

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

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

“The most important sociologist since Max Weber!” is the tribute that Michael Pusey pays to Jürgen Habermas. However, scholars like Sonja Foss, Karen Foss and Robert Trapp comment on the density of his style of writing which taxes even the most conscientious devotees of the Frankfurt School. Given this backdrop, readers will find that John Sitton offers not only a comprehensive but also a very clear and concise overview of Habermas’ work. Sitton is able to do a commendable job of winnowing the kernels from the massive work Habermas has compiled over the last several decades.

Given Habermas’ interdisciplinary, encyclopedic, and inaccessible writing, not all of which has been translated, Sitton provides a great elucidation of his life work. He has captured and recorded Habermas’ intimate familiarity with a broad range of theorists, philosophers, disciplines, approaches, and debates. Sitton has succeeded in his purpose of introducing Habermas to a much wider audience than the small cohort of experts to whom he has been familiar. Sitton portrays Habermas in a manner consistent with Frank Parkin’s observation (*Marxism and Class Theory: A Bourgeois Critique*, 25) that “inside every neo-Marxist there seems to be a Weberian struggling to get out.” Habermas argues that historically neither capitalism nor socialism has succeeded in emancipating people from Weber’s “iron cage.” The post World War II interventionist option, the welfare state compromise, has now been virtually decimated. In its place, Habermas offers a Weberian solution built on Weber’s theses of rationalization. This notion is Habermas’ idea of “communicative action.” Although Sitton does not mention it in his review, this theory has gained great currency especially in communication studies and rhetorical theory debates.

Communicative action is the process by which people are able to rationally reach each other and draw meaning from the contemporary world. To be rational for Habermas means that an individual must be able to defend his or her beliefs and behaviour by providing “reasons” for them. Three kinds of rational actions that Habermas initially distinguishes are cognitive-instrumental, moral-practical and aesthetic-expressive. Habermas’ concept of rationality is the heart of communicative action and actually derives from the Weberian analysis of Calvinism and the ethic of rationality that characterizes modern society. His communicative action theory creates social space for the public sphere. Political, social and cultural discussions

within the public sphere establish new powers, which Habermas labels as communicative or communicatively generated power.

His concept of “societal rationality” leads him to develop the theory of society as a dualism between the “societal lifeworld” and the “societal system.” Lifeworld for Habermas is “a culturally transmitted and linguistically organized stock of interpretive patterns.” His functionalist societal system incorporates three subsystems: economic, public administrative, and “lifeworld.” Habermas argues that “social integration” and “system integration” respectively are the two ways in which contemporary society is held together. Furthermore, social and systemic integration are not only two distinct processes but they are also irreducible to each other. Thus he defends the Enlightenment ideal of rationality as applied to all human activity against those who suggest that rationality is obsolete as a universal.

In his critique, Sitton highlights only three of the most contested terrains in Habermas: language, art, and gender. Postmodernists repudiate the underlying assumption of linguistic practices, which must be based on consensus to support Habermas’ contentions. Sitton also argues that Habermas’ concept of aesthetic rationality is too underdeveloped to be of great utility. Finally, many feminists object to Habermas’ lack of treatment concerning gender issues. Furthermore, they accuse Habermas of failing to understand how patriarchal structures permeate every aspect of society including family units and the consequent implications they have for society.

In discussing the limitations of Habermas’ social and political argument, Sitton underlines the lack of rigorous theoretical relation between the societal lifeworld and the societal system. This aspect, Sitton asserts, is a critical weakness that limits the theoretical space for contemporary political action. Habermas’ contribution to an understanding of the role of politics in the twenty-first century is examined by virtue of the heuristic value of his theory which guides Habermas in analyzing contemporary society. However, Sitton claims that the same theory really limits Habermas’ comprehension of political understanding in modern capitalist society especially with respect to globalization. Additionally, the theoretical space does not allow for a proper treatment of issues such as multiculturalism and immigration. Nevertheless, Habermas’ insights cannot be ignored because he does raise new issues, even commenting on social movements, the rise of fundamentalisms, the welfare state crisis, the global economy, cosmopolitanism and the potential development of the notion of a world citizen.

Within the discipline of communication studies, writers such as Em Griffin find that his concept of communicative speech acts provides a useful approach to understanding ethical considerations. While Sitton does not dwell on these ethical concerns, media ethics has become a very important issue in Western society over the last couple of decades and Habermas has helped to focus on some of the important elements. But as Sitton notes,

feminists claim that Habermas is unable to appreciate the distinction between a masculine “fair” ethic and a feminine “care” ethic.

This easy to read book is excellent for anyone who wants to grasp the essential Habermas. The text includes a helpful 24-page chapter of notes. While the primary appeal will undoubtedly be for social and political theorists interested in critiques of society, Sitton provides a valuable contextual comprehension for communication studies as well as rhetorical theorists. Within that field Habermas has become an influential theorist in the last two decades. Overall, the text is very suitable for understanding some of the strengths and weaknesses of the Habermas project during the last few decades. Sitton concludes that the “central premises of Habermas’s theory constrain our ability to think through to an answer” (158). Nevertheless, even if Habermas is unable to provide satisfactory answers, he certainly has highlighted many of the right questions. To paraphrase Habermas himself, he has at least attempted to help “lift the fog” that exists today surrounding the analysis of social emancipation. In this respect Sitton cogently assesses Habermas’ contribution.

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