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## **Learning and Communicative Rationality**

*The Contribution of Jürgen Habermas*

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## **Learning and Communicative Rationality**

### **The Contribution of Jürgen Habermas<sup>1</sup>**

*Palle Rasmussen*

#### **Introduction**

Jürgen Habermas is one of the most well known intellectuals and social theorists of today. During his long career he has written comprehensively on many aspects of both philosophy and social theory, and his work on themes like the public sphere, the theory of knowledge, socialization, legitimation, social evolution, communication, systems theory, modernity, ethics, law and democracy have been very influential, as have his comments on many political issues.

It is only natural that a contribution as wide-ranging and penetrating as this has been taken up, debated and inspired research in many areas of science. One of these is educational research. Since the seventies Habermas has often been cited in educational research, most often in the context of critical or liberating educational strategies. Both Habermas' early concept of emancipatory cognitive interests and his later concept of communication free from power games have inspired critical educational principles, but have also been denounced by educationalists inspired by post-modernism or systems theory.

This article has a somewhat different focus; I try to map and discuss Habermas' contributions to a theory of learning. Assumptions about learning are part of the theoretical foundation for educational principles, but a theory of learning covers a much wider and more complex field. It tries to conceptualise forces, patterns and consequences of learning processes at all levels of society. In such a view learning is found both in contexts designed for educational purposes and in contexts dominated by other agendas; and it takes place both in individuals, groups and larger social entities.

When I say "a theory of learning" it should not be taken to mean a very formalised and systematic theory about all the aspects mentioned above. Although learning in my view (and also in Habermas' view, I think) is an increasingly important element in modern society, learning is not a main structuring principle. Learning is embedded in contexts of society, culture, organisations and individuals, and must be conceptualised together with these. But the wide-ranging theoretical framework developed by Habermas should provide the

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<sup>1</sup> The references to books and articles by Habermas will mostly refer to the original German editions not least because some of the articles are only available in German. Only in those cases where quotations are used will I refer to the English translations.

opportunity for locating some important aspects of learning in modern society. This is what I try to do.

In the article I present and discuss four types of learning, which have been conceptualised in Habermas' theory. These are:

1. Individual learning, in the form of socialization and moral development.
2. Learning as a core element in communicative action and the reproduction of lifeworlds
3. Social evolution as decentred processes of learning involving both technological and moral development
4. Learning in the public sphere as a crucial part of the democratic process in the constitutional state.

It is important to note that the use of the term "learning" in these examples represents my interpretation. Habermas himself does not use the term consistently, but the processes he describes certainly qualify as learning in the comprehensive sense outlined above.

The four themes have all been treated in Habermas' work, but at different times. The first and the third theme were prominent in his work as a Max Planck Institute director during the seventies, the second theme was taken up in the eighties, especially in the "Theory of Communicative Action", while the fourth theme was present both in his analysis of the public sphere in the early sixties and in his contributions to democratic theory during the nineties.

I will present and discuss the four themes in turn. First, however, I will present an outline of Habermas' work and its development since the sixties. The aim of this is both to provide a general framework for themes and to illustrate the connections between them. Before concluding the paper I will add as a specific example of this Habermas' analysis of the university as a context for learning.

### **Exploring Communicative Rationality and Modern Society**

Habermas finished his university studies in the mid-fifties and in the following years he worked as a research assistant at the Institute for Social Research, which had been re-established in Frankfurt after the war. One of the themes he researched was the political awareness and participation of students. Habermas was thus closely affiliated with the critical theory of the "Frankfurt School", but he also drew on other inspirations. One indication of this is that his doctoral dissertation (Habermas 1962) was not submitted in Frankfurt, but in Marburg, with Professor Wolfgang Abendroth, who was known for works on the history of the labour movement.

The theme of the dissertation was the origins and the development of the public sphere. The study remains the most historical of Habermas' works. Habermas highlights how the sphere of representations with which the sovereign prince surrounded himself was gradually colonised and transformed by the emergent bourgeoisie. On the basis of their economic independence, but also on the basis of their cultural merits the citizens demanded the right to participate in public debate about the social order. New mass media, above all the newspapers,

offered practical possibilities of a public reasoning, where all arguments and interests could be questioned and possibly rejected. Habermas also demonstrated how developments in everyday life, in the mass media and in political life gradually undermined the public sphere. But he has held on to the ideal of open, public reasoning as a core element of human society, and he has sought to qualify this ideal in his later theoretical work.

Apart from the dissertation Habermas' main contributions during the sixties were in the fields of philosophy and the theory of knowledge. He became professor of philosophy and sociology in Frankfurt and contributed to the so-called "positivist dispute" in German sociology, where critical theory confronted modern positivism. Adorno's contributions to this debate portrayed positivism as a spreading instrumentalisation of human civilization, but Habermas' point of view was different: He criticized the positivist belief that the natural sciences could provide a model for general and value-free knowledge in the human and the social sciences. In his book on "Knowledge and Human Interests" (1968a) he emphasized that all science builds on peoples' interest in knowledge, and that these in turn depend on the kind of action and life that different persons are involved in. He distinguished between two basic types of science. Empirical-analytical sciences build on technical knowledge interests which connect to work and other systems of purposive rationality in society. Historical-hermeneutic sciences, on the other hand, build on practical knowledge interests (in the classical sense, where "practical" means the character of good life), and these are connected to human interaction in social lifeworlds. To these two, Habermas adds a third type of science, critical science, which is built on emancipatory cognitive interests. This type of interest is not connected to any particular contexts in society; it is oriented towards liberating knowledge and human action from rigid and non-legitimate power structures.

The main line of argument in Habermas' works on the theory of knowledge was thus to specify the societal spheres of validity of different scientific paradigms. Neither positivism nor hermeneutics could claim universal validity. Also Habermas tried to explicate the scientific basis of the emancipatory perspective that had been launched by critical theory.

During the late sixties the student movement had a strong impact in the universities of the German Federal Republic. Like many other young academics Habermas saw this as a positive development and involved himself in work on reforming the content of studies and the structures of governance. But politically Habermas attached himself to Social Democratic reformism rather than to the new left, and as the student movement gradually adopted a clear-cut Marxist platform Habermas increasingly found himself in opposition to it (cf. Holub 1991). This contributed to his decision to leave professorship in Frankfurt in 1971. In the following years, up to 1982, he worked as a director of research at a Max-Planck Institute in Starnberg, called the "Institute for Researching Life Conditions in the Scientific-Technical World". Two themes were prominent in his work during these years, one being communicative competence and the other social evolution.

In his writings on the theory of knowledge Habermas had already suggested that the basis for human rationality was to be found in the ability to express meaning and communicate through

language. He now undertook a systematic exploration of this idea, inspired not least by the philosophy of language. He maintained that people's acts of communication in everyday life rest on communicative competence, which contains an intuitive knowledge of universal rules for human communication. He distinguished between two levels of communication through language. One is communicative action in the form of daily social action and interaction, which contains some degree of implicit norms and power relations. The other level is discourse, in which the normative preconditions of communication are continuously questioned. Discourse presupposes an ideal situation of dialogue, in which no acts are directed by power and in which all participants have equal access. The principles of ideal dialogue regulate discourse, but they are also contained in communicative competence, and are thus potentially present in all communicative action.

Theories of social evolution attempt to conceptualise general and long-term processes in social development. Together with other researchers at the Max Planck Institute Habermas studied a number of theories and analyses in this field and tried to synthesise these into a model of social development that could be seen as a process of growth and learning. This was done in a critical dialogue with Marxist theory, not least in the volume "Toward a Reconstruction of Historical Materialism" (Habermas 1976). Habermas levelled criticism at Marx's tendency to interpret history as linear, pre-determined development focused around one actor or subject (like the working class in capitalism). Nevertheless, Habermas finds fruitful concepts and approaches in the Marxist tradition. Marx distinguished between the basis and the superstructure of a given society, and he described changes in the modes of production as a dialectic between forces of production and relations of production. Habermas understands the development of forces of production as an endogenous mechanism of learning, creating new knowledge and technology, while he interprets the relations of production as institutional structures (like for instance law) and types of social integration. However, social integration demands not technological, but moral and practical knowledge and this also develops through learning. So unlike Marx he does not see the forces of production as the only driving force of societal change.

"The Theory of Communicative Action", first published in 1981, was the culmination of Habermas' work during the seventies. In this massive volume he assembled and systematised not only his work on communicative competence and social evolution, he also included other themes. One example is the analysis of the relationship between system and lifeworld, which is a core element in the book. This draws on a debate with the system theory of Niklas Luhmann which Habermas had been involved in since the early seventies. Furthermore, the comprehensive theoretical analysis is presented through a discussion of the sociologists like Weber, Durkheim, Mead and Parsons as well as critical theory.

As a contrast to the massive collection of concepts and arguments characterising "The Theory of Communicative Action" it is well worth recapitulating Habermas' more informal statements about the mission of the book. In an interview given on occasion of its publication (Habermas 1985) he said that the work had been driven partly by a main idea and partly by an intuitive experience. The idea was to give words to the possibility of people living together

in a satisfactory balance between autonomy and dependency, without giving up the cultural, social and economic differentiations made possible by modernity. The intuitive experience was that satisfying inter-subjective networks were in fact possible.

Not long after the publication of the Theory of Communicative Action Habermas returned to the University of Frankfurt, once more as professor of philosophy and sociology. His work during the eighties focused more on philosophy. It included a number of critical analyses of post-modern and de-constructivist philosophy; but his main project was a positive one, developing principles of discourse ethics. The field of ethics is the validation of moral rules and norms. A well-known example is the general ethical rule that Kant proposed and called the “categorical imperative”; it says that one “should only act on the maxim (meaning moral rule) that you can want as a general law”. Ethics in this form presupposes the will of the individual subject to do the right thing. But this is exactly the precondition that Habermas criticised and tried to transcend in his theory of communicative reason. The task for a discourse ethics is then to reshape ethical rules so that they do not depend on the will of the individual, but rather on general recognition in open debate without interference from power relations. The rules of discourse ethics are formal; they define procedures for democratic assessment of rules and their justifiability. They do not constitute guidelines for the actual creation of moral norms or for visions of the good life.

In his work during the nineties Habermas turned again to social theory. The main work from this period is “Between Facts and Norms” (Habermas 1992), in which he undertakes to outline a theory of law and the constitutional state, and of the democratic process in the state. What he proposes is a discourse theory, meaning that it focuses on procedures and presuppositions rather than on institutions and systems; the normative element is stronger than in the theory of communicative action. The title of the book signals Habermas’ view of current research traditions in law and political science. He sees them as divided in two camps that do in fact have little in common. On one side are the predominantly normative approaches which often risk losing their touch with the reality of society, on the other the objectivist approaches which tend to overlook all normative aspects. Habermas wants to contribute to overcoming this gap. In his discussion of law in society he develops a dual perspective, where the legal system is understood both from the “inside”, in its normative content, and from the “outside”, as part of social reality. In his discussion of democracy in the constitutional state he blends elements from both the liberal and the republican traditions of democracy. In the liberal tradition the state is the guardian of the economic order, and democracy is a question of resolving conflicts of interests. In the republican account the state is a framework for the moral community of the citizens, and the democratic process is the ethical and moral self-reflection of citizens. The discourse theory proposed by Habermas accords a crucial role to the political public sphere, where interests are mediated to legitimate bases for state policies; but he emphasises also that new ideas must be developed in autonomous and less formalised associations rooted in civil society before they are legitimated in public political debate. There is some continuity here back to Habermas’ early work on the public sphere, but also a change to a more abstract, normative kind of analysis.

Alongside his theoretical writings Habermas has all through his career published articles where he comments on current cultural and political issues. In these articles he does not try to apply his own conceptual framework in a very stringent way, but still his commentaries and interventions illustrate some political implications of the theories. One well-known example is his heated debate during the eighties with a group of conservative historians, who in their writings tried to play down or even not to mention the atrocities of Nazism. This “normalisation” of German history was intended as a contribution to the restoration of German national identity. Habermas levelled a sharp and fundamental critique against this undertaking, maintaining that identity must not be built on denial or partial truth. It must build on enlightenment, open and critical assessment of the past and its consequences (cf. Holub 1991).

### **Individual Learning and Morality**

At the Max-Planck Institute for Researching Life Conditions in the Scientific-Technical World, which Habermas directed during the seventies, individual development and learning was an important theme. The main work on this theme was done by other researchers, but Habermas himself also contributed.

In fact his interest in individual learning had been evident earlier. In the late sixties he taught a course in socialization theory; the lecture notes were published unofficially and circulated widely. While much of the new left turned (in line with the early critical theorists) to the psychoanalytic tradition as a basis for social and political psychology, Habermas turned rather to the social psychology of Mead and ego-psychology developed in the US. In his writings on the student movement he also drew on socialization theory. While many ideologists in the movement itself tried to explain it with reference to the economic contradictions of capitalism, Habermas maintained that the protest potential of the movement should rather be explained in social psychological terms. In an article published in 1968 he argues that the socialization of many radical students has not taken place in the restricted framework of traditional bourgeois or petty-bourgeois lifestyle and morality; they have grown up with liberal educational practises and in subcultures independent of economic necessity. The dispositions produced in such an environment conflict strongly with the routines, the instrumentality, the status-competition and the mass culture in the everyday life of industrial society, and this conflict is at the root of student protest (Habermas 1970a, p. 192-193). The new sensibility of the students cannot accept the exclusion of questions of the good life from public policy and debate, and this politicises the protest and the movement.

It is evident here that the question of individual development for Habermas is intimately linked with the question of reason and co-existence in adult life. The students had developed a special sensibility, which enabled them to highlight problems in social life, but not to enter into a constructive dialogue with the people living this life. To Habermas socialization is neither a by-product of social structures and institutions nor a seamless reproduction of existing social hierarchies and roles. It is a process aimed at developing the cognitive and moral qualities that the individual needs to participate in a plural and democratic society. This is an ideal type of the process of socialization. In real life the process may encounter barriers,

contain disturbances or even fail altogether. But the ideal type is a basis for analysing and assessing empirical patterns of socialisation.

This approach to socialization and individual development is also evident in Habermas' later contributions, which focus mainly on the development of moral thinking being for the most part inspired by Lawrence Kohlberg's work (cf. Habermas 1976, p. 63ff.). On the basis of Piaget's models and investigations of phases in individual cognitive development, Kohlberg developed a model of individual moral development and refined it through empirical research. The definition and validation of moral rules has generally been the business of philosophy, and discussions of Kohlberg appear in Habermas' contributions to philosophy as well as to social theory.

According to Kohlberg's model individual moral development proceeds through the three main stages of pre-conventional, conventional and post-conventional morality, each of which is in turn divided into two sub-phases. The individual develops from rule-following prompted by sanctions over internalisation of rules into independent moral reflection based on universal principles. Habermas has linked this model to different aspects of his theory, in later years to the concepts of communicative action and discourse ethics. In a major article on this (Habermas 1983b) he argues that the principles of discourse ethics provides a better philosophical foundation for Kohlberg's theory of moral development than the pragmatist approach which Kohlberg himself relies on. Among other points Habermas maintains that discourse ethics demand a concept of "constructive learning" related to the one used by Kohlberg and Piaget.

Habermas emphasizes that the progression from one moral stage to another is a process of learning, which is driven by a constructive effort by the learner. The person growing up reconstructs and differentiates the cognitive structures in a way that enables her to solve moral problems in a better way than before. Discourse ethics matches this constructivist concept of learning because it sees the discursive argument as the reflective development of communicative action. This development demands a change of attitude that the child, who is growing up in the framework of everyday communicative practise, is not originally capable of. The change of attitude means that things and events, which at an earlier stage have been taken naively as "facts", must now be recognized as something that may or may not exist. In the same way socialized norms are transformed into possible rules, which may or may not be accepted as legitimate.

Habermas illustrates the problem of transformation from a conventional to a post-conventional level of morality by comparing it to the process of adolescence compressed into one critical point: The point when the young person for the first time adopts a general hypothetical attitude towards the normative contexts of his or her life world. If the young person does not resort to traditionalism he has to reconstruct his fundamental concepts of the normative order. From now on he cannot escape the distinction between those norms which are in fact recognized and accepted, and those norms which are worthy of acceptance. Moral consciousness has emerged as a basis for reasoned judgement.



Summing up, the main theme in Habermas' work on socialization and individual learning is the development of cognitive and moral reason from childhood to adulthood, or rather to the mature thinking of the independent moral individual.

### **Learning and Lifeworld**

In Habermas' conceptualisation of modern society, which he has presented most comprehensively in the "Theory of Communicative Action" (Habermas 1981), different types of rationality are embedded in cultural and social contexts and are reproduced through different types of action. Communicative rationality, which has the potential to humanize the social order, is anchored in the lifeworld and upheld through communicative action. Reflexive learning is an important part of this process.

The concept of rationality is a controversial one in social theory. It has often been denounced as an obsolete residue of idealist philosophy. Habermas, however, maintains that a critical theory of society must include a theory of rationality, because the world we live in is still in many ways determined by the process which Weber called "the disenchantment of the Western world". Social theory must be able to grasp this process of rationalization. But according to Habermas, neither Weber nor early critical theory developed an adequate understanding of the ambivalence of this process; they analyzed it mainly in its negative dimension.

While Weber discussed the question of individual freedom in the thoroughly rationalized society, critical theory focused on the consequences for consciousness and personality. Adorno and Horkheimer saw the increasing predominance of instrumental rationality as an integrated element in the development of Western civilisation, driven by the expansion of market economies and the universalisation of the commodity form. Unlike the more orthodox Marxists, who looked to the working class for resistance, the early critical theorists saw no social or subjective forces which could reverse this trend. This led Adorno to the conclusion that a true understanding of man and society could not be achieved by means of scientific method of analytical thinking, because these modes of thought were infected by instrumental rationality. As an alternative, Adorno pointed to the intuitive understanding of man and nature, which could find expression and be experienced through different forms of art.

To Habermas, Adorno's conclusion signals the inability of early critical theory to realize the project of a theoretical, interdisciplinary social science. He locates the main reason for this failure in a conception of subjectivity and consciousness, which early critical theory inherited from idealist philosophy. In this paradigm, the subject is confronted with a world of objects, towards which it may relate in two ways: Understand them or master them. Habermas maintains that subjectivity must be conceived differently: The subject is not just confronted with a world of objects; it is also in contact with other subjects, with whom it may communicate over ways to relate to the world of objects. The development of rationality is an intersubjective learning process.

To link the notion of communicative rationality with the analysis of society, Habermas develops a typology of social action. In his early works, he distinguished between goal-oriented action and communicative action (which he also labelled "work" and "interaction", cf. Habermas 1968b). In the "Theory of Communicative Action", he subdivides these two categories, arriving at five forms of social action.

<i>Main type</i>	<i>Sub-type</i>
<b>Goal-oriented action</b>	Instrumental action (directed towards objects) Strategic action (directed towards subjects)
<b>Communicative action</b>	Conversation Norm-regulated action Dramaturgic action

In working out the characteristics of communicative action, Habermas draws on the theory of speech acts, and especially on the vital concept of illocutionary force. The illocutionary force is Austin's designation for the kind of act we perform when we utter a sentence. It should be distinguished from its locutionary force (the referential or cognitive meaning) and also from its perlocutionary force (the intended function or result). The illocutionary force indicates mutual relations between the partners of communication, and conditions for the validity of these relations.

In Habermas' typology, each form of communicative action is dominated by a component in the speech act. Norm-regulated action is dominated by the illocutionary component. The basic form is: "I promise you, that...". The criterion for evaluating norm-regulated action is justification. Conversation, norm-regulated action and dramaturgic action are not independent forms, but rather coexisting elements in communicative action. But fundamentally it is illocutionary force of speech acts that constitutes the rationalizing potential of communicative action.

The evolution of a differentiated system of linguistic communication increasingly provides interaction partners with the option of confirming or denying each other's claims to validity. This is the reason why illocutionary force has the potential for creating durable social relations: "A hearer can be "bound" by speech-act offers because he is not permitted arbitrarily to refuse them but only to say "no" to them, that is, to reject them for reasons" (Habermas 1987b, p. 74). This potential also affects the development of individuals. The engagement in dialogue with others also makes it possible for the subject to engage in an inner dialogue, developing a capacity for self-reflection.

As I interpret it, the intersubjective learning of communicative rationality must be seen as a continuous process where participants improve their competence in offering and responding to communicative acts, and at the same time confirm their attachment to the same community. The availability of communication "artifacts", mainly in the form of linguistic systems of communication, makes it possible to stabilize the outcomes of learning, both in social

organization and in the minds of subjects. In Habermas' theory, the "place" of this stabilized learning is the life-world.

The concept of lifeworld was originally developed within phenomenological philosophy and sociology. It signifies the horizon of communication, the frame of reference which is common to speaker and listener, and which enables them understand each other. Thus, the lifeworld mainly consists of "tacit knowledge" founded in everyday life. The lifeworld is continuously reproduced through communicative action. If distortion of communication takes place, for instance through obscure blending of communicative and strategic acts, it threatens the reproduction of the life-world. Because of changes and crises in social life communicative rationality is not something learned once and for all; it will often have to be re-contextualized and re-learned.

Habermas' concept of society is two-faced. It is conceived not only in terms of the lifeworld but also in terms of social systems. This is because the organization of social life is not only achieved through mutual understanding between individuals. Many social processes are coordinated through media that establish common measures for individual evaluations of the consequences of action. One such medium is money, which coordinates individual action on economic markets.

In the course of social evolution, differentiation occurs both in social systems (in the form of growing complexity) and in lifeworld contexts (in the form of rationalization). Differentiation also transforms the relationship between system and lifeworld to such an extent that they are finally "uncoupled" from each other. Through rationalization, the knowledge transmitted within the life-world increasingly becomes the object of discussion. Through a parallel process, the reproduction of society increasingly comes to rest on subsystems of goal-oriented action, organized through media like money and power. The problem is that in developed Western societies, the social systems come to dominate or undermine the processes of rationalization in the lifeworld. This is what Habermas calls the "colonization of the lifeworld". It implies a systematic distortion of communicative learning. One of the examples Habermas offers is the legal regulation of social relations in the family and in the school. School law originates as a supplementary regulation; the processes of education are expected to "run themselves", drawing on the potential of communicative action. But when the formal structures of legal regulation come to dominate educational institutions, the capacity for symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld suffers. As educational institutions are entrusted with the development of skills aimed at the labour market, they are tied to the system perspective. The economic system demands that education be disconnected from the ideal of education as a general civil right, and connected to the system of employment. And he continues: "From the perspective of social theory, the present controversy concerning the basic orientations of school policy can be understood as a fight for or against the colonization of the lifeworld" (Habermas 1987b, p. 371).

In sum, Habermas sees the development of rationality as a continuous intersubjective learning process. Participants improve their competence in offering and responding to communicative

acts, and at the same time confirm their attachment to the same community. Through the system of language communicative action is connected to the lifeworld, which it reproduces. This reproduction is however threatened by an over-riding tendency of social systems to colonize the life-world, leading to a systematic distortion of communicative learning.

### **Social Evolution as a Process of Learning**

Habermas' interest in learning during his work at the Max Planck-institute was linked to an interest in the study of social evolution. In parallel to his view of individual development he sought to describe the development of human societies as a process of growth and learning. As mentioned earlier the Marxist tradition served as an important stepping stone for this, although Habermas disagreed with Marxism on several points.

Marxism focuses on socially organised work as a core element in the theory of evolution. But in line with both his earlier and his later works Habermas maintains that work is not an appropriate model of social action, and that Marx's concept of work must be differentiated in different types of action (Habermas 1976, p. 145 f.)

- The purposive transformation of materials is instrumental action
- The purposive collaboration in production is strategic action
- The distribution of produced goods demands mutual understanding through linguistic interaction, i.e. communicative action.

Habermas finds that Marx's conceptualisation of the evolution of humanity has the same dogmatic character as other philosophies of history formulated in the same period. History is interpreted as a linear, necessary, unbroken development of one general macro-subject. But in Habermas' opinion the existence of such a general macro-subject is not a necessary element of historical materialism. Evolution is driven by different societies and the macro-subjects embedded in them.

Marx saw the important evolutionary processes of learning, which triggered epochal change, in the dimensions of technical and organisational knowledge and in instrumental and strategic action, that is, in the forces of production. He distinguished between basis and superstructure, and he described the changing modes of production as a dialectic interplay of the forces and the social relations of production. Habermas attempts to reformulate this. The development of the forces of production can be regarded as an endogenous mechanism of learning, which creates new knowledge and technology. But it is not clear why this can lead to social change, for social integration does not demand technical knowledge, but practical moral knowledge.

Today, there is good reason to assume that learning also takes place in the dimensions of moral insight, communicative action and the consensual regulation of conflicts. This leads to more mature forms of social integration and relations of production, and makes possible the use of new forces of production. Thus, the structures of rationality, which manifest themselves in worldviews, moral views and identities, get an important place in theoretical development. It is especially important to reconstruct systematic patterns in the development of normative structures, patterns that signify a developmental logic inherent in cultural tradition and

institutional change. But this developmental logic still depends on the evolutionary challenges of unsolved (economically conditioned) problems in the social system, and on learning processes provoked by these problems. In other words, culture is still part of the superstructure, even if it plays a more important role than many Marxists have imagined (Habermas 1976, p. 11-12).

The concept of mode of production is too narrow to describe the universal element in social levels of evolution. Instead it is necessary to look for very general principles of social organisation. Such principles of organisation may be classified as "evolutionary characteristics". One place to look for them is in the descriptions of moral consciousness and competence for action provided by developmental psychology. Here Habermas once again turns to Kohlberg and his model of moral development. The solution of moral problems in individual consciousness takes place at pre-conventional, conventional and post-conventional levels. The same pattern manifests itself in the social evolution of ideas of justice and morality. The models of individual development are better researched and documented than their counterparts in the area of social evolution, but it is no surprise that homologous structures of thinking can be found in the evolution of mankind. The evolutionary learning processes of societies depend on the competencies of the individuals belonging to these societies. The reproduction of society and the socialization of the members of society are two aspects of the same process, and depend on the same structures. Societies may learn in an evolutionary way, in that they use the cognitive potential contained in world-views to reorganise systems of action.

Habermas asserts that fundamental concepts may be defined for a genetic theory of action which may be read in two ways: either as categories for the steps of competence that can be acquired by the subject capable of language and action, or as categories for the infrastructure of systems of action, and thus for different forms of social integration.

Habermas did in fact try to propose a number of such categories and to characterise different types of society (Habermas 1976, p. 170), but in my opinion the result remained highly speculative. His theory of evolution remained a complex proposal, which was only in part followed up by empirical and historical research (not by Habermas himself). An account of social evolution was incorporated in the theory of communicative action, but this had a more narrow focus, using mainly the concepts of social integration vs. systems integration to characterise evolutionary phases.

I find the idea of constructing a genetic theory of evolution on the basis of homologies between individual and societal development very dubious. But Habermas' reconceptualisation of historical materialism, with its focus on learning mechanisms and multi-polar development, is still fruitful and should inspire further research.

Although Habermas is not a historian he takes a profound interest in historical debates and especially in the relationship between past and present. Apart from his dissertation on the evolution of the public sphere, most of his writing on historical matters is found in shorter

articles. One of these (Habermas 1995a) is especially interesting in the context of evolution, because it discusses what it means to learn from history.

Habermas discusses different approaches to the idea of learning from history (drawing on a study of this made by Reinhardt Koselleck). The formula "Historia Magistra Vitae" is known from Cicero, but to him and other classical thinkers it did not designate the historical process as a totality, but rather history as a collection of exemplary events, who could serve to educate later generations. Habermas points out that this kind of "learning" is only possible if one assumes that history repeats itself, and that human actions are more or less of the same kind throughout history.

The development of a consciousness of history starting late in the 18<sup>th</sup> century ended the classical notion of learning from history. From that time on the contemporary use of history is of a different kind. Historical knowledge provides a context for the present situation, linking it with past and future. There are, however different versions of this understanding.

One version is the philosophy of history, which traces the cruel and ironic powers of rationality that move history through the actions of humans, but without their knowledge. Hegel tended to conclude that actors always learned too late, whereas Marx wanted future generations to learn through the philosophy of history. The insight in the processes of history should help emancipate people, so that they could become subjects of their own history, producing it with will and consciousness. In this understanding historical and utopian elements are intertwined.

A second approach was the "German school of history-writing" which from the outset criticised the philosophy of history. This school recognized that the historical evolution of human life has had many changing forms, but saw it as wrong to characterise some forms as progress. Historical research should provide insight into the reality of previous epochs; but knowledge of history should not provide guidelines for contemporary action. Still historical knowledge has an educational value, because the confrontation with different conditions and ways of life can help people understand their own life and society.

A third version is that of hermeneutics. To Gadamer, drawing on Dilthey, history-writing is not simply a post-event contemplation. History-writing is also an active continuation of a tradition. And tradition rests on historical recognition; on the authority of works that have secured themselves a status as classics against time and criticism. It is evident that hermeneutics are less interested in historical events than in the historical texts that inform us about these events.

Habermas notes that the three ways of reading history share the curious premise that we can only learn from history when it has something positive to show us, something worth emulating. This is in spite of the fact that we normally learn from negative experiences, from disappointments or failures that we try to avoid in the future. This applies both to collective actors and to individual life histories. In Habermas' view processes of learning are provoked

by experiences that occur to us and problems that we run into, and which often influence us in painful ways. So the question is how we learn from events that represent the failure of traditions. And especially what is learned in situations where the attitudes and abilities of the participants do not enable them to respond adequately to urgent problems; where established horizons of expectation break down.

Habermas' ideas about social evolution as learning were shaped in discussion with the Marxist theories and analyses of the seventies. They represented a fruitful revision of some core concepts in historical materialism, notably the idea that evolution is driven mainly by the forces of production and the idea of one central subject of social change. They also contained some highly speculative suggestions about homologies between individual and societal development. Habermas' theories and models on evolution were ambitious, and applying them in historical analysis would have been a massive task. Although some of his colleagues took steps in this direction (cf. Eder 1985) the program remained largely unfulfilled. His more recent contributions about learning and history are not meant as contributions to the theory of evolution but rather as interventions in a public process of reflection and reasoning.

### **Learning in the Public Sphere**

The public sphere has always been accorded a crucial role in Habermas' analysis of society and democracy. In his first major work (Habermas 1962) he traced the origins and development of the public sphere in modern society. Instituted as a place where people were assembled to show their respect for the sovereign and receive information, the public sphere was appropriated by a new type of citizens who, because they were economically independent, claimed the right to voice their interests and have them respected. The public sphere became a place for public reasoning by men (not women, at least not until later) with equal rights of participation. Habermas portrayed the early public sphere as the kind of public communication that he has taken great pains to conceptualise systematically in his later work. But he also traced the degeneration of this sphere in a modern society dominated by organised capitalism, bureaucratic states and mass media.

In his more recent works on political and legal theory Habermas retains a strong focus on the public sphere, but seems to have a more optimistic assessment of its role in contemporary society. He develops a more elaborate normative model of the democratic process and the roles played by civil society, constitutional rights, public sphere, legislation and policy implementation. This does not mean that he no longer recognizes threats and power differentials; the normative model can be seen as a basis for critical analysis of contemporary political processes.

Learning has an important role in the democratic process, and especially in the public sphere. This is where citizens learn to voice and negotiate problems in a context that promotes communicative rationality and power.

The public sphere consists of a common public space, which is divided into many different subtypes of public spaces, where citizens are able to gather both as senders of and as receivers

of social communication about social interests, but also as a neutral third part, as a public. The public sphere may thus be seen primarily as a network for the communication of information and opinions.

The problems communicated in the public sphere do not however originate here; they are rooted in the private sphere and can only be treated in the public sphere if they find a public form. Civil society has a crucial role here; it has the ability to give problems a form that makes them relevant for debate in the public sphere. The core of civil society consists of networks of voluntary associations emerging more or less spontaneously from the private sphere. These networks consist of citizens trying to find acceptable interpretations of their interests and also to gain influence on the institutionalised process of decision-making.

Habermas pictures a cycle of power in the form of an ideal procedure for reaching collective decisions. From the outset the actors of civil society have social power i.e., a capacity to realize their own interests at the expense of others. This power may then be transformed into communicative power if the citizens meet as a public and agree on the rules for social interaction and the realization of collective goals. These agreements are ideally based on a standard of justice, that helps define which demands and needs that deserve public attention and which do not. This standard of justice is formulated on the basis of a free public debate, following the rules of discourse ethics and tending towards communicative rationality. However, real communicative power is only realized when the demands formulated in the public sphere pass through the filters of institutionalised decision-making and through parliamentary procedures thereby leading to actual legislation. After the formal parliamentary process of legislation the results are implemented through legal and administrative power, which makes legislation binding through sanctions.

As mentioned, the normative model of deliberative democracy can be seen as a basis for critical analysis of contemporary political processes. Habermas' interventions in public debate illustrate the kind of threats he perceives to be confronting the public sphere, and the kind of deliberation he finds worthwhile.

One issue that Habermas has often commented on in recent years is the process of German re-unification. In one article (Habermas 1995b) he discusses Adorno's well-known paper on "Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit" (Adorno 1959), where Adorno emphasised the importance of consciously confronting Germany's (then recent) painful past. Adorno drew on a psychoanalytic notion of "working through" the partly subconscious experiences and motives. But he did not, says Habermas, have a naive faith in the healing power of consciousness and rational knowledge. Although he insisted on a merciless reflection on a past that confronts us with unpleasant sides of ourselves he also maintained that this reflection only has a healing power if it is not directed at us from the outside, but is a self-reflection, our own responsibility.

Today, under the conditions of post-metaphysical thinking, there is no alternative to self-reflection if we want to understand ourselves. Today there are many co-existing life-forms of



more or less equal status. This leaves room for individual life courses, but it does not allow dependence on stable and authoritative ideal models of life.

Such problems do not pose themselves only on an individual level (in the "first person singular"), but also on the level of over ethical and political understanding of ourselves as citizens in a community (in the "first person plural"). It is a question of articulating a sincere collective self-understanding, which both satisfies criteria of political justice and expresses a feeling of political community shaped through history. This public process of ethical and political self-understanding is the central dimension of what Adorno called confronting the past. This process should not be mistaken for the existential coming to terms with personal guilt and the legal prosecution of criminal acts. Personalisation and "tribunalisation" disturbs the focus of public debates on political and ethical self-understanding.

Another article (Habermas 1995c) discusses the complex relationship between reunification and the demise of fascism and warns against uncritical celebration of the political culture of the German Federal Republic. Although unlearning of authoritarian culture could take place in a different and easier way in the Federal Republic than in the German Democratic Republic, and although the citizens of Western Germany could gain confidence in a democratic political system in the context of economic growth, this in itself was not sufficient to transform confidence in the system into an active democratic mentality. The citizens had to convince themselves of the normative substance in the western political traditions, and they had to rediscover in their own traditions the heritage of humanism and enlightenment. Such a democratic mentality can only develop in the context of a political culture of freedom and disagreement. It develops through criticism and debate in the arenas of a public sphere where arguments still count, and which has not degenerated into privatised media consumption.

In sum, Habermas accords learning an important role in the democratic process, especially in the interface between the voluntary associations of civil society and the deliberations in the public sphere. While his early analysis of the public sphere tended to conflate the ideal picture of communicative action with the historical reality of the public sphere in early modernity, his more recent analyses avoid this. They do not quite, however, answer the question as to how the principles of communicative rationality are embedded in the social context of the public sphere. The concept of learning itself is not discussed at a theoretical level in Habermas' work on the public sphere; but it is evident that learning is understood as a process of reflection on certain experiences, current as well as historical, both at an individual and a collective level.

### **The University as Context for Learning**

Among the great number of articles and papers Habermas has published over the years, several discuss questions of universities and their roles in society. In fact, some of Habermas' earliest research was related to this topic: In the late fifties, when Habermas was employed as a research assistant at the "Institute of Social Research" in Frankfurt, he worked on a study of the political participation of university students (Habermas et al. 1961). In the sixties, he contributed to the debate on the democratisation of higher education, supporting (up to a

certain point) the students' demand for formal influence in university affairs. An example is a brief article on the question of student influence in university decision-making (Habermas 1970c). Habermas argues that students should in fact be given considerable formal influence. Decisions about the organisation of research and teaching certainly have consequences for students, and so they have a legitimate right to participate. Habermas also makes the point that maintaining the autonomy of research and teaching today is not possible without some ability to act politically. University decision-making cannot be organised like parliamentary democracy; but it has to involve the main groups of the university in order to establish itself as a political actor in defence of autonomous science.

Since the early seventies Habermas has written little on education and universities. But he has contributed one important essay on "The Idea of the University" (Habermas 1987a).

The German model of the university as a unified institution for research and teaching was worked out by idealist philosophers like Humboldt and Schleiermacher in the early years of the nineteenth century. In Habermas' opinion, the model reflected two main aims. Firstly, the university reformers wanted to demonstrate, how scientific work could disassociate itself from the church without being subordinated to other social forces, like political power or the logic of the market. This could be done through state funding of autonomous institutions of research and learning. Secondly, they wanted to explain why it was in the interest of the state to guarantee the autonomy of universities and science. The answer to this was that science, which is allowed to follow freely the quest for knowledge, has the power to locate, sum up and unify the essential ideas and culture of the nation.

Idealist philosophy emphasized the unity of research and teaching. The process of constructing scientific discourse could not be separated from the process of lecturing. And a central element in lecturing was discussion with students, preferably in small groups which allowed an egalitarian form of communication. Because the German university reformers regarded philosophy as the fundamental science, which should constitute the common foundation for all disciplines, they saw the unity of research and teaching as a general characteristic of the university.

Thus, according to Habermas, the idea of the university within German idealism implied a notion that the university as an autonomous microcosm could anticipate a society of free and equal individuals. There was a certain lack of realism in this, and the gap between the idealist university idea and the "facts of life" in university and society became increasingly obvious over the years. The occupational system demanded vocational academic competence. Academic credentials became a mechanism for establishing and demarcating class, in the form of an "educational bourgeoisie". The empirical sciences broke away from the idealist foundations of scientific unity, and science gradually became a key productive force in industrial society. University autonomy was granted by the absolutist state only in exchange for political docility. Still, Habermas does not regard Humboldt's university model as a mere illusion. He asserts that it contributed towards giving German university science an unusual

strength and dynamic character, and that it contained a surplus of utopian ideas, which facilitated renewal within departments and faculties.

The Humboldt model has continued to exert influence, not only in Germany, but also in other European countries and in the United States. Habermas points to the fact that the university reforms of the late sixties emphasized the idea of the university as an autonomous institution filling the need for constructive criticism of contemporary society. At the time, Habermas himself indicated the possibility of a "material critique of science", a comprehensive critical approach to the methodology, the fundamental assumptions and the social functions of sciences. In this way he hoped to elucidate the relations of scientific processes to the lifeworld. Habermas also supported (although not without reservations) the demand for participatory democracy in universities, seeing this as an important aspect of their critical function in society.

However, the developments of the sixties and the seventies once again demonstrated that the actual organization of science and higher education did not conform to the model. In modern society, most branches of science and higher education are organized as large-scale systems, with a high degree of specialization, closely connected to the material reproduction of society, and often dependant on private funding. In these areas, social criticism and participatory democracy remained marginal phenomena.

This leads Habermas to the question whether universities should rightly be understood as systems of instrumental and strategic action, integrated with the larger systems of modern society. This is the position of sociological systems theory, as formulated e.g. by Talcott Parsons (Parsons & Platt 1973). Systems theory maintains that all areas of action, which are involved in the modernization of society, must take the form of functionally specialized, relatively autonomous subsystems.

Habermas does not accept this analysis. It is a fundamental assumption in his theory that society must be seen simultaneously in two perspectives: As a life-world and as a system. This is also true for universities. Habermas argues that the simplifications of systems theory are disproved by the fact that the increasingly differentiated functions of research and study are still organized within one institution: The University. The connection to a common lifeworld has counteracted the institutional consequences of functional specialization.

"As before, however, the learning processes that take place within the university not only enter into an exchange with the economy and administration but also stand in an inner relationship to the functions through which the lifeworld reproduces itself. These learning processes extend beyond professional preparation to make a contribution to general processes of socialization by providing training in the scientific mode of thought, that is, in the hypothetical attitude towards facts and norms; they go beyond the production of expert knowledge to make a contribution to intellectual enlightenment with their informed political stands on concrete issues; they go beyond reflection on fundamental issues and questions of methodology to contribute to the hermeneutic continuation of tradition through the

humanities, and to the self-understanding of the scientific and scholarly disciplines within the whole of culture through theories of science and scholarship, morality, art and literature. It is the organization of scientific and scholarly learning processes in university form that continues to root the differentiated specialized disciplines in the lifeworld by fulfilling these various functions *simultaneously*" (Habermas 1990, p. 122).

I have quoted this argument at length to illustrate how Habermas understands the system aspects and the life-world aspects of university study. Universities produce vocational skills and expert knowledge; but they also produce political and moral arguments about the quality of individual and social life. They do this not because they are rooted in a common ideal or set of goals, but because scientific work and thinking is fundamentally communicative. Habermas states that "...in the last analysis it is the communicative forms of scientific and scholarly argumentation that hold university learning processes in their various functions together" (Habermas 1990, p. 124).

A person engaged in scientific work may seem isolated in his office, in the laboratory or in the library; but he works in the context of a community of scientists, a "public sphere" within his specialized field of study. Because of this, the cooperative search for scientific knowledge is always something more than a process in a self-regulating system.

In Habermas' opinion, the German university idea still has some truth in it. Not because professors intuitively grasp the unifying ideas of society, but because the communicative nature of science connects the learning processes in university settings with the lifeworld. But Habermas emphasizes that scientific argument may not be generalized into an exemplary case of communicative action. It is an important contribution to a communicative rationality, not the model for it.

## **Conclusion**

Although Habermas has not made learning one of the core concepts in his theories on communicative action and discourse ethics, these theories do in fact accord processes of learning an important role in individual and social life. I have tried in this paper to present and discuss four types of learning, which have been conceptualised in Habermas' theory. These are:

- Individual learning in the form of socialization and moral development. The main theme here is the development of cognitive and moral reason from childhood to adulthood, or rather to the mature thinking of the independent moral individual.
- Learning as a core element in communicative action, where participants learn to offer and respond to communicative acts, and also to confirm their attachment to the same community. Communicative action is connected to the lifeworld, which it reproduces. The development of rationality is a continuous intersubjective learning process, which is however threatened by the tendency towards the colonisation of the lifeworld by social systems.

- Social evolution as decentred processes of learning involving both technological and moral development. Here Habermas presented a fruitful revision of some core concepts in historical materialism, notably the idea that evolution is driven mainly by the forces of production and the idea of one central subject of social change. His suggestions about homologies between individual and societal development were dubious and remained an unfulfilled research program.
- Learning in the public sphere as a crucial part of the democratic process in the constitutional state. Democratic learning is especially important in the interface between the voluntary associations of civil society and the deliberations in the public sphere.

Besides these four themes I also presented Habermas' analysis of learning in a specific institutional setting, that of the university. He argues that the communicative nature of science connects the learning processes in university settings with the lifeworld. This provides some justification for upholding the idealist "idea of the university".

I do not regard Habermas' contributions on these five themes as building blocks for a unified theory of learning. They are rather illustrations of the ways in which structures and processes in modern societies as well as in everyday human life are shaped or mediated through processes of learning. Viewing these examples through the lens of a comprehensive cultural and social theory provides important contributions to research on learning.

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