

A contribution to the critique of Jürgen Habermas

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The following contribution by a reader from Sri Lanka comments on the article "How Jürgen Habermas defends the Balkan war" by Ulrich Rippert
<http://www.wsws.org/articles/1999/jun1999/habe-j05.shtml>

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The article challenging the political stance and the social theory of Jürgen Habermas by Ulrich Rippert published in WSWS on June 5, 1999 is a very timely one. Seventy-year-old Habermas is often portrayed as the “foremost social thinker” of our time—or more accurately, at least since 1970. Also regarded as the “most important theorist in the field of social sciences after Max Weber”, Habermas has now revealed his reactionary character in the debate of the Balkan war, refuting all the honorable titles.

The importance of the critique of Habermas is relevant not only to Germany or to the advanced capitalist world but also to the island in which we live, in a corner of South Asia. In recent times, Habermas has occupied a significant place in intellectual and cultural circles in Sri Lanka.

It's not incorrect to regard Habermas as a forerunner of Post-Modernism, or the last (contemporary) representative of Modernism. In spite of the dispute between Habermas and Lyotard on Post-Modernity, the Post-Modernists hold him in high esteem. It's a serious misunderstanding if someone thinks the reason for Habermas' fame is the brilliance of his thought. On the contrary, as comrade Rippert quite rightly put it, the authority of the Habermas' theory lies solely in the indigestible terminology of his writings.

The Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School began its work by criticizing Marxism—especially the concept of the “deterministic relation between the (social) super-

structure and the economic base”. However, the pre-Habermasian Frankfurt philosophers who followed the Critical Theory often placed one foot in Marxism and called themselves “Neo-Marxists”. At their best, their criticism of capitalism was based on Marxism. In this sense, there was a period in which even Habermas considered himself a Marxist. Or at the very least, he was forced to use Marxist theoretical conceptions because of the Frankfurt tradition. But, when studying his works one can see he always remained an anti-Marxist. Even in his appreciable early little work, *Legitimation Crisis* (1971) which questioned the legitimacy of the values in modern capitalist society, he did not advocate a socialist solution. He objects to both dialectical materialism (in *Theory and Practice*) and historical materialism (in *Communication and the Evolution of Society*). His two-volume major work, *Theory of Communicative Action* (1981) [1], which is tackled by Rippert, concludes with a rejection of Marx's ‘Theory of Value’. Mere negations! But where are the alternatives? It's hard to find a definite coherent ideology in Habermas' dozen or so books.

Even his latest writings seem to be ‘old wine in new casks’. There is nothing positive achieved by him in transferring from ‘Systems Theory’ to ‘Communication Theory’. One follower correctly called this conversion, the “Linguistic turn of the Critical Theory”. In reducing the investigation of knowledge into an investigation of communication, he simply quit the epistemology and the methodology. He himself wrote: “The methodological fruits of my efforts consisted chiefly in uncovering the dimension in which the symbolically pre-structured object domain of social science could be approached through interpreting meaning.”[2]

Habermas criticized the various paradigms of modern social science, from Weber's ‘Rationalization Theory’ to Alfred Shutz's ‘Phenomenological Ethno-methodology,’ but he offers us a petty-bourgeois radical and idealistic

theory of the same character. One of the renowned founding members of Frankfurt School, Theodor Adorno (1903-1969), said none of these approaches in social studies, claiming to be scientific or quantitative, provide a basis for social transformation.

In fact, this type of social theory never proceeds beyond Hegelian dialectics. In Hegel's philosophy, critique is a negative judgment in which the existing forms of beliefs are detected and unmasked. But, according to dialectical materialism or Marxism, Critique is not merely an intellectual negation of the ideological systems of thought, but a practical and revolutionary activity. In his famous *Theses on Feuerbach*, Karl Marx placed the proposition of revolution in the very center of social science and political philosophy stating that, "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it." The so-called Neo-Marxists of Frankfurt who tried to revise some 'false conceptions' in Marxism, did not stop at deforming it but pushed the burning necessity of revolution to the corner. In other words, they did not step down from the 'super-structure'.

Of course, the sterility of Critical Theory has unfolded since Adorno's time. Despite his brilliant analysis of contemporary positivism, the Critical Theory, as a whole, took the path of adaptation to present-day reality. After Walter Benjamin, who could be considered the greatest intellectual of the Frankfurt School [3], the contributions of its representatives, if any, to the development of Marxism was very small. However, in dealing with major political issues such as imperialist war, Nazism, Stalinism, colonization, etc. they had still not descended totally into reactionary positions. But, onto which shore was Horkheimer's successor grounded?

In 1960s, when student activists attacked Adorno for not being Marxist enough and for being irretrievably bourgeois, [one of Adorno's students called into the master's open grave, "He practiced an irresistible critique of bourgeois individualism, and yet he was caught within its ruins." [4] Habermas responded quickly by defending "the right that the untrue bourgeois subjectivity still remains in the process of disappearing in relation to its false negation." [5] Nevertheless, he rejected the student politics in first person-plural: "We sociologists did not reckon with the possibility that students could play a political role in developed industrial societies." [6]

Earlier, when Frankfurt scholars were saying the reason for the continuity of capitalism lay mainly in the authority of ruling class in the ideological field, they seriously

underestimated the crisis of proletarian leadership. Later, when Horkheimer rejected the leading role of the working class in social transformation, it marked a rapid deterioration of Critical Theory. Today, when Professor Habermas comes forward as an open propagandist of capitalist politics by justifying NATO's Balkan war, it signifies not only the "end of the period to which the Critical Theory of Frankfurt School belongs", it also reflects the logical conclusion of its historical path.

Finally, we reiterate the short answer given to Habermas' predecessors by Marx and Engels in their work *German Ideology*: "The driving force of history is not criticism but revolution."

Notes:

1. For a comprehensive critique of this work, see "Reason or Revolution? Habermas's *Theorie des Kommunikativen Handelns* by Professor Anthony Giddens, in *Habermas and Modernity*, ed. Richard J. Bernstein, Polity Press, UK, 1985.

2. Jürgen Habermas, *On the Logic of the Social Sciences*, trans. S.W. Nichol森 and J.A. Stark, Polity Press, UK, 1988, Preface (emphasis added.).

3. In fact, Walter Benjamin had been attached to the Frankfurt School only for very short period - five years. After the financial ruin of his parents, he obtained a small income from Horkheimer's institute. However, before his sudden death, he launched an ideological struggle against the anti-Marxist deviations of his colleagues.

4. Cf. Jürgen Habermas, *Philosophical-Political Profiles*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence, Heinemann, London, 1983, p. 103.

5. Ibid. Introduction, p. xv.

6. Jürgen Habermas, *Towards a Rational Society: Student Protest, Science and Politics*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro, Polity Press, GB, Reprinted, 1989, p. 29.



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