Habermas Contra Lyotard: The Question of Modernity

Ramze Endut[1]

Abstract

This paper will explore the discourse between Jürgen Habermas and Jean-François Lyotard regarding their interpretations of modernity. Both philosophers are significant figures in contemporary thought. Habermas is recognized as a leading critical theorist, while Lyotard is identified as a prominent postmodernist. Despite their differing philosophical frameworks, both acknowledged the increasing complexity of society. In their exchange, Habermas advocated for the concept of universal emancipation, viewing modernity as an ongoing endeavor. Conversely, Lyotard outright dismissed this notion, arguing that Habermas's perspective represents yet another grand narrative that has lost its validity in the context of postmodernity. Consequently, this paper will analyze the positions of both philosophers, focusing on Habermas's critique of Lyotard's postmodernism in relation to modernity.

Keywords: *Modernity, Postmodernity, Communicative Action, Habermas, Lyotard, Hegel.*

Introduction

The experience of totalitarianism once led Western philosophers into a complex dilemma. Since the time of Descartes, there has been a widespread belief that reason would illuminate the human condition. However, this very reason ultimately gave rise to cruelty, oppression, suffering, and violence. Consequently, following World War II, a pervasive sense of pessimism emerged, leaving little room for hope. The early generation of Critical Theory also reflected this bleak outlook. The philosophical discourse surrounding pessimism has deep historical roots, tracing back to counter-Enlightenment thinkers like Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Bataille. The first generation of the Frankfurt School, including figures such as Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, and Benjamin, expressed despair over the image of modernity. In contrast, Jürgen Habermas, a member of the second generation of the School, sought to advance the Enlightenment's quest for universal human liberation. He aimed to rejuvenate Critical Theory by countering its pessimistic tendencies. Habermas, drawing from the traditions of Kant, Hegel, and Marx, identified a promising alternative. This alternative perspective is evident in his discussions on modernity. Notably, Habermas does not adhere strictly to a single theoretical framework; instead, he employs an eclectic approach, incorporating insights from Anglo-Saxon philosophy. For instance, he reinterprets German Idealism, Freud's psychoanalysis, Weber's rationalization theory, Durkheim's functionalism, Parsons' systems theory, and Mead's social behaviorism, ultimately integrating these diverse theories into a theory of communicative action.

Habermas's endeavor to rejuvenate Enlightenment ideals faces significant obstacles. The rise of postmodern thinkers like Lyotard, Derrida, and Foucault presents a formidable challenge to his philosophy. These thinkers align with the concept of postmodernity, which gained traction in the West during the 1950s, particularly in the realms of art and architecture, well before Habermas formulated his philosophical response. The popularity of postmodernism in philosophy surged with Lyotard's seminal work, *The Postmodern Condition*, where he introduced a new framework: postmodernity. He argued that all propositions or validity claims should be contextualized, positioning Lyotard as a pivotal figure in postmodern thought and a catalyst for Habermas's ambitious project of rescuing modernity. In defending postmodernity, Lyotard critiqued Habermas's ideas as mere "transcendental illusion," asserting that we exist in a postmodern state devoid of universal truths. He famously characterized postmodernism as a skepticism towards grand narratives, suggesting that each society operates under its own specific logic, which stands in stark contrast to Habermas's concept of communicative action. According to Lyotard, the notion of

[1] Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Email: ramze@ukm.edu.my.

communicative action is simply another iteration of a grand narrative, implying that Habermas's proposals aim to "revive the terror of reason."

However, Habermas effectively counters Lyotard's argument with remarkable insight. To grasp the profound discourse between Habermas and Lyotard, this paper will outline several key steps. Firstly, it will delve into Hegel's interpretation of modernity. Why focus on Hegel? For Habermas, Hegel represents the inaugural philosopher to articulate a coherent understanding of modernity. Secondly, we will examine Lyotard's concept of postmodernity in greater detail, including the reasons behind his dismissal of grand narratives. In dialogue with Lyotard, we will also analyze Habermas's perspective on modernity as an unfinished endeavor. Thirdly, we will address Habermas's critique of Lyotard, particularly concerning the latter's views on communicative action. Finally, we will conclude with a discussion of critical assessments regarding Habermas's alternative approach to communicative action.

Hegel and the Theory of Modernity

The concept of "modern" has a rich historical background. Drawing on Hans Robert Jauss's definition, Habermas (1981: 1) traces the term "modern" back to its Latin origin, "Modernus," which was first recorded in the late 5th century. For Habermas, discussions of modernity are inherently contrasted with antiquity, marking a significant transition. He argues that modernity should not be confined to the Renaissance period alone. In fact, Western society has identified itself as "modern" since the 12th century, particularly during the reign of Charlemagne. Furthermore, the 17th century in France witnessed the emergence of "La Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes," which symbolizes the essence of modern thought, envisioning a new historical narrative that breaks away from the past. Consequently, the term "modern" in the Western context consistently denotes a new era, especially during the Age of Enlightenment. As Habermas states:

"The project of modernity formulated in the 18th century by the philosophers of the Enlightenment consisted in their efforts to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art according to their inner logic. At the same time, this project intended to release the cognitive potentials of each of these domains from their esoteric forms. The Enlightenment philosophers wanted to utilize this accumulation of specialized culture for the enrichment of everyday life - that is to say, for the rational organization of everyday social life."

To have a clear understanding of modernity, as noted by Rorty (1984: 37) and Zoeller (1988: 151), Habermas invokes Hegel's perspective, particularly that of the Young Hegelians. In his influential work, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Habermas (1996: 23-44) articulates that Hegel perceives modernity not merely as the social conditions associated with modernization but also as a historical context or an epochal concept. In simpler terms, modernity represents not just a "new world" but also a "new age." When compared to contemporary expressions in English and French, it can be interpreted as "modern time" or "temps modernes." For Hegel (1966: 75), modernity signifies the recognition of a new world that departs from the past, marking a transitional phase for both eras.

Hegel characterizes modernity as a state marked by an awareness of novelty, yet this awareness must remain cognizant of the past. This temporal consciousness views history as a dynamic process, wherein individuals can be seen as a "scarce resource" capable of addressing various challenges. For instance, in Marx's framework, this "scarce resource" is illustrated through the notion of labor, which is perceived as the sole element that requires distribution across different applications, thereby leading to the labor theory of value as a solution to the identified issues. Consequently, Hegel posits that the "present" serves as a transitional phase toward the future. The notion of modernity is thus linked to concepts such as progress, revolution, emancipation, development, Zeitgeist, social transformation, and crises. Hegel's interpretation of 'time' offers insights into the nature of consciousness, distinguishing between the qualitative temporality of consciousness and the quantitative mathematical time of Being. In Hegel's philosophy, time is unique and consists of irreplaceable moments, with modernity representing a distinct characteristic that defies measurement by the standards of previous eras. This understanding of time is fundamental to Hegel's exploration of modernity. In fact, Hegel (1966: 471) spells out that, "time appears as Spirit's destiny and necessity, where Spirit is not yet complete within itself."

Hegel ultimately dismisses any criteria that lie outside the framework of modernity. Drawing inspiration from Benjamin, Habermas (1981: 11) advocates for Hegel's interpretation of modernity. He recalls Benjamin's assertion that time resembles "a sequence of events akin to the beads of a rosary." For Habermas, Hegel seeks to connect modernity with consciousness, which he defines as subjectivity within a Cartesian context. This subjectivity is what distinguishes individuals and fosters progress. It is also tied to concepts of "freedom" and "reflection." In this pursuit, Hegel's notion of subjectivity encompasses four key components: (i) individualism, (ii) the right to critique, (iii) autonomy in action, and (iv) the philosophy of idealism. Historically, the development of subjectivity can be traced back to the Age of Enlightenment. During this period, Martin Luther differentiated authority from faith traditions, placing all matters under the jurisdiction of the individual subject. Furthermore, during the Age of Enlightenment, particularly through Kant's influence, marked a transition from religious morality to the emphasis on human will. Consequently, under the influence of absolute subjectivity, we can reshape our modern culture. For Hegel, the essence of modernity is to propel historical progress, asserting that social advancement is the outcome of reason's labor throughout history.

Hegel is widely recognized as the philosopher of dialectics, largely due to his formulation of progress through this lens. He examined modernity not only in a positive light (future/thesis) but also in a negative context (past/anti-thesis), culminating in a reconciliation (synthesis). The critical question that arises is how reconciliation can be achieved. Hegel attributes this to reason, asserting that reason possesses the capacity to foster reconciliation within a rational society. This notion serves as Hegel's normative framework for establishing a social order grounded in ethical life (Sittlichkeit). However, this perspective is later critiqued by Habermas, who contends that Hegel's conception of reason remains centered on the individual subject. Habermas argues that, in Hegel's view, reason is tied to modern subjectivity and culminates in the notion of the Absolute Spirit, which Hegel describes as the ultimate reality. This presents a significant challenge for Habermas regarding Hegel's interpretation of modernity, as Hegel situates modernity within the realm of subjectivity, whereas Habermas seeks to address this limitation through the concept of intersubjectivity.

Lyotard and the Postmodern Condition

Lyotard's contributions to the discourse on postmodernism are significant and should not be overlooked. He played a crucial role in integrating postmodern thought into philosophical discussions, which had previously been predominantly centered on art and architecture. In his influential work, *The Postmodern Condition*, originally a report for the Quebec Government, Lyotard provides a philosophical framework for understanding the postmodern state. He further develops this discourse by exploring sociological dimensions in his later work, *The Differend*. Lyotard (1984: xxiv) defines the postmodern as an "incredulity toward metanarratives," suggesting that science has historically positioned itself as the sole arbiter of valid knowledge, reaching its zenith with positivism. During the modern era, science was regarded as the legitimate source of knowledge, which intertwined with the concept of human emancipation. However, Lyotard argues that in the postmodern condition, such claims to legitimacy are no longer sustainable. In addition, Fairfield (1994: 59) emphasizes that the dominance of the 'metanarrative' is central to all modern political and epistemic legitimations. For Lyotard, science is merely one of many language games, and in a postmodern context, the notion of a singular truth (as represented by science) must be abandoned. Instead, he advocates for the acceptance of multiple truths, suggesting that grand narratives should be supplanted by smaller, localized narratives; homology should give way to paralogy; and consensus should be replaced by dissensus. How did Lyotard further develop this concept?

Lyotard previously noted the absence of legitimacy within the informatics society. He argues that advancements in science and technology have led to the complete erosion of the original purpose of knowledge, transforming it into a mere commodity. Lyotard criticizes this outdated method of knowledge acquisition, which confines itself solely to scientific methodology, as unacceptable. This limited viewpoint has resulted in a relationship between educators and learners that resembles that of suppliers and consumers. Furthermore, in the context of globalization, nations are increasingly prioritizing production power. As a result, a country's sovereignty ultimately hinges on its capital, economic strength, and trade capabilities. In this contemporary landscape, the discourse is not about knowledge and ignorance. It is about payment of knowledge with investment of knowledge. Lyotard contends that the concept of knowledge

within the informatics society has fundamentally evolved, with the most significant consequence being the legitimacy of knowledge itself. This perspective is supported by Steuerman (2000: xiii):

"In postmodern contemporary societies, the idea of knowledge as *Bildung*, that is, as education of the spirit with a view to its emancipation from ignorance and therefore from domination, has become meaningless. Knowledge has become the interchangeable, depersonalized 'bits' of information technology and this transformation reduces it to technically useful knowledge, which is either efficient or irrelevant."

To enhance the examination of the legitimacy issue surrounding knowledge, Lyotard introduces the concept of language-games. This idea, originally articulated by Ludwig Wittgenstein, pertains to the interplay of language and the actions that are interwoven within its context. For instance, the game of chess is characterized by its specific rules; altering a rule regarding piece movement does not fundamentally change the essence of the game. Consequently, seeking a universal framework becomes futile, as language games inherently possess unique characteristics. Lyotard identifies three key propositions regarding language-games: (i) the rules do not inherently provide their own legitimacy but are established through an agreement among participants, (ii) the existence of rules is essential for a game; even a minor change in a rule can transform the game's nature, and any utterance or action that fails to adhere to the established rules is excluded from the game, and (iii) each utterance should be regarded as a "move" within the game. Lyotard argues that these components are interrelated within the realm of language. Thus, for Lyotard, the postmodern condition is fundamentally tied to the concept of "move" within society.

However, what model does Lyotard propose for postmodern society? He begins by critiquing modernity, arguing that the pursuit of a mass society remains a modern endeavor aimed at totalizing truth. This desire for totalization is viewed by Lyotard as paranoid, utopian, and hopeful. Ultimately, the outcome of mass society still aligns with grand narratives, such as those of positivism (Comte), functionalism (Parsons), dialectical materialism (Marx), or organicism (Durkheim). Lyotard seeks to distance himself from these modern elements. In the context of postmodernity, he explains that the grand narratives of political systems have shifted to alternative narratives rooted in religion, ethnicity, lifestyles, and capital. These categories, according to Lyotard, have greater access to information than traditional political structures. Each category operates under its own set of rules, existing within intricate and dynamic networks. Consequently, these networks generate unpredictable, indeterminate, and uncontrollable movements. Thus, society in a postmodern condition is characterized by continual new developments.

Lyotard emphasizes the concept of language-games and draws a critical distinction between scientific knowledge and narrative knowledge. He suggests that within a modern framework, narratives are often perceived as primitive, traditional, or even regressive. However, narratives function as a type of language-game, akin to science, each governed by its own set of rules and serving distinct purposes. While science has contributed to the development of a positivistic society, other narratives possess the potential to foster ethical communities. Lyotard argues that a significant issue in contemporary society is the dominance of the grand narrative, which positions science as the exclusive source of legitimate knowledge. He identifies two dimensions of the grand narrative: (i) the political dimension, which aims for emancipation, freedom, and universal solidarity, and (ii) the speculative dimension, which encompasses the methodologies employed to realize the grand narrative, such as dialectical reasoning. Together, these dimensions have shaped modern history, particularly in relation to historical knowledge and the institutions that uphold it.

Additionally, through the lens of emancipation, Lyotard argues that humanity is positioned as the champion of freedom. In his view, modern society perceives knowledge as a means to liberate individuals from ignorance, poverty, and slavery, guiding them from irrationality to rationality. This notion of progress is fundamentally linked to the pursuit of knowledge. A clear illustration of this can be found in the national struggles, particularly within the frameworks of socialism and capitalism, both of which employ a scientific methodology. Lyotard posits that modern society risks becoming totalizing by adhering to a singular truth of knowledge. Ultimately, the goal of progress is to achieve universal human emancipation. This concept evolves into what he terms 'universal language-games,' akin to notions such as Ultimate Reality (God), Absolute Spirit (Hegel), or Absolute Infinite (Cantor). Consequently, Lyotard observes that the speculative dimension has been narrowed down into a singular approach that serves as a custodian of justice and

goodness (political dimension). In essence, Lyotard suggests that all modern narratives converge on a universal idea. Thus, he asserts (1984: 35):

"True knowledge, in this perspective, is always indirect knowledge; it is composed of reported statements that are incorporated into the metanarrative if a subject that guarantee their legitimacy."

Lyotard unequivocally asserts that in a post-industrial society, this overarching narrative is untrustworthy. The consequence of such trust leads to societal development characterized by technological advancement and the proliferation of capitalism. Ultimately, the legitimacy of narratives converges into a singular language game. However, the primary reason for the delegitimization of narratives stems from the very nature of modernity. This decline is attributed to an internal erosion of knowledge's legitimacy, exemplified by the diminishing authority of science, which still requires practical subjects. These subjects, however, differ based on the language games in play, indicating that a universal science is unattainable, and thus, no single universal knowledge exists. Beyond this internal erosion lies an external reality. For Lyotard, the Holocaust at Auschwitz stands out as a profoundly shocking event, having claimed the lives of six million Jews and undermined the concept of reason, which modernity regards as its foundational tool. As Hegel is quoted by Lyotard, "What is real is rational and what is rational is real." Yet, in the context of Auschwitz, the event is undeniably real but fundamentally irrational, thereby dismantling the Hegelian totalization project. Furthermore, in a post-industrial society, knowledge is no longer pursued for its own sake. Lyotard contends that the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake is meaningless; instead, knowledge is generated for profit, evaluated not by the standards of truth or falsehood, but by performative criteria, defined as "maximum output and minimum input." In summary, Lyotard concludes that modernity has forfeited its credibility, ushering in the era of the postmodern condition.

"let us wage a war on totality; let us be witness to the unpresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name."

Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity

Habermas (1981: 3) traces the term "modern" back to its Latin origin, "modernus," which emerged in the 5th century. During that period, it served to differentiate Christians from their Roman and pagan predecessors, emphasizing that the 'modern' era represented a distinct departure from the Ancient. However, it was not until the 19th century that the concept of modernity evolved to encompass associations with modern science, the industrial revolution, and artistic freedom. Overall, Habermas characterizes modernity as a shift from the old to the new, reflecting a preoccupation with ushering in a new age.

From what perspective can we substantiate this obsession? Lyotard addresses the nature of knowledge as it pertains to a new historical context. In contrast, Habermas highlights aesthetics as a key example. He argues that modern aesthetics in the 19th century was largely confined to the realm of fashion, which is inherently transient and subject to constant change with emerging trends. This observation extends to contemporary society, reflecting the ongoing evolution driven by the latest fashions. Consequently, modern consumer culture aligns seamlessly with this dynamic. A close reading of Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1991: 89-140) reveals a compelling analysis of the bourgeois public sphere during the 19th century, which functioned as a successful autonomous entity in modern history. Regrettably, this public sphere was subsequently undermined by the dominance of instrumental rationality. Ultimately, art, which once served as a vital tool for the freedom movement of that era, devolved into a pursuit of art for its own sake. This shift marked the decline of the reflective qualities that characterized the Enlightenment.

Habermas noted that the current societal landscape has been significantly shaped by two primary rationalization imperatives of modernism, both of which have undermined genuine self-experience. These imperatives are (i) the economy, specifically capitalism, and (ii) the administration, or bureaucracy. In this context, Bernstein (1992: 2) argues that art has been reduced to a purely aesthetic experience, where aesthetics is understood in terms of beauty and non-cognitive aspects, thereby detaching art from truth and morality. Similarly, Eagleton (1990: 349) contends that art has been absorbed into commodity culture, losing

its role as a critical voice of the Enlightenment. He asserts that art can only hold validity if it implicitly critiques the conditions that give rise to it. Furthermore, new technologies exemplify how consumers can become uncritical, with this phenomenon linked to the notion of progress from previous eras. Habermas (1981: 4) underscores this point.

"Emphatically modern document no longer borrows this power of being a classic from the authority of a past epoch; instead a modern work becomes a classic because it has once been authentically modern."

In the 20th century, there appears to be a pressing need to reassess the concept of modernity. This necessity arises from the Enlightenment's objective, which Kant (2009: 1) clearly articulates as the challenge of facilitating humanity's emergence from its self-imposed immaturity (*Unmündigkeit*). Kant further defines immaturity as the inability to utilize one's understanding without the guidance of others. However, in the aftermath of World War II, reason—once heralded as the Enlightenment's instrument—was criticized for giving rise to various issues, including aporias, disordered personalities, false totalities, terrorism, anti-Semitism, fascism, environmental destruction, and even the fetishization of commodities. These troubling phenomena were largely fueled by the forces of economic and bureaucratic modernization, which sought to undermine established systems. In Habermas's framework, the concepts of 'system' and 'life-world' (*Lebenswelt*) represent distinct domains of action within his social theory. When the system encroaches upon the life-world, Habermas refers to this as the colonization of the life-world. Through this lens, he perceives modernization as approaching a state of darkness. Consequently, maturity (*Mündigkeit*), which he identifies as the "task of the modern age," becomes increasingly isolated.

Habermas acknowledges that modernity faces significant challenges. However, he argues against abandoning it. The reason for this stance is that he views modernity as an ongoing endeavor. Therefore, it is essential to revive the aspirations of the Enlightenment. In this context, Habermas emphasizes the significance of reflexive reason. He posits that reflexive reason is achieved not through instrumental reasoning but through communicative reasoning. In this framework, language serves as a powerful tool for emancipation, a notion Habermas refers to as the 'pragmatic universal.' He asserts that universal pragmatics involves the philosophical exploration of the essential conditions required for achieving mutual understanding through communication. This concept can be distilled into an ideal speech situation that prioritizes the quality of arguments. According to Poster (1992: 572), the 'pragmatic universal' signifies the understanding and consensus that are inherent goals of linguistic communication. Through this framework, Habermas envisions a society characterized by non-dominating interactions (subject-subject), where consensus can be cultivated through procedural means. This stands in stark contrast to instrumental reasoning, which is predicated on domination (subject-object) over others. For Habermas, only this form of communicative reasoning can mitigate the excesses of the modern era.

The concept of proceduralism is essential for fostering communicative rationality. Scambler (1996: 571) argues that effective action relies on the rationalization of the life-world, a process that Habermas acknowledges appears to be distant. However, Scambler asserts that the procedural notion of reason serves to 'unite' the diverse values present in society. Habermas posits that a genuine rationalization of the life-world can address the pathologies of modern society through everyday practices, thereby re-establishing connections within our contemporary culture. Ultimately, the aspiration for universal human emancipation, which Lyotard refers to as a grand narrative, remains significant. Habermas (1981: 13) emphasizes this point.

"the life-world has to become able to develop institutions out of itself which sets to the internal dynamics and to the imperatives of an almost autonomous economic system and its administrative complements."

Communicative Action – A Critique to Postmodernism

While Lyotard and Habermas present distinct and competing paradigms, there are notable similarities in their analyses. According to Steuerman (1989: 107), both thinkers initiate their discussions by recognizing the rise of post-industrial or pluralistic societies, which are characterized as complex. In such societies, Lyotard highlights the evolving status of knowledge, while Habermas focuses on the legitimation of social

systems, both of which are influenced by varying values. This complexity has led to a decentralization of societal structures. Redding (1986: 12) notes that both theorists concur that in a complex society, the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of the system and the life-world become disconnected, reducing interactions to mere commodity exchanges and instrumental actions. This trend risks leading to a totalizing society, paving the way for political domination. In this context, Lyotard (1984: 66) acknowledges the merit of Habermas's arguments, stating, "Habermas's cause is good." However, he expresses reservations about Habermas's notion of consensus, deeming it "outmoded and suspect value."

The comparison between the two thinkers extends further. Both acknowledge that the core issue revolves around norms and criteria. In Lyotard's framework, this is referred to as the problem of legitimacy, while in Habermas's perspective, it is termed the problem of normativity. Consequently, Lyotard argues that knowledge cannot be confined to scientific understanding, whereas Habermas contends that rationality should not be limited to instrumental reasoning. Both philosophers advocate for a more comprehensive approach to engage with the complexities of society. They highlight the richness of human language as expressed through language-games and communicative action. However, at this point, their linguistic approaches diverge. Lyotard's vision of postmodernity is centered on exclusive language (language games), whereas Habermas's vision of modernity emphasizes inclusive language (communicative reason).

Habermas critiques Lyotard by introducing the concept of communicative reason, which he believes can facilitate consensus in a complex society. He articulates this by differentiating between the philosophy of the subject (*Subjektivität*) and the philosophy of intersubjectivity (*Intersubjektivitä*t). As a proponent of critical theory, Habermas draws on Hegel, noting that Hegel's early work also reflects an intersubjective paradigm. However, he argues that this paradigm is confined to the dialectical process and does not extend to Hegel's notion of the Absolute Spirit, which is rooted in subjectivity. Habermas identifies this limitation as a significant issue of modernity, asserting that the philosophy of the subject, beginning with Descartes, has neglected the essential dimension of intersubjectivity necessary for fostering an autonomous public sphere. While Lyotard views grand narratives as a burden of modernity, Habermas addresses the challenge by highlighting our failure to recognize the communicative elements inherent in human cognition. He posits that through language, rational discourse can be established, thereby nurturing the potential for universal human emancipation. In his assessment of modernity, Habermas states (1984: 36):

"Modernity at variance with itself of its rational content and its perspective on the future."

Habermas explores the inherent communicative dimension of human beings by examining their cognitive capabilities. He posits that individuals possess the ability to promote mutual learning and understanding. This potential is evident in psychoanalysis, where individuals often adopt perspectives from others. Through this capacity for sharing, people can collaboratively make decisions, even within complex societal structures. Recognizing this ability, Habermas asserts that language serves as a medium for intersubjectivity among individuals. This medium allows for the expression and reflection of personal interests and viewpoints. However, the type of language Habermas refers to is not the everyday vernacular, as noted by Lyotard, but rather discursive language. This form of communication is characterized by inclusive and non-coercive rational discourse among free and equal participants. The question arises: why is it termed rational discourse? In Habermas's discourse ethics, the principle of universalization is central, comprising three key statements. The first (i) asserts that all affected individuals can accept the anticipated consequences and side effects of a proposed moral norm's general observance on their interests. The second (ii) emphasizes that the conditions for practical discourse, from which universally valid norms may arise, require the participation and acceptance of all affected individuals, ensuring that these norms align with their interests. The third (iii) states that consensus can only be reached if all participants engage freely. Thus, through rational discourse, the life-world can be rationalized, enabling the avoidance of its colonization. At this juncture, discussions among participants become more reflective, serious, and critical.

In the context of speech act theory, Habermas emphasizes that effective communication between a speaker and a listener is grounded in three universal validity claims: (i) truth, (ii) rightness, and (iii) truthfulness. He argues that these validity claims are essential normative principles in rational discourse, which should extend beyond any specific local context. These claims are crucial for facilitating meaningful communication. Once

these principles are established, a consensus can be reached, although Lyotard disputes this notion. Habermas further connects the concept of subjectivity, represented by individuals, to intersubjectivity, which involves interactions among individuals. This relationship serves as the foundation for communicative action. Unlike Lyotard, who views language-games as confined to specific ordinary practices, Habermas seeks to bridge the gap between communicative action in everyday situations and reflexive communicative action in rational discourse. Habermas (1981: 44) articulates this distinction as follows:

"… that form of social interaction in which the plans of action of different actors are co-ordinated through an exchange of communicative acts, that is, through a use of language orientated towards reaching understanding."

There remains a pertinent question: what is the aim of communicative action? Essentially, its role is to serve as an effective means of interaction within a complex society. While Lyotard discusses the concept of small narratives, these can indeed be integrated into a larger narrative through communicative action. Consequently, conflicts of interest within a complex society can be addressed more effectively through well-reasoned arguments.

Additionally, Habermas presents his theory of truth, which, similar to Lyotard's perspective, asserts that there is no singular or absolute truth. However, Habermas distinguishes himself by outlining a method for identifying pragmatic truth. His concept of pragmatic truth is not definitive; it is subject to change and relies on rational discourse. This approach contrasts with Lyotard's focus on fragmented narratives, which lack a solid political framework for restructuring a complex society. For Lyotard, every intervention is merely a "modern illusion."

Habermas views this as an opportunity for engagement. This perspective illustrates that his concept of communicative action can be applied across a wide range of fields, including politics. In the realm of political theory, deliberative democracy is fundamentally rooted in Habermas's ideas, which are particularly relevant for complex societies. Furthermore, Habermas argues that the project of modernity can be advanced through communicative action rather than through instrumental action, which is prevalent in late capitalism. His approach stands in contrast to Lyotard, who seeks to create a new historical narrative by moving away from modernity. In this context, Habermas critiques Lyotard's postmodernism as embodying an anti-modern stance that is chaotic and irrational. Additionally, Fraser and Nicholson (1989: 90) have also articulated a similar critique of Lyotard's position by stating:

"Throws out the baby of large historical narrative with the bathwater of philosophical metanarative and the baby of social-theoretical analysis of large-scale inequalities with the bathwater of reductive Marxian class theory."

Habermas argues that Lyotard's relativism opens the door to conservative ideologies, stifles dialogue, and may incite violence. He contends that this perspective allows "the other of reason" to gain unchecked power through the principle of universalization. Habermas warns that embracing Lyotard's ideas could lead to the colonization of the life-world instead of its rationalization. He believes that reason can be reclaimed through communicative action, positioning his practical philosophy as a response to postmodern thinkers like Lyotard. Phelen (1993: 612) highlights the distinction between the two, stating, "if Habermas is the social theorist as legislator, then Lyotard is the philosopher as jester." Bernstein (1985: 25) notes that Habermas's work garners significant critical attention because he engages with the belief that it is possible to confront challenges and critiques while responsibly reconstructing a comprehensive understanding of modernity and its issues. In contrast, Chomsky (1995) argues that postmodernism lacks meaning as it contributes nothing to analytical or empirical knowledge. Steuerman (1989: 113) offers a more nuanced perspective, suggesting that Lyotard's work can be interpreted as a radicalization of modernity's project. Similarly, van Reijen (1990: 98) elaborates on this idea by mentioning:

"What is at stake in the controversy between Habermas and Lyotard, however, is the range, the applicability and the self-justification of the approach of modernity."

Conclusion

Habermas's contribution to the defense of modernity as an ongoing project of Enlightenment is compelling. He offers a framework aimed at achieving this project. However, his ideas, particularly regarding communicative action, have faced significant criticism. Beyond critiques from postmodernists like Lyotard, Derrida, and Foucault, other scholars have also raised concerns. For instance, Appadurai (1990: 299), Gilroy (1992: 214), and Luhmann (1998: 23) suggest that Habermas's concept of communicative action merely represents an "extension of Western domination," "eurocentrism," and "European rationality." Additionally, Stanley and Pateman (1991) argue that Habermas's viewpoint embodies a comprehensive notion of patriarchy, which he idealizes within the bourgeois public sphere, a domain they view as emblematic of male dominance. Similarly, Kompridis (2006: 17), a student of Habermas, critiques the notion of communicative action as a "normative gain" stemming from the linguistic turn, asserting that it remains tethered to limited rationalist foundations that have "needlessly devalued" the theory's potential.

The criticisms surrounding Habermas's project of universal human emancipation cannot overshadow its essential role in a complex society. Habermas himself recognizes that this endeavor is inherently incomplete. He views it as a procedural framework for utilizing public reason to facilitate democratic societal change. In the context of a complex society, or what Lyotard refers to as a postmodern condition, the concept of communicative action emerges as a significant alternative. Thus, modernity continues to persist. While Lyotard (1984: 111) argues that modernity has been "abandoned… destroyed, liquidated," it remains evident that modernity has not vanished. The core issue lies in the balance of enlightenment—whether there is too little or too much, or a deficiency or excess of reason. Habermas maintains that modernity should be viewed as an ongoing project rather than one that should be forsaken. Ultimately, the potential for reason to be salvaged exists through the embrace of communicative reason, as summarized by Jean Antoine de Condorcet (1955: 4-5).

"The time will therefore come when the sun will shine only on free man who know no other master but their reason."

References

Appadurai, A. (1990). Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Culture Economy. Theory, Culture, and Society. 7: 295-310.

Bernstein, J. M. (1992). The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno. Cambridge: Polity.

Bernstein, Richard J. (ed.). (2007). Habermas and Modernity. Massachusetts: The MIT Press Cambridge.

Chomsky, Noam. (2010). "Chomsky on Postmodernism." LBBS, Z-Magazine's Left On-Line Bulletin Board, 13 Nov 1995. Cosma Shalizi's Homepage. Web, June 24. 2024.

Condorect, Marie Jean Antoine de. (1955). Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.

d'Entrèves, Maurizio Passerin & Behabib, Seyla (eds.). (1997). Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity. Massachusetts: The MIT Press Cambridge.

Eagleton, Terry. (1990). The Ideology of the Aesthetic. Oxford: Blackwell.

Fairfield, Paul. (1994). "Habermas, Lyotard, and Political Discourse." Reason Papers: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Normative Studies. Vol. 19. (Fall): 58-80.

Gilroy, P. (1992). Black Atlantic. London: Hutchinson.

Habermas, Jürgen. (1981). Modernity versus Postmodernity. New German Critique, No. 22, Special Issue on Modernism, (Winter): 3-14.

Habermas, Jürgen. (1981). The Theory of Communicative Action. London: Beacon Press.

Habermas, Jürgen. (1991). The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society. Massachusetts: The MIT Press Cambridge.

Habermas, Jürgen. (1996). The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures. Massachusetts: The MIT Press Cambridge.

Hegel, GWF. (1966). The Phenomenology of Mind. London: Alien & Unwin.

Kant, Immanuel. (2009). An Answer to the Question, What Is Enlightenment?. London: Penguin Books.

Kompridis, Nikolas. (2006). Critique and Disclosure: Critical Theory between Past and Future. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Luhmann, Niklas. (1998). Observations on Modernity. Stanford: Standfod University Press.

Lyotard, Jean-François. (1984). The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson. (1989). Social Criticism without Philosophy: An Encounter between Feminism and Postmodernism. Social Text No. 21, Universal Abandon? The Politics of Postmodernism: 83-104.

Phelan, Shane. (1993). Interpretation & Domination: Adorno & the Habermas-Lyotard Debate. Polity, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Summer): 597-616.

Poster, Mark. (1992). Postmodernity and the Politics of Multiculturalism: The Lyotard-Habermas Debate over Social Theory. Modern Fiction Studies, Vol 38, Number 3 (Fall). 567-580.

Redding, Paul. (1986). Habermas, Lyotard, Wittgenstein: Philosophy at the Limits of Modernity. Thesis Eleven 14: 9-25.

Rorty, Richard. (1984). Habermas and Lyotard on Post-Modernity. Praxis International 4: 1April. 32-44.

Schambler, Graham. (1996). The 'Project of Modernity' and the Parameters for a Critical Sociology: An Argument with Illustrations from Medical Sociology. Sociology 30: 567-581.

Stanley, L., & Pateman, C. (1991). Feminist Interpretations and Political Theory. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Steuerman, Emilia. 1989. "Habermas vs Lyotard. Modernity vs postmodernity." New Formations, No. 7 (Spring): 51-64.

Steuerman, Emilia. 2000. The Bounds of Reason: Habermas, Lyotard and Melainie Klein on Rationality. London & New York: Routledge.

van Reijen, Willem. Nov 1990. "Philosophical-Political. Polytheism: Habermas versus Lyotard". Theory, Culture & Society 7: 4: 95- 104.

Zoeller, Guenter. 1988. Habermas on Modernity and Postmodernism. The Iowa Review, Vol. 18, No. 3, Fall. 151-156.