137). Cultural reproduction ensures that in the semantic dimension “newly arising situations can be connected up with existing conditions in the world; it secures the continuity of tradition and a coherence of knowledge sufficient for the consensus needs of everyday practice” (Habermas, 1987a: 343).

In the dimension of “social space” legitimate orders of interpersonal relations from “social integration” create “solidarity”. The dimension is exemplified by participants who “co-ordinating their actions by way of intersubjectively recognising criticizable validity claims...are at once relying on membership in social groups and strengthening the integration of those same groups” (Habermas, 1987b: 137). “Newly arising situations (in the dimension of social space) can be connected up with existing conditions in the world; it takes care of co-ordination of action by means of legitimately regulated interpersonal relationships and lends constancy to the identity of groups” (Habermas, 1987a: 343).

And finally, in the dimension of “historical time”, interactive capabilities allow “personal identity” to be created through “socialisation”. For example, “through participating in interactions with competently acting reference persons, the growing child internalises the value orientations of his social group and acquires generalised capacities for social action” (Habermas, 1987b: 137). Here, then, the socialisation of members “secures the acquisition of generalised capacities for action for future generations and takes care of harmonising individual life histories and collective life forms” (Habermas, 1987a: 344).

The three “structural nuclei” of the lifeworld are thus symbolically reproduced or rationalised through communicative action of the “transmission, critique and acquisition of cultural knowledge”, the “co-ordination of knowledge via intersubjectively recognised validity claims and the “formation of identity” respectively (Habermas, 1987b:144). Until this point I have discussed the contribution of the three functions of communicative action to the reproduction

of the lifeworld within their own frames, i.e. cultural reproduction produces the transmission of cultural knowledge in the culture sphere of the lifeworld etc. Habermas adds that each of the reproduction processes contributes to maintaining all of the components of the lifeworld. So, for example, cultural reproduction helps maintain the other two components of the lifeworld - society and personality - by producing legitimations for existing institutions in the society sphere and socialisation patterns and educational goals for the acquisition of generalised competences for action in the personality sphere of the lifeworld. The contributions of the reproduction processes to the maintenance of the structural components of the lifeworld are represented in **Error! Reference source not found.**

Reproduction processes	Structural components	<i>Culture</i>	<i>Society</i>	<i>Personality</i>
<i>Cultural reproduction</i>		Interpretive schemes fit for consensus ("valid knowledge")	Legitimations	Socialisation patterns Educational goals
<i>Social integration</i>		Obligations	Legitimately ordered interpersonal relations	Social memberships
<i>Socialisation</i>		Interpretive accomplishments	Motivations for actions that conform to norms	Interactive capabilities ("personal identity")

Figure 1 Contributions of Reproduction Processes to Maintaining the Structural Components of the Lifeworld²

11.2.2 System

Habermas regards the lifeworld as the linguistic context for the processes of communication (Rasmussen, 1990). Social change and development occurs through the progressive rationalisation of the lifeworld - that is, through the processes of symbolic reproduction - and in this way societies are able to 'go on'. This rationalisation process runs parallel to another process: that of the differentiation of the structures of society. All the time the rationalisation of the lifeworld is being influenced by and is influencing this other process of social system differentiation. In contrast to the symbolic reproduction that takes place within the lifeworld, the system is the context for material reproduction of the structures of society. Habermas suggests that in tribal societies, since the three validity claims of communicative action are undifferentiated and can not be contested, the lifeworld is coextensive with the social system

and so “reproduce[s] itself in every interaction”. Kinship relations and tradition are the source of both social and system reproduction in such societies and, therefore, in tribal societies “system differentiation...does not yet make itself noticeable by intervening in the structures of the lifeworld” (Habermas, 1987b:172).

However, an increasingly “role bound” hierarchy in “traditional societies” (those societies organised around a state) means that “functional interconnection” rises above the level of the “simple” interactions of tribal society³. As economic functions are also taken over by system values and oriented by the market in the form of capitalism, there is considerable differentiation of and between the media-controlled state and economic subsystems. As a result developments in class differentiation become independent of kinship relations and instead are defined by functional position, income and way of life (Outhwaite, 1996). The stable and powerful “steering media” of money and administrative power come in and work relatively autonomously “in a disinterested manner indifferent to the unique personalities and interests of the individuals inhabiting them and thus, in a manner which appears to be indifferent to the dynamics of cultural reproduction, social integration and socialisation” (Kemmis, 2000), essentially challenging the “assimilative powers of the all-encompassing lifeworld” (Habermas, 1987b:172). Social integration (in the lifeworld) and system integration become “uncoupled” such that the social system escapes from the “intuitive knowledge of everyday communicative practice”. The social system instead appears to reify into systemic mechanisms with an autonomous “second nature” that is norm free and appears as an “*objectified* context of life”.

Since the steering media encode a purposively rational attitude “it is possible to exert a generalised, strategic influence on the decisions of other participants while *bypassing* processes of consensus-oriented communication” (Habermas, 1987b:183). As the functional rationalities of “monetarisation” and “bureaucratisation” expand over wider domains the imperatives, language, values and norms that are based on systems and strategic action are said to saturate the lifeworld replacing “linguistic communication with a symbolic generalisation of rewards and punishments”. A discourse of roles, functions and functionality comes to predominate in the reproduction of the lifeworld (Kemmis, 2000) and so “the lifeworld is no longer needed for the co-ordination of action” (Habermas, 1987b:183), becoming relegated to one subsystem amongst others.

² (Reproduced from Habermas, 1987b: 142)

³Habermas has been criticised for his rather simplified understanding of tribal society and his proposals regarding the emergence of consensus formation therein.

11.2.3 Crises of reproduction

As a result of this *colonisation process*, Habermas suggests that we have reached the point today - with advanced capitalism sitting alongside the welfare-state - where economic and political subsystems assume the task of social integration and where individuals and groups identify themselves and their aspirations in systems terms. The social system has become sufficiently complex that lifeworlds have become vastly provincial and as Habermas forcefully suggests “structural violence is exercised by way of systemic restrictions on communication; distortion is anchored in the formal conditions of the lifeworld...” (Habermas, 1987b: 187). The result of the incursions into the lifeworld and the disruptions to the reproduction of its structural nuclei are suggested to come in the form of pathologies such as “loss of meaning” in the dimension of culture, “anomie” in the dimension of society and “psychopathologies” in the dimension of personality. The various pathologies across the three structural nuclei are set out in **Error! Reference source not found.**

Disturbances in the Domain of	Structural components	<i>Culture</i>	<i>Society</i>	<i>Person</i>	Dimension of evaluation
<i>Cultural reproduction</i>		Loss of meaning	Withdrawal of legitimation	Crisis in orientation and education	Rationality of knowledge
<i>Social integration</i>		Unsettling of collective identity	Anomie	Alienation	Solidarity of members
<i>Socialisation</i>		Rupture of tradition	Withdrawal of motivation	Psychopathologies	Personal responsibility

Figure 2 Manifestation of Crisis when Reproduction Processes are Disturbed (Pathologies)⁴

The rest of this chapter attempts to describe, from my experience and perspective, the ways in which those engaging in business-NGO relationships - change-oriented relationships with powerful actors - may experience the competing imperatives of the system and lifeworld or “boundary crises” practice.

Briefly, I work from the suggestion that the increasingly ubiquitous presence of pathologies seems to indicate that locations where the symbolic reproduction of lifeworld values take place

⁴ (Reproduced from Habermas, 1987b: 142)

have become reduced. As suggested in chapter 3, the need for legitimacy amongst multinational business has increased considerably following the presence of a number of changing conditions of social reality. Legitimacy and trust are the kind of non-functional resources that emanate from the lifeworld and not the system. As the system incursions of monetarisation and bureaucratisation dominate within business, multinational companies increasingly require external sources to help confer the appropriate legitimacy upon their actions and existence. My working of the system and lifeworld theory suggests that the reason why businesses engage NGOs is because NGOs are perceived (by society, business and themselves) as locations in which the symbolic reproduction of lifeworld values overrides the orientation towards material reproduction of system values. The perceived orientation towards symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld components within NGOs, in contrast to the dominating control by money and power in other organisational locations (businesses and government), has provided NGOs with the ability to confer legitimacy. This ability has lead powerful actors to seek out association with NGOs as they look for their to “licence to operate” from society. However, as I go on to suggest, both this ability and the associated engagement of powerful actors by NGOs are based upon a false perception/assumption about the extent to which NGOs are separate from the incursions of system values of money and power. The chapter goes on to suggest how this perception and the engagement of powerful actors are likely to present NGOs with significant internal organisational challenges as well as restrict such forms of engagement to first-order developmental change.

11.3 Symbolic reproduction in NGO lifeworlds

In the following section I seek to map some of the ways and areas in which NGOs may be considered to have contributed to the symbolic reproduction of lifeworld components. It may strike you as over-generalised, imputing an excessive degree of homogeneity over the diverse NGO sector and this is an important consideration. However, I hope that you can bear with me as I conduct a kind of “thought experiment”, similar to that undertaken by Habermas in the *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1987a:344).

The section also raises some important questions regarding the nature of theory and its use in the context of participatory action research towards sustainability. Briefly, this section on NGO lifeworlds is very explorative, but is also a personal interpretation and attempt at sense making. While for me it has been valid, in the sense that it has enabled me to construct another piece of “story”, in an action context it would seem to require further validation from

participants in NGO-business relationships, to identify the sense making potential afforded by such a theoretical mapping.

11.3.1 Knowledge constitutive interests and the welfare-state

In order to further the application of this thought experiment to NGO-business relationships I would first like to outline Habermas' theory of knowledge constitutive interests in the context of the modern welfare-state. Above I have described Habermas' theory of the system and lifeworld that forms part of his theoretical project of validating free communication and the ideal speech situation as a way towards the reconstitution of welfare-state capitalism. Prior to his theory of communicative action, Habermas attempted a critique of positivist reductionism (in particular the reduction of epistemology to methodology). He posited that knowledge, which is rooted in history, is bounded by three transcendental interests: "technical", "practical" and emancipatory". This tripartite division corresponds to the ideas emerging from other critical theorists such as Adorno, Marcuse and Horkheimer.

Habermas suggests that technical/instrumental knowledge, embodied in empirical-analytical inquiry, arises from interests in "possible technical control over objectified processes of nature" (Habermas, 1978:191). Practically effective knowledge, manifested in the hermeneutic sciences, emanates from interests in "a process of mutual understanding...in the tradition bound structure of symbolic interaction" (Habermas, 1978:191). Finally, emancipatory knowledge is suggested to arise from an orientation towards "analyses that free consciousness from its dependence upon hypostatised power" (from Habermas (1971)). Thus, the three knowledge constitutive interests take form respectively in the mediums of work, language and power.

The modernist project has required a form of reasoning based on systemisation, regulation and control. The recent history of Western consciousness has been dominated by this form of reasoning. The result (alongside the considerable and important improvements to physical conditions and security of life) is, according to theorists from the Frankfurt School, that instrumental reasoning continues to predominate today to the virtual exclusion of questions about the nature of the ends that are sought. This is emphasised by Habermas in his consideration of the establishment and the status of the welfare-state and class conflict. Inherent in the welfare-state and modern capitalism is a class compromise since for Habermas,

"the legal institutionalisation of collective bargaining became the basis of a reform politics that has brought about a pacification of class conflict in the social-welfare-

state. The core of the matter is the legislation of rights and entitlements in the sphere of work and social welfare, making provision for the basic risks of the wage labourers' existence and compensating them for handicaps that arise from the structurally weaker market positions (of employees, tenants, consumers, etc.)” (Habermas, 1987b: 347).

This “if-then” structure of employment, tenancy and consumption within the welfare-state is seen as provision and compensation for the losses to lifeworld brought about by the increased system complexity that are required for the maintenance of the capitalist growth enterprise. The result is essentially that “social-welfare policy heads off extreme disadvantages and insecurities without naturally affecting the structurally unequal property, income and power relations” through the provision of monetary compensation (Habermas, 1987b:347).

The incursions of system values into lifeworlds is both a sign and symptom of the welfare-state and the compromise as described above. One might suggest that this has occurred most readily and visibly in business and government; these can be seen as important domains in which experiences of system relations began to replace lifeworld values in moves towards greater and greater functional rationalisation. The orientation towards strategic action, monetarisation and bureaucratisation of multinational business and big government can perhaps be accepted as defining characteristics of their organisational imperatives and system roles in the welfare-state. I recall my sense when working with participants from Shell that I rarely felt that I was talking to the individual and more often felt that I was being given the “party line”, according to the role of the individual within the organisational system.

Large domains of social life, less concerned with strategic activities of systemisation, regulation and control and more concerned with communicative processes of individuation-socialisation, social integration and cultural reproduction, have historically been somewhat more immune to the incursion of system values. Meanwhile other domains have been created to solve emergent system problems. As the social system has become more complex, extensive, and dense and as money and power have increasingly come to appear as forces of nature, this immunity has steadily eroded. Incursions of system values have seeped into more and more domains of social life; education, families, charity, art, love, spirituality have increasingly become subject to the system discourse of roles, functions and functionality and under the control of the steering media of money and power.

11.3.2 Communicative action in NGOs

This “incursion” has contributed much to such activities allowing them to become more “professional” and “efficient”.⁵ However, in locations previously acting as important storehouses for symbolic reproduction of lifeworlds, the replacement of communicative action of the lifeworld with strategic action of the system - of mutual understanding and consensus formation with purposive rational action and functional reasoning (Kemmis, 2000) - has put the reproduction processes further under strain. While it seems that nowhere is left completely undirected by money and/or power, different locations have adopted and adapted to the discourse to differing extents and in differing ways.

I would like to take the thought experiment forward with the notion that some characteristics of NGOs have had an historical, albeit parochial, role in the reproduction of lifeworlds. In this way they have come to be seen as a source of resistance to the effects of colonisation and an organisational shelter from the boundary crises between social conditions and the system in late modernity. In particular, I suggest that as a result of their origins, functions and growth (perceived, real and relative), the NGO sector in the North has developed an image of being separate from the incursion process and of contributing solely to the symbolic reproduction of lifeworlds through communicative action.

The origins of many NGOs (taken to be a wider ranging spectrum from non-profit organisations to charitable foundations and missionary concerns) have lain in “friendship” or “family” bonds, centred around mutual and local areas of concern and/or with a “non-profit” orientation (Korten, 1987; de Senillosa, 1998). As a result, the individual association from employees with a particular NGO may be seen to come from an attachment to the intersection between the specific organisation and the associated movement/cause. It seems reasonable to suggest that for those involved in the provision of NGO services, being part of an NGO may have evoked a symbolic attachment in the three dimensions of the lifeworld.

On the basis of the contributions of the processes of cultural reproduction, social integration and socialisation to the structural components of the lifeworld (as set out in **Error! Reference source not found.** on page **Error! Bookmark not defined.**) Habermas also outlines the functions that communicative action takes in the reproduction processes. These contributions are set out in **Error! Reference source not found.** on page **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

⁵ You might recall the section about “abundance: paper clips, bootstraps and rivers of plenty” in the Shell-Living Earth learning history and the questions that arose about how we are to understand an NGO in the context of increasingly abundant resources.

So developing our thought experiment (working within the space of concepts in **Error! Reference source not found.** and **Error! Reference source not found.**) one suggestion we might make concerns cultural reproduction in the semantic dimension of the lifeworld. Here the missionary origins of many organisations, such as CAFOD and Christian Aid now considered to be firmly within the NGO camp, may be viewed as outcomes of altruistic desires (Korten, 1987). These organisations might be seen as locations for cultural reproduction towards the kind “interpretive schemes fit for consensus” that require communicative action for the maintenance of a store of valid knowledge. Related to this renewal of specific religious knowledge, NGOs may have thus made a contribution towards the continuing legitimation for existing institutions of the faith in the societal nucleus.

Reproduction processes	Structural components	<i>Culture</i>	<i>Society</i>	<i>Personality</i>
<i>Cultural reproduction</i>		Transmission, critique, acquisition of cultural knowledge	Renewal of knowledge effective for legitimation	Reproduction of knowledge relevant to child rearing, education
<i>Social integration</i>		Immunisation of a central stock of value orientations	Co-ordination of actions via intersubjectively recognised validity claims	Reproduction of patterns of social membership
<i>Socialisation</i>		Enculturation	Internalisation of values	Formation of identity

Figure 3 Reproductive Functions of Action Oriented to Mutual Understanding⁶

Alternatively, we might consider that the vocational nature of employment in NGOs suggests the attachment of the individual to the organisation that embodies the “cause”. In a world where the social system and lifeworld have been differentiating from each other and where the gap between horizons of life experience and the possibilities for their realisation has been rising (Habermas, 1987b), the conjunction between the specific movement/cause of the NGO and the organisational container allows NGOs to offer some form of constancy in identity group.

⁶ (Reproduced from Habermas, 1987b: 142)

This quasi-solidarity in the dimension of social space, then, holds forth the potential to reproduce patterns of social membership in the personality component of the lifeworld.

Additionally, the shared sense of attachment towards the (temporally unbound) organisation and cause can, when compared to functional system goals, be seen as a source of personal responsibility in the dimension of historical time. This might be seen as offering individuals the kind of socialisation of members that enables “individual life histories” to be in “harmony with collective forms of life”. We can also imagine that the causes at the centre of NGO activity can be seen as sources for motivation for actions that conform to the norms within that social group.

These observations do not provide a direct match with the deep kinship patterns of tribal communities in which Habermas suggests system and social integration remained firmly together; they do begin to suggest how it is that NGOs have come to be perceived (by both staff and members as well as by the public) as bearers of lifeworld values.

11.3.3 Perceptions of doing good

A perception of the underlying altruistic nature of NGOs has been fostered and perpetuated by the sense that as “charities” NGOs are involved in the politically unencumbered and materially (in terms of profit) unconcerned provision of assistance and services to others, in “doing good” (Zivetz, 1991; Fisher, 1997). Moreover, the assumption that there are numerous problems in the social and environmental world that will, no doubt, indefinitely require the attention of committed others, further contributes to a perception that those who are working with others today are providing absolute and unambiguous positive benefits, virtually irrespective of means. As intimated in the Shell-Living Earth learning history (7.5) the premise of unambiguously beneficial service towards others has, on occasion, become the justification-proper for the continued presence of any particular individual or organisation.

A largely unquestioned acceptance of the ends of many NGOs, alongside their historical insulation from the marketplace via charitable giving and philanthropy, has meant that issues of organisational (institutional) perpetuation have been shifted to an arms length relationship from the “competitive” search for funds. I suggest that, both in wider society and within the sector itself, the result of this perceived distance is an underlying, tacitly accepted theoretical frame of reference of non- or negative-growth in the NGO sector.

The above constructions seem to allow for the impression that the ideal-type NGO orients action towards mutual understanding. The sector has become socially constructed to stand in contrast to the overtly and unashamedly individualistic and growth-oriented paradigm of advanced capitalism. More explicitly in the language of Habermas, the organisations are perceived to be apart from the “productivist core”; they do not seek to “buy solidarity or meaning” through money or power. Evidence would seem to bear out the existence of these perceptions; as suggested in section IV, one of the reasons Shell sought to engage with NGOs was because of the high esteem that society held them in.

At the same time that this perception has persisted many NGOs have moved forward beyond their origins in the provision of welfare and relief. As discussed in chapter 3 latter generation NGOs have moved into the role of systems catalysts and agents of institutional change. The threat to sustainability from economic globalisation and capitalism - the system boundaries - once perhaps defined by NGOs in rather narrow, parochial terms have now come increasingly to include the roots and project of neo-liberal welfare-state capitalism. Additionally, various other discourses around empowerment, capacity building and participation have all ultimately come back with the answer that “for us, the lowers, to do more you, the uppers, must do less yourself”. Latter generation NGOs have begun to walk tentatively towards the logical conclusion therein and in so doing entered into a corridor of paradox. As some commentators have managed to voice, a fundamental NGO objective should now concern creating the conditions for their own obsolescence and eventual closure. As de Senillosa comments

“we must not forget that NGOs, in contrast to profitable companies, do not work to gain a bigger slice of the ‘market’, but help others to grow. At the end of the day, our commitment as an NGO is to ‘withdraw ourselves from the business’ (Dichter, 1989)” (1998: 49-50).

However, that the sector as a whole thinks this way, that a recognition of the need for self-withdrawal happens or that participation and capacity building go beyond a purely methodological status are clearly contested claims. Meanwhile, the huge problem of what such a self-reflexive logical conclusion would mean for organisational life and activity seems to have completely escaped any attention.

11.4 Colonisation by the backdoor

While the above notion of NGOs as sources of refuge from lifeworld incursions may seem appealing and even partially true, an important caveat needs to be brought to attention: NGO lifeworlds are not completely isolated communities, the organisations and individuals within have grown up and existed within the very real context of the highly differentiated and differentiating lifeworlds of late modernity. It is the *perception* of immunity from the double pronged attack of monetarisation and bureaucratisation and from today's overwhelming "discourse of roles, functions and functionality" (a perception held both within and outside of the sector) that provides a considerable challenge to the participative practice of latter generation, system catalyst type NGOs. If it were clear that all of society has become equally oriented to functional reasoning and purposive rational action, we would perhaps have even ground to stand upon and survey the changed and changing territory. However, the perception of certain sections of society - for example NGOs and academia - being seen as island-like refuges from the colonisation, as able to maintain an arms length relationship with respect to the steering media and oriented solely towards mutual understanding, adds to the challenges arising from the erosion of lifeworld values. In this section I describe how NGOs are enfolded within this colonisation process and how perceptions of distance from it have created certain problems.

The contradiction of this perceived distance from the conditions of colonisation - a process that seems to have little respect for wealth, authority or apparent other-centredness - can be thrown into sharp relief by the realisation that the emergence of the NGO as an organisational form is very much part of the welfare-state compromise. Although NGOs may consider themselves and be considered by others to be members of the "variegated array of groups" who are removed from the "productivist core of performance" (Hirsch 1980 cited in Habermas, 1987b) - professing solidarity with the dispossessed and disempowered - I suggest that lifeworlds of NGOs are very much involved in this process of monetarisation and bureaucratisation as part of this welfare-state compromise. It seems that this process may be played out at two inter-related levels within NGOs.

Firstly, looking at the individual staff - as citizens of social-welfare-states - employment in an NGO can be seen as part of the overall compensation package for life-risks offered by the state. Despite the orientation towards social causes and needs, the "if-then" compensation structure is nevertheless part of employment in the NGO sector; it involves all employees of NGOs in the compensation package necessary for the class compromise of the welfare-state.

When played out an international level, i.e. beyond the boundaries of any individual welfare-state, NGOs can still be thought of as part of the redistributive compensation efforts of bourgeois law. While the individual country of operation may not be a social welfare-state, the casting of the net of advanced Western capitalism manages to reach individuals all over, offering (for free?) the same juridification of life-risks to most NGO employees. My thoughts return to the picture shown to me by Miriam Isoun whilst I was in Nigeria, which showed the line of social scientists and NGO workers all studying and benefiting from the assistance provided to the communities of the Delta (see appendix D).⁷ I am also reminded of a refrain that I heard a number of times, in different forms, from a number of NGO staff; that even as employees of NGOs they must still pay their mortgages.

Secondly, at an organisational and institutional level we may also see NGOs as inherently part of this process of monetarisation and bureaucratisation. As suggested above, Habermas regards the welfare-state class compromise as providing compensation for the basic life risks for the structurally weaker market positions of employees, tenants and consumers. This indemnification of life-risks in monetary form is usually sufficient. However, tangible problems of changes in life situation have occasioned the development of “therapeutic assistance” as “social service”, taking compensation over and above mere “consumerist redefinition”. The notion that the welfare-state will offer monetary compensation for the results of increased system complexity and effects upon lifeworlds is an example of the introduction “into matters of economic and social distribution an “if-then” structure of conditional law that is ‘foreign’ to social relations, to social causes and needs” (Habermas, 1987b:362).

When seen through the lens of Habermas’ analysis of welfare-state capitalism, the role of the generalised NGO can be framed by the notion of a “social service” and can be regarded as a manifestation of “therapeutic assistance”. The role of the NGO seems to fit alongside other welfare-state interventions of “administratively prescribed treatment” by an external (individual and organisation) expert. This “expert, who is acting functionally, perpetuates the client-as-object condition, instead of making (and despite, implicitly at least, professing to) a contribution to social integration of lifeworlds. For example at the international level, NGOs have been labelled as the “frontmen” of the “Lords of Poverty” for their role in perpetuating a fundamental split between the developed North and South through the neo-colonialism of development aid and assistance (Fisher, 1997; Hancock, 1989).

⁷ An interesting aspect in that representation is the presence of a number of scientists acting on behalf of development institutions and NGO activity. The perceptions of distance from monetarisation and bureaucratisation within the world of the academic are remarkably similar to those sketched out above with regard to the NGO sector. To this end you

Thus, we might contrast the perceived immunity of NGOs from the incursion of system values with a suggestion that their very existence, institutionalisation and proliferation in the post-Second World War era renders Northern NGOs very much part of the system conditions of advanced capitalism, as subject to the effects of increased system complexity and by inference involved in the colonisation of lifeworlds. As suggested, above the implications of this are significant given the increasing number of calls from latter generation NGOs for developmental and transformational change to the capitalist mode of production.

We can get a glimpse of this suggested process of colonisation with the example of the relationship between grassroots activism and the activities of NGOs in international policy circles. The NGO sector seems to have, for some time, held on to their grassroots origins and the perception of being firmly attached to the “orientation and attitude of members”. The massive expansion in NGO numbers and diversity over the last 10 years draws a picture of an entire ecology of organisations that are there to serve the needs of the disempowered, to *help* silenced people, communities and environments. But the profusion and ubiquity in certain policy circles of such organisations in both the North and South, as opposed to grass roots and community-based organisations, and the abundant opportunities for “helping others” are perhaps signs of an underlying tension between system and lifeworld imperatives and the problems of legitimation in modern society.

The relationship between grass roots organisations and NGOs is perhaps demonstrative of the ways in which system values sit within the NGO belly. Tarrow suggests, it is only when “domestic actors can access international institutions that they most easily overcome obstacles to transnational contention and gain long term resources to support their claims”. In line with this, domestic activists in the South - looking to build external identification of the domestic problem - necessarily view such institutional arrangements as a source for developing the domestic resources of their activities. As some take on this role they become the overseas representatives of the grassroots struggles (Tarrow, 2000) resulting in the development of a “cosmopolitan cadre of activists”, such as those formed for the anti-dam campaigns in India. Keck and Sikkink have accorded Northern NGOs the role of a “boomerang”, working within this triangle of domestic groups, their governments and transnational activist networks such that “resource-poor domestic actors can gain leverage in their own societies...by enlisting the aid of resource-richer non-state actors outside their boundaries” (referenced in Tarrow, 2000).

might recall the vignette concerning Shell and the RGS-IBG described in chapter 4.
link to: http://www.bath.ac.uk/carpp/publications/doc_theses_links/r_shah.html

The challenge seems to involve some domestic activists trying to increase access to international resource bases by speaking the language and playing the game of Northern donor organisations, whilst avoiding becoming alienated from domestic social networks. Meanwhile, Northern NGOs – seeking to assist their Southern counterparts and increasingly tasked to enable access to funds in an ever more competitive and professional market for resources – have less opportunity for action oriented towards mutual understanding and more need to communicate with a strategic orientation.⁸ While these groups may well establish supportive networks, gain access to resources and build new “collective action frames”, Tarrow reminds us that international institutions are created by states and are therefore not “in the business of dissolving state authority structures”.

Habermas would probably conclude that donor agencies, as international vectors of welfare-state capitalism, provide various functions and resources that allow the strengthening of (both elitist and grass roots) domestic groups. These donor groups act as the crucible in which the claims of domestic groups - made in system-oriented functional language - are most likely to prosper, all the while subjugating communicative action of the lifeworld to the sidelines. Like the social services of today’s “therapeuticocracy” that Habermas refers to, NGO activities seem to have taken “on a reality of their own nurtured by professional competence..., the framework of administrative action, biographical and current ‘findings’, the readiness and ability to co-operate of the person seeking the service or being subjected to it” (Habermas, 1987b). There are numerous other examples of goal-oriented behaviours and the monetarisation and bureaucratisation of transactions in the NGO world: the intense competition for funds between NGOs, the professionalisation of employment and internal structure, serious marketing of activities, the ready adoption of a “victim language” by clients who have learnt the NGO language and questions over NGO perpetuation (Fisher, 1997; Bebbington & Farrington, 1993). These can all be taken as signs of the effect of system conditions and values upon NGOs. The manifestations of crisis when lifeworld reproduction processes are disturbed, such as withdrawal of legitimation, unsettling of collective identity, withdrawal of motivation or loss of meaning (Habermas, 1987b) evoke quite distinct pictures of various issues currently facing the NGO sector⁹.

⁸ The decreasing demands or opportunities for communicative action in the NGO sector allows a discourse of roles and functions to become equally if not more important than one of solidarity and meaning. Solidarity and meaning cannot be bought in from the outside, but roles and function can and quite often are.

⁹ Rather than setting these thoughts out, I will leave it to readers to use their own experiences to draw out and conclude as to the meaning and “validity” of such a mapping.

As suggested above, NGOs have always already been part of “the system” of welfare-state capitalism. Increasing competition for funds amongst differentiated NGOs, requests from government and other donors to demonstrate “results”, an awareness of the professionalising nature of NGO employment¹⁰ and, most of all, the increased visibility of social and environmental problems combine to create a context that demands that NGOs show observable and tangible improvements. As organisations they are increasingly tasked to ensure effectiveness in the role that they play to ensure that their clients are being served efficiently (Edwards et al., 1999). The system prerogatives upon NGOs and individuals within have meant more pressure to conform to system values.

The impulses of lifeworld relations to the types of underlying activities of NGOs are significant; building solidarity “through” organisational mutual understanding, “cultural reproduction” towards transformation and development in society, and “identity formation” in the NGO through dual processes of socialisation and individuation – all these emanate from the lifeworld and are continually thought about and acted upon by NGO members. Importantly, it is these lifeworld values and the related orientation towards action aimed mutual understanding that have provided the basis for the legitimating value offered by NGOs. However, it seems that this is no longer enough; the brightness of postmodernity’s self-reflexivity has made the contours of the NGO body apparent, revealing the organisations and individuals within to be connected to system imperatives. And this brightness itself has rendered the organisations increasingly part of the processual pattern of constituting and being constituted by system imperatives and incursions and part of the overriding tendency for instrumental reasoning towards strategic action.

The tendency to marginalise or deny the incursion of system values upon NGO lifeworlds can, on the one hand, perhaps be considered a generalised and unreflective omission (leaving the backdoor unlocked). On the other hand it may also be considered as a specific denial of and/or failure to address the effects of their own actions upon system perpetuation (leaving the key to backdoor outside under the sign “Here’s the backdoor key”). Whatever the case, it seems significant that despite these increasing incursions, NGOs are perceived and perceive themselves to be part of an ecology of spaces that are safe from the attack of money and power. Importantly, the “accidental-on-purpose” admission of system imperatives has also

¹⁰ The awareness of the fact that NGO employment is more than mere vocational dedication to a cause and can equally be considered a “mere employment” alongside their increasing institutional roles can be considered as source for calls that the organisations lose their parochial and familial nature and develop more professionalism.

opened up new arenas for NGO activity that, at the same time, rely upon this perception as well as hold the potential to undermine it.

11.5 NGOs as system catalysts engaged in change efforts with powerful actors

One particular practice that has been made available for NGO action has been the engagement of powerful actors in the welfare-state capitalist system in collaborative relationships aimed towards catalysing change. When looked at in terms of the system-lifeworld theory, the relationships would seem to operate from a perception that NGOs, oriented towards mutual understanding, are banks of legitimacy from whom government and business can, and increasingly must, draw. For many latter generation NGOs the imperative resulting from perceptions of their legitimacy is to leverage their influence in order to effect change within these powerful sectors of society.

In a similar way to that in which I described the admission of NGOs to the policy dialogue as being made with the proviso of the continuation of current system, NGO partnerships with large businesses, at a micro level at least, imply that the action is closer to the heart of the system. In a sense NGOs, having taken on the role of a therapeutic assistant in the welfare-state, are already very much within a discourse of roles, functions and functionality; the institutional role of NGOs has increased and they have become important actors within the system. Additionally, as Korten has suggested, “when NGOs position themselves to be systems catalysts, their technical weaknesses become apparent”(1987).

Kemmis has adopted Habermas’ differentiation of three knowledge constitutive interests (technical/instrumental, practical/hermeneutic and critical/emancipatory) in his consideration of change and stability in the context of educational systems. He suggests that instrumental and practical reasoning lead respectively to views of “systemisation, regulation and control” and “wise and prudent judgement about what to do in shared social contexts” (Kemmis, 1995:143) and are, in this sense, grounded separately in system or lifeworld conditions. On the other hand, critical reasoning stands out from the other two forms in its attempts to foster a consideration of the inter-relation between lifeworld and system and to lead to emancipation from system conditions.

In a vein similar to Kemmis' work with educational systems, the systems diagram in **Error! Reference source not found.** on page **Error! Bookmark not defined.**¹¹ seeks to describe a potential network of relationships between the incursion of system values into lifeworlds, emergent patterns of NGO-business collaboration and social change and development towards sustainability. The following paragraphs describe some of the activity that I have sought to represent in the system diagram.

In the diagram I suggest that business engagement of NGOs is predicated upon a form of reasoning based on an interest in expanding (or preventing a decline in) technical control in the light of emergent social conditions, pressures and understanding. Businesses have responded to the current legitimisation crisis by engaging NGOs with instrumental reasoning to maintain system conditions. Meanwhile the NGO response to system pressures has been to engage with business to achieve more leverage - understood in terms of effectiveness - in their activity. Together, then, the change potential of these relationships can be seen through the lens of instrumental and practical reasoning. These relationships are oriented towards a domain of significant and visible social and environmental problems held within the container of an increasingly complex and inter-dependent social system.

Along with other instances of instrumental reasoning - where challenges are perceived in terms of systemisation, regulation and control - the diagram suggests that an increased level of developmental change results in improvements to the material substratum. As a result current system values and steering media are increasingly perceived as appropriate and the validity of instrumental reasoning is shored up. The felt need for critical reasoning that questions underlying system orientation is reduced with the result that system values are increasingly perpetuated by orientation towards strategic action and lifeworlds are filled with system values.

I present the pathologies that result from the incursion of system values in three areas (although they are not sequential): in society and in two groups of powerful actors - business and NGOs. Taking the first of these areas, more lifeworld pathologies in society in general augment the need for developmental action and change. Secondly, pathologies in the actions of powerful organisations become more evident and there is a greater need for legitimisation

¹¹ This particular system diagram contains "external factors" or "givens" that are not part of the overall pattern of feedbacks and feedforwards that characterise the diagram; this does not prevent the reader from starting at any point in the diagram. The "plus" signs on the arrows are to be read as magnifying trends; i.e. "a *decreased* focus in instrumental reasoning leads to *decreased* developmental change and action" or "an *increased* focus in instrumental reasoning leads to *increased* developmental change". The "minus" signs are oppositional trends, i.e. "*decreased* challenges to system relations will lead to *increased* perpetuation of system values" or "*increased* challenges to system relations will lead to *decreased* perpetuation of system values".

amongst business; as business perceive the relative legitimation value of NGOs in current system terms their instrumental engagement of the NGO sector increases. With the incursions into NGO lifeworlds and the resultant increased discourse of roles, functions and functionality the relative predominance of strategic action over communicative action in NGOs increases. This orientation increases both professionalisation and monetarisation/bureaucratisation in NGOs. The monetarisation and bureaucratisation leads to further pathologies in NGOs lifeworlds, such as the withdrawal of motivation. It also leads to an increased perception within business of the legitimation value of NGOs in terms of the current system terms. This perception leads businesses to seek further instrumental engagements with business.

In the diagram one can discern a number of interacting loops¹² that are in simultaneous operation. One loop concerns the rate at which business engages NGOs with instrumental reasoning, as a function of their need for legitimation in current system terms; it is an up-building dynamic or reinforcing loop that spirals away (in either a positive or negative direction depending on the initial input). Another loop concerns the professionalisation of NGOs as they orient towards strategic action and the resultant effects upon their lifeworlds from the associated processes of monetarisation and bureaucratisation. This dynamic also feeds the level of developmental action and change in society, through the tendency towards an instrumental view of change and change relationships. A third reinforcing loop of interest concerns the relationship between the incursion of system values into lifeworlds in society in general, the perception of social and environmental problems in terms of instrumental reasoning and the drive towards developmental change and action.

In this diagram I have also included two underlying “givens” or assumptions labelled “class compromise” and “historical conditions”. I suggest that both conditions/assumptions have fostered a need for developmental action and change. Overall, the diagram suggests a reinforcing dynamic. Since NGO legitimacy arises from an actual orientation towards communicative action and perceived detachment from the steering media of money and power, the result of increased levels of instrumental engagements between business and NGOs, bringing about greater bureaucratisation and monetarisation, is likely to contribute (significantly and increasingly) to a legitimation crisis in the NGO sector. At the same time, the need and continued call for developmental action is likely to create further lifeworld pathologies in

¹² The overall tendency of any loop can be worked out from counting the number of “minus signs” in the loop. An odd number of negative arrows will mean that the loop is a homeostatic one that controls itself; an even number of “minus signs” will mean the loop is reinforcing moving towards growth or collapse at ever increasing rates. Note this is different from the plus and minus signs which merely represent the relationship between two variables. In this diagram there are only reinforcing loops.

society and business and to require further therapeutic assistance and legitimation from (amongst others) NGOs. It suggests that, without intervention, the NGO sector is likely to thrive and relationships with the private sector are likely to continue until the point at which the perception of “detachment from money and power” catches up with reality of “always already part of the system and increasingly subject to its imperatives”.

My sense is that this game of “catch up” is likely to go on for a considerable time. Evidence would seem to suggest that the NGO sector is becoming more professional, influenced by bureaucracy and money, increasingly having questions asked about legitimacy and is being afforded more responsibility and predominance in (civil and political) society. For example, the merger in December 2000 of Imperial Cancer Research and the Cancer Research Society in the UK was advanced on the basis reducing the duplication of research and offering cost savings. At the same time as this merger was taking place the very legitimacy of two the organisations and their research agenda was coming into question given their links to pharmaceutical companies and a reluctance to conduct work into the origins of cancer in man-made chemical compounds.¹³

The suggestion that the colonisation of NGOs lifeworlds has occurred without remainder would represent the same dualistic thinking that maintained them as untouched bearers of lifeworlds. Society maintains an overriding perception of the legitimacy of NGOs compared to spokespeople in industry or government (Bendell, 2000c: 23) and thus they seem to remain significant standard bearers of lifeworld values. In a complex social system with considerable problems in the here and now, this legitimacy has been enhanced by their orientation towards developing solutions to pressing issues. The isomorphic pattern as displayed in the systems diagram is likely to perpetuate an interpretation of business involvement for sustainability essentially in terms of first-order change.

¹³ For example, George Monbiot in the Guardian 18 December 2000
link to: http://www.bath.ac.uk/carpp/publications/doc_theses_links/r_shah.html

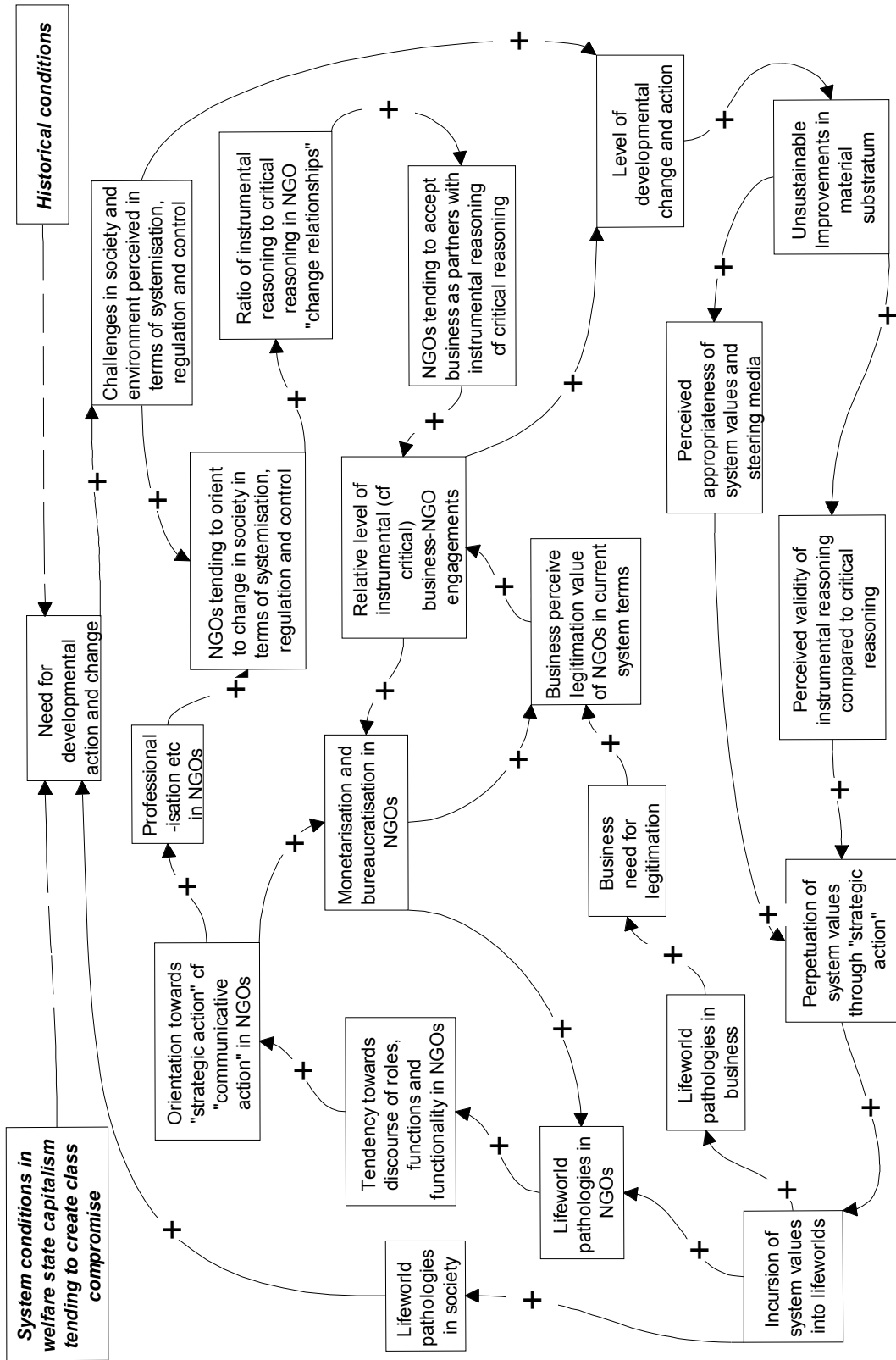


Figure 4 NGO-Business systems diagram

11.6 Research/practice and my experience of boundary crises

In the previous section I have outlined some of the boundary crises that those encountering the interface between NGOs and business may experience. Earlier I suggested that one of my reasons for considering the double-bind theory and system and lifeworld theory concerned the focus upon the pragmatics of communication that seemed to contribute to my sense making concerning NGO-business relationships. It was Stephen Kemmis' work in Australia within educational systems that brought the system-lifeworld thesis to my attention (Kemmis, 1995; 2000; 2001). There he explores the practice and the views of participants in educational settings from the multiple perspectives of system and lifeworld in order to bring boundary crises as actually experienced into stereoscopic focus. This is as opposed to an approach which focuses exclusively upon systems theories or theories of social action. He describes how many university teachers find their work increasingly monetarised, with tight monitoring and regulation of resources, and bureaucratised, brought under the control of university-wide policies aimed at effecting control. This monetarisation challenges "previously-taken-for-granted assumptions and principles about academic freedom and academic work" (Kemmis, 2001:99).

Upon reading about his research and practice I was initially drawn to the parallels between the patterns that I had been discerning within NGOs and their relationships with the private sector and Kemmis' description of the experience of individuals in university departments and educational systems. As I teased out some of the implications of the system and lifeworld thesis for NGO-business relationships it also became increasingly obvious that Habermas' conception of boundary crises added considerable depth to my understanding of my own relational practice, in terms of my research relationships with Shell, Living Earth, the communities and others. In this next section I explore my relational practice in the language of system and lifeworld.

A significant front across which I became aware of the boundary conflict between system and lifeworld values in my research relationships regarded the writing of the INTRAC case study. As may be recalled, I was required to produce a case study of the relationship between Shell and Living Earth as part of my agreement to conduct the research. A conflict arose quite quickly in terms of my attempts to conduct the inquiry with Shell and Living Earth in a participatory, action-oriented way and the needs of writing the case study. I had felt that creating spaces for engagement within the organisations would be an important way to proceed

with my research. As the complexity of the situation and depth of engagement required emerged, it seemed that the structure of a formal case write-up seemed to place restrictions that could potentially damage my ability to maintain and develop relationships with the organisations.

In terms of lifeworld processes (see **Error! Reference source not found.**), my desire to maintain participatory relationships perhaps represents the socialisation-individuation dynamic, where I sought to form my identity with Living Earth and Shell through a collaborative orientation to the organisations. At the same time, the writing of the case-study for INTRAC (itself an NGO) can also be placed in the context of my attempts at identity formation as a member of the NGO and the research communities. Whilst I wished to forge relationships with Shell and Living Earth I was also seeking to reproduce a form of knowing that would be validly recognised within the academic communities that I associated with, variously, as critical, reflective and change-oriented. As a result I worked towards producing a pattern of social membership therein; that is I engaged in communicative action towards social integration in my lifeworld domain of personality. Finally, there are at least two ways in which my experience can be framed in terms of cultural reproduction in the lifeworld. Firstly, to some extent I was seeking to contribute to a transformation of the way in which discourses around research, inquiry and change are understood as part of my practice of participatory inquiry into sustainability. At the same time (it seems clear now, although at the time I was not particularly conscious of its extent) I was seeking to reproduce a sense of shared culture with the non-European, dispossessed communities of the Delta in the presentation of my work.

My experience suggests, that in a similar way to that in which perceptions of the untainted nature of NGO activity have been fostered, we might also conceive of the public perception of academic activity as being as immune to the systems incursion of money and power through the false consciousness of scientific objectivity, neutrality and non-normative generalisation.¹⁴ This also helps to explain the isomorphic tendencies, noted in chapter 3, between theory and practice as regards to business and organisational involvement in sustainability.

The various lifeworld reproduction processes that I sought to enact through communication in case study write-up and in my research more generally created tensions with the elements of systems functioning that I experienced. So for example, I felt constricted by INTRAC's timeline for the write-up and the fact that it was being written for an external audience; my

¹⁴ It is interesting to note that while NGO legitimacy may be based upon a perception of deeply felt and lived values,

practices and orientations towards symbolic reproduction in the lifeworld were “enmeshed” (Kemmis, 2001) in these two elements of systems functioning in research communities. More significantly, my communicative action was also enmeshed within the elements of systems functioning of Shell and Living Earth. The initial delay to get confirmation that the research could go ahead, the inability to discuss Shell’s objectives for the research with Michael Megarry (and being asked instead about what I thought the objectives should be), the requirements of the system that I liaise through Michael in order to contact Shell Nigeria, the bureaucratic nature of any attempts to meet or talk to Shell staff (with the resounding feeling of alienation, as I literally sat waiting in the corridors of power of Shell Nigeria), the “party line” adopted within my interviews at Shell and their general inability to work with an open-ended attitude - all these issues framed my interactions with Shell in systems terms that created conflict with the lifeworld values that I sought to enact. Meanwhile my attempts at communicative action towards mutual understanding were probably met with the conflicting expectations within Shell and Living Earth regarding academic objectivity and value neutrality.

11.6.1 Theoretical reflexivity?

In this chapter I have sought to explore the relational practices of NGO-business engagement and my own collaborative inquiry through Habermas’ social theory of the modern-welfare state. Although very dense, the account of the challenges of modern society that Habermas offers through the theories of communicative action and the system and lifeworld is theoretically rich. However, it seems that, like other theorists of social structure and agency, he does not fully embody his own ideas in his writing. By this I mean that, while his work has an underlying emancipatory motif it remains, in and of itself, an overwhelmingly impersonal grand narrative. However, for Habermas this is in fact a necessity for he believes that theory and practice cannot be joined together directly. Rather, that a theoretical discourse (of critical theory) should stand apart, prior to and informative of a practical discourse; that in order to do this the critical theorist qua theorist cannot enter the world of practice. According to Gustavsen, Habermas’ position requires a mediating discourse between the discourses of theory and practice for the project of enlightenment and liberation (Gustavsen, 1996; 2001).

However, despite his intentions to affirm the importance of the lifeworld, my reading of his work left me highly concerned about where Habermas’ own experience of lifeworld sits. This is perhaps because I find a conception of the lifeworld, such as that as forwarded by Abram (1996), which takes rather more directly from Husserl’s phenomenology, a more appropriate

one since it is evocative of the living-breathing-stuff-of-life. Very rarely does Habermas extended a sensuous hand to me, the reader, that would allow me to move with him, beyond the theory into a joint practice of communicative action. Outhwaite (1996) has suggested that Habermas extends his use of the lifeworld in two directions - as a cognitive “horizon of meaning” and the relatively informal ways of life. Misgeld has argued that the distinction between “system” and “lifeworld” is misleading because it detracts from the practical point of the theory and blocks reflection upon actual social situations in the relevant societies of our time. Outhwaite (1996) adds that the double-sided use of “lifeworld” by Habermas has caused some misunderstanding of his work. It seems to me that maybe the double-sided edge of his definition is the relatively informal lifeworld experience of Habermas trying to free itself from his theoretical posturing and grand narrating.

Perhaps I am asking too much of Habermas, for authors such as Kemmis suggest the theoretical discourse of the lifeworld and system “offers a way of understanding participants’ perspectives as structured by the contrasting and sometimes competing imperatives of social systems and the lifeworlds participants might inhabit” (2000). Kemmis goes on to suggest how he has done this in an action research setting, bringing the attention of co-participants to the constitution and reconstitution of lifeworld processes and the system functioning through their practices. Through such a critical action research, those involved in the action research/practice are encouraged to address their experience of boundary crises between system and lifeworld through communicative action moving beyond the theoretical discourse into the practice of democracy. McCarthy has also attempted to pragmatise Habermas’ theoretical work by considering the everyday practice of communicative action. It seems that a practical discourse can emerge through the mist of Habermas’ theoretical excursions and abstractions. To some extent I have sought in this chapter to add to these theoretical contributions and the mediating discourse between theory and practice that Gustavsen (2001) has advocated for communicative action. I return to some of these attempts at pragmatising communicative action in chapter 12.

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