

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

JOHN F. SITTON, *Habermas and Contemporary Society*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003, xv + 197 p. Index.

Sitton's book represents a survey of Habermas' major works, divided into eight cogently written chapters of approximately 20 pages each. One major strength of the book consists of Sitton's presentation of the theoretical antecedents to Habermas' work. Like others, Sitton identifies Habermas' concerns with the previous contributions of Weber, Lukacs, Horkheimer and Adorno, and Marcuse. In this way Sitton grounds Habermas' work in Weber's thesis that societal rationalization emerges from pre-existing cultural rationalization. A major thrust of the book is Sitton's Marxian corrective of Habermas theories.

In succeeding chapters, Sitton elaborates the major components of Habermas' theoretical framework. He follows Habermas' own explanatory strategy in describing rationality as an outcome of communicative processes. These include the posing and defending of validity claims, the elaboration of system from this "lifeworld," the colonization of the lifeworld by system, and Habermas' conceptualization of the public sphere as practical redress to this one-sided rationalization of the modern world.

Before proceeding to his own assessment of Habermas, Sitton outlines three current general critiques. Postmodernists find untenable Habermas' emphasis on consensus and have criticized him for having a sterile conception of social life. In their view, consensus plays out in actual terms as a form of domination. Second, some criticize Habermas for paying too little attention to his third type of rationality, the aesthetic-expressive. Sitton demonstrates recognition on the part of Habermas that this criticism is justified. In later works, Habermas suggests a differentiation of the aesthetic from the expressive to form potentially four types of rationality as opposed to three. Third, Sitton demonstrates Habermas' acceptance of many feminist critiques with regard to his inadequate attention to gender dynamics. In this section, Sitton demonstrates skill both in outlining the critiques and in detailing Habermas' response to them.

The final chapters of the book involve Sitton's critiques and the projected utility of Habermas' theory. Sitton disagrees with Habermas that capitalism as currently constituted renders class conflict "latent" (35). Moreover, the disassembling of the welfare state in recent times potentially brings class conflict again to the fore. While Sitton may see Habermas and him as

agreeing to this latter point, Sitton argues that the effectiveness of Habermas theory is put in jeopardy in general by the lack of attention Habermas pays to social class. Habermas places his hopes of a renewed project of modernity on the increasing effectiveness of the public sphere. Sitton argues that in the absence of class analysis, Habermas does not have sufficient grasp of the dynamics of “interest” to render an effective analysis. Moreover, Sitton interweaves his critique of Habermas with reference to quotes by Habermas which characterize him as caught in functionalist explanations of system.

Sitton argues that Habermas’ project, although useful, does not replace classical Marxian analysis with regard to social transformation: “class relations expressed through property forms focuses our attention on the social structures that embody capitalism, and, arguably, govern its historical trajectory” (157). Sitton argues convincingly that class analysis based on the Marxian tradition remains a cogent form of analysis with respect to current conflicts. He concludes that Habermas’ theory seriously de-emphasizes the role of class and therefore the obstructions class conflict will erect in regards to Habermas’ emancipatory project based on uncoerced communication. At the same time, it is left unclear to the reader the extent to which Habermas objects to this point of view. Unlike the treatment of Habermas in the previous section, the reader of this section notes the paucity of substantive responses included on behalf of Habermas.

Sitton’s presentation and analysis of Habermas leaves gaps in the logic of Habermas’s methodical theory development. This makes Sitton’s position vulnerable to criticism. In the first half of the book, Sitton minimizes the contributions Habermas incorporates into his own work of George Herbert Mead, and, therefore, Habermas’ substantial grounding in American pragmatism. Habermas’ treatment of modern subject formation as a dialectical achievement in communicative acts is underplayed. Without this substantial component of Habermas’ thinking coming to the fore (a stream of concern throughout his work), it is possible for Sitton to make Habermas appear as a classical functionalist with regard to the treatment of system. As such, Habermas is made to appear indistinct from Talcott Parsons. The irony is that the second volume of Habermas’ *The Theory of Communicative Action* constitutes a critique of functionalist reasoning. According to Jane Braaten (*Habermas’s Critical Theory of Society*, 1991, 78-79):

A functionalist explanation of the systems that integrate the complex interactions within a society is not genuinely explanatory, for Habermas, unless one first achieves an understanding of the lifeworld of that society from the participant’s point of view, for the limits of the participant’s point of view and norms on which it is based are limiting conditions on the development and differentiation of the economic and administrative systems.

Habermas’ comprehension of system remains grounded in his emphasis on interpersonal communication. Sitton demonstrates his distinctively

different political and analytical orientation to Habermas in the final paragraph of the book, in which he asserts that “reason without revolution is not possible” (157). In the end, Sitton asserts a left realist approach while Habermas seeks to achieve a different approach based on the identifiable communicative capacity found in concrete human behaviour. Habermas has shifted dramatically from a realist to a pragmatist epistemology. It is this decidedly different epistemology presented by Habermas’ work that Sitton does not fully explain for his readers. This leaves the debate regarding the class conflict / communicative action approaches to conflict in society unresolved in Sitton’s text.

In many respects, John Sitton is successful in his stated purpose to make both the principal contributions and criticisms of Habermas accessible. One must have some background in the writing of Habermas to discern the contributions of Sitton’s book. Because of the debates that he raises, it would be most useful to read the book in conjunction with other treatments of Habermas’ theoretical framework.

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