

A New Critical Theory? Habermas and the Search for the Normative Foundations

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Abstract

In this paper, I analyze Habermas's reconstruction of a critical theory of society and the need for a theory of communicative action. Here, three major themes have guided my approach. First, I have tried to define a structure within which Habermas's project to reconstruct a normative groundwork for a critical theory of society can be evaluated. Second, I show that Habermas constructs an apparent difference between "action oriented to reaching understanding" and "action oriented to success" in order to develop his next argument, which places communicative actions as the original system of integration for the modern social order. Third, I evaluate Habermas's conception of critical theory in relation to its own criteria, that is, practice, taking into account simultaneously three major points. The first is Habermas's intention. For Habermas, the relation between theory and practice is not artificial, since theory only has a mediated access to practice by contributing to practical discourse and reflection. This is why Habermas speaks of "the idea of a theory of society conceived with a practical intention." The second point is Habermas's theoretical approach to the problem of practice. Habermas argues that a critical theory, instead of trying to direct political action, should offer knowledge from which participants in a discourse can draw to help them reach an understanding about their common situation. The third point is the socio-historical background of Habermas's critical theory, or what Habermas describes as his "psychology of research," that is, to bring back confidence to the emancipatory potential of Occidental rationalism. The last section, consequently, is devoted to the argument of Habermas's critics that the problem of the normative conditions of possibility for the task of a critical theory of society is in fact the Achilles heel of Habermas's renewal of Critical Theory.

Keywords: Habermas, communication theory of society, normative groundwork, psychology of research, reconstructionist science

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