Critical Social Theory

Habermas’s Theory of Communicative Actions:

The Foundations of Sociological Theory

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Offices Hours:
  1. Wednesday: 2:00 – 4:00
  2. By Appointment.

REQUIRED TEXTS:

SECONDARY LITERATURE:

COURSE GOALS:
The primary goal of this course is to introduce students to Habermas’s magnum opus: the two-volume Theory of Communicative action (1981) [hereafter TCA]. TCA is devoted to articulating the basic concepts of social theory, which should be of keen interest to any student of the social sciences and/or Humanities. The central goal of the course is to familiarize students with the theoretical and conceptual complexities involved in making any informed pronouncement about “modernity,” “Western rationality,” “Eurocentrism,” “Occidental development,” “capitalist growth,” “technological reason,” “Westernization,” etc. Habermas intervenes in the “discourse of modernity”: i.e. the debate whether Occidental modernization is just one specific cultural world among a multiplicity of others, with no claim to universality or rationality. If the current Philosophical Discourse of Modernity is defined by the total relativity of standards of rationality to various different and incompatible cultural worldviews, then Habermas is, without doubt, the most staunch critic of this form of cultural studies.

OVERVIEW OF HABERMAS’S THEORY OF COMMUNICATIVE ACTION:

TCA set itself three goals: (1) develop a concept of communicative rationality; (2) develop a Neo-Marxist two-level concept of society in terms of symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld (relations of production), “from above,” and material and functional social reproduction (forces of production), from below; and (3) develop a theory of rationalization and modernization
focused on the empirical diagnosis of real social pathologies. Habermas’s formal pragmatic analysis of everyday communication dispatches the first task: a critique of communicative reason. To address the second, Habermas reviews the foundations of sociology by analyzing the concepts of reason built into traditional sociological models of action. His examination of the sociological/philosophical classics – Marx, Weber, Mead, Durkheim, Lukacs, Horkheimer/Adorno, Parsons, and Luhman – reveals that none adequately confronts “the rationality problematic” and hence each misdiagnoses modernization and rationalization. TCA represents Habermas’s “second attempt to appropriate Weber in the spirit of Western Marxism” – Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* being the first attempt – now armored with his alternative paradigm of communication. Pessimistic assessments about modernity and the Enlightenment project of reason are driven, Habermas argues, by conceptual constrictions and overgeneralized empirical observations. The horrors of the 20th Century and contemporary social crises are real enough, but they call for the rectification and completion, not dismissal and abandonment, of modernity.

Habermas presents TCA as a treatise of the foundations of social theory. Classical sociology arose, Habermas avers, as a theory of bourgeois society, the child of Enlightenment ideals of reason, along one lineage, and of the reality of scientific, industrial, and political revolutions, along another. Its task was to explain how capitalist growth and state consolidation broke open traditional societies, subjecting them to economic and administrative forces that appeared autonomous, uncontrolled, and corrosive to traditional lifeforms. It combined empirical descriptions with rational assessments, delivering pessimistic diagnoses of Enlightenment ideals of reason amidst the stark realities of European modernization. Informed by Nietzsche’s, Darwin’s, and Freud’s frontal assaults on Enlightenment ideals of practical reason, moral progress, and agential autonomy, theories of modernity became increasingly negative, unqualified, and total. TCA offers a systematic review of the foundations of social theory.

The fundamental question of sociology is, how is social order possible? Any theory of society, Habermas argues, necessarily confronts the normative question of rationality – i.e. the question of how we asses the rationality of agents and social orders – at three different levels: (1) meta-theoretical level of basic action concepts (how do sociologists conceive of what agents do), (2) methodological level of access to object domain (what methods do sociologists use to first gain access to what they study), and (3) empirical level of parsing out factual modernization from normative rationalization (how can sociologists offer a bifocal – i.e. factual/normative or empirical/evaluative – study of actual forms of modernization). Habermas reviews three traditional models of action – teleological, normative, and dramaturgical – introducing his own model of communicative action as a reflexive, rational form in which the issues confronted by these first-level actions are communicatively handled. The teleological model posits a solitary agent who chooses means to realize ends within the objective world, the basis of decision theory, game theory, and cybernetic models of rationality. The normative model posits socialized groups that conform to the social world of normative expectations, the basis of Durkheim’s and Parsons’s role theory. The dramaturgical model posits an agent who presents her subjective world to an audience, the basis of Goffman’s model of self-presentation. The ontological assumptions of each model – objective, social, and subjective worlds – allow for various types of rationality assessment – efficiency of means, rightness of conformity, and sincerity of self-presentation. Simply put, we always evaluate situations in terms of how we coordinate interaction on the basis of facts, norms, and feelings, where breakdowns in social coordination accrue to the inefficiency of work, the illegitimacy of social arrangements, and the insensitivity to individual persons. Habermas’s basic idea is that when such breakdowns of social coordination occur, we talk about what the facts are, which norms we should follow, and how others interpret their needs and desires. Habermas demonstrates that only communicative action – talk about facts, norms, and feelings – allows agents to reflexively repair the “broken intersubjectivity” that arises when work becomes inefficient, interaction illegitimate, and coexistence insensitive. Work becomes inefficient when do not know enough about the objective world to master it. Interaction becomes illegitimate when we fail or order the social world according to norms we can all (ideally) agree upon. Finally, coexistence becomes insensitive when we fail to recognize the subjective worlds of individual agents: i.e. how they interpret their needs and desires. Simply put, communicative action allows agent to rationally repair breakdowns in purposive, regulative, and dramaturgical action.
Communicative action allows agents to pinpoint the breakdown of social order in the objective world (nature), the social world (society), and subjective world (self) and to therein cooperatively and reflexively repair the breakdowns in the various domains of first-level actions. If the object domain of sociology is virtually upgraded to include communicatively interacting agents, then methodological access requires an approach that is rational. In short, sociologist and subjects-of-study are virtual partners in (potential) communicative interaction. Habermas emphasizes that our access to the symbolically structured social reality requires the understanding of meaning – i.e. interpretive hermeneutic methodology – and that such understanding is inextricably interconnected with the critical assessment of validity. Access to the object domain demands a methodological approach that is virtually rational and performative.

Habermas’s thesis that communicative action and lifeworld are “complementarity concepts” links his critique of reason to social theory. From the participant perspective, the lifeworld is both a resource for, and product of, communicative action. The horizontal, implicit, holistic, taken-for-granted certainty of the lifeworld marks it out as a constitutive or existential condition of the participant outlook, making it unavailable to reflective control: i.e. “quasi-transcendental.” The everyday concept of the lifeworld, however, constitutes the domain of empirical social facts that can be narrated and explained, making it the suitable subject matter of social scientific observation and research. Habermas insists on this double participant/spectator, “inner”/“outer” methodological shift, because it links his philosophical ideal of reason to his empirical social-scientific outlook upon social reality. Without this reflexive equilibration of philosophical/sociological perspectives, the internal tension between the facticity and validity in modern social life would disappear, leaving us with a “blind” sociology of social realities or “empty” philosophy of rational ideals. Social theory becomes critical, Habermas maintains, precisely by implicating the ideals of reasons in real social affairs.

Habermas’s philosophical concept of procedural rationality links everyday communication, “from below,” to institutionalized domains of theoretical, practical, and aesthetic-therapeutic discourse, “from above.” Learning processes are viewed “internally” as rational problem-solving and “externally” as social practices and institutions subject to explanatory and functional analyses. The social institutions of science and industry, politics and law, art and humanistic enterprises are real social systems that cannot be reduced to philosophical idealizations. Social research requires a reflexively managed, bifocal, participant/observer methodology to avoid either philosophical idealism – institutions embody rational insight – or social scientific realism – institutions arise contingently and exert real causal/function effects.

Sociological accounts of modernity focused on how capitalist growth and state bureaucracy split open traditional societies, exposing them to economic and administrative forces that appeared autonomous, uncontrolled, and corrosive to both conventional lifeforms and post-conventional democratic intervention. There are social realities that are not, and cannot be conceived as, the intended consequences of action: the “hand” of the market and “arm” of the state are not only “invisible” but also impersonal, indifferent, and mechanical. A sociological realism views economic growth and state power as “self-regulating systems” that integrate society “behind the backs” of participants, linking the effects of individual actions into aggregated functions that exert real, though unintended, causal effects upon society. Social research must methodologically balance the internal “lifeworld” perspective – treat institutions as a history of learning – and external “system” perspectives – treat institutions and domains as impersonal, self-regulating, functional systems. Accordingly, Habermas distinguishes between two types of integration: “social” integration secured through communicative interaction, and “system” integration secured through self-regulating systems that functionally aggregate unintended effects. These two types of integration secure, respectively, the symbolic and material dimensions of social reproduction.

The symbolic reproduction of society – lifeworld – is secured in the institutionalization of different discourses: theoretical, practical, and aesthetic. Institutions such as the sciences secure the cultural reproduction of knowledge. Legal and moral institutions secure social integration, and humanistic enterprises secure the formation of personal identities (socialization). These three macro processes of social reproduction – cultural reproduction of knowledge, social integration of actions, and socialization of subjects – reflect, at the institutional level, the three micro linguistic modes – cognitive representation of world, communicative interaction in society, intentional expression of subjectivity. The utterance act is, Habermas maintains, the “atomic unit” in which
all three essential “components” of the lifeworld – culture, society, personality – come into play. Classical sociologists failed, Habermas demonstrates, to appreciate the full spectrum of the communicative rationalization of the lifeworld sustained through symbolic reproduction. Husserl’s and Schutz’s phenomenological concepts of the lifeworld emphasize the reproduction of knowledge, offering a “culturalistic abridgement” of the lifeworld. Durkheim and Parsons emphasize social integration, offering an “institutionalistic” abridgement. Mead’s symbolic interactionism emphasizes the way in which internalizing the generalized Other shapes personal identities, offering a “social-psychological” abridgement. Because communicative action is polyvalent – representational, interactive, and intentional – the lifeworld it symbolically sustains is likewise polyvalent – cultural reproduction, social integration, and socialization.

In contrast to symbolic reproduction, the material reproduction of modern society is secured through self-regulating, quasi-autonomous systems such as the capitalist economy and the administrative state. The medium of economic commerce and market integration is the exchange of money, which Habermas deems a “de-linguistified steering media” and likens to administrative power, which regulates and integrates state interventions according to official roles, procedures, and responsibilities. Money and power are “de-linguistified steering media” in the sense that what happens in the market or state is effected, not by communicative consensus, but by monetary exchange and official procedure. Moreover, market economies and administrative states are self-regulating systems that functionally integrate or aggregate effects into unintended real-life consequences. System integration is “functionally” rational, whereas social integration is “communicatively” rational. The contrast between social and system integration – symbolic and material reproduction – is not, Habermas avers, merely a methodological shift from participant to observer viewpoints: markets and states are “quasi-autonomous” impersonal, functionally circulated realities that exert powerful, often devastating effects upon socially integrated domains such as private families and public civic forums. Habermas also insists, however, that economic and administrative commerce is intricately tied to, and suffused with, symbolic interaction. Marx’s thesis that material base determines symbolic superstructure fails to capture the complex interpenetration and co-dependence of modern system and social integration.

Habermas proposes a logic of social evolution that consists in the interdependent and co-variant structural changes in social rationalization, “from above,” and system functionality, “from below.” The rationalization of the lifeworld demands increasing differentiation of the “value spheres” of cultural reproduction, social integration, and socialization. The material reproduction of society demands the increasing system complexity in economic activity and bureaucratic administration. In tribal, feudal, and monarchial societies, social and system integration are still fused: economic exchange and social recognition are not separated out. The threshold of modernity breaks lifeworld and system apart, setting up markets and states as autonomous, self-regulating and yet interdependent functional systems steered, respectively, by money and power. Market and state are anchored to the lifeworld through the legal institutionalization of wage labor and tax-based state power – private and public law – each supporting and augmenting the other. This structural logic of social evolution suggests a balance between lifeworld and system – symbolic and material reproduction – but it does not determine their actual historical direction and force of influence.

Habermas diagnoses the dynamic of modernity as a dangerous imbalance of social and system integration. Market and administrative imperatives “colonize” the lifeworld: money and power replace communication as de-linguistified steering media. They “reify” communicatively secured private and public domains: individuals work to compulsively consume; citizens vote to enhance their strategic client-of-the-state compensations. They “desiccate” cultural resources: the semantic resources of cultural traditions evaporate when strategically deployed for commercial purposes and administrative “public relations.” They erode traditional lifeforms: the symbolic contents and ritual practices of traditional lifeforms either function as inbred cults or as curated artifacts. They generate social-welfare compensations for market anomalies that place welfare recipients under punitive and disempowering surveillance and control. When the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld is, in general, attenuated by system imperatives, deficits in cultural reproduction lead to “loss of meaning,” deficits in social integration lead to “anomie,” and deficits in socialization leads to social pathologies. Such systemically induced pathologies imbed distorted communication within the “grammar” of the lifeworld.
This dangerous *dynamic* of a deformed, dis-equilibrated, and demoralized modernity is not, however, dictated by the developmental *logic* of social evolution. This crucial distinction between the *logic* and *dynamic* of social evolution is the core of Habermas’s critique of traditional theorists like Marx, Weber, and Horkheimer/Adorno, who work with underdeveloped conceptions of reason and overdramatized sociological observations. In *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Habermas deploys this critique on postmodernist thinkers like Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida, Foucault, Bataille, and others. Habermas asks that his diagnosis be tested by its empirical fruitfulness in identifying both crisis and critical response. The fruitfulness of a wholesale abandonment of Enlightenment reason as an exhausted civilization, with its correlative conjuration of a new epoch “to come,” is not particularly fruitful, Habermas contends, in either regard.

A virtue of Habermas’ approach is his identification of a variety of new social movements as alike critically responsive to the grammars of modern life forms distorted by inscribed system imperatives. Feminist, ecological, anticolonial, gender, anti-globalism, fair-trade, food-justice, demonetized-exchange, and localist social movements work in a “subinstitutional,” “extraparliamentary,” informal, grass-roots fashion to recuperate the communicative grammar of social coexistence and to rekindle discursive political will formation. Suspicious of party-controlled politics of economic and military security, such groups scrutinize the material practices, patterned perceptions, and habitual behaviors of everyday life as illicitly channeling coexistence, interaction, and communication away from political deliberation concerning genuine interests. Such informal publics cannot, of course, effect political change alone, so Habermas has amplified his work to include discourse theories of law and democracy. The core of this account is that the constitutional state must link the informal communicative power of citizens to formal decision-making institutions that anchor economic and administrative subsystems to democratic guidance: “law represents . . . the medium for transforming communicative power into administrative power” (*BFN*, 169).

**EVALUATION:**

Students will be evaluated on the basis of class participation, vocabulary quizzes, midterm examinations and a final paper.

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<th>Breakdown of Points of Evaluation</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Participation:</strong></td>
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<td>Classroom discussion, office-hour conferences, email correspondence, and discussion with classmates</td>
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<td><strong>Response Papers:</strong> The purpose of a response paper is to hold us accountable to our reading. In the paper, identify core concepts from the readings and clarify, present, and explain them via artistic examples, personal experiences or other tangible material. 1-3 pages in length, double spaced)</td>
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<td><strong>Midterm Paper</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Final Paper</strong></td>
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POLICIES:

Students are expected to follow the reading schedule, bring textbooks to class each day, to mark up their texts with questions and comments, and prepare at least three questions to introduce into classroom discussion. In other words, students must bring their texts to class with marginal notes, highlighted or underlined passages of particular importance, and pages marked where they have encountered difficulties in understanding the material. Response papers offer students the opportunity to identify and to clarify central terms and concepts. The midterm assignment allows students to write essays on key philosophical issues and arguments, and the final paper offers students the opportunity to respond in depth to a single topic. The final paper is due on the day scheduled for the final examination. The following are basic policies:

• 3 unexcused absences will result in a full course grade reduction (exceptions allowed only with proper documentation).
• Late papers are marked down a half grade per day (exceptions allowed only with proper documentation)
• No active electronic devices such as computers, mobile phones, Blackberries, Blueberries, or any other electronic fruits and vegetables are permitted in the classroom, although tape recorders are permitted.
• All documented disabilities will happily be accommodated upon the student’s request.
• An act of plagiarism results in a failing grade for the specific assignment. A second act will result in an F course grade.
• During seminar discussions, students must attend to the person holding the floor, responding to his or her contribution. In other words, no one-on-one lateral comments, which divert attention from the ongoing discussion.
• 3 unexcused absences will result in a full grade reduction.
• Late papers will be marked down a half grade for the first day and a full grade for the second day. All work must be turned in at the end of term, unless alternative assignments have been given by the instructor.

SCHEDULE OF READING

1. Historical Account of Modernity and the Rationality Problematic: Modernization as Rationalization.

Week One:
- Translator’s Introduction (v – xxxix).
- Author’s Preface (xxxix – xlii)

2. What is Rationality and How Should We Conceive it?
- “Introduction: Approaches to the Problem of Rationality”
  - “Rationality” – A Preliminary Specification.”
  - “Some Characteristic of the Mythical and Modern Ways of Understanding the World”

Week Two:
- “Introduction: Approaches to the Problem of Rationality”
  - “Relations to the World and Aspects of Rationality in Four Sociological Concepts of Action”
  - “The Problem of Understanding Meaning in the Social Sciences”

3. What is Modernity and Is It a Good Thing: Max Weber’s Theory of Modernity

Week Three:
• “Max Weber’s Theory of Rationalization”
  o “Occidental Rationalism”
  o “The Disenchantment of Religious-Metaphysical Worldviews and the Emergence of Modern Structures of Consciousness”

Week Four:
• “Max Weber’s Theory of Rationalization”
  o “Modernization as Societal Rationalization: The Role of the Protestant Ethic”
  o “Rationalization of Law: Weber’s Diagnosis of the Times”

4. Habermas’s Philosophy of Language: Formal Pragmatics & Communicative Rationality

Week Five:
• “Intermediate Reflections: Social Action, Purposive Activity, and Communication”

5. The Paradigm Shift from Purposive to Communicative Action

Week Six:
• Translator Preface
• “The Paradigm Shift in Mead and Durkheim: From Purposive Activity to Communicative Action”
  o “The Foundations of Social Science in the Theory of Communication”
  o “The Authority of the Sacred and the Normative Background of Communicative Action”

Week Seven
• “The Paradigm Shift in Mead and Durkheim: From Purposive Activity to Communicative Action”
  o “The Rational Structure of the Linguistification of the Sacred”

6. Habermas’s Conception of Modernity: The Momentous Uncoupling of System from Lifeworld: What is Functional Rationality?

Week Eight:
• “Intermediate Reflections: System and Lifeworld”
  o “The Concept of the Lifeworld and the Hermeneutic Idealism of Interpretive Sociology”
  o “The Uncoupling of System and Lifeworld”

Week Nine:
• “Concluding Reflections: From Parsons via Weber to Marx”
  o “Marx and the Thesis of Internal Colonization”

Week Ten:
• “Concluding Reflections: From Parsons via Weber to Marx”
  o “Marx and the Thesis of Internal Colonization”
  o “The Tasks of a Critical Theory of Society”

FINALS WEEK: