

A Critical Theory of the “Rationality” of US Foreign Policy: The Case of the American War in Vietnam*

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Abstract *The attacks of September 11th, 2001, have increased the urgency of understanding the relationship between war-making and political culture. This essay uses Frankfurt School critical theory to analyze the development of the increasing “rationalization” of US foreign policy during the Cold War, focusing heuristically on the case of the US war in Vietnam. Particularly developing a Habermasian reading of these phenomena, the essay argues that, despite elite management and “steering” strategies, “subsystemic imperatives” are never completely “uncoupled” from the “cultural life-world.” In the case of the US war in Vietnam, contradictions between elite political and economic instrumental rationalities and interests, and the broader American political culture and values, led to legitimation problems and loss of trust which have continued into the present period.*

Introduction

The 20th century was humankind’s deadliest in warfare, by far.¹ Modern technological societies in the past century have developed not only previously un-imagined productive capabilities, but also un-imagined and “unthinkable” destructive capabilities. For the first time in its history, humankind has lived for several decades with the literal means of its own destruction (along with the possible destruction, in the worst case, of most life on the planet). Weapons of mass destruction continue to proliferate around the world (with India and Pakistan as the most recent demonstrated nuclear powers). In the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks in the US, and the subsequent war in Afghanistan and “war on terrorism,” one important question for social research becomes all the more urgent: the question of the relationship of modern war-making to political culture, as well as to economic, social and political forces. Some have argued that state “success” and legitimation and war-making “success” and legitimation largely go hand-in-hand and rise and fall together (notwithstanding significant variation in definitions of “success”).²

All states which contemplate war-making face the task of legitimating these actions within their existing political cultures, as well as, to some extent, in

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¹ Michael Renner, *Ending Violent Conflict* (Washington, DC: Worldwatch Institute, 1999), p. 10.

² Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990–1990* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992).

relation to the "world community."³ This idea has a long history within political philosophy, political theory and international relations.⁴ War-making is culturally and ideologically legitimated within an existing, evolving socio-cultural environment, within a particular national and world history, and, at the same time, warfare interacts with and changes that culture and history. The particular form of ideological legitimation of war-making and foreign policy varies from state to state according to national history, culture, social and economic structure, and other contingent and conjunctural factors.

This essay offers a contemporary critical-theoretical interpretation of these relationships in terms of the development of US foreign policy during the Cold War. This work formulates a broader critical-theoretical analysis of this phenomenon, and applies it to the case of the important American historical watershed of the Vietnam War experience. The essay begins by reviewing some of the work of some early critical theorists (Georg Lukacs, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse) and the work of the contemporary critical theorist Jurgen Habermas, focusing on the role of the increasing complexity and rationalization of contemporary social systems in the conduct of US foreign policy, and its interaction with culture. The present work sits in relation to a larger, macro-level scholarly project in the work of a number of social scientists studying the state and war-making over the past several decades, notably some of the work of Anthony Giddens, Michael Mann, Charles Tilly, Theda Skocpol and Michael Klare (and the earlier work of C. Wright Mills).

In broadest terms, a central problematic addressed by much of this work is the question of the relationships between: (1) the modern national security state (NSS), including the military apparatus, (2) the interconnected economic structures, networks and interests (some, including former President Dwight Eisenhower, refer to the nexus of these two subsystems as "the military-industrial complex"⁵), and (3) the cultural/ideological sphere which mediates, interprets and judges the relative legitimacy or illegitimacy of these subsystems. The first two components (the national security state and military-industrial

³ It may be recalled that the first sentence of the US Declaration of Independence concludes, "a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation."

⁴ Cf. Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince* (New York: Penguin, 1995); Karl von Clausewitz, in Edward Collins (ed.), *War, Politics, and Power* (Washington, DC: Regnery Gateway, 1962); and Hans Morgenthau (revised by Kenneth Thompson), *Politics Among Nations*, 6th edn (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1985). Machiavelli views "good arms" and war-making as the Prince's most important task, and states repeatedly the importance of the Prince having the support or "goodwill" of the people to rule effectively. Clausewitz writes at length about war as a "political act" involving "beliefs," "emotions," "passions," etc. For Clausewitz, "The political object" of war must "bear in mind its influence on the masses which it is to affect. Accordingly, the character of these masses must be considered" (p. 71). For Morgenthau "national character cannot fail to influence national power ... in war and peace," including "public opinion" and all "those intellectual and moral qualities which make up the national character" (p. 151). Jean Elshtain's *Women and War* (New York: Basic Books, 1987) offers a compelling feminist political-philosophical consideration of this question, with discussion of these authors.

⁵ Cf. Gregory Hooks, *Forging the Military-Industrial Complex* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991).

complex) have been studied to a significant extent by various authors.⁶ The third component (the cultural/ideological) has been studied in relation to US foreign policy generally, and the experience in Vietnam largely in terms of particularistic historical and cultural analyses, rather than in critical-theoretical terms.⁷ This essay contends that some of the theoretical insights of critical theory can be further developed in relation to US foreign policy in general, and, heuristically, to the case of the US experience of the Vietnam War.

In the US case, the central "difficulty" from the point of view of foreign policy-making elites can be stated succinctly. Particularly since the end of World War II, and perhaps more so since the end of the Cold War, the legitimating discourse of American foreign policy is faced with a distinctive and contradiction-laden challenge: trying to manage and maintain a system of stark and growing global inequality in which the US and its interests are supreme, while at the same time appearing to support "American ideals and values" internationally—ideals of "freedom, equality, democracy and the rule of law."⁸ What insights can critical theory provide in understanding this core problem of US policy?

Societal Differentiation and the Rationalization of Subsystems

One of the central themes of the Frankfurt School of critical theory is the critique of the development of instrumental rationality in advanced Western society. It is useful to begin by briefly reviewing the development of this theme. Drawing from the work of Max Weber, the Frankfurt School theorists argued that instrumental rationality increasingly displaces normative rationality in contemporary advanced capitalist society. Weber argued near the end of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* that capitalism grows out of the culture and rationality of Protestantism, but that capitalism then becomes increasingly autonomous from its religious normative basis; it takes on a life and logic and

⁶ Cf., *inter alia*, C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959); James Donovan, *Militarism, U.S.A.* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970); Richard Barnett, *Roots of War* (New York: Penguin, 1972); Seymour Melman, *The Permanent War Economy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974); Ann Markusen, *The Rise of the Gunbelt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Sam Marullo, *Ending the Cold War at Home* (New York: Lexington Books, 1993); Gregory Hooks, *ibid.*

⁷ On US policy generally, see Michael Hunt, *Ideology and US Foreign Policy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), and Tom Engelhardt, *The End of Victory Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1995); on Vietnam, cf. James Gibson, *The Perfect War* (Boston and New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986); John Carlos Rowe and Rick Berg (eds), *The Vietnam War and American Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); Tom Wells, *The War Within* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994); and Arnold Isaacs, *Vietnam Shadows* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

⁸ On global inequality, the United Nations has reported that global material inequality has grown more in the past 25 years than any other time since the British Industrial Revolution. Cited in Craig Murphy, "Critical Theory and the Democratic Impulse," in Richard Wyn Jones (ed.), *Critical Theory and World Politics* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2001). Arguments about American "ideals" and/or "core values" have a long history which can't be re-engaged here. For one well-known mainstream treatment, see Samuel Huntington, *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1981). Cf. Noam Chomsky, *On Power and Ideology* (Boston: South End, 1987); and *World Orders Old and New* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

momentum of its own—this is one of the central ways in which modern capitalist society becomes “disenchanted,” in Weber’s view. Purposive rationality (making money) increasingly displaces value rationality (in this case, the Protestant “calling”). As one expression of increasing rationalization, Weber suggests his famous metaphor in which the self-propelling materialistic rationality of capitalism threatens to become an “iron cage” for modern humanity.⁹

Georg Lukacs developed a Marxian reading of Weber’s rationalization thesis through his analysis of reification and (class) consciousness.¹⁰ Lukacs combined Weber’s thesis with Marx’s analysis of the commodity form and commodity fetishism, to suggest the formulation that under advanced capitalism the commodity form increasingly extends to other spheres of life—other social relations and consciousness itself tend to become increasingly objectified and reified, for instrumental purposes, in modern capitalist society.

Max Horkheimer, and Horkheimer and Adorno, developed related critiques of instrumental rationality which leads to the negation of normative reason. For Horkheimer, writing at the height of the Nazi horror, the classical and Enlightenment ideals of the good society based in normative/moral reason—of a rational harmony of individual and common interests expressing “what is good for the totality”—are eclipsed by a technical rationality which becomes self-referential and self-perpetuating and negates the normative rationality of the whole.¹¹ From the time of Descartes onward, philosophy and science have increasingly placed themselves “in the service of the prevailing mode of production.”¹² By the 20th century, the technical, instrumental reason of the machine (e.g. “the most tanks”) becomes a rationality of terror, domination and injustice—a social order in which “reason has been purged of all morality, regardless of cost, and has triumphed over all else ...”.¹³

Extending from Horkheimer’s thinking, Horkheimer and Adorno developed their well-known analysis of the “dialectic of Enlightenment” in which reason expresses the desire and potential in history for human freedom and justice, yet also contains the tendency toward its opposite, domination and unfreedom.¹⁴ Enlightenment, and science and technology, express the human will to freedom from illusion and myth, but also the will to power (a theme running through earlier German philosophy from Kant to Nietzsche). With science and technology, humankind increasingly dominates and masters nature, but also increasingly dominates itself—science produces ever more efficient and effective means of domination of man by man [sic.] Perhaps the most horrific expression and symbol of this dialectic for Horkheimer and Adorno is the death camp Auschwitz; a place perfectly rational, calculated, orderly and efficient in the organization and industrialization of mass death and extermination.

Rationalization continues as one of the core themes in the work of Herbert

⁹ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958), p. 181.

¹⁰ Georg Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971).

¹¹ Max Horkheimer, “The End of Reason,” in Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (eds), *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader* (New York: Continuum, 1982), p. 29.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 39.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹⁴ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1994).

Marcuse, perhaps most famously in his ideology critique of advanced industrial society, *One Dimensional Man*. According to Marcuse, "A comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom prevails in advanced industrial civilization, a token of technical progress."¹⁵ As with earlier Frankfurt theorists, for Marcuse the contradiction of modern society is the "rational character of its irrationality."¹⁶ One-dimensional, technical rationality may be rational within the narrower ("efficiency") terms of particular means for particular ends, but is irrational in broader social and normative terms, i.e. the more it produces unfreedom, domination, conformity, alienation, injustice and destruction—the more it negates the now significant potentialities for a just and humane world within the limit conditions of the current level of human development.¹⁷

Various commentators have noted the often totalizing and (perhaps too) pessimistic conclusions of Horkheimer, Adorno and (sometimes) Marcuse, in which there appears to be no escape from the instrumental domination of the existing system.¹⁸ Within the limits of an analysis of the philosophy of consciousness (which downplays empirical social-scientific analysis in favor of literature, myth and metaphor), this view tends to see the *status quo* as "totalitarian," inescapable—Weber's "iron cage" come to pass. It is in this sense in the work of Horkheimer and Adorno that the dialectic between freedom and unfreedom grinds ever slower, immobilized by the increasingly effective weight of domination.

In the work of Jurgen Habermas the dialectic is revived. Informed by the earlier Frankfurt theorists, Habermas develops a complex and detailed treatment of the rationalization and rationality themes in critical theory. Particularly in *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas engages at great length with many of the foundational figures of 19th and 20th century social theory: Hegel, Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Mead, Lukacs, Horkheimer and Adorno, Talcott Parsons and Niklass Luhmann, to name the most prominent.¹⁹

In highly schematic terms, building from the work of these earlier theorists, Habermas believes that modern, Western, advanced capitalist societies are characterized by certain broad rationalizing tendencies, notwithstanding significant particular historical variation. As these societies develop, they become increasingly complex and differentiated.²⁰ Social systems and subsystems develop and differentiate to manage the functional requirements of increasing societal complexity (or, in Luhmann, systems are developed to reduce "boundless world complexity" to lower levels, where action can be planned and managed).²¹

As these subsystems develop, they in turn become more complex and

¹⁵ Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon, 1964), p. 1.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁷ See the discussion of this analysis in Douglas Kellner, *Herbert Marcuse and the Crisis of Marxism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984).

¹⁸ See Arato and Gebhardt, *op. cit.*; Douglas Kellner, *ibid.*; Jurgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987); and Stephen Bronner, *Of Critical Theory and its Theorists* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994), pp. 73–101.

¹⁹ Jurgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume I and Volume II* (Boston: Beacon, 1984 and 1987) (hereafter: TCA:I and TCA:II, respectively).

²⁰ Habermas suggests this idea throughout many of his works; see, for example, TCA:II, p. 153ff.

²¹ Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis* (Boston: Beacon, 1975), pp. 148–149 (hereafter: LC).

differentiated—as they do so, they develop their own increasingly autonomous institutional cultures, values, and “rationalities.” Through this development, the economic and political subsystems tend to become increasingly *functionally* separated or autonomous from the cultural context of the public sphere. Habermas refers to this as “the uncoupling of system and lifeworld.”²² However, as will be argued below, this functional uncoupling does not entail a complete normative separation from the broader cultural context.

How, then, does the theoretical review developed thus far apply to the case of American foreign policy during the Cold War, and particularly the case of Vietnam?

US Foreign Policy, the Political and Economic Subsystems and Legitimation

The American national security state experienced vast and lasting expansion during and following World War II.²³ The NSS and military–industrial complex after the war dwarfed what had preceded it. Thus, the rise of systems analysis and rationality (coinciding with the heyday of “structural–functional” and related paradigms in much of American social science) went hand-in-hand with the massive expansion (and concomitant increasing complexity) of the NSS. Particularly from World War II onward, the modern American NSS developed into a highly differentiated and complex apparatus which largely operates with its own subsystemic rationalities, and also operates in congruence and alliance with the modern capitalist economic subsystem, but which at the same time is situated within the broader existing cultural sphere. Both the political and economic subsystems follow their own instrumental rationalities which are mutually reinforcing, though retaining some degree of autonomy. The instrumental orientation of foreign policy (within the political sphere) is to promote American power, “security” and “interests” (this will be expanded below). The instrumental orientation of the economic sphere is to advance American business and corporate interests (resources, markets, profits, etc.) which is also expressed as one of the core “interests” of US foreign policy (e.g. protecting and promoting “free trade”). In the famous formulation of Woodrow Wilson, “Since trade ignores national boundaries and the manufacturer insists on having the world as a market, the flag of his nation must follow him, and the doors of the nations which are closed against him must be battered down.”²⁴

Following the work of C. Wright Mills, Noam Chomsky and others, the view here is that the goals of US foreign policy are determined by political and economic elite groups in the US (in which political and economic interests usually overlap or correspond to high degrees) but which must be legitimated culturally.²⁵ To be sure, it should be noted that though there is a strong

²² Habermas, *TCA:II*, p. 153ff.

²³ Gregory Hooks, *op. cit.*, and Sam Murullo, *op. cit.*

²⁴ Wilson, cited in Chomsky, *On Power and Ideology*, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

²⁵ Mills, *op. cit.*; Chomsky (1987 and 1994), *op. cit.* There is a substantial literature on the debate over the relationship and degree of “relative autonomy” between the political (“state”) and economic subsystems which cannot be elaborated in this paper. See, for example, Peter Evans *et al.*, *Bringing the State Back In* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985); and G. William Domhoff, *State Autonomy or Class Dominance?* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1996).

interconnection of interests between the political and economic spheres, they are not identical—US economic interests are "primary" though they are not the only interests in all cases; they do not directly "determine" the political.

However, the argument in this paper is that it is in the situatedness of the political and economic subsystems in the broader cultural sphere where there is significant potential for social tensions or crisis tendencies to occur. Indeed, Habermas argues that one of the central limitations of the once-dominant functionalist and systems theories of the mid-20th-century is their privileging of structural analysis and reification of culture. In an extended critical exegesis on Talcott Parsons, Habermas suggests that a key lacuna of Parsons' theoretical corpus is his shift in his later work from "action theory" to "systems theory" with the resulting "objectification of the lifeworld" and the abandonment of any "special status for culture." In this framework, culture and "meaningfully oriented behavior" are subsumed as part of the "cultural system," viewed as just one component "piece" of the larger social system—with the result, according to Habermas, that "actors disappear as acting subjects; they are abstracted into units to which the decisions and thus the effects of action are attributed."²⁶ Though no serious discussion is possible here, in broad terms Habermas' entire "Theory of Communicative Action" can be viewed as a sustained attempt to bring culture and critical, reflective, intersubjective communication and action "back in" to social science, and especially functionalist and systems analysis. In this sense the "uncoupling of system and lifeworld" is never complete; subsystems develop their own rationalities but always in the broader cultural context.

What are the relations between the political and economic subsystems on the one hand, and the cultural sphere on the other? In *Legitimation Crisis*, Habermas analyzes the crisis tendencies within advanced capitalist societies. According to Habermas, crises in social systems are produced "through structurally inherent system-imperatives that are incompatible ..." or "... structurally inherent contradictions" which cannot be integrated or resolved or adequately adapted to by the system.²⁷

A central systemic contradiction which Habermas addresses is that between the economic subsystem with the imperative of private capital accumulation through the appropriation of surplus value from socialized production, and the political subsystem which must be legitimated according to norms of modern democracy; i.e. "through the universalistic value-systems of bourgeois ideology, civil rights ... and the mechanism of elections ..."²⁸ Moreover, Habermas notes in *The Theory of Communicative Action* an asymmetry in the legitimation requirements of the political as compared to the economic subsystems: "power not only needs to be backed like money (e.g. by gold or means of enforcement); it not only needs to be legally normed like money (e.g. in the form of property rights or official positions); power needs an *additional* basis of confidence, namely, *legitimation*."²⁹ Thus, though increasingly instrumentally autonomous, the political subsystem in particular requires "motivation" or legitimation in the cultural

²⁶ Habermas, *TCA:II*, pp. 234–235.

²⁷ Habermas, *LC*, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

²⁹ Habermas, *TCA:II*, p. 270, emphasis in the original.

sphere. Political action (e.g. in this case, foreign policy) is subject (at least to the degree that it is “un-distorted”; e.g. where it is not secret, “covered up,” unacknowledged, denied, etc.) to criticism according to validity or truth claims, presentation of evidence, standards of rational argumentation, and the like.³⁰ In other words, if it is to retain legitimacy, the political subsystem must be able to respond to and withstand (public) critical challenge as to its goals, purposes, policies and actions, or “performances.” Failure to respond effectively can lead to “legitimation deficits” and, ultimately, to crisis.³¹

There are a number of ways that the political subsystem attempts to manage (or “steer”) these contradiction potentials. First, the political subsystem manages this contradiction, according to Habermas, by maintaining a system of *formal*, as opposed to substantive (or, in his later work, “deliberative”) democracy.³² This enables the political subsystem to keep the contradiction of interests from public consciousness, from becoming publicly “thematized.” In other words, the political subsystem attempts to limit public participation to formal, largely symbolic forms—the function of the public is seen as ratifying or sanctioning political decisions and policies which are negotiated and determined by other means (i.e. by elite groups, largely in private). This is one way in which the political subsystem maintains its autonomy from the conscious “normative regulation” of the cultural sphere.³³

A second mechanism by which the political subsystem achieves the exclusion of the public from substantive participation is by reference to “complexity” beyond the capacity of non-expert, or lay-persons’,” “understanding,” which is used to invoke the necessity of “expertise” and the presentation of the foreign policy elite as an “expert class” of “specialists” who “manage” foreign policy in “the nation’s interests.” This line of thinking has a long tradition and a substantial literature within foreign policy scholarship.³⁴

A third method by which the political subsystem handles the contradictory imperatives of private wealth accumulation and public social interests in a democratic polity is by mechanisms of “ideological management”—or propaganda. This phenomena has also been examined by numerous analysts.³⁵

³⁰ Habermas, *TCA:I*, p. 8ff.

³¹ Habermas, *LC*, pp. 46–47.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 36. Habermas refers to the management efforts as “steering capacity” (cf. *LC*, p. 45; and his discussion of Parsons on this concept in *TCA:II*, p. 257ff).

³³ Using very different terminology, a somewhat similar analysis is advanced by Chomsky, *op. cit.* (1987 and 1994).

³⁴ There is much debate over the level of knowledge (and, therefore, suitability to participate) that the “general public” has on foreign affairs. One “elite-theory” line of argument, sometimes called the Almond–Lippman thesis after two of its main proponents, argues the public is woefully ignorant, and not suited to participate, on foreign affairs. Others argue that the general public is fairly ignorant on details but has good overall intuition, judgment and “prudence.” See Bruce Jentleson and Rebecca Britton, “Still Pretty Prudent: Post-Cold War American Public Opinion on the Use of Military Force,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 42 (1998), pp. 395–417. See also my own discussion of this debate, in “Losing Hearts and Minds: The Cultural Mediation of the Vietnam War Experience in America,” unpublished Doctoral dissertation, City University of New York, Graduate Center, 2000.

³⁵ See, for example, Michael Parenti, *Inventing Reality* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1986); Michael Hunt, *op. cit.*; and Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky *Manufacturing Consent* (New York: Pantheon, 1988).

A fourth set of processes by which the political subsystem manages the cultural sphere in terms of foreign policy is by a host of policies and actions designed to reduce "visibility" and public "thematization," such as secrecy (*inter alia*, "plausible deniability", etc.), "low-intensity conflict," Special Operations, the use of proxy armies, and the like.³⁶ It is difficult for the public to make moral judgments about, or to become politically engaged with, policies and actions about which it is unaware.

In many cases these processes may operate in tandem: on the one hand, to the extent possible, the foreign policy elite attempts to exclude the US public from meaningful or substantive participation in setting or evaluating policy (by secrecy, reference to "complexity", etc.); on the other hand, to the extent necessary, the elites attempt to mobilize and "steer" public assent and "support" for (elite-determined) "US interests."

The Instrumental Rationality of "Realism" in US Foreign Policy

Within the political subsystem, the dominant ideological paradigm and discourse of American foreign policy in the 20th century (and, it might be argued, throughout US history) has been so-called "Realism" and, more recently, "Neo-realism."³⁷ This tradition has a long history, with intellectual antecedents in Thucydides, Machiavelli, Clausewitz and many others.³⁸ A central tenet of the Realist paradigm of international relations (IR) is that morality and ethics are subordinate to the autonomous standards of politics. International relations are first and foremost about power. These precepts are clearly stated by canonical figures within 20th century American international relations theory and practice like Hans Morgenthau and Henry Kissinger. In Morgenthau's *Politics Among Nations*, which has gone through many editions and is one of the authoritative texts of basic IR theory in the US, he states that "politics [is] an autonomous sphere of action and understanding apart from other spheres, such as ... ethics, aesthetics, or religion." For Morgenthau, IR are about "interests, defined in terms of power."³⁹ In Kissinger's formulation, the purpose of US foreign policy is to create "an overall framework of order" in which US interests are dominant.⁴⁰

During the Cold War and the Vietnam period, US foreign policy followed an instrumental rationality of "Realism" through a discourse expressed in terms of "American interests", "national interests", "security interests", etc., defined in

³⁶ E.g. Michael Klare and Peter Kornbluh (eds), *Low Intensity Warfare* (New York: Pantheon, 1988).

³⁷ For good discussions, see David Callahan, *Between Two Worlds* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994); and N. J. Rengger, *International Relations, Political Theory and the Problem of Order* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

³⁸ It is interesting to note that Michel Foucault put forth his own distinctive critical theory of "governmentality" in which he suggested that Machiavelli and Clausewitz (among others) "attempted to articulate a kind of rationality which was intrinsic to the art of government ..." but which tended to result in a "self-referring circularity of sovereignty ..." and led ultimately to a "complex form of power ... which may be termed government" that is pre-eminent in the West today. Foucault, "Governmentality," in Graham Burchell *et al.* (eds), *The Foucault Effect* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 89–103.

³⁹ Morgenthau, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

⁴⁰ Kissinger, cited in Chomsky, *On Power and Ideology*, *op. cit.*, pp. 8–10.

terms of power and (less explicitly) dominant economic interests. That is, in the current context, US "Realism" attempted to effect the "uncoupling" of the instrumental rationality of the political system (e.g. "Realist foreign policy imperatives") from the values-rationality of the cultural lifeworld.⁴¹

However, to recap from the earlier discussion, although US foreign policy follows its own largely autonomous ("Realist") instrumental rationality and power interests, which overlap largely with elite economic interests, *it remains situated within the context of the normative rationality of the broader cultural sphere.* The foreign policy apparatus attempts to manage potential tensions or conflicts within the cultural sphere by a variety of methods (just summarized). The contradiction potential, however, is that US foreign policy must be legitimated, at some level, with the US public. This is a structurally inherent contradiction, in the Habermasian sense. Foreign policy goals which serve particular economic and power interests must be legitimated as general and universal, i.e. as "American interests." Theorists like Marcuse, following Marx, refer to this type of phenomena as "mystification."⁴² Since it is difficult to rally broad popular support to fight wars for Exxon or General Motors or to maintain extreme global inequalities (as noted in the Introduction), US policy in the 20th century has been legitimated primarily in terms of "American interests" and "American ideals" and "values", i.e. "freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law", etc. (In critical-theoretical terms, this might be described as a mystification of American national purpose, expressed, for example, as "America's special role in the world.") "American interests" represented in this way (by foreign policy elites, within the media, etc.) are resistant to thematization in terms of sectional *differences* in interests, or perceptions of interests, along lines of class, race, gender, ethnicity, etc. "Unity" is posited and assumed; American national interests are, by (elite) definition, universal, shared, valid and good.⁴³

However, the problem and "steering" difficulty, from the point of view of the political subsystem, is when public perceptions of the realities of US policy and action conflict with the stated "ideals" and purposes. That is, US policy is determined by "Realist" rationalities and interests, but *legitimated* largely in terms of American ideals and values. When public perceptions of the reality don't mesh with the stated ideology, for growing sectors of the population, conflict and legitimation problems may intensify.

Despite sophisticated and sustained efforts, the public management strategies of the political subsystem are not completely successful, and are often only partially successful. At certain points in history, under certain conditions, political management strategies and policies may come under the increasing scrutiny of the normative rationality of the public sphere and can lead to popular political mobilization, organization, protest, unrest and/or de-legitimation.

⁴¹ Habermas, *TCA:II*, p. 113ff.

⁴² Cf. Marcuse, *op. cit.*, p. 189ff; Kellner, *op. cit.*; and Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume I* (New York: Vintage, 1977), p. 1052ff.

⁴³ It is interesting to reflect upon the amount of commentary in the US since September 11th, 2001, devoted to asserting "American unity." The level of commitment to making this assertion strikes this author as being at a frequency and urgency that betrays a deep-seeded insecurity that American unity is *not* as solid as it might be or should be.

Debates about the conditions under which mobilization, protest, unrest and de-legitimation occur have been widely developed and cannot be re-engaged in this essay.⁴⁴

There is a vast literature now on the unfolding of these processes in the case of the US experience in the Vietnam War. In the framework laid out in this paper, the contradictions between instrumental "Realist" foreign policy interests and the normative rationality of "American ideals" led to "unmanageable" political control problems and legitimation deficits, which have been exhaustively documented: protest, moral outrage, resistance, breakdown of elite consensus, domestic turmoil and "disillusionment" (conjoined with military defeats, escalation, quagmire, atrocities, disintegrating military morale and effectiveness).⁴⁵

Declines in support for the war and declines in trust and confidence in government and other major institutions during the Vietnam period are widely documented.⁴⁶ Public opinion data since the 1960s shows the two trends very clearly: the diminution of public support for the war, and diminution in trust and confidence in American government institutions. A wide variety of studies and measures are available on these issues; only a few can be cited here. On attitudes about the war, John Mueller offers a wealth of data and analysis, from different polls and questions over time. The overall downward trends in public support and trust are quite striking.

For example, Gallup polls on the "mistake" question (asking whether respondents think "the US made a mistake sending troops to fight in Vietnam") show a consistent decline in support of the US involvement in the war; from 61% in support and 24% opposed in August 1965 (15% don't know), to 28% in support and 61% opposed in May 1971 (11% don't know). Thus, support fell by more than half over these six years, while opposition rose by more than two-and-a-half times.⁴⁷

Paralleling the drops in support for the war were significant declines in the level of "political trust" among US citizens towards their government, and in the proportion of the public expressing a "great deal of confidence" in government institutions. In a summary of "trust" studies, historian Max Kaase reaches the following conclusion about the US:

There was a massive and steady decline in political trust from the mid-1960s until 1980. There is no question that the downward change from a high of about 75 per cent in 1964 to about 30 per cent in 1980 truly deserves to be called spectacular ... [The data] suggest that the substantial decline in political trust in the United States has not been paralleled in all Western democracies ... it seems that the

⁴⁴ Cf. Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1978); and Roberta Garner, *Contemporary Movements and Ideologies* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996).

⁴⁵ Cf. Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties* (New York: Bantam, 1993); Gabriel Kolko, *Anatomy of a War* (New York: The New Press, 1994); and Tom Wells, *The War Within* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994).

⁴⁶ See John Mueller, *War, Presidents and Public Opinion* (New York: John Wiley, 1973); Max Kaase, "Political Alienation and Protest," in Mattei Dogan (ed.), *Comparing Pluralist Democracies* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1988); Gary Orren, "Fall From Grace: The Public's Loss of Faith in Government," in Joseph Nye *et al.* (eds), *Why People Don't Trust Government* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); and Ken Cunningham, *op. cit.*

⁴⁷ Mueller, *ibid.*, pp. 54–55.

Table 1. Per cent with “great confidence” in each institution

	1966	1971	1973	1975	1979
Federal Executive	41	23	19	13	17
Congress	42	19	29	14	18
Military	62	27	40	24	29

Source: This table modified from Harris Poll data presented in Peter Merkl, “Comparing Legitimacy and Values Among Democratic Countries,” in Mattei Dogan, *op. cit.*, pp. 19–63.

shattering events of the Vietnam War and the Watergate affair have left a special mark on the political beliefs of people in the United States.⁴⁸

Relatedly, a study by Peter Merkl shows a marked drop in the percent of US citizens expressing “a great deal of confidence” in the leadership of government institutions during the Vietnam era (Table 1).

Thus, each of the government institutions specified here experienced significant declines in public confidence between 1966 and 1975. (Federal Executive and Congress dropped 68% and 67%, respectively, while Military dropped 61%. The jump in confidence in Congress and the Military in 1973 may reflect increased support around the US withdrawal from Vietnam.)

Taken all together, there are several unmistakable parallel trends in political attitudes between the mid-1960s and the late 1970s: those who thought sending troops to Vietnam was a mistake more than doubled from 1965 to 1971, trust in government declined from about 75% to about 30% (or 25% in the Miller and Borrelli study cited below) in 1980, and confidence in key political institutions dropped by around 60–65%.

Other public opinion studies suggest that the effects of Vietnam on public attitudes carried into the present, including during the Reagan and Bush presidencies, despite efforts to make American “proud and strong” again.⁴⁹ Using different data and methodology from the above studies, another study by Arthur Miller and Stephen Borrelli found that trust in government rebounded slightly during the Reagan Administration (Table 2), finishing in 1988 at about

Table 2. Question: how much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right—just about always, most of the time, or only some of the time (in percentage)?

	1964	1968	1970	1974	1976	1980	1982	1984	1986	1988
None of the time (volunteered)	0	0	0	1	1	4	2	1	2	3
Some of the time	22	36	44	61	62	69	62	53	57	55
Most of the time or just about always	76	61	54	37	33	25	33	44	38	40

Source: This table modified from Arthur Miller and Stephen Borrelli, “Confidence in Government During the 1980s,” *Peace Review* 19 (1991), pp. 147–173.

⁴⁸ Kaase, *op. cit.*, pp. 126–127.

⁴⁹ Orren, *op. cit.*

40% who trust government most of the time or just about always, above the 25% low point of 1980, but still well below the 76% level in 1964. More recent studies are consistent with these earlier findings, and show that the trends of loss of trust in government continued through the 1990s. Trust-in-government percentages stayed in the 20–30% range. Not since the early 1970s have more Americans said they trusted their government "most of the time" than the number who said "some of the time."⁵⁰

Miller and Borrelli conclude that the recovery of public trust in government from 1980 to 1984 "was tentative, never fully crystallized, nor based on an enduring solution to the problems that were the root cause of the previous long-term decline in trust."⁵¹ The authors suggest that the low level of trust reflects growing discontent with the political system, its leadership and its policies, and the gap "between promises and performance."⁵² The Vietnam War experience entailed a significant manifestation of this gap. Over time this discontent has become more generalized and deep-seated (a view supported by much of the data cited in *Why People Don't Trust Government*, edited by Joseph Nye *et al.*, and *Bowling Alone*, by Robert Putnam.)⁵³

The declines in trust and confidence in government, and contention about foreign policy goals and interests, have contributed to lasting legitimation difficulties for the American polity more generally. The war expressed and accentuated conflicts between the political, economic and cultural spheres, and diminished the "steering capacity" of political elites, particularly in the realm of foreign policy, but also with broader effects in the general political culture.⁵⁴ These conflicts represented a clash between what most Americans took to be America's most basic values (the cultural lifeworld)—"what America stands for" (at least conceived as an ideal or mythic narrative)—and increasing public awareness of what the US was really doing in Vietnam; actual US policy and conduct. The Vietnam conflict manifested a schism between what America said it stood for, or what most citizens believed it stood for or ought to stand for, and what we/it (or the government, in the name of US citizens) was actually doing. During the war this conflict was expressed in terms of an increasing government "credibility gap," moral outrage, disillusionment, etc. This schism created legitimation problems, and arguably a crisis of political values and persistent distrust, even problems of the functioning of the political system (Habermas' "steering problems") which have well outlasted the war itself, into the current period.

The experience (or "trauma") of the Vietnam War, over time, led to a rupturing of both the elite consensus (for example, in early 1968, many of Lyndon Johnson's top advisers—the "Wise Men"—telling him to get the US out of Vietnam), and, at the same time, protest and opposition to the war expressed a de-legitimation of the elite representations of US foreign policy and America's

⁵⁰ Nye *et al.*, *op. cit.*; George Cvetkovich and Ragnar Lofstedt (eds), *Social Trust and the Management of Risk* (London: Earthscan, 1999); Robert Putnam *Bowling Alone* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 171.

⁵³ Nye *et al.*, *op. cit.*, and Putnam, *op. cit.*

⁵⁴ Habermas, *LC, op. cit.*, pp. 45–77.

role in the world (i.e. a fragmenting of the majority position of public support or “consent”).⁵⁵

Notwithstanding many efforts to rebuild American “unity” and “pride,” the distrust and disillusionment of the Vietnam period has not been eliminated, or, it might be argued, even significantly diminished.

Implications for Today

In a formulation evocative of both Lukacs’ reification thesis, and Marcuse’s *One Dimensional Man* thesis, Habermas, at the end of *The Theory of Communicative Action*, discusses the idea of the “colonization of the lifeworld,” and raises the question whether the cultural lifeworld is becoming increasingly colonized, or dominated by instrumental, systems rationalities—to what extent are our daily lives (“lived experience”) becoming increasingly systematized, not only in our activities (what we do), but in our consciousness and thinking? How much is the lifeworld structured by system imperatives and rationalities?

The answer in this paper is mixed, but perhaps somewhat hopeful. On the one hand, at certain times, under certain conditions (of raised consciousness, and social and political mobilization and transformation), the public sphere and the lifeworld come alive, organize and mobilize to resist economic and political system imperatives. In these periods, the mobilized public (“engaged citizens”)—with significant effort, dedication and sacrifice—can impede the “normal” functioning of these systems, can redirect or alter the “steering” of these systems.

On the other hand (as Parsons showed at great length), systems also adapt. Political and economic institutions and organizations also learn, adapt and strategize new, more effective ways “to manage” the public sphere (this point acknowledges the more pessimistic reading of the dialectic of freedom and domination by Horkheimer and Adorno). So, for example, the military and foreign policy establishment also learned their own “lessons” of Vietnam: *inter alia*, the importance of having (and mobilizing) public support, managing the media and public opinion, keeping US casualties low, that Americans will not support wars without clear objectives, that Americans are more likely to resist extended military engagements and, therefore, the US should fight “fast wars,” use overwhelming force, rapid deployment, etc. These “lessons” (from the point of view of the national security state) were all learned and demonstrated, with considerable effectiveness, in the 1991 Persian Gulf War, and seemingly, thus far, in the war in Afghanistan and against terrorism.

Thus, rationalization and autonomization of subsystems and their instrumental rationalities continue apace in contemporary society, but the uncoupling of system and lifeworld is never complete. In critical-theoretical terms, the movement of the dialectic continues at a more advanced level. Both of the above trends obtain: the American people have learned (to be less trusting of government, more skeptical, more critical in their thinking about the political and economic spheres), but subsystems have also learned (how to better manage, steer, or “spin” public opinion and foreign policy implementation). The Vietnam

⁵⁵ See Todd Gitlin’s discussion of these processes in *The Sixties*, *op. cit.* On the effect of the “Wise Men,” see pp. 303–304.

experience showed that the cultural lifeworld is not necessarily "colonized" or manipulated by political and economic subsystems; that it is possible to change policy and "systems," but that such experiences also have lasting effects on the lifeworld, i.e. in the form of disillusionment, "loss of innocence," loss of trust, the spread of a "hermeneutics of suspicion."⁵⁶ In this sense, skepticism and distrust are themselves rational, an essential component of the normative rationality of the cultural sphere. Societies and publics, or at least portions thereof, *can*, and sometimes do, learn the importance of being more informed, educated and engaged. Publics *can* learn a "healthy skepticism" toward government and political and economic elites, a renewed understanding of the timeless political maxim: "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty"—vigilance toward political and economic elites.

⁵⁶ This phrase is attributed by Sara Ruddick to Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza. Ruddick, "The Rationality of Care," in Jean Elshtain and Sheila Tobias (eds), *Women, Militarism, and War* (Savage, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1990).

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