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Immanent Critique

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IMMANENT CRITIQUE

Habermas's work can be described as a form of immanent critique on two levels: the methodological and the social. On the level of *philosophical methodology*, Habermas almost always adopts an immanent approach. This means that the theories he discusses are shown to be problematic based on their own assumptions and arguments, rather than being dismissed for not conforming to some externally developed standpoint or for being incompatible with independently acquired empirical evidence. The most well-known examples of such an immanent approach can be found in *Knowledge and Human Interests*, *Theory of Communicative Action*, *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, and *Between Facts and Norms*. Of course, such an immanent approach does not exclude the possibility of examining whether theories prove to be useful for purposes that they themselves do not pursue. Examples for such inquiry can be found in *Theory of Communicative Action*, where Habermas discusses the possible contribution of analytic theories of language to an understanding of the integrative force of communication (a project in which the authors discussed, such as Searle, are disinterested).

Habermas's relation to the idea of immanent critique on the level of *substantive social theory* is more important and controversial. To engage in an immanent critique on this level means to provide a critique of social practices using principles that are reconstructed from those very practices, rather than using principles that have their validity established by moral arguments that do not refer to the practices to which the principles are applied (see Benhabib 1986 and Stahl 2013a).

Immanent critique in this sociotheoretical sense is a core commitment of social theories in the tradition of Hegel and Marx. However, Frankfurt School criticism has had a famously ambivalent relation to that idea, which is reflected in different ways throughout Habermas's work. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* can be read as an example of immanent critique based on a model that was inspired by Marx (see TP, 251; Honneth 1991, 226). Habermas reconstructs the self-understanding ("objective meaning" [STPS, 88]) on which the public sphere rests in order to evaluate and critically examine actual practices and institutions within this context and uncover contradictions within them that make it impossible for them to realize their own promises. However, this model of critique, which draws on an objective meaning immanent in social practices, is soon replaced. This is due to both a skepticism toward the idea of objective meaning and to the problem of the inherently conservative character of hermeneutic reconstruction of social understanding (ISS, LSS): first, in the *Logic of the Social Sciences*, by the idea of a mutual correction between hermeneutic and analytic forms of knowledge about the social; then, in *Knowledge and Human Interests*, by the idea of a third knowledge interest connected to self-reflection. This constitutes a move away from the idea that social critique must relate to historically specific social practices and thus a move away from the classic idea of immanent critique. Instead, the idea here is that social critique must be grounded in a specific mode of intersubjective practice that can be reconstructed independently from its historical institutionalization. While the reasons for these developments are primarily methodological,

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the second feature of Habermas's departure from the classic idea in the 1970s is social-theoretical: in his analyses of late capitalism, he increasingly assumes that social domination can do without appeals to ideological justification by increasingly submitting practices that once had harbored a potential of resistance against technocratic control. It is for this reason that he argues in 1976: "bourgeois consciousness . . . has been thoroughly emptied of binding normative contents. However, if . . . the bourgeois ideals have gone into retirement, there are no norms and values to which an immanent critique might appeal with the expectation of agreement" (CES, 96f.). Because the model of an emancipatory knowledge interest in *KHI* turns out to be problematic (McCarthy 1978), Habermas later turns toward the idea of reconstructing a "potential for critique built into communicative action itself" (TCA1, 121). This is neither a transcendental reconstruction – as the potential is part of a practice that can only be reconstructed with the help of an empirically informed universal pragmatics – nor a merely empirical reconstruction, as it depends on reconstructing an idealized form of social interaction from the sociological perspective of the lifeworld. In TCA, universal pragmatics is thus accompanied by an analysis of the rationalization of modern lifeworlds on which the unfolding of the potential of communication depends. As a result, Habermas arrives at a complex model of immanent critique (Stahl 2013b). This model is intended to be an alternative to the model of critique employed by Horkheimer and Adorno in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*. As Habermas argues in *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Horkheimer and Adorno radicalize ideology critique (which is a form of immanent critique) to such a degree that the distinction between reason and power disappears (PDM, 119), leading to a performative self-contradiction. He suggests that an alternative to this radicalization of immanent critique would be to set the "normative foundations of critical social theory so deep that they [are not] disturbed by the decomposition of bourgeois culture" (PDM, 129), thereby describing his project.

While it is clear that Habermas intends TCA to ground immanent critique, objections against this claim have been raised from two directions. First, it is unclear whether his reconstruction of immanent potentials depends on a problematic distinction between system and lifeworld that systematically neglects internal problems of power within discursive forms of interaction (Honneth 1991, 299). And second, it is unclear whether the critique of colonization in TCA refers to immanent potentials of communication rather than relying on a merely external standard regarding the undesirability of social dysfunctionalities caused by colonization (Jütten 2011). Additional objections against the TCA version of immanent critique concern whether it is strong enough to support critical normative conclusions (Finlayson 2013), and whether it neglects the possibility-disclosing aspects of immanent critique (Kompridis 2006, 257).

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SEE ALSO:

Critical Theory
The Frankfurt School
Hermeneutics
Historical Materialism
Rational Reconstruction
Karl Marx

SUGGESTED READING

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