HABERMAS ON NORMATIVE INTERSUBJECTIVITY: THE SOCIOLOGICAL AMBIVALENCE OF “PUBLIC COMMUNICATION”

I do think that I have been a reformist all my life, and maybe I have become a bit more so in recent years. Nevertheless, I mostly feel that I am the last Marxist.... I don’t think that there can be any type of revolution in societies that have such a degree of complexity;.... For academics, revolution is a notion of the nineteenth century.

--- Habermas (Calhoun 1992)

As Habermas (1986, 98; 1992, 422) boldly claims, there is a general “theoretical lack of democracy” in Marxism in which bourgeois democracy has never been treated either fairly or seriously. Political-legal legitimacy, unlike in Marxist arguments, is not based as much on class domination as on “deliberation and argument.” It is “discourse-centered” and “institutionalized” around “the general conditions of communication for a discursive formation of will” rather than around the exploitation of workers by capitalists (pp. 448-50). The bourgeois democracy is not about political management by the administrator of the administered, but about discursive interaction between interlocutors. As a result of his disagreement with other Marxists regarding the historical significance of bourgeois democracy, Habermas constructed a unique view about social formation under capitalism. His theoretical effort aims to establish a Marxist social theory that focuses on evolution of communication rather than revolution of production, persuasion rather than domination, and intersubjective legitimacy rather than objective administration. With regard to the economic and technical domination in late capitalism, Habermas’s (1996) solution is to theoretically and historically look for a “mediating sphere of public communication” between economic-technical domination and individuals, between system and lifeworld, between social facts and social norms. Habermas’s earlier discussion of the public sphere and its more recent transformation into the issue of communicative rationality can be viewed as his lifelong effort to re-construct this intermediate
sphere, in which, he believes, a normative theory of intersubjectivity in Marxism can be established.

The Public and Private Spheres: Past and Present

According to Habermas (1992), his own vision of the public sphere was inspired by Adorno’s discussion of mass culture. Like his mentor’s analysis of the culture industry (Horkheimer and Adorno 1944), Habermas’s interest in the public sphere also attempts to search for the “redemptive other” of mass culture. Both of them believe that this redeemer can only be found “outside” the culture industry and its re-production. In contrast to Adorno’s philosophical approach which explores the dialectical self-critique of reason in thinking, Habermas takes a historical-sociological approach toward rationality exploring the historical roots of the concept of public and how it developed in the western bourgeois societies—especially how the public sphere developed in parallel with the culture industry and yet struggled against the commercialization of the public sphere by the culture industry.

In order to understand Habermas’s analysis of the public sphere, it is necessary to explore how and why public spaces are historically distinct from private spaces and how the emergence of the idea of public parallels the development of rationality. According to Habermas, during the Middle Ages, the public sphere was included within the private sphere. The public sphere, then, specifically referred to the objective representation of the king’s sovereignty in the display of his private body and power in front of the collectivity of his subjects. The arena of the public was inscribed and included within the king’s private sphere until the king’s power could be physically seen before the populace. Therefore, the “feudal public sphere” was only a derivative of the king’s privacy in public. Since this representation of the king in the medieval period always involved both his “private and subjective” body and his “public and objective” sovereignty over the subjects, there
was no need to distinguish the category of public from that of private.

However, with the decline of the feudal powers—the polarization of the Church, the king and the nobility—and the rise of the bourgeoisie, the king’s sovereignty began to diffuse and his private body of power to disperse. The “wholeness” of the king’s personal sovereignty was transformed into collectively “fragmented” bourgeois popular sovereignties, and the individuals of the bourgeois class came to share his private body of power. This diffusion of the king’s feudal sovereignty to popular bourgeois democratic sovereignties and the dispersal of the king’s subjective body/power into bourgeois subjective spheres made the distinction of public and private historically necessary. The king’s private body symbolized the wholeness and oneness of sovereign power, but now democratic sovereignties are composed of the sum of the infinitely fragmented private bodies of bourgeois individuals. Although the explosion and dispersion of the king’s privacy enabled the bourgeois to construct their own individual privacies, it also made the public sphere in a single king’s privacy no longer historically possible. The public sphere can no longer be concretized in one private body or derived from it. The historical split of the private from the public in the king’s body not only has contributed to the rise of new private spheres, but also has required a new conception of the public sphere.

In feudal times, the function of the public sphere was to display the personal presence of the king in public, which implied both his private power/body and his public sovereignty (Habermas 1989b, 142). In contrast to this “feudal public sphere,” the “bourgeois public sphere” was viewed as the collective representation of individual sovereignties, demonstrating that the public is a collectivity of individual presences of bodies and power. The feudal sovereignty and its legitimacy was based upon the people’s perception of the unity of private and public in the king; in contrast,
bourgeois democratic sovereignties rely upon the demarcation of the subjective privacy from the
objective publicness made possible by the public invocation of reason--the differentiation of the
public sphere from the king’s private sphere--and upon a new historical reunification of these two
spheres made possible only by the association and interaction of private people of the bourgeois
class (Habermas 1989a, 27). In other words, popular sovereignty (the social and political-legal
basis of contemporary societies) is always “intersubjective,” based upon the dialectical demarcation
and unity of the subjective and the objective, of the private and the public. This historical
ambivalence of private and public, subjective and objective, and its possibility of intersubjectivity
have contributed to the rise of the bourgeois public sphere.

According to Habermas, in order to understand the formation of the bourgeois public sphere,
it is necessary to understand the social-historical construction of private autonomy among
individuals. The authentic public sphere, argues Habermas (1996, 366), is constituted by private
people. “The spheres of private persons come together as a public.” It is simply because “the
public’s understanding of the public use of reason was guided specially by such private experiences
as grew out of the audience-oriented subjectivity of the conjugal family’s intimate domain” (1989a,
28-30). Just as the feudal public sphere is the historical derivative of the king’s privacy, the
bourgeois public sphere is based upon the emergence of bourgeois private individuals. Three
historical developments in the West, according to Habermas, have enabled the bourgeoisie to
develop their own private autonomy distinct from the feudal powers: the Reformation and its release
of religious belief from the public church to private faith, ensuring religious freedom in bourgeois
privacy; the public-legal institution and its “institutional guarantee” of people’s struggle against the
king and the State; trade and private property, which make freedom and self-reflection possible
However, what does Habermas mean by the bourgeois private sphere and its subjectivity? In essence, it refers to an “audience-oriented privateness”--“a process of self-clarification of private people focusing on the genuine experiences of their novel privateness”--which is constructed in conversational and dialogical communication (Habermas 1989a, 29; 1992, 426-27).\(^1\) On the one hand, this privacy contributes to “psychological experiences of subjectivity concerned with itself,” which possibly constitutes individual absolute sovereignty and subjective communication. On the other hand, the “interiority” of bourgeois privacy, being waived from economically productive labor, is characteristic of dialogue and its critical-rational discourse. Psychological and political-economic emancipation, implied in the bourgeois private sphere, has contributed to the rise of the bourgeois public sphere and public communication which is “based upon intraparty and intra-association critical publicity” (Habermas 1992, 440).

In my view, Habermas’s picture of bourgeois private and public sphere is like two concentric circles linked through “communication.” The inner circle represents private autonomy and its subjective particularity. The possibility of the outer circle--the public sphere and its generality and abstractness--is a derivative of the inter-subjective dialogues in this inner circle. The “exteriority” of the public and the objective is dependent upon the existence and development of the “interiority” of the private and the subjective. On the other hand, due to its objectivity and abstractness, the public sphere is able to secure a “social space of communication structure” for concrete and subjective private individuals, in which they can “communicate with each other, and confirm each other’s subjectivity as it emerged from their spheres of intimacy” (Habermas 1989a, 54; 1996, 360). The bourgeois public sphere is a historical product of the dialectical play of the subjective interior

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\(^1\) Habermas 1989b, 138; 1992, 440.
and the objective exterior spaces. Nonetheless, when this historical relationship between the interior and the exterior in the bourgeois public sphere reversed, the nature of public sphere also under went “social-structural transformation.” Following Adorno’s analysis of the culture industry in the 1940’s, Habermas argues that the arrival of the culture industry contributed greatly to this transformation--in both the spheres of publicness and the concept of rationality implied in it.\(^3\)

Just like any mode of government, bourgeois democracy needs to resolve the issue of legitimacy in both political and legal senses. Nonetheless, unlike the “traditional” legitimacy of feudal power which is hidden and exclusively concentrated in the king’s monopoly of power and sovereignty, the contemporary “legal-rational” legitimation of democracy is in “an apparent display of openness” (Habermas 1989b, 141). In contrast to the feudal display of the king’s physical body and power “in front of” the people, the bourgeois system produces the symbolic representation of each private individual “by” the collectivity of individuals. Thanks to the invention of media of mass communication, bourgeois political systems are able to summon individual sovereignties collectively, but without any physical motion of collective actions--e.g. without having every body in the same place at the same time. The culture industry has made the public sphere possible by gathering individual sovereignties, from the people and for the people, collectively and publicly.

However, unlike the demonstration of the king’s sovereign power by showing his body in public, the culture industry can publicly represent the popular sovereignties before the people without producing the individual physical bodies, and thereby allowing those bodies to remain in their own spaces--e.g. homes. The advantage of this mass communication-mediated representation over its feudal counterpart is that it involves popular bodies in the constitution of publicly objective representation, symbolically rather than physically, and this representation occurs on a daily basis in
everyday life instead of only on some special occasions. The disadvantage is that the public arena
is produced and objectively maintained by the mass media rather than by individual privacies. As
Williams (1974) argues in his analysis of “mobile privatization” in the broadcasting industry, the role
of mass media is to mobilize private presences, and to represent the collectivity of individuals as a
“public body”—like the king’s body shown in public. Thus, the culture industry-mediated
publicness is no longer a derivative of privacy, but is a mobilization of privacy and its individually
fragmented bodies and powers. It is no longer an objective representation of self, but is
objectification of self. Individual privacy is no longer a bedrock for the rise of the public, but is
subordinated to it. This mobilization of private selves by the mass media has nothing to do with
public communication, but everything to do with “publicity.” “To depoliticize public
communication,” according to Habermas (1996, 377), “is the kernel of truth in the theory of the
culture industry.” The concept of public refers to a rational and critical discussion of public affairs
in public; however, publicity is only interested in resolving the problem of objectively legal-political
representation of individual sovereignties in mass democracy.

Contrary to the critical role played by the public use of reason, the function of publicity is not
to struggle against the state and power relations outside private spheres, but to objectively
legitimatize social systems. The character of public opinion is no longer dependent upon a
reasoning public and public discussions, which are both “critical in intent” and “institutionally
guaranteed” (Habermas 1996, 142). Public opinion has devolved into public relations, which
manipulatively subject the mass to political and economic processes without any criticism. As
Habermas puts it, publicity “serves the manipulation of the public as much as legitimation before it”
(1989a, 178 [original emphasis]). In this sense, the thesis of Enlightenment and its possibility for
public use of reason is absorbed by its own anti-thesis--publicity of private spheres. The interiority of privacy has been pulled to the outside, and the exteriority of publicity has pushed itself inside. When the possibility of the public sphere becomes publicity, the inner sphere also turns out(-side) to be both “publicized privacy” and “privatized publicity.” This new form of public sphere, which is based upon the publicity of private spheres, Habermas names the “mass public sphere.” In contrast to the bourgeois public sphere and its dependence upon inner autonomy, this externalized mass public sphere is manipulated by the culture industry, which is in charge of the construction of the private spheres of the mass.

Following Adorno’s view of pseudo-individuality in the mass-mediated culture industry, Habermas contends that there are no historical and sociological conditions for the mass to produce, internally, their own privacy and interiority as the bourgeois did. On the contrary, the mass consumes the subjectivity that is externally defined by mass communications. This alienated objectification of subjectivity makes the mass subjects subordinate to external objective relations. Like Adorno’s “bourgeois and individualistic view of subjectivity,” Habermas also claims that as long as the construction of subjectivity comes from the internal private sphere--e.g. the bourgeois subjectivity--it is good. Nevertheless, when the external or the other creates this subjectivity--e.g. the culture industry--it is definitely bad. Mass subjectivity and its private sphere is no longer a hermeneutic place for free individuality, but an arena for mass communication-mediated manipulation. Along with such a view of mass subjectivity, Habermas implies that public communication among the mass is impossible, simply because, unlike its bourgeois counterpart, the mass cannot develop “audience-oriented subjectivity” and the critical capacity to use reason publicly in this kind of private sphere. In other words, the historical opposition between interior construction
of subjectivity and exterior construction of subjectivity contributes to the sociological differences between the bourgeois and the mass, as well as their notions of “public” (Calhoun 1992, 468).

In the age of the mass and mass communication, according to Habermas, the public body of private individuals has disappeared, only the mass of individuals is left. In an argument similar to Adorno’s, that the domination of the culture industry makes the mass of individuals unable to contribute to cultural production, Habermas suggests that those individuals can no longer rationally and critically participate in public affairs in public arenas. Real public opinion exists only in the absence of the objective representation of mass subjectivities, and the true public sphere can not survive in the presence of public relations or publicity, which involves the mass in public arenas. The only possibility for the public body of private individuals is in organizations, since the organization is the only social space which still allows “organized individuals” to participate in critical-rational discussion or intersubjective communication in public senses. Only these individuals “could use the channels of the public sphere which exist within parties and associations and the process of making proceedings public.” Only this public of organized private people can avoid the manipulative publicity displayed by the administrative power and generate an alternative of “critical publicity” arising from public communication on intraorganizational levels (Habermas, 1989a, 232; 1989b, 141-42; 1992, 440).

In this way, Habermas’s early analysis of the public sphere is only an extension of Adorno’s account of the culture industry, which attempts to explore how and why public communication is colonized and made impossible in the age of mass communication and mass culture (1989a, 467-68). Despite his disappointment about the mass public sphere, Habermas, like his Frankfurt School predecessors, still thinks that rationality may coexist with power relations without surrendering to
them. Therefore, in his theoretical-historical reconstruction of the public sphere, he still allows for critical-rational discourse in private spheres and at intraorganizational levels, but does not believe that there is any possibility for autonomous and non-coercive solidarity at more collective levels--e.g. interorganization or intergroup. Despite the title of his first anthology of interviews *Autonomy and Solidarity*, Habermas’s (1992) motto could be “no autonomy, no solidarity.” He believes that solidarity only can exist in the social space that allows critical rational discourse and critical capacity, however there is no such thing--private autonomy--in mass/collective levels. Therefore, no mass solidarity is possible.

In addition to the erosion of private interiority by the culture industry, Habermas (1989a, 225) argues that there is another historical, social trend that makes collective solidarity and genuine public use of reason impossible in contemporary societies: the coming of the social welfare state. Just as the culture industry is accessible to everyone, the welfare system offers each person security with the price of economic autonomy and the mass becomes a client of the state. The privacy of the mass is reliant upon the state, and no longer autonomous. In this way, the welfare state erodes “solidarity and autonomy” in the mass, and turns them as social actors into “societalized private persons” (Habermas 1992, 445).

Moreover, the welfare state, by managing its clients and changing the historic opposition of capital and labor to that of the administer and the administered, reduces the possibility of class struggle. Through the political management of economic conflicts, economic justice no longer calls for the negotiations among different groups of social interests, but relies on political interventions of the state apparatus. Thus, the legitimacy of the state is built upon the economic dependence of social members upon the state. This economic dependence, on the one hand, destroys the
possibility for any social solidarity arising from critical individual debates and arguments. The historical opposition between real public opinion and ruling structure in the form of a state has been replaced by the legitimacy of the state sustained by the public opinion of individual clients (Habermas 1989b, 136). On the other hand, the accommodation of the public sphere within the welfare state also hinders any possibility of the public sphere being differentiated from its counterpart of publicity in the culture industry.

In short, this welfare state style of public sphere is different from the bourgeois public sphere, since the former is no longer “interest-free” but “a field for the competition of interests,” which brings about the “refeudalization of public sphere” (pp. 141-42). The mass public sphere is refeudalized, because the historical distinction between private and public in the bourgeois public sphere has disappeared. “The integration of the public and private realms,” argues Habermas (1989a, 177), “entailed a corresponding disorganization of the public sphere that once was the go-between linking state and society.” The public sphere of the mass has restored the indistinction of the private and the public in the feudal period when the public sphere was undifferentiated and inscribed within the king’s private sphere, and the social sphere was dominated by the feudal powers. Nonetheless, in contrast to that feudal inclusion of public in its private counterpart, the public (objective) accommodates the private (subjective) and the state apparatus absorbs civil society. The false concepts of public and its objectivity have eroded the historical possibility of individual privacy.

In sum, Habermas’s historical-sociological analysis of public sphere has announced not only the doomed fate of the mass and their historical mis-link with the public sphere, but also the impossibility of public communication among them. Ironically, the rise of mass and mass
communication has not expanded the scope of the bourgeois public sphere, but has destroyed the political character of the public sphere as counterforce to the state apparatus, and depoliticized the public sphere, making it an appendage to the culture industry and its consumer culture. The historical paradox is that the inclusion of the mass in the bourgeois public sphere has excluded the possible formation of the public sphere in the domain of mass communication. Public communication, based upon critical and rational conversation, can only exist at the face-to-face level. In the sphere of mass communication, publicity and its irrational discourse absorb any form of public communication. Habermas, following Adorno, has declared that mass communication is an anti-Enlightenment project that brings us the opposite of rational and public communication. Any collective representation of private individuals in mediated communication is out of the question.

Facing the impossibility of public communication in the arena of mass communication, Habermas continues his search for the possibility of rationality outside power relations and explores where this kind of rationality may lie by moving into an analysis of communication. In my view, only through the understanding of Habermas’s account of rationality, can one know why and how he transforms his analytical focus from the public sphere to communicative rationality and action. To understand this theory of communicative rationality, one must realize Habermas’s re-conceptualization of rationality within the tradition of Frankfurt School critical theory—how he redefines and enlarges the concept of reason, aiming to transcend the “black writer,” Adorno’s “dark forces of rationality” (Habermas 1987a, 106).

From Communicative Rationality to Communicative Inter-action

Habermas’s concept of rationality rests on two criteria. The first criterion is criticizable validity claims, and the second one is intersubjectivity. Any individual and subjective utterances,
according to him, can be assessed as rational or irrational because they raise criticizable validity
claims, which are fallible and open to objective judgment (Habermas 1984, 8-9). Furthermore,
something is only rational if it meets the conditions necessary to forge an understanding with at least
one other person, hence rationality is “intersubjective” rather than subjective or objective (Giddens
1987, 229).

From this definition of intersubjective rationality, one can realize the significant
relationship of communication to rationality. If there is no communication, one is not able to
establish relationships with other people--intersubjectivity--or to raise any criticizable validity claims,
which reflect on rationality. Thus, rationality always presumes communication. Based upon this
presumption, Habermas tends to claim that any rationality should be, or at least is oriented toward,
the “communicative.” The concept of communicative rationality, as defined by Habermas (1984,
101), “carries with it connotations based ultimately on the central experience of the unconstrained,
unifying, consensus-bringing force of argumentative speech, in which different participants
overcome their merely subjective views and, owing to the mutuality of rationally motivated
conviction, assure themselves of both the unity of the objective world and the intersubjectivity of
their lifeworld.” This definition implies that communicative rationality always includes three
aspects of action and three validity claims, which involve three world relations (Habermas 1979,

The first aspect of action is the “teleological action.” This mode of action presupposes a
relation between the actor and an objective world of states of affairs. The validity claim of this
rationality of action is truth. To test truth requires “theoretical discourse.” The second aspect is
the “normatively regulated action.” In this kind of action, the actor can relate not only to an
objective world, but also to a social world, which “consists of a normative context that establishes which interactions belong to the body of justified interpersonal relations” (Habermas 1984, 88). The validity claim of this domain is rightness. In contrast to the truth claim in teleological action, the test of rightness requires a practical rather than theoretical discourse. The third aspect of action is “dramaturgical,” which focuses on how the performance of any action reveals or expresses something about the actor’s subjectivity. In this performance and expression of actions, an individual represents his subjective world in a specific way to an audience of other actors. The validity claim of this action is truthfulness, for which the proper test is the comparison of a speaker’s expressed intentions with his ensuing actions (Habermas 1984, 1987b; White 1988).

In contrast to both strategic action in aesthetic expressions and instrumental action in scientific works, the characteristic of communicative action is always oriented to reaching understanding (Verstehen) rather than to the success of power and knowledge (Wissen). “I shall speak of communicative action,” writes Habermas (1984, 286), “whenever the actions of the agents involved are coordinated not through egocentric calculations of success but through acts of reaching understanding.” In other words, communicative action includes not only the content and information aspect but also the relational aspect between the interlocutors (Habermas 1979, 41-43). Communicative action is inscribed in the dual structure of speech: the “representational” function of speech, and the “inter-subjectivity” in which speaker and hearer, through illocutionary acts, establish the relations that permit them to come to an understanding with one another.

More importantly, “the orientation to reaching understanding that is predominant in everyday practice,” writes Habermas, “is also preserved for a communication among strangers” (1996, 366 [original emphasis]). Communicative action must involve not only intimacy but also
estrangement, not only isolation, but also participation in different social conditions--e.g. private and public spheres, interpersonal lifeworld and impersonal system. In this way, Habermas claims that communicative action is the “original mode” of communication.\(^5\) It is the most comprehensively rational form of communication in which action must be oriented to reaching an understanding across all three dimensions: representation of the objective world, expression of subjective meanings, and establishment of legitimate interpersonal relations. This form of communication involves three social domains: objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art (Habermas 1983, 9; Pusey 1987, 80).

Furthermore, the purpose in Habermas’s conceptualization of rationality is not only to gain an understanding of the diversity of communicative action, but also to conceive of modernity, which deals with the decoupling process of cultural modernity and societal modernization--the differentiation of systems and lifeworlds (Habermas 1992, 443). In order to analyze the “triad” of subjective expression, objective representation, and intersubjective legitimacy in communicative action, Habermas puts more focus upon the distinction of “system and lifeworld” in his more recent analysis, and emphasizes the inter-subjectivity of lifeworlds. With the help of such distinction, Habermas explains that there are two different forms of rationalization in the project of modernity. On the one hand, societal modernization--the rationalization of social systems--is concerned with the progressive differentiation and complexity of social systems, and involves enhanced levels of instrumental reason. On the other hand, cultural modernity--the rationalization of lifeworlds--involves changes in lifeworlds, which include the differentiation of the value spheres of truth, goodness, and beauty and their corresponding modes of knowledge. Lifeworlds also include the increasing secularization of beliefs and the institutionalization of the norms of reflexivity and
criticism (Habermas 1983, 13). Simply put, the importance of “this intersubjectively shared, overlapping lifeworld,” as Habermas (1994, 111) puts it, “lays down a broad background consensus, without which our everyday praxis simply couldn’t take place.”

As the latest chapter in the critique of rationality within the tradition of Frankfurt School style of critical theory, Habermas continues his lifelong attempt to find the possible coexistence of rationality with power relations in his analysis of communicative action and lifeworlds. Unlike his Marxist predecessors, Habermas not only establishes a critical discourse of rationality and modernity, but also seeks for a “normative foundation” on which this discourse may rely. He asserts that, one of the fundamental questions for any critical theory is: if there is no normative foundation, how is critique possible? He points out two possible choices for critical theorists without such foundation. The first choice is to reduce everything to power, as Foucault and many post-structuralists have done. Another choice is to always “stir up and hold up,” like Adorno’s negative dialectics (Habermas 1987a, 126-27).

Rejecting these two approaches, Habermas argues that the normative foundation of communication may serve as an “Archimedean point” for critique. In disagreement with the classical Marxist ideological critique of production and its illusory vision of utopian society, Habermas intends to establish some intelligible link between ideological analysis and emancipatory possibility by arguing that intersubjective communication is the only social arena for any dialogue between “ideology and utopia” (Habermas 1986, 212; Bernstein 1985, 24). Only communicative action may fulfill the promises of Marxism, which include both “emancipatory capacity from doxa” and “self-reflection in dialogical form” (Bernstein 1985, 12-16). From this normative foundation of intersubjectivity, Habermas defends his position against both objectivist and subjectivist arguments.
Following the anti-objectification tradition of Adorno and the Frankfurt School, Habermas speculates on how to preserve the possibility of free individuals in an objectively alienated world.

However, in contrast to Adorno’s (1987) dialectical and structural theory of society, which emphasizes the significance of economic and technical production in the constitution of social alienation, Habermas moves his analytical focus from the objective production to the intersubjective aspects of sociation. This move from production/consumption in classical Marxism to an analysis of communicative inter-action is not only a transformation of his own Marxist-style social and political critiques of the public sphere into the differentiation of rationalities in social inter-action, but also an attempt to Weberize his original Marxist project by arguing that the mechanism of any liberation in contemporary societies is no longer in the relations of the social system—e.g., the relations of economic production and labor—but in the relations of association in lifeworlds. As a Weberian Marxist, Habermas revisits Weber’s theory of action, on which he reconstructs this theory of communicative inter-action. By emphasizing the diverse possibilities of social action, Habermas attempts to rescue his own thought from the “dark forces” of economic domination and its structural expansion within the Frankfurt School tradition.

In doing so, Habermas switches his focus from ideological critique of the public sphere to analysis of deeper levels of normative foundations of communication in everyday life—some empirical, rather than “a prior” or “transcendental” foundations (1986, 13-14; 1992, 442). As a rediscovery of civil society, a lifeworld is based upon “relations of association” rather than “relations of production” found in social systems (Habermas 1992, 453). “I simply think that,” asserts Habermas, “one can label as a lifeworld only those resources that are not thematized, not criticized. The moment one of its elements is taken out and criticized, made accessible to discussion, that
element no longer belongs to the lifeworld” (1986, 109 [my emphasis]). In other words, any life forms and life-styles that have not been criticized, fit in this category.

Similar to his early analysis of privacy as a search for “a priori historical construct of subjectivity” in daily interaction, Habermas’s discussion of lifeworld is another attempt to seek “system-free communication”—unmediated parts in the pollution of mass society and culture—in everyday life. He seems to treat the exploration of the lifeworld and daily communication in cultural modernity as an “ontological resistance and resolution” to the “pathological colonization and disturbance” created by power and money in societal modernization. Habermas’s strategy is to re-link modern culture, everyday social praxis and action, to the sphere of communication, and he emphasizes that the latter is the meeting place for the three worlds of society, culture and communication. In contrast to the Marxist revolutionaries, the reformist Habermas (1992, 444) claims that “the state apparatus and economy [is] a systematically integrated action field that can no longer be transformed democratically from within…. ” Rather, he argues that, “the languages of administrative power are by definition alienated from agents, from natural language,” and are not open to “reassessment, retranslation and rereception” for any social agents (Calhoun 1992, 473).

In this way, Habermas avoids the holistic view of society often found in the Marxist terrain. The social totality, for him, has collapsed and the hope of social revolution has generated into discursive re-formation. The individual has become the only perceptible totality in society with which social theories may deal (Habermas 1989b, 136). The change in social-economic relations in the Marxist revolution has been replaced by the preservation of individuality in interpersonal communicative reason (Habermas 1986, 211; 1987a, 112). Unlike his early dedication to social-political critiques, Habermas no longer intends to challenge the capitalist political and
economic systems, but only to ensure the maintenance of discursive democracy in everyday life and its role as “a democratic dam against the colonizing encroachment of system imperatives on areas of the lifeworld” (1992, 444 [original emphasis]). His major concern has become the pursuit of the “socially differentiated integration,” in which different kinds of social action and interest can be coordinated without damaging any particular forms of life through daily public communication. The task of critical social theory is no longer to subvert the objectification of socio-economic structures, but to intersubjectively negotiate the objectivity in daily life.7

On the other hand, the substitution of discursive interaction for the public/private contrast in Habermas’s theory of communicative action is an effort to criticize “subject-centered reason--sovereign rational subject--and any treatment of subjectivity and intentionality only as a function of form of life” (McCarthy 1987, viii-ix). Habermas (1983, 11-12) opposes any arguments that claim that only subjective expression and performance is valid in this alienated social world, and disagrees that aesthetic-expressive action is the only possible strategy for human liberation. He argues that any attempt to replace intersubjective communication with subjective aesthetics is not legitimate, since any subjective expressions can be valid only through interpersonal negotiation. In this way, Habermas distances himself from Adorno’s notion of the dialectical negation of communication, and replaces it with “determinate negation.”

Communication, for Adorno, is both dialectical and negative. Dialectical means that the relationship between subject and object is both oppositional and unified. Negation stresses that this dialectical process is never-ending, and its dynamic is in the subjective negation of its own objectivity. The continuous negation and separation of subject from object is a necessary condition for its re-unification with the object, when the objectivity of subject and the subjectivity of object
may be accomplished. This “dialectical negation” of subject and object contributes to the possibility of non-alienated subjectivity in the objective social world without any subordination of subject to object or vice versa. According to Adorno, immanent critique of reason and internal logic of rationalization make dialectical negation possible. The possible cure for alienation and objectification is reason itself—in its “immanence and transcendentality” (Adorno 1973 and 1982). Habermas, like Adorno, believes that reason is “self-corrective and self-reflective.” Nonetheless, its self-correction and reflection is not in the dialectics of reason, but in the communication of reason and (inter-) action (Habermas 1987a, 113; McCarthy 1987, xvi).

Therefore, Habermas’s strategy is to explore “the selectivity and alternative possibilities of rationalization which may emerge from the procedure of communicative rationality” rather than the “internal logic of rationalization” (Bernstein 1985, 23). Unlike Adorno’s search for negative dialectics between subject and object, Habermas appeals to a “determinate negation” by putting this dialectical and negative duality of subject and object into an inter-subjective dimension of public discourse. For Habermas, the possibility of subjective objectivity and objective subjectivity in Adorno’s arguments about “dialectical negation of communication” can be reached only through the dialogical process of social inter-action, since the subjective expression and objective representation can only be legitimized in interpersonal relations. This intersubjective negotiation, in contrast to Adorno’s notion of the wandering subject, which ends “nowhere,” may help a subject locate a dwelling space in its fellowship with other subjects, but still hold on to its “separation and negation from the objectively alienated relations.” For Habermas, a “nomadic but non-negative” self is possible, since this individual self not only relies on the negative critique of objective knowledge, but also on association and dialogue with other selves. In other words, this construction of the
individual self always involves the subjective-aesthetic struggle for objective representations and its
negotiation with other subjective expressions in interpersonal relations, in which the dialectic
negation of subject and object may reach an “intersubjective legitimacy” (McCarthy 1987, xvi;
Habermas 1992, 456).

Evaluations and Critiques of
Habermas’s Analysis of “Public Communication”

In summary, Habermas’s analysis of rationality, from public sphere to communicative action,
deals with the significance of “intersubjective legitimacy” in contemporary societies. In his works
on the public sphere, Habermas’s major objective is to answer the following question: Is there any
possibility for a non-alienated and non-objectified subjectivity “outside” the mass-mediated
subjectivity constructed by the culture industry? According to him, the historical differentiation and
distinction of “bourgeois private sphere” from the objectification of the culture industry enabled the
bourgeoisie not only to establish their “interior construction of subjectivity” but also to build up their
intersubjective concept of “public.”

In other words, Habermas indicates that the emergence of
intersubjectivity is historically based upon the dichotomy of private/public (subjective/objective),
and he emphasizes the historical opposition of the “subjective side” of rationality--e.g.
audience-oriented subjectivity--to its “objective side” in his analysis of the bourgeois public sphere.
This theoretical invention of public sphere marks an important step in the discussion of
intersubjectivity in rationalization, although it has not yet moved beyond the binary opposition of
subject and object.

Undoubtedly, Habermas’s attempt to construct intersubjective rationality reaches its climax in
his analysis of communication and lifeworlds, where he reverses his previous argument that the basis
of intersubjectivity is the dual opposition of subject and object. In his more recent work, he claims
that only through social interaction, can objective representation and subjective expression obtain their intersubjective legitimacy. Interpersonal communication is the only possible social dimension for reconciling the historical opposition of subject and object through negotiation with one another. In this way, Habermas has transformed his concentric view of private/public, which underlines the duality of subjectivity and objectivity, into a spiral view of communication, which deals with the dialogue of subject and object through intersubjective interaction.  

More importantly, Habermas’s more recent arguments about communicative rationality and inter-action suggest that there are two separate communication spheres in contemporary societies: mass communication and the communication process of lifeworlds. The mass media and their construction of an “exterior” mass audience externally manipulate mass communication. The communication process of lifeworlds is a self-generating process of communication, which involves an “interior” audience oriented to dialogue, and the possibility of a public use of reason (Habermas 1992, 437). The differentiation and specialization of contemporary societies not only produce the distinction of systems and lifeworlds, but also the rupture between mass mediated communication and dialogical communication in daily life. In contrast to the classical Marxist argument that the specialization and differentiation of society are the sources of possible alienation, Habermas insists that “fragmented individual spheres” and social differentiation have become hermeneutic resources for resistance and emancipation.

Furthermore, Habermas challenges his Marxist comrades and their productionistic view of domination. According to the Marxist, capitalist society is mainly based upon the control of production in both economic and technical arenas; however, Habermas argues that it is, instead, based upon the control of communication. Control of communication creates openness,
accessibility, and mobility rather than exclusiveness or closure. From the age of production to that of communication, the mode of domination and legitimation in capitalism is no longer “ideological and structural constraints imposed upon social agents” but “legitimate participation and deliberation” in them (Habermas 1986, 176). This transformation from production to communication explains how important it is for social theorists to distinguish communicative inter-action from mass mediated communication, and explores the theoretical and historical possibility of the former to renew a democratic conversation and public discourse outside the mass media. For example, in Habermas’s view, the isolation of fragmented private persons and audiences created by the mass communication of the culture industry forms an “abstract but inclusive public sphere,” which may invite individual participation and develop communicative power to “influence the effectiveness of administrative power in the functionally differentiated societies” (1996, 372-74).

In this way, communication is no longer teleological, but procedural. It does not aim to construct objective representation and have different social members reach the same subjective interpretation. Communication is, rather, a fundamental and compulsive social process, in which different parties of social interests may take a part and commonly share the “procedural impartiality” that has been fulfilled (Calhoun 1992, 468). There is no longer need to distinguish true consciousness from false, and the classical Marxist concept of false consciousness has been replaced with the concern of “procedural rationality and justice” in communication.

Thus, Habermas’s theory of communicative inter-action can be seen as a move away from philosophy of false consciousness to that of communication. The former concerns the truly objective representation of subject and the sincerely subjective expression of objectivity, while the latter deals with how this representation and expression are negotiated rightly and impartially
through the procedure of intersubjectivity (Habermas 1986, 199). Communicative inter-action, for Habermas, is the best way—if not the only way—to confront and resist the social mediation constructed by economic-technical domination, since communication is intersubjectively symbolic interaction, which always involves subjectively aesthetic-expressive experiences and objectively cognitive-instrumental representation. Communication is not only a necessary process of differentiation and integration for the subject and object, but also a procedure, which institutionally guarantees the possibility of dialogue and negotiation between the self and other. The fulfillment of this procedure is the only way to avoid the objectification and normalization of inter-subjectivity, or the decline from inter-subjectivity to subjectification.

However, communication is not only a historical-social process that enables social actors to endlessly and negatively strive against alienation—both objective and subjective dimensions—but also some kinds of inter-subjectivity may be reached in this negotiating process. In brief, for Habermas, maintaining publicly discursive interaction is the only cure for the pathologies in society and culture, and he tends to argue that the transformation or reformation—the change to different forms—is only possible through this procedure of communication (1989b, 136; 1992, 443). Public discourse of communicative inter-action may help clean up the manipulation and polluted colonization of mass communication in the sphere of the lifeworld; however, it is out of the question that any social actors can transform the objective structures of mass communication.12

If the administered society and its mass communication are based upon ontological distances among social actors, then communicative inter-action does not bridge those distances, but only aims to coordinate action among social members of different interests through dialogue in daily interaction. In other words, interpersonal association is always a potential solution for the
colonization of publicity and its objectified legitimacy of the social system, through the “intersubjective legitimacy” achieved in communication. In this way, the triumph of communicative sociation is not in transforming the alienating administrative power of mass communication, but in serving as an intersubjective mediator, which resists social mediation from the objective structures of mass communication. The purpose of communicative inter-action is no longer to overcome the isolation of the subjective from the objective or appeal to its reunification, but to maintain the intersubjective negotiation of subjectively fragmented expressions of truths and to legitimize the objective representations of individual truthfulness.

Whether in his conceptualization of “public” or “communication,” Habermas appeals to the formation of individual sovereignty and freedom in an interpersonal and discursive dimension. This social concern for self-freedom is always connected to social legitimacy of personal communication and deliberation. Put it another way, Habermas’s analysis about communicative intersubjectivity in both private and public spheres can always be seen as normative discourses of social interaction in capitalist societies. The sociological ambivalence of Habermas’s theories of “public communication”--theories of both publicness and communication--demonstrate that the possibility of personal liberty is always inscribed in a compulsorily dialogical process of communicative sociation, which makes both mass democracy and the public discourse of mass communication impossible.

NOTES

1 The emergence of private/public, according to Habermas, is based upon the historical
separation of civil society from the state. Borrowing from Scottish moral philosophers, Habermas points out that “civil society was always contrasted with public authority or government as a sphere that is **private in its entirety**” (1992, 433 [original emphasis]). In a word, the private sphere designated the exclusion from the sphere of the state apparatus (1989a, 142).

2 “Subjectivity,” writes Habermas, “as the innermost core of the private, is always already oriented to an audience” (1989a, 49).

3 Without any doubt, Habermas (1989a) has treated the eighteenth century commercial cultural institutions (especially the newspaper) as one of the most important historical forces, which contribute to the bourgeois public sphere. In contrast to his nostalgic view of cultural institutions in the past, Habermas sees the contemporary culture industry merely as the colonizer of the bourgeois public sphere.


5 Habermas also indicates the “compulsiveness” of communication by underlining that “I never say that people **want** to act communicatively, but that they **have to**” (1994, 111 [original emphasis]).

6 As Giddens (1987) eloquently puts it, Habermas’s theory of communicative action is “reason without revolution.”

7 As Habermas admits that “communicative power cannot take the place of administration but can only influence it. This influence is limited to the procurement and withdrawal of legitimation” (1992, 452).

8 Habermas, following Adorno, is one of the first theorists who attempts to theoretically and empirically problematize this mass-mediated subjectivity constructed in the culture industry by re-constructing a free bourgeois subjectivity. His discussion of “audience-oriented privateness” in bourgeois private spheres echoes Horkheimer’s (1972) notion of bourgeois autonomy in the family, which is a strategy of “recognizing the particular individuality” in order to struggle against objectification and the identification of subjective and objective, of particular and universal.

9 In his book *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (1996), Habermas has utilized his concept of communicative inter-action in lifeworlds to reinterpret and reconstruct his previous analysis of public sphere, and made the latter sound more “intersubjectively communicative.” For example, the public sphere is redefined as “a communication structure rooted in the lifeworld through association network of civil society” (p. 359).

10 The view about two kinds of communication in the contemporary capitalist society is definitely not new in mass communication research. For example, Katz and Lazarsfeld’s analysis of “the two-step flow of communication” also indicated that there is always a gap between mass communication and interpersonal communication, which “filters” the
effects of mass media (Katz 1957). In contrast to Katz’s two-step flow of communication and his emphasis on the transmission role of “opinion leaders,” Habermas argues that, not some social intermediaries of opinion, but the individuals’ participation in interpersonal dialogue of public affairs in lifeworlds limits mass communication effects.

11 Habermas (1992, 446) agrees with B. Manin’s argument that “the source of legitimacy is not the predetermined will of individuals, but rather the process of its formation, that is, deliberation itself....The deliberative principle is both individualistic and democratic.....”

12 Habermas notices the need of “objectification” of communicative rationality in institutions, but never makes any concrete proposals (Bernstein 1985, 24).

References


Books.