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Graham Scambler

Sociology 1996; 30; 567
DOI: 10.1177/0038038596030003009

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SOCIOLOGY Vol. 30 No. 3 August 1996
567–581

THE 'PROJECT OF MODERNITY' AND THE PARAMETERS FOR A CRITICAL SOCIOLOGY: AN ARGUMENT WITH ILLUSTRATIONS FROM MEDICAL SOCIOLOGY

GRAHAM SCAMBLER

Abstract This paper is premised on the view that it is premature to write about the end of modernity. Moreover it is argued that, for all the flaws of early Enlightenment philosophy, what Jurgen Habermas has termed the 'project of modernity' should be seen as incomplete, rather than abandoned. Drawing more generally on Habermas' theories, five metatheoretical theses are outlined and elaborated. These, it is suggested, might set the parameters for a *fin-de-siècle* sociology, geared above all to the rationalisation of the lifeworld, which is both credible and critical in orientation.

Key words: project of modernity, communicative rationality, system and lifeworld rationalisation, critical sociology, health and medicine, public sphere.

Introduction

It is a basic – orthodox but unfashionable – premiss of this paper that much of the literature on postmodernity is of significance less because it offers a convincing analysis of some kind of epochal transition than because it is – in a generalised, diffuse way – reflective of change within modernity. Thus talk of the end of modernity is taken to be, at best, premature. It is argued that the recent work of Jurgen Habermas has established that the much-criticised Enlightenment legacy, the so-called 'project of modernity', can and must be reconstructed, and requires to be viewed as incomplete, not abandoned. In the course of expounding this argument an outline of Habermas's own perspective on what will here be called, 'high' – in preference to the more prejudicial 'late' – modernity is incorporated. The paper goes on to utilise Habermas's studies of modernity and its reconstructed project to posit a series of metatheoretical theses which, it is suggested, might establish the parameters for a *fin-de-siècle* sociology which is both defensible and critical in orientation.

Modernity and its (Incomplete) Project

What Habermas (1981) has termed the project of modernity has many complex origins and strands (see Toulmin 1990), the latter coalescing in the Enlightenment of late eighteenth century Europe and epitomised above all by

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the critical philosophy of Kant. Discussion of the project frequently starts from Habermas's (1981, 1987a) affirmation of its continuing relevance. The strategy here will be to draw on Habermas's work to attempt to counter the growing number of assertions that the project of modernity has now run its seductive and unsatisfactory course.

Kant (1970:54) characterised the self-conscious intellectual movement known as the Enlightenment as 'man's emergence from self-incurred immaturity' (see Hulme and Jordanova 1990). At the core of the crystallising project of modernity was his vindication of a concept of reason which, perhaps for his contemporaries rather more than for him, bore the promise of ineluctable progress to the good society as well as to the comprehension and control of nature. Two types of critique calling for the abandonment of the project have been pre-eminent of late. The first focuses on the undeniable failure of the project to honour its promise, most evidently concerning the rational construction of the good society. And the second points to philosophical flaws in the explication of reason on which the project of modernity is founded. There is truth in both.

While there is no gainsaying either the continuing absence of the good society or the scale of the varied crises that have beset the peoples of virtually all societies this century, it will be argued here, following Habermas, that the project of modernity should be regarded as 'incomplete', not abandoned. Why has the project failed thus far? Building on Weber's analysis, Habermas approvingly notes that modernity has led to a threefold differentiation of cultural or 'value spheres'. Indeed, he accords this process pride of place in his definitions of the project of modernity:

> The project of modernity, formulated in the eighteenth century by the philosophers of the Enlightenment, consisted in their efforts to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art according to their inner logic. At the same time, this project intended to release the cognitive potentials of each of these domains from their esoteric forms. The Enlightenment philosophers wanted to utilise this accumulation of specialized culture for the enrichment of everyday life – that is to say, for the rational organization of everyday life (1981:9).

There is a clear sense in which the entire corpus of Habermas's work can be interpreted as an insistent defence of a reconstructed version of this project, increasingly through the 1970s and 1980s against those he regards as the agents of counter-Enlightenment, inspired above all by Nietzsche, Heidegger and Bataille (Best and Kellner 1991).

For Habermas (1984), Weber's concepts of rationality and rationalisation are too restricted and insufficiently abstract. This misled Weber in at least two related ways. First, distracted by the manifestly varying *contents* they afford, he underestimated the extent to which rationality and rationalisation in the different value spheres (and, indeed, in different cultures) possess the same formal or procedural properties. Second, he maintained that the different

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value spheres are not only inherently irreconcilable, but become more openly and explicitly so the further rationalisation progresses. Habermas, by contrast, espouses the universality of reason, and holds that the different value spheres have come to *appear* increasingly irreconcilable primarily because of 'selective rationalization' due to the growth and dominance of the capitalist economy and state bureaucracy (Brand 1990).

Habermas's (1984, 1987b) defence of the universality of reason hinges on a formal or procedural concept of rationality owing much to the linguistic turn in twentieth-century philosophy. He argues that reason can no longer be said to have its roots in the subject-object relations of the philosophy of consciousness – 'be it the "transcendental", unhistorical subject of Kant's "pure reason" or the global subject behind Hegel's picture of Reason's "externalization" and reabsorption in history, or the privileged historical subject (the working class) of Marxist thought' (Brand 1990:10) – but in the subject-subject relations of communicative action. What Brand calls Habermas's 'central intuition' is that people's use of language implies a common endeavour to attain consensus in a context in which all participants are free to contribute and have equal opportunities to do so. Indeed, language use presupposes commitment to the 'ideal speech situation', in which discourse can realise its full potential for rationality. It does not follow that the ideal speech situation is commonly to hand, but it does mean that communicative action, although always occurring in a historical context, depends also on an ahistorical factor.

> This factor is found in the claim for the validity of the reasons which induce people to take their particular share in communicative action. In such claims no historical limitation is recognized since they are based on the (implicit) view that their validity should be accepted by anyone capable of judgment who is free to use it, whether in the past, present or future. The idea of rationally motivated shared understanding – and rational motivation implies the total lack of compulsion or manipulation – is built into the very reproduction of social life, or so Habermas claims. The symbolic reproduction of society is based on the 'counterfactual' ideal of the 'ideal speech situation', which is characterized by 'communicative symmetry' and a compulsion-free consensus' (Brand 1990:11–12).

Communicative action, or action oriented to understanding and consensus, is contrasted with strategic action, or action oriented to success, often through manipulation or coercion (Scambler 1987).

This theory of communicative rationality is pertinent to Habermas's critique of Weber's 'restricted' concept of rationalisation. What does Habermas have to say about 'selective rationalisation'? He contends that Weber conflated the logic and the dynamic of development. Weber treated the rationalisation that occurred in the Occident as inevitable when it was in fact contingent and selective. The prognostic gloom found in Weber's work, as well as in that of Habermas's predecessors at Frankfurt, especially Horkheimer and Adorno (1972), is understandable but misconceived.

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In neo-Parsonian fashion, Habermas argues that societal differentiation has produced four subsystems: the economy, the state, the public sphere and the private sphere. There has been a fundamental 'uncoupling' between the economy and the state, which constitute the 'system', and are normatively characterised by strategic action, and the public and private spheres, which constitute the 'lifeworld', and are normatively characterised by communicative action. The four subsystems are interdependent in that each is specialised in terms of what it produces but relies on the others for what it does not produce. The economy produces 'money', the state 'power', the public sphere 'influence', and the private sphere 'commitment'. These products or 'media' are traded between subsystems: 'for example, the economy relies on the state to establish such legal economic institutions as private property and contract, on the public lifeworld to influence consumption patterns, and on the private lifeworld to provide a committed labour force, and itself sends money into each other subsystem' (Crook *et al.* 1992:28).

However, the media of the subsystems are far from equivalent in their capacities. As system and lifeworld become more clearly marked, the media, and thus subsystems, of the former come progressively to dominate the latter. It is in this sense that Habermas writes of the 'colonization of the lifeworld'.

> In terms linked directly to the Weberian theme of rationalization and the Marxian theme of commodification, the lifeworld becomes colonized, that is increasingly state administered ('juridified') and commercialized. Possibilities for communicative action in the lifeworld become attenuated as social participation becomes hyper-rationalized in terms of immediate and instrumental returns. Participants encounter each other as legal entities and as parties to contracts rather than as thinking and acting subjects (Crook *et al.* 1992:28).

In short, the dynamic of development has meant that system rationalisation has outstripped the rationalisation of the lifeworld, hence the reference to selective rationalisation. Rationalisation of the lifeworld here refers to an increase in the scope of communicative action and to a growth of communicative rationality. Distancing himself from the 'iron cage' pessimism of Weber and others, Habermas insists that the logic of development allows for further rationalisation of the lifeworld through a reconstitution of its public sphere. Currently the most promising agents of such a reconstitution – and of a reconstructed project of modernity – are the 'new' (as opposed to older class-based) social movements. Yet for all his reasoned preservation of hope, Habermas sees little immediate prospect of its fulfilment.

Habermas's reconstruction of the project of modernity can now be summarised. Enlightenment thinking has had its (system) successes and its (lifeworld) failures, but any flaws in its philosophical grounding can be overcome, according to Habermas, by means of a reconstruction of the project of modernity. He credits Hegel rather than Kant with posing the key challenge: freed from the dogmas of religion and tradition, heading the philosophical

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agenda in modernity is its self-grounding. Entrapped within the philosophy of consciousness or 'subjectivity', Hegel was unable to meet his own challenge. Habermas seeks to do so by rejecting subjectivity in favour of 'intersubjectivity' in the formal or procedural concept of rationality at the heart of his theory of communicative action. The universality of reason, using Habermas's more expansive and abstract concept than Weber's, is implicit in communicative action. Rationalisation in the West has *in fact* been selective, leading to an uncoupling of system and lifeworld and the former's colonisation of the latter. Relatedly, overwhelming priority has been given to one of the triad of value spheres, that of objective knowledge (via science and technology), and an élitist culture of expertise has arisen in all three value spheres. But these developments were *contingent* rather than inevitable and are in principle open to change through political action. Effective action may be dependent on further rationalisation of the lifeworld – which Habermas admits seems far from imminent – but the formal or procedural concept of reason which 'unites' the otherwise differentiated value spheres both grounds the reconstructed project of modernity and permits its description as incomplete, thus (re-)affirming the possibility of its completion (see Honneth *et al.* 1992a; 1992b).

The significance of the high level of abstraction of Habermas's theory of communicative action has not always been appreciated. In Brand's words, its focus is on 'those elements in the conditions for consensus formation which go beyond the spatial and temporal limitations of any particular context' (1990:117). Habermas has persistently disassociated himself from the utopianism some critics discern in his theory, suggesting that the facts 'will reveal as an incurable romantic one who tries to affirmatively spell out utopia in terms of particular examples' (1985:70). There is prescription of potential, but not of content.

It does not follow, of course, that modernity should be left to its own devices, the content of the future unaddressed. As Giddens notes:

> History is not on our side, has no teleology, and supplies us with no guarantees. But the heavily counterfactual nature of future-oriented thought, an essential element of the reflexivity of modernity, has positive as well as negative implications. For we can envisage alternative futures whose very propagation might help them to be realized. (1990:154).

It remains important, nevertheless, that the 'models' of *utopian realism* that Giddens calls for are recognised for what they are (see Smart 1992).

Parameters for a Critical Sociology

A few additional remarks on the current debate about the recent demise or resuscitation of Enlightenment philosophy some two centuries after Kant are

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necessary before the question of the parameters of a credible, critical sociology is addressed. Postmodernism's announcement of the demise of Enlightenment philosophy is understandable but erroneous and dangerous. It is understandable partly due to the enhanced pace of change and continuing and extensive pathologies of high modernity; and partly due to the flaws in Enlightenment philosophy exposed both by postmodernists, albeit at the price of performative contradiction, and by theorists like Habermas. It is erroneous in that, as Habermas has shown with his concept of formal or procedural rationality, the project of modernity is capable of reconstruction and is therefore very much alive, or incomplete. It is dangerous because postmodernism constitutes a hope-less form of neo-conservatism unable to mount any rational critique of existing social relations, that is, without performative contradiction.

The limited claims Habermas makes for his reconstruction of the project of modernity need emphasising. He offers 'a weak but not defeatist concept of linguistically embodied reason' (1992a:142). The utopianism some diagnosed in his earlier writings is eschewed: 'the idealizing presuppositions of communicative action must not be hypostatized into the ideal of a future condition in which a definitive understanding has been reached' (1992a:144). Shorn of utopian prophecy but not of reasoned hope, what then is the potential of Habermas's project of modernity? If more appealing and defensible forms of life are to be realised,

> . . . they would have to be produced through our own combined effort and be marked by solidarity, though they need not necessarily be free of conflict. . . . This endeavour is fallible, and it does fail over and over again. This type of producing or self-bringing-forth places the responsibility on our shoulders without making us less dependent upon 'the luck of the moment'. Connected with this is the modern meaning of humanism, long expressed in the ideas of a self-conscious life, of authentic self-realization, and of autonomy – a humanism that is not bent on self-assertion. This project, like the communicative reason that inspires it, is historically situated. It has not been made, it has taken shape – and it can be pursued further, or be abandoned out of discouragement (Habermas 1992a:146).

A strong case can be made for arguing that while much sociological work arising out of unreconstructed Enlightenment thinking has proved to be flawed (on theories of social change, for example, see Smart 1992), and the idea of a postmodernist sociology is internally inconsistent, both reason and hope are to be found in a critically-oriented sociology at once appropriate to high modernity and allied to Habermas's reconstructed project. Such a sociology would be geared to lifeworld rationalisation. This commitment to the further rationalisation of the lifeworld, grounded in Habermas's theory of communicative action, is of the essence of the critical sociology commended in what follows.

It is now possible to articulate a series of five metatheoretical theses, drawing on the preceding argument and discussion and most conspicuously on the work of Habermas. These concern and suggest some parameters for

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the discipline as a whole, although they are anchored occasionally in examples from medical sociology in Britain.

Thesis 1. The full ramifications of the reflexivity of high modernity for sociological practice have been insufficiently addressed.

Reflexivity has long been a strong theme in the work of Giddens (1990, 1991), linked as it is to his earlier concept of the double hermeneutic, but it has recently become central also to the theories of social change of other influential writers (see Beck *et al.* 1994). For Giddens (1990:38) the reflexivity of modernity 'consists in the fact that social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices, thus constitutively altering their character'. He argues that this reflexivity has become deeply unsettling in its subversion of early and outmoded Enlightenment ideals of certain knowledge: the world is thoroughly constituted through reflexively applied knowledge, but there is now no surety that 'any given element of that knowledge will not be revised'. Furthermore, the re-entry of sociological discourse into the contexts it analyses is pivotal; indeed, 'modernity is itself deeply and intrinsically sociological' (Giddens 1990:43).

While the importance of reflexivity, as defined by Giddens, is now widely acknowledged by sociologists, it is less apparent that this acknowledgement translates into 'appropriate' practices. This, as thesis 2 maintains, is principally because sociologists' system ties tend to outweigh their ties to the lifeworld.

Thesis 2. Sociology needs to more critically examine its primary allegiance to economy and state and, via the media of money and power, system rationalisation.

Given sociology's origins in, and subsequent affinity, with the unreconstructed Enlightenment project, it is not surprising that its history is one of abetting as much as resisting selective rationalisation and lifeworld colonisation. Two examples from medical sociology are pertinent here.

Consider, first, the debate on welfare statism and the potential for market-oriented or privatised health care. For all the intense political and academic (including mainstream social theoretic) interest in the 'crisis of welfare statism', many British medical sociologists working in the field appear more responsive to short-term system needs than to the far-reaching effects of changes in UK welfare and health policy for the lifeworld. The multiplicity of system-driven, and increasingly commissioned, projects around the health reforms embodied in the NHS and Community Care Act of 1990 in general, and service audit and evaluation (incorporating much 'quality of life' research) in particular, testify to this. The readily available funding for such projects is doubly significant given the return on fund-holding for the careers

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of academics adjusting to a creeping 'McDonaldisation' of academic life (Ritzer 1993). The point is not that these projects are intrinsically undesirable, but rather that their engineered and disproportionate pursuit now has to be understood in the context of an impetus to 'economic privatism' and 'statist authoritarianism' (Cohen and Arato 1992).

To elaborate, it is as if British sociologists' neglect of the general thrust of the government's NHS reform package constitutes approval, or at least assent. Criteria of assessment of the quality of health services are of course complex (Maxwell 1984), but the government has made much of two such criteria, heralding the putative capacity of the (internal) market to generate competition conducive to enhanced *service efficiency* and *patient choice*. In fact, medical sociologists have long been aware from comparative research that health care markets tend to lead to service *in*efficiency, notably by increasing administrative costs, and – as the sovereignty of the 'citizen' loses ground to that of the 'consumer' (Pierson 1991) – to constrain patient choice for the less affluent. In the USA, which has the most market-oriented health care system among western countries, where per capita spending on health had reached $2,051 by 1987 (compared with a UK figure of $746); where one in six people have *no* health benefits and many more are significantly under-insured; and to whose deeply troubled 'medical-industrial complex' the Thatcher/ Major governments have turned for policy innovation; twenty-five cents out of every health dollar were being spent on administration by the end of the 1980s (compared with a UK figure of 6 per cent) (Navarro 1993). Predictably, administrative costs in Britain have been rising steadily through the 1990s. Equally predictably, choice for most patients has been curtailed by the mechanisms of the internal market: rather than 'the money following the patient' as forecast in government literature, patients have more commonly followed the money in line with locally negotiated purchaser-provider contracts.

The second example focuses on attempts to combat social class related health inequalities in the UK. As the Black Report (1980) long ago attested, the key priority here is the reduction of material or structural deprivation, and especially child poverty: 'Above all, the *abolition of child poverty* should be adopted as a national goal for the 1980s' (Townsend and Davidson 1992: 206). One reason why an 'anti-poverty strategy' along the lines of that proferred in the Black Report is as – or more – urgently required now as then is the government's pursuit since of what might be called a 'pro-poverty strategy' resulting, for example, in a doubling of the number of children stricken by poverty: whereas in 1979, 12 per cent of all children were living in poverty (if poverty is defined as below 50 per cent average income), by 1987 this had risen to 26 per cent. Clearly most vulnerable are children in families experiencing unemployment or where there is a lone parent.

The evidence suggests that class-related health inequalities have increased since 1979 and are set to continue do to so (Davey Smith *et al.* 1990;

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Whitehead 1992; Black 1993). But the point of concern here is how readily how many medical sociologists seem to have 'adjusted' to the government's disinclination to accept established causal links between material or structural deprivation and health, and to its policy of 'depoliticising health' (see *The Health of the Nation,* HMSO 1992) by stressing cultural or behavioural factors like smoking and alcohol and drug consumption and presenting an individual's health as more or less exclusively a matter of personal behaviour and responsibility. Once again this is in large part a function of system-generated and monitored research and of changes in the institutions of academia. The study of the role of cultural and behavioural factors in accounting for class-related health inequalities is important, but less so than the neglect or concealment of the potentialities of the economy to sustain and deepen class-related health inequalities, and of the state, in all but rhetoric, to tolerate them.

What these brief examples illustrate is a primary and disproportionate commitment to a pattern of enquiry and research consonant with, or at least not *effectively* opposed to, the imperatives of economy and state. Some of this work is undoubtedly defensible, but what of sociology's link with the lifeworld?

Thesis 3. Sociology's principal commitment is to the rationalisation of the lifeworld. It is a core theme of this paper that the overriding commitment of a critical sociology is to the rationalisation of the lifeworld, and this is, of course, incompatible with a *primary* allegiance to system needs. The implications of this commitment for sociological practice can be considered in relation to the examples from British medical sociology just outlined. While the search for answers to questions deriving from system-driven projects around the health reforms and the salience of behavioural risk factors for class-related health inequalities may be defensible, what is *not* is either their *systematic* displacement of questions less compatible with system imperatives, or the control or containment of any answers made possible by an as yet unreconstituted public sphere of the lifeworld (see thesis 4 below).

There are solid grounds for maintaining that medical sociology's system ties are such that many of its exponents – by fine-tuning a cluster of health reforms leading inexorably to a service which will cost more to administer while reducing choice for most patients, by neglecting the prepotent material causes of class related health inequalities, or by communicating almost exclusively to system-based or 'established intellectuals' (Eyerman and Jamison 1991) – are either witting agents of 'manipulation' in the lifeworld or unwitting agents of 'systematically distorted communication'; either way, their work serves strategic action and lifeworld colonisation rather than communicative action and lifeworld rationalisation (Habermas 1984, 1987b; Scambler 1987).

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Thesis 4. The nature of sociology's commitment to lifeworld rationalisation requires its promotion of and engagement in a reconstituted public sphere.

According to Habermas, societies like Britain are characterised by 'formal' democracy, namely, 'a legitimation process that elicits generalized motives – that is, diffuse mass loyalty – but avoids participation' 1973:36). Since social (and health) policy priorities are framed by private investment decisions in the subsystem of the economy, politics is democratic in form only; thus it is largely irrelevant which political party holds office since the state's commitment endures – administering the economy so that crises are avoided. Formal democracy may be contrasted with 'substantive' democracy, which affords 'genuine participation of citizens in processes of will-formation' (Habermas 1973:36). Substantive democracy, in effect, *institutionalises* in the public sphere the fundamental norms of rational speech (although Habermas here warns against utopianism and against equating substantive democracy with any particular form of organisation).

Substantive democracy entails further rationalisation of the lifeworld via the reconstitution of the public sphere out of the residue of a 'bourgeois public sphere', once progressive and resistant to economy and state but long since 'collapsed into a sham world of image creation and opinion management in which the diffusion of media products is in the service of vested interests' (Thompson 1993:177; see Habermas 1989b). If practitioners of a critical sociology, fated to be actors in high modernity, are to realise an overriding commitment to lifeworld rationalisation, then they must *of necessity* engage with a reconstituted public sphere. And such engagement, of course, requires them to seek answers to the question:

> . . . of whether, and to what extent, a public sphere dominated by mass media provides a realistic chance for the members of civil society, in their competition with the political and economic invaders' media power, to bring about changes in the spectrum of values, topics, and reasons channelled by external influences, to open it up in an innovative way, and to screen it critically (Habermas 1992b:455).

Thompson has recently suggested that Habermas himself, perhaps over-indebted to his Frankfurt predecessors, is too pessimistic in this regard, that he tends to exaggerate the extent to which 'the recipients of media products are relatively passive consumers who are enthralled by the spectacle and easily manipulated by media techniques' (1995:74).

Thesis 5. If sociology is to be effective in promoting and engaging in a reconstituted public sphere, alliances must arguably be built with system-based and, especially, lifeworld-based activists.

As thesis 4 avers, the public sphere might be 'the target as well as the terrain of contemporary collective action' (Cohen and Arato 1992:526). Consistently with the Michelsian iron law of oligarchy, *in the absence of its reconstitution* the

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goals of inclusion and participation will predictably lead to 'cooptation, deradicalisation, professionalisation, bureaucratisation and centralisation', 'success' amounting to failure to effect. As Cohen and Arato contend, however, inclusion and participation can be means to reconstitution. Thus they write of new social movements:

> While the democratization of civil society and the defence of its autonomy from economic or administrative 'colonization' can be seen as the goal of these new movements, the creation of 'sensors' within political and economic institutions (institutional reform) and the democratization of political society (the politics of influence and inclusion), which would open these institutions to the new identities and egalitarian norms articulated on the terrain of civil society, are the means to securing this goal (1992:526).

The subsystems of economy and state are not, of course, unitary phenomena and fruitful alliances between sociologists and system-based activists in these subsystems are not uncommon. But perhaps the alliances with the most potential for contemporary sociologists committed to lifeworld rationalisation through gains in substantive democracy are those with lifeworld-based activists or 'movement intellectuals' from the new social movements (Eyerman and Jamison 1991). Habermas sees these movements as provoked by the colonisation of the lifeworld, appearing 'at the seam between the lifeworld and system in a kind of ongoing boundary dispute over the limits of systemic intrusion' (Ray 1993:60). He also sees in some of them a genuine potential for effecting a decolonisation of the lifeworld. Indeed, such movements might be prototypes for, and are associated with, 'the development of new participatory-democratic institutions which would regulate markets, bureaucracies and technologies' (Ray 1993:62). However, although they may currently be the most likely agents of a reconstituted public sphere and of a further rationalisation of the lifeworld, having displaced the 'old' class movements in these respects, Habermas is – as any self-respecting critical sociologist would be – cautious and far from optimistic.

To return briefly to the domain of health in the UK, advocates of the 'new public health', many of them system-based academics (including some medical sociologists) or public health practitioners, have sought to extend the agenda for social change pertinent to the people's health. Whether addressing class-related health inequality in Britain or increasingly global impediments to health – ranging, for example, from the AIDS epidemic, to the ageing of populations, to the 'toxic by-products of a modern economy, transmitted through air, water, soil and food' (Institute of Medicine 1988) – they have emphasised the requirement for change not only at the 'operational' level (e.g. innovations in health promotion and service delivery), but, crucially, at the 'political' and 'structural' levels. Consistent with the argument developed in this paper, it seems clear first that the state cannot move to neutralise many current threats to the people's health through political or structural change without contradiction and without risking a crisis, ultimately of legitimation

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(Habermas 1973); second that many health threats can be understood as latent functions of selective – or excessive – system rationalisation in the west; third that the optimum, if presently slender, prospect for countering many health threats may rest with public mobilisation around political and structural change, contingent upon advances in substantive democracy in the public sphere of the lifeworld attained through the new politics of the new social movements; and fourth that, given overlapping (new public health) agendas, real opportunities exist for alliances between activists across the boundaries between system and lifeworld (Scambler and Goraya 1994b:9).

Axiomatically, the media of mass communication are crucial, and it is in relation to these that sociologists' potential alliances with system-based and, especially, lifeworld-based activists representing the new social movements could be most telling. As Garnham insists, there is a need to move beyond the orthodox liberal view of the free press which assumes either that 'the market will provide appropriate institutions and processes of public communication to support a democratic polity' or that 'only the market can ensure the necessary freedom from state control and coercion'. (1992:363) Garnham notes the evidence of the effects of a growing and globalising trend towards the commodification of public information, referring to 'oligopoly control' and a 'depoliticisation of content' far removed from the liberal concept of a free market of ideas. He commends Habermas concept of the public sphere of the lifeworld:

> Habermas . . . distinguishes the public sphere from both state and market and can pose the question of the threats to democracy and the public discourses upon which it depends coming from the development of an oligopolist capitalist market and from the development of the modern interventionist welfare state (1992:361).

Conclusion

This paper utilises the social theory of Habermas to argue that sociologists have yet to face up to the consequences of the reflexivity of high modernity for their own work. Often they are committed by their system ties to a blinkered or inappropriate pursuit of system rationalisation at the cost of an increasingly colonised lifeworld. Too many British medical sociologists, for example, have pulled their punches in relation to the government's flawed health reforms and refusal to countenance the salience of material deprivation as a cause of class-related health inequalities. Astonishingly, only a marginalised few have invested in theory or research on such alarming and vital current *global* threats to people's health as relative and absolute poverty, the trades in arms and dangerous substances, agribusiness, or, indeed, the ubiquitous 'risk' in high modernity characterised so graphically by Beck (1989, 1992; Scambler and Goraya 1994a, 1994b).

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It has been intimated that reason, conceived formally or procedurally as universal, commits sociology to what Habermas has referred to as the reconstructed, and as yet incomplete, project of modernity; that this commitment requires that sociology be directed first and foremost to the decolonisation and further rationalisation of the lifeworld; and that this, in turn, necessitates sociologists, *fated to be actors in high modernity,* acting *consciously* through alliances of interest with other system-based and lifeworld-based activists, perhaps most notably from the new social movements, to promote and engage with a reconstituted public sphere of the lifeworld.

Importantly, it is *not* being suggested that all system-driven sociology is undesirable, nor that all sociological work that might be defined in the context of this paper as pre- or non-critical is without value or return. Moreover it should now be clear that, if sociology be committed to the completion of the project of modernity, there is no occasion either for utopian prophecy or for much in the way of optimism. As Habermas explains in his recent interview with Haller:

> The 'emancipated society' is an ideal construction that invites misunderstanding. I'd rather speak of the idea of the undisabled subject. In general, this idea can be derived from the analysis of the necessary conditions for reaching understanding – it describes something like the image of symmetric relations of the freely reciprocal recognition of communicatively interacting subjects. Of course, this idea can't be depicted as the totality of a reconciled form of life and cast into the future as a utopia. It contains nothing more, but nothing less, than the formal characterization of necessary conditions for nonanticipatable forms of an undisabled life (Habermas 1994:112–113).

Acknowledgements

The author is grateful to David Blane, Myfanwy Morgan and James Nazroo, and to the editors and referees of *Sociology*, for their comments on an earlier version of this paper.

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Biographical Note: GRAHAM SCAMBLER is Senior Lecturer in Sociology and Director of the Unit of Medical Sociology at UCL. His principal interests are in social theory and medical sociology, recent research including work on chronic and stigmatising illness and the health of sex workers. He is editor of *Sociological Theory and Medical Sociology* (1987), author of *Epilepsy* (1989), co-author of *Menstrual Disorders* (1993), and co-editor of *Rethinking Prostitution: Purchasing Sex in the 1990s* (In Press) and *Modernity, Medicine and Health* (Forthcoming).

Address: Academic Department of Psychiatry, University College London Medical School, UCL, London W1N 8AA.

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