

Translating the Emancipatory Semantics of Religion into  
the Secular Discourse for a Global, Reconciled Society in  
the Later Work of Jürgen Habermas

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***Abstract***

In the midst of the contemporary, global divide between the sacred and the profane, the religious and the secular, faith and reason, believers and non-believers, which taken to its extreme by neoconservative theorists points toward the future possibility of a “clash of civilizations,” or more precisely, war on a global scale, this paper analyzes and critiques Jürgen Habermas’ most recent work on the need for the universalistic and egalitarian semantic potential of religious myths, language, concepts, symbols, etc to be translated through the social process of what he terms an “institutional translation proviso,” which would allow the alternative normative potential of religion that advocates for a more rational and reconciled future society to enter as a discourse partner into the realm of the modern secular public and political spheres. By means of his paradigm shift to the human potential of language, memory and recognition, through which he has developed his theory of communicative praxis and now approaches the possible inclusion of the semantic, liberational potential of religion into the discourse of the public sphere, something is nevertheless missing in Habermas’ analysis. Within the framework of his theory of communication, Habermas identifies this “something” as the religious foundation and semantic potential as inheritance of reason itself. That “something” which this chapter identifies is that which Habermas critically identifies but nevertheless relegates into the background of his communicative theory and discourse ethics, namely, the systemic, globalizing power of neo-liberal/neo-conservative capitalism, U.S. imperialism, and the ever-increasing carnage to humanity and nature that it produces. As tragically exemplified in the neo-conservative *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* of 2002 and 2006 – known as the Bush Doctrine I, it is precisely this expanding power of U.S. led Western global domination that systematically undermines, colonizes, infects and perverts the very ideal process of public and political discourse that Habermas advocates for the possible creation of a more reconciled, constitutionally created democracy. The chapter ends with the argument that the historical materialist critique, particularly that of the first generation of critical theorists [Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse, Erich Fromm], and its future-oriented focus on the human potential of work and the revolutionary struggle for recognition, justice, equality, truth, autonomy in solidarity, and peace/shalom/salaam – all human needs expressed by and struggled for in the Abrahamic, prophetic religions, must be more deeply synthesized with Habermas’ discourse ethics to make them and his inclusion of religion in the contemporary, secular discourse more socially, historically, and most important of all - humanistically relevant in the struggle for a more reconciled, future global society.

Key Words: Theodicy, Axial Age, Judeo-Christian heritage, Methodological Atheism, Semantic Potential, Post-Secular, Public Sphere, Reconciled Future Society.

***Introduction***

Jürgen Habermas’ critical theory of religion is an important part of his entire theory of communicative action aimed at realizing the ideals of the bourgeois and Marxian enlightenment movements - what he calls the “unfinished project of modernity” – through the normative, social dynamic of discourse ethics founded upon and expressive of the differentiated logic of validity claims contained within the act of communication and language itself. The ideal goal of such communicative action is the socio-historical

creation of unconstrained mutual understanding among individuals in an undistorted, consensually based, unlimited communication community - a democratic, constitutional state and global community, wherein the universal, inter-subjective, epistemic and normative foundations of communicative action between individuals in the “life-world” as well as within the highly differentiated and complex social action systems and subsystems of modernity are no longer dominated or perverted by the particularized interests of power and wealth. The importance of religion, particularly its still unrealized semantic potential for human liberation and happiness, within the public sphere of the modern, post-secular society is the focus of this essay as it is expressed in the most recent work of Habermas. Due to the dialectical complexity and evolution of Habermas’ theory *in toto*, in which he approaches the substance of communicative action in many different ways and with many different “accents” [Peukert 1984:172ff], it is extremely difficult to understand his theory of religion without comprehending it within the context of his entire *oeuvre*. That such an undertaking is beyond the scope of this chapter is obvious. However, such a task has been critically addressed by other authors, particularly that of Rudolf J. Siebert [2010, 2001, 1994]. In this essay, Habermas’ most recent expression of his critical theory of religion will be presented within the context of his refusal to abandon the project of modernity and enlightenment as well as his reconstruction of historical materialism in terms of his paradigm change from the one-sided, distortion of modernity through the prominence given to subjectivity within the philosophy of consciousness to that of an inter-subjective, linguistic paradigm of communicative action. The critique of Habermas theory of religion in the modern public sphere is also anchored in these key elements of his theory of communicative action.

### ***Becoming Pious?***

On October 14, 2001, Jürgen Habermas, the second generation critical theorist, received the international Peace Prize of the German Publishers and Booksellers Association, in the famed St. Paul’s Church (Paulskirche) in Frankfurt am Main. In his acceptance speech on receiving the Prize, and as a response to the September 11, 2001 attacks against the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in the United States of America, Habermas [2003:101-115] addressed the accelerating antagonism in modernity between

the religious and the secular, between faith and knowledge. Since then, the topic of religion in the modern, post-secular public sphere has been a central issue in Habermas' recent work and interviews, including the much talked about January 19, 2004 discourse with Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, on the topic of "The Pre-political Moral Foundations of a Free State" [Habermas & Ratzinger 2006]. Since then, many scholarly articles and critiques have been written about Habermas' recent concern with religion prompting some to question whether he has turned to religion and theology as a corrective to his secular, philosophical analysis of the crisis of modernity [Arens 2009, Harrington 2007]. It is interesting that a similar accusation was made against Max Horkheimer due to his increased focus on religion in his later works; that in the face of the *aporias* of the Enlightenment's self-referential reason as expressed in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* [Horkheimer & Adorno 1972], *Eclipse of Reason* [1974a], *Critique of Instrumental Reason* [1974b], and other articles and interviews, Horkheimer had retreated into religion. I have shown elsewhere that Horkheimer never made such a retreat to religion nor did he become religious at any point in his career, as the emancipatory substance of religion was an essential element from the very beginning in the development of his Critical Theory [Ott 2001, 2007/2009; Siebert 2001, 2010]. The same refutation can be said for Habermas: He has not forsaken the secularizing, unfinished project of Modernity or of the Enlightenment through any retreat to religion [Arens 2009]. From the very beginning, Habermas' work included an implicit critical theory of religion as an element of his developing theory of communicative action. Habermas even defended himself against this insinuation of his becoming religious during an interview, given in preparation for his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, by stating "*Ich bin alt, aber nicht fromm geworden*" – "I am old, but have not become pious" [Funken 2008:181-190]. In terms of faith or piety, Habermas remains as "religiously unmusical" as Max Weber.

As it was with members of the first generation of the Critical Theory, e.g. Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and Horkheimer, whom Habermas [1993:49] called not only the administrative director of the famed "Frankfurt School" but also the "*spiritus rector*" of the Critical Theory itself, the determinate negation or translation of the prophetic, eschatological, critical and emancipatory substance of religion into a modern, secular form in the historical struggle for a more reconciled future society has been a

topic with which Habermas has and continues to wrestle in the continuing development of the formal and universal pragmatic of his Theory of Communicative Action. Although there is a definite methodological disagreement, if not “polarization” [Honneth 1992:3-16], between the first and second generation critical theorists critique of the “crisis” of modernity, the socio-historical materialistic goal of negating the reification of modernity’s productive forces for the creation of a free, just, humane, reconciled, and peaceful future society has always remained the same. As will be expressed below, within the contemporary, globalizing socio-historical context of the capitalist social system failure leading to cybernetic “emergency” measures to protect vested corporate class and national interests, the future relevancy and revolutionary potential of the critical theory of society and religion lies in dialectically uniting these two methodologies to overcome the supposed dark and pessimistic extremism of the first generation as well as the so-called “blue-eyed” idealism of Habermas for the creation of a dynamic, liberating theory and praxis in the struggle for “alternative future III – the reconciled, free and just society” [Siebert 2010, Appendices 3].

### ***Theodicy:***

As in all religions, great works of art, aesthetics, and philosophies, not to mention the experiences of billions of people in their everyday “life-world,” the cruel and ever-present problem of “theodicy” – the needless and horrifying sorrow, suffering and death of the innocent in nature and more disturbingly in modern society as well as the continuing, systemic escalation of barbarism - critically runs as a principle or underlying issue of concern through the entire complex, multifaceted, and dialectically interconnected work of Habermas. His recent work on the dialectic between religion and secularity is a theoretical, materialist response to the theodicy of Modernity, as he seeks to mediate or show a “third way” alternative to the dangerous reification of Modernity into two ideological, antagonistic and increasingly deadly world views: on the one hand, a Western styled “globalization” in the form of neo-conservative imperialism as well as the system and structures of neoliberal capitalism, and on the other hand, the rise of reactionary and retaliatory religious fundamentalism, which is as Habermas states a purely modern development directed against the years of perceived and all too real

exploitation and domination of Third World – or “Peripheral” – countries by a technologically superior Western civilization, which is said to have failed to realize the ideals of humanity [Habermas 2003:101-115; 2008b; Harrington 2007:45-61; Huntington 1996a, 1996b; Chomsky 1999; Harvey 2007, 2003; Johnson 2000; 2010; Klein 2008; Ott 2007: Chap. 11; Petras 2001; Baumann 1998; Ahmadi-Najad 2006.]

According to Habermas [1991:158-169; 2003:102], the traditional, “strong,” comprehensive religious worldviews and their substantive, “logos” rationality have lost their credibility and have disintegrated due to their inability to resolve the theodicy at the modern level of highly differentiated and rationalized action systems and their internal learning processes. The relevance of religion in the modern, secular world, however, is not thereby abstractly negated by Habermas. His theory of formal, universal pragmatics and of communicative action includes within its logic the possibility if not necessity for the inclusion of the determinately negated/secularly translated semantic potential of religion in the public sphere discourse of a post-secular society, which seeks understanding and consensus in the concrete, historical purpose of continuing the Enlightenment’s project of creating a constitutional democratic state. As Habermas states, this inclusion of the semantic potential of religion in the discourse of modernity is not a stratagem for the formal appeasement of the religious. It is rather an essential expression of the dialectical logic of communicative rationality itself that, through a reconstructed “geneology of reason,” understands the boundary between religious and secular reason to be “fluid” and thereby identifies the roots of secular reason in the birth of world religions during the “Axial Age” [Habermas 2003:101-115; 2005a, 2005b, 2006a:16-18; Jaspers 1953; Armstrong 2009, 2006; Eisenstadt 2000; Bellah 2005; Schwartz 1975; Parkes 1959]. It is by means of his Theory of Communicative Action that Habermas seeks to address the escalating theodicy problem by continuing the “unfinished project of Modernity” for human liberation and sovereignty in a democratic constitutional society committed to the creation of a good and happy life for all. Habermas explains the historical evolutionary bases for this through his restructuring of historical materialism in terms of prioritizing the inter-subjective paradigm of communicative rationality over Marx’s use of the dualistic and authoritarian philosophy of consciousness and its paradigm of subjectivity.

***Birth of Modern, Secular Society***

It has been well documented that the development of modern, secular society arose from the horror of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century religious massacres and wars, which devastated Central Europe; e.g. the religious wars between Roman Catholics and Protestants/Huguenots in France from 1562-1598, expressed in the slogan "*Une foi, un loi, un roi,*" (one faith, one law, one king); the Thirty Years War's [1618-1648] decimation of the population in German cities by one third and by two-fifths in German rural areas, and the horrifying slaughter of the population in the principalities of the Holy Roman Empire, reducing it from 20 to 16 million. The secularization of the State was precisely what was needed in response to this religiously sanctioned terror. Slowly, after these wars, the European nations adopted the policy of religious toleration, wherein religious minority confessions were at first guardedly put up with or indulged [*Duldsamkeit*]<sup>1</sup> by the government and the established religious majority. This earlier behavioral understanding of tolerance or toleration of religious minorities gradually developed into the granting of legal recognition and eventually of equal rights for minorities to give public expression to their religious beliefs in organizational form. England took the lead in this development after its 1688 Glorious Revolution with John Locke's [1955] *Letter Concerning Toleration* of 1689. Here, Locke gave the first detailed moral argument for the separation of the secular and religious/salvation oriented realms. For Locke, questions of faith were "matters of conscience" and not matters that could be politically legislated. Acknowledging that Locke's concept of tolerance was directed toward intra-Protestant denominational relations and thereby excluded Catholics, atheists, and members of non-Christian religions, nevertheless, with this distinction, Locke [1955:48-49] laid the modern foundation for defining what "public reason"<sup>2</sup> is:

"...the political society is instituted for no other end, but only to secure every [person's] possession of the things of this life. The care of each [person's] soul, and of the things of heaven, which neither does belong to the commonwealth nor can be subjected to it, is left entirely to every [person's] self."

According to Locke, who addresses the issue of religion from the perspective of Western European Christianity, every church, as a voluntary organization of individuals freely

organized around agreed upon doctrines expressive of a universal or “logos” rationality, was free to organize, administer and to express its faith in its religious liturgy and actions *as long as* these practices were legal according to the civil law. A church, and thus, religion, never had the right to any action that was against the secular law. In similar fashion, governments were not to interfere with any religious practice except when necessary to protect the public good. Governments were to assume a “neutral” position with regard to religion and refrain from supporting or enforcing any religious beliefs or practices via its power of law.

According to Habermas [2008b:5-6], with this post-Reformation and post-religious war pacification of society through the separation of Church and State, a “*modus vivendi*” – an agreed upon or accommodating way of living established between differing or even hostile people, groups, communities – was created in order for life to go on in a more peaceful manner. The result of this was that often the opposing religious sub-cultures ghettoized itself from the “other” – from other churches and even from society itself – and thus, remained alien to each other. This tolerating and accommodating *modus vivendi* approach to addressing the religious conflict, which created a needed socio-political restraint but no real reconciliation between the religions, was proven inadequate at least in principle through the development of the constitutional revolutions of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In this revolutionary period, principles were created of a new, democratic political order based on the constitutional rule of law and participatory democratic will formation of the people. This new constitutional state developed in the framework of the *contractualist tradition* – which as Habermas [2003:108] states has its roots in the religious revolutionary way of thinking brought about during what Karl Jasper’s called the “Axial Age” (whose dynamic spirit, according to Habermas [2005a:158] is expressed in the First Commandment of the Jewish Decalogue) and the birth of the great world religions between 800BCE to 200BCE – that relies on “natural reason,” on public arguments to which all persons are to have equal access. However, now the justification of the secular state rested on the notion of a “*common human reason*” rather than a religious legitimation of God [Habermas 2006a:4]. The constitutional state developed as a response to these religious wars through secularization and then by the democratization of political power. According to this new democratic political ideal, all sub-cultures –



religious or not – were expected to subordinate themselves in terms of their doctrines, dogma, etc, to the more universal purpose of creating a political community in which all citizens could mutually recognize each other as members. Now, as citizens of a democratic state, the “demos,” people were understood to be the authors of the laws that were to be obeyed, which grant them the right, as private citizens, “to preserve their identity in the context of their own particular culture and worldview” [Habermas 2008b:6]. Habermas states that it is this new relationship in Modernity of a democratic government, civil society, and the self-maintenance of subcultures that is the *key* to correctly understanding the struggles between religion and secularity today.

### ***The Modern Divide between the Religious and the Secular***

The modern divide if not antagonism between the religious and the secular, between God and the world, between reason and revelation, between faith and science, between believers and non-believers and its various historical consequences grew out of this secular response to the horror of these former religious wars. One of the dominant consequences of this cognitive and socio-historical bifurcation between the religious and the secular was the creation of the modernization/secularization theory that is rooted in the Enlightenment but was specifically formulated in functionalistic terms in the 1950’s and 1960’s [Berger 1999:2]. According to Habermas [2008b:1], this modernization/secularization theory is grounded on three hypotheses:

1. Progress in science and technology that promotes an anthropocentric understanding of the disenchanting world because the totality of the empirical world can now be causally explained.
2. The functional differentiation of social sub-systems through which churches and religious organizations lose their control over and importance for law, politics, public welfare, education, science. Religion is now to restrict itself to its “*proper function of administering the means of salvation,*” and to turning faith into a private, spiritual, soul affair.
3. There is no longer any need for a deity to take care of people in the midst of socio-historical crises due to the higher levels of welfare and greater social security produced in the developed modern societies, which results in the reduction of risks in life and a sense of increased existential security.

Habermas correctly states that these hypotheses as well as their historical socio-political development in terms of class antagonisms, of Western First/primary world domination of Third/peripheral world global relations, etc. express a narrow Euro- and ethnocentric perspective.<sup>3</sup> This can be seen in all of these hypotheses but particularly in terms of the third hypothesis stated above, of the modern development of increased levels of welfare, social security, and reduced risks to life. The question must be asked *for whom* has life become more secure and less contingent? The daily news reports of the continuing global “Great Recession” of increasing job, benefits, home and happiness loss for the working class massively contradicts this hypothesis [Damon 2009; Eckholm 2009; Goodman 2010; U.S. Department of Labor 2010]. The class antagonism in modern, globalizing capitalist society and the increasing uncertainty of life for the masses of the working class, the “underclass,” the immigrants, *campesinos*, sweatshop slave laborers – most of whom are women and children whose work creates the profit for their masters – is glossed over and ideologically ignored with this hypothesis of “progress.”

This modernization/secularization process, experienced by many throughout the world as a form of Western, capitalist domination if not imperialism cloaked as “globalization” [Petras and Veltmeyer 2001] has provoked powerful movements and theories of counter-secularization if not anti-modernization, often taking the form of religious fundamentalism [Fields 1991]. Chalmers Johnson [2000; 2004; 2007; 2010:chap. 1] has described this anti-Western, anti-secular reaction through the term “*Blowback*,” which is a CIA term first used in 1953 to describe the likelihood that U.S. overt and covert operations and interference in the domestic affairs of other countries, particularly Third World countries, would result in retaliations against Americans and the West at home and abroad. Already in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Joseph Schumpeter [1976] spoke positively of capitalism’s dynamic as a force of “creative destruction.” In traditional societies, the “creative” part of this capitalist destruction has not been as obvious as it has appeared to be in more advanced, secular Western societies. The secular, capitalist modernization that penetrates into these countries, often during times of natural or strategically created societal “shocks” to the social totality [Klein 2008] has often instigated social and cultural upheavals. The disintegration of the traditional, normative foundations of these societies produces enormous anomic confusion, fear, and anger,

which produces a fundamental “shift in mentality” in these traditional societies: one of resistance and staunch reaction to the ideology and productivity of capitalist, secular modernity. Contemporary scholars, such as David Harvey [2003, 2007] and Naomi Klein [2008], have dropped the “creative” adjective in describing the destructive process of globalizing capitalism to both the largest portions of humanity and to nature. This reaction has produced what some have called the return or resurgence of religion as a response directed fundamentalistically against “the perceived insults and injuries caused by a superior Western civilization” [Habermas 2006a:1]. This fundamentalistic religious, retaliatory response against the experienced history of secular Western domination and disrespect literally exploded in the terror strikes against the symbols of Western capitalism and imperialism, i.e. the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon, headquarters of the United States Department of Defense in Arlington County, Virginia on September 11, 2001. For the religious terrorists who flew the planes and the organizations they represented, these buildings and what they housed were symbols of the “Great Satan” [Ayatollah Ruholla Khomeini 1979]. This religious critique of the dialectic of the Enlightenment, and of the failure of liberalism and of secularism to realize its professed highest ideals of *Liberté, Egalité, and Fraternité* (freedom, equality, and solidarity) was also the substance of the Iranian President Ahmadinejad’s letter sent via the Swiss embassy to then President George W. Bush on May 9, 2006. The immanent critique of this political theological appeal to overcome the contradiction between professed personal religious faith – President Bush proclaims himself to be a “born-again Christian” - and antagonistic international actions by the United States was summarily ignored by the Bush Administration.

However, as Habermas [2003:102] states “fundamentalism is an exclusively modern phenomenon and *therefore, not only a problem of others.*” Religious fundamentalism is a response to the “time lag” between culture and society, between traditional and modern forms of society, between religion and secularity. It is interesting, therefore, to see a similar revival of the fundamentalist, evangelical, so-called religious Right that has occurred in the US, while it remains the dominant modern, capitalist society. Whereas in Third World countries, religion is becoming a force of resistance to the globalizing secular domination of the West, in the United States the rise of the religious Right has

been a force for increased conservative social policies as well as heightened support for neoconservative U.S. superiority in the world. As reported in the PEW U.S. Religious Landscape Survey of 2008, devout and religiously active citizens in the U.S. have remained relatively constant over the past 6 decades. This is not the case in Europe. The neoconservative movements of religious renewal in the U.S. are strengthening the political division of the West, particularly in the U.S., especially against progressive social policies: recognition of gay/lesbian marriage, abortion issues, abolition of death penalty, etc. Again, this is not the case so much in Europe, who, according to Habermas is walking the Enlightenment/secularization/modernization path alone now. Habermas [2008:2] states that secularized Europe, its Occidental form of reason, and the resulting secularization theory appears now to be the world wide anomaly, walking the *Sonderweg* – the non-normative, deviant “other way” – in counter-distinction to the continuation of religion in society and politics.

### ***“Zero-Sum Game”***

Habermas [2003:104] differentiates the historical meaning of secularization into two forms: 1.) secularization as “the taming” or replacement of religious authority, ways of thinking and forms of life by superior if not rational *equivalents*; and 2.) secularization as “unlawful appropriation” or expropriation/“stealing” and thereby, distortion if not destruction of religion by modernity. The first explanation sees secularization as a progressive historical movement in terms of the disenchantment of modernity, while the second understands secularization as part of humanity’s and history’s decline. According to Habermas, both of these understandings make the same mistake as they construct secularization as a “*zero-sum game*” between “the unbridled capitalist productive development of science and technology” and the resulting class inequalities and warfare and the conservative forces of religion and tradition. Even in the face of the contemporary growth of religious communities and their responses to the development of Modernity, Habermas [2008:3] still believes that the data globally supports the secularization hypothesis. Yet, for him, the weakness of the hypothesis lies in the imprecise use of the concepts “secularization” and “modernization.” In modern society, the differentiation of functional social systems brought the religious communities and

churches to confine themselves to “their core function of pastoral care” as they renounced their expertise in other areas of society. With this, as a corollary, the practice of faith also withdrew into a more personal and subjective realm. Yet, all of this reduction and withdrawal does not imply that religion as a whole lost its relevancy or influence in the political, cultural or personal life. For Habermas, the conflict between the religious and the secular as real as it has become, is nevertheless artificial if not ideological as it ignores the socio-historical fact that religion continues to exist in the developing context of secular modernity. According to Habermas [2003:104], this conflict is inconsistent with the reality of a post-secular society as it ignores “*the civilizing role of a democratically shaped and enlightened common sense*, that is the third way or “party” in the midst of a modern development of “*Kulturkampf*,” which has the potential of realizing the ominous reality of the neo-conservative notion of the so-called “clash of civilizations” [Huntington 1996a; 1996b.]

### ***Unfinished Project***

As is his entire Theory of Communicative Action *oeuvre*, Habermas’ critical theory of religion is to be understood within the framework of his philosophical defense of the modernity’s so-called unfinished project of Enlightenment. In his 1980 acceptance speech upon receiving the prestigious Adorno Prize from the city of Frankfurt, Germany for his outstanding contributions to the fields of philosophy, Habermas [1997:163] asked a fundamental question concerning the future of modernity in the face of its theodicy – the horror and destructiveness of its existing and globalizing antagonisms: “...*should we hold to the intentions of the Enlightenment, battered as they may be, or should we abandon the project of modernity?*” In the face of the reactionary attacks by post-Enlightenment, post-Modernity, *posthistoire*, neo-conservative, anarchistic philosophical and social theories as well as by religious fundamentalism against Modernity and the historical development of its humanistic ideals of liberty, dignity, equality, justice, happiness, solidarity, and peace as an expression of “the notion the infinite progress of knowledge and an infinite advance toward social and moral betterment,” Habermas [1997:159; 1987:1-22], as the first generation critical theorists before him, seeks to differentiate between and thereby defend an “authentic modernity” from its distortion

into the existing one-dimensionality of an instrumentally and strategically colonized and kitsch filled “modernism.”

As Habermas [1987:chapters. 1-2] states, it was Hegel who first developed a clear understanding of the concept of modernity, of its dangers and its potentials. Already in 1807, as a critical development of the Enlightenment beyond its philosophic embodiment in Kant, Fichte, and Schelling, Hegel [1967] gave expression to the dialectical development of reason in modernity from the naïve and edifying “unbroken immediacy” of a substantive rationality to its differentiation into the various forms of scientific knowledge. Such a self-differentiation or unfolding of reason from its mythic or ontological substantive form into its concrete scientific manifestations is, according to Hegel, the inner necessity of knowledge itself in the pursuit of truth. For Hegel [1967:70-71], through the philosophical and historical dialectical development of reason itself, the scientific form alone is the true shape in which truth exists. For Hegel, this dialectical development of reason in its inner, psychical life as well as in its concrete, lived external manifestation is the beginning of culture. Of course, for Hegel, the modern differentiation of reason into its various scientific forms and developments was not to lead into a catastrophic reification and antagonism between science and religion, reason and faith. Rather, through its own “immanent critique” of itself in scientific, philosophical form, reason would march with seven-mile boots on the cold path of its own necessity and push through the negativity of the extremism of both an immediate, religious substantive intuition of truth as well as the positivism of a non-substantive science of “what is” toward its fulfillment in Absolute knowledge. No matter whether one agrees with Hegelian philosophy or not, already at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Hegel described the contemporary, murderous crises into which Modernity has fallen, which has been described by neo-conservatives as an ensuing “clash of civilizations” [Huntington 1996a, 1996b, 2004; Harrison & Huntington 2000.]

According to Habermas [1991:162], in analyzing the development of an enlightened modernity a century later, as well as disavowing the dynamic of Hegelian dialectical logic, Max Weber [2008; 1963] also depicted modernity as the result of the differentiation of the substantive reason of religious and metaphysical world-views into three *distinct* rationalized and specialized areas, which were only formally connected. As

Hegel before, so too did Weber see modernity developing out of the fog of religious world-views that could no longer answer the increasing theodicy problems of real life. According to Weber, there was an intrinsic relationship between modernity and the process of disenchantment and secularization that occurred in Western civilization through what he termed Occidental rationalism [Weber 1958:13-31; Habermas 1984:143-271]. Because of this, the substantive, ontological reason of an obsolete religion now became differentiated into the secular value spheres of the self-sufficient “expert cultures” of science, morality, and aesthetics, which operate according to their own distinct forms of rationality and their inherent validity claims. In addressing questions of knowledge, the realm of science and scholarship is determined by a cognitive, instrumental and strategic rationality; in addressing questions of justice, the realm of morality operates by a moral, practical, communicative reason, and in addressing issues of taste or beauty, the realm of art utilizes an aesthetic, expressive rationality. According to Habermas, it was the intention of the Enlightenment philosophes that the differentiation and development of reason in its various forms would become the property not only of the system “experts” but would be disseminated for the consciousness and praxis of the people in the everyday life-world. The principles of the bourgeois Enlightenment were not only to increase humanity’s scientific knowledge for the technical domination of nature via instrumental reason, but were also to enable the development of humanity’s self-reflective consciousness in the form of a liberated subjectivity, which would result in the progressive, socio-historical creation of a more moral, just, happy and peaceful society.

It is quite obvious that this has not [yet] happened. The Enlightenment’s utopic vision of the progressive development of reason in creating a good, just and peaceful society has come to a halt due to the bifurcation of reason itself into opposing, schizophrenic realms: that of the highly specialized and bureaucratized social “System” that functions by means of an instrumental and strategic rationality according to the interests and needs of the trans-national capitalist class, and that of the everyday “Life-World,” which is founded upon communicative reason. Habermas [1979:97] describes this development as the bourgeoisie becoming cynical and apathetic about its own foundational ideals and norms, which have thus been systematically marginalized as to

their importance, as exemplified by the social sciences drift if not purposive move into positivism, “the myth of things as they actually are” [Horkheimer & Adorno 1972:x] and the jettisoning from its content of any binding normative content. The secularization of Western culture into these three expert realms was also accompanied by the secularization and thus, rationalization of Western societal structures in accordance with the modern development and need of the capitalist economic system and a bureaucratic state organization. With the modern development and specialization of reason into differentiated and self-sufficient expert cultures, the everyday life-world of the general public and thus, of the everyday layperson/worker “who is an expert in daily life” was and is endangered of becoming increasingly alienated from and dominated by the advancements of such cultural and societal modernization [Habermas 1987:chapt. 1-2; 1991:166]. Modernity’s systematically rationalized and bureaucratized expert cultures, now cut free from the dialectically conceived current of historical tradition, which is *abstractly* not *determinately* negated as being antiquated and thus, irrelevant, became tools of the now dominant instrumental/purposive rationality’s drive for increasing productivity, exploitation and domination in the service of the global capitalist class pursuit of ever increasing surplus value and not the development of a more reconciled future society. Such a visionary, utopian promise for and potential of Modernity was and still is contained in the critical cultural expressions of aesthetics, religion and philosophy – Hegel’s notion of the Absolute Spirit; those areas of human creativity that are expressive of communicative rationality. Thus, a dual schism occurs in Modernity between the expert cultures and the development of human tradition from which these cultures have come, as well as between the highly specialized System and the general public Life-world. The traditional, religious and metaphysical substance, language, symbols, rituals, and structures that provided meaning and a sense of identity and security for the masses, have now been devalued and undermined by the development of secular Modernity, which has itself been overwhelmed by the advancing one-dimensionality of Western culture’s instrumental and strategic rationality that “alters the relation between the rational and the irrational” [Marcuse 1964:247; 2001:81-93, 122-162]. It is this purposive and mechanical reason that, in the terms of Horkheimer, Adorno, Benjamin, Marcuse [1964:10f], Fromm [1955] and Habermas [1987, 1975a], has been



systematically and by artifice “*introjected*” into human beings as their “social character” by the colonization of the everyday life-world by the system of the existing social totality. Such a dialectic of Enlightenment that systemically reinforces the normalization of the irrational being reasonable, wherein “war is peace, freedom is slavery, ignorance is strength” [Orwell 1949], has the very real potential of turning possible *citoyens* – those who are conscious of and live and act for the *universal* well being of humanity – into becoming *bourgeois* – self-centered and self-serving individual monads, who understand freedom only in particularized, subjectivistic manner, i.e. for themselves, and who having thus dispensed with serving universal purposes “are without wisdom” and “incapable of either virtue or bravery” [Hegel 1979, 1974:209; Arribas 2000:213-219]. When such conscious or unconscious conformity to alienating system integration efforts fail or are rejected, it is often then that people return to the pre-modern, traditional, quasi-naturalistic forms of identity and will formation. In both first and third world countries, such a delimitation of the Life-world from the developments of societal and cultural modernization becomes a seedbed for the development of reactionary, religious fundamentalism against the further development of Modernity

### *Crisis of Modernity*

Due to the cultural and societal domination by instrumental and strategic rationalization, modernity has fallen into multiple “states of emergency” to quote Benjamin [1969:257], or maybe better termed in light of the language of this essay, the *theodicy* in modern form has raised its horrifying and deadly Hydra-head once again. In the face of this modern theodicy, there are many who claim that modernity and its ideals have failed, particularly in its cultural form. Above all, it has been the neo-conservatives theorists, politicians and media commentators who blame the crises of modernity on the ideals of the cultural enlightenment; ideals which are used to critique the modern theodicy of the systemically caused human suffering, degradation, horror and death of modern “civil” society; ideals that are said to contaminate the modern mentality with inflated expectations of universal notions of humanity’s worth, dignity, and inherent right to life, liberty, equality, justice, happiness, as well as to the material rights to food, clean water, housing, education, work, health care – all things that neo-conservatives say the

given social system, its productive forces, and the State cannot guarantee; cultural ideals that are said to undermine the authority of the status quo and its traditions, particularly that of conservative, authoritarian “civil” religion; ideals that are said to be exhausted and dead, yet still propagated by misguided intellectuals. While advocates of post-modernism, post-enlightenment, *posthistoire*, as well as of anarchism and of religious fundamentalism seek in various ways the cancellation of a failed modernity, the neo-conservatives seek the cancellation of the cultural/emancipatory enlightenment, which they say is “degenerate” and has become “crystallized,” while they advocate for ever-greater financing of the continued advancement of the instrumental and technical rational enlightenment. According to the neo-conservative theory, the bourgeois enlightenment’s ideals, which are still contained within critical aspects of cultural modernity, have become exhausted and are no longer relevant due to the proven success of the autonomous, self-sufficient, self-promulgating, and automatic system modernization based on instrumental and strategic reason.

### ***Failed “Melodies”***

The modern development of reason’s bifurcation and reification into schizophrenic antagonism between religion and secularity/modernity holds out the dangerous contemporary possibility for the realization of Weber’s [1958:181] prognostication that modernity will ultimately end in the “iron cage” of a capitalistically dominated, totally administered society or in the un-ending war society expressed in neoconservative’s terms as the “clash of civilizations,” the U.S. policy of an “unending war on terror,” etc. Efforts to mitigate if not overcome this increasing antagonism of modernity have not been very successful. According to Habermas [1979:97f], this is particularly so for the “melodies of ethical socialism” that have failed in their revolutionary efforts to historically negate and transcend the crisis of modernity through the creation of a more reconciled society. Habermas [1979:95-129, 130-177; 1987b:106-130] specifically applies this epitaph to Marx’s historical materialistic critique of capitalism as well as to the critique of the first generation of critical theorists, particularly that of Horkheimer and Adorno.

In spite of the normative, humanistic foundation and purpose of Marx's historical materialist critique of capitalism expressed throughout his *oeuvre*,<sup>4</sup> Habermas [1979:96] nevertheless states, "from the very beginning there was a lack of clarity concerning the normative foundations of Marxian social theory." Historical materialism was supposed to be a "critical" social theory, which was grounded in Marx's materialistic appropriation of Hegel's logic. The Logos-logic of Hegel expresses the fundamental dynamic of dialectics, being that of "determinate negation" and what has come to be known as "immanent critique:" critiquing the objective, system and structures of – in this case – society by the norms upon which they are established [Hegel 1967, 1969; Adorno 1973; Marcuse 1960; Antonio 1981]. Dialectical critique holds the so-called "real" in account to its proclaim "ideal," the form to the content, what is done to that which is said. This dialectic Marx applied not to only the dominant bourgeois theories of society but also to the everyday life experiences and reports of people, classes, and nations that contradicted the theoretically expressed values, e.g. life, liberty, happiness, equality, solidarity, which were also incorporated into the revolutionary democratic constitutions of the time.

However, according to Habermas [1979:95-129, 130-177], Marx made the mistake of remaining within and thus, utilizing the modern philosophy of consciousness and its dualistic paradigm of subjectivity translated into the very same instrumental and strategic form of rationality – with its emphasis on the human potential of work and technology - in his attack on the capitalist construction and domination of the socio-economic forces of production. As he states, such a method can explain the development of the crisis of modern social disintegration, but it cannot resolve it. According to Habermas [1979:145f], the possibility of such new forms of social integration appeal to the domain of a moral-practical knowledge and to its evolutionary learning process, a process that cannot be reduced to instrumental or strategic rationality. As he states, the advance or evolution of the productive forces that are created by these forms of rationality does not produce more justice, equity, righteousness, peace but only new forms of labor organization. In the face of the system created, destabilizing and horror-producing global crisis that endangers modernity, the possibility of securing new forms of social integration through the critical appeal to and reflection on society's values and norms - which provides the pace-making potential for the creation of social change in the

operation of the new social productive forces - belongs to communicative rationality and action which is oriented toward reaching understanding and consensus formation based on universal validity claims. Habermas' theory of communicative action is his attempt to reconstruct the liberating critique of historical materialism and thereby continue the project of enlightened modernity in its work to create the liberal democratic constitutional state.

Through his transforming of the evolutionary learning theories of Piaget and Kohlberg into his theory of communicative action, Habermas opens the door for the inclusion of the "cognitive" or semantic potential of marginal social groups and their world views, e.g. religion, entrance into the interpretive system of society. As he states, this inclusion of the cognitive or semantic potential of differing worldviews into the modern secular discourse of the public sphere can possibly contribute normatively to the creation of a new principle of social organization. The ideal result of this would be the creation of a new level of social integration that determinately negates the former system crisis. It is in the form of the existing society's marginalized, if not demeaned and forgotten, interpretive systems' "potential" that the "other" cultural, religious, political world-views critique of the "crisis" and its accompanying narrative, visionary expression of an alternative future can be anamnesticly re-membered and allowed into the public sphere's discourse [Habermas 2005b; Metz 1997]. This analysis of the development and purpose of Habermas' theory of communicative action sets the stage for understanding his recent focus on religion in the public sphere.

### ***Self-Reflective Religion/Self-Referential Politics***

Habermas states that it was Christianity that set "the cognitive initial conditions for the modern structures of consciousness" as well as the range of motivations, expressed in Weberian terms, in the development of capitalism. According to Habermas [2005a:148-149], both Judaism and Christianity are deeply rooted in the normative self-understanding of modernity, as the ideals of universal equality, freedom, autonomy in solidarity, the morality of conscience, emancipation, human rights and democracy are the *heirs* of Judaism's ethic of justice and Christianity's ethic of love. The normative foundations of modernity [albeit now translated into secular form] are found in these Abrahamic

religions to which there is no alternative. For the furtherance of the so-called “project” of Modernity in the midst of its own dialectic of increasing and extremely dangerous global crises, this religious, substantive legacy must be remembered and drawn upon as in the past in new ways.

According to Habermas, the modern reality known as globalization has not provided a new orientation or a new form of consciousness to this heritage. The neoliberal and neoconservative globalization of capitalism is the radicalized continuation of its original principle and purpose of producing ever increasing profit accumulation for the owners of capital. This has been and continues to be the driving class-warfare dynamic of capitalism since the end of the eighteenth century. Habermas agrees with Weber’s [1958] analysis of Protestant Christianity that the Church has served an important role as pacemaker for this mentality.<sup>5</sup> However, neither the Church nor religion in general has such a leadership role in the globalization of trans-national capitalism and the corollary modern form of communication. Habermas states that Christianity is greatly affected and challenged by the consequences of this new infrastructure, as are other forms of the Hegelian “objective Spirit,” e.g. the family and the State [Hegel 1971:241-291; 1967b].

According to Habermas [2005a:149; 2005b:293-301], for the Christian church to meet the challenges of capitalist, neo-liberal, transnational globalization it must “re-appropriate its own normative potential more radically” in terms of being non-paternalistic, non-ethnocentrically “ecumenical” and by becoming more polycentric as a world church, in terms of the political theologians Johann Baptist Metz’s [1998, 1997, 1995, 1983, 1981, 1980, 1979, 1973, 1968] and Jürgen Moltmann’s [1996, 1992, 1990, 1981, 1977, 1975, 1974, 1972, 1969, 1967] work, as well as the work of Hans Küng [2007, 2000, 1995, 1992, 1991; Küng & Homolka 2009; Küng, et al. 1986]. Modern faith must become self-reflective/reflexive. It is only through such self-critique that it can enter into a “universe of discourse” delimited by secular knowledge and shared with other religions. Such reflexive religion can thereby become, in John Rawls [2001:128-180] terms, a “reasonable comprehensive doctrine.”<sup>6</sup>

As a reactionary response to the modern theodicy experiences of preventable, needless human suffering and death, religious fundamentalism’s return in practicing and promoting the exclusivity of pre-modern religious attitudes is a false answer to the

epistemological and socio-political situation. According to Habermas [2005a:153], the “only convincing criteria for criticizing the miserable state of our economically fragmented, stratified, and un-pacified global society” is modernity’s normative values of egalitarianism and universalism. As he states,

*“The monstrously brutal process of global social modernization since the fifteenth century”* that has led to the ‘modern condition’ is without any clearly recognizable alternative.” ... “There is no reasonable exit-option left to us from a capitalist world society today.” [Emphasis added by author.]

The transformation of global capitalism now seems possible only from within, which is concretely playing itself out presently throughout the West through the nationalization of the banks and corporations due to the unfolding crisis of the capitalist system. According to Habermas, a form of self-reflective, self-referential politics is needed, which would aim at strengthening capacities for political action itself, and at reigning in an uncontrolled economic dynamic both within and beyond what still counts as the authoritative level of nation-states.

According to Habermas, in the face of the antagonism between the secular and the religious, the West must return to its own cognitive resources in the secularly sublimated or determinately negated Judeo-Christian heritage of self-reflection, of de-centering one’s own perspective, of taking the role of the other, and of self-critically distancing itself from its own traditions. The West must understand itself as only one voice among many “in the hermeneutical conversation between cultures.” According to Habermas [2005a:155], the encounter with “‘strong’ alternative traditions” – secularism in scientific, political, cultural forms, Islam in the form of its Sharia laws, etc – gives the West a chance to become more fully aware, in a non-defensive, non-ethnocentric way, of its own roots in the Judeo-Christian tradition. These strong, “other” cultures can be the spur to reflection for intercultural understanding. All participants in this global discourse must become aware of their own particular mental/cultural presuppositions before they enter the discourse. This call of the social philosopher Habermas is strikingly similar to the work of the Catholic theologian, Hans Küng, for the creation of a “new world ethic” expressive of the reciprocity of the Golden Rule [Küng 2000, 1991; Küng & Homolka 2009.]

***Methodological Atheism***

Habermas seeks to resist and overcome the dangerous reification of the modern divide between the religious and the secular, believers and non-believers, faith and knowledge. He does this through his turn to a linguistic paradigm and its validity claims that focuses on the human potential of language, memory, recognition. Even with this paradigm change, however, Habermas is in complete agreement with the first generation of critical theorists, particularly with Adorno, who understood his own critique of reification in terms of the prohibition against making images – the *Bilderverbot* – of the second Commandment of the Decalogue. Habermas [2005a:159] states: “With this intention, if not in the means of realizing it, I am in complete agreement with Adorno.” As did the first generation of critical theorists, so Habermas through his emphasis on the methodological atheism of his linguistic paradigm change also attempted to determinately negate the prophetic, liberating and eschatological substance of Judaism and Christianity into his theory of communicative action. Eduardo Mendieta [2002:2-11], who has written on and documented much of Habermas’ writing on religion takes this a step further by saying that Habermas also determinately negated into his work the critical tradition of Jewish utopian Messianism of the first generation of critical theorists. As will be seen, Mendieta’s statement is open to serious debate.

Habermas has no objection to the claim that his conception of language and of communicative action oriented toward mutual understanding is rooted in the legacy of Christianity. For him, the dynamic of reaching understanding – the concept of discursively directed agreement which measures itself against the standard of intersubjective recognition, that is, the double negation of criticizable validity claims – in his terms nourishes itself from the heritage of a *logos* understood as Christian, one that is indeed embodied in the communicative practice of the religious congregations. His relation to a theological heritage does not bother Habermas, as long as the methodological difference of the discourses is understood; as long as philosophical discourse conforms to the distinctive demands of justificatory speech, which he calls a methodological atheism. By means of this method, any proclamations of unconditional

meaning must pass the test of consensus formation through “the tribunal of justificatory discourse” [Habermas 2005a:162.]

Through his linguistic paradigm change and the discursive validity claim of “understandability,” Habermas expresses the need for the universalistic and egalitarian semantic potential of religious myths, language, concepts, symbols, etc to be translated so as to enter as a discourse partner into the realm of the modern secular public sphere. By means of his focus on and development of the dialectical linguistic paradigm, Habermas continues - albeit in a much less negative or “dangerous” form - the first generation of critical theorists, particularly Horkheimer’s, Adorno’s and Benjamin’s, emphasis on the need for an *inverse theology*<sup>7</sup>; one that maintains in terms of Adorno [2005:136] that

“Nothing of theological content will persist without being transformed; every content will have to put itself to the test of migrating into the realm of the secular, the profane.”

Through such translation of religious content, both believing and non-believing citizens have the possibility of fulfilling the normative expectations of the liberal role of citizens in the realm of the public sphere of a post-secular society. The possibility of mutual recognition and respect of the “other” can then likewise be created when certain cognitive conditions and the corresponding epistemic attitudes are agreed upon and shared. Habermas [2006a:4] calls this procedure “the deliberative mode of democratic will formation.”

### ***Ethics of Citizenship***

Based on the notion of a common human reason come those basic rights that free and equal citizens must grant each other if they wish to govern their co-existence rationally by means of positive law. For Habermas, this democratic procedure is able to legitimate the social organization by two principles: 1.) the equal political participation of all citizens, who not only are subject to the law but are the law’s creators, and 2.) the epistemic dimension of a deliberation that grounds the *presumption* of *rationality* acceptable outcomes. According to Habermas, these two principles explain the kind of political virtues the liberal state must expect from its citizens. These two principles of democratic will formation are the conditions for the successful participation of all



citizen's – believers and non-believers - in the democratic self-determination of the secular society/state and define the “ethics of citizenship ... citizens are expected to respect one another as free and equal members of their political community” [Habermas 2006a:5]. When confronted by a political problem, citizens are expected to look for a way to reach a rationally motivated agreement – “*they owe one another good reasons.*”

According to the universalistic principles of the Enlightenment that focus on the deliberative and inclusive procedures of democratic will formation, these two causes of the religious and the secular, and thus, of believers and non-believers are to complement each other. It is by means of this universal democratic purpose that the notion of tolerance receives its dynamic substance that goes beyond a particularizing/compartmentalizing “modus vivendi” approach to life and society, whereby, in Habermas's terms, each citizen – believer or non-believer - must mutually concede one another the right to those convictions, practices and ways of living that they themselves reject [cf. Marcuse 1969]. This concession must be supported by a shared basis of mutual recognition that can overcome the dissonance and alienation of otherness. The basis of recognition is “the awareness ... that the other is a member of an inclusive community of citizens with equal rights, in which each individual is accountable to the others for his/her political contributions” [Habermas 2008b:7]. The constitutional state provides the legal framework for the self-governing of free and equal citizens by means of the use of public reason, which requires citizen's to justify their political statements, attitudes, actions before one another in light of a reasonable interpretation of valid constitutional principles. “Only those political decisions are taken to be legitimate that have been *impartially justified* in light of generally accessible reasons” [Habermas 2006a:5]

### ***“Institutional Translation Proviso”***

Habermas recognizes the dialectical relationship between the separate entities of the state and the individual. Neither side can negate or subsume the other into itself. Thus, for Habermas, the secular state must not apply the institutional separation of church and state, religion and politics, faith and knowledge to the individual. For believers, such a requirement could produce an undue mental and psychological burden on the person.

This would be an *asymmetrical* burden on the people of faith, since secular citizens are not required to perform a similar translation effort. The secular State must remain “sensitive to the force of articulation inherent in religious languages” – for its “semantic potential - in order to fairly search for “reasons that aim at universal acceptability” [Habermas 2003:109] The boundary between religious and secular reasons “are fluid.” Both sides must be involved in determining these disputed boundaries, which requires both sides to take on the perspective of the other one.

Yet, every citizen must recognize that they live in a secular state, which is to exercise its political authority in an impartial manner. They must know and accept that only “secular reasons count” in the institutional political realm. Yet, according to Habermas [2006a:10], the only thing that is required of the faithful is the epistemic ability to *consider one’s own faith reflexively from the outside* – by taking the role of the other – and thus, relate their faith to secular views. This is what he terms the secular “*institutional translation proviso*” that people of faith are to recognize, which prevents them from the schizophrenic requirement to split their identity into religious [private] and secular [public] parts. Religious people must be allowed to express their convictions in a religious language “if they cannot find secular ‘translations’ for them” [Habermas 2006a:10]. Knowing that they are part of a secular state, wherein they are both the creators and subjects of the law, religious people can express themselves in religious language and images, knowing also that the institutional translation proviso applies to their speech acts. They have to trust that their religious language will be correctly translated into secular form. Thus, for Habermas, the political use of private religious reasons is not proscribed since religious traditions, particularly the Abrahamic, prophetic religions have the ability to give voice to moral intuitions that give expression to the suffering of innocent victims – the theodicy problem.

Thus, religious materials of comprehensive world-views can be expressed in the discourses of the public sphere. However, the translations of religious material must take place before it reaches the political institutions, i.e., the *political* public sphere. According to Habermas, this is the only acceptable way for the truth content of religious contributions to enter the political institutional discourse. As Habermas states, this translation must be a cooperative task. Believers and non-believers must be involved in

the translation effort. This requires that the secular, non-believers also, however, must open their minds to the possible truth content of the religious presentations. By means of such dialogues with people of faith, their religious reasons might well emerge in the transformed guise of generally accessible arguments.

### ***Reciprocity of Expectations***

This discursive procedure of translation in mutual respect and recognition is what Habermas [2006a:13] calls the “reciprocity of expectations among citizens,” who owe one another reasons for their political statements and attitudes. It is this that distinguishes a community integrated by constitutional values from a community segmented along the dividing lines of competing world views. This principle of reciprocity is violated when the religious citizenry and institutions are given an asymmetrical burden of having to learn and adapt to the dominant secular form of reason and thereby, translate their religious language into secular form. Secular citizens do not share this same responsibility.

“The duty to ‘make public use of reason’ can only be discharged under certain cognitive preconditions. Required epistemic attitudes [ways of knowing] are the expression of a given mentality and cannot, like motives, be made the substance of normative expectations and political appeals. Every ‘ought’ presupposes a ‘can.’ The normative expectations of an ethics of citizenship have absolutely no impact unless a required change in mentality has been forthcoming first...” [Habermas 2006a:13]

Secular citizens, who are expected to cooperate with their religious counterparts, must also be expected to perform a self-reflective transcending of a secularist self-understanding of Modernity.

“Under the normative premises of the constitutional state, the admission of religious statements to the political public sphere only makes sense if all citizens can be expected not to deny from the outset any possible cognitive substance to these contributions – while at the same time respecting the precedence of secular reasons and the institutional translation requirement.” ... “An epistemic mindset is presupposed here that would originate from a self-critical assessment of the limits of secular reason” [Habermas 2006a:15].

According to Habermas, in the absence of such cognitive preconditions, a public use of reason cannot be imputed to citizens. As Habermas states, this cognitive precondition for

his ethics of citizenship, which is to be expected equally from all citizens – religious and secular, is expressive of all citizens undergoing a complementary learning process.

### ***Complementary Learning Process of Believers and Non-Believers***

As has been stated, for Habermas, in any democratic order, all citizens must be included as equals in civil society. This is the expectation and demand of a constitutional state for an ethics of citizenship. Religious citizens and communities are expected “to appropriate the secular legitimation of constitutional principles under the premises of their own faith” [Habermas 2008:10]. This requires a mutual interpretation and translation of both the secular constitutional ideals as well as the religious stories, images, symbols, etc. into their semantic potential. This requires a shift from a traditional to a more *reflexive* religious consciousness and epistemic attitudes. This requires a *learning process* – a mutual, complementary learning process that can be fostered but not morally or legally stipulated or forced on others.

In a constitutional state, all norms that can be legally implemented must be formulated and publicly justified in a language that all citizens understand. The state’s neutrality with regards to religion does not preclude the permissibility of religious utterances within the political public sphere. As Habermas [2008:11] states, “The ‘separation of church and state’ calls for a *filter* between these two spheres – a filter through which only ‘translated’, i.e., secular contribution may pass from the confused din of voices in the public sphere into the formal agendas of state institutions.” Thus, the democratic state must not pre-emptively reduce the polyphonic complexity of the diverse public voices, because it cannot know whether it is not otherwise cutting society off from scarce resources for the generation of meanings and the shaping of identities. Both the religious and the non-religious citizens are called to a “higher,” self-reflective political universal of democratic will formation and purpose that requires them to treat each other with mutual respect and recognition as citizens and human beings in the struggle to create a more reconciled future society. To treat the other with “disrespect” would be to revert to the level of a mere “modus vivendi,” which destroys the other and the possibility of democracy itself.

### *A Critique*

As stated above, Habermas understands the historic embodiments of religion to be essentially obsolete in addressing the issues of modern, secular society. However, religion may nevertheless contain a still relevant “epistemic,” “semantic potential” in a pre-modern, intuitive form, which can be ascertained for any possible contributions to the secular socio-political spheres of discourse only through its translation from its religious and thereby particularistic hermeneutical, “strong” ontological form into a secular, universalistic, normative expression according to the validity claims of language and the discourse ethics of communicative action in the agreed upon work of creating a democratic constitutional state. The standard by which the so-called semantic potential of religion is to be judged for such modern relevancy is the liberal Enlightenment’s ideal notion of the democratic constitutional state and its universal conception of human rights and norms; norms and rights - as Habermas acknowledges - that are rooted in the world religions of the Axial Age, particularly that of Judaism and Christianity in Western civilization. However, a question arises as to whether the semantics of religion can be translated truthfully, comprehensibly and thus, meaningfully by the standard of such a political ideal? Is such a translation of possible religious semantic potential into secular linguistic form enough to overcome the increasing global barbarity of neo-liberal capitalism and the imperialism of the West’s neo-conservatism? “Something’s missing.”

This statement comes from Bertolt Brecht’s [2007] 1930 epic drama/opera entitled *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*. In a 1964 public discussion between Adorno and Ernst Bloch [1988:1-17] on the topic of the contradictions of utopian longing, Bloch quoted Brecht’s statement that “something’s missing” and applied that critique to modernity and its historical development. According to Bloch, that “something” is *utopia*, the hope and longing for that which is other than what is, if not also for the totally “Other.”<sup>8</sup> Within the framework of his theory of communication, Habermas [2010:chaps. 2 & 7] also acknowledges that “something is missing” in the development of reason in Modernity. However, Habermas stays well within the linguistic paradigm to identify this “something” as the religious foundation and semantic

potential as inheritance of reason itself. This essay ends with this very same critique from Brecht and Bloch, that there is “something missing” in Habermas’ theory of religion and its relevance in critically addressing the crisis or theodicy of modernity. There are many issues that could be addressed here, but I focus only on one: Habermas’ lack of serious attention given to the revolutionary religious critique and call for the negation of the *negative*, of the “slaughter-bench” [Hegel 1956:21] and increasing barbaric power of history, known as a “Golgotha” not only of the Absolute Spirit but also of the human [Hegel 1967a:808], which moves “progressively” toward a totally administered, bureaucratized, cybernetic society if not the neo-conservative’s *Kulturkampf*. This is the contemporary horrific form of theodicy, which must be theoretically and concretely addressed in terms of both *poiesis* [the creative potential of thought, language, culture] and the *praxis* of social labor for any possible negation of this catastrophic historical development, which possibly could allow for the creation of a more reconciled future society.

*Religion and Theodicy:* As stated in the introduction to this essay, the dynamic substance of all religions is expressed in how they address and resolve the concrete theodicy problem of the suffering of the innocent experienced in nature but especially experienced in society and history. The substantive importance of a religion rises and falls historically based on its ability to resolve the theodicy according to its historical place in the evolutionary learning process. As Siebert [1994:153; 2010] states, for Habermas, the mythical, religious-metaphysical world-views have disintegrated “because even their most sophisticated theological answers to the theodicy problem have fallen far behind the problem-consciousness of the modern everyday life-world.” As Habermas [2003:114] states, his theory of communicative action in the modern context of a post-secular society “continues the work, for religion itself, that religion did for myth” in the attempt to salvage religion’s “scarce resource of meaning.” According to Habermas, the universal mode of “nondestructive secularization” is the method of translation that can recover that which has “almost [been] forgotten, but implicitly missed,” namely, the sense of moral feeling, which has been expressed so far only by religious language. In a similar fashion, Mendieta [2005:2] states that Habermas’ modern, secular approach of

methodological atheism is not the rejection but the dialectical sublation of the substance of the Judeo-Christian traditions. I agree with both of these statements at the formal, methodological level. However, what is missing in Habermas' appropriation of religion into his theory is the *substantive* religious *outrage* expressed in the Abrahamic, prophetic religions at the crushing of the life and happiness chances of the *anawim* – the workers, the poor, the humble, the powerless – for the gain of the socially dominant. The Biblical texts and the Koran are filled with the condemnation of such exploitation, domination and murder. This prophetic, Messianic, and eschatological condemnation of such socially constructed horror and negativity and its moral demand that these conditions be negated in an *immediate* if not revolutionary manner [e.g. the story of the call of Moses and the Exodus (Exodus 3-15); the revolutionary task and action of Elijah – the “troubler of Israel” (1 Kings 18-19) and Jeremiah's prophetic appointment over nations and kingdoms, “to pluck up and pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and plant” that which is new (Jeremiah 1:10), through John the Baptist's demand to “bear fruits worthy of repentance” by acting immediately to negate the negativity of human need [Luke 3] to Jesus' reference to his followers “to deny themselves and take up their cross and follow” him in living for the eschatological new creation of God and its righteousness by bringing the good news of liberation and redemption to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free (Mark 8:34-38, Matthew 6:33, Luke 4:18-19) are completely missing in Habermas' formal and ideal pragmatic. In the inner or immanent critique of the prophetic and eschatological texts is heard the demand that the theodicy be immediately addressed; that the cry of “*Hurry for me!*” [Genesis 1991] is answered in the here and now. In Habermas' theory, as important as it is in the struggle for a future reconciled society, the socio-ethical revolutionary substance of religion is pushed to the margins as it is leveled into becoming a possible contributing partner for the furtherance of the Enlightenment's liberal political program.

*Religious “Ekstasis”*: As Karen Armstrong [2009:chapt. 1, esp. pgs. 8, 10] states, “Religion is hard work. Its insights are not self-evident and have to be cultivated in the same way as an appreciation of art, music, or poetry must be developed. ... Like art, the truths of religion require the disciplined cultivation of a different mode of consciousness”

– a mode of consciousness and praxis that inspires the hope-giving desire and motivation for otherness, transcendence, *ekstasis* [stepping outside the existing norm]: for answering the theodicy question. It is precisely this mode of consciousness that the dominant if not victorious form of secular reason in its instrumental and strategic forms has labored so hard to expunge. How then is such an essential prophetic and eschatological dynamic of religion to be translated into modern secular form for inclusion in the public sphere discourse, when the needed consciousness for such translation is so systematically damaged if not missing?

Prior to his more mature expression of the theory of communicative action, Habermas [1997:167] stated this very concern of the capitalist domination of the societal productive forces and the resulting colonization of modern culture and the life-world.

“Modern culture can be successfully linked back up to a practice of everyday life *that is dependent on vital traditions* but impoverished by mere traditionalism *only if* social modernization too can be guided into other, non-capitalist directions, and if the life world can develop, on its own, institutions that will lie outside the borders of the inherent dynamics of the economic and administrative systems.” [Emphasis added by author.]

Habermas states that the possibility of such a change is not good, but the desire for such a change arises from within the Enlightenment itself due to it being hijacked and perverted by capitalism. However, in similar fashion to the marginalization of the revolutionary substance of religion, it is just this historical materialist analysis of class struggle and the crisis of capitalism that is “displaced to the margins of intellectual discourse” by Habermas [Snedeker 2000:240]. This is due to Habermas’ paradigm shift for the development of his theory of communicative praxis and discourse ethics from the human potential of work and tools to that of language and the struggle for recognition [Siebert 2010:chapt. 7; 1994:chapt. 1; 1985:chapt. 1]. In this shift, the revolutionary potential of social labor’s praxis is reduced to the dualistic model of instrumental rationality’s logic of domination – of spirit over nature, of subject over object - as expressed in the philosophy of consciousness. As Axel Honneth [1995:chapt. 2, esp. pgs. 39-49] states, the loss of social labor’s praxis of resistance against capitalism and its struggle for a more reconciled, non-capitalist society is the price of this paradigm shift. As an idealistic rational *formal* process, Habermas’ communicative ethics is almost irrefutable as an



inter-subjectivistic paradigm for establishing rational, consensually derived decisions and forms of action. However, in the face of technological rationality, as the latest transmutation of the idea of Reason into the “profitable insanity” of “incestuous reasoning” [Marcuse 2001:158-159], whereby reason is no longer understood as the negation of the domination and repression of humanity and nature but rather as submission to the facts of life of an increasing class dominated, “irrationally rational” bureaucratically controlled [totally administered] and militaristic society bent of defending and imperialistically extending globally the power of the capitalist elite, the rational structures of communicative action as theodicy are not strong enough by themselves to bring about this revolutionary transformation. They also become susceptible to and essentially already have been colonized, and thus dialectically inverted, into being tools of the oppressive status quo. This is a point already made by [Horkheimer and Adorno 1972:120-167, Adorno 1991; 1973; Marcuse 2001; 2007:esp. chaps. 2-4] in their critique of the “culture industry.” Such a critique does in no way disqualify the validity claims of communicative action. They remain intact, at least at the theoretical level. What Adorno [1973:3] said concerning the present viability of philosophy, applies to the discourse ethics of Habermas’ theory of communicative action: The conditions for its realization have not yet materialized as the forces that prevent their realization are still in place, wounded – constantly self-wounded by their own contradictions, but nevertheless, still dominant.

To use Habermas’ own analogy, his communicative action theory is playing a completely other game than that of the capitalistically dominated game of chess, orchestrated to its own class advantage. Yet, in its present form, Habermas’ game reduces not only religion but also the historical/dialectical materialist social revolutionary purpose into the philosophical ideal of communicative praxis. As such, Habermas’ theory does not take seriously enough the horror of the negative and the need for its determinate negation. It does not take seriously enough the chasm between the ideal and real, between the inter-subjective praxis of creating consensus among people through discourse according to the principles of universal validity claims and the hard, cold, deadly reality of the existing authoritarian class system that distorts language and forms of communication, not to speak of culture itself into forms of domination and conformity

to “what is.” The issues of the globalizing system and structures of domination, exploitation and the resulting suffering and horror of billions of people every day are glossed over in the attempt to find a paradigm “abstract” enough to apply to all socio-historical systems and thereby legitimate the “moral-practical” linguistic turn to communicative action as the dynamic for the reconstruction of historical materialism and as a type of secular process for the continuation of the relevant religious norms in the public sphere discourse. In this, the revolutionary teeth and thus, critical and liberating bite of historical materialism and of the prophetic religions – whose humanistic substance was dialectically incorporated into its socio-historical critique and goal - is seriously dulled by Habermas’ abstract system analysis and focus on universal pragmatics. Unlike the practical historical revolutionary goal of Marxism, and of the prophetic religions, Habermas’ reconstruction of both historical materialism and of religion is too tolerant of the negative, too pragmatic – which is determined not so much by the “ought” of morality but by what is “possible” according to the established social system.

*The Future of the Critical Theory:* It is for this reason – and others – that Habermas’ theory of communicative action – as an essential component of the revolutionary struggle for human enlightenment, liberation, redemption and happiness - needs to be incorporated dialectically with the first generation critical theorists determinate negation of historical materialism and religion in terms of negative dialectics, in order to allow their synergetic - in terms of Benjamin’s [1969:253] image of the chess-playing automaton/historical materialism who will win all challenges with the assistance of the ugly hunchback/theology that has to keep out of sight - critiques of the existing crises of globalizing capitalism and Western Imperialism as well as their visions of an alternative, more reconciled, global human future to be more relevant and potent in the historical struggle. Communication aimed at not only consensual understanding and action, but also toward an alternative, reconciled social system has to break out of the control of the irrationally organized [instrumental and strategic] rational system of domination. Communicative action is certainly a part of this liberational struggle, but the class domination of the productive forces and relations will not be broken by discursive reason alone. In the name and for the life of those who have been and are suffering and dying

due to the positivistically, scientifically rationalized irrationality of the globalizing capitalist system of exploitation and domination [Benjamin 1969:253-264], the system of production and distribution needs to be universalized in terms of political democracy and economic socialism. This means revolution, however a social revolution that incorporates the self-critical and consensus validity claims of communicative action as well as the dialectical morality of the Golden Rule. Both forms of the Critical Theory, that of the “earlier and undeniably more radical” first generation of Horkheimer, Adorno, Benjamin, Marcuse, et al. and that of Habermas, need to be dialectically united in the wrestling match with the negativity of Modernity. It is here that the critical theory of religion can be understood as a connecting bridge to not only the extremes within the theory itself, but even more so to determinately negate the contemporary divide between the religious and the secular for the possible creation of a more reconciled, just, good, happy and peaceful future world.

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Notes:

<sup>1</sup> See Habermas’ explanation of the historical development of this term into legal state policy in “Religious Tolerance as Pacemaker for Cultural Rights” in Jürgen Habermas. 2008a. *Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays*. Malden, MA: Polity Press, Chapter 9.

<sup>2</sup> According to the burgeoning doctrine of liberalism in the economic and political domains of early liberal capitalism, reason, in its public or socio-political manifestation, was the method through which people’s individual autonomy and their possessions, particularly those of capitalist class, were made legally secure against any external [particularly the working class] threats through the establishment of laws as well as their agencies of enforcement, which maintained and guarded the order of the status quo.

It is precisely this early, modern, “liberal” conception of reason in its secular form that has been systematically constructed into being an instrumental and strategic hand-maiden in the historical development of the various “stages” of capitalism – from its incipient liberal/market stage, through monopoly capitalism, to the present-day transnational-corporate/globalizing/“imperialistic” form. Today, the human and environmental costs of this development in the pursuit of ever-greater corporate class profits on the back of exploited and thus, ever-cheaper labor and natural resource costs have been tragically experienced and witnessed by so-called Third-World or “Peripheral” countries and the global working class. The neo-liberal, capitalist globalization policies, as advanced by Western dominant transnational

corporations and banks, the International Monetary Fund [IMF and their “Structural Adjustment Programs” now renamed as “Poverty Reduction Strategy Policy”] and the World Bank have resulted in not only the 1997 Asian market collapse – from which these countries have not yet recovered, but also the present [2007-?] global “Great Recession,” resulting [as of December 2009 in the United States alone] in the official number of unemployed persons, at 15.3 million, and the unemployment rate at 10.0 %. As stated in the January 8, 2010 Economic News Release: Employment Situation Summary, produced by the Bureau of Labor Statistics of the United States Department of Labor [www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.nr0.htm], these figures are double of what they were when the recession started in December 2007. The loss of jobs has resulted in over one million home foreclosures in the U.S., all the while corporate profits have reached their highest levels in five years [Damon 2009]. This is coupled with the neo-conservative holocaust of an estimated 95,062 – 103,718 civilian deaths from violence due to the U.S. led coalition invasion, war and occupation of Iraq beginning on March 19, 2003 and continuing to the present [January 19, 2010] costing over \$700 billion, and an estimated 12,436 civilian deaths plus 1,596 coalition forces deaths in the Afghanistan war [Operation Enduring Freedom January 19, 2010] costing over \$250 billion.

<sup>3</sup> See the short article on the two sides of the European spirit, only one of which is expressive of the instrumental, technological rationalism of domination and exploitation that is here expressed as Eurocentric’s, by Johann-Baptist Metz, entitled “Freedom in Solidarity: The Rescue of Reason” in Johann-Baptist Metz and Jürgen Moltmann’s *Faith and the Future: Essays on Theology, Solidarity, and Modernity*. 1995. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, pp. 72-78.

<sup>4</sup> Marx [e.g. 1964; 1977; 1998; 1892; Marcuse 2001:chapt. 6] expressed this as the need for humanity to be dialectically grounded in its materialistic species-being [*Gattungswesen*] for the development of new forms of human *sensibility*, which could be the potential for the creation of new revolutionary ways of seeing, hearing, feeling, and acting for a humanized socialistic society over and against the reifying bourgeois reduction of humanity, society and history to the philosophic realm of idealistic abstraction that turns human beings into means of the Notion [materialistically translated into the capitalist class] rather than self-producing, socio-historical ends of their own labor.

<sup>5</sup> In terms of the analysis that the Protestant Reformation of Christianity facilitated the acceptance and development of capitalism, the author agrees with Walter Benjamin’s inversion of this position. Instead of Protestantism being the intentional *shill* for capitalism, it is rather that capitalism “developed as the parasite of Christianity in the West ... until it reached the point where Christianity’s history is essentially that of the parasite – that is to say, of capitalism” [Benjamin 1996:289].

<sup>6</sup> The resistance against such work of becoming self-reflexive, or - from a religious perspective - becoming more faithful to the mystical and political *imitatio Christi*, was expressed to me by a parishioner during the last year my 25 years as an ordained minister of the United Church of Christ. During the last month of a very contentious last year [March 2001] of my 12 year pastorate at this particular church, a female parishioner told me that “we [the members of the congregation] don’t want to learn anything. We don’t want to change anything. We just want to sing our hymns and keep our traditions.” This women had her finger on the pulse of the established members of this congregation – and thus, those who financed the church’s operations - who were becoming increasingly threatened by the church’s programmatic socio-political implementation of the incarnational and thus, ethical and eschatological call of Jesus that “*if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me*” [Mark 8:34]. Another long time member of the church expressed this same sentiment when he said, “I joined this church years ago because all I had to do was come and sit in the pew. Now, *you* want us to get up and do something. I don’t like it!” In developing G.K. Chesterton’s statement of people’s fear of four words, “God was made human,” Slavoj Žižek [2009:26] gives expression to, what I assert to be, the *unconscious* theological fear that lies behind these statements of church members in taking the incarnational–ethical–eschatological substance of the Christian *evangelion* too seriously. Theology is an element but not the primary issue here. Rather, the far more conscious and thus, driving fear expressed by these statements - a fear that cannot be reduced to mere subjectivism - to the private opinions of two church members since they express that which has become much more normative in the Western bourgeois church - is the fear of the faith’s call to radical, revolutionary-world transforming historical *change* both at the existential and socio-economic-political levels. It is the fear of losing one’s identity, position, security and thus “life,” which has been created within the established social class antagonism of capitalism. The Judeo-Christian proclamation of the incarnational-in-breaking of God into history that calls for the abrupt end of the progressive continuum of history and its horror [Hegel 1956:21f; 1967a:808; Benjamin 1969:253-264, esp.

#IX], through the liberational breaking-out of humanity from all forms of domination, exploitation, alienation, hopelessness, and fear for the purpose of creating “a real state of emergency” in the historical struggle for a more reconciled future society and ultimately for the New Creation of God – the very normative substance that Habermas states that the Christian church must “re-appropriate” – is precisely the religious semantics and truth that has been re-enchanted into a civil religion by the religion of capitalism [Benjamin 1996:288-291]; a “pagan” religion of particularity and privilege that has colonized, evangelized, and thus, parasitically bled the Christian church of its universal, revolutionary substance.

<sup>7</sup> For the meaning of this critical concept see: “Letter 27, Berlin 17 December 1934,” “Letter 39, Hornberg, 2-4 August, 1935,” and “Letter 25, 5 December 1934” in Adorno, Theodor W. 1999. *Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin: The Complete Correspondence, 1928 – 1940*. Henri Lonitz [Ed.] Nicholas Walker [Tr.] Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press; Adorno, Theodor W. 1973. *Negative Dialectics*. E. B. Ashton [Tr.], New York, NY: The Seabury Press, p. 207; Adorno, Theodor W. 1974. *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*. [Particularly Aphorism #153 – “Finale”] London: NLB; Benjamin, Walter. 1969. “Theses on the Philosophy of History” in *Illuminations*. Hannah Arendt [ed.] New York, NY: Schocken Books, pp. 253-264; Benjamin, Walter. 1978. “Theologico-Political Fragment” in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*. New York & London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich; Horkheimer, Max. 1972. “Thoughts on Religion,” in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, New York: Seabury Press, pp. 129-131; Horkheimer, Max & Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, New York: The Seabury Press, pp. 23ff; Siebert, Rudolf J. 2001. *The Critical Theory of Religion: The Frankfurt School*. [Particularly Chapter II], Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press; Siebert, Rudolf J. 2007. “Introduction: The Development of the Critical Theory of Religion in Dubrovnik from 1975-2001” and “Theology of Revolution versus Theology of Counter-Revolution [Chapter 20] in Michael R. Ott’s [Ed.] *The Future of Religion: Toward a Reconciled Society*. Leiden, Boston: Brill; Siebert, Rudolf J. 2006. “Toward a Dialectical Sociology of Religion: A Critique of Positivism and Clerico-Fascism” in Warren S. Goldstein’s [Ed.] *Marx, Critical Theory and Religion: A Critique of Rational Choice*. Leiden, Boston: Brill; Ott, Michael R. 1999. *Max Horkheimer’s Critical Theory of Religion: The Meaning of Religion in the Struggle for Human Emancipation*. Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America; Ott, Michael R. [ed.] 2007. “Max Horkheimer’s Negative Theology of the Totally Other” [Chapter 6] and “Civil Society and the Globalization of Its ‘State of Emergency: The Longing for the Totally Other as a Force of Social Change” [Chapter 11] in *The Future of Religion: Toward a Reconciled Society*. Leiden, Boston: Brill.

<sup>8</sup> For an analysis of Adorno’s and Bloch’s discourse, see my article on Heathwood Press website entitled: “Something’s Missing: A Study of the Dialectic of Utopia in the Theories of Theodor W. Adorno and Ernst Bloch.” <http://www.heathwoodpress.com/somethings-missing-study-dialectic-utopia-theories-theodor-w-adorno-ernst-bloch/>.