

# Rational Argumentation and Social Change in the Frankfurt School Tradition

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There continue to be criticisms of Habermas that attempt to fashion him as an idealist defender of a transcendent and universal rationality, a utopian committed to a concrete “ideal speech situation,” or even as some kind of logical positivist with no need for or interest in rhetoric (e.g., Flyvbjerg, 1998). These efforts have continued despite his quite explicit clarifications that good reasons alone have insufficient suasive force to produce and maintain the normative basis of liberal democracy; that pragmatic epistemic realism does not imply moral realism; that the “ideal speech situation” is an assumption rather than a goal of communicative rationality; and that in political struggles for social change, rhetorical processes aimed at democratic opinion and will-formation are essential to integrate the divergent beliefs and intentions held by members of the public (Habermas, 1996, p. 156; Habermas, 2005, p. 7, p. 282). Such misreadings may stem from an insufficient understanding of the unique historical context within which Habermas develops his ideas. One hallmark of Habermas's writing is that it synthesizes the ideas and technical vocabularies of several disparate schools of thought—German idealism, American pragmatism, analytic linguistic philosophy—against the backdrop of the neo-Marxian tradition he inherited from Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse (among others). My aim in this essay is to clarify Habermas's theory of public argumentation by placing it in its appropriate historical context.

## Early Frankfurt School and the Critique of Instrumental Reason

Since antiquity, it has been common for accounts of social change to posit a utopian state of human affairs, either pessimistically at the beginning of history or optimistically at its end, and accordingly present history either as an interminable deterioration from some past golden age or as a progressive improvement toward a future ideal society. These positions tended to oscillate over time. Early modern pessimism gave way in the Enlightenment to a radical optimism about the inevitability of progress built upon an unyielding faith in the power of human reason to learn from experience over time—an optimism exemplified by Hegel, a central figure in the German idealist tradition. This is the tradition inherited by Marx (1867/1906), who eschewed Hegel's idealism for a materialist account of history. Like Hegel, his account was both fatalistic and optimistic, so much so that he predicted that progressive social change would

come “with the inexorability of a law of nature” (p. 837). Marx's colleague Engels (1902) later synthesized the optimistic and pessimistic positions, contending that human history began with “primitive communism” and will end with stateless and classless communism.

The interdisciplinary neo-Marxian intellectuals associated with the Institute for Social Research at the University of Frankfurt were concerned primarily with reconciling this traditional Marxist view of history with the development of advanced capitalist society in the West and totalitarian communism in the East. Influenced by Weber's (1958/2003) description of the rationalization of modern societies, they explained the development and entrenchment of capitalism by developing a critique of *mass culture*. Writing immediately after World War II, Horkheimer and Adorno (1947/2002) found themselves in a world that seems to be getting worse, not better. Following Marx, they looked for contradictions in capitalist society. Though liberal political philosophy tends to promote individualism, the “culture industry” that was emerging crushed it, paradoxically promoting sameness. On the surface, capitalism historically appeared to be marked by constant contest and struggle, yet that struggle was bounded by what capitalism permits. Work became unending, and during leisure periods, technocratic liberal capital left no one alone. “Even during their leisure time,” Horkheimer and Adorno observe, “consumers must orient themselves according to the unity of production” (p. 98). Similarly, Marcuse (1964) avers that the products of labor “indoctrinate and manipulate; they promote a false consciousness which is immune against its falsehood” (p. 12). The worker, after finishing the “work” element of the day, watches movies and television in order to learn what he or she can buy with his or her paycheck. Marcuse contends that this line of thinking results in “a pattern of *one-dimensional thought and behavior* in which ideas, aspirations, and objectives that, by their content, transcend the established universe of discourse and action are either repelled or reduced to terms of this universe” (p. 12).

Central to this view is the idea that a political subject's capacity for rational critique is rendered impotent by a process of mimesis by which audience members come to internalize the ideological commitments reified in the images of mass culture. “Life is to be made indistinguishable from the sound film . . . The power of industrial society is imprinted on people once and for all” (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1947/2002, pp. 99-100). No longer the product of an intersubjective process, democratic will-formation in late capitalist society is facilitated by the production and distribution of “public opinion” through the channels of mass communication (Marcuse, 1964; see also Lippmann, 1922). News, entertainment, and ideology, all emanating from a single source, are blended together and consumed *en masse* by the public, and rational-critical discourse is no longer a

viable strategy to achieve progressive social change, having no real ability to make the contradictions of advanced industrial society salient to its atomized subjects. The optimistic view of rational progress that developed during the Enlightenment was based on the assumption that sovereign subjects, self-aware and self-identical, could dominate nature through instrumental rationality, and thereby direct the development of human society in a positive manner. This view was inverted in early Frankfurt School thought, as atomistic individuals were seen as not the subjects but rather the objects of instrumental reason—which had evolved into an irrational force that now dominates both nature and humanity—wielded by an autonomous society of total administration.

This critique is an elaboration of the Marxist concept of *reification*, a severe form of alienation in which abstract social relationships are objectified. Marx (1867/1906) illustrated this phenomenon by distinguishing between the exchange value and use value of a commodity. For individuals in a society characterized by a market economy, the value or worth of a commodity is not determined by its intrinsic utility, but by its relative potential to be exchanged for other commodities. Productive forces and relations conspire to transform the subject into an object: “Labor produces not only commodities; it produces itself and the worker as a commodity” (Marx, 1844/1964, p. 107). The critique of the culture industry takes this one step further—culture now exists only in “commodity form . . . Exchange value, not truth value, counts. On it centers the rationality of the status quo, and all alien rationality is bent to it” (Marcuse, 1964, p. 57). The exchange of labor power for variable capital, mediated through the “cultural dynamics of representation,” makes a fundamentally irrational and alienating system intelligible to its participants (Greene, 2004, p. 193).

For the early Frankfurt School theorists, the only remaining space for social change is the aesthetic realm, capable of perpetuating an “antagonism between society and culture prior to the rise of mass society” (Arendt, 1961, p. 201). Even there, the emancipatory potential is vulnerable, as the songs and images of pre-modern art have been stripped bare and inserted into popular movies, advertisements, and a pop culture that is the establishment’s shadow. Formerly, art could be used to poke fun at and critique elements of society. Given that all truly critical content has been driven from the media, media content is now “nothing other than style; it divulges style’s secret: obedience to the social hierarchy” (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1947/2002, pp. 103-104).

### **Habermas and the Critique of Functionalist Reason**

It is not difficult to see why Habermas criticized the tradition he inherited for presenting neither a unified theory nor a program for achieving social change:

“Adorno wrote essays on the critique of culture and also gave seminars on Hegel. He presented a certain Marxist background. And that was it” (as cited in Wiggerhaus, 1994, p. 2). Habermas (1987) identifies two major problems with the critique of mass culture of his forebears. First, he contends that by retaining the conceptual elements of the labor theory of value while eschewing Marx's theory of history in favor of “pseudonormative propositions concerning an objective teleology in history . . . [that were] not able to support an empirical research program” (p. 382), the early Frankfurt School intellectuals had “blinded themselves to the realities of a developed capitalism based on the pacification of class conflict through welfare-state measures” (p. 334). The labor theory of value relies enthymematically upon the equation of rationalization and reification, resulting in a myopic view of the historical development of media-steered subsystems. Acting as a terministic screen, the Marxist language of value reveals in the destruction of traditional forms of life the institutionalization of a new class relationship, but it conceals other aspects of the increasing differentiation of the symbolic structures of the *lifeworld* (the taken-for-granted social reality of everyday life) and the reification of post-traditional forms of life. The communication processes emerging in an increasingly rationalized lifeworld present new opportunities for social solidarity. Critical theorists can provide a foundation for those seeking to achieve progressive social change through public argumentation only by discovering “the conditions for recoupling a rationalized culture with an everyday communication dependent on vital traditions” (Habermas, 1987, p. 356). For the early Frankfurt School thinkers, nothing positive ever results from the reconfiguration of the lifeworld by the autonomous systems of the capitalist economy or the administrative state.

Habermas's second problem with his intellectual predecessors is their failure to “expand the critique of instrumental reason into a critique of functionalist reason” (p. 334). Functionalist reason is a special case of instrumental reason, produced by self-regulating systems “whose imperatives override the consciousness of the members integrated into them” (p. 333). A totalizing critique of instrumental rationality is incompatible with the use of rational argumentation to achieve meaningful progressive social change. Consequently, the earlier critics “could locate the spontaneity that was not yet in the grips of the reifying force of systemic rationalization only in irrational powers—in the charismatic power of the leader or in the mimetic power of art and love” (p. 333). For them, any political consensus was the result of “hammer[ing] into every brain the old lesson that continuous attrition, the breaking of all individual resistance, is the condition of life in this society,” more or less precluding the possibility of resistance through reasoned argument (Horheimer & Adorno, 1947/2002, p. 110). They (ironically) had a one-

dimensional view of mass culture—the weapon with which “the giant corporation” wages a fight “against an enemy who has already been defeated, the *thinking subject* [emphasis added]” (p. 120). If the subject no longer thinks, is no longer capable of responding to rational-critical argumentation, then why bother? Yet Habermas sees in this critique a kernel of truth. If, as seems to be the case, we can identify the irrationality entailed in the bureaucratization and monetarization of the public and private spheres, communicative rationality must still in some sense be possible (for how else did we come by this knowledge except through communicative reason?). Indeed, the critique of mass culture posits that “the communication flows steered via mass media *take the place of* those communication structures that had once made possible public discussion and self-understanding by citizens and private individuals” (p. 389).

This insight is important for Habermas because it implicitly points to the thesis that the lifeworld has been colonized by the systems-world, which “is based on a critique of functionalist reason, [and] which agrees with the critique of instrumental reason only in its intention and in its ironic use of the word reason” (p. 391). Systems of instrumentality – chiefly the capitalist economy and the administrative state – are complicated, requiring steering media (money and power, respectively) and generalized forms of communication to remain coordinated in order to avoid legitimation crises. Each system is directed toward instrumental ends: for the economy, efficient allocation of scarce resources; for the state, legitimation of the social order. The steering media used by each system are remarkably effective for these purposes—they “uncouple the coordination of action from building consensus in language altogether,” a quite important task as the complexity of modern life would break down if every decision was debated and re-debated until consensus was achieved (p. 390). Yet the suspension of reasoned argumentation is wholly inappropriate for the lifeworld itself.

Communicative action is governed by practical rationality – ideas of social importance are mediated through the process of linguistic communication according to the rules of practical rationality. Ideas of instrumental importance to a system are mediated according to the rules of that system (the most obvious example is the capitalist economy’s use of currency). Self-deception, and thus systematically distorted communication, is possible only when the lifeworld has been “colonized” by instrumental rationality, so some social norm comes into existence and enjoys legitimate power even though it is not justifiable. This occurs when the means of mediating instrumental ideas gain communicative power (e.g., financial resources are used to silence opposition to some social viewpoint, or ideologically-laced vocabulary like “intellectual property” gets privileged administratively to such an extent that its use is required of all

participants in related public deliberations). When people take the resulting consensus as normatively relevant, the lifeworld has been colonized and communication has been systematically distorted.

If the colonization of the lifeworld by the systems-world is the result of instrumental reason in general (rather than functionalist reason), the colonization thesis takes on a totalizing character: “A monolithic picture of a totally administered society . . . a repressive mode of socialization that shut out the inner nature and an omnipresent social control exercised through the channels of mass communication” (p. 381). Problematically, this view covers over another, more positive, and totally inseparable aspect of mass culture, namely that its channels remove restrictions on the horizon of possible communication . . . and therein lies their ambivalent potential . . . Mass media can simultaneously contextualize and concentrate processes of reaching understanding, but it is only in the first instance that they relieve interaction from yes/no responses to criticizable validity claims. Abstracted and clustered though they are, these communications cannot be reliably shielded from the possibility of opposition by responsible actors. (p. 390)

It is in this ambiguity that the relative desirability of Habermas’ social theory over and against that offered by the earlier critical theorists becomes unambiguously clear. The totalizing critique of mass culture replicates the error inherent in the Marxist reliance on functionalism. A rationalized lifeworld requires no violent utopian political revolution – it is already here, and all we must do is overthrow its imperial masters through the use of clear public argumentation.

## **Conclusion**

Critical theory as conceived by the early Frankfurt School offers a philosophy of history fundamentally similar to the view I addressed at the beginning of this essay, merely inverting the fatalistic utopianism of traditional Marxist theory. The history of modernity is seen as a progressive deterioration from a pre-modern utopia of sorts, where instrumental reason served a sovereign humanity still interested in freedom. With the Enlightenment, instrumental reason became an irrational force by which all of humanity has become dominated. The only hope for progressive social change provided by Horkheimer and Adorno (1947/2002) lies in the pre-capitalist cultural products which they seem to romanticize: “A jazz musician who has to play a piece of serious music, Beethoven’s simplest minuet, involuntarily syncopates, and condescends to start on the beat only with a superior smile” (p. 101). In contrast, Habermas (1987) argues that reification should “be measured only against the conditions of

communicative sociation, and not against the nostalgically loaded, frequently romanticized past of premodern forms of life” (p. 342).

For Habermas, history neither starts nor ends with a golden age of perfection. Indeed, rational argumentation, based as it is on humanity's near universal drive to improve its condition throughout history, has no role in a utopia. A perfect society lacks history, for history is change, and perfection can only change by becoming less than perfect. Without the need for cooperation steered by rational argument, the only possible state for humanity is one of aimlessness and indifference. Neither the utopian classless society nor the dystopian advanced industrial society have any need or room for reasoned argumentation, nor is social change possible in either.

It is no accident that accounts of social change often come with utopian and deterministic elements. Utopia works as an index for the progress one would like to achieve, and determinism is related to the insight that gives rise to instrumental reason itself – namely, that “every change is the result of a cause, and that there is regularity in the concatenation of cause and effect” (Mises, 1957/2007, p. 177). Rather than serve as metaphysical entities (which is in clear tension with Horkheimer's nominalism), Habermas treats both as epistemic components of argumentation. In place of fatalistic determinism he offers communicative action; instead of an historical utopia he presents an ideal speech situation, not as a concrete reality but as the counterfactual assumption interlocutors make as they adopt an orientation toward consensus. This obviously does not entail that a rational political consensus (not based on any exclusion or unequal power relationship) could actually exist – it is an epistemic orientation, not a substantive goal. By putting Habermas in the context of the irreducibly materialist Frankfurt School, I believe I have shown not just why the accusations with which this essay begins are misguided, but why they fundamentally are incoherent.

Habermas's critical theory, which locates and grounds critical rationality in ordinary language, has a lot to offer to the empirical study of argumentation. Critics may identify systematically distorted communication inductively, by looking for violations of the assumption of ideal speech, without fear that in so doing they have invoked some indefensible metaphysical order. What reasons are persuasive, and ought they be? Why does the unreasonable appear reasonable, and what can be done about it?

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