

# **On Tradition, Communication and Social Reproduction**

## Introduction

In 'Overcoming Resistance to Cultural Studies,' Carey writes,

how is it, through all sorts of change and diversity, through all sorts of conflicts and contradiction, that the miracle of social life is pulled off, that societies manage to produce and reproduce themselves? .... it is through communication, through the intergraded relations of symbols and social structure, that societies, or at least those with which we are most familiar, are created, maintained, and transformed. (Carey 2009, p.83-84)

That social life, social order and a society's self-reproduction takes place borders on the incredible given the differing – and often conflicting – interests between the various members of a society. The question of the relationship between social order and conflict is one that has drawn the attention and fascination of social theorists since Durkheim. It is an important question in that it is through the successful resolution of conflict that a society is 'maintained and transformed', i.e., what I am including under the term as social reproduction.

In this paper I want to forge a closer conceptual link between the concepts of tradition(s)<sup>1</sup> and communication in relation to the issue of social reproduction. I will argue that (a) tradition(s) necessarily constitute(s) the background of a society (i.e., its way of life), and that (b) for a society to reproduce itself communication is necessary. In effect, I am arguing for a recuperation and recognition of the concept of tradition(s) on the grounds that it provides the conditions of possibility for the communication that maintains and transforms a society.

## 1.0 Tradition and society

### 1.1 Tradition and social maintenance

An analysis of the way a society reproduces itself would take as a point of departure the question of what it is that is being reproduced. I would like to start by specifying that the reproduction of a society is the reproduction of its way of

life, what a number of theorists call the lifeworld. Schutz, for example, defines the lifeworld as the everyday world in which ‘people both create social reality and are constrained by the pre-existing social and cultural structures created by their predecessors’ (Schutz cited in Ritzer 1996, p. 215). It is interesting to note that with the phrase ‘by their predecessors’ he is implying that these ‘pre-existing social and cultural structures’ do not exist in a vacuum but are the product of a tradition(s). It is on the role of tradition(s) as the basis of a lifeworld that I will focus on in this section, for the stability of the lifeworld is legitimised by virtue of the acceptance of the tradition(s) that inform it with attempts to implement changes in the lifeworld usually indicative of the decline of certain traditions.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines tradition as ‘that which is thus handed down; a statement, belief or practice transmitted (especially orally) from generation to generation’. This definition emphasizes the notion of something that is being transmitted or ‘carried down’ from the past<sup>2</sup>. This is probably the most common and general understanding of the term to theorists of tradition, such as Edward Shils (1981) and Gadamer (1989). However, there are others, for example, Pieper (2008), who offer a narrower definition of tradition framing it within the context of religion so that the focus of tradition is the transmission of ‘sacred tradition’ (Pieper 2008, p. 31-51) and explicitly opposing it to ‘secular’ traditions.

What is clear is that common to the various definitions of tradition is the idea that something from the past is retained in the present such that it continues to be remembered and relived. In this paper, I am utilising the broader account of tradition but reconfiguring it so as to account for both the continuity and change that occurs within a society. In effect, the dynamics of a tradition(s) functions as the condition for the possibility of the reproduction of society. I am using the term reproduction here to indicate both the stability and transformation of a society.

A preliminary question that needs to be addressed concerns why – given the scathing critique of tradition conducted during the Enlightenment – we should re-consider the role of tradition as a necessary condition for the reproduction of society. Such a re-consideration has already been enacted by H. G. Gadamer, who, in *Truth and Method* (1989, p. 277-285) rehabilitates the concept of tradition from its Enlightenment critics. He argues that the Enlightenment critique of the authority legitimized by tradition is derived from the value that Enlightenment theorists placed upon reason. They argued that since the knowledge and truths derived from a tradition could not be rationally justified then they could not be

considered as reliable. The inherited wisdom transmitted by the tradition(s) had no place within Enlightenment thinking.

Gadamer's defence of tradition is twofold: (a) the value of a tradition(s) is that it has survived the test of time. This shows that a tradition(s) preserves what is best and it explains why Gadamer thinks that the past still has something to teach us. However, this does not mean that what is of value in a tradition(s) will remain so forever, since it is always possible that the truths embodied in a tradition change. But these changes will in turn further the growth of the tradition rather than constitute an end of the tradition(s); (b) the Enlightenment mistrust of the authority of tradition configured this authority as irrational (since it had no rational justification) and by implication oppressive (since it had to be accepted). Gadamer responds by claiming that this is mistaken, for to accept something as an authority is not to accept something that is irrational, but rather to recognise a person's capabilities. When, for example, we are unwell we go to the authority in medicine – the doctor – to ask for help. In this situation we recognise the doctor as the person who is superior to us in knowledge and his judgement therefore overrides our own. There is, therefore, no contrast between reason and authority because seeking the authority is, in fact, the rational thing to do.

One possible objection to centralising tradition in the understanding of society is this: if a tradition is concerned with the transmission of the past to the present, other than historical interest, why should it carry any weight? Doesn't a society continue to function with or without tradition(s)?

In answer to these questions Shils (1987) argues that tradition(s) function as a regulative ideal(s). It is because the past has been handed down over successive generations and accepted that one considers what has been transmitted by the past as entailing a normative element and therefore not something that one is indifferent to. The 'transmitted' comes across as the 'natural' way of doing things and acting: it offers a pattern or blueprint of the way social practices, customs and beliefs are conducted. Members of a society internalise these patterns of acting and communicating that in turn serve to re-confirm what has been handed down, even if this re-confirmation goes unnoticed: 'past practices persist while appearing as if their connection with the past, if noticed at all, is entirely secondary to their 'naturalness' and their 'rightness'' (Shils 1981, p. 201). The traditions of a society function as normative ideals of patterns of action, rules of behaviour or systems of belief that members of accept as a form of guidance.

## 1.2. Tradition and social change

However, while the tradition posits these regulative ideals, the interaction between the person and his/her social context might generate disagreement and the desire to change the tradition. This is the crucial point: what is the relationship between tradition and change or conflict? It is therefore necessary to examine the relationship between tradition(s) and changes in society so as to understand how a society's way of life is reproduced despite the changes that come about over time. The interesting question is: to what extent does a society change but still consider itself to be the same society.

There is a certain resistance to changing traditions that are the background of a society: to replace a tradition with another requires a certain amount of material, moral and intellectual effort. These elements are not conducive to change which explains why traditions appear durable and lasting. And yet, societies change: the 'world' of our great grandparents is not the same as ours despite considering ourselves to be members of the same society – the same, in fact, though not identical. What contributes to this feeling of sameness is not the fact of living on the same spatial location or of having the same nationality as our predecessors, but a feeling of continuity with them.

The changes that take place in a society are changes that retain something from the past and introduce something different into it. These changes take place in a piecemeal fashion: if the changes occur at an institutional level, it is one institution or part of an institution that changes while the rest continues to function; if it concerns values, the change involves a set of values but not all the values within that society. And because these changes are replaced by something else there is always some sense of continuity with the past.

The consistent identities, those identities in the various spheres of social life some longer than others and interconnected with each other, preserve the society by keeping some of its past in the present and by sustaining the sense of identity through time. (Shils 1981, p. 168)

Changes occur because although it is much easier to accept the society one is born into, over time, it is quite possible that certain traditions are perceived as an obstacle to someone or to some group's fulfilment. Two preliminary points concerning the nature of the relationship between a tradition(s) and change should be made: (a) a tradition has within itself the 'potentiality of being changed' but these changes are enacted by those who have inherited the tradition (Shils 1981, p. 213); (b) the fact that a tradition is inherited and accepted does not mean that

its recipients do not reflect upon it. As it is received, a tradition(s) is subjected to critical rational analysis and certain features might prove to be unsatisfactory, as a result, triggering the desire for change (Shils 1981, p. 215).

The latter point requires further elaboration. The desire for change arises because (a) the tradition is no longer considered relevant to the present situation since the current situations could not have been anticipated in advance, and cannot be resolved by an appeal to the traditions of society<sup>3</sup>; and (b) the tradition is inapplicable to the future for humans accept not only what they have inherited, but they also posit ‘new’ and ‘different’ ends that they consider conducive to their life. As a result, the tradition is changed or rather, modified, to incorporate what is perceived as the future situation.

What this account of tradition shows is that the concept of tradition is not a ‘static’ one whereby a tradition is received and passively accepted. On the contrary, I am arguing that traditions are dynamic in that they constitute the conditions that make possible the ongoing existence of a society, i.e., its reproduction. This is why I find Pieper’s account of tradition as ‘sacred’ in that it transmits (a) what is identical at the origins (Pieper 2008, p. 47) and (b) that the dynamism of a tradition is merely a reconfiguration of this original religious message into contemporary idiom (Pieper 2008, p. 15) to be too narrow to explain both stability and change within a society.

A tradition presents the opportunity for communicative interaction within society and through the challenges, discussions and debates both the tradition and the society that is embedded within it are modified and revitalised. This can be seen, for example, in the reception of traditional moral codes and the reaction to them by members of a society. Despite being inherited, these moral codes are reflected upon (they might be perceived as oppressive, or irrelevant to contemporary life) and this reflection might lead to a desire – not so much for its rejection – for changes to them.

## 2.0. Communication and Society

### 2.1. Communication and social maintenance

It is evident that the concept of tradition cannot be easily dismissed from an attempt to understand the processes of social reproduction. The tradition, as the past communicating in the present, continues to exert its influence on the dynamics of a society. Traditionalists are keen to point out that while modernists

tend to eschew anything related to the past in favour of the present and the future, the past continues to operate as a taken-for-granted, background condition in the processes of social reproduction. In this respect, Gadamer has highlighted this issue in his discussion on 'Prejudices as conditions for understanding' in *Truth and Method* (Gadamer 1989, p. 277-307).

Clearly what is needed is not just an acknowledgement of tradition(s) as a continuing presence, but rather the need to regain confidence in it. One obstacle to regaining confidence in the past is, for example, the contemporary glorification of technological inventions that create the impression that we are living in a perpetual present. Each new invention inaugurates another beginning which has little to do with what came before it. Within this frame of mind, time has been compressed into the present such that the past becomes distant as soon as something new is constructed. While modernists embrace technology as the key to building a progressive society that has no ties with the past these attempts have repeatedly failed because idea that a society can break from its past and start over, at a zero point, has proved to be an illusion.

However, the concept of tradition outlined so far can be criticised as a modified version of the transmission model of communication. Given that the transmission model operates within the framework of 'A sending a message to B', this model can easily be re-configured as 'the past sending a message to the present'. This model shows its limitations in Pieper's account of tradition as 'sacred tradition' which he describes as a process or 'activity' between two 'partners' where one transmits and the other receives a certain content such as 'a statement about reality, an interpretation of reality, a proverb'. He calls this content the 'tradition of truth' (Pieper 2008, p. 9-10). Since, on this account, there is a temporal positioning of the sender as prior to the receiver, he goes on to claim that if we go back in time, we arrive at the worldly origins of the tradition and these in turn are 'the first recipients of a proclamation which flows from a divine source' (Pieper 2008, p. 28-29). It might be his Christian background, but the structure of his argument is similar to the arguments for the existence of God that proceed from effects to causes until one arrives at a first cause that is outside the series of causal relations. While for Pieper it is only 'sacred traditions' that count as 'true' traditions because (a) only they go back to an origin that is transcendent and (b) only they carry the weight of authority and the power to create an obligation' (Pieper 2008, p. 37-47) and while, admittedly, he does not deny the

importance of secular traditions both traditions have a common denominator in that they transmit the past to the present.

The implication of accepting a transmission model of communication in trying to account for social reproduction is that it neglects the sense of belonging that is an essential part of adhering to a tradition. To explain the way a tradition generates a sense of belonging, I would like to introduce the distinction introduced by James Carey in *Communication as Culture* (2009) between the ritual and transmission models of communication. This distinction parallels the different ways in which Wittgenstein understood the nature and role of language. In the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* (1922) the function of language was that of transmitting information that can be true or false of the world. This account reduces the diversity of language to its descriptive element, a diversity that in the Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations* (2001) celebrates as a virtue. In this text there is a shift towards the understanding of language in terms of its use within a culture. As a result, Wittgenstein claims that one does more with language than ‘merely’ describe reality but rather enables persons to interact and do things within a ‘form of life’.

These models of communication parallel the opposing representational and constructivist views of language,

We must first discard the view of language as reference, correspondence and representation and the parallel view that the function of language is primarily to express assertions about the world. Then we must substitute the view that language – communication – is a form of action – or better, interaction – that not merely represents or describes but actually moulds or constitutes the world.(Carey 2009, p. 64)

The transmission model of communication is defined by Carey as ‘a process whereby messages are transmitted and distributed in space for the control of distance and people’ (Carey 2009, p. 13). The origin of this usage in the 19<sup>th</sup> century included both the transportation of people or goods and the imparting of information. Carey argues that the transmission model – manifested in the developing railway network – constituted communication as a tool that enabled power and control to be exerted at a distance. For power and control to be achieved it was essential that people, goods or information arrived at their destination quickly so that their effect can be maximized. With the invention of the telegraph the concept of communication as transmission was narrowed down to the transmission of messages since messages could reach their destination much quicker than the transportation of goods or people<sup>4</sup>.

The key to understanding the transmission model of communication is the association of space with the projection of power. Carey's analysis of the newspaper from the perspective of the transmission model reveals that the newspaper functions as a tool that transmits information or entertainment (or both) across large distances. From this perspective the questions that arise in newspaper studies concern their 'effects' upon audiences: does the news enlighten or obscure reality, does it change or strengthen attitudes, does it generate credibility or doubt? Other questions might be functional: do they help integrate or not a society, do they promote or not personalities? (Carey 2009, p. 16). The problem with such an approach to newspaper studies is that it is overly mechanistic assuming that the relation between question and answer is causal. Rothenbuhler (1998, p. 123-128) draws inspiration from Carey in furthering this line of argument: by focussing on communication in terms of its effects or results (a) other qualities ('aesthetic richness', 'hermeneutic possibilities' or 'historical importance') are neglected and (b) communication is broken down into 'isolatable units' that focus on 'an act [rather than] interaction'.

The alternative ritual model of communication is defined as 'a process through which a shared culture is created, modified and transformed'<sup>5</sup> (Carey 2009, p. 33). Carey's use of the concept of ritual should be specified insofar as he is emphasising the act of communication as a ritual rather than the performance of rituals as a form of communication; while the analysis of rituals as a form of communication has a long history (Rothenbuhler 1998; Sorensen 2005; etc), the notion of communication as a ritual is relatively recent and Carey is usually credited with its origins in the literature.

According to Carey's account, the ritual model of communication enables members of a community to belong, participate and create the way of life or a culture within which they live. This model of communication consolidates the identity of a community over time by reiterating its beliefs, practices and customs. It is concerned with the 'maintenance of society in time', the 'creation, representation, and celebration of shared even if illusory beliefs' and ultimately it brings 'persons together in fellowship and commonality' (Carey 2009, p. 33). The crucial underlying feature of the ritual model is its temporal dimension: by re-living the past as the present, it is possible for a society to reproduce itself on the basis of what it shares, of what belongs to it.

In his analysis of the origins of the ritual model, Carey highlights its religious foundation, and in particular that aspect of religion that emphasized praying,



chanting and ceremony (as opposed to sermon, instruction and admonition). The emphasis of the ritualistic model is that of bonding the community together, as opposed to the transmission of messages to members of the community each of whom is perceived as a solitary individual. However, even without the religious background, the purpose of ritual remains that of providing a meaningful context within which human actions acquire significance. In effect, rituals – linguistic and non-linguistic – constitute a way of life by taking up a variety of ‘symbolic forms’. These symbolic forms function ‘internally’ in the sense that they consolidate the way of life of a society, as opposed to their having an external purpose by functioning beyond themselves. The purpose of these symbolic forms is not to provide ‘information, but confirmation, not to alter attitudes or change minds but to represent an underlying order of things, not to perform functions but to manifest an ongoing and fragile social process’ (Carey 2009, p. 15).

Adopting the ritual model of communication in the analysis of newspapers shifts the analysis towards the world-view or vision that is being communicated through the newspaper. One might say that, on Carey’s view, reading the newspaper is an invitation towards a metaphysic with different forces engaged in conflict on the world-stage. While the newspaper organises these forces as a presentation of reality, what it communicates ‘is not information but drama. It does not describe the world but portrays an arena of dramatic forces and action; it exists solely in historical time; and it invites our participation on the basis of our assuming, often vicariously, social roles within it’ (Carey 2009, p. 17).

Although Carey’s examples of communication as ritual seem to focus on the media, Rothenbuhler (1998, p. 123-129) demonstrates the appropriateness of Carey’s ideas in the analysis of everyday communication as ritual: (1) while the transmission model treats humans as isolated and causally effecting each other with communication as a ‘tool’ one uses, the ritual model conceptualises humans as embedded within a world of communication, with human life unfolding within a world of significance; (2) communication as ritual emphasizes the stability and order that is essential for social reproduction; the sameness of everyday communication allows social life to perpetuate itself and even change presumes such stability to be effective; (3) communication as ritual in everyday life constitutes reality in the same way as rituals do. This claim is underpinned by the argument that communicative processes promote a dramatic vision of reality as well as a way of living in that reality.

It should be pointed out that while the problem with the transmission model is that it ignores the larger context within which communication takes place Carey does not dismiss the transmission model outright, but rather re-positions it within the social context subsuming it under the broader account of communication as ritual.

Neither of these counterposed views of communication necessarily denies what the other affirms. A ritual view does not exclude the processes of information transmission or attitude change. It merely contends that one cannot understand these processes aright except insofar as they are cased within an essentially ritualistic view of communication and social order. (Carey 2009, p. 17)

The upshot of Carey's theorisation of communication as ritual and of its grounding within a tradition(s) is that together these provide the basis that can generate a sense of belonging to a society. In other words, the reproduction of a society takes as its point of departure the fact that we are born into a society that already has a way of life constituted by its traditions and maintained by ritualised forms of communication. However, while Carey acknowledges that the reproduction of society can entail the generation of conflicts (Carey 2009, p. 24) his interest is directed towards the stability and maintenance of a society. In order to explain the way conflicts are resolved within a society, it is necessary to supplement his account with that of other theorists of communication.

## 2.2. Communication and conflict resolution

In this section, I am arguing that the necessary condition for a society to reproduce itself is that of communicative action. As there is a broad spectrum of what constitutes communicative action, (ranging from the trivial to the serious), I am narrowing my discussion to those issues that can be considered central to the way of life of a society, i.e., the serious. I am therefore excluding other forms of communication – poetry, humour – on the grounds that it is the 'serious' communicative exchanges that generate a degree of involvement by those members of a society who might condemn or condone the proposed changes<sup>5</sup>.

In my analysis of communicative interaction I utilize the writings of Jurgen Habermas on the grounds that central to his concerns is the question of the relation between social reproduction and language. In *A Theory of Communicative Action* (1987), he provides a theoretical account that explains the way conflicts can be resolved without society disintegrating into chaos<sup>6</sup>. For Habermas, since rationality is embedded within language, then rationally argued solutions

demonstrate how social conflicts can be overcome. Communicative action is therefore grounded in reason with its purpose defined as the achieving of mutual understanding (Habermas 2002, p. 294). This is opposed to strategic action which is geared towards a different purpose, i.e., success, manipulation. Clearly, the latter is parasitic upon the former since the possibility of success or manipulation entails understanding the other. While this opposition is useful in conceptualising the different purposes of communication, the sharpness of the distinction has been criticised as untenable (Johnson 1991, Thomassen 2010).

Speech act theory is the starting point for Habermas' analysis of society because it clearly demonstrates the intimacy between language and a way of life. A society is defined as a '[s]ymbolically prestructured segment of reality that the adult subject can understand in a nonobjectivating attitude, that is, as one acting communicatively (as a participant in a system of communication)' (Habermas 2002, p. 89-90). The writings of J.L. Austin provide Habermas with both the concept of the utterance (as opposed to the sentence) and the notion of the illocutionary force of the utterance, where by uttering something a speaker is doing something, where by saying 'I do' one is getting married<sup>7</sup>. An utterance has therefore a 'dual structure' (Habermas 2002, p. 60) that consists of: (a) a performative aspect (or illocutionary aspect) and (b) a propositional content. The propositional content of an utterance is what the sentence is about, or what it refers to, while the performative aspect concerns its use, or what can be done with the propositional content. It is this pragmatic use of utterances that interests Habermas because it highlights the importance of the context as the intersubjective dimension of meaning.

One simply would not know what it is to understand the meaning of a linguistic expression if one did not know how one could make use of it in order to reach understanding with someone about something. (Habermas 2002, p. 228)

The communicative act takes place when the intention of the speaker is understood in the process of communicating some content. The content can be cognitive or non-cognitive so that with cognitive utterances the emphasis is upon the world and any disagreement will concern the truth or falsity of the content, with the social dimension taking secondary place. With non-cognitive utterances, the emphasis is on the social aspect while the cognitive side is secondary. But, the important point is that there is always a social dimension to language use because communication entails understanding both the content and the intention of the speaker, since the content must be understood as something specific, that

is, as a fact or an invitation or a promise, or a command, etc. Every type of utterance entails a social relation.

Habermas' 'universal pragmatics' describes the conditions that are fulfilled in everyday communicative exchanges. The continuation of this interaction assumes a number of things: (1) an utterance is meaningful (it follows the syntax of the language); (2) an utterance is true (it says something about the world); (3) an utterance is truthful (the speaker is consistent in what he/she says and does) and (4) an utterance is appropriate (the speaker has the right to say what he/she is doing).

The four dimensions of communication are taken for granted in the flow of everyday interaction. But should they be questioned or challenged then it must be possible to offer reasons or justifications for one's utterances; a speaker should be able to defend himself/herself against any disagreement with his/her views. It belongs to the very nature of communication that participants can offer reasons for what Habermas calls their 'validity claims' clearly demonstrating the close and necessary link between communication and reason, i.e., 'communicative rationality'. Discourse is that process that occurs when communication is suspended and utterances are challenged; it is a meta-communicative process that asks for the reasons that justify the utterance. Discourse occurs

when the meaning of the problematic validity claim conceptually forces participants to suppose that a rationally motivated agreement could in principle be achieved... (Habermas 1987a, p. 42)

Of the four validity claims informing a communicative act, each has a different mode of what Habermas calls 'redemption'. The validity claims can be grouped into two different 'sets' as there is a fundamental difference between them: one 'set' includes the validity claims of comprehension and sincerity, while the other 'set' the validity claims of truth and correctness. The difference between the two 'sets' is that it is only the second 'set' that can be redeemed in discourse. In the case of comprehension, when an utterance is challenged with regard to its meaning the speaker can always use other words to convey the meaning. In the case of sincerity, the validity claim is redeemed if the actions of the speaker conform to his/her intention (such as keeping a promise). On the other hand, the validity claims of truth and appropriateness involve discursive argumentation: whether it is a question of establishing the truth of a statement or the appropriateness of a norm, the speaker must defend his/her claims by offering

reasons or justifications. Discourse is a meta-communicative process since it involves the suspension of everyday communication and yet, paradoxically it is only through further communication – argumentation – that communication breakdowns can only be resolved.

It might be claimed that Habermas is optimistic about the power of argumentation for resolving conflict (Schrag in Ramsey and Miller 2003, p. 15-16). He is also dismissive of ritualistic discourse as a platform for social integration on the grounds that ritual is equated with magic and therefore inferior to rational discourse. This is an issue that Cheal (1992, pp. 363-374) takes up arguing for the ongoing value of rituals as offering (a) alternative visions of reality; (b) the possibility of social integration independently of argumentation; and (c) a response to changing social situations. For Cheal, Habermas' concept of communicative action insofar as argumentation can lead to increasing conflict rather than its resolution; if this happens, then ritual discourse can prevent the social descent into chaos by tapping into shared 'feelings of identification' (Cheal 1992, p. 371).

The difficulty with Cheal's argument that ritual can function as a form of social integration is that the problems that led to the conflict in the first place would remain unresolved; and while the force of the rituals might overcome the differences between participants temporarily, at some point the conflicts would still need to be resolved. This is the point highlighted by Sorensen who argues that ritual actions engage in a lower degree of 'emotional intensity' when contrasted to 'real actions'. In effect, rituals do not necessary provide a platform for social integration over and above conflicting points of view, but can in turn perpetual conflict albeit with a lesser degree of intensity. Ritual communication masks conflict but makes no attempt to resolve it. In other words, Habermas' theory of communicative action is still viable in that it provides a mechanism for the resolution of conflicts.

In 'Actions, Speech Acts, Linguistically Mediated Interactions and Lifeworld' (Habermas 2002, p. 215-255), Habermas specifies the importance of the relation between communicative action and a way of life, i.e., the lifeworld within which communication takes place.

The concept of communicative action must prove its worth within sociological theory of action. The latter is supposed to explain how social order is possible. In this respect, the analysis of the presuppositions of communicative action may be helpful. It opens us the dimension of the

background of the lifeworld, which enmeshes and stabilizes interaction to form higher-level aggregates. (Habermas 2002, p. 277)

The question of social order and social transformation is central to social theory in that it seeks to explain how it is possible that a society composed of distinct persons – each pursuing their own interests – are able to live together and resolve the various conflicts that might arise between them. Habermas’ analysis of the possibility of social order introduces the concept of the lifeworld as the framework within which communicative action takes place.

While most of the time communication unfolds without any feature of the lifeworld being questioned, at times disagreement and dissent occur and this continues until consensus is once again re-established through discourse. It is therefore, the lifeworld which provides the conditions for both social order and critical discussion. In *A Theory of Communicative Action Vol II* (1987b, p. 121-124), Habermas illustrates this point with a story: at a construction site a new foreign worker is asked by one of the senior workers to fetch some beer for their morning break. This request can be challenged by the younger worker on a number of grounds: the validity claim to intelligibility (perhaps the young foreign worker does not understand German well); the validity claim to appropriateness (the young worker does not think it is part of his duties to fetch beer and not right of the senior worker to ask him); the validity claim to factual assumptions (there are no shops selling beer near the construction site) and the validity claim to sincerity (the young worker thinks that the senior worker is trying to humiliate him in front of the other workers). What Habermas wants to illustrate with this story is not only the possibility of challenging claims but the further point that with communicative action people bring their cultural competences and assumptions into the situation. In this story, the lifeworld of the foreign worker is different from that of the senior worker, and this explains why the young worker might think it odd to drink beer in the morning break. And he might not recognise that there is an informal hierarchy at the construction site that allows the senior worker to command the younger one. Following the breakdown in communication a new consensus is achieved, and this new consensus in turn feeds into the lifeworld.

The relationship between the lifeworld and communicative action is circular in that both feed into each other: ‘the reproduction of the lifeworld is nourished through the contributions of communicative action, while the latter simultaneously is nourished through the resources of the lifeworld’ (Habermas

2002, p. 191). While Habermas' account sees the lifeworld as the space where the processes of cultural reproduction, social integration and socialization take place, the value of communicative action<sup>8</sup> is that it provides a mechanism for the resolution of conflict and therefore the means by which the continuity of a society is ensured. Through the medium of communication the way of life of a society is negotiated, revitalised and transmitted and by so doing, perpetuating the way of life that constitutes that society.

The problem with Habermas' account of communicative action is that it seems to be modelled upon a transmission or linear model of communication that reduces conflicts to the present moment. Despite the importance he attributes to the lifeworld, the theory of communicative action explains conflicts as 'merely' an issue that is happening now, and therefore ignoring the role the past might have had in generating conflicts. His account therefore sidesteps the inherited nature of such conflicts – their traditional underpinnings – and this reduces the possibility of understanding and resolving them.

While Habermas does not seem to lament the loss of tradition(s) (1989) insofar as it will be replaced by a post-conventional society, by re-inscribing the formative influence of tradition upon the lifeworld, the possibility of conflict resolution is enhanced. It is against the background of a tradition(s) that feed(s) into the lifeworld that participation in a society makes sense, for on the one hand, traditions generate a sense of belonging and order but at the same time, they can also generate a sense of non-belonging and alienation. With the appearance of conflict it might become necessary to question whether both tradition(s) and society might be in need of refreshing. Although clearly it is a tradition(s) that transmits the content that can be the cause of conflict within the lifeworld, my concern in this paper is to recuperate the value of tradition in relation to a lifeworld as it is against the background of a tradition(s) that communicative interaction in the lifeworld can be understood. This is why the questions of whether a tradition(s) can be the vehicle that communicates ideological distortions and is therefore in need of a critical theory of society to uncover these distortions, or whether the resources of hermeneutics are sufficient to expose and revise prejudices, are not pertinent here insofar as I am concerned with demonstrating that a tradition(s) is the necessary condition for the existence of a lifeworld and the communicative interaction that sustains it<sup>8</sup>. This is why Habermas' account, whilst clearly contributing to an understanding of communicative interactions that enable a society to reproduce itself, needs to be

supplemented with an account – such as Carey’s – that highlights the formative role that tradition(s) and ritual play in the constitution of a society as a temporal space in which stability is the norm and conflict a possibility.

## Conclusion

The issue of social reproduction concerns the continued existence of a society’s way of life. It is a thorny issue in that it is closely tied to the value-system of a society and when established values are challenged this has the possibility of leading to violence. And assuming that violence is not a desirable means towards the resolution of conflicts, an approach to conflict resolution is needed that takes into consideration the different views of the members of a society until a solution can be found. This paper has argued for a close conceptual link between tradition, society and communication. In a sense this paper rephrases Gadamer’s assertion in *The Hermeneutical Experience* (1989), ‘To be situated within a tradition does not limit the freedom of knowledge but makes it possible (p. 241) with ‘to be situated within a tradition does not limit the freedom of communication but makes it possible’.

In short, I have argued that (a) if tradition constitutes the background for social maintenance and transformation (i.e. social reproduction) and (b) if social maintenance and transformation require communicative interaction, then (c) tradition is the necessary condition that enables communication.

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<sup>1</sup> I am using the term tradition in both singular and plural forms to indicate that a society might consist of a dominating tradition, but also other less-dominating traditions, some of which might also be in conflict with the dominant tradition.

<sup>2</sup> The emphasis on the past shows the difference between a tradition and a custom: in the case of the latter, a custom describes the way something is done, while in the case of the former it describes how something has always been done.

<sup>3</sup> While the proliferation of technologies in the contemporary world are a case in point, this pattern of change can be also found in traditional societies where the acceptance of the past as a guide was not applicable to every concrete situation. Situations arose for which there was ‘no wholly satisfactory explanation or guides to action’ (pp. 29-30) and this necessitated considering modifying patterns of action or beliefs in relation to these circumstances.

<sup>4</sup> Carey lists the characteristics of the transmission model as ‘persuasion; attitude change; behaviour modification; socialization through the transmission of information, influence, or conditioning or, alternatively, as a case of individual choice over what to read or view’ (p. 33).

<sup>5</sup> I am leaving aside the issue of the whether communicative interaction should be assumed as rational – as Habermas contends, or whether it should also include rhetorical dimensions as Gadamer and Schrag think.

<sup>6</sup> Habermas’ philosophical method is that of immanent critique whereby he retains the ideas of other writers that he finds still tenable for an understanding of contemporary society and organising them into a systematic account; he also utilises empirical theories of society to produce ‘rational reconstructions’ that are both conceptual and empirical.



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<sup>7</sup> The difference between Habermas and others (for example Searle) is that while Austin focuses on those utterances that acquire their illocutionary force through convention, his interest lies in the illocutionary force of everyday utterances.

<sup>8</sup> Within the lifeworld communicative action enables the three structurally different processes of cultural reproduction, social integration and socialization to take place; these processes constitute the structural features of a society, namely culture, society and personality (1987a p. 137).

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