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NEW SOCIAL PARADIGM: HABERMAS'S THEORY OF COMMUNICATIVE ACTION

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Abstract. *The paper discusses the contribution of J. Habermas to the foundation of a new social paradigm in the form of the communicative action theory. The author first gives a global survey of Habermas's intellectual development, starting from Marx through the critical theory to post-Marxism that Habermas finally left behind since oriented towards convergence and integration of the social action theory, the system theory and the symbolic interactionism theory.*

Unlike Marx's paradigm of production and social labor as the basic category Marxist theory is built upon, Habermas has built a new paradigm of the communicative action focused upon the communicative mind, communication and rationality as well as the communicative community. The author critically points to the values as well as inner limits of Habermas's theory that reduced a complex and controversial class nature of the society to the "communicative community" thus promoting idealistic worship of the role of the rational discourse.

Key words: *Communicative Action, Rational Discourse, Communicative Mind, Communicative Community, Post-Marxism*

The theory of communicative action belongs to the set of modern post-Marxist theories. Its author is Jurgen Habermas (1929-), the German philosopher and sociologist who pertains to the second generation of the Frankfurt philosophical circle. A few phases can be distinguished in his intellectual and scientific development, namely, speculative-hermeneutic, empirical-critical, neo-Marxist and communicative-theoretical ones.¹ Habermas acted as a neo-Marxist by his critical theory of society. He is one of the most fruitful and most often quoted authors in modern sociology. He is also the most translated

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¹ M. Prokopijević, *Sporazumevanje i racionalnost*, Stručna knjiga, Belgrade, 1989, p. 8

German theorist. Numerous studies have been written about his work. He has published a great many works, namely, *Structure and Public* (1962), *Theory and Practice*, (1966), *Knowledge and Interest*, (1968), *Reconstruction of the Historical Materialism*, (1976), *Theory of Communicative Action* (1981), *Problems of Legitimacy in Late Capitalism* (1982), *New Obscurity* (1985) and *Philosophical Discourse of the Modern* (1985). However, it should be stressed that, by his principal work entitled *Theory of Communicative Action* (1981), Habermas, who had acted, up to that time, within the critical theory of society and thus had been regarded as the supporter of this theory despite other influences distinct in his works (except for those of Marx, Weber, Parsons and symbolical interactionism), made a factual step toward post-Marxism. Namely, in this particular work Habermas did not found a new meta-theory but a new social theory, a new paradigm. Despite Marx's paradigm of production and social labor as the basic category around which the social Marxist theory was constituted, *Habermas founded the paradigm of communicative action*, that is, of communication. In his work there is a distinct requirement for convergence and synthesis of the action theory with the system theory; thus, the traditional type of rationality is offered an alternative as communication mind, intersubjective rationality.²

The global intellectual development line of Habermas leads from Marx *via* neo-Marxism to Post-Marxism and a movement away from it, toward convergence and integration of the social action theory, the system theory and the symbolic interactionism theory. As for Marxism, as one of more important sources of his theoretical views, Habermas approaches it on the basis of Horkheimer and Adorno's critical theory, but he also "enlarges and exceeds this conception."³ He primarily regards Marxism as criticism, most of all, as criticism of ideology. He speaks about Marxism as "a philosophy of history in its practical application", that is, "as a theory tending to change the reality on the whole." Habermas regards the historical materialism as a "meaningful program of the future social revolution." However, Habermas considers it necessary to carry out reconstruction of the historical materialism not only as a method but as a theory as well. In his study entitled *Reconstruction of the Historical Materialism*" (1976) Habermas carried this task out by questioning the "basic concepts" and "basic assumptions" of the historical materialism while, at the same time, doing some revision as well. In his version the historical materialism is not only a theory about radical social changes but about social evolution as well. Starting from the thesis that labor and language are "older than man and society" Habermas questions the assumption about the "labor subject" or "macro-subject" as a unique process of linear, indispensable and ascending development of the society in the course of its history. By stressing the importance of Marx's concept of the production ways as a "key for reconstructing" history, Habermas, at the same time, emphasizes the importance of labor knowledge and organization (*organizational principle*) in the historical development, pointing to the fact that the social evolution is based upon learning (individual and collective) for the sake of solving the problems people are faced with during the production forces' development. In various epochs,

² H. Burgerm *Subjektocentrirana filozofija i komunikativna intersubjektivnost*, preface to Habermas, *Filozofski diskurs moderne*, Globus, Zagreb, 1988, p. 9

³ G. Zaječaranović, *Savremena filozofija*, II Vol., Prosveta, Niš, 1995, p. 249

various social formations, the societies are organized upon diverse organizational principles in which various levels of collective learning are expressed. The transition from one formation to another can be expressed, in his view, as a change of the society organizational principle for the sake of enlarging the space needed for the production forces' development as well as for forming new relationships to nature and among people.

Starting from the criteria for differentiating the organization principles, Habermas, in his conception of the social evolution concerning the history of human society - unlike the orthodox thesis about pre-class and three class formations and future classless formation - distinguished only "*four social formations*," namely, the one preceding high culture, traditional, capitalist and postcapitalist ones.⁴ The first is pre-class while the others are class ones. The traditional formation comprises slave-holding and feudal formations, while the postcapitalist comprises modern state-socialist societies. It should be stressed that Habermas also assumes a "postmodern" social formation as a "formation of the future" which might be "mind-created society" in the spirit of the critical social theory requirements.⁵ Analyzing the ways of reproduction and functioning of the above-mentioned formations, Habermas stresses that the organizational principle of the first formation is a "primary role of age and gender" (kinship system); the principle of the traditional formation is "class government in the political sense" (state); the capitalist formation principle is "the hired labor and capital ratio" through the market, while the organizational principle of the future "postmodern" formation will be communicative action (rational communication and consensus, communicative mind).

In his study entitled "*Theory of Communicative Action*" (1981) Habermas turns aside from the Marx paradigm. He creates a new theory that, regarding its format, he compares with the Parsons' theory in the preface. He first gives the definition of the general categories of human knowledge and action and then proceeds by deducing social categories. Likewise, in the introductory part, Habermas pays tribute to sociology as the only one among social sciences that has managed to preserve a high level thanks to the concept of "rationality" ("mind" in the philosophical sense) as the center of its research.

Habermas's theory of communicative action represents a critical synthesis of the leading sociological theories, primarily of those of Parsons, Weber and Marx. His general theoretical objective is to link the communicative action theory, as a variant of the action theory, with the system theory into a comprehensive approach to the social theory.⁶

On the basis of his analysis of the leading sociological theories, Habermas builds a conceptual analytical apparatus of his new theory of society. In that sense, he elaborates the basic concepts such as *social action*, *interests*, *life world*, *social system*, *regulation* as communication, etc. Regarding differences in the character of actions, Habermas distinguishes *four forms of action*, namely, 1. teleological action, 2. norm-regulated action, 3. dramaturgical action and 4. communicative action. Habermas also differentiates the instrumental action from the communicative and emancipation ones. To each action type, various interests of the mind (theoretical interest, practical and emancipation) correspond to. To each degree of the social development, according to Habermas, a

⁴ Quoted with reference to G. Zaječaranović, *Savremena filozofija*, op. cit., p. 253

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 253

⁶ Quoted with reference to E. Pusić, *Društvena regulacija*, Globus, Zagreb, 1989, p. 80

degree of understanding social facts (knowledge), moral justification (legitimacy) and legal norms (regulation) corresponds to. If the development of these dimensions is not mutually coordinated, the society is subjected to conflicts, crises and changes.⁷

In his theory of society, Habermas distinguishes the *social environment* or "*the world of life*" (in which man leads his everyday life by establishing more or less direct relationships with others) from *social systems* (economic, political, legal-normative) as specifically structured and institutionalized interaction patterns among people. *In the history of human society, social systems grew out of the world of life.* The social systems are maintained by the instrumental action exerted upon the external surroundings, as well as by specially regulated stereotyped communicative action with respect to the internal surroundings, to the nature of its members. *Their basic characteristic is to create the system dependence of people* and groups and thus they appear as subjects in the political system, as clients in the public service ruling system and as consumers in the economic system. Through the controlling media (such as *money, power, influence, value*) the social systems affect human behavior, regardless of direct interaction and their individual personal interests. Therefore, historically speaking, in the course of the human society development in time the separation of the systems from the life world takes place as well as the formation of new modern *institutions* to mediate among people, namely, those based upon wider principles of social integration, knowledge, legitimacy and regulation. These system institutions narrow their rational range in time and become too narrow; in other words, they become conservation and social blockage factors and thus, they lose their legitimacy. They are dominated by money and power orientation, monetarization, bureaucratization and politization. From the social modernization and rationalization process, the system in time appears as a blockage factor and starts to affect aggressively the life world, while trying to colonize the world life and turn it into a medium for monetary and political trafficking.⁸ Habermas tended to see the essence of the modern (capitalist and socialist) society crisis in the fact, or, rather, tendency of the systems to expend thus narrowing human free space; they also tend to subdue "the world life"; therefore, the main problem of modern society is "how to save the social world from the system structure onrush, that is, what conditions are necessary to ensure and develop the subject autonomy in the not-yet-conquered communities."⁹ According to Habermas, the way out should be looked for in affirmation of the "communicative rationality", in strengthening of the civil society autonomy, in expanding the space reserved for free action and communication of people who, in mutual communication, bring about rational decisions founded upon rational argumentation and consensus instead of upon strengthening of authoritarian government forms and system enforcement. Following this line of thinking, Habermas also notes a progressive role of new social movements, stressing that conflicts in modern society move away from the production relation sphere into the domain of culture and politics.

Habermas thinks that the existing forms of social organization, both capitalist and socialist ones, should be replaced by new organizational principles. Instead of the success

⁷ V. Katunarić, *Teorija društva u frankfurtskoj školi*, Naprijed, Zagreb, 1990, p. 120

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 120

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 120

principle or the solidarity principles, Habermas is pleading for the argumentation and communicative action principles. Namely, he thinks that practical issues of the social life of modern (postmodern) society, including the issue of social conflicts, can be solved by the rational discourse among people. Of course, this requires the provision of adequate prerequisites; most of all, it is necessary to abolish compulsion in communication; then it is necessary to develop universal communication ethics and establish adequate democratic procedures among people and social groups. In this context, Habermas especially stresses the role of the speech act in the communication process, pointing to contextual and other conditions as well as assumptions in which the rational discourse can be accomplished. Habermas thinks that, in the conditions of free communication, problems of conflicts, crises and legitimacy can be solved in modern (capitalist and socialist) society which, among other things, also suffers from the "legitimacy crisis", meaning that it is faced with the crisis of its own identity, in addition to being overwhelmed with doubts into a variety of ideologies, worldviews, strategies and ways of governing.¹⁰

Comparing Marx's and Habermas's social theories it should be stressed that there *are essential differences* between their key points. Namely, Marx's paradigm relies upon "the idea of materialism in sociology", that is, upon the role of labor and production ways in social changes throughout history, while Habermas stresses the role of organizational principle and communication; in a word, while Marx speaks about the primacy of the "base", Habermas is promoting the view of the superstructure primacy since the communicative action belongs to it. The normative basis of Marx's theory is formed of the value theory and the theory of exploitation and alienation, discarded by Habermas, while he, at the same time, speaks about alienation in terms of privileges and deprivation. The normative basis of Habermas's theory is related to speech and communicative action. Likewise, Marx speaks about the historical role of the proletariat as a macro-subject in the emancipation process, while Habermas believes that speech and communicative community both involve pluralism of actors, that is, all social layers and interests. While Marx speaks about revolutionary transformation of the class society into the classless one, Habermas writes about a lasting and gradual, that is, evolutionary correction of the existing state. Marx's project requires abolition of the multiple-party system, market, government division; Habermas, on the other hand, considers all these mechanisms valid, though corrected; while Marx's project is put into a utopian perspective, Habermas's is going on *ab ovo*. Finally, Marx's project requires the creation of the new man, while Habermas's counts on the existing people.¹¹

In addition to the above-listed differences, some *similarities between Marx's and Habermas's social theories* should also be stressed. Namely, they both believe in good human nature; both the authors search for non-capitalist ways of social organization looking for an alternative of the social development, the only difference being that in one case, this principle is looked for in the communist solidarity (Marx), while, in the other case, the principle is to be found in mutual negotiation and communication processes (Habermas).¹²

¹⁰ G. Zaječaranović, op. cit., p. 254

¹¹ M. Prokopijević, *Sporazumevanje i racionalnost*, p. 99

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 99

The alternative, therefore, offered by Habermas in his paradigm is communicative rationality or communicative mind, founded in communicative action. This theory actually represents a movement away from Marx's theoretical perspective; therefore, his theory cannot be "regarded as either Marxist or neo-Marxist" as claimed by *Miroslav Prokopijević* in his study (ph. dissertation) on the "Communication and Rationality - Criticism of Jurgen Habermas's Communicative Social Theory".¹³ For this reason, regarding the concept of the social state role and the evolutionary way of democratic social changes, Habermas's concept can be considered as post-Marxist and social-democratic one. Namely, the *Habermas program* - according to which (unlike social integration through market or state) communicative action should become the basic organizational social framework with the social role of the state in amortization and institutionalization of social (especially class) conflicts, along with strengthening of the civil society autonomy, developing forms of the participation democracy, an important role of new social movements and a critical role of sociology as a humanist-enlightenment science - can be regarded as *a theoretical expression of socio-democratic ideals*, that is, ideals of social-democratic socialism.¹⁴

Finally, it should be stressed that, though critics highly estimate the achievement of the Habermas paradigm (connecting its coming into being with numerous current mega trends, especially with an important role played by mass media and forms of the symbolic communication in the processes of globalization and integration of modern world society), numerous *vulnerable points of the Habermas theory* should also be mentioned, starting from a far too early and radical abandonment of the Marx labor paradigm to the reduction of a complex and contradictory nature of the society to the "communication community" and idealistic worship of the roles of the rational discourse, communicative action and communication in general. In his presented theoretical model, Habermas has simplified too much the social life of modern society by reducing it to "pure" laboratory conditions thus depriving it of real and contradictory dialects of special and general interests, most of all, of class contradictions. It is, therefore, justified to question "whether the proposed social organization paragon shaped according to the the philosophical seminar model is valid. Is the free argumentation norm, if understood as a seminar principle, can the basic organizational principle of a valid social establishment?"¹⁵ Unfortunately, the myth about philosophers - rulers and an ideal state seems to be repeating itself, by new means and upon new bases, at the end of the 20th century, as shown by the German social philosopher Jurgen Habermas in his communicative action theory.¹⁶ Still, regardless of all possible objections and shortcomings, Habermas's work, especially his requirements for integration of diverse theoretical approaches, represents a great *challenge* as well as an inspiration for further development of modern sociology in the world at large.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 99

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 100

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 5

NOVA SOCIJALNA PARADIGMA: HABERMASOVA TEORIJA KOMUNIKATIVNOG DELOVANJA

Ljubiša Mitrović

U radu se razmatra doprinos J. Habermasa utemeljenju nove socijalne paradigme u liku teorije komunikativnog delovanja. Autor najpre daje globalni pregled intelektualne razvojne linije Habermasa: od Marksa, preko kritičke teorije do postmarksizma i iskoraka iz njega, ka konvergenciji i integraciji teorije društvenog delovanja, teorije sistema i teorije simboličkog interakcionizma.

Nasuprot Marksovoj paradigmi proizvodnje i društvenog rada kao osnovne kategorije oko koje se konstituisala marksistička teorija, Habermas je izgradio novu paradigmu komunikativnog delovanja u čijem je središtu komunikativni um, sporazumevanje i racionalnost, komunikativna zajednica. Autor kritički ukazuje na vrednosti, ali i na unutrašnje granice Habermasove teorije, koja redukuje kompleksnu i protivrečnu klasnu prirodu društva na "komunikativnu zajednicu", promovišući ulogu racionalnog diskursa.

Ključne reči: *komunikativno delovanje, racionalni diskurs, komunikativni um, komunikativna zajednica, postmarksizam*