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*Philosophy Social Criticism* 1999; 25; 1

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**Piet Strydom**

## **Triple contingency**

### **The theoretical problem of the public in communication societies**

**Abstract** This paper seeks to show that the proposition of ‘double contingency’ introduced by Parsons and defended by Luhmann and Habermas is insufficient under the conditions of contemporary communication societies. In the latter context, the increasing differentiation and organization of communication processes eventuated in the recognition of the epistemic authority of the public, which in turn compels us to conceptualize a new level of contingency. A first step is therefore taken to capture the role of the public in communication societies theoretically by what may be called ‘triple contingency’. Since the process of the definition of reality and its outcome, to which the response of the public is central, is best seen in constructivist terms, attention is also paid to relevant methodological and epistemological questions.

**Key words** cognitive turn · communication · constructivism · double contingency · Habermas · Luhmann · observation · Parsons · situationalism · the third point of view

#### **Introduction**

One of the most important insights gained by the social sciences, sociology in particular, in the recent past is that the public as public is nothing less than a constitutive part of societally significant communication processes in contemporary societies. Advancement in the social scientific understanding of observation in social processes, stimulated by developments in cybernetics and the cognitive sciences, has supported and strengthened this insight. During the 1950s and 60s, even acute critically

PHILOSOPHY & SOCIAL CRITICISM • vol 25 no 2 • pp. 1–25

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[0191-4537(199903)25:2;1–25;007252]

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oriented authors such as C. Wright Mills (1956: 303) and Jürgen Habermas (1989: 249) still found it possible to work with a distinction – i.e. between public and mass – that at least in effect denigrated, not unlike the mass culture critiques of the time, the larger part of the public. For some time already, this is no longer possible for we have come to recognize that the public plays an active part even at the level of mass communication. This is particularly the case in contemporary societies that are increasingly assuming the form of communication societies.

Although it has been attracting more and more attention, a proper sociological understanding of the role of the public – and hence of observation – in communication societies nevertheless still seems to be lacking. The first step towards such an understanding is a theoretical translation of the above-mentioned insight. The aim of this paper is to take this tentative step by advancing the claim that the proposition or theorem of double contingency put forward by Parsons and other authors such as Habermas and Luhmann is no longer sufficient since today we have to reckon with what may be called triple contingency.<sup>1</sup> The implications of this more complex form of contingency, however, are not only strictly theoretical by nature. It also has a profound methodological impact. A new light is cast on the sociological perspective and hence on the self-understanding of the sociologist. Indeed, some of the most pressing current methodological debates turn precisely on this issue. In the background, of course, lurk still deeper questions concerning the epistemology of the social sciences.

In this paper, I propose first to outline the new understanding of the public, then to draw out its theoretical implications in the form of the theorem of triple contingency, and finally to follow it up with some epistemological and methodological reflections on sociology's characteristic third point of view.

## **The public as a constitutive element of communication societies**

The social phenomenon of the public made its first appearance in the context of the early modern communication revolution. In the wake of the breakdown of the religious world-view and the Church's loss of monopoly over the official interpretation of reality, a socially diverse group of intelligentsia stepped into the breach whose members were compelled to appeal to the public to uphold their competing and even conflicting interpretations (Mannheim, 1972: 9–11). In a period when the number of books in Europe increased from approximately 30,000 to 9 million, the humanists of the Renaissance were the first culture producers to vie for public attention (Hauser, 1951: 78, 81). For their successors,

the 18th-century men of letters, as well as musicians and artists, who fully experienced the shift from patronage to the market, the loss of aura of cultural objects due to their transformation into commodities and the change of personal service into an impersonal activity, the orientation towards a diffuse and unknown public became a dominant feature of their mode of existence. The rapidly growing reading, theatre-going, concert-going and art-admiring public who in the course of time acquired a new competence, aesthetic judgement, was closely related to the emergence and consolidation under conditions of mercantilism or early capitalism of a public who engaged in critical debate about the state, government and the exercise of political power and later became an ineliminable part of modern politics (Habermas, 1989; 1992).

The path followed by the public in its genesis and development since the early modern period, particularly the 18th century, is clearly marked by legal and constitutional milestones (Habermas, 1989: 59, 70, 83; 1992: 455; Gerhards and Neidhardt, 1990: 21, 23, 25). Most important among them are the abolition of censorship, the recognition of freedom of thought, freedom of speech or expression, freedom of the press, freedom of association and assembly, freedom of demonstration, and today the nascent legal constitutionalization of the so-called 'fourth power', the mass media.<sup>2</sup> This trajectory, stretching as it does from an initial lifting of restrictions via the laying of institutional foundations to the contemporary protection of the public, is indicative of an increasing differentiation and organization of communicative processes. We witness, on the one extreme, the emergence of the public in the early modern communication revolution, followed by its institutional organization, and, on the other, the recognition of the authority of the public in late 20th-century communication societies.

(1) *Talk*. In the wake of the breakdown of the all-embracing 'catholic' world-view, freedom of thought and freedom of speech allowed people from all sections of the population to think differently about whatever prevailed and to communicate such thought to others. Everything could be conceived differently, and through communication not only was everything now at least potentially connected with everything else, but anything could also be changed in this medium. This applied equally to human social relations. Instead of hierarchy, status and rank, supported by the correct obligatory dress code, the emphasis was now on the parity of humanity. Free individuals could now communicate with one another in an unconstrained way, engaging in social intercourse in which status was disregarded and rank replaced by social tact. People from diverse backgrounds met more or less by chance and entered into spontaneous relations which were in principle open to all potential interaction partners. The public made up of private individuals emerged here within the framework of interactions of an episodic nature,

presupposing the presence of the interacting partners – a simple form of communication variously referred to as ‘talk’ (Heidegger, 1967: 203–14), the ‘face-to-face relation’ (Schutz, 1967: 167–72), ‘encounters’ (Goffman, 1961) or ‘*communication au trottoir*’ (Luhmann, 1986: 75). Considering the development of travel, printing, armies and navies, administrative structures, markets, money, coffee houses, salons, secret societies, sexual relations, marriage, the modern European languages and national communication communities, both the micro- and macro-structural conditions of early modern ‘commercial society’ immensely increased the probability of such communication.<sup>3</sup>

(2) *Gatherings*. The actual increase in talk or encounters and in particular the recognition of the rules or principles governing social intercourse made possible the deliberate organization and eventually the institutionalization of the ability to think matters through and to communicate the results. Initially, the organization of communication took the form of gatherings, meetings, or assemblies such as the *soladitates* of travelling scholars, aristocratic conversational circles, learned meetings, and so forth. Later, the legal or constitutional establishment of freedom of association and of assembly definitively consolidated this new departure. The Royal Society founded on an edict of 1662 is an early example of a legally based institution, while the constitutionally based and procedurally regulated political institutions of modern times, parliaments in particular, provide another. To these could further be added the interesting instance of organizations and collective protests related to broad social movements.

In the case of gatherings at the level of organization in question here, we witness communicative arrangements which are not just public but at the same time organized around a particular theme, problem, common concern or issue and, while drawing a self-selecting membership, are clearly structured into organizers, discussion leaders, speakers and audience. In proportion as simple, episodic interactions are generalized in a more abstract and structured form, however, the public undergoes a complementary reconstitution. The presupposition of physical presence still applies, but the role of the public develops in a more specific direction. While attendance is a matter of free choice, expressive possibilities are more limited and actual participation in the form of a contribution from the floor is circumscribed by the need to relate to the speaker and to be relevant. Besides sheer presence, effective expressive forms at the command of the public such as cheering, applause, murmuring, booing and walking out nevertheless serve as an indication of the constitutive sense it retained after its role had changed. Even the early modern executions that Foucault (1977: 57) discusses under the title of ‘the spectacle of the scaffold’ would not have made any sense without the presence of the public.

(3) *Communication Society*. Once communication processes are uncoupled from the physical presence of the public, a completely different yet by no means untypical situation under modern conditions ensues. If institutionalized gatherings are a remove away from talk or encounters, this new situation is characterized by a still higher degree of abstraction. This quality is explicable by reference to the absence of the public. Generalized communication processes come into operation which presuppose a complex institutional and technical infrastructure and are oriented towards an unlimited body of absent and anonymous addressees. It is not simply that abstract, anonymous interaction and communication situations increased exponentially under modern conditions. It could even be argued that the emergence of modern society, including the social sciences, sociology in particular, coincided with the appearance, as it were, of the absent, unknown, faceless collective third person, the public.<sup>4</sup> The institutionalization of the absent and anonymous public profoundly changed the structure and process of public communication and thereby transformed the conditions of reproduction of modern societies. They now definitively became communication societies.

Let us look at a few examples. In law, politics, economics and science, where equality, the common good, symbolic exchange and objectivity are respectively stressed, the orientation towards the absent and anonymous public is so pervasive that those present, even family members and friends, are treated as though they were part of this public (Giesen, 1995: 246). Beyond these domains which had been well known already to the classical sociologists, however, it is mass media communication in post-modern or postsocial societies which today most graphically brings this picture home to us. Within these generalized communication processes presupposing a highly complex technical base, the communicator's role became fully professionalized and the public's role underwent a further complementary change. Its absence was made complete by having been shorn of its ability to make decisions and to act accordingly. It is on the basis of this tendency that mass society theorists and mass culture critics earlier saw fit, quite erroneously, to decry mass publics for their passivity.<sup>5</sup> Since the ultimate concern is communication and not simply self-expression, implying that the number of voices clamouring for attention required regulation, the complete absence of the public is necessary to give everyone a chance to participate (Gerhards and Neidhardt, 1990: 24; Fuller, 1993: 294). Decisive, further, is the significance that attaches to the only remaining form of expression of the public, namely public opinion (Gerhards and Neidhardt, 1990: 24; Habermas, 1992: 438; Fuller, 1993: 285). That public opinion is the result of a controversy in which a certain degree of agreement was attained, rather than simply a statistical quantity or an aggregate of individual opinions, reflects the fact that there

are no true experts in matters concerning the public sphere. In public opinion, therefore, we see the mutual dependence of the media and the public. Whereas talk and gatherings lack general recognition unless the media provide them with a public arena and shape their themes into newsworthy items, the media depend for their impact or effect not only on their reception by the public present at episodic and organized interaction processes but also on the latter's information input and feedback. Through talk and gatherings, the public provides the media with identified and initially defined problems which admit of being made into issues, and the influence actors exercise in public communication depends in the final analysis on the resonance and acceptance or agreement of the public. Against this background, it becomes clear that allegedly passive mass publics in fact play an active role in mass communication, even if largely as recipients, whether listeners or viewers.<sup>6</sup> Besides various opportunities to participate, the public possesses a certain authority in that in its own right it is an ineradicable and crucial part of generalized communication processes in contemporary societies (Gerhards and Neidhardt, 1990: 34). Ultimately, the significance of the public devolves on the fact that it and it alone is constitutive of 'the internal structure of the public sphere' (Habermas, 1992: 440) within which communication processes in communication societies take place. The public renders determinate, in quite unpredictable ways, what is at first indeterminate in public communication.

## From double to triple contingency

### Introduction of the concept: Parsons

Parsons introduced 'double contingency' as a theoretical concept to account at a basic level for the possibility of social interaction or communication and, by extension, of social order. The focal point of the concept is provided by the differences between two social actors, ego and alter. In brief, it refers to socially undetermined situations in which social interaction remains impossible unless the lack of determination and hence the differences between social actors are overcome by those involved. Any and every instance of interaction between two social actors – two being the elementary possibility – therefore necessarily takes place under conditions of double contingency. On introducing the concept, Parsons stated the theorem or proposition of double contingency in the following form:

There is a *double contingency* inherent in interaction. On the one hand, ego's gratifications are contingent on his selection among available alternatives. But in turn, alter's reaction will be contingent on ego's selection and

will result from a complementary selection on alter's part. Because of this double contingency, communication, which is the preoccupation of cultural patterns, could not exist without both generalization from the particularity of the specific situations (which are never identical for ego and alter) and stability of meaning which can only be assured by 'conventions' observed by both parties. (Parsons and Shils, 1951: 16)<sup>7</sup>

Two actors encounter one another in a social situation. Whatever each does depends on what each chooses to do and on what the other does. For both, the situation is equally open in that each could choose this way or that and could decide to react this way or that. Both actors are moreover equally uncertain, for both are potentially unlimited sources of words and actions. To overcome this condition of a situation that is equally open and uncertain for both actors, i.e. the condition of double contingency,<sup>8</sup> they need to relate to one another in such a way that each has stable meanings to have recourse to and that the situation becomes one which is common to them both. The question then becomes: What does Parsons see as the solution to the problem posed by the fact of double contingency? How do the two actors relate to one another? On what basis do the actors make a selection among available alternatives? On what basis do they react to one another?

Parsons's (1964: 37–8; 1977: 168–9) solution to the problem of double contingency takes the form of cultural determination. Culture, which is always already available as a shared system, penetrates action orientations to such an extent that the existence of a value consensus can be assumed. This can be considered from two sides. On the one hand, culture provides shared symbols or elements of tradition which control general systems of orientation. Decisive for the solution in question, however, cultural patterns of value on the other hand are internalized and institutionalized so as to become part of personalities and inter-action systems as need dispositions and role expectations respectively. Two actors, motivated by their needs, who face one another in an encounter generally delineated by cultural symbols, are thus able to relate to each other or to enter into social interaction due to the correspondence between or overlap of the role expectations or normative orientations they had acquired through socialization.

### **Assimilation to communicative action theory: Habermas**

In his analysis of Parsons's work, Habermas (1987: 213–34) seems to accept the concept of double contingency. He indeed does not confine his critique to an attack only against Parsons's proposed solution, i.e. the cultural determination of action orientations, but also questions his theory of action. Yet his own alternative, the theory of communicative action, does not invalidate or jettison double contingency. In fact, central

to Habermas's (1987: 217) position is what he calls 'the problem of coordination' in the sense of the harmonization of the plans of action of different actors, and in a later work (Habermas, 1992: 173) he explicitly accepts Parsons's concept of double contingency. On Habermas's account, Parsons's theory of action remains attached to both utilitarianism and empiricism, and thus not only starts from the monadic or solitary actor but also takes the form of a monological theory. As a consequence, it takes no account of the only mechanism by means of which the problem of double contingency could be solved, the coordinating mechanism of consensus building through language or communication. Parsons does not lose sight of language completely, to be sure, but he plays down the communicative aspect of coordination in favour of a reified concept of culture. The latter is past-oriented, static, objectivist and conceived epistemologically, and stands in a static, overlapping or interpenetrative relation to institutions and personality.

Habermas lays the foundations for his own solution to the problem of coordination generated by double contingency by adopting a theory of action that gives a central role to communicative consensus formation. This theory allows him not only to regard culture as fluid and as standing in a flexible relation to institutions and personality, but also to take a constructivist view. Culture, institutions and personality are symbolic structures of the lifeworld which are reproduced in the medium of communicative action, and interaction participants construct common action orientations by using their competences interpretatively to appropriate transmitted culture and to relate it either affirmatively or critically to existing norms and institutions. Under conditions of double contingency, communicatively acting participants are compelled to construct a common definition of their situation and to arrive at some understanding of relevant themes and plans. Construction of this kind is achieved through interpretative work, argumentation, the taking of yes or no positions and criticism, while the resulting mutual understanding or agreement provides an at least temporary solution to the perennial problem of double contingency.

### **Systems theoretical appropriation: Luhmann**

Luhmann (1985: 148–53) regards Parsons's theorem of double contingency as being of great theoretical importance, but he takes issue with the theoretical framework as well as the details of the American theorist's formulation. Double contingency is a basic condition of the possibility of social action and hence of social systems. Both social action and social systems depend with functional necessity on the solution of the problem of double contingency. Luhmann is critical of Parsons's solution, however. To fall back on value consensus is tantamount to banking on the past,

reducing social order to a problem of socialization, misunderstanding social evolution as a variant of socialization, and misleading oneself into believing that the constitution of social systems depends on an always already available, pre-given, shared cultural system. Luhmann's alternative is to conceive of double contingency from the more general theoretical point of view of the constitution and continuous processing of meaning linked to systems theory. This allows him to regard double contingency as an abiding problem that cannot be solved once and for all, and to insist that, rather than action subjects, it is either psychic systems or social systems that confront one another under such conditions. Parsons anyway overlooks the fact that social actors are constituted within a social system rather than preceding and thus constituting the system. On this basis, Luhmann distinguishes his position from Parsons's by introducing temporal and modal theoretical considerations. First, rather than fixing on a pre-given consensus, a solution to double contingency could be sought in a temporal process in which a consensus is built up in a manner that is sensitive to chance. Secondly, contingency is a modality that excludes necessity and impossibility and thus underlines the possibility of being different or something else. These assumptions imply that in the process of encountering each other and attempting to overcome double contingency, two 'black boxes' (Luhmann, 1985: 156) are not compelled to fall back on the past but could, and in reality do, reach out towards a possible future world.

In Luhmann's view, the theory of action to which Parsons remains indebted must be surrendered. Traditional formulas for dealing with the problem of double contingency, such as, for instance, 'reciprocity of perspectives', are inadequate in that they assume a symmetry model which neglects the auto-selectivity of perspectives and the ungraspability of the other. Even symbolic interactionism, which correctly stresses the use of symbols, operates with only one half of double contingency.<sup>9</sup> As an action theory, it lacks the means to come to terms with the structure formation entailed by the other half. At this juncture, Luhmann introduces the theory of social systems, particularly autopoietic systems theory. Within this framework, double contingency is a permanent, basic problem faced by any and every system. As an 'autocatalytically operating problem', it brings about a 'state of conditional readiness' in systems, a systems-building possibility in waiting, and thus necessarily and inevitably leads to the formation of systems (Luhmann, 1985: 172, 177).

Habermas and Luhmann occupy two diametrically opposed positions, yet this difference should not be allowed to cloud the similarities between them. Generally speaking, of course, their respective positions are complementary in the sense that they focus on the same matter from points of view that cannot be assumed at one and the same

time. Whereas Habermas locates himself within the theory of communicative action and seeks from that base to account for society as a system, Luhmann gives priority to systems theory and undertakes to account for action within that framework. As regards their critiques of Parsons, more specifically, their respective positions are comparable in so far as both backtrack to a more general processual and constructive point of view and stress an orientation towards the future and open possibilities. But what is more remarkable in the present context is that both, despite attacks against Parsons, accept the theorem of double contingency. In the following paragraphs, by contrast, I propose to develop an argument against this very assumption. Instead of the theorem of double contingency held in common by Parsons, Habermas and Luhmann, I am going to take up a suggestion of Klaus Eder and Oliver Schmidtke (1997: 17) to argue in favour of what may be called 'triple contingency'. This brings us back, of course, to the significance of the public in contemporary communication societies.

### The Observer

Habermas and Luhmann, like Parsons, are able to maintain the idea of double contingency only because they make a certain assumption that is by no means untypical in the social sciences. This assumption is more readily apparent in proponents of the theory of action, but, as Luhmann's appropriation of the concept of double contingency shows, it can even find a place in systems theory. Positively, it amounts to the basic idea that mutually related or involved actors, participants or carriers of meaning, that is, essentially no more and no less than two, represent the basic unit to which one has to revert were he or she to account for the social world. Parsons focuses on 'ego and alter', Habermas similarly prefers 'communicatively acting subjects oriented toward mutual understanding', and Luhmann insists on mutually intransparent 'black boxes', whether psychic or social systems, which are nevertheless able to relate to one another through the presupposition of reciprocal determinability. Most frequently, the assumption in question is linked to the pervasive idea of social relationships in terms of which the basic building block of the social world is the dyad of 'I' and 'Thou', the first person and the second person. Even Luhmann (1985: 156), who points out the limitation of this concept, understands the basic situation of double contingency simply as: 'Two black boxes, due to whatever coincidence, get involved with one another'.

Negatively, the assumption underpinning the theorem of double contingency becomes apparent from the way in which the third person, the third point of view or the observer of social life, is treated. Although both Habermas (1987: 35–9, 150–1, 173, 182–5; 1992: 399–467; 1996:

106, 122) and Luhmann (1985: 407–11; 1992: 68–121) generally speaking have quite sophisticated positions on the observer, the arguments by means of which they appropriate the concept of double contingency contain no evidence to suggest that they recognize this constitutive component of the social world and give it its proper due. The lack of appreciation of the role of the third point of view, or even simply the attribution of an impoverished role to it, is indicative of a serious theoretical deficiency.<sup>10</sup> To correct it, the concept of double contingency needs to make way for a more adequate replacement – namely triple contingency. In the first scenario, two social actors, communicatively acting subjects or black boxes, A and B, face or encounter one another and enter into some relation with each other as ‘I’ and ‘Thou’. In the basic situation of triple contingency, by contrast, there is a third perspective, borne by C, who observes what A and B are saying and doing. By so doing, C has a constitutive impact on the social situation. Indeed, this threefold configuration represents the elementary social situation rather than the former twofold one. But it also brings a higher degree of contingency with it.

In the case of double contingency, two actors, subjects or black boxes are compelled to make a selection from alternatives while taking the other into account, and thus to establish a relation between them. The inclusion of the third point of view means that the social situation in the case of triple contingency is very different and more complicated from the start. It is not simply a matter of elementary interaction, which was discussed above under the title of ‘talk’ or ‘encounter’. The observer belongs to the situation as a constitutive part of its sociality. Over and above the ‘I’ and ‘Thou’, the third point of view represents society. It embodies the societal power of definition. C has a constitutive social role in that he, she or it has the power to define the situation. Whatever A and B say and do, therefore, must in principle make sense to C. From the start and throughout, A and B are subject in their interrelations to meaning as defined by society and represented by the observer. As regards contingency, A and B make their choices and take each other into account, while at the same time being relativized by a societal definition or collectively accepted representation for which the observer stands which itself becomes established only in the course of the process. What this situation of triple contingency entails becomes clearer when one considers the centrality and shaping impact of public communication in contemporary societies. Neither the racial conflict in South Africa nor apparently now the ethnic conflict in Northern Ireland could have been resolved otherwise. Public communication formed an inherent part of the dynamics of both conflicts and the definitional power brought to bear on both by international observers and more broadly the observing public proved decisive.<sup>11</sup>

Let us explore the theorem of triple contingency further by taking a somewhat closer look at the third point of view. Two moot points are of particular importance. The first concerns the location of the third point of view: is it context-independent or does it have a foothold in society itself? The second concerns the epistemological and methodological consequences: does the third point of view entail a legitimizationist or a constructivist approach? Considering Habermas's seminal contribution to the recognition of the significance of the public and his tireless efforts to resolve the issues raised by it, the following treatment of these questions will make some reference to his work.

### **The third point of view: within or beyond society?**

In his early work, Habermas traced the genesis in the early modern period of the public as the decisive constitutive component of the public sphere. Against the background of the growth of both a cultural and a political public in various European countries, he stressed the in-principle inclusiveness of the public. Despite the exclusiveness of a public in any given instance, it could never avoid the general significance of its concerns nor could it close itself off completely and bar access to those who are able to participate (Habermas, 1989: 37). It is this basic characteristic of the public, its being in principle indefinite and unlimited, that led Habermas (1973: 24–65) to give it the normative interpretation which he would later conceive of as domination-free discourse regulated by the ideal speech situation. The idealization involved here is akin to that proposed by his mentor, friend and collaborator Karl-Otto Apel (1980; 1981) in his transformation, based on an appropriation of Peirce, of the transcendental self-consciousness underlying Kant's philosophy into the transcendental or 'ideal communication community'. 'Transcendental' or 'ideal' here qualifies the real or empirical communication community in so far as it is governed by norms or rules (Böhme, 1997: 352) – such as the acceptance of the basic rules of argumentation, the equality of discourse partners, the mutual recognition of discourse partners, etc. While this idealizing assumption makes a good deal of philosophical sense, it can from various points of view be regarded as too strong. This position has been taken by many of Habermas's critics, among whom are both philosophers and sociologists, even ones sympathetic to him. Recently, he has sought to meet the major thrust of these criticisms by locating what he calls the 'third perspective' within society itself. Let us briefly consider one sociologically relevant strain of criticism, and then evaluate this response of his.

The abiding strain of criticism I have in mind here, which has been stated in the 1970s and subsequently restated time and time again in

varying forms,<sup>12</sup> can be clarified from two sides. From one angle, it is argued that Habermas essentially concentrates on the reasoning about the organization of society. His interest is in the ideas that structure the perception of the organizational problems of society and argumentation about them. The underlying aim in doing so is to account for the development of the ideals that can historically be attributed to society. This approach, according to the criticism, does not explain anything, however. It detaches itself from both the real historical process and the actual organization of social relations. Theoretical categorization combined with the perusal of philosophically formulated moral systems predominates, while historically sensitive sociological analysis of the generation of such reasoning, ideas and ideals receives insufficient attention. From another angle, it is argued that the concern with the ideals of society entails a projection beyond society itself. Habermas operates with an aprioristic and hence pre-sociological assumption regarding the conditions of practical reason. He thinks of it as a normative consensus that results from discourse or reflexive communication disburdened of external pressures and power relations – or rather, counterfactually, as the anticipated result that would issue from the process were it possible to come to a positive end. This procedure may well be philosophically fruitful and justifiable (Miller, 1992: 12; McCarthy, 1994: 72; Böhme, 1997: 351–63) and could even be sociologically meaningful in that it provides reconstructive analysis with a guideline (Habermas, 1992: 35, 37, 94, 105, 349), but the critics doubt whether it leaves any room for a negative criterion and hence for a historical universal such as hegemony, not to mention exclusion.

In order to counter this criticism, Habermas (1988) has submitted that his position is a postmetaphysical one. Due to the collapse of the religious-metaphysical world-view and the concurrent transition to a pluralistic society, since the 18th century moral obligations can no longer be publicly justified by recourse to the transcendent point of view of God. Under current conditions, the place of this standpoint, which lies beyond the world, is taken by the moral point of view that represents a reconstruction within the world of the lost unity. In a recent work, Habermas (1996: 16, 106, 109, 125) has restated this position of ‘internal transcendence’ and he gave the moral point of view a remarkable twist by conceiving of it as a ‘third point of view’ which is located ‘in society itself’. According to him, this is ‘the moral point of view in terms of which modern societies are criticized by their own social movements’ (Habermas, 1992: 125). This means further that ‘an affirmative attitude can only be taken toward the negative potential in societal tendencies which leads to an unrelenting self-critique’ (1996: 126). As against his critics, particularly the sociologists among them, it is obvious that Habermas here suggests that to ascribe to him a concern with

reasoning which entails a purely positive aprioristic assumption beyond society is mistaken. The question is, however, whether he will be able to uphold this stance. Is the third point of view he defends actually located within rather than beyond society? And if it is located in society, in what sense is this the case?

Recently, Habermas (1996: 95–127) has put forward an interesting critique of John Rawls that is all the more significant in the present context in that it manifests an unacknowledged shift from double to triple contingency. In Rawls's understanding, agreement in the political domain depends on the citizens adopting two different perspectives: the perspective of participants entailed by their adherence to some world-view or another, and the perspective of observers who register the convergence of the different world-views and the establishment of an overarching consensus. Habermas objects that this construction presupposes two and only two perspectives, and hence neglects the third perspective going beyond them. This third perspective is the one that those involved together adopt and employ in public, the all-embracing public perspective that is intersubjectively shared by all those involved. This accounts for the fact that it possesses epistemic authority. It represents the demands of practical reason that are independent of the various world-views of the participants and to which the various world-views are therefore required to submit. Habermas also describes this epistemically authoritative third point of view variously as the impartial perspective, the perspective of impartial or critical evaluation, and most often the context-independent moral point of view.

It is here that a certain equivocation becomes apparent – one that grows more acute when Habermas attributes this viewpoint to social movements. Habermas rightly insists on the third point of view that the theorem of triple contingency dictates should be regarded as coming into play and thereby goes beyond Rawls's concept of observation. But, on the one hand, it is depicted as a context-independent moral point of view presupposed by everyone and, on the other, it is portrayed as embodied by social movements. This description of the third point of view raises a number of related questions. Can the third point of view be both universalistic and tied to the collective identity of a particular participant? How could this be achieved? Is there not room for an intermediate conception that fits in more meaningfully with the notion of the public and its authoritative role in public communication? Should the third point of view not be tied to the communication process or discourse itself rather than to either incommensurable world-views or to the universal audience as such or, as in Habermas, to both?<sup>13</sup>

These questions bring us to some pressing epistemological and methodological implications of the theorem of triple contingency.

## Legitimationism or constructivism?

The theorem of triple contingency implies a new way in which to understand the conditions of adequacy of social knowledge. In terms of the concept of double contingency and its solution by means of cultural determination, Parsons conceived of these conditions in an a priori normative manner. This position can be taken as being expressive of the traditional sociological stance. What counts is whether social actors in fact know what they could be expected to know, i.e. what they ought to know, about social relations and social interaction. One way of going beyond this traditional understanding, is to allow for research to uncover a posteriori the competences required by social actors in particular types of social situations. Habermas (1979; 1984), for instance, proposed a cognitivist empirical-reconstructive approach which stresses ontogenetically acquired action competences and allows a differentiated analysis of communicative action in linguistically mediated contexts. This proposal of his is only one of a number of relatively recent contributions to what has been called the 'cognitive turn in sociology' (Fuller, 1984) and is documented in an important yet somewhat neglected volume edited by Karin Knorr Cetina and Aaron Cicourel (1981).<sup>14</sup> The drawback of Habermas's approach, which is reflected in his retention of the concept of double contingency despite the shift from a normative to a cognitive position, is that it is ultimately based on psychological assumptions. The cognitive is narrowly understood in terms of the individual mind rather than in terms of the more sociologically relevant phenomenon of social knowledge and cultural models.<sup>15</sup> In the case of triple contingency, by contrast, matters are quite different.

Instead of social actors and cognitive action competences, the concept of triple contingency calls for an emphasis on the relational setting or structured situation within which actors find themselves and within which their actions take their course. Theoretically, this requirement has been met in different ways. Eugene Rochberg-Halton (1982), for instance, speaks of 'the structured situation' with reference to the attempts of such authors as Bourdieu and Eisenstadt to bridge symbolic interactionism and structuralism. Knorr Cetina (1988) puts forward a position she calls 'situationalism' that steers a course between action theory and structuralism, between methodological individualism and collectivism. Margaret Somers (1994) proposes an 'institutional and narrative approach' that disaggregates macro-categories or totalizing metaphors and reassembles them into indeterminate clusters or configurations of cultural and institutional relationships expressed in relational metaphors. Rather than society, the focus is on the relational setting in

the sense of a patterned matrix of relations through which social actors as well as power and organizations are contingently connected and positioned. Eder and Schmidtke (1997), in turn, argue in favour of a 'situation theoretic model' that is relational and structure-oriented. While it takes a plurality of actors, value orientations, actions, motives, rational calculations and so forth into account, it proceeds from the structuralist assumption that there are rules operative in social situations that coordinate action events independently of the motives, intentions and goals of the actors. They link these rules to collectively shared representations or cultural codes that are communicated within the context of public communication.

In communication societies, social action that makes a difference depends for its effect not on the subjective meaning, intention or goal of the actors involved but rather on being objectively defined in the social situation as significant action. The constructive context provided by the relational setting or structured situation creates a web of relations which makes it possible for those observing the actors involved and commenting on them to make a decisive contribution to the definition of the meaning of their actions. In communication societies, the constructive context takes the form of the context of public communication or the public sphere. The actors and observers are all components of this public domain, and these components are all related to each other through the communication taking place within that context. This occurs by being made a medium of communication or being thematized and thus being coordinated with one another. A crucial effect of this tendency, which helps to account for the centrality and authority of the public in communication societies, is that in proportion as actions and relations are coordinated by communication, power becomes dependent on the acceptance of definitions of reality (Eder, 1993: 12). The more communication becomes the mechanism of co-ordination, the more power accrues to the public, which is in the most propitious position to accept or reject the meanings communicated by the participants and thus to fix the collectively accepted definition of reality.

What is collectively accepted, however, is a consensus only in the ideal case. The meanings, symbols or codes that are communicated, struggled over and finally accepted are shot through with power, with the result that what is collectively accepted rather amounts to a dominant definition of reality, which could involve exclusionary mechanisms but more typically now tends to take the form of hegemony.<sup>16</sup> Although it is the case, as Apel (1976) and Habermas (1979) maintain from a transcendental or universal pragmatic position, that a final consensus is necessarily and unavoidably presupposed, communication processes cannot be analysed directly and exclusively in terms of such a consensus. Neither the participants nor even the observing public which has the

power to define the meaning of the actions of the participants know beforehand what the final collectively accepted agreement will be (Miller, 1992: 15–16). The fact that the observing public is itself divided into ‘competing counterpublics’ (Fraser, 1997: 75) or into supporters, sympathizers, opponents and bystanders (Neidhardt and Rucht, 1991: 457) exacerbates this condition of indeterminacy and uncertainty. This condition, it should be emphasized, is precisely the locus of the third moment of contingency in question in this paper. The definition of reality that is eventually accepted in the wake of an observed process of communication and struggle over meanings, which overcomes this indeterminacy and uncertainty, is a construction achieved not only by the participants but in particular also by their audience, the observing public.

Before finally returning to the constructivism that is broached above and comparing Habermas’s proposal to it, it is necessary first to ferret out some of the epistemological implications. At issue here is in particular the complicated questions of the adequacy of social knowledge, the role of the observer and the epistemic authority of the sociologist. Fuller (1984: 441–3) has summarized the traditional sociological understanding in an epistemological scheme according to which the sociologist has three complementary options vis-à-vis the social actors he or she observes. The first is to think like a native, the second to pass oneself off as a native, and the final to abandon native categories in favour of theoretical categories. Interpreting this, one may say that, in the first case where social knowledge is equated with self-knowledge, the sociologist assumes an observer’s role that would suit a subjective hermeneuticist. In the second, where social knowledge is taken to coincide with knowledge of the presentation of the self to others, the sociologist adopts the role of the participant observer. In the third, finally, where the conditions of adequacy of social knowledge are located beyond the social actors at a level occupied by the social scientist alone, the sociologist is an objectivist or reductionist observer either of the positivistic or quasi-positivistic type or of the systems-theoretical or functionalist type. These three positions, however, do not exhaust all the possibilities. A new departure is represented by the cognitive turn in sociology. This could be interpreted as the a posteriori revelation by means of indices (Fuller, 1984: 443) or the ‘reconstruction’ (Habermas, 1979: 9) of action competences. In this case, the sociologist is a cognitivist observer who equates social knowledge with the level of competence demanded of social actors in given social situations. A different interpretation, entailed by the theorem of triple contingency, becomes available when one does not confine oneself to social actors and their competences but, over and above them, takes seriously the social knowledge and cultural models which are embodied in the observing public

or, differently, are collectively accepted in a given context. Here the epistemic authority of the sociological observer derives from the observing public, which places the sociologist in a position to identify and specify the collective definitions that are empirically operative and effective in the context under observation.<sup>17</sup> The sociologist remains a cognitivist observer, however, in that he or she focuses on cognitive or knowledge structures. The competences of actors are by no means irrelevant since they have to be considered in terms of how they enter into the construction of the collective knowledge that is eventually accepted by the public. But most important are the collectively accepted knowledge or cultural models embodied by the public.<sup>18</sup>

In various sociological traditions, both old and new, the constructivist approach has remained confined to the level of action. This is true not only of the more obvious cases of phenomenology (Schutz, 1967; Berger and Luckmann, 1967) and constructivist sociology of science (Knorr Cetina, 1981),<sup>19</sup> but also of social constructivism focusing on social processes (Van den Daele, 1977) and of social movement research concentrating on collective action and collective identity (Melucci, 1995). In the latter case, when shared socially constructed ideas are acknowledged they are confined to the level of collective action, and even when public discourse is introduced it is treated as external to social movements rather than being the context within which the latter are constructed (e.g. McAdam et al., 1996). The constructivist approach comes into its own, however, only when it is extended to the relational and structured context of social action (Eder, 1993: 14, 60; also Eder, 1996; Eder and Schmidtke, 1997). Once this is done, it becomes clear that social or collective action that makes a difference or is collectively significant possesses this quality not of its own accord but only because it was constructed as such through communication in the public domain. This particular conception of constructivism is one of the most acute yet by no means well-understood recent insights of the social sciences, and indeed one that closely articulates with the concept of triple contingency. According to it, the constructivist perspective focuses on intentions, goals, values and identities linked to social and collective action or, differently, on action structures and meanings in so far as they are transposed from the actors to the constructive context, from the individuals to the communication between them within view of the observing public. At this latter level, they become features or attributes of the relational, structured setting shared by the participants and observers alike. They are collectively accepted and valued and in the process power accrues to them. They thus acquire the role of structuring factors, features of the social situation which serve as cultural presuppositions of social action and social processes and hence exert a structuring force on all those involved.

To bring these reflections on the epistemological and methodological implications of the theorem of triple contingency to a close, I want to consider the second of two characteristic limitations of Habermas's proposal regarding the third point of view against this constructivist background. Attention was given to the first one earlier, i.e. the projection of the third point of view as the transcendent, moral point of view that leads to the predilection to analyse processes of construction in terms of a final consensus rather than in terms of the sequence of attempts on the part of the participants to jointly identify and define a controversial question and to find a collectively acceptable solution to it. The second limitation turns on Habermas's locating of the moral point of view in society itself by linking it to social movements. Constructivism, by its very nature, forbids the social scientist to adopt an identificatory procedure. It requires that the whole plural range of participants relevant to a given constructive context be taken into account without any tendency to favour one and hence to identify with it. To do so, would be to subvert the very constructivist perspective the social scientist claims to be upholding. It would be tantamount to taking a legitimatist rather than a constructivist position.<sup>20</sup> The social scientist identifies with the intentions, goals, values and identity of one of the participants and interprets the constructive process in terms of the normative code preferred and communicated by that participant rather than standing back to consider the dynamic interplay of the normative codes of all the participants within their common setting and the outcome of this dynamic as settled by what is eventually collectively accepted. Although the social scientist might tend to want to identify with a social movement struggling for a worthy cause, in the constructivist perspective the movement is only one among a plurality of participants all of whom warrant equal attention. In so far as Habermas takes the point of view of a social movement, he adopts a legitimatist rather than a constructivist approach, and in so far as he interprets the social movement's point of view in terms of the transcendent moral point of view projected beyond society rather than as part of a communicative process, he exhibits an old discredited predilection for the philosophy of history which he has as yet not fully jettisoned.

Although constructivism operates at a certain distance from the participants, this approach is not simply morally neutral or devoid of any moral sensibility and concern. Rather than maintaining an immediate relation with a transcendent normative standard, as though the social scientist knows what ought to be the case, it is a more indirect approach. Given the nature of language and communication, a constructivist analysis undeniably presupposes by pragmatic necessity a reference to an indefinite and unlimited community, but its more immediate concern is the public. From this it seeks to grasp what is collectively accepted in the

particular situation, but this does not entail measuring existing reality against a necessary and unavoidable presupposition stylized as a normative standard, as Habermas (1992: 36) insists. Even if this is not a stark confrontation of ideal and reality but an identification of traces of existing reason in distorted practices, as he holds, such a procedure tends to cast theory and analysis in the form of moralizing, i.e. stating what ought to be and pointing out that reality does not measure up to this standard. The constructivist approach, by contrast, is more concerned with locating starting-points for a new constructive learning process that could possibly move in the direction of an unlimited and indefinite public. This requires first that the normative codes of all the participants, not just that of a preferred one, be investigated as possible presuppositions for furthering constructive learning. By singling out a social movement and linking his normative standard to it, Habermas not only identifies with the movement but also renders any critique of it impossible. All the participants, social movements included, must secondly be subjected to a social critique (Eder, 1988: 275, 319, 352, 374–7; 1993: 78–80, 98–100) that focuses on the particular illusion which each entertains in its strategic communication in relation to the other participants. Rather than simply holding up the picture of a transcendent normative standard to the participants so that they can begin to appreciate how far short their own ideals fall, as does the moral philosopher, the constructivist sociologist seeks out the illusory side of these ideals in order to expose the errors that need to be corrected. In this sense, sociology is not exhausted by describing existing reality, ‘facticity’, in comparison with a normative standard, ‘validity’, as Habermas (1992: 37, 94, 105, 349) proposes, since it specifically undertakes the uncovering and exposure of illusory ideals about reality and their effects on what becomes collectively accepted in the course of public communication within a particular situation – that is, of course, if sociology takes triple contingency seriously.

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## Notes

This essay was conceived and substantially drafted in Berlin during a research sojourn in early 1998. I wish to express my gratitude to all those who made it possible, particularly Professor Klaus Eder of the Humboldt University for institutional, intellectual and personal support, and University College Cork for leave of absence and financial support.

- 1 In a recent paper on object-oriented forms of sociality emerging in postsocial societies, Knorr Cetina (1997) introduces an interesting new perspective but surprisingly remains attached to the traditional sociological thesis of double contingency, albeit without mentioning it explicitly. While she stresses expertise and its 'dehiscence' into society in her theory of 'objectualization', she overlooks the fact that expertise is impossible in public communication. It is precisely in the principle of the public or the 'universality of non-expertise', as Fuller (1993: 285) calls it, that the concept of triple contingency finds its starting point.
- 2 See e.g. Lichtenberg (1990) and Habermas (1992: 455).
- 3 In this context, 'commerce' refers not simply to economic matters but to all the nascent global forms of intercourse of the time. See Heilbron (1998).
- 4 This was Hannah Arendt's (1971) reason for her infamous attack against the social sciences and her pronounced anti-sociological animus.
- 5 See e.g. Rosenberg and White (1957).
- 6 Curiously enough, Thomas McCarthy (1994: 89) commits a version of this error when he simply equates the third-person perspective with the role of the uninvolved spectator.
- 7 See also Parsons (1964: 36 and 1977: 167–8).
- 8 Schutz (1967: 170) formulated the problem as follows: 'And these meaning contexts of mine will be "subjective" to the extent that I am attending to your actual conscious experiences themselves and not merely to my own lived experiences of you. Furthermore, as I watch you, I shall see that you are oriented to me, that you are seeking the subjective meanings of my words, my actions, and what I have in mind insofar as you are concerned. And I will in turn take account of the fact that you are thus oriented to me, and this will influence both my intentions with respect to you and how I act toward you. This again you will see, I will see that you have seen it, and so on.' Miller (1992: 10) offers a clear summary statement of double contingency: 'Ego's perspective on ego/alter relationships is contingent on alter's perspective and vice versa. There are two self-other circles that have to be coordinated.' Knorr Cetina (1997: 20, 22) presents a new controversial 'objectual' version focusing on 'social forms binding self and other' based on the 'inter-object-person' relation.
- 9 Miller (1992: 10–11) also criticizes theories of role-taking or of taking a social perspective, such as those put forward by Piaget, Mead, Flavell, Feffer and Selman, for concentrating on only one side of double contingency: 'They have been interested in ego's and alter's abilities to take multiple roles or perspectives, and they have left open the question of how this taking of multiple roles or perspectives can be coordinated between alter and ego.' Focusing on coordination, as he does, Miller is obviously closer to Habermas than to Luhmann.
- 10 Although McCarthy (1994: 92, 100) acknowledges the structuring import of a point of view bringing legitimation pressure to bear on actors, he completely underestimates not only the third-person standpoint which acts as its vehicle but, by way of the critique of the 'oculocentrism' of the traditional subject/object model of knowledge, also the new social scientific understanding of observation. Knorr Cetina (1997: 7–8) incorporates the

- observational dimension by way of ‘“other” cultural elements and practices’ or the ‘alien culture . . . of knowledge and expertise’ which spills over and gets woven into society. Here the third point of view is reduced to the expert and expert cultures.
- 11 Social scientists are just beginning to appreciate the significance of the observing public at the global level, e.g. Hegedus (1990: 263–80), Habermas (1996: 192–236) and Beck (1996). McCarthy (1994: 92–3) stresses the need for the social sciences, critical theory in particular, to adopt a consistently global perspective, but it is unclear how they could achieve this if they are simultaneously required to renounce the third point of view.
  - 12 See e.g. recent critical volumes such as: Wellmer (1986); Honneth and Joas (1991); Calhoun (1992); Hoy and McCarthy (1994); Rosenfeld (1996); Rasmussen (1996); and Fraser (1997).
  - 13 It is only by stressing the communicative process or discourse that it is possible to temporalize, pragmaticize and contextualize communicative rationality without having to surrender transcendence or idealization, as McCarthy (1994: 72) rightly demands.
  - 14 Lately, both resource mobilization theory (e.g. McAdam et al., 1996) and rational choice theory (e.g. Esser, 1996) have also undergone the cognitive turn.
  - 15 In her recent work, however, Knorr Cetina (1997) understands knowledge and cultural models in terms of the universalization of expertise rather than of the universality of non-expertise.
  - 16 Various models are available for dealing with the dominant definition of reality: Foucault (1977) provides a model of exclusionary mechanisms and Chomsky (1989) a model of social and cultural control, while a hegemony model is put forward by Antonio Gramsci (1985) and followers of his such as Laclau and Mouffe (1985) and Eley (1992).
  - 17 It should be obvious that, despite the employment of the word ‘observer’, the critique of ‘oculocentrism’, as articulated by McCarthy (1994: 100), does not apply to the position taken here since use is made of a communications model.
  - 18 The task of bringing out this dimension is bound to loom ever larger as contemporary communication societies are transformed also into knowledge societies. At issue in the latter is not only expert knowledge but in particular taken-for-granted knowledge that frames expert knowledge and, typically, is discursively brought to the level of awareness.
  - 19 In her recent work, for example, Knorr Cetina (1997: 25) submits that: ‘sociology . . . played an important role in bringing about the shift in mentality through which individuals came to be seen as the bearers of personal costs of collective structures’. This is not wrong, of course, but what she overlooks is that sociology emerged only in a cultural space opened up by a broader discourse.
  - 20 The legitimatist position proceeds from the moral criterion of good and bad, evaluates the social actors according to it, and finally identifies with the one it judges to represent the good and hence as being legitimate.

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