

Hope and Habermas

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The contemporary sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas has contributed much to critical IR theory, which he radicalized by asserting that:

“the resources for assessing the growth of knowledge are reflexive and can be apprehended... in the practices of ordinary language use”[i].

The idea that knowledge is derived from communication, rather than the authority of expertise, was a radical shift from the assumptions of the ‘scientific objectivism’ that dominated IR theory before Habermas[ii]. This paper will identify what it presents as one of the biggest pitfalls of Habermas’s critical social theory: that Habermas’s *intersubjective* theory of communicative action is fundamentally subjective. This paper will also accentuate how aspects of Habermas’s theory can be identified in today’s politics. This will be achieved by breaking down Habermas’s theory into three complexes: the redefinition of the lifeworld, the division of society between the lifeworld and the system, and finally, the development of colonization. This paper will then acknowledge some of the pitfalls of Habermas’s critical social theory. It will incorporate these critiques as a tool to argue that the imperfections of Habermas’s theory do not necessarily diminish the hope that it provides for prospective international communication and cooperation. This paper will conclude by pointing out how the rationalization of communicative action can be observed between current colonized nation states. The overarching purpose of this paper is to explain how Habermas’s theory of communicative action provides the international community with hope for prospective change.

Habermas’s Critical Social Theory

According to Martin Weber, author of the article *The Critical Social Theory of the Frankfurt School and the ‘Social Turn’ in IR*:

“Habermas is accredited with the revision of critical social theory through the development of critical philosophy as social theory [through Habermas’s theory of Communicative action]” [iii].

Habermas built his social theory of rationality upon a variety of:

“major currents of the 20th-century Western philosophy and social theory [including] speech-act theory and analytic philosophy, classical social theory, hermeneutics, phenomenology, developmental psychology, and (Parsonian) systems theory”[iv].

Habermas’s theory of communicative action is best understood when broken down into three distinctive complexes.[v]

In the first of these complexes, Habermas redefines rationality as “epistemic, practical, and intersubjective”[vi]. According to Habermas, rationality consists in “how speaking and acting subjects acquire and use knowledge”[vii]. Therefore, knowledge is fundamentally active because it is contingent upon the intercommunication of actors. In order for actors to coordinate action, they must communicate under the premise of gaining “mutual understanding”[viii]. When actors in society seek to reach common understanding and to coordinate actions by

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reasoned argument, consensus, and cooperation [ix], they engage in what Habermas calls “communicative action”[x]. By establishing this paradigm of intersubjectivity that “emphasizes the pragmatics of communicative action”, Habermas ultimately arrives at a universalistic theory of rationality with communicative action which is grounded socially, rather than transcendently[xi].

Habermas’s second complex determines that modern society is composed of two differential phenomenological concepts: the lifeworld, and the system. Habermas relates each of these two dimensions to a determinate form of action and rationality: communicative versus strategic [xii]. Strategic actors are concerned with achieving their individual goals. They are not interested in establishing mutual understanding. Due to the strategic actors’ emphasis of success, they are deemed “atomistic” or isolated because “they regard others solely as their resources to be exploited in or constraints on their pursuit of their own plans” [xiii]. This pragmatic attitude of strategic action that is aimed towards egotism and the achievement of one’s goals is characteristic of “the system”, which:

“reflects a linear increase in a society’s steering capacity—engendered by the steering media of money and power—that encode purposive-rational action and instrumental reason [for strategic actors]”[xiv].

The effect of media-steered communication is what Habermas terms as ‘unburdening’[xv]. ‘Unburdening’ is when social actors are relieved from having to justify their actions [xvi]. The implications of steering media, such as ‘power and money,’ are essential to the system because it provides the foundational means through which the system is hierarchized. Certain sovereign actors with power and money are more apt to exercise their agenda and achieve their goals because their possession of money and power affords them the opportunity to influence other actors to agree with whatever they propose, and essentially silence all others who pose a challenge.

Grounded in the process of social evolution, which is achieved through communicative action, is the phenomenological concept of the ‘lifeworld’ [xvii]. The lifeworld, thus, is the dynamic social world, which is (in principle) obtainable by all participants in communicative practices [xviii]. The lifeworld serves to “explicate the conditions under which action can be coordinated or become meaningful from the perspective of participant practitioners in mutual recognition”[xix].

Furthermore:

“what is crucial for Habermas is that because the lifeworld consists of communicative action – people reaching common understandings on everything from car pools to community action to foreign policy – communicative action and it alone has the ability to regenerate influence and value-commitments ” [xx]

- and -

“while the ‘media’ through which integration or coordination are achieved in the domain of systems are money and power, in the domain of the lifeworld ‘steering’ is anchored in solidarity ”[xxi].

From Habermas’s point of view, the solidarity of the lifeworld can only be supplied from each actor’s application and participation in communicative action [xxii]. Nonetheless, as modern society advances, communicative action between nation states is becoming increasingly integrated with characteristics of strategic action[xxiii].

In his third complex, Habermas defines this process of integration as colonization. Colonization *is* a crisis between the system and the lifeworld because –

“the rationalization of the lifeworld makes possible the emergence and growth of subsystems whose independent imperatives turn back destructively upon the lifeworld itself”[xxiv]

- and -

“colonization of the lifeworld by systems or by systems imperatives.... happens when the communicative orientation

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towards mutual understanding is substituted by the instrumental and strategic orientation towards success "[xxv].

Habermas goes on to hypothesize that as the lifeworld becomes colonized,

"there is a transfer from action-coordinated language to 'steering media,' [xxvi] expressed concretely in the way in which the medium of money can apportion strategic influence and reward without relying on coordination conceived in communicative terms as in the lifeworld" [xxvii].

Thus, when money and power "colonize the lifeworld," it ultimately displaces communicative action, thereby inhibiting the reproduction of the lifeworld^[xxviii]. As a result of colonization, humankind is left with a restructured form of negotiation that intrinsically utilizes media as a means of communication [xxix].

Critiques

By employing the idea of the lifeworld as a universal phenomenology, Habermas invites a storm of disparagement from critics due to his inability to provide an explicit definition of the 'lifeworld.' Oddly enough, Habermas did not construct this term out of thin air.

The philosophical term 'lifeworld,' originated in 1936, with Edmund Husserl's *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* [xxx]. According to the sociologist Austin Harrington, what Husserl means by the term 'lifeworld,' is a:

"tissue of intersubjective background understandings that first makes scientific objectifying knowledge meaningful" [xxxi].

For the philosopher Alfred Schütz, the lifeworld was the presumed 'common-sense reality' of the social world [xxxii]. When Habermas returned the concept of the 'lifeworld' to critical theory, he described the concept as:

"the world of everyday communicative interaction which gradually differentiates over the course of processes of social evolution into distinct rationally articulated spheres of 'cultural validity'" [xxxiii].

Even Habermas's own definition of the lifeworld is murky- at best. This presents a significant problem because the 'lifeworld,' which is the domain of Habermas's *intersubjective* theory of communicative action, is inherently subjective. Therefore, the lifeworld, which represents the existential projection of an actor's knowledge and value commitments, just 'is.' Habermas's main problem lies in his use of a conceptual term as a foundational piece of his theory.

Habermas's use of the lifeworld as the domain of communicative action ultimately weakens his argument by throttling the practical use of communicative action into a battle of interpretation, which is entirely rooted in subjective nature of the lifeworld. Because the lifeworld can be interpreted in innumerable ways, many scholars, like Martin Weber, spend their time and talents debating the legitimate meaning, purpose, and intent of the lifeworld. While these debates or 'interpretation battles' over the appropriate perception of Habermas's lifeworld might spur opportunities for intrinsic learning, they also present a critical problem. These debates obscure the underlying value that can be found in Habermas's theory: *hope*.

Communicative Action as Hope

If one can accept the fact that Habermas's theory *is* flawed and move past Habermas's use conceptual language, one can appreciate the value of Habermas's theory. Underneath the fallacies that can be found in communicative action, there is an underlying insinuation of *hope*. Habermas's theory of communicative action affords the international hope by asserting that problems can be solved and social integration can be achieved through dialectical interaction. According to this theory, it is possible for international actors to institute real, cooperative

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change that is multilateral. It is such a simple, yet revolutionizing, assertion to make. Communicative action provides international actors with the tools to achieving cooperative objectives, regardless of the socio, cultural, or economic differences that divide them. The theory also recognizes the value of actors on the periphery by asserting that they too offer a unique perspective and attribute to the overall knowledge of the 'lifeworld,'— whatever that might be. It is this possibility of change that makes Habermas's theory radical, because it asserts that if actors are willing to simply *communicate* the proceeding solutions to global issues, problems will be multilaterally beneficial. The value of communicative action is that it provides a theoretical map that, when put in practice, has the potential to institute concrete integration. It is this prospect of *potential* change that justifies humankind's *hope* for a progressive, cooperative future.

Colonization in Action

Whereas Habermas's second complex provides humankind with hope for a better future, his third complex offers a stark reflection of the world that we live in. Habermas's third complexity does a suitable job of bridging theory and practicality, because the effects of colonization can be observed in real-time through current international events. The United States is one current international actor that exemplifies just how rationalized communicative action has become. Even within the arena of the United Nations, the United States exercises quantitative media in order influence decisions in its own favor. Even when the United States does not offer monetary incentives when trying to reach a consensus on a political issue, there is always an underlying influence of media. The *idea* of the media behind the United States becomes the real form of communication when it comes to the negotiations of the US with other nation-states [xxxiv]. Nation-states with less 'media' (i.e., power and money) stand no chance of asserting their plans and desires when it comes to negotiating with the United States. Consider the situation in Syria as an example. Ban Ki-Moon, Secretary-General of the UN, said that "the situation in Syria should be resolved in a peaceful way, through dialog"[xxxv]. Yet, the United States was adamant on overriding the advice of the UN and invading Syria. Despite the overwhelming outcry from individuals all over the world claiming that this decision was hasty, costly, and deadly, there were various nation-states, like France, who were in support of the United States's decision. Perhaps this is because underneath every form of 'communicative' advice or action the United States proposes, there is an underlying consensus regarding how much power and money the United States has and how many things the United States can do with it.

Conclusion

Whereas communicative action insinuates hope, the colonization of communicative action reflects the world that we live in. By observing our world through the lenses of Habermas, we can identify the components that inhibit social integration, and while we might not be able to agree on a cooperative method of exonerating ourselves from colonization, there is still hope that one day we can achieve change through communicative action. This paper explained how Habermas's theory of communicative action not only provides the international with hope, but also identified the ways in which communicative theory can be observed in modern society. After breaking down Habermas's theory into three complexes – the redefinition of the lifeworld, the division of society between the lifeworld and the system, and finally the development of colonization – this paper was able to identify Habermas's *intersubjective* theory of communicative action as fundamentally and inherently subjective. After incorporating critiques of Habermas's work, it established the hypothesis of Habermas as hope, upon the foundation that recognized that imperfections of Habermas's work. After embracing the shortcoming of communicative action, this paper was finally able to highlight the hope that Habermas's theory provides for prospective international communication and cooperation. Then, this paper continued to explain its examination of Habermas's theory, by examining the final complex of colonization. The section entitled "Colonization in Action," was able to point out how the rationalization of communicative action can be observed between current nation states within the United Nations.

[i] Martin Weber, "The Critical Social Theory of the Frankfurt School, and the 'Social Turn' in It," *Review of International Studies* 31, no. 1 (2005). 197.

[ii] *Ibid.* 197.

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[iii] Ibid. 198.

[iv] Shelton A. Gunaratne, "Public Sphere and Communicative Rationality: Interrogating Habermas's Eurocentrism.," *Journalism & Communication Monographs* 8, no. 2 (2006). 2.

[v] Ibid. 3

[vi] James Bohman and William Rehg, "Jürgen Habermas," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2011/entries/habermas/> (2011).

[vii] Jürgen Habermas, *Reason and the Rationalization of Society* trans. English translation by Thomas McCarthy, vol. 1, *The Theory of Communicative Action* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984).8.

[viii] Martin Weber, "The Critical Social Theory of the Frankfurt School, and the 'Social Turn' in IR." 203.

[x] Roger Bolton, "Habermas's Theory of Communicative Action and the Theory of Social Capital " in *Economics and Center for Environmental Studies*, Economics and Center for Environmental Studies (Williamstown: Williams College, 2005).

[xi] Gunaratne, "Public Sphere and Communicative Rationality: Interrogating Habermas's Eurocentrism.."3.

[xii] Ibid. 4.

[xiii] James Johnson, "Habermas on Strategic and Communicative Action," *Political Theory* 19, no. 2.

[xiv] Ibid.

[xv] Weber, "The Critical Social Theory of the Frankfurt School, and the 'Social Turn' in Ir."202.

[xvi] Ibid.

[xvii] Gunaratne, "Public Sphere and Communicative Rationality: Interrogating Habermas's Eurocentrism.."3.

[xviii] Weber, "The Critical Social Theory of the Frankfurt School, and the 'Social Turn' in Ir."203.

[xix] Ibid. 203.

[xx] "Notes on Habermas: Lifeworld and System," University of Calgary <http://people.ucalgary.ca/~frank/habermas.html>. Because communicative action has the ability to 'regenerate influence and value system,' group value systems are socially constructed. More about this topic (ie: the relationship between the value system of groups and the individual) can be found in the works of Robert Oprisko including, "The Rebel as Sovereign: The Political Theology of Dignity" and Honor: A Phenomenology. Robert L. Oprisko, *Honor: A Phenomenology*, Routledge Innovations in Political Theory (New York, NY: Routledge, 2012); "The Rebel as Sovereign: The Political Theology of Dignity," *Revista Pleyade*, 9(2012).

[xxi] Weber, "The Critical Social Theory of the Frankfurt School, and the 'Social Turn' in Ir." 203.

[xxii] Ibid.

[xxiii] Ibid

[xxiv] Martin Weber, "The Critical Social Theory of the Frankfurt School, and the 'Social Turn' in IR." 204.

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[xxv] Lasse Thomassen, *Habermas: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London Continuum 2010). 46.

[xxvi] Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action Volume Two: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason* trans. Thomas A. McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press 1987). *Reason and the Rationalization of Society* 1. 182.

[xxvii] Weber, "The Critical Social Theory of the Frankfurt School, and the 'Social Turn' in It." 204.

[xxviii] Rehg, "Jürgen Habermas."

[xxix] The term media essentially refers to the differential forms through which communication is mediated "in society, culture, and the everyday life of the individual." Friedrich Krotz, "Mediatization: A Concept with Which to Grasp Media and Societal Change," in *Mediatization: Concept, Changes, Consequences*, ed. Knut Lundby (New York, Bern, Berlin, Bruxelles, Frankfurt am Main, Oxford, Wien: Peter Lang, 2009). Media is important because it is an intermediate tool that stands between two individuals. By injecting the system's prevalent tool of 'steering media' (ie: money and power) into the lifeworld, actors are able to utilize money and power as a *means* of communication for negotiation purposes.

[xxx] Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology; an Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970).

[xxxi] This Austin Harrington, "Lifeworld " *Theory, Culture & Society* 23, no. 3-4 (2006). 341.

[xxxii] Ibid.

[xxxiii] Ibid.

[xxxiv] Because of colonization, the United States is able to exert their money and power, either directly or indirectly, as a tool for communication. The 'steering media,' in this case America's money and power, acts as a powerful intermediary tool that intercedes between the United States' and other nation states. Thus, the presence of money and power obstructs the United States' ability to engage in true communicative action with other nation states.

[xxxv] David Sanger Mark Landler, and Thom Shanker, "Obama Set for Limited Strike on Syria as British Vote No," (2013).

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