

THE *LIFEWORLD*. A COMPLEMENTARY CONCEPT TO HABERMAS' THEORY OF COMMUNICATIVE ACTION

Alvin A. Galeon, Ph.D.

Habermas contends that the problems and discontents of today's technical world are not caused by rationalization itself.¹ Rather, they are rooted "in the failure [of man] to develop and institutionalize all the different dimensions of reason in a balanced way."² To be sure, Habermas is not totally opposed to the trend and project of modernity, but he aims to provide the better an alternative to it through his *Theory of Communicative Action*.

The *Theory of Communicative Action* is concededly an outcome of his attempt to solve the pathological situation brought about by science and technology.³ In this theory, Habermas endeavors to give new directions toward the creation of the ideal world. By stressing the need to utilize their reason. For him, rational discourse is the key toward building strong interpersonal relationships among individuals and creating thereby a harmonious society through consensus.

The *Lifeworld*

Habermas introduces *lifeworld* as a complementary concept to communicative action. He presents it from two essential viewpoints, i.e., as transcendental-phenomenological in the Kantian sense and as hermeneutical-phenomenological in the Hegelian sense.

For Habermas, any utterance about situations by all social actors in communication is always embedded in various worlds—the objective (consensual fact), the social (intersubjective-normative component) and the subjective (private element). These three worlds represent the life of a man which Habermas calls his *lifeworld*. The lifeworld is significant in arriving at an agreement in the individuals'

utterances about the pathological situation. It serves as a framework or background in their discussions.⁴

Taking the idea of Shutz and Luchmann, Habermas describes the lifeworld as:

[the]stock of knowledge [which]... is to be understood not as a context transparent in its totality, but rather as a totality of what is taken for granted, changing from situation to situation, sets into relief at any given time against a background of indeterminacy. This totality is not graspable as such but is co-given in the flow of experience...⁵

In other words, the lifeworld includes but is not limited to the traditions, norms, values, beliefs, etc. uncritically accepted by individuals. It is not absolute and is therefore subject to change. It embraces the preunderstood, the present, and the future contexts.

As a preunderstood context, the lifeworld is unproblematic, ordered, unquestionable, shadowy and irrelevant to the discussion. Here, everybody assumes that one's motives and understanding of a particular act, for example, may hold the same with other members in the community.⁶ However, as soon as a context of relevance is brought into a situation or when a particular problem regarding the situation is brought to the fore, the lifeworld "loses its triviality and unquestioned solidity."⁷ In this sense, important elements of the lifeworld are moved to the present context for they come into view and are then thematized and "mobilized in the form of consensual and yet problematizable knowledge."⁸

As a present context, the lifeworld serves as the essential basis to which communicative actors refer, reproduce and add their actions. It is deemed relevant to the situation and is tested through communicative action.⁹ In short, actors keep the segment of the present lifeworld as a resource for actions oriented to mutual understanding. Here, the lifeworld appears to be a limiting horizon for communication. Thus, the interpretation of a situation is limited within the framework of what has already been accepted.¹⁰

Initially, speakers and hearers relativize their utterances as they recognize the possibility that another actor of communication might contest their validity claims. While there are different

interpretations of the situation, they welcome the better idea not by insisting on their own validity claims but through a common understanding of their absurd condition. Common understanding happens when the actors arrive at a mutual agreement concerning the situation.¹¹ It is the intersubjective recognition of the validity claims raised by certain speakers in a discourse.

Lastly, as a future context, the lifeworld serves as the product of the communicative action. However, such a product is not the end-all of discourse because the lifeworld, although it sets boundaries in communication, is boundless. It is in principle not exhaustible. Hence, there is always a continual process of production and reproduction of the lifeworld which opens up the possibility to shift or expand the understanding. Moreover, as a future context, the lifeworld is incontestible for a certain time but transforms itself later to suit relevant situations.¹²

The exact elucidation of conditions (i.e., lifeworld in a present context) through communicative action presents itself as a circular process, always, at least in principle, criticizable and communicatively rationalizable. Hence, this process goes on and on. The end of communicative action is the attainment not of a universal (where there is no more room for change) but of a universalizable principle, a rational agreement on the definition of a questionable situation which is still subject to critique and, subsequently, to change.

Habermas' universalizable principle is drawn from the philosophy of Kant and Hegel. In this manner, Habermas steers a middle course between aprioristic foundationalism (which is seen to rely on the philosophy of consciousness) and relativistic contextualism. He bridges the gap between the intelligible and the empirical domains of the situation by not restricting the standards of rationality to a given culture or tradition and formulates a procedure for the rational assessment of any important question, in which the empirical situation is also given importance.¹³

In so doing, Habermas remains within the Kantian framework reformulating it on the ground of communicative norms. "For Kant, to act autonomously is to act rationally, and to decide rationally is to decide freely."¹⁴ Habermas goes beyond Kant by accepting Hegel's argument that men are simultaneously being

shaped by and are shapers of society. For Hegel, reason is not static; it evolves and changes together with the standards of society. Hence, "the *telos* of human society is to be discovered by sifting through the patterns in these changes—patterns in man's choices that reveal the character and direction of development..."¹⁵ Considering the ideas of Kant and Hegel, Habermas' communicative action results in a scaled down version of Kant's idea—the intersubjective use of reason (Hegelian sense) in communication.

Habermas also observes that Kant's overemphasis on the individual's reason leaves the consequences unimportant and is prone toward thematizing only one world—the subjective world. Such monological deliberation of issues by the individual is not complete and is prone to error since there is no way to test his interpretation or validity claim. In this argument, an individual's perspectival biases are most likely unrevealed in a monological testing procedure.¹⁶ This situation leads to pure transcendentalism, which Hegel vehemently criticizes.

Hegel contends that "insights should be transformable into the concrete duties of everyday life."¹⁷ For Habermas, Hegel is right in this respect. However, to avoid relativistic contextualism, Habermas transforms reason from Kant's personal to the social perspective, from the monological to the dialogical perspective.¹⁸ Thus, Habermas argues that issues must be resolved through the social deliberation rather than the individual's rational deliberation.

Communicative action is thus an opportunity to share various interpretations of the lifeworld and determine which is the better insight specially times of dispute. Using Hegel, Habermas avoids any residue of pure transcendentalism. Using Kant, however, his lifeworld abides in a peculiar *half-transcendence* or *quasi-transcendence*, making it the site for communicative action. This is so since it allows for the historicization of the lifeworld (as the ongoing communicative achievement of citizens of the lifeworld) without falling into the relativism that Habermas sees in the more sociological and hermeneutical conceptions of it.

The Colonization of the Lifeworld

Habermas believes that the modern capitalist society is undergoing a process of "one-sided rationalization." Consequently, the technological society today is experiencing a great crisis of legitimacy. By legitimacy, Habermas refers to the citizens' sense that the institutions within which they live are just, benevolent, in their best interest, and deserving of their support, loyalty, and adherence. In other words, legitimacy is clearly linked to social order.

Habermas observes that as advanced capitalist societies develop, the core integrative function of communication (i.e., rational agreement) is increasingly disabled or "colonized."¹⁹ Alongside this colonization, individuals behave toward formally organized action systems, primarily motivated by the process of exchange (money) and power. Social actors "adopt a strategic attitude and objectify normative contexts into something in the objective world."²⁰

The modern capitalist society, with its economic and bureaucratic spheres, appears "in which [social action is] regulated only via [delinguistified media of communications--i.e.] money and power."²¹ Thus, "norm-conformative attitudes and identity-forming social memberships are neither necessary nor possible in these spheres; they are made peripheral instead."²² Social individuals have been largely disconnected from norms and values and have above all become independent of their moral-political foundations.

No doubt, the medium of money affects much of the lifeworld. Indeed money "transforms use values into exchange values, the natural economic exchange of goods into commerce in commodities."²³ In certain situations and in certain respects, "the money medium replaces linguistic communication"²⁴ and results into a decrease of the efforts by social actors to interpret and discuss pathological situations in order to arrive at common solutions. Consensus formation via language and coordination of individual actions become impossible as they uncouple the interaction from the *lifeworld* context.

Luhmann calls this situation "technicizing of the lifeworld" or "dehumanization of society." By technicizing of the lifeworld, Luhmann means "relieving the interpretation processes of experience and action from having to take up, formulate, and communicatively

explicate all meaning relations that are implied [in the lifeworld context of communicative action]."²⁵ He also describes its effect as the "dehumanization of society" whose members "[split themselves off] from the lifeworld of formally organized domains of action."²⁶ Hence, people in this situation are indifferent to the structural components of the lifeworld, such as culture, society, and personality.²⁷ The traditional forms of life are dismantled to the extent of differentiating the structural components. As such, people become individualistic and unmindful of their essential role in advancing authentic progress.

Taking into consideration the essential feature of money, Habermas agrees with Parsons that it "transmit(s) messages with a built-in preference structure"²⁸ from the sender to the receiver. Money "can inform the receiver about an offer and induce him to accept it."²⁹ However, such acceptance does not rest in "an affirmative response to a criticizable validity claim."³⁰ Hence, actors motivated by money are oriented only to the consequences of actions—actions that depend only on calculating their success like profitability.³¹ Furthermore, Habermas also accepts the idea that money is neither a commodity nor a production factor. Unlike language, money has no intrinsic value even though it symbolizes amounts of value.³² Thus, millions of pesos in the hands of a man who is trapped in an isolated island will be deemed useless and non-valuable.

Power as specified in votes also takes a significant role in the colonization of the lifeworld. Like money, power as a steering medium represents only symbolic embodiments of value. According to Parsons, the power claim has its value as it is backed up by the possible threat of sanctions and the application of direct force. However, in itself, power possesses no intrinsic value.³³

People governed by a steering medium such as power face the lifeworld with pragmatic and purposive-rational dealings and exert generalized strategic influence on the decisions of other individuals. With the authority to give negative and positive sanctions, those in power also devalue the lifeworld context by bypassing the processes of consensus formation in language. In this

manner, the lifeworld is regarded as unnecessary for coordinating actions.³⁴

According to Habermas, if the actions of individuals are motivated purely by either money or power or merely by both money and power without any reason at all, then action coordination no longer requires responsible participants. This is so since responsibility entails the orientation of one's actions to criticizable validity claims. Yet, in the case of an interaction enforced by mere money and power, the criticizable claims to which actors have to defend themselves by saying yes or no have been relieved. In which case, actors are not anymore held accountable. Such a situation enhances the degree of freedom of action oriented to mere success³⁵ or pragmatic consequence. This is a situation in which the members of the lifeworld are devoid of influence and value commitments.

This legitimation crisis of society, which Habermas calls colonization of lifeworld by systems of power and money, leads him to revise and develop Parsons' remedy to pathological situations. Habermas employs the idea of legitimacy in as much the same way as Parsons talks about motivated compliance, as a prerequisite to social order. Such an idea is expressed thoroughly by Parsons in his AGIL's concept.

AGIL is an acronym that refers to the four generalized media in a society. A refers to the *Adaptation* that depends mainly on the generalized medium of money. G means *Goal Attainment* which depends on the medium of power or votes. I is *Influence* and L is *Value Commitments*. According to Parsons these four generalized media, which are essential to societal stability, need to work together to achieve social equilibrium. Habermas appreciates Parsons' explanation of this concept, but he reinterprets it by going beyond the concept.³⁶

For Habermas, there is a fundamental difference between these media. A and G are quantitative; both can be counted and whoever has the most of them wins. On the other hand, I and L are qualitative. Indubitably, no one can quantify influence or value-commitments since these are only enacted in communication between persons.³⁷ With this difference in mind, one can understand what Habermas means by the colonization of the *lifeworld*.

It is said that in traditional social settings, I and L operate. However, as the society develops, the quantitative media (A and G) begin to dominate. This domination of the quantitative media is the major source of colonization. The present situation allows one person or party to dominate the others by having more money or votes. Along with this dominance of money and power, the societal community of I and L is being colonized by its members who have fewer spheres for communicative action. In this situation, there is no more room for the others to be influenced through the most acceptable validity claims in discourse and no more chance for the members of the community to be committed to the normative values which they themselves construct and reconstruct. Social actors are put into a place where they are reduced to parts of the machinery which maintains the system. In this situation, their scope of action and decision is minimized. In addition, coordination of action among them becomes remotely possible. A rich politician, for example, after his being elected in a government position, may not have any more time to listen to the grievances of the people who have voted for him. This is so since the politician considers his success as merely a result of his money and power and not really due to the will of the people. A businessman may also treat his workers to be merely a part of the machinery by which to get the profit he wants. In this situation the discourse between politicians and people, owners and workers, rarely happens. The result is individualism, passiveness and competition among the social actors.

Actually, Habermas is not against money and power per se. For him, they are not a hindrance for the coordination of action or, in short, for communicative action. The core problem here is the legitimacy of their use. Unless money and power are understood as expressions of shared value-commitments and interpersonal influence, they will not be legitimate. For him, I and L alone can generate the legitimacy of A and G.³⁸

Habermas believes that the crisis of contemporary modernity is caused by the uncoupling of the systems media (A and G) from the lifeworld and its media (I and L).³⁹ The uncoupling of the systems media and the lifeworld can also be used as a reason why the modern capitalist society is dominated by a few rich and powerful people.

This phenomenon calls for every communicatively acting subject to play his significant role in the reconstruction of the colonized lifeworld. Such a call implies the necessity to rise and transform the structure of the public sphere, thus making communicative action inevitable.

Conclusion

Communicative action is a method of ideal discourse which endeavors to solve the pathological situations of modernity by using reason in all its aspects and conditions. In this endeavor, the lifeworld concept plays an important role is certainly a complementary to Habermas' concept of communicative action. Without the *lifeworld*, the use of reason would become unbalanced and consensus (which is the end of communicative action) would become impossible. As such, communicative action would be a failure.

I agree with Habermas that reason is not itself the cause of the modern problems; it is the unbalanced use of reason which causes them. An evenhanded use of reason happens when we give importance to and live the lifeworld in both Kantian and Hegelian sense of the word. This use of reason is also a way of avoiding both pure transcendentalism (which at times makes universal ideas obsolete and impractical) and relativistic contextualism (which at times leads to deficient standards and chaos).

By applying Hegel, the lifeworld becomes dynamic, a change in the lifeworld which depends on the mutual agreement of the social actors in a discourse. By applying Kant, the outcome of discourse is regarded as universalizable which in turn serves as a part of the lifeworld and becomes another basis for consensus. In this way, lifeworld and communicative action go hand in hand and become inseparable.

The unwarranted rationalization of modernity can be avoided if the lifeworld dominates the systemworld of money and power. Indeed, the lifeworld that governs the validity of truth-claims and argumentations can constitute the principal factor in the construction and reconstruction of the ideal world. Certainly, the use of reason in a balanced way and the supremacy of the lifeworld will lead

individuals to an authentic and meaningful life in the midst of modernity.

ENDNOTES

¹ Accordingly, man's rationality at times hinders the attainment of the ideal end. Thus, instead of going to the higher state of being (as Hegel asserts), man's reason leads him and his technological society to failure. Max Weber, for instance, regards the "rationalization of modern society to mean the ever more constricting enclosure of [men's] lives within an iron cage of technology, bureaucracy and dehumanizing calculation." See Peter Dews, ed., *Habermas: A Critical Reader* (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 2.

² Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action* Vol 1. *Rationality and Rationalization*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), xxxix.

³ This age of science has undeniably brought great advantages to people. However, it has also brought adverse effects. Modernization has resulted in competition, relativism, and individualism. The age of science has destroyed the unity of man, thus threatening the societal life or, in Habermas' lingo, man's *lifeworld*. Such a situation calls for the best solution.

⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action* Vol. 2. *The Critique of Functionalist Reason*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), 120-121. Subsequent citation from the same book will henceforth be abbreviated as TCA 2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 132. Quoting D. S. Shwayder, *The Stratification of Behavior* (London, 1965), 21ff.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 123-124 and 132.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 133.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 133.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 120-121.

¹² *Ibid.*, 132-133.

¹³ David Weberman, book review, "Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action," of Jürgen Habermas. Translated by Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber. *Philosophical Review* 101 (October 1992): 924.

¹⁴ Jane Braaten, *Habermas' Critical Theory of Society* (New York: State University of New York, 1991), 2.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁶ Habermas, "Morality and Ethical Life" *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 207.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 207.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 207-208.

¹⁹ Habermas, *TCA* 2, 196.

²⁰ Ibid., 154.

²¹ Ibid., 154.

²² Ibid., 154.

²³ Ibid., 171.

²⁴ Ibid., 261.

²⁵ Ibid., 263. This is a quoted quotation from the book of N. Luhmann, *Macht* (Stuttgart, 1975), 71

²⁶ Ibid., 307-308.

²⁷ Ibid., 307.

²⁸ Ibid. 264.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 265.

³³ Ibid., 268.

³⁴ Ibid., 280-281.

³⁵ Ibid., 263.

³⁶ Ibid., 255-260.

³⁷ Ibid., 255-269.

³⁸ Ibid., 271-281.

³⁹ Ibid., 154.

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