Modernity, Communicative Action and Reconstruction of Rationality

Jason L. Powell

Faculty of Health & Life Sciences, Coventry University, Priory Street, CV1 5FB, Coventry, United Kingdom

E-mail address: jasonpwll3@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Associated with the Frankfurt School, Jurgen Habermas's work focuses on the modern foundations of social theory and epistemology, the analysis of advanced capitalistic societies and democracy, the rule of law in a critical social-evolutionary context, and contemporary politics, particularly German politics. Habermas's theoretical system is devoted to revealing the possibility of reason, emancipation, and rational-critical communication latent in modern institutions and in the human capacity to deliberate and pursue rational interests. Habermas is known for his work on the concept of modernity, particularly with respect to the discussions of rationalization originally set forth by Max Weber. He has been influenced by American pragmatism, action theory. This paper sets out to explore the problems and possibilities of communicative action and the reconstruction of rationality which Habermas claims was lost in postmodern genre.

Keywords: Habermas; communicative action; rationality; modernity

1. INTRODUCTION

The philosophical works of Jurgen Habermas occupy an unparalleled position in Western society. The late Rick Roderick (1986) claims Habermas represents the most important attempt at re-constructing critical theory out of the shadows of Marx. Coupled with this, Habermas uses Kant and Hegel to revitalise Marxism by developing an emancipatory theory of society. In addition, according to Delanty (2000) his relation to Adorno, Horkheimer, Benjamin and Marcuse at Frankfurt school is important in interpreting his modernist insights. Despite this, Delanty (2000) claims Habermas is more affirmative and keen towards the classical philosophical tradition particularly the 'enlightenment'. For the past two decades in particular, Habermas has written on the enlightenment project in a reflexive manner: facing up to enlightenment thought and legacy via a systematic critical analysis of the present: its historiography, pathologies, and futurology. At the same time, there has been a huge escalation of neo-Nietzschean philosophers under the labels of 'postmodernist' and 'post-structuralist' who have castigated the enlightenment to the dustbin of the history of ideas, that its metanarratives of 'progress' and 'freedom' have failed and that western rationality is exhausted (Delanty, 2000).

Habermas (1992) claims that neo-Nietzschean critiques of enlightenment fail because they lose a sense of direction. In regard to Foucault (1977), Habermas (1992) accuses him of

'cryptonormativity' and 'irrationality': the former applies because Foucault cannot explain the standards Habermas thinks must be pre-supposed in any condemnation of the present; the latter because of the appellation of Nietzsche's influence. The somewhat legendary albeit brief dispute between Habermas and Foucault turns on whether Foucault is understood to be criticising modernity from a pre-modern or postmodern view. Habermas is willing to defend his own reconstruction of the modern enlightenment tradition, against those critics of modernity of whom he considers to be anti-modern because of the reactionary implications of their views. As Habermas points out: 'The Young Conservatives recapitulate the basic experience of aesthetic modernity' (1981, 7).

The main assumption for Habermas (1992) is that the project of modernity can be redeemed. The diagnoses of Horkheimer, Adorno, Nietzsche, Heiddeger, Foucault and Derrida are false. Habermas's task is to strengthen the 'project of modernity' by reconstructing it vis-à-vis the 'theory of communication'. Hence, the massive task is to overcome the pessimism of late modernity, the indulgence of his predecessors at Frankurt, Adorno and Horkheimer (1949), by resolving the dilemmas of subject-centred reason in the paradigm of communicative action.

The next section highlights the significance of communicative action in the manifestation of everyday existence in modern society.

2. 'BUILDING BLOCK' OF MODERNISM: COMMUNICATIVE ACTION

The theory of communication attempts to facilitate a continuity of language fused into the project of modernity. According to Rasmussen (1990), Ferdinand De Saussure's (1959) distinction between diachronic and synchronic is fundamental in unravelling Habermas' thought: diachronic historical-evolutionary schemes of understanding language follows the model of the enlightenment. From this perspective, Habermas' attempt to reconstitute the project of modernity through language is consistent with diachronic model of understanding language. Language is the vehicle for the most fundamental form of social action, namely his theory of communicative action. Habermas (1981, 44) defines communicative action as:

'… that form of social interaction in which the plans of action of different actors are co-ordinated through an exchange of communicative acts, that is, through a use of language orientated towards reaching understanding'.

Sociologically, Habermas (1981) fuses micro and macro dimensions: he uses Mead and Durkheim as a theoretical bridge to develop communicative action. While Mead is important because of symbolically mediated interaction, Durkheim is important because of his analysis of the 'sacred' and process of secularization of religion. Therefore, Habermas (1981 and 1992) sees the 'language - communication' framework as a new way of retrieving the project of modernity. Habermas wants to show how the transformation from traditional society to modernity involved a progressively secularization of normatively behaviour reconstructed through communicative action. Drawing on his assessment of communicative competence of social actors, Habermas (1981) distinguishes between 'action orientated to success' and 'action orientated to understanding' and between the social and non-social contexts of action. Action orientated to success is measured via rules of rational choice; action orientated to understanding takes place through 'communicative action'. This manifestation of communicative action materialises by mutual and co-operative achievement of understanding amongst collective participants.

Communicative action is linked to the reason embodied by universal pragmatics, since it is directed by search for intersubjective recognition of validity claims (truth, rightness and sincerity) although this may be only implicitly present in any case of actual social interaction. Communicative action is based on an analysis of the social use of language oriented to reaching understanding which focuses on the action co-ordinating effects of the validity claims offered in speech acts (Habermas, 1981). Communicative action is internally linked to communicative rationality which is a central plank for a critical theory. This involves an attempt to characterise universal features of communication in their structure and consolidation that remains open to empirical rationality and verification. Similarly, Roderick (1986) interprets communicative rationality as an attempt to identify empirically the historical development of rationality structures as well as problematizing further rationality to more modern spheres of social life.

Habermas' (1981) notion of Lebenswelt or 'lifeworld' must be introduced as a contextual marker to link action theory with rationalisation processes. This means understanding not just how particular actions may be judged as rational but how rationality potential in modernity embed particular actions and makes possible rational conduct of everyday life. Habermas conceptualises the 'lifeworld' as the taken for granted universe of everyday existence. For Habermas (1981) the lifeworld is the saturation of communicative action, tradition and routinized way of doing acts. The lifeworld is a pre-interpreted set of forms of life within which daily conduct materialises. In Habermas' view the context for the process of evolutionary development of society, culture and individual personality is the articulation of the lifeworld that correlates with an internal system of language. We can see therefore that the lifeworld forms the linguistic context for processes of communication. For Habermas (1981) through the rationalization of the lifeworld social change is said to occur. Processes of rationalization within the lifeworld are said to occur through communicative action while irrational processes of change occur through strategic action. By extending Max Weber's theory of rationalisation, Habermas claims society can flourish along lines of progressive differentiation and rationalisation. Habermas (1981), for her the eclectic theorist, draws on notions from Talcott Parsons of 'social system' to clarify as it becomes more differentiated, the lifeworld becomes ever more rationalised. The important point is that as the lifeworld and social system become ever more differentiated from each other but as they do each new system developed can further life possibilities (Kellner, 1989). The non-realisation of these possibilities leads to counter-emancipation: the taking over of communicative imperatives by strategic imperatives via colonisation of the lifeworld.

3. 'IN THE BLUE AND RED CORNERS': LYOTARD V HABERMAS

Shortly after the publication of Habermas' 'theory of communicative action', a debate on postmodernism emerged in western social theory. The debate was instigated by Derrida, Baudrillard and Lyotard on the tradition of the modern and calls for breaks within this tradition. For Lyotard (1984), Habermas' project of modernity has become obsolete and society had entered the 'postmodern condition'. Lyotard (1984) claims modernity could not think itself, get hold of itself intellectually, with distancing itself historically achieved implementations. For Lyotard (1984, 111):

'My argument is that the modern project [of realising universality] has not been abandoned or forgotten but destroyed, liquidated'.

Further, Lyotard (1984) is scathing of how Habermas will:

'… use the term 'modern' to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of the Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational'.

The very concept of 'postmodernism' is defined by Lyotard (1984, 55) as 'incredulous towards metanarratives' and asks 'where after the metanarratives can legitimacy reside'. For Lyotard (1984) what Habermas is offering one more metanarrative of 'communicative action' which is a generalist and abstractual narrative of emancipation. Lyotard (1984) is against the language games of metaphysics and philosophy of science. Lyotard (1984) calls for an 'irreducible plurality' of language games each with its own 'local' rules, legitimation and practices. Postmodernism offers to move beyond Habermas' modernist narratives and is rapidly gaining currency throughout social and human science disciplines way into the 21st century (Powell, 2001). There are several themes that are shared in postmodern analysis which consolidate Lyotard's (1984) interpretation.

First, there is distrust in the concept of absolute and objective truth. 'Truth' is viewed as contextual, situational, and conditional (Biggs and Powell, 2001). Second, emphasis is placed on fragmentation rather than universalism, again pushing away from the general and encompassing toward the particular (Powell, 2001). Third, local power is preferred over the centralized power of the nation state, and the <u>decentralization</u>, or the process of democratization of power, is a pervasive theme of postmodern narratives (Mestrovic, 1994). Fourth, reality is simulated but is otherwise not a very meaningful concept; reality conceived as a general and universal truth is profoundly doubted (Foucault, 1977). Fifth, we are seeing the rise and consolidation of consumer culture that tends to put 'power' in the hands of the consumers, but can also equally manipulate consumers through marketing ploys and interpolating discourses of consumer freedom by dictating costs in global market place (Biggs and Powell, 2001).

Finally, diversity and difference is emphasized and valued above commonality based on homogeneity (Powell, 2001). Postmodern analysis of culture is no longer a fringe perspective as it promotes strategies of individualism and diversity; and it is critical of strategies that devalue individuals because of any characteristic that control access to knowledge, and that assault identity (Biggs and Powell, 2001). It sees ethics as situational.

The response to the conceptual development of postmodernism has infuriated as many scholars as it has intoxicated. It is no surprise to see Habermas' reaction in particular as very antagonistic of and to postmodernism. For him either individuals encounter a strategic choice either:

'hold fast to the intentions of the Enlightenment or give up the project of modernity as lost' (Habermas, 1985).

Habermas (1984, 24) defends the 'project of modernity' from the theoretical schisms of Lyotardian postmodernism which omits:

'a modernity at variance with itself of its rational content and its perspective on the future' (Habermas, 1984, 36).

Habermas (1984) in 'Philosophical Discourses of Modernity' recognised that theories of postmodernism had their roots in irrational precursory influences such as Heidegger and Nietzsche. Habermas (1984) contends that modernity 'rebels' against tradition and has valorised highly charged aesthetic experiences of novelty, dynamism, singularity and intense presence. With increase innovation in technology and science, modernity embedded a sense of foundationalism and ontological security to society and the self in general. Further, Habermas claims that the project of modernity was 'unfinished' and contained unlimited capacity for emancipatory potential. Such potential draws on the specialization of culture for the enrichment

of daily life and simultaneously the rational organisational of everyday life and experience. The project of modernity has unlimited potential to increase social rationality, justice and morality; this can be realised by cognitive progression and moral boundaries of rationality.

From Habermas' (1984) point of view the defence of the enlightenment is qualified. He gives sweeping castigation to the 'young conservatives' whom he accuses of setting up 'false programs of the negation of culture' which fail to realise positive contribution to project of modernity.

4. PUTTING HABERMAS UNDER THE THEORETICAL MICROSCOPE

Habermas' (1981, 1984, and 1992) exhaustive, complex, and defensive theoretical arguments are very much open to scrutiny. Habermas' theoretical archrival Nikolas Luhmann (1982) has dismissively claimed:

'… there are far too many grounds and arguments… when it has not been very precisely determined in advance what is relevant and what is not … communication will in actual fact, not lead to anything' (Luhmann quoted in Brand, 1990, 120).

In addition, Doorne (1985 cited in Brand, 1990) claims that Habermas does not really distinguish between two contexts of analysis: firstly, formal universal pragmatics; secondly, empirical research. Similarly, Brand (1990) rejects Habermas' position because of his hostility to empirical research and deduced logic. Coupled with this, Therborn (1986 cited in Roderick, 1986, 2-3) has castigated Habermas for deviating from the 'path' of true science' by developing a 'speculative' epistemology which rejects key neo-Marxian concepts.

Ironically, there are two modernistic yet sociological grounds that Habermas fails to incorporate or appreciate in his analysis: gender and racial inequality. The former because Habermas' theorizing is built on a conception of the world in which, albeit essentialist characteristics but realities, 'middle class' 'white' 'males' dominate. The whole 'project of modernity' and associated accounts of rationality and progress have historically sided with men over women (Stanley and Pateman, 1991). The enlightenment philosophizing was a language based seeing women in an inferior position to that of a man; a period of patriarchal domination. Whilst Stanley and Pateman (1991) do acknowledge that Habermas' notion of emancipation is influential to feminists seeking a normative theory of consciousness and liberation, she does reserve judgement on Habermas' theory of communicative action. They see it as gender blind and perpetuates enlightenment tradition of *male streaming* mainstream analysis of reconstructing project of modernity.

Secondly, to compound the adverse androcentric effects of 'project of modernity', it can be coupled with an accusation of eurocentrism. According to Gilroy (1992) European culture was homogeneous during and after the enlightenment. He claims social theory can no longer understand interpret the project of the enlightenment without understanding the periphery. For example, the legacies of slavery, colonialism and imperialism serves as reminders to the over-ambitiousness of Habermas's hopes and aspirations for social life.

In addition, the central tenets of the 'project of modernity' including rationality and progress for which Habermas (1981) attempts to formalise as practical achievements, should be put into a dark context. As the predecessors at Frankfurt school in 1949 saw, Adorno and Horkheimer and Zygmunt Bauman (1989) powerfully narrates, the Holocaust provides a devastating critique of enlightenment legacy and thought and highlights the slipping into a barbarism of Nietzchean nightmares. For example, on one level, Hitler's regime in Germany

merely refined and perfected 19th century techniques of social discipline. But, on yet another level, Hitler's regime was a deliberate throwback to an archaic 'society of blood', a society of savagery and a society with a lust for domination, control and power; a society which raises further questions to the enlightenment project. Coupled with this, there have been periodic episodes of inhumanity which have ranged from genocide in Rwanda in the 1970s onwards, mass genocide and 'ethnic cleansing' in former states of Yugoslavia in Kosova in 1999 as one stark example. The most spectacular recent example was the terrorist attacks on 'twin towers' in New York and subsequent 'war' in Afghanistan. It is very difficult to implement Habermas' (1984) universalized narratives of communicative action, with so many differences between states, cultures and ideologies. It seems it is very difficult to provide a modern solution to a postmodern problem: for example, *diversity* of fundamentalist beliefs and consequent actions (postmodern), *communicative action* is very brittle in overcoming instabilities of such beliefs (Habermas' modernism).

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Habermas' work is a concern with rethinking the tradition of critical theory and German social philosophy. Rationality, freedom and justice are not just theoretical issues to be explored and debated, but for Habermas (1981) they are practical tasks that demand utter commitment and relentless achievement.

BIOGRAPHY

Professor Jason L. Powell BA (Hons), MA, Ph.D, FRSA is Professor of Social Gerontology and Associate Dean of Faculty of Health and Life Sciences at University of Coventry. He holds an Honorary Fellowship at University of Liverpool; Honorary Professor at Australiasia Research and Education Foundation at Tasmania University; Visiting Research Fellow at Oxford, and recently invited as Visiting Scholar at Harvard University. He has been Visiting Professor in Canada, USA, Australia, Africa and Jordan. He was nominated and elected to Fellowship of the British Royal Society of Arts (FRSA) in recognition of his research. He has strong interests in social theory, ageing, power and identity. He is author of *Social Theory and Ageing* (2006) which was part of Charles Lemert's distinguished 'New Social Formations' book series, Rowman and Littlefield: New York.

References

[1] Bauman Z. (1989). *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Cambridge: Polity

[2] Bernstein R. (Ed.) (1985). *Habermas and Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity

[3] Biggs S., Powell J. L., *Journal of Aging & Social Policy* 12(2) (2001) 93-111.

[4] Brand A. (1990). *The Force of Reason*, London: Allen Unwin.

[5] Brenner W. H. (1989). *Elements in Modern Philosophy*, London: Prentice Hall

[6] Delanty G. (2000). *Social Science*, London: Routledge.

[7] Foucault M. (1977). *Discipline and Punish*, London: Tavistok.

[8] Gane M. (1981). *Baudrillard*, London: Routledge.

[9] Gilroy P. (1992). *Black Atlantic*, London: Hutchinson.

[10] Habermas J. (1981). *The Theory of Communicative Action*, London: Beacon Press

[11] Habermas J. (1984). *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity

[12] Habermas J. (1992). *Postmetaphysical Thinking*, Cambridge: Polity.

[13] Horkheimer M., Adorno T. (1949). *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Allen Unwin.

[14] Kellner D. (1989.) *Critical Theory, Marxism, and Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity.

[15] Levin D. (1993). (Ed.) *Modernity and Hegemony of Vision*, California: University of California Press.

[16] Lyotard J-F. (1984). *The Postmodern Condition*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

[17] McCarthy T. (1978). *The Critical Theory of Jurgen Habermas*, London: Hutchinson.

[18] Mestrovic S. (1993). *The Barbarian Temperament*, London: Routledge

[19] Powell J. L., *Science Paper Publisher* 4(2) (2001) 1-13.

[20] Rasmussen D. (1990). *Reading Habermas*, London: Blackwell

[21] Roderick R. (1986). *Habermas and the Foundations of Critical Theory*, London: Macmillan.

[22] Stanley L., Pateman C. (1991). *Feminist Interpretations and Political Theory*, Cambridge: Polity.