



The Jürgen Habermas Web Resource

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This hypertext project began as a class project on the rhetorical theory of Jürgen Habermas for my [English 980: Studies in Rhetoric](#) class at Michigan State University. This web site was a class project during my doctoral studies, and has not been updated for a few years. Please direct comments or questions to robinson@edtech.mcc.edu

I am often asked how to contact Professor Habermas. Unfortunately, I do not have his e-mail address or contact information.

Sources for Habermas and His Work

Habermas was a student of Theodor Adorno, and a member of the [Frankfurt School](#) of critical theory. He is perhaps the last major thinker to embrace the basic project of the enlightenment, a project for which he is often attacked. When compositionists and rhetoricians pay attention to Habermas, it is usually to pair him in a theoretical debate over issues surrounding postmodernism. [Foucault](#), Gadamer, Lyotard, etc. are often set up as his opponents. Yet the debate always seems to be a recasting of the debate between Kant and Hegel. Habermas is decidedly Kantian in his dedication to reason, ethics, and moral philosophy.

At the center of Habermas's controversial project, as it is outlined in his [written work](#), are the contested and problematic areas of universality and rationality. Of his theoretical intent and his debt to important German sociologists like Marx and Weber, Jefferey Alexander notes:

To restore universality to critical rationality and to cleanse the critical tradition from its elitism, Habermas seeks to return to key concepts of Marx's original strategy ("Habermas and Critical Theory" 50).

In many ways, Habermas is engaged in the restoration of philosophical and sociological work which has been discredited or harshly criticised. Among these are theorists such as Karl Marx, Max Weber, Wilhelm Dilthey, Georg Lukacs, Sigmund Freud, G. H. Mead, and Talcott Parsons (Foss, et. al. 241) as well as contemporary critics such as Stephen Toulmin and Jean Piaget.

Habermas has no shortage of critics. His work is routinely criticized by postmodernists, poststructuralists, and [feminists](#). A particularly damning dismissal of the political nature of contemporary critical theory is given by [Edward Said](#), who uses Habermas as a spokesman for theory's anti-political stance.

Habermas and the Public Sphere

Habermas's most complete exploration of the notion of the public sphere is found in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. (1989). Central to many theorists in the area of print culture, the public sphere is further elaborated by Habermas in Volume Two of *The Theory of Communicative Action* as he discusses the distinction between lifeworld and system. As Johanna Mehan notes:

This distinction between public and private parallels, but is not identical to, the distinction he draws between system and lifeworld. On the one hand, action in the modern world is coordinated by systems which function according to means-end rationality; the market is a paradigmatic example of such a system... On the other hand, actions are coordinated primarily by communicatively mediated norms and values, and by the socially defined ends and meanings which constitute the fabric of the lifeworld (6-7).

Mehan further states that Habermas sees the differentiation and structure of the public and private spheres as "essential to the character of modernity" (*Feminists Read Habermas* 6).

Habermas and Communication Theory

Habermas's main contribution to communication theory is the elaborate theoretical apparatus he described in the two volumes of *The Theory of Communicative Action*, published in 1981. [Power](#) is a key concept in Habermas's conception of communicative rationality. Axel Honneth and Hans Joas note that the publication of this work, "brought to a provisional conclusion the intellectual efforts of twenty years of reflection and research." They see the large work by Habermas as addressing the following four general themes:

- a meaningful concept of the *rationality* of actions
- the problem of an appropriate *theory of action*
- a concept of *social order*
- the *diagnosis of contemporary society*

Honneth and Joas argue that the basic idea behind the two volume treatise is "that an indestructible moment of communicative rationality is anchored in the social form of human life." This thesis "is defended in this book by means of a contemporary philosophy of language and science, and is used as the foundation for a comprehensive social theory" (*Communicative Action: Essays on Jürgen Habermas's The Theory of Communicative Action*).

In *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* Habermas defines the concept of communicative action:

[Communicative action](#) can be understood as a circular process in which the actor is two things in one: an *initiator*, who masters situations through actions for which he is accountable, and a *product* of the transitions surrounding him, of groups whose cohesion is based on solidarity to which he belongs, and of processes of socialization in which he is reared (135).

Central to this social notion of language and human reason is the concept that Habermas terms [validity claims](#), the idea by which he connects speech acts to the idea of rationality.

Discourse Ethics

Habermas defines discourse ethics as a "scaled down" version of Kant's categorical imperative--a kind of moral [argumentation](#). Discourse ethics is built from Habermas's understanding of [constructivist models of learning](#). He remarks that discourse ethics is:

- deontological
- cognitivist
- formalist
- universalist

The primary sticking point for all of us in this class will be the last category, the universal or what Habermas refers to as U. Central to his concept of discourse ethics is the domain Habermas terms [practical discourse](#), which owes much to the work of Stephen Toulmin and the "informal logic" movement in philosophy.

The Debate over Modernity

When he was awarded the Adorno Prize in 1980, Habermas wrote his important essay "Modernity--An Incomplete Project." In his introduction to the essay, Thomas Docherty notes:

The occasion of the essay aligns Habermas with Adorno; yet the content of the lecture aligns him with precisely that rationalist tradition in Enlightenment of which Adorno was enormously sceptical. Here, as in his later work of the 1980s, Habermas sees the possibility of salvaging Enlightenment rationality. The project of modernity done by eighteenth-century philosophers 'consisted of their efforts to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art according to their inner logic', their aim being, according to Habermas here, 'the rational organization of everyday social life.' (*Postmodernism* 95).

Habermas appears to be the only contemporary theorist willing to defend the tradition of modernity, and he is frequently called to do so in debates with theorists like Lyotard, Gadamer, and [Foucault](#). As Victor Vitanza's [English 5352 syllabus](#) demonstrates, rhetoricians often cast Habermas as *the* modernist in a debate over modernity. His course, entitled "Major Figures in Rhetoric: Habermas, Lyotard, and the problem of the Ethical Subject," explores the problems of ethics and postmodernism.

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