

A CRITIQUE OF COMMUNICATIVE ACTION IN JURGEN HABERMAS' PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract

The fundamental problems of global crises have rendered our humanity distorted and putting our humanity at crossroads. The problem of global crises facing our humanity today has necessitated the need for using the Habermasian tradition of the ethics of communicative action in resolving human problems. This paper is aimed at reflecting on the critique of Habermas's conceptualization and contextualization of communicative action as role playing. Communicative action serves as the basis for socio-political order and the hallmark for an emancipated global society. This paper adopted the method of analysis in navigating through this plethora of global crises because Habermas believed that communicative action guarantees linguistic transparency, moral accountability and human emancipation. This paper concluded that communicative action is the ethics of dialogue and the key to moral answerability, human emancipation, social cooperation and linguistic transparency. Communicative action is the basis for normative ideal social order, normalization and the stabilization of human behaviours. Communicative action is predicated on the indispensability of dialogue. Dialogue is part and parcel of democratic stabilization.

Keywords: Communicative Action, Dialogue, Language, Society, Social order

Communicative Action in a Contemporary Global Political World

This intellectual discourse has shown the inextricable link between language, communication and global political order to human rationality. The central notion of Habermas's work offered fundamental critiques of social condition and the problem of social order. Habermas's work is emphatically the critiques of society, culture, religion and politics. It presupposed the moral dimension of human activity and epistemological significance; the act of knowing, speaking and acting. Habermas proved to have a more comprehensive view on language and practice in terms of his Wittgensteinian standpoint and his conception of deliberative democracy. Habermas traced the link between discursive communication and constitutional democracy. In concluding this work we will summarize Habermas's discursive communication and democratic theory and point to the problem areas in contemporary global political order caused by terror and terrorism. The paper discusses basically Habermas's conceptualization of communicative action which is anchored on a better argument and the need for normative presupposition.

Furthermore, human society is only meaningful in the context of the actualization of the ideals of the common good in which the proper ground for achieving the ends of society or social stability, progress, justice, social development and tranquility is attained. The human person is the most noble and most perfect rational being in all of nature and in the whole of creation. Language is a part and parcel of the process of rational discourse. Language is a rational discourse and it involved intelligibility. Rationality is a critical issue that deals with philosophy. The theory of rationality hinged on reaching mutual understanding in a system-life world. Habermas posited that the theory of rationality of beliefs and actions is a theme usually dealt with in philosophy. The ultimate goal of dialogue is the fusion of horizons. The main question is whether such fusion is possible in the dialogical engagement of individuals.

Communicative Action as the Basis of Gadamerian "Fusion of Horizons"

The possibility of the Gadamerian "fusion of horizons" is based on the radical openness, in dialogue, to moral resources and truth claims in which we defend human flourishing in both cultural and anthropological tradition. Moral claims or resources and truth claims are related to the value of humanity found in all cultural traditions. Truth claims are criticizable validity claims. They are criticizable validity claims where there are the yes/no positions that are generally acceptable or rejected in society. Reason exists and it is the form and substance of

the rational man and the rationalization of society and it is the solid bedrock of free and open communication. Global transformation needs the interpretation of the notion of communicative reason. The global reality is that this new age is faced with the circumstance, events and major changes in the social, political, economic, and cultural environment of one nation-state affecting the environment of many other nation-states and global communities. The world has entered into one of the most critical global crises of our generation. What is very critical or vital to us in our contemporary social world is the human degradation across the globe. There is no gain saying the fact that natural forces, threaten human welfare. We as human beings are facing a world crisis and many of us will be walking through our personal crisis as a result of these broader global crises. The world is in a crisis-state. There is no crisis – free life as far as we are concerned as human beings. The knee jerk system- life world seems to be collapsing. The world economic system is spinning out of control. The whole world is in a crisis point. Crisis always caused the slow pace of human development. Crisis creates the opportunity for creativity. It provided a powerful motivation for change. The critique of reason is crucial in a rational society. Habermas' conception of the critique of reason within reason itself revealed the need for rational society to be characterized by radical reforms and rational dialogue. Communicative action required rational dialogue. Dialogue is not just the transference of knowledge but that of double function characterized by communicative interaction in an inter-subjective world.

Communicative Action as a Criticisable Validity Claims

Man should not be as a means to an end but an end in itself. Habermas and Kant believed in international law, global peace and universal solidarity. Habermas believed that "philosophy is the guardian of rationality".¹ Habermas's philosophy assumed legitimate, normative expectations, and the interactional contexts between two or more people in a process of dialogic communication in the world. Bourdieu's concept of the politics of difference is what he referred to as social practice. Bourdieu's conception of dialogue connoted the politics of difference. Society should be governed by the precept of truth, good and beauty. For Finn Thorbjorn Hansen posited that "the greatest value a human being can ever hope for- only the Gods, Socrates would say, would be able to find and possess the truth, good and the beauty, not human beings".² Dialogue is driven by dialectics of good logical arguments and counter arguments and a discursive reflection and language. Dialectics has its own motivation and movement. Global terrorism is

antithetical to the sacredness of our humanity and dialogic communication. Terrorism is a threat and a great evil to humanity. Global terrorism is a calculated attempt to thwart the world of its universality and the intercultural dialogue of universal brotherhood. Terrorism destabilized the project of humanity and the project of humanity is a sacred norm. Terrorism can cause an untold hardship to the members of the planet earth. Terrorism is bad and should be condemned in total because it is a gross violation of the sacredness of our humanity or the ethics of global peace in a new world order. The moral life is accepted as universal, necessary, obligatory and connoted the practical engagement in everyday reality. The political engagement is developed through a complex relation of reciprocity and mutuality and it is achieved by conducting oneself according to universal, rational principles.

Habermas's philosophy failed to meet the Kantian paradigm to address the problem of ethics in human society. Habermas's thought does not expressed realistic political objective. Kant is Habermas' point of departure because he actually embarked on the reformulation of Kant's moral and political philosophy. Habermas believed that the Enlightenment democratic vision marked the liberation of humanity. Habermas' strategy is the epistemological sweep and the transvaluation of Kant's classical international law into new cosmopolitan order. Habermas' philosophy has not been able to address the re-enchantment of nature and disenchantment of the enchanted world. Habermas' theory of communicative action and political theory has a pragmatic account. Habermas's work has not been able to address global insecurity, terror and terrorism. The global world today is facing the challenges of Islamic fundamentalism, and the problem of capitalism, and racism in America. Fundamentalism is the demand for a strict adherence to orthodox theological doctrines, usually understood as Islamic fundamentalism, fundamentalist modernist or Christianity fundamentalist. The problem with North/South Korea is not really the problem of Islamic fundamentalism but the problem of economic and political crises. Habermas's work is characterized by some striking weaknesses. Habermas' thought is deeply rooted in Eurocentric prejudices. Habermas believed that communication is always ambiguous, suspect of latent violence. In line with Carl Schmitt's position, Habermas's thought reflected on what Borradori called the "ontologization of friend-foe relation".³Habermas favoured a normative legitimation and a gradual transformation of international law into a new cosmopolitan order. Habermas revisited the universalistic structure of the legal and moral foundation of a liberal order. Habermas' theory of communicative action is the reformulation of Kant's

moral universalism and the question of universality. The theory of communicative action brings to the foreground the inclusiveness of individuality and otherness as the vehicle for self-correcting learning processes. Habermas' thought is the key to solve apparently insurmountable problems. For Habermas, democracy, in its structural perfectability, is both the means and the end of human emancipation and the political task of social transformation. Emancipation is located in everyday communicative practice. Habermas saw human autonomy as a function of interpersonal exchange. Habermas does not take individual autonomy for granted. The Habermasian approach focused on the theory of social order. Habermas reflected on a form of order that arises spontaneously when rational and mutually aware individuals succeed in solving coordination problems. A social relationship exists 'when several people reciprocally adjust their behaviour to each other with respect to the meaning they give to the normative standards of society. The theory of communicative, political action becomes very pertinent because in consequence, boundaries between public and private, the individual and society, the system and the life world are deteriorating and must be bridged by purity of motives and good theoretical framework.

Philosophical sociology's problem is that of excessive fragmentation of the system and the life world. The rational man makes the model of social life possible and is actualized through institutionized model of democratic deliberation. Ritzer and Stepnisky believed that "social systems have grown increasingly complex, distorted, differentiated, disintegrated and characterised by an instrumental reason".⁴ Habermas distinguished between strategic reason and instrumental reason. A rationalized society should be one in which both system and lifeworld are permitted to synergistically rationalize, following their, own internal logics. Ritzer and Stepnisky reflected on the rationalization of system and life-world of society characterized by material abundance and control over its environments as a result of rational systems and one of truth, goodness, and beauty stemming from a rational life world. The project of modernity is an unfinished project waiting to be completed by the power of communicative rationality and rationality has its own limitations which simply deny us the enrichment of life. Accordingly, Ritzer and Stepnisky believed that "Georg Simmel is best known in contemporary sociology for his contributions to our understanding of the patterns, or forms, of social interaction".⁵ The idea of communicative action correlated with the idea of social interaction. George Ritzer and Jeffrey Stepnisky duly observed that we do not need to lose sight of the insight, into the larger scale aspects of social reality.

George Simmel like Habermas equated society with interaction. Ritzer and Stepnisky quoting Georg Simmel believed that “society ... is only the synthesis or the general term for the totality of this specific interaction ... society is identical with the sum total of these relations”.⁶ This social relation is rational relations. Kant advocated for perpetual peace on a global scale. The idea of international law and perpetual peace is a contemporary legacy of Kant’s political theory. One of the questions that interest us in Habermas’ political philosophy is the relationship between his communication theory and his political theory in the contemporary world. The Habermasian picture of the conceptualization of communicative, political action presupposed the response to the plethora of conflicts that arise in the world of practice. Accordingly, Hoffman and Graham believed that “what makes concepts political is that they respond to conflicts that arise in the world of practice”.⁷ Politics is the study of legitimate, normative behavioural expectations or an analysis of our common social worlds. Politics has to do in its strict sense with the practical everyday discourse of human association. Politics is cognitive and it is anchored on good causes. Hoffman and Graham asserted that “good causes can be strengthened by good arguments”.⁸ Kant and Habermas’s contemporary political theory can be categorised as right based’ because the purpose of the state is not only to realise goodness but, to ensure that people have respect for each other’s right. Hoffman and Graham believed that “a political consequence of the priority of the right over the good is that the state’s functions are limited... Kant political theory is less commonly formed in the course on the history of political thought”.⁹ Habermas’s writings provided challenging points of reference to make contemporary political theory more relevant and useful. Habermas’s communicative, political action showcased the fact that the relevance of theory to practice represented a paradigm shift of humans’ quest for the progress of contemporary rational society. The rise of globalization has created the need for an international normative framework, contemporary political order and political theory has moved to fill the ideological gap. Habermas’ ideas are geared towards the politics of globalization. For Mackenzie, “contemporary political philosophy is alive and it is grappling with new ways of thinking about classical problems, wide range of newly identified problems and with innovative theoretical paradigms as well”.¹⁰ Contemporary political philosophy reflected on the resolution of conflicting interests in public life. For Mackenzie:

Political philosophy, in short, is a negotiation between the (often competing) demands to philosophize about political life and to politicize those philosophical claims themselves. Many defenders of democracy

have resorted to construct alternative visions of a new democratic system, the most popular being deliberative democracy...deliberative democracy is a model of democratic government that seems to overcome the failings of the purely representative model by placing a large emphasis on the value of “deliberation. Deliberation, in this context, refers to a process, or more often processes, of rational argumentation. The central claim, therefore, is that voting is not enough to sustain democracy.¹¹

The ideal of deliberative democracy is the dialogical process of settling disputes for the purpose of resolving problematic situations. Mackenzie aligning himself with James Bohman summed up the ideal of deliberative democracy as “a dialogical process of exchanging reasons for the purpose of resolving problematic situations that cannot be settled without interpersonal co-ordination and cooperation”.¹² The ideal of deliberative democracy is to construct properly the dialogical conception of human rationality where mutual understanding in the democratic potential of debate and discussion is reached. Habermas described public conversation where everyone is concerned to reach mutual understanding with one another as ‘communicative action’. Accordingly, Mackenzie believed that “a communicatively reached agreement is not about one person treating another as an object; in philosophical terms, it is not based on a subject – object relationship, but rather on a genuinely inter-subjective relationship: a relationship between people”.¹³ Communicative, political action in Habermas’s conception of deliberative democracy correlated with the idea of the political public sphere. The political public sphere has to do with the public domain of the collective individual members living in a particular market economic structure and political environment. Habermas has developed his theories of communicative, political action and discourse ethics which provided the basic normative core for deliberative model of democracy.

The Concepts of Law and Democracy in Habermas’s Philosophy

Habermas began to see law not as part of the human problem, but as part of solution to human predicament and ideological distortion of the system- life world. Law as a command served as a basic normative core for human society. It is the basis of normative ideal social order. Habermas offered a more rational discourse and rational account of law and democracy. Habermas does not reject a

fully democratic form of social deliberation. Habermas' communicative, political action is predicated on democracy. Democracy is premised upon disagreement within agreements. Habermas believed that when we reject democracy, the system-life world will be in a state of social chaos which can only be resolved by systematically undistorted communication. What he referred to as public discussion or conversation or debates in the models of democratic setting.

Consequently, realising and transforming democracy is still a genuine goal even for complex and globalizing social world. Habermas' theory of deliberative democracy has to do with political principles and practices. Habermas's communicative, political action theory is reflected on the process of collective bargaining. Accordingly, Jay believed that:

Theorists of "consociational democracy" abstracted three factors from states which had achieved stability. First, stability was promoted by the very separation of peoples into distinct social and political blocs, since, high fences make good neighbours. Second, the solidarity of these groups promoted a concentration of authority in the hands of their representative leaders, giving them power to control dissidents and freedom of political manoeuvre. Third, the elites recognized that open political confrontation would have disastrous consequences, and hence by a process of bargaining, and accommodation produced agreed policies that reconciled the contending claims and interests.¹⁴

Deliberative democracy is the process whereby the indispensability of dialogue is applicable to political public debate or public discussion. It has to do with the individual and the state. Plato and Rousseau, for instance, opined that the sole objective of the formation of the political state is to guarantee normative peace, tranquillity, order, freedom, justice and the common good. Deliberative democracy hopes for a deeper engagement with political life. Dialogic communication precedes deliberative democracy. In any democratic debate or public discussion, communication becomes very relevant in the normative framework of such society. The aim of all good government is to guarantee the improvement of the people and the stability of the political state. The beneficiary primacy of society has to do with the momentary burst of freedom. Habermas' theory of communicative, political action presupposed the ideal of democratic government. Democratic government is fundamentally about the equality of each person in the state and to have a say in government decision. Deliberative democracy is central and encapsulated the egalitarian dimension of the democratic

ideal. Communicative, political action theory is a central egalitarian dimension of the democratic ideal. Democracy is a system of government that is practical and it is based on the solid bedrock of constitutional patriotism. One very crucial element in understanding Habermas' contemporary political philosophy is that, we must first and foremost bring to the foreground interpretation of politics, morality and law as the bases of normative ideal social order. Politics has to do with political relation. Politics has to do with constitutive and transformative human association. Politics constituted political interaction. Habermas' contemporary political philosophy reflected on politics, morality and law. Habermas and Rawls' notion of politics has to do with the conceptualization of international justice. For Mackenzie, "Rawls' creative approach to a theory of justice requires the demands of equally reasonable yet different versions of the good life".¹⁵The idea of the good life required the need for contemporary political order. Mackenzie observed that politics is not a very abstract way of thinking about the task of political philosophy. Politics focused on the human dimension. Habermas' contemporary political philosophy focused on the human dimension of politics. Political activity reflected a kind of social interactions of human persons. Political activity appeared as a particular way of reaching rational agreement where disagreement exists and impacts on other people. The liberal supported the basic features of a complex modern society. For Baradat, "liberals are quick to recognize deficiencies in society and therefore are anxious to reform the system".¹⁶Habermas' theory of communicative action encapsulated the normative assumption of politics as a social process of human interaction. Politics is a process and it has a definitional difficulty in terms of its conceptual clarification. Broadly speaking, politics and dialogue connoted social order, human existential dimension and the rational process of social cooperation and social co-ordination. Politics and dialogue have utilitarian orientation or the value of public good. It has to do with the existential condition of human affairs and socio-political order. Political activity demanded the rational process of politics and dialogue. Politics and dialogue demand the recognition of unifying force and the aesthetic appeal to inter-subjectivity. Habermas's theory of communicative action is the precondition for ethical discourse of an ideal society. For Hoffman and Graham, observed that "Habermas maintains that freedom of belief and association is a precondition for discourse".¹⁷Habermas and Rawls shared the same idea of basic human rights. Accordingly, Hoffman and Graham, believed that "the growth in consciousness of human rights is one of the achievements of communicative rationality".¹⁸Hoffman and Graham believed that "politics is a dialogue, in which people bring

to bear their different cultural perspectives, such that what emerges from the dialogue is something pluralistic yet coherent”.¹⁹Habermas’ theory of communicative action presupposed political participation. Accordingly, Hoffman and Graham believed that “democracy requires participation, but it would be wrong to assume that this is only possible through direct involvement in political processes”.²⁰ For Hoffman and Graham, “democratic causes are those that empower people”.²¹Habermas’ democratic theory is anchored on emancipating people in rational society. Habermas’s philosophy has some element of utopianism just like socialism. Socialism is much more than economic system. Martin Plot opined that “Habermas first seems to approach the understanding of democracy in a way similar to how it has developed in the theory and practice of modern democracy”.²²Habermas’ theory of communicative, political action is anchored on critical debate or public deliberation. Martin Plot posited that “Habermas emphasizes the aspect in which violent conflict was replaced, not by peaceful, political conflict, but by critical debate”.²³ Habermas’s notion of communicative action seeks to achieve linguistic understanding. Martin Plot opined that “in sum, reaching understanding is both an end and a means in democratic political action”.²⁴Habermas’s notion of communicative action anchored on the basis of rational dialogue and characterized by communicative practice of everyday life. Martin Plot alluded to Lenoble’s position that “he valorizes Habermas’ vision of a broadened communication and a reinforcement of the space of public debate... He thinks that this objective implies that, contrary to Habermas, we must bring to light the precise, logical nature of human linguistic exchange”.²⁵Habermas’s notion of communicative, political action is the enigma of language and expression; an enigma intrinsic to any human institution, and the communicative normative standards for democratic political actions as such.

Habermas’ criticizable validity claims referred to the linguistic dimension of speech and action that remained open to the indeterminacy and plurality of meanings characteristics of open communicative process. Habermas affirmed pragmatic analysis to speech and action. Habermas’ theory of communicative action represented the understanding of democratic politics. Habermas reintegrated communicative rationality into the political public sphere. The purposive rational activity is Habermas’ notion of democratic political theory characterized by the potential for opinion formation and common will formation in noncoercive communication. Speech is the human way of acting par excellence. The idea of public deliberation is faulted due to the problem of human nature and

subjective interests. Habermas believed that law has a role to play in the normalization and the stabilization of human behaviours. For Habermas, “law is the medium through which communicative power is transformed into administrative power”.²⁶ Habermas believed that “politics has been overburdened and democracy has been endangered...politics has become overburdened by problems that are worldwide and now internally proliferating”.²⁷ Habermas’ critique of society internalized democracy. According to the Habermasian picture, human rights have a “transnational and universal character”. Habermas concluded that “language itself supplies the primary source of social integration...communicative action, then, depends on the use of language oriented to mutual understanding”.²⁸

Evaluation

Habermas’s work has both merits and demerits. One of the merits is that his theoretical reconstruction reminds us of the need for truth and action in democratic governance. One of the demerits in his work is that his work has not been able to grapple with the present complexities of our contemporary societies. Our humanity can only be defined by a phenomenon of free and open communication which is based on rational dialogue. A great society is that society that is built on the solid bedrock of free and open communication. Communication occurred mainly through language and language is the key to culture. Language is the carrier of culture. Communicative action is embedded in life world context. In the final analysis, society must be integrated through communicative action through social integration and emancipation. Communicative action is the normative basis of intersubjectively recognized criticizable validity claims. The theory of communicative, political action reflected on norm-conformative behaviour. Habermas opined that “social integration is possible only on the basis of normatively valid rules...”.²⁹ Habermas’ communicative action is anchored on normative contexts and reflected on the thesis of internal colonization. It reflected on hermeneutics, linguistics, pragmatics, social, political, moral, ethical and epistemological significance. Habermas’s theory of communicative action reflected on both the rights of political participation and the rights of communication. Habermas’ theory of communicative action is devoid of personality clashes and is monetary-bureaucratic complex. It is cultural humanism or cultural rationalism. Habermas believed that “only a democracy that is understood in terms of communication theory is feasible under the conditions of

complex societies...a communicative stream of a vital public sphere embedded in liberal political culture".³⁰Habermas' theory of communicative action brought to the foreground epistemological realism and public dialogue. Habermas opined that "what we may achieved with the successful refounding of the unity of a nation-state that was torn apart decades ago depends first of all on how we assess the future of the nation-state in general".³¹ As we have seen, system-life world formed the horizon of processes of reaching mutual understanding in which participants rationally agree upon or discuss something in the one objective world (common social world). Habermas is apologetic. Habermas concluded that "reaching understanding in the life world requires a cultural tradition that ranges across the spectrum, not just the fruits of science and technology".³² Habermas believed that "we do not fully control the totality of our practical existence".³³ Habermas's theoretical reconstruction presupposes a practicality condition.³⁴ It represents the ordered whole in which alone the very possibility of human ethical life arises.³⁵ Habermas's conceptualization of society is critical social theory. For Audi, critical theory is any social theory that is at the time explanatory, normative, practical and self reflexive.³⁶ His social theory reveals the political state as the actuality of concrete freedom.³⁷His ides of state-regulated capitalism, social developments involves contradictions or crises arising from democratic human society.³⁸ His social and political theory reflects the idea of a welfare state. For Habermas, philosophy has been only too conscious of its origins as something that had ontological primacy. Society is conceived with a practical intent.³⁹His theoretical analysis reveals the public's involvement in the critical debate of political issues of democratic society.⁴⁰ His theoretical reconstruction reveals the source of normative orientation and the critique of a modernity that is at variance with itself.⁴¹ His socio-political epistemological realism is simply the methodological investigation and the metaphysical implication of the democratic state and rational society; it reveals the strict complementarity to lived experiences.⁴² His political template and social theory reveals a kind of an epistemological political praxis.⁴³ His theoretical framework is a reciprocal relation between speaker and hearer whereby the end result is critical understanding and linguistic transparency in democratic human society.⁴⁴ His work reveals the societal learning processes of the rationalization of society.⁴⁵ His philosophy anticipates a practical perspective in terms of which the welfare state is organized into action orienting histotries.⁴⁶ His philosophical perspective or social theory is the attempts of the welfare state to increase its role and powers for the overall good of society, and the promotion of human rights and freedom.⁴⁷Habermas's

theoretical construct is the scientification of politics and the problem-complex of political decision.⁴⁸ His conceptualization of communicative action is the rationalization of society. For Habermas, rationalization means, first of all, the extension of the areas of society subject to the criteria of rational decisions.⁴⁹ Accordingly, Habermas posited that society is exemplified by purposive-rational-action.⁵⁰ His work is anchored on a socio-epistemological paradigm. It rests on the idea of the common good in the welfarist state. His work can serve as a leit motif test for African revival whereby democratic governance in Nigeria in particular and Africa in general should be based on truth and action.⁵¹

Concluding Reflections

The Habermasian picture of the normative structure of society reflected that our practical existence has a normative and systemic character. The idea of linguistic communication has to do with normative and systemic character of meaning. We do not fully control the totality of our existence. The Habermasian picture of the human world presupposed the critique of reason and theory of communicative action. The Habermasian analysis adequately accounts for the paradoxes of communication and rationality that are revealed by a careful analysis of the intersubjective psychic life. Communicative ethics controversy focused on moments of social interaction. Intersubjective theory explored the development of mutual recognition. The goal is a completely new social order in which human cooperation is the normative basis of rational conduct and productivity. Habermas's work is the critique of culture and politics.

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