CHAPTER SEVEN

Transaction and a Sociological Method for Social Problems

Having discussed the transactional conception of relations such as subjectivity and objectivity, emotion and cognition, mind and body, we now direct attention to how the transactional approach can be employed in reframing the disciplinary goals of the sociological enterprise. The basic goals and analytical strategies of traditional sociological study rests firmly on the dualistic assumptions of rationalism. Therefore, a shift to the transactional ontology would necessitate a reformulation of sociology’s purpose and method. In this chapter, we continue our dialogue about some new potential directions open to a transactionally oriented sociology.

There are many different ways to approach this task. Indeed, it will be critically important to consider a number of alternative avenues for constructing a transactional paradigm of sociological study in the future. However, in an effort to maintain continuity with the general themes of the preceding chapters, we will now consider the relevance of transaction to the sociological study of social problems. As noted earlier, the notion of human problem-solving figures prominently in the pragmatist philosophical system that inspired the transactional perspective. Consequently, focusing on social-problems research may be the most direct way to describe the distinctive character of the transactional method.

The social-problems focus is important for another reason. In recent years, a growing number of critics have described an emerging crisis of
legitimacy for academic sociology (Lemert 1995; Sjoberg and Vaughan 1993; Turner 1989). While there are varying opinions about what ails the discipline and what should be done about it, many critics are concerned about the growing irrelevance of mainstream sociological research to civic discourse about social problems (Sjoberg and Vaughan 1993). In a time when the problems confronting us have never been more complex and the need for sophisticated, empirically based analyses of these problems has never been greater, the sociological voice is largely absent in the public debate on social problems. There are many reasons why this is so, as we presently discuss, but a fresh approach to the sociological study of social problems is clearly needed now. We believe that a transactional social-problems research model holds great promise as a paradigmatic alternative to the framework that guides most mainstream sociological research today.

Thus, in this chapter, we outline a transactional approach to the study of social problems and demonstrate how this approach addresses the crisis of legitimacy in academic sociology. As a first step, we identify some of the reasons why sociological theory and research presently has little influence on the public discussion of social problems. This analysis will inform our effort to articulate a social-problems research paradigm that can make a more substantive contribution to civic discourse.

**Social-Problems Research and Civic Discourse**

Drawing from literature on a variety of topics, ranging from social commentary on political and intellectual life in the United States to systematic studies of media institutions and disciplinary critiques, we examine some of the cultural, organizational, economic, and technological factors that undermine sociology's influence in public-policy debates. We will also discuss the way in which the content of sociological theories about social problems contributes to the discipline's civic impotence. If recent changes in civic culture negatively influence the way in which the lay public receives sociological knowledge, how sociological narratives about social problems are theoretically constructed also contributes to sociology's marginal status in policy debates.

The literature reviewed here weaves together divergent strands of critical reflection on contemporary American society to reveal how forces currently transforming civic culture contribute to a view of sociological knowledge as either redundant or irrelevant to the public debate on social problems.
The Information Revolution and the Culture of Criticism

One of the most important influences on civic culture in the United States today are recent advances in information and communication technology. These technological changes have recently been addressed in general terms by a number of commentators (Abramson, Artherton, and Orren 1988; Bennett 1988; Elshtain 1995; Entman 1989; Lasch, 1995; Neuman 1991), but sociology's place in this new environment has not received much attention. The revolution in information-processing and media technology has produced an interesting paradox: While the emerging communications revolution has the potential to revitalize civic discourse, we are witnessing a trend toward an actual impoverishment of public debate on social problems.

On the one hand, the widespread availability of radio and television and a broad range of print media has created the potential for a mass audience for information related to civic affairs, a potential sometimes realized in the form of massive collective reactions to key social events. This potential may be further enhanced by the explosive growth of the market for personal computers in recent years and the expansion of the international network (the Internet) of electronic information exchange and dialogue.2

On the other hand, these technological innovations incorporate features that seem to encourage low-level participation in social-problems discourse and superficial political debate. In recent commentary on this problem, social critics such as Christopher Lasch (1995) focus on the destructive effects of televised political debates that emphasize personal style rather than the substance of arguments. Lasch also decries the emergence of "commercial persuasion" in which consumers of political ideas are subjected to advertising campaigns designed to manipulate personal needs and desires. Similarly, Jean Elshtain (1995) argues that innovations such as telepolling and interactive television are ushering in a political system based on instant plebiscite. Meaningful political debate is sacrificed as politicians strive to tap the public mood on specific subjects: "[T]here is no need for debate with one's fellow citizens on substantive questions. All that is required is a calculus of opinion" (1995, 29).

Thus analysts such as Lasch and Elshtain find the new information and communication technology subverting the institutional processes that have contributed historically to some degree of democratic exchange in civic culture. These technologies have created an environment in which sociological analyses of social problems have little chance for serious consideration. The distinguishing characteristics of sociological
explanation—its emphasis on structural rather than individual forces and its orientation towards holistic, multivariate analyses—render it unsuitable for media formats designed to explain complex issues in terms of simple formulae. Successful political campaigns in this era of “instant plebiscite” increasingly rely on well-crafted appeals to the cultural biases of the electorate. The structural logic of sociological inquiry does not resonate with the radical individualism of American culture, which means that sociological perspectives are not likely to win a following in today’s media-dominated system.

Radical individualism is not the only cultural principle expressed and promoted through media institutions that contributes to sociology’s marginality in the public arena. Another recent trend more directly (but not exclusively) influenced by media institutions is a pattern best described as the “culture of criticism.” Media preoccupation with individual “chiselers and cheats” and the failings of dominant social institutions has created a climate in which sociology’s critical mission is viewed as redundant.

Research focusing on the ideological content of the news media has yielded a confusing picture of this institution’s place in the political process, with some researchers emphasizing the “liberal bias” of media messages and others positing that news media contribute to the maintenance of ruling-class hegemony. However, the two camps agree that the media function as a critical voice, although they differ in interpreting the ultimate consequences of this critical focus. The present analysis incorporates elements of both the conservative and radical perspectives on the news media’s ideological functions.

Neoconservative social commentators such as Moynihan (1973), Huntington (1975), and Crozier, Huntington, and Watanuki (1975) argue that the formal mandate of television and print news organizations to expose corruption within the public and private sectors has given rise to an “adversary culture” characterized by a growing public distrust of most major social institutions. While radicals do not necessarily disagree, they have been more concerned about the limited scope of media criticism. They point out that the critical mission of news organizations rarely extends beyond the identification of disconnected instances of corruption and scandal and thus falls short of a systematic examination of the structural basis of power and privilege in American society (Herman and Chomsky 1988; Parenti 1992; Tuchman 1974). Lack of empirical research on these issues makes it difficult to derive sound generalizations about the media’s impact on civic culture, but the neoconservative and radical
critiques paint a disturbing picture of a profoundly cynical public with little faith in existing institutions or tolerance for sophisticated social criticism. We believe that this is an accurate picture of the current state of civic culture in the United States (see also Wallerstein 1998).

The culture of criticism profoundly impacts the receptivity of lay audiences to sociological explanations of social life. Positivist sociological analyses, rooted in such theoretical perspectives as structural functionalism, exchange theory, rational choice theory, or in the atheoretical research of strict empiricists, are often dismissed by the public as either intellectual obfuscation of trivial issues or as idealized models of social life. Individuals and groups differentially situated to observe or experience certain types of oppression often regard positivist analyses of these domains as merely legitimating established power and privilege. Civic culture is not a fertile seedbed for social-problems perspectives based on positivist analyses. Public cynicism toward other social institutions seems to extend to mainstream social science as well.

Public-issue perspectives inspired by critically oriented sociology fare no better within the current culture of criticism. The key principles of critical sociology—the focus on taken-for-granted assumptions of hegemonic ideologies, questioning the basis of authority, and challenging entrenched power and privilege—are clearly redundant within a cultural environment awash with critical commentary of one kind or another. While critical commentary by the print and electronic media is not coherently organized or committed to sustained and detailed analysis, it nevertheless generates an information overload that diminishes the public's responsiveness to more sophisticated forms of critical analysis. Sociological perspectives on political and economic power or authority and truth claims are not seen by the public as novel viewpoints. Such perspectives are easily absorbed in the litany of criticism pouring from the public arena.

The changes in civic culture described here are important for understanding sociology's marginality in the social-problems debate, but other factors contributing to this outcome must be considered as well. At the same time that social, cultural, and technological changes have undermined the public's receptivity to sociological narratives, the production of such narratives has also been reshaped by important social changes. We will now focus attention on how social and organizational changes in the work environment of intellectuals, in general, and sociologists, in particular, have diminished the influence of sociological perspectives in the public debate on social problems.
Chapter Seven

The Bureaucratization of Intellectual and Sociological Inquiry

In a book dealing with the disappearance of the "public intellectual" in American civic culture, Russell Jacoby (1987) notes that the last generation of independent social critics—essayists, editorialists, book reviewers, and pamphleteers concerned with important social issues—failed to reproduce itself after the 1950s. Jacoby attributes the disappearance of a younger generation of free intellectuals to several interrelated social changes in American society. At the center of these changes was the movement of intellectuals into university bureaucracies:

Younger intellectuals no longer need or want a larger public; they are almost exclusively professors. Campuses are their homes; colleagues their audiences; monographs and specialized journals their media. Unlike past intellectuals they situate themselves within fields and disciplines—for good reason. Their jobs, advancement, and salaries depend on the evaluation of specialists, and this dependence affects the issues broached and the language employed. (Jacoby 1987, 6)

Other changes have intersected with the expansion of universities to hasten the demise of the public intellectual. While younger intellectuals were pulled into university life by the attraction of steady salaries, they were also pushed in that direction by the gradual disappearance of an urban ecology and bohemian culture that served as the principal breeding ground for the free-lance writers and artists of an earlier age. As suburban tracts exploded and inner cities declined in the postwar period, "bohemian colonies" within the urban environment could no longer be sustained and their populations dispersed (Jacoby 1987, 28). The result was a loss of the interpersonal support networks and cultural institutions that nurture the development of public intellectuals.

Academic sociology has been one of the primary destinations of younger generations of intellectuals. Choosing the relative safety of academic organizations over the insecurities of free-lance work arrangements, recruits to sociology in the postwar period entered a profession undergoing fundamental changes in its mission and the character of its work, changes directly tied to the growing bureaucratization of academic institutions.

In a recent critique of contemporary American sociology, Sjoberg and Vaughan (1993) describe sociology's dramatic shift away from the earlier traditions of urban sociology pioneered by the Chicago School before the Second World War and the social and cultural criticism of sociologists like Daniel Bell, David Riesman, and C. Wright Mills in the
1950s and early 1960s. In the postwar period, a new type of research came to dominate the discipline as sociologists began to seek and receive state and corporate sponsorship for their research. Following the lead of colleagues in the natural sciences, sociologists began to promote a "big science" approach to research by organizing research groups engaged in highly technical analyses of large data sets. Tailoring their research to fit the expectations of powerful actors within the government, sociologists succeeded in winning large research grants administered through agencies like the National Science Foundation. The survey-research tradition advanced within the discipline as politicians came to appreciate the value of public-opinion polls for tracking public sentiment. Similarly, evaluation research received increasing financial support as advocates of the Great Society social programs of the 1960s looked for ways to judge the effectiveness of these government initiatives (Sjoberg and Vaughan 1993, 78).

Jacoby's general treatment of contemporary intellectual culture, Sjoberg and Vaughan's description of the growth of bureaucratic sociology, and a number of similar analyses (Damrosch 1995; Klausner and Lidz 1986) reveal the broad structural changes in postwar U.S. society that shaped public demand for intellectual, sociologically informed perspectives on public issues. Changes in the urban and institutional environment eroded the culture of free intellectuals, and pushed new generations of intellectuals into the universities. Academic sociology became bureaucratized and firmly coupled with other large-scale organizations in the public and private sectors, and the main constituency for sociological research and publication narrowed to professional audiences increasingly differentiated into specialty and subspecialty groupings. The content of sociological production reflects the character of this audience, as work published in professional journals has become more methodologically or theoretically sophisticated and largely incomprehensible to nonspecialists (Smelser 1988; Vaughan 1993). In the contemporary academic environment, the possibilities for doing sociological research and writing that will appeal to lay audiences while, at the same time, win recognition from the profession are limited.

One obvious expression of this problem is the continuing debate over the role of applied research in sociology. Some argue that sociology must move more aggressively in the direction of applied or public-policy research in order to improve the discipline's standing (see Borgada and Cook 1988). Indeed, sociologists often play active roles in the development or evaluation of specific social-policy programs (Freeman et al. 1983; Freeman and Rossi 1984; Whyte 1986; 1991). But social commen-
tary and policy analysis continue to be marginal enterprises in sociology, because these activities are not logically connected to the central disciplinary tasks of theory development and empirical validation. The dominant research models for academic sociology do not provide an epistemological justification for an active engagement in public discourse.

In addition to these institutional problems, opening civic debate to the sociological voice is further undermined by the discipline’s intellectual approach to the study of social problems. Sociology’s role in social-problems discourse is ironic: On the one hand, no other social science discipline is more formally committed to the study of social problems, with sociologists historically dominating the large and influential Society for the Study of Social Problems, playing leading roles in managing and contributing to the Society’s prestigious journal Social Problems, teaching social-problems courses as a part of the formal curricula in sociology, and writing textbooks and supplementary readings for such courses. On the other hand, sociologists specializing in social-problems research do not often contribute to the public discussion of problems that afflict modern society or propose solutions to them. In order to fully understand this irony, we must look more carefully at the theoretical foundations of social-problems research.

**The Stalemate in Social-Problems Theory**

By all appearances, efforts during the last three or four decades to establish a general theoretical framework for social-problems research have led to a stalemate (see Best 1989; Hazelrigg 1985; 1986; Miller and Holstein 1993; Pfohl 1985; Rafter 1992; Schneider 1985; 1991; Troyer 1992; Woolgar and Pawluch 1985). Early research on social problems (pre-1970s) and some variants of contemporary research are rooted in the paradigmatic assumptions guiding the discipline of sociology as a whole. Social problems are seen as consequences of certain structural or social-system imperatives, related to the maintenance of privileging structures or the social system as a whole. Examination of social problems in such structural terms yields an “objective” analysis that contrasts with the subjective sensibilities of common-sense actors or the ideological constructions of interests groups. Hence, in this “objectivist” tradition, social problems are products of objective conditions tied to structural changes such as industrialization, bureaucratization, mechanization, and other modernization trends (Clinard 1974; Dynes 1964; Horton and Leslie 1974; Weinberg 1970).

In contrast, the social-constructionist approach (Blumer 1971; Spector and Kitsuse 1973; 1977) rejects the idea that social problems can
always be treated as objectively real. Sensitive to the power of collective definition and public opinion, constructionists argue that objective conditions have very little to do with the cause or origin of social problems. Focusing on “the activities of individuals or groups making assertions of grievances and claims with respect to some putative conditions,” constructionist emphasize “the process by which members of society define a putative condition as a social problem” (Spector and Kitsuse 1977, 75). More recent theoretical development in the social-problems field has involved, by and large, efforts to further elaborate the constructionist model. Hilgartner and Bosk’s (1988) “public arenas model” incorporates elements of several distinct theoretical traditions, but it is still rooted in the central constructionist assumption that “social problems are projections of collective sentiments rather than simple mirrors of objective conditions in society” (1988, 53–54). The constructionist approach has come to clearly dominate the field in recent decades (Troyer 1992, 35).

While constructionism has been ascendant since the 1970s, its core presuppositions are now receiving critical attention. For instance, Woolgar and Pawluch’s (1985) metaphor of “ontological gerrymandering” refers to a form of selective relativism that is a fundamental bulwark of the constructionist approach. Through ontological gerrymandering, constructionists

make problematic the truth status of certain states of affairs selected for analysis and explanation, while backgrounding or minimizing the possibility that the same problems apply to assumptions upon which the analysis depends. By means of ontological gerrymandering, proponents of definitional explanation place a boundary between assumptions which are to be understood as (ostensibly) problematic and those which are not. (1985, 216)

Adherents of the constructionist perspective erect an ontological boundary between the objectivist claim that social conditions associated with a given social problem change across time, and the constructionist claim that putative conditions do not change (or change in a ways inconsistent with the perceived growth of the problem). Constructionists adopt a critical stance towards the first claim, but not the second. Without this selective relativism, the constructionist model collapses.

Woolgar and Pawluch’s critique has stimulated an intense theoretical debate that has crystallized distinct camps within the constructionist tradition. The so-called “strict” constructionists accept Woolgar and Pawluch’s criticism and endeavor to purge their analyses of any explicit or implicit assumptions about objective reality (Spector and Kitsuse 1987;
see also Troyer 1992). This version of constructionism, which has its roots in phenomenological sociology, begins with the premise that all knowledge of the world is socially constructed, even the assertions of social scientists that contradict those of claim makers. Consequently, strict constructionists see no need to reconcile constructionism and objectivism in order to study the claims-making process. The focus of research should be claims themselves, and not the validity of those claims.

An alternative to strict constructionism can be found in an approach that Joel Best (1989) has called “contextual constructionism” (see Blumer 1971; Gusfield 1985; Rafter 1992). Best also accepts the Woolgar and Pawluch criticism, but moves in the opposite direction from the strict constructionists by arguing that selective relativism is simply unavoidable in constructionist analysis. Therefore, he opts for a “partial” constructionism that incorporates elements of objectivist analysis:

[C]ontextual constructionist assume that they can know—with reasonable confidence—about social conditions. They acknowledge the socially constructed nature of [social scientific] information about social problems, but they assume that such information can be used to (imperfectly) describe the context within which claims-making occurs. (1989, 247)

Thus it appears that efforts by sociologists to advance social-problems theory have reached a stalemate. This impasse is defined by the failure of either objectivist or constructionist analysis to adequately account for the growth and decline of social problems while, at the same time, neither approach can be dismissed out-of-hand. Consequently, sociologists seeking to contribute their knowledge to public discourse on social problems are hampered by the discipline’s own critical reflection on the inadequacies of its knowledge-base in the field.

Consideration of these issues adds another crucial dimension to the present account of sociology’s marginal status in civic discourse on social problems and policy. If the civic irrelevance of sociology is partly due to the technological, cultural, professional, and organizational forces described above, we must also acknowledge the part played by the current impasse in social-problems theory. Sociology’s civic disengagement is a multifaceted problem that results from how sociological knowledge is generated as well as how it is received within the social and cultural environment of contemporary American society.
Having identified some of the reasons why the sociological perspective is not a more influential force in public-policy debate, we will now propose an alternative theoretical and methodological framework for social-problems research that can increase the relevance of sociological theory and research to civic discourse. In outlining the transactional approach, we draw on several distinct lines of theoretical development. First, we look to the critical theory of Jürgen Habermas (1973; 1984; 1987) for a metatheoretical approach that can be adapted to the transactional ontology and the embodied conception of human action developed in the earlier chapters of this volume. Second, despite our earlier criticisms of postmodernist social theory, we believe that postmodernism yields some important ideas about how to infuse social-problems research with the principles of democracy and community empowerment. And finally, the countersystem approach (Lyng 1988; 1990a; 2002; Sjoberg and Cain 1971) offers some concrete strategies for dealing with the bureaucratic and professional constraints that stand in the way of a transactional approach to social-problems research. We then use this material to introduce some tentative proposals for an alternative approach, proposals that will hopefully encourage a dialogue about sociology's role in the postmodern world.

In schematic form, the transactional approach incorporates the following principles:

1. Social theory must get beyond the impasse between objectivism and constructionism by offering a view of social problems as both socially constructed and objectively real. This can be accomplished by making the identification of solutions to problems an integral part of the critical analysis of modern society. Thus the research paradigm should offer a way to logically connect “deconstructive” and “reconstructive” analysis.

2. The identification of potential social reconstructions should not be guided by rational standards alone. Social reconstruction should also draw on extrarational, embodied sentiments and conflicting life-forms that reflect the body’s inherent resistance to social determination.

3. The bureaucratic constraints on sociologists’ ability to contribute to the public resolution of social problems must be transcended by identifying a constituency for research outputs
that includes, but also extends beyond, the traditional professional audience.

4. The research paradigm should provide a logical structure for linking these new goals with the more traditional disciplinary goals of empirical analyses and theoretical development.

We begin by exploring ways in which Habermas's critical framework can be adapted to the study of social problems through a transactional interpretation of some of his key concepts. This will eventually lead to a conceptual system that accords with the first principle of our transactional social-problems approach: the linking of deconstructive (critical) analysis and reconstructive (problem-solving) analysis.

**Linking Deconstruction and Reconstruction: The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas**

One of the most influential social theorists of the postwar period, Jürgen Habermas synthesized core concepts and themes from a number of theoretical traditions into a coherent system that has kept the critical-theory tradition alive and revived its emancipatory agenda. Habermas provides a useful metatheoretical framework for sociological analysis, which can serve as a point of departure for elaborating our transactional social-problems approach. Consequently, this chapter is devoted in part to reconceptualizing elements of Habermas's system along the lines of the transactional approach.

This work has already begun in some important respects. Indeed, our effort here has been inspired primarily by the increasing number of scholars who point to the promise of a greater cross-fertilization between Habermas's critical theory and pragmatism (Hinkle 1992; Joas 1992; Shalin 1992). This exploration continues the course charted by Habermas himself in the most sophisticated and comprehensive statement of his views, contained within his Theory of Communicative Action (TCA). Various theoretical traditions informed this impressive synthesis, but Habermas's use of pragmatist ideas in developing the "action-theoretic" dimension of TCA is an important part of his framework. However, while contemporary interpreters of pragmatism applaud Habermas's use of pragmatist ideas, they generally fault him for his lack of sensitivity to the ontological principles in which these ideas are rooted.

We endorse this critique, but now wish to take the next step by exploring the possibilities for reconfiguring Habermas's theoretical system. The key part of this reconfiguration involves a modification of
Habermas's notion of the "life-world" in order to take account of the embodied character of human transaction. As noted in the previous chapter, it is the body, not the "self" or any other abstracted aspect of the human agent, that acts. Starting from this premise, it follows that the action-theoretic problem at the heart of the life-world concept should address the embodied nature of such action. In other words, we should conceive of the life-world as a reality constituted by (to use Frank's terminology) "bodies coming to terms with one another." Thinking of the life-world in this way will have far-reaching consequences for the transactional approach to social problems.

We begin by outlining the key elements of universal pragmatics and TCA. Then, after reviewing the pragmatist critique of Habermas's work, we focus on the concepts of the "life-world" and "system" and suggest some ways to reconceptualize these ideas in light of insights derived from the earlier transactional analysis of emotions and the body. One of our primary concerns in this reconceptualization is to reveal how the embodied characteristics emphasized by the transactional perspective can be related to the search for solutions to social problems. This will demonstrate how resistance to system imperatives emerges within the life-world in the form of collective embodied responses to system colonization.

THE THEORY OF COMMUNICATIVE ACTION AND UNIVERSAL PRAGMATICS. If the transactional perspective rejects the dualistic oppositions of traditional social-problems theory, then we can look to TCA and its conceptual core, "universal pragmatics," as a starting point for an alternative social-problems approach. By linking deconstruction and reconstruction, Habermas offers a methodological strategy for social-problems research that is consistent with the notion of transaction. He calls for a form of social-scientific practice organized most fundamentally as a transformative enterprise (Habermas 1971). In the same way that human beings routinely transform reality as they act to solve everyday problems and, in the process, acquire knowledge about the workings of the material world, knowledge of the social order is best advanced through a method that gives priority to the reconstruction of society.

Habermas gives primary attention to establishing rational procedures for constructing conceptual models of alternative social arrangements. Pragmatist thought figures prominently in his notion of rationality, which explains, in part, the compatibility between recent interpretations of pragmatism and Habermas's system (see Shalin 1992). TCA is founded upon the pragmatist conception of reason as symbolically mediated interaction. As Mead (1967) asserted, reason arises when
the individual takes into his or her own response the "attitude of the other"—hence, reason is a thoroughly social force. Habermas adds a missing structural dimension to this conception by emphasizing not only reason's movement through history towards self-consciousness and self-criticism but also its subversion by "systematically distorted" communications in a "money-bound," "media-steered" society that prevents the realization of reason's full critical potential (Habermas 1987, 256–82).

Objectivity here springs from reason, residing partly in the universal discursive standards that must guide the public discussion of alternative social arrangements. Such discussions take place within specially constituted "ideal speech situations" located in life-world institutions free from the contaminating influences of the political–economic system (Habermas 1987). In the ideal speech situation, public issues are addressed through rational argumentation, in contrast to the unreflexive process by which common-sense actors typically mediate issues of truth, justice, and authenticity. The only way to avoid the usual appeal to established custom in settling validity claims is to create a normative environment where "only reason should have force" (Habermas 1970, 7). This is the function of the ideal speech situation, an environment governed by procedural rules for achieving communicative rationality.⁶

In light of the first four chapters of the present volume, it would appear that Habermas is woefully naïve in his overdistanced and disembodied approach to reason. However, this is not quite fair, as we will see in reviewing the formal critiques of TCA by contemporary pragmatists (see below). In any case, Habermas's approach to objectivity is not restricted to the rational mediation of validity claims. He also establishes explicit links between the social-construction process and objectivity by tying rational critique to the search for alternative structures. Ultimately, conflicting views of social issues can be objectively resolved only by transcending the existing order through the creation of a different hypothetical order. Hence, the principal goal of discourse within the ideal speech situation is to identify structural alternatives without subjective distortion:

Rational reconstructions . . . deal with anonymous rule systems, which any subjects whatsoever can comply with, insofar as they have acquired the corresponding competence with respect to these rules. Reconstructions thus do not encompass subjectivity, within the horizon of which alone the experience of reflection is possible. (Habermas 1973, 22)
Habermas succeeds here in showing how the social-(re)construction process can be uncoupled from subjectivity. When social problems are defined from the perspective of an alternative institutional system, they emerge as socially constructed phenomena that are, nonetheless, objective in character. Objectivity in this sense derives from the "anonymous rule systems" associated with not-as-yet existing social systems that are used to define problems. This approach to social problems contrasts markedly with their social construction within an existing socio-economic system, where resources are mobilized by various interests to construct ideologically based definitions of contentious issues.

Thus Habermas offers a potential solution to the impasse in social-problems theory. A theoretic approach that logically connects deconstructive and reconstructive analysis offers a way to transcend the theoretical incommensurability that currently plagues the field. The alternative perspective views putative social problems as always socially constructed and endorses the effort to better understand the process by which issues are defined as problems in the public arena. At the same time, however, this perspective also identifies a way to define social problems without ideological distortion. This is achieved by analyzing existing social structures and the problems they generate from the standpoint of the hypothetical model, which results in critical deconstruction tied to an explicit vision of an alternative to the existing order.

The deconstruction/reconstruction link takes on added significance when one considers the contemporary cultural context discussed earlier in this chapter. A sociological study of social problems that offers not only a critical analysis of the existing order but also a way of identifying potential solutions to problems (solutions that derive from hypothetical social models) could function as a unique voice within the current culture of criticism. Demonstrating systematic and complex logical connections between the critical analysis of current social conditions and the broad contours of alternative social structures could contribute a much-needed perspective to the discussion of public issues. Still, the model advanced here raises questions that must be addressed before we can fully articulate the alternative approach.

THE LIMITS OF DISEMBODIED REASON: THE PRAGMATIST CRITIQUE OF TCA. It is clear from the preceding discussion of Habermas's ideas that he is deeply committed to the modernist project and its focus on the liberating potential of reason and rational discourse. In this respect, it can be said that Habermas perhaps owes his greatest debt to Max Weber, who was less concerned in a critical sense about the role of reason in modern affairs than he was about the triumph of formal rationality over sub-
stantive rationality. Following Weber's logic, Habermas sees rationalized communicative action within the life-world as the antidote for the increasing influence of purposive-rational action emanating from the system. Although he is deft in his application of pragmatist thinking to this problem, it is precisely this use (or misuse) of the pragmatist tradition that concerns contemporary commentators the most.

As Dmitri Shalin (1992) reveals in his critical assessment of Habermas's general corpus and TCA in particular, contemporary pragmatists adopt a common stance in questioning the rationalist principles upon which Habermas bases his theoretical approach. Shalin neatly summarizes the pragmatist response to Habermas by creating a series of antinomies, which capture the fundamental differences between TCA and "pragmatic politics" (1992, 253–73).

He begins with the opposition between "disembodied reason," which occupies a central place in TCA, and the pragmatist notion of "embodied reasonableness." What is highlighted by this contrast is the importance that pragmatists place on "noncognitive forms of intelligence irreducible to verbal intellect," which are left out of TCA due to its privileging of consciousness and discursive practices. Reason, as it appears in TCA, "has no obvious relation to the human body and noncognitive processes (emotions, feelings, sentiments)." This is just the conception of pure reason that was destroyed by Damasio's (1994) clinical studies. These studies support the pragmatist view of communication as a process of "minding something together, carrying out a larger act in which participants are engaged bodily as well as mentally," which accounts for the pragmatist sensitivity to the nondiscursive element in culture. This focus reflects a deep appreciation for the insight, highlighted in the previous chapter, that just "as the body becomes 'enculturated,' . . . so culture becomes embodied" (Alexander 1987, quoted in Shalin 1992, 255).

Next, in contrasting "determinant being" with "indeterminate reality," Shalin points to the limitations of TCA arising from its reliance on the categorical distinctions bequeathed by rationalism and its overdetermined view of reality. Opposing this view is the pluralism and perspectivism of the pragmatist tradition, which gives ontological priority to "objective uncertainty" in a universe existing in a perpetual state of becoming. Thus, while Habermas's rationalist ontology helps explain his faith in argumentation as a means for settling validity claims about a world of uncertainty, the pragmatist ontology suggests another consequence following from discursive techniques of validation: "Each time we pass judgment on the situation at hand—literally terminate indeter-
minacy—we bring out some of its potentialities and render obscure its other possible determinations" (1992, 258).

An important epistemological consequence of the pragmatist ontology is its demand for an alternative to "discursive validation" in rationalist inquiry. Pragmatism calls for an approach that achieves what Shalin refers to as "pragmatic certainty." This latter concept is critical to our effort to resuscitate "truth" as a meaningful idea for sociology, because it offers a way of addressing the limitations of discursive validation techniques while not abandoning the important distinction between truth and error. For pragmatists, "truth is no longer grasped ... in the rationalist manner as *aequatio intellectus et rei* but instead is pragmatically conceived as a practically accomplished unity of knowledge and reality" (1992, 260). Moreover, to achieve pragmatic certainty in the unification of knowledge and reality one has to engage in "joint action," which can be described as "living and minding together where theoretical, normative, and aesthetic discourses merge into one, where humans feel, think, and transact at the same time, and where a different logic is called upon to help us master everyday contingencies" (1992, 260). Pragmatists find certainty in the ability of organized groups to make real situations conform to idealized plans through collective transformative actions (1992, 261).

In contrasting "rational consensus" and "reasonable dissent," Shalin addresses head-on Habermas's formula for constructing the kind of rational society that will ensure the effective resolution of social problems and humankind's emancipation. He inquires into the dangers of the consensus model of problem-solving embodied in Habermas's ideal speech situation and its orientation to policies based on purely theoretical calculations. What we find in pragmatism is an alternative approach, "one that accentuates the limits of theoretically grounded consensus and highlights the productive properties of dissent" (1992, 262). Thus pragmatists see conflict as no less important than consensus in the search for rational solutions to problems.

The pragmatist orientation towards dissent will be especially important for our effort to refashion the life-world concept, because we will assert that dissent, born of the body's resistance to cultural inscription, is an unavoidable consequence of life-world transactions. However, the type of dissenting posture emphasized by our conception of the life-world is not one based on discursive disagreement. Rather, it is dissent expressed through transactions between bodies and their social and physical environments in acts of production, consumption, and social interaction. Even with the shift in focus, these patterns of dissent have the same significance that Shalin attributes to "dissenting insights"—
they must be “safeguarded because they hint at the unrealized potentialities of being” (1992, 267).

The two remaining antinomies, “transcendental democracy” versus “democratic transcendence” and “rational society” versus “sane community,” refer primarily to the types of social and political arrangements that reflect the competing principles of rationalism and pragmatism. Thus, while both Habermas and contemporary pragmatists celebrate democratic processes, the meaning of democracy for the two is not quite the same. Consonant with TCA’s general focus on discourse, the democratic ideal within this system is an institutional arrangement that ameliorates the distortions of communicative practices arising from market and bureaucratic influences. The ideal speech situation is based on principles that ensure a consensual, democratic form of decision making free of domination. Pragmatists, by contrast, see democracy as a system more directly attuned to problem-solving in a world of great uncertainty and unpredictability:

If society is a semiordered chaos routinely generating unanticipated consequences, as pragmatism implies, then democracy is a historically specific mode of managing uncertainty. . . . Democratic systems thrive on uncertainty; they rely on market, competition, ad hoc ing, and muddling through as necessary, even if distortion-proned, mechanisms for handling a large number of incalculable variables. By the same token, democratic policies promote conflicting life-forms, open up public discourse for an ever-widening range of participants, and maximize the public’s role in defining the terms in which indeterminacy can be legitimately terminated. (Shalin 1992, 266)

In this view, democracy is a political system that not only values open political debate but also encourages multiple collective actions, many of which are competing, in the search for solutions to complex social problems. Pragmatists accept that social reality and any problem it presents to human beings are much too complex to be understood and adjudicated in terms of any single perspective, no matter how much people may agree about its validity. What pragmatists encourage most in the name of democracy is the value of the “conflicting life-forms” that every society generates when transacting bodies resist cultural inscription and develop corporeal potentialities through collective problem-solving. The body’s capacity for resistance and the conflicting life-forms produced by resistant bodies are critical concerns of our alternative social-problems approach.

The clash between human qualities that are valued by rationalism—cognition, discourse, logic, determinacy, consensus—and those qualities
it disdains or ignores—sentiment, common-sense, inconsistency, indeterminacy, conflict—not only informs the different interpretations of democracy embraced by Habermas and the pragmatists, but also their respective visions of a humane society. For Habermas, the only way to free public discourse of ideological distortions is to infuse communication with the principles of reason. This will purge the life-world of the communicative irrationalities generated by system imperatives and remove from discourse all contaminating influences associated with emotion, indeterminacy, parochialism, and the like.

In making the pragmatist case for the “sane community,” Shalin notes that while

Habermas wants to clear communications from inarticulate sentiments, private interests, logical inconsistencies, and similar distortions as inimical to reason, . . . [p]ragmatists find these essential to keeping one’s sanity amidst the semichaotic order that surrounds us in everyday life.

(1992, 270)

This suggests that an adequate conception of the life-world must leave room for emotion and transacting bodies. If one starts with this premise, it is possible to locate a domain of social life where values and norms are fully embodied: “values [are] inseparable from habit . . . [s]ocial norms have to find their way into mind’s noncognitive recesses and become suffused with emotions, transformed into habits, translated into routine judgments” (1992, 271). In other words, values and norms are objectified by the body, while on another level they are also resisted by the body. Thus the dialectic between the body’s objectifying and resisting response to social facts forms the central core of the life-world.

The capacity of transacting bodies within the life-world to generate creative alternatives to the system’s colonizing forms derives from corporeal resistance. The life-world is rich with social adaptations to the problem complexes of everyday existence, adaptations that are ontologically connected to the objective uncertainty of the body—that is, its contingent and resisting character. As we will explain below, the recoupling of the life-world and system that Habermas advocates can happen only by fully exploiting the creative problem-solving capacities of contingent bodies involved in localized transactions with one another and their immediate environments:

Above all, pragmatists call for personal efforts in one’s immediate community. . . . [S]ocial reconstruction starts in one community, envelopes the city, moves to the state level, and then comes to the national legisla-
ture...suggest[ing] the kind of pragmatic, grass-root politics essential to democratic reconstruction. (1992, 273)

Having reviewed Shalin’s pragmatist critique of Habermas, the stage is now set for the next step in our effort to outline a transactional social-problems approach. If the first principle guiding this effort is to establish a logical connection between deconstruction with reconstruction in social-problems analysis, the second principle is that the social-reconstruction process should make use of the full range of embodied capacities that human beings possess for collective problem-solving. We have seen that Habermas’s focus on rational reconstruction is flawed, because it privileges cognition and rationality at the expense of embodied sentiments, emotions, and other nondiscursive ways of experiencing the world. Consequently, it will be necessary to modify Habermas’s theoretical framework by infusing his approach more thoroughly with principles borrowed from pragmatist philosophy and its offspring, transactional sociology. As the preceding discussion suggests, the key to this modification is a rethinking of the concept of the life-world.

Embodyed Social Reconstruction:  
The Promise of Conflicting Life-Forms

As we have seen, the principal problem with Habermas’s concept of the life-world is that it does not incorporate the broader range of capacities for reasoned action captured by the pragmatist notion of “living habit.” As Eugene Halton (1995, 204) notes: “Habermas has conceived the life-world as a passive reservoir of knowledge with no capacities for reasonable activity...biology plays no part in his conception, he conceives life solely from the rationalist’s viewpoint as ‘tacit knowledge.’” By shifting the focus from knowledge to experience as the foundation of the life-world, a more encompassing concept can be constructed, one that now incorporates not only tacit knowledge but also “habits of belief providing common-sense prejudices, wisdom, traditions, and crafts” (1995, 205). While Habermas sees the life-world as storing the interpretive work of preceding generations, Halton views it as “the incorporation of prior experience in human traditions and practices” (1995, 205).

The Embodied Life-World: From Communicative Action to Corporeal Transaction

Following the work of Shalin, Halton, and other contemporary pragmatist critics of Habermas (Antonio and Kellner 1992; Joas 1992; Sciulli
1992), we think it imperative to make room in the life-world concept for
the transacting bodies and the emergent products of these transactions.
Therefore, we propose substituting the notion of “corporeal transaction”
for Habermas’s “communicative action” in the action-theoretical fram-
work. This change would shift life-world analysis from an exclusive focus
on patterns of symbolic interaction to include bodily transactions
involved in production, consumption, and social interaction (via domi-
nation or communication). The transactional approach puts embodied
actors at the center of the life-world by allowing us to see the body as
both acting subject and resisting object—serving, in this way, as one
important source of the conflicting life-forms that make up the life-world.

In proposing this broader conception of the life-world, it is important
to retain the idea of the taken-for-granted character of the habitual pat-
terns that constitute this domain. However, the scope of taken-for-
granted experience is now much wider than just tacit knowledge. The
unreflective habit that fills the life-world consists of corporeal wisdom
passed across generations as bodies engage in productive, consumptive,
and communicative transactions. This wisdom is fully embodied and not
immediately available to critical consciousness and therefore remains,
in Habermas’s words, the “horizon-forming context” for processes of
corporeal problem-solving.

As we argued in the previous chapter, the key problem for bodies is
contingency. This problem is the focus of ongoing efforts to terminate
the indeterminacy of human bodies and the rest of nature, on the one
hand, through transactions undertaken by bodies engaged in produc-
tion, consumption, and communicative alignment with one another, and
on the other hand through the institutional mechanisms and technolo-
gies of a society moving towards higher levels of rational control and
efficiency. In an extension of this analysis, we can now suggest that
transactions of the former type belong to the life-world, while the institu-
tional patterns of the latter type define the system.

Thus a crucial modification of the Habermasian scheme here is to see
productive, consumptive, and communicative action as belonging to
both the system and the life-world. In addition, it is now possible to ana-
lyze the differentiation of the life-world in terms of evolving corporeal
transactions that produce localized solutions to indeterminacy, accom-
panied by a critical collective awareness of the problem-solving signifi-
cance of these transactions. As we will show, possibilities for social
reconstruction reside in the exploration of these localized and subcul-
tural life-forms, and not in Habermas’s misguided commitment to com-
municative rationality.
Embodied and Disembodied Production

From a transactional perspective, the life-world is a domain where human actors strive to come to terms with the inherent contingencies of their bodies partly through creative acts of embodied production. This approach to terminating indeterminacy fits most closely with the Marxian notion of “free labor” in which the undeveloped species potential of the body is expressed in the form of the organically based capacities and skills required to transform material substance into useful objects. Embodied, free labor is fully transactional—the body creates itself in the act of creating the object/product and corporeal contingency is managed in a self- and species-affirming fashion. In thinking about this kind of productive act, it is critically important to keep the life-world analytical focus: when we locate labor in this domain, we mean to highlight the part that it plays in allowing people to deal with the contingent nature of their bodies. This is not to deny the importance of that other key problem that human beings share with all other species: the need to ensure our material survival. However, the latter is properly conceptualized as a problem addressed within the system, which stands in some historically unique relationship with the life-world of transacting bodies. Seeing human productive acts (labor) as a focal activity of both the life-world and the system is central to the transactional view.

The importance of this dual analytical focus becomes especially clear when we consider the problem of the uncoupling of the life-world and the system. In the case of the simple, undifferentiated structure of tribal societies, in which system and life-world are coterminous, the productive activities involved in meeting one’s survival needs are, by nature, highly embodied and holistic. As such, they provide a means for managing corporeal contingency and actualizing species capacities at the same time that they yield the resources required for survival. Hence, in these circumstances, the production functions of system and life-world are closely intertwined, which explains why survival and subsistence activities in tribal societies so often carry sacred and ritual significance: one’s labor in fulfilling subsistence needs is also the means by which one attends to transcendental concerns inscribed in sacred practices.

With the development of bureaucratic, industrial society and the growing influence of the rationalization principle, the system and life-world become uncoupled and dialectically opposed. Now, labor devoted to acquiring the means of subsistence is shaped by purposive-rational calculation and becomes largely disembodied in character. This does not
mean that productive activity in general can no longer address the problem of corporeal indeterminacy—only that labor structured by the *system* is not focused on producing solutions to this problem. Consequently, system differentiation and the attendant rationalization of labor creates a life-world imperative to maintain alternative forms of embodied labor.

In an extension of our analysis in the previous chapter, we can now see the *disciplined body* emerging as a consequence of system colonization of the life-world. Under the rationalization imperative of the system, manifested concretely as the promotion of economic and bureaucratic efficiency (Marx and Weber) and rational discourses for controlling and “improving” bodies and minds (Foucault), corporeal contingency is terminated in the form of disciplined regimens, which deeply inscribe bodies and minds. Part of what is imprinted in the body is one’s location in the system’s division of labor, reflected in the corporeal consequences of specialized occupational practices. Thus we find the labor practices of ditch diggers reflected in their hard muscles, stooped backs, and sun-damaged skin, as compared to the large posteriors, flaccid muscles, and pale skin of office workers who sit in front of computer screens all day. But the disciplinary regimens of the system cut even deeper into the body and mind than this. When workers of all types have their labor practices organized to maximize output, maintain quality standards, or please customers, their bodies (Braverman 1974), emotions (Hochschild 1983), and minds (Edwards 1979) are disciplined at a level that extends beyond the more immediately recognizable inscriptions produced by the division of labor. As noted above, this deeper-level inscription is a part of the taken-for-granted, “horizon-forming context” of corporeal experience.

Habermas’s thesis about the increasing encroachment of the system on the life-world broadens our understanding of the other structural imperative highlighted by our earlier analysis of the disciplined body: the disciplining effects of the human sciences and related discourses. Although division of labor, managerial strategies, and related work regimens function as powerful colonizing forces in the life-world, embodied actors often resist these forces and come to view work as a necessary evil that does not merit a full commitment of body and soul. In contrast, the disciplining effects of Foucault’s “panoptic system” are typically achieved with the active participation of the actors under surveillance in this system. Many people willingly submit their bodies and minds to therapeutic regimens prescribed by physicians, psychologists, and other members of the consulting professions. Their search for “health,” “well-
being,” and related goals inspires them to actively embrace the “technologies of domination” that Foucault describes so brilliantly.

In short, increasing system differentiation in the domain of production and the colonization of the life-world by these forces of production have important consequences for the termination of corporeal contingency. The evolution of institutions and discourses for producing goods and services and desirable bodies and minds opens up the life-world to the disciplined body. However, as influential as this type of body usage and other colonizing types are in the contemporary life-world, they can never totally dominate corporeal transactions in this domain. As Habermas notes, the penetration of the life-world by the system “cannot be carried through without remainder” and thus the life-world is “never completely husked away” (1987, 311).

In looking for evidence of embodied production in the life-world, we are drawn to collectively organized productive transactions performed for the specific purpose of developing corporeal capacities beyond those associated with the disciplined body. To be sure, participation in these types of activities has steadily eroded in the postindustrial era, but these life-world transactions continue to be valued by many people. In the context of the rationalized economy of late capitalism, it is still possible to find marginalized occupational groups such as visual artists, musicians, craft workers, and the like who engage in embodied labor practices for the principal purpose of expressing the personal truths of their contingent bodies. Many more people look for opportunities to develop artistic or craft skills in their leisure time through participation in hobby groups, ranging from hot-rod assemblers to quilt makers. These groups often take on the characteristics of the craft guilds by developing institutionalized means of communication (newsletters, web sites, etc.) for sharing information and teaching skills to others. It is beyond the scope of our analysis to describe the full range of opportunities for leisure-time participation in embodied, craft-like activities, but suffice it to say that this represents a large and growing sector of modern social life.

What may be an even larger sector of life-world activities devoted to embodied production are the alternative institutional practices and discourses involved in directly constituting the body. The alternative ideas and practices to which we refer have emerged in large part in direct opposition to the rational discourses and technologies that define the panoptic system. Consider, for example, the large number of alternative health perspectives and practices that have attracted a wide following within Western societies in recent decades. These alternative medical
paradigms typically incorporate concepts and therapeutic principles that specifically negate the scientific assumptions and concepts of the biomedical perspective and related approaches. For instance, Lyng's (1990a) case study of the holistic health movement reveals that most of the "modalities" subsumed under the holistic health banner involve medical ideas and practices that are antithetical in some specific way to established biomedical practice. Thus, in general terms, the notion of "holistic" practice challenges the "reductionist" orientation of established biomedical practice (i.e., the reduction of the illness to the level of tissue lesion). Similarly, the various mind-control techniques emphasized by holistic health advocates (meditation, dreamwork, visualization, biofeedback, etc.) contradict the biomedical principle of mind-body dualism (one expression of which is the institutionalized separation of "mental" and "physical" health in the biomedical paradigm). In one faction of the movement, the negation of biomedical principles has even reached the extreme of rejecting scientific-validation procedures as means of assessing the efficacy of treatment regimens. These examples are representative of a large number of holistic health ideas and practices that negate biomedical principles.

The holistic health movement is significant as a life-world pattern because it represents a type of embodied production that stands in direct contrast to the disembodied production practices of the system. In this case, the focus of productive transactions is the body itself, rather than the material objects produced by "free labor" as Marx conceived it. However, in seeking to realize the body's species potential by pursuing the holistic ideal of eclectic body practices (Lyng 1990a, 64), this form of production contradicts the disciplining thrust of human-science perspectives like the biomedical model. Thus with the emergence of holistic health and the many similar movements (including the craft movements of the leisure sector) as collective embodied responses to the corporeal inscriptions produced by the system's technologies of domination, we find confirmation for Habermas's claim that the life-world can never be completely husked away. As we argue below, these life-world patterns can be usefully explored by social scientists looking for solutions to social problems and avenues for social reconstruction.

Embodied and Disembodied Consumption

In addition to patterns of embodied labor, the life-world also incorporates embodied forms of consumption. As with production, the twin analytical focus defined by the system/life-world distinction is crucial for a full understanding of consumption. Thus, from the life-world per-
perspective, the transactions involved in consumption are related to the key life-world problem of corporeal contingency while, from the system perspective, consumption is tied most directly to the problem of individual and collective survival. Once again, the contrast between undifferentiated tribal societies and complex modern societies is instructive. In tribal societies, consumption practices relating to the maintenance of survival are embodied insofar as individuals form intimate, corporeally based connections to the things they consume. Even the most basic form of consumption—the ingestion of food—often requires full engagement with the foodstuffs consumed, as reflected in the complex ritual practices associated with the preparation and eating of food in many tribal cultures.

The same can be said for other objects of consumption. Although production and consumption practices are not highly differentiated in tribal societies with no real equivalent of modern consumer culture, trading and bartering systems do result in an exchange of certain “consumer goods,” such as the materials used for clothing and body adornment. The use of these materials illustrates the embodied nature of consumption in the tribal social context. In contrast to modern Western practices, these materials are not treated as temporary body coverings or decorative devices to be recycled by days of the week, social occasions, or moods. Rather, they are more or less permanent body accessories that cannot be easily discarded, because of emotional/spiritual considerations or because they are actually inscribed in the flesh (piercings, tattoos, etc.).

By contrast, in the modern case of an uncoupled life-world and the system, consumption practices differentiate into their embodied and disembodied forms, with the former evolving in the life-world and the latter developing under the influence of system rationality. As consumption becomes an imperative for the postmodern market economy and therefore a requisite for system maintenance, embodied actors become less and less engaged with the objects they consume. In the extreme case, consumption becomes entirely “conspicuous” in nature, with consumer goods serving only as signifiers of status and having little use-value for those who purchase them. The system imperative operating here is the goal of maximizing consumption by the purchasing public, which places a premium on individuals buying and discarding consumer goods for immediate replacement by “new and improved” forms. Planned obsolescence, ongoing product revisions, disposable goods, new product developments, and similar strategies ensure that consumer goods are dis-
carded and replaced as quickly as possible. The radical expression of this principle is the “shop till you drop” ethic, in which the experience of purchasing consumer goods takes priority over the goods themselves. The shift in orientation from the value of the consumer objects to the value of the consumption experience is reflected most dramatically in the emergence of a therapeutic model of “shopping addiction.” According to this model, shopping addiction is equivalent to addictions to psychoactive chemicals: the desire for the experience is uncontrolled and insatiable, while the objects that are the focus of one’s shopping activities cease to be significant.

Under the influence of increasing system rationalization and the rise of the consumption imperative, possibilities for fully embodied transaction with the objects of consumption diminish. If the system requisite is to maximize consumption, then it becomes increasingly difficult for embodied actors to form deep and complex relations with the objects they consume. In a life-world cluttered with throw-away goods that hold people’s attention for only brief periods, it is difficult to experience the kind of sustained transactions with consumer objects that would contribute to the development of unrealized human potential. Consequently, the hyperconsumerism of late capitalism has a deep impact on the life-world problem of terminating the body’s indeterminacy. However, the inability to engage in these transactions does not mean that consumers fail to identify with the goods they purchase. Indeed, they form strong identifications with consumer goods, but use these goods only as prefabricated reflectors of institutionalized identities. One can assume identities as “cowboys,” “bikers,” “preppies,” “hippies,” or “punks” by merely wearing the appropriate clothing and acquiring the necessary accessories rather than actually embracing the lifestyle. The paradoxical character of this pattern is illustrated by corporate executives who trade their weekday business suits for Motorclothes (a Harley-Davidson trademark), removable tattoos, and turn-key Softtail Harleys in order to assume weekend “biker” identities (see Lyng and Bracey 1995).

Thus we can now see the mirroring body as the immediate consequence of life-world colonization by the system in the form of the consumption imperative of late capitalism. Consumer objects imprint the body, but corporeal contingency is terminated strictly in terms of the particular uses and superficial manufactured identities selected by the sellers of these goods. While the potential always exists for the formation of a deeply embodied connection to a consumer object, a potential that is sometimes realized, economic rationalization results in effective
market strategies that undermine this possibility. Hence, the mirroring body is ephemeral—its form is constantly changing as customers cycle large quantities of consumer goods through their lives.

However deeply the life-world is penetrated by the system requisite for maximizing consumption, the body does not lose its capacity for resisting the corporeal inscriptions of the mirroring body. Thus, even in the context of late capitalism, the life-world continues to afford social actors opportunities for terminating corporeal contingency through alternative forms of embodied consumption. In the realm of life-world transactions, one manages the indeterminacy of the body by becoming holistically engaged with significant objects of consumption. As the focus of one’s full body attention, a commodity form can serve as a means for organizing a set of cognitions, emotions and desires, and other body capacities around transcendent themes that order or terminate indeterminacy. Like embodied labor, this way of relating to material substance is fully transactional—the self-affirming qualities of the object are determined by the consumer’s engagement with it as strongly as the characteristics of the object itself. In embodied consumption, the body creates itself transcendentally at the same time that it shapes the objects it consumes.

In this analysis, embodied consumption within the life-world contradicts the consumption imperative of the system. Since embodied consumption involves a full, multidimensional engagement with the object, a pattern of conspicuous consumption cannot suffice to make this happen. Being fully engaged with the objects that one purchases in the marketplace means that there is limited space in the life-world for such objects—people have room for only a few transactionally significant objects in their lives. Using consumer goods as signifiers of status also has little relevance to the life-world problem of corporeal indeterminacy. This problem can be addressed in consumer practice only through intensive engagement with the commodities—simple ownership is insufficient.

What is the evidence for embodied consumption in the life-world of contemporary Western society? As noted earlier, it is not our task here to catalogue the full range of alternative life forms relating to embodied transactions in each medium. However, it is useful to provide empirical illustrations of life-world alternatives to system colonization in support of our claim (following Habermas) that the colonization of the life-world “cannot be carried through without remainder.” Thus when we look for ways in which people become deeply connected to objects of consumption through embodied transactions that express human potentials and
corporeal truths, it may help to consider selected examples from radically different social locations.

At one end of the continuum, an exemplar of embodied consumption can be found in the appreciation of high art (see Marcuse 1978). The special significance of high art (including the visual, auditory, and performance categories) is that it serves essentially the same function in both the production and consumption mediums. Artists may look to their art as a way to realize personal human capacities and truths that cannot be experienced through existing cultural forms, but serious consumers of this art have come to expect the same thing from observing it. Indeed, to engage in a deeply embodied appreciation of art is equivalent to “consuming” it—taking it into one’s body and soul where it calls forth ideas, sentiments, and capacities not previously expressed. As art historians have taught us, the greatest artworks are those productions that engender in the observer new ways of seeing or new ways of being in the world. Thus the aesthetic experience is found in the corporeal transaction between the observer/consumer and the art piece—the observer’s body is constituted by the art while its aesthetic content arises through the act of observing it (Dewey [1934] 1958).

While the practice of appreciating high art may represent a form of embodied consumption enjoyed by relatively few people in contemporary society, we find similar kinds of embodied consumption taking place in very different social locations within the life-world. To demonstrate that the forms of embodied consumption can vary significantly while the substance of this transactional process remains the same, we could consider the life-world phenomenon of “product cults” as another example of embodied actors forming complex connections to objects of consumption. The depth of these connections varies from one product cult to the next, but cults associated with the sport of motorcycling represents an archetype of the kind of embodied relations we have in mind.

An examination of any of the major periodicals devoted to sport motorcycling in the United States today provides evidence of the fully embodied connections that many “bikers” have with their machines. This is found, in part, in the extreme form of brand loyalty exhibited in letters-to-the-editor sections and in articles describing personal motorcycle adventures. Testimonials to the unique feel and look of Triumphs, Nortons, Ducatis, Moto Guzzis, BMWs, Harley-Davidsons, and a wide range of other brands regularly appear in the pages of motorcycle magazines, reflecting the deep devotion of many riders to an intense involvement with their motorcycles (in contrast to the “weekend bikers”
described above). In addition to the time spent riding, committed bikers invest many hours maintaining and customizing their motorcycles, sharing their experiences with other owners of their brands, and, in something akin to the observer's gaze in experiencing high art, studying the visual aesthetics of their bikes. In the purest expression of this form of embodied consumption, the "outlaw" bikers of the 1960s and 1970s often dispensed with all possessions except for their Harley-Davidson-based "chopped hogs" so that they could dedicate complete attention to exploring the aesthetic and experiential possibilities residing in their motorcycles (Lyng and Bracey 1995; Thompson 1966).

As difficult as it may be for some readers to logically connect the art patron's appreciation of high art and a biker's devotion to his or her chopped hog, both are forms of embodied consumption that conflict with bodies imprinted by a never-ending cascade of product uses and manufactured identities created by corporate institutions. Art patrons and bikers may appear to have little in common, but they do share a capacity for corporeal resistance to the colonizing influence of the mirroring body. The resistance represented by these forms of embodied consumption, and other forms not mentioned here, constituted another life-world domain of alternative structures that can be explored in the search for new possibilities for social reconstruction and solutions to social problems.

**Embodied and Disembodied Communication**

Finally, we must consider how embodied communication relates to the life-world issue of corporeal contingency. Dealing with embodied communication is where we can see most clearly how the focus on corporeal transaction leads us away from Habermas's key theoretical problem in analyzing the life-world. While he sees communicative action as the basis of social order in the life-world, our focus is how communicative transactions are involved in embodied actors coming to terms with corporeal contingencies in themselves and others. As we have seen, it is possible to manage the indeterminacy of the body in transactions with the *material* world through production and consumption practices. But it is also important to relate this problem to the distinctive human capacity for organizing and ordering indeterminate reality through the social construction of *meaning*.

This process was of particular concern to the classical pragmatists of the early twentieth century, with George Herbert Mead providing what many would regard as the definitive treatment of the problem. As noted in previous chapters, Mead's distinction between the "I" and the "me" refers specifically to the dynamic between a contingent body capable of
spontaneous, unpredictable behavior and a social mind that gives meaningful form to this behavior. In conceptualizing the “two phases of the act” in terms of the “I” and the “me,” Mead was mindful of the dialectic between spontaneity and constraint, chaos and order in human experience (Blake 1976). One of the critical insights of his analysis is that the unpredictable element in human behavior is the focus of ongoing efforts by co-present actors to intersubjectively formulate its meaning. As the term “formulate” suggests, the primary goal of communicative exchange between actors is to give “form” to behavior that would otherwise be formless in a meaningful sense. Thus face-to-face communication is one way to extinguish corporeal contingency.

It is by no means coincidental that Mead and his pragmatist colleagues chose to focus on face-to-face interaction in analyzing the dynamic between form and formlessness in human experience. This focus reveals an understanding of the special significance of embodied communication in human experience, an understanding that was lost to some of Mead’s later interpreters who emphasized symbolic interaction at the expense of corporeal processes. Mead perhaps had only an intuitive sense of the importance of corporeal contingency as a key human problem and the significance of embodied communication for this problem, but the life-world concept allows us to elaborate his ideas in this new direction. As the domain in which embodied actors struggle with corporeal contingency, the life-world is constituted in part by patterns of face-to-face, embodied communicative transactions among co-present individuals.

In discussing the nature of embodied communication in the previous chapter, we referred to mounting evidence from the neurosciences and other fields that the social construction of meaning involves much more than just linguistic exchange. As Goffman suggested in his early work and the neurosciences are demonstrating with sophisticated empirical studies, meaning is transmitted through embodied communicative exchanges that are often precognitive in nature and too fast for the actor’s awareness (Turner 1999). Indeed, the accumulating neuroscientific evidence is merely confirming what pragmatists have long understood as the central fact about the social construction of meaning: “Human communication is a sign-process involving the varied human capacities and touching the deepest extrarational sources of intelligence built into and grown out of the human body” (Halton 1995, 195 [emphasis in original]). However, the extrarational-communication capacities referred to here come into full play only within the webs of embodied interactions that sustain the life-world. These corporeal capacities are largely absent from communicative action within the system.
The uncoupling of the system and life-world is revealed, in part, by the starkly different communication patterns that characterized each domain. Indeed, because of the signal importance of communicative sign-processes in the evolution of the human species, this capacity is a particularly useful marker for examining the historical differentiation of the system out of the life-world. Much of the growth of human civilization can be understood in terms of the development of various forms of disembodied communication. With the evolution of written languages, it became possible for bodies to communicate outside of face-to-face contexts and share meaning across significant distances of space and time (Habermas 1987, 184). The development of this communication technology created unprecedented possibilities for disseminating information and organizing large collectivities around common belief systems—the Bible’s role in the evolution of the theocratic societies of the Middle Ages is a case in point. Written language was a crucial prerequisite for the emergence of social systems per se, but by the same token, system differentiation created the residual space of the life-world, where communication remained embodied and profoundly shaped by the experience of corporeal contingency.

Under the growing influence of written language, communication became bifurcated into two fundamentally different forms. While face-to-face communication is reciprocal in nature, with two or more individuals negotiating the meaning of one another’s embodied actions (with a mix of spontaneous and predictable elements), meaning constructed by written language is largely unidirectional. With the development of sophisticated communication technologies that increasingly drive post-industrial societies, disembodied communication has become even more prevalent. By the twentieth century, embodied actors separated in time and space can share voice communication in addition to written language. The emergence of the telephone and other technologies of electronic voice communication, the technologies of visual images, and now in the twenty-first century, computer-based communication technology capable of linking the entire earth and creating “virtual realities” has further expanded the sphere of disembodied communication.

Focusing on the growth of disembodied communication under the influence of system rationalization adds an important dimension to Habermas’s analysis of the systemic distortion of discourse. He emphasizes delinguistified media in the form of money and power as forces that deform communication in the life-world and undermine language as a means of coordinating action. However, money and power also put the disembodied, one-way communication of the print and electronic media
under themanagerial control of a relatively small number of social agents. These agents use their control over the means of disembodied communication principally to disseminate relatively narrow, ideologically based views of reality that ignore or attempt to obscure the indeterminacy of nature and the body.

This emphasis is not inconsistent with Habermas's critical analysis of the communicative distortions imposed by the system, but it shifts the focus away from the problem of "delinguistification" of communication to the issue of its "disembodiment." Reflecting once again the contrast between Habermas's linguistic bias and the transactional focus on the embodied nature of human action, the present analysis sees the impoverishment of communication arising from the steady encroachment on the fully embodied transactions of face-to-face communication by the system requisite for disembodied communication. What is lost in the media-steered communications that displace face-to-face communication in the life-world is the full range of corporeal signs exchanged between individuals engaged in interaction. We have argued at some length that the meaning emerging out of interaction derives not only from the exchange of linguistic symbols but also from corporeal signs. Meaning is "given" through language as well as "given off" by the body. However, the most important feature of face-to-face communication is the corporeal condition that is reflected in contradictions between the "given" and the "given off"—the body's contingent nature. As we have seen, the possibility for the creative construction of meaning ultimately depends on transactions between face-to-face actors seeking new ways of symbolically terminating corporeal indeterminacy. Dictated by the needs of the system rather than the life-world problem of corporeal indeterminacy, disembodied communications do not draw on the body's creative reservoir of contingency and therefore assume a rigidified, impoverished, and fragmented character.

The dominating body can now be seen as the product of the colonization process in the medium of interaction. Placing the dominating body within the Habermasian framework allows us to relate this type of body usage to disembodied communication, which, as a colonizing force in the life-world, imprints bodies in the same way that the other system imperatives we discussed do. Approaching the dominating body in this way adds an important dimension to Frank's analysis, because we can now understand the role that totalizing discourses play in constituting this body style. Communications emanating from the system are disembodied and therefore insulated from the contingent character of nature and the body. Indeed, contingency is denied because it challenges the validity of
rigid discourses that attempt to reduce complex phenomena to simple formulations. This is why the dominating body fears contingency in the other and seeks to force the other to succumb to its determinant symbolic universe. In the most extreme case, the corporeal indeterminacy of the other so threatens the dominating body's rigidified symbolic terminations that the "final solution" for this problem is to destroy the other.

Thus Frank's decision to focus on the German Freikorps as an empirical illustration of the dominating body is analytically important, even though he did not emphasize the connection between this body style and the emerging Nazi symbolic universe embraced by members of the Freikorps. The Freikorps's dominating practices emerged in a life-world context in which Nazi propaganda emanating from the system was increasingly at odds with the contingencies of face-to-face interaction. Consequently, the only way that this dissonance could be removed as a threat to the Nazi's symbolic universe was to annihilate the source of the challenging contingency. This dynamic is exquisitely captured in the movie *Schindler's List* when we see a Nazi concentration camp commandant struggling to come to terms with his contingent sexual desire for a young Jewish woman interned in the camp. He deals with the dissonance of his strong attractions to someone who is viewed as subhuman in his Nazi consciousness by brutalizing and very nearly murdering her. Through the paradoxical process described in the previous chapter, this dominating body draws on his own corporeal contingency for the violent capacity to annihilate the contingent other and, in doing so, denies his own unpredictable responses to an embodied other more complex than his worldview will allow.

While the case of the German Freikorps provides a powerful illustration of the connection between disembodied communication and the dominating body, less dramatic examples abound in the contemporary world system. Ideological frameworks covering the entire political spectrum from left to right are routinely imposed on the life-worlds of embodied actors in most contemporary nation-states. In the United States today, disembodied communications pouring from the system promote a wide range of discourses, extending from ideologies involved in electoral and "identity" politics to fundamentalist religious orientations and entertainment culture (Postman 1985). Each of these discourse systems inscribes dominating bodies when they inspire actors to deny the existence of indeterminacy and assume a one-dimensional stance towards the world. Armed with a totalizing symbol system, the dominating body approaches face-to-face interaction with the goal of imposing its own subjectivity on the other—making the other submit to
his or her truth—as opposed to seeking an intersubjective understanding of emergent indeterminacy.

Finally, we come to the problem of corporeal resistance to colonization by the system’s communication imperative. To reiterate an earlier point raised in discussing the production and consumption mediums, regardless of how deformed the life-world is by system colonization, it is never completely dissolved. Vestiges of embodied communication can still be found in the life-world in the form of face-to-face exchanges that draw on corporeal contingency as a wellspring for the creative construction of meaning. While ephemeral forms of embodied communications are widely dispersed throughout the life-world in face-to-face exchanges between neighbors, co-workers, family members, and leisure-group participants, institutionalized forms are more difficult to identify. However, it is possible to point to the embodied communications of various institutionalized groups organized for the specific purpose of fostering mutual understanding. Participants in certain “self-help” groups, “encounter” groups, and “dialogue” groups often share a commitment to search for new ways to achieve meaningful collective experience and mutual understanding. Caution must be exercised in making this claim, because some of these groups, particularly certain self-help organizations, are less interested in the creative construction of meaning than they are in imposing an established interpretive scheme on their members. (The quasi-religious orientation of the group, Alcoholics Anonymous is a case in point.) However, it does appear that many of these groups are explicitly committed to the goal of creating a space for open dialogue about the complex problems and experiences shared by their members.

The environment for open dialogue fostered by these groups seems to accord in some respects with Habermas’s notion of the ideal speech situation, but the way in which they differ from this construct underscores the importance of embodied communication to our analysis. In contrast to Habermas’s concern that the procedural rules for achieving communicative rationality be followed in ideal speech situations, the groups we identify here give primary emphasis to the embodied expressions of meaning—emotions, sentiments, bodily displays involved in role-playing, and the like—the very things that Habermas wants to eliminate as sources of communicative distortion. It is not insignificant that all of these groups strive for intersubjectivity through face-to-face communication. The reliance on embodied exchanges is crucial for elaborating meaning structures that tap into unexpressed human capacities and sentiments—new symbolic terminations of corporeal contingency. This dif-
fers significantly from the use of rational procedures in ideal speech situations, which does not depend at all on embodied communication. Indeed, ideal speech exchanges could be conducted just as easily over the Internet as they could in face-to-face contexts. As another form of disembodied communication, Habermas’s version of free speech is not fundamentally different from communication emerging from the system.

What we see in the institutionalized forms of embodied communication within the life-world are, once again, intriguing possibilities for social reconstruction and solutions to social problems. Earlier in this chapter, we referred to Shalin’s (1992, 273) call for a “pragmatic politics” that begins with “personal efforts in one’s immediate community.” It is possible now to be even more specific about the starting point for social reconstruction. In order to take full advantage of the creative potential that resides in a community of embodied actors collectively seeking to discover and realize human potential, reconstruction can begin with those groups engaged in embodied communication. Embodied communicative practices, intertwined with practices involving embodied production and consumption, are the basis of life forms that offer the greatest potential for solving human problems.

Recoupling the Life-World and System

By way of summarizing this section, we will now direct attention to one of the principal implications of our modified approach to the life-world. By substituting corporeal transaction for Habermas’s communicative action as the conceptual complement to the life-world, we have been able to develop a much broader conception of the possibilities that exist for social reconstruction. Within the Habermasian framework, social reconstruction requires the creation of institutional arrangements that ensure the possibility of free and open communication. The rationalization of the system and life-world is a doubled-edge sword, producing (through rationalization of purposive action) steering media that lead to communicative distortions but also creating (through rationalization of communicative action) the possibility for reasoned discourse that can lead to unconstrained agreement. The starting point for social reconstruction is to establish a reasoned consensus about the truth of the matters at hand, which can be achieved by following the procedural rules of the ideal speech situation. Hence, the pursuit of rationally achieved understanding has the short-term consequence of allowing communicative actors to seek normative and factual consensus about appropriate solutions to social problems, which, in turn, contributes to the long-term social-reconstruction goal of recoupling the life-world and system.
Missing in this emancipatory program is any clear indication of where the alternative social arrangements for social problem-solving are to be found. As important as it may be to achieve normative and factual consensus about social problems, the more challenging task is to identify creative alternatives. Habermas (1987, 391–96) does acknowledge the important role played by protest movements in postliberal societies, but he sees such movements as a form of resistance to colonization rather than offering solutions to problems. In his nominalistic framework, members of protest groups can best contribute to progressive change by joining with others in reasoned discourse and striving for consensus. Dissenting from what the majority sees as justifiable and valid by proposing radical alternatives to prevailing arrangements has no place in this model.

Whereas TCA is focused primarily on the process by which social reconstruction is ultimately achieved—that is, the process of democratic consensus building, the transactional approach is more concerned with the substantive content of reconstructed forms. As we have seen, the penetration of the life-world by disembodied production, consumption, and communication practices terminate corporeal contingency in the form of the disciplining, mirroring, and dominating bodies, respectively. But these inscriptions are always resisted by embodied selves at some level, because corporeal contingency can never be completely extinguished. Thus even as system imperatives imprint bodies and minds in these powerful ways, the central problem of life-world never disappears. As “unfinished animals” (Nietzsche), embodied human beings must constantly search for new ways to come to terms with corporeal contingency within themselves and in others. This, of course, is the source of the socially constructed life forms that are sustained through embodied transactions of production, consumption, and communication—creative life forms that have the greatest potential as models of alternative institutional arrangements for addressing difficult social problems.

What remains as a critical problem for our modified version of TCA is the issue of reestablishing the dialectic between the life-world and system, the recoupling of these two dimensions of social reality. If forms of embodied production, consumption, and communication that emerge and thrive within the life-world are to be used as models for social-reconstruction purposes, then how will these life forms be introduced into the system? And what role does the system play in sustaining the dialectic between itself and the life-world? In other words, by what means can the relationship between these two dimensions become mutually enriching and enhancing? In answering these questions, we will also address the
key problem introduced at the beginning of this chapter, which seems to have all but disappeared in our lengthy discussion of system and lifeworld: the task of identifying a new role for sociology in dealing with social problems. These are the issues to which we now turn.

**Breaking Down Bureaucratic Constraints**

In proposing a transactional social-problems framework, we have argued for a method that borrows from the Critical Theory tradition by linking analytical deconstruction with synthetic reconstruction in social-problems research. In light of sociology's difficulties documented at the beginning of this chapter, we believe that the theoretical link between critical and synthetic forms of analysis can empower sociologists by arming them with an important resource for dealing with the culture of criticism. The proposed approach not only provides a way to objectively define social problems, but also ties this to the articulation of potential solutions to problems.

Following the discussion of pragmatist ontology and the embodied nature of human transaction in earlier chapters, we have also suggested a way to modify Habermas's critical theory framework to explore how indeterminacy, emotions and sentiments, nondiscursive ways of knowing, and extrarational corporeal capacities are involved in human problem-solving. What emerged from this modification of the TCA framework is an approach to reconstruction that helps in identifying alternative social arrangements used as standpoints from which to define social problems and fashion solutions. The conflicting life-forms that emerge in the life-world as expressions of corporeally based *resistance* to system colonization offer the greatest potential as creative solutions to social problems and emancipatory social reconstructions.

However, at this point, we seem to face a significant contradiction. The ultimate goal of this chapter is to articulate an alternative social-problems approach for the field of *sociology*. And yet, the discussion has led us to the conclusion that the analysis of social problems should begin with life-world institutions far removed from the institutional domain of sociological practice. Indeed, sociology and institutions of scientific knowledge-production in general are parts of the very system that most threatens the life-world. In Habermasian terms, as we have seen, science and sociology are products of the rationalization of knowledge that has developed in parallel with the other rationalizing trends within the system. The most important of these parallel trends for sociology is the increasing bureaucratization of system institutions, includ-
ing the institutional arrangements of contemporary sociological prac-
tice, as described at the beginning of this chapter. As a fully rationalized
and bureaucratized practice, academic sociology is far away from prob-
lem-solving transactions that take place in the life-world.

This problem is at the heart of a broader critique of sociology recently
advanced by advocates of a "postmodernist" approach to social research. We will remember that Steven Seidman (1991) criticizes the
rationalist assumptions undergirding most forms of sociological theory
and research and the discipline's foundational program. Like Habermas,
postmodernists make social reconstruction a central goal of the theo-
retical enterprise. But unlike Habermas, their approach to the social-
reconstruction process is inclusive. Habermas's call for strict adherence
to rational standards among all parties involved in the discussion of
social reconstruction is seen by postmodernists as exclusionary (see
Halton 1992). In contrast, the postmodernist strategy abandons the ration-
alist project and instead explores ways to legitimize multiple, nonpro-
fessional narratives oriented to social groups engaged in social and
moral discourse about contemporary social life.

Although the principal purpose of this strategy is to "expand the
number of parties who may participate more or less as equals in a debate
about society" (Seidman 1991, 135), it can also vitalize sociological dis-
course. Sociologists who collaborate with groups tied to life-world insti-
tutions can explore the creative problem-solving strategies these groups
develop in response to system colonization. At the same time, con-
stituencies for sociological knowledge can be developed outside the
bureaucratic and professional structures within which most sociologists
presently work. Expanding sociology's audience and connections to
groups outside of established bureaucracies would serve to counterbal-
ance the powerful forces currently contributing to the increasing
bureaucratization of academic work. Thus while there is much in the
postmodernist project we cannot endorse,7 the program does suggest
some important additions to social-problems research. We can now con-
ceive of an approach to the study of social problems that would orient
sociologists to a social-reconstruction agenda while also empowering
nonprofessional audiences outside of academic bureaucracies.

This proposal has important implications for the issue of bridging the
gap between the life-world institutions that generate new problem-solv-
ing adaptations and the system institutions devoted to academic or pol-
icy analysis of social problems. If embodied transactions of the life-world
offer the greatest hope for creative problem-solving, then researchers
should seek to establish collaborative relations with groups organized to
promote these practices. Collaboration between sociologists and nonacademic groups already occurs in some areas of social-problems research, but these collaborations typically involve projects focused on narrowly defined issues of interest to professional policy makers. In several lines of recent scholarship, however, a new form of collaborative research is beginning to take shape. This approach explores ways in which academic sociologists can connect with grass-roots organizations or social-movement groups. Various terms were participation research (Cancian and Armstead 1992; Gaventa 1988; Maguire 1987; Tandon 1981; 1988), "collaborative research" (Delgado 1989; Nyden et al. 1997), or "participatory action research" (Whyte 1991), this body of literature offers some promising ideas about how to link social-problems researchers to groups outside of academic or professional policy circles.

The participatory action research (PAR) model has been adopted by researchers involved in a wide variety of community-oriented projects and is, by no means, uniquely appropriate for sociological research on the life-world patterns emphasized in this volume. However, we see the PAR model as a useful tool for linking social-problems researchers to groups engaged in the kinds of embodied transactions that offer possibilities for reconstructing system institutions. As an illustration of the kind of collaboration we have in mind, we could refer to Lyng's (1990a) case study of the holistic health movement. Although this study was not formally organized as a PAR project, it incorporated many of the core principles of this method by organizing a research agenda based on the collaboration between movement participants (at both the local and national level) and the social researcher. Using social-scientific data-collection methods (interviews, document analysis, etc.), the researcher constructed a systematic model of the health practices and concepts advocated by the movement. Although a large number of specific "modalities" are subsumed under the banner of holistic health, the research produced a general model of health practice that clearly revealed its status as a form of embodied production (see above). Using this life-world pattern as a base, the researcher then infused the model with sociological concepts and research findings to create a "counter-system" model, described below, that could be employed as a critical standpoint for analyzing the existing health care system. The collaboratively produced countersystem served both as a reference point for defining social problems within the biomedically based health care system and as source of potential solutions to these problems.

These additions to our alternative social-problems framework inspired by postmodernist thought and action research address some
important concerns about transactional sociology, but they also raise some new concerns. If sociologists embrace the proposals put forth here, will they be forced to abandon the traditional goals of sociological study? Is the social-reconstruction component inconsistent with the traditional disciplinary commitment to producing basic theory about society? Does the call for research and writing directed to nonprofessional audiences exclude continuing efforts to disseminate research findings among professional, academic audiences? In answering these questions, we will add one more important dimension to the theoretical model.

**Linking Theory and Praxis:**

**The Countersystem Method**

The questions posed here force us to return to the transactional principles that served as the starting point for the present chapter. We have noted the pragmatist commitment to breaking down the troubling dualisms bequeathed by rationalism, a goal shared by postmodern theory. This focus is reflected in the transactional conception of the subject/object relation discussed earlier. But the most significant transactional challenge to dualistic thought can be found in the perspective's approach to issues of validity and explanation. A succinct expression of this approach is the pragmatist assertion that truth is "a practically accomplished unity of knowledge and reality" (Shalin 1992, 266). This statement is full of implications for various matters addressed in this chapter, but we will restrict the discussion at this point to one key problem. In response to the questions posed above, we focus on what the pragmatist definition of truth implies about the relationship between "basic" and "applied" research in sociology.8

One of the most enduring features of the division of labor in postwar American sociology is the clear separation between the various activities devoted to developing and verifying of theoretical models—"basic research," and efforts to apply this knowledge to the resolution of practical problems—"applied research." This separation has been made possible in part by the development of verification procedures that are disconnected from the application of sociological knowledge to real-world problem-solving. But such a separation was anathema to the early pragmatists who argued that the verification of ideas can be achieved only through transaction in the world of indeterminacy. Valid ideas are those that lead to efficacious action in the external environment. And when ideas directing action lead to unexpected results, the validity of these ideas must be questioned and a reformulation is in order. Hence, in the
pragmatist framework, separating basic research from the activities associated with the application of research findings cannot be justified—valid knowledge, as we have argued, is produced through the use of systematic procedures for implementing ideas in a practical context.  

Pragmatism provides a strong theoretical rationale for connecting basic and applied research, theory and praxis; but as noted above, the highly abstract character of pragmatist thought makes it difficult to derive concrete methodological strategies from this system. Thus the pragmatist framework offers no guidance for determining the level at which ideas must be implemented in order to achieve pragmatic reality testing and also contribute to structural changes in the social order. It is also unclear how ideas and conceptual systems used in pragmatic problem-solving are precisely related to the analysis of existing social conditions. These issues can be addressed by identifying a method of analysis that establishes a more detailed logic and procedure for linking basic and applied research. The method of countersystem analysis (Lyng 1988; 1990a; 2002; Sjoberg 1997; Sjoberg and Cain 1971; Vaughan 1993) constitutes such an approach.

The countersystem method pulls together the various strands of theoretical thought discussed in this chapter by logically connecting deconstruction and reconstruction as components of a continuous research process. In this framework, the reconstructive dimension serves multiple purposes. First, the construction of alternative social arrangements (reconstructing existing conditions) is oriented to the goals that typically guide pragmatically oriented researchers, running the gamut from critical and postmodern theorists to applied researchers. This part of the research agenda is dedicated to identifying solutions to social problems, but it accomplishes this task in a novel way. In order to avoid defining problems and their potential solutions in an ideologically determined way, a model of alternative social arrangements (a "countersystem") is constructed and used as a reference point for identifying social problems within the existing system. This strategy draws on Habermas's insight about the use of hypothetical models to ensure the objectivity of one's analysis of the existing social order. Defining social problems from the standpoint of a hypothetical system—that is, identifying the ways in which existing conditions diverge from ideal arrangements—mitigates against the influence of the prevailing interest structure in determining what constitutes a social problem. The countersystem also serves as a general template for constructing solutions to the problems identified. In confronting the broad range of alternatives for dealing with a problem, priority can be given to approaches that contribute to social change in the direction of the countersystem ideal.
Conducting applied research in this way creates the need for a strong analytical component insofar as social problems are defined through comparative, structural analysis. This is the place where the applied program logically connects to a program of basic research, and it is here that we find a second major purpose of the reconstructive dimension. The construction of alternative social models can also fulfill an important function in the development of basic theory. By serving as a systematic contrast to the existing social system, the countersystem can be used as a reference point from which to critically analyze the current system. A (re)constructed social model serves as an essential resource for a deconstructive analysis of prevailing structural imperatives—hence, reconstruction and deconstruction are linked as inseparable parts of the research process.

The countersystem logic, "analysis through contrast," allows researchers to deal with an inevitable problem they face as fully socialized members of the very same sociocultural systems they seek to critically analyze. What works against a thoroughgoing critique of one's own culture are the many taken-for-granted assumptions underlying the analyst's worldview. This problem has been recognized in several different intellectual domains in recent decades. It was brought to the attention of sociologists when Alvin Gouldner (1970) discussed the pervasive influence of "domain assumptions" in mainstream sociological research. Philosopher of science Paul Feyerabend (1978) demonstrated its relevance to all scientific disciplines by framing the issue in general epistemological terms. Feyerabend challenges the positivist distinction between abstract theory and the world of empirical "facts," arguing that scientists' perceptions of empirical patterns are structured by overlapping conceptual systems that arise in earlier historical times and become institutionalized within the existing culture. Consequently, standard procedures of empirical verification in science serve only to validate theoretical explanations that accord with institutionalized ideological and cosmological systems of the dominant culture. Feyerabend's solution to this problem employs a countersystem strategy:

> How can we analyze the terms in which we habitually express our most simple and straightforward observations, and reveal their presuppositions? ... The answer is clear: we cannot discover it from the inside. We need an external standard of criticism, we need a set of alternative assumptions or, as these assumptions will be quite general, constituting, as it were, an entire alternative world. (1978, 31–32)

Feyerabend is all-inclusive in designating alternative models that can be used for counterinductive purposes, reflecting his broad interest in sci-
entific theorizing as a whole. He sees all conceptual systems as potentially useful "external standards of criticism," whether they are invented from whole cloth or imported from outside of science, "from religion, from mythology, from the ideas of incompetents, or the ramblings of madmen" (1978, 68). As a modification of Feyerabend's approach, the countersystem method requires that the contrasting standard of criticism be based on models of alternative social arrangements—preferably alternatives deriving from the embodied transactions of the life-world. In this framework, social reconstructions serve as the contrasting reference points for critical analysis.

While countersystem analysis may seem to be an unusual way to generate theoretical insights, there are notable cases in which the logic of counterinduction has been successfully employed, either implicitly or explicitly, as a method of theory development in the social sciences. Perhaps the most obvious use of the countersystem strategy can be found in the long tradition of anthropological study that relies on the comparisons between tribal cultures and contemporary Western culture to call attention to the unrecognized peculiarities of Western cultural practices (see especially Harris 1974; 1977). Elsewhere, comparative reasoning has yielded enduring insights within a number of diverse theoretical traditions, ranging from Talcott Parsons's (1951; 1964) analysis of medical practice to Marx's (1964a) study of capitalist economic relations. For instance, Parsons's (1951, 428–79) point of departure in his seminal study of the medical institutional complex is the simple question: Why can't modern medical practice (and, by extension, other professional services) be organized according to the same free-market principles that govern the provision of goods and services in all other sectors of modern capitalist economies? Parsons's comment that his "problem could not be stated this way without (the) comparative perspective" (1964, 334) is a clear acknowledgment that his analysis is ultimately driven by the contrast between the ideal market and the professional model.

The classical Marxian framework provides an even better illustration of this method. While Parsons chose to contrast two existing institutional subsystems, Marx's countersystem for analyzing the structure of capitalist society was, in the true sense of the term, a hypothetical system. In the period that he completed his most important work, the communist model was an analytical construct, not an actual system of socioeconomic relations that existed anywhere in the world. But it is safe to say that many of Marx's most important insights about the nature of capitalism derived from contrasting this system against the communist alternative. A case in point is Marx's (1964a) use of the "labor theory
of value" to analyze the structural basis of worker exploitation under capitalism—a clear instance of using an alternative social model to redefine a core cultural concept that then brings forth previously taken-for-granted features of the existing system.

In addition to offering a clear-cut logic for linking basic analysis and research devoted to pragmatic problem-solving, the countersystem method also incorporates concrete strategies for dealing with other theoretical issues discussed above. Thus we can reconsider the postmodernist call for a fully democratic model of civic discourse and the dilemma this creates. If sociologists avoid making special claims of authority in the analysis of social issues, how can they find an audience for their views in the intensely competitive political environment that exists in the United States today? It appears that any effort to enhance sociology's authority in civic discourse would also serve to undermine democracy in the civic arena.

While it may not be possible to completely transcend this problem, it can be ameliorated through the use of another countersystem tactic. Following Seidman's postmodernist lead, countersystem analysts are encouraged to look outside of traditional academic and policy-making circles for alternative social models. One way to accomplish this goal is to adopt the collaborative model described in the previous section. Stronger ties between academic sociologists and loosely organized groups or social movements promoting embodied production, consumption, or communication practices could be the basis of useful reciprocal relationships. Life-world groups introduce researchers to innovative ideas and perspectives that can be used to elaborate countersystems, while movement groups gain access to the analytical and empirical research skills of sociologists to refine and expand their own perspectives. The collaboration would ultimately contribute to the advancement of basic research by providing resources to develop countersystems used for analytical purposes, as well as efforts to resolve actual problems through the application of sociological knowledge by organized community groups.

It is important to remain aware of the degree to which countersystems will inevitably depart from the original life-world practices that inspire them. In constructing a countersystem based on a movement perspective, analysts must make certain that the model is rigorous, grounded in appropriate empirical research and framed in terms of key structural issues. As a consequence of this process, the resulting countersystem may differ substantially from the model promoted by the movement and, in this sense, it meets Habermas's standard of a truly
hypothetical system. Of course, this result must be seen as a double-
edged sword in that the very same qualities required to maintain objec-
tivity in the analysis of social problems may also serve to alienate the
partisan groups with which sociologists collaborate. Thus researchers
adopting the countersystem approach must successfully negotiate the
dialectical tension between partisanship and analytical objectivity. In
the true sense of the dialectic, these opposing demands are absolutely
necessary to one another: objectivity is achievable through the elabora-
tion of partisan viewpoints in the direction of hypothetical models, while par-
tisan agendas are most effectively promoted when they receive support
from objective analyses of social problems.

Sociologists who successfully negotiate this tension can contribute
to a pragmatic, collectively organized campaign to promote social recon-
struction while also advancing democratic goals. By exploring life-world
institutions within the local environment, researchers support the
social-change efforts of the people most directly affected by social prob-
lems, but who are typically left out of the policy-making process. This
allows for the development of social-problems definitions and policy
alternatives that reflect local community or regional traditions. At the
same time, however, the structural and global orientation of social-prob-
lems researchers should help to infuse local perspectives with a macro-
level dimension, focusing attention on the role of broad structural forces
(patriarchy, racism, bureaucracy, capital, etc.) in generating problems,
thereby contributing to more broad-based efforts to deal with structur-
ally rooted social problems. We have in mind here the organization of
social-movement coalitions at the national and transnational level or
"social-movement industries" (McCarthy and Zald 1977). Thus what this
strategy offers in the way of a unique paradigm for policy development
is a life-world inspired "bottom-up" approach.

Once the initial countersystem has been constructed in this fashion,
the researcher moves to the analytical phase of the research process.
Armed with a model that springs from corporeal resistance to the in-
scriptions imposed by system colonization, which therefore negates the
existing system, one can engage in counterinductive reasoning to pro-
duce theoretical insights and empirical evidence that challenge the
assumptive order of the system under examination, as described above.
With the completion of the analytical phase, the research cycle is repeat-
ed: the countersystem can now be refined and elaborated on the basis of
knowledge acquired in the study of existing structural arrangements.
Hence, the countersystem method involves a reiterative process in
which alternative policy models are critical tools for analyzing the exist-
ing system, and this analysis, in turn, becomes the foundation for reformulating the model.

Conclusion

This chapter has been devoted to exploring the promise that the transactional perspective holds for giving sociologists a more constructive role to play in the public discussion and resolution of social problems. After describing the barriers that have emerged in the postwar period to sociology’s participation in the social-problems debate, we proposed an alternative transactional approach to the study of social issues. This approach draws on the core transactional principles outlined in earlier chapters and the broader pragmatist framework from which they were derived. Indeed, the pragmatist conception of truth is what ultimately led us to focus on social-problems research. This conception holds that truth is found in the unification of knowledge and reality achieved through the collective problem-solving efforts of embodied actors. If sociology is to take seriously the search for truth—and we believe that it should—then it must find a way to contribute its knowledge-base to the collective resolution of social problems. Here, truth is embedded in objectivity as “effectiveness” and our fifth level of action—praxis.

The transactional approach to social-problems research is distinguished by its emphasis on social reconstruction, embodied life forms, democratic participation, and the countermajoritarian method. In articulating these principles, we relied heavily on Habermas’s critical theory perspective, although we have modified his framework by making the notion of corporeal transaction the conceptual linchpin of the model. This modification made it possible to introduce the body and its extra-rational capacities into the life-world where, previously, there was only the detached mind and tacit knowledge. With our broader conceptualization of an embodied life-world, we can now see this dimension of social reality as a domain where actors not only engage in face-to-face interaction with other human beings, but also in corporeal transactions with things either produced or consumed. Viewed from a transactional perspective, the life-world is a more complex reality than Habermas allows and a rich source of often-conflicting life-forms.

This modification of TCA has important implications for the sociological study of social problems. By broadening the focus of the colonization process to include the social inscription of bodies (in the form of the disciplined, mirroring, and dominating bodies), it has been possible to identify the objective foundations of human resistance to colonization and the
source of potential solutions to the problems created by system rationalization. As we have argued, resistance to system rationalization and colonization of the life-world ultimately derives from the inherent indeterminacy of the body: Although the body is inscribed by the production, consumption, and communication imperatives of the system, corporeal contingency can never be fully extinguished. Hence, embodied actors must continue to struggle with this basic life-world problem and search for new ways to terminate the indeterminacy of the body and impersonal reality. The socially constructed products of this search can function as grist for social reconstructions, which ultimately serve as objective standpoints for the identification and resolution of social problems.

Adoption of the countersystem method and collaborative research arrangements with life-world groups are critical links in the process of translating embodied life forms into models for system reconstruction. At the same time, participation by sociologists in this process also represents the most effective way to advance the knowledge-base of the discipline and move sociological knowledge closer to the validity standard of “pragmatic certainty.” In applying our knowledge to the resolution of real-world problems, we will confront evidence of the efficacy or resistance that reality offers to collective actions guided by that knowledge.

Thus the real promise we find in the transactional perspective is a way for sociology to contribute to the recoupling of the life-world and system. A product of system rationalization, sociology can nonetheless empower life-world groups and enrich life-world institutions by expanding the theoretical and empirical base of life-world perspectives. By serving the crucial function of translating life-world practices into countersystem models for analysis and reconstruction of system institutions, sociology can make it possible for the life-world to humanize the system—life-world perspectives and practices expand sociological knowledge and open up the system to critical analysis and reorganization. Drawing on the power of a fully embodied praxis, transactional sociology thus helps to reestablish the dialectical tension between the life-world and system as well as our theories and the real world.

Notes

2. At present, only a small percentage of the U.S. population has access to the Internet, but the dramatic growth rate of new subscribers suggests that a sizable proportion of the population is likely to use the Internet in coming years.
3. An important refinement of this strategy involves the use of “focus groups”
by political campaigns to identify issues that elicit strong emotional responses from potential voters.

4. As every teacher of sociology knows, to succeed in moving common-sense actors in our culture from individualistic interpretations of social life to structural viewpoints requires that one make maximum use of *instructional* resources and strategies. The direction of technological and stylistic developments within the electronic and print media generally undermine rather than enhance the instructional potential of this information-distribution system.

5. Sjoberg and Vaughan are primarily concerned with the dominance of the natural science model within sociology, which they believe is fostered by the bureaucratization of the academy and, in their view, ultimately serves the interests of other powerful bureaucratic structures in the public and private spheres (1993, 88). Of greater significance to the present analysis, however, is the way in which the dominant forms of sociological research (including but not restricted to positivism) and the bureaucratization process have worked in concert to diminish sociology's relevance to public-policy discourse. Beyond the specific interests that may be served by the natural science model, it is clear that the disciplinary agenda dictated by this model has little value for the advancement of civic discourse: With its "emphasis on techniques and methods, shorn of broader sociological theory and ideas," sociology "cannot address the overriding social and moral issues that confront humankind" (1993, 86).

But the inability to contribute to civic discourse is not unique to those embracing the natural science model in sociology. Sjoberg and Vaughan may overstate their case when they attribute these limitations exclusively to the natural science model. The more fundamental problem has to do with the general practice among sociologists, irrespective of the research tradition they follow, of directing their scholarship to relatively narrow professional audiences. A case in point is the work within the increasingly popular "postmodernist" tradition. Although postmodernists are highly critical of all forms of rationalist social science, the alternative forms of scholarship they advocate are often more impenetrable to general readers (within both professional and nonprofessional audiences) than the most technically advanced forms of positivist research.

6. See Shalin (1992) for one interpretation of these rules.


9. This principle is reflected most clearly in Mead's distinction between "information" and "knowledge." "Information" refers to a level of consciousness tied to symbolic interaction between actors: each person's gesture calls out in that person the same response it calls out in the other, a process organized cognitively through the use of significant symbols. "Knowledge" is produced by using conceptualizations to solve problems that prevent us from acting effectively in the world: "The test of success of the process of knowledge, that is, the test of truth, is found in the discovery or construction of such objects as will mediate our conflicting and checked activities and allow conduct to proceed" (Mead 1959, 68).