Chapter 8

Universal Pragmatics and Communicative Action

ABSTRACT

This chapter introduces Habermas’ Universal Pragmatics and related Theory of Communicative Action as the most suitable philosophical framework through which to view the interview responses presented in the next set of chapters. This chapter is not intended as a detailed exposition of the philosophy, but rather serves to sketch how Habermas’ Universal Pragmatics with Communicative Action Theory provides useful insights for interpreting and understanding the interviewees’ comments.

INTRODUCTION

Guba and Lincoln (1994) suggest four underlying “paradigms” for research: Positivism, post-positivism, critical theory and constructivism.

For critical researchers, social reality is historically constituted and is produced and reproduced by all people. Critical researchers further maintain that although people can consciously act to change their social and economic circumstances, their ability to do so is constrained by various forms of social, cultural and political domination. Thus the main task of critical research is seen as being one of social critique, whereby the restrictive and alienating conditions of the status are brought to light. As such, critical research focuses on the oppositions, conflicts and contradictions in contemporary society, and seeks to be emancipatory. One of the best-known exponents of contemporary critical social theory is Jürgen Habermas.

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HABERMAS’ UNIVERSAL PRAGMATICS

Habermas traces his philosophical discourse on modernity back to the Young Hegelians and is particularly interested in the various ways in which they dealt with antinomies of reason arising within the philosophy of the subject. This project extends from Descartes through to Kant and Husserl and finds critical expression in the diremptive conception of a self-inflated subject, alienated from both its internal and external nature. To identify the problematic of rationalization with reification and to free it from the aporias of the philosophy of consciousness, Habermas passes through Marx into a Praxis Philosophy that is moderated by Husserl and Weber (himself associated with Lucas, Horkheimer and Adorno), and also into the works of the Frankfurt School (Juniper, 2001. p. 8). Habermas’ innovation represented a clear paradigm shift away from purposive activity to communicative action, which was also incidentally inspired by the likes of Mead (in the Symbolic Interactionist School) and Durkheim.

In addition to the above, Habermas also took into account and integrated into his own work the contributions of language theorists Wittgenstein, and Chomsky; and assorted phenomenologists; ethnomethodologists, functionalists, structuralists, etc. In the Marxist reception of Weber’s theory of rationalization, from Lukacs to Adorno, the rationalization of society is always thought of as a reification of consciousness. In addition, Habermas argued that the role of communicative action in Praxis Philosophy is just as a force of production. This position implies that there is a separation of emancipator practice from critical consciousness, and thus the instrumental rationalization of lifeworld becomes immune from ideological critique, due in large part to its lack of critique content. Thus, rationalization cannot be dealt with adequately within the conceptual frame of the philosophy of consciousness, in which an objectifying operation practiced by a Reason could be mutilated by the drive for self-maintenance of both bureaucratic administration and the market place. Therefore, Habermas applied the basic concepts developed by Mead (communication-theoretic foundation of sociology) and Durkheim (a theory of social solidarity connecting social integration to system integration). Through this application he developed the Theory of Communicative Action to reconstruct an undamaged intersubjectivity that allows for both an unconstrained mutual understanding among individuals and for the enlightenment of individuals, who come to an unconstrained understanding with themselves (Habermas, 1987).

The philosophical underpinning of Habermas’ project offers two important contextual inferences when it comes to elucidating the research methodology of this book. First, Habermas identifies a clear distinction between technical, practical and emancipator knowledge-constituting interest. This is evident at a methodological level in the distinction between the empirical-analysis, historical hermeneutic and
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