

Habermas Revisited: Indigenous Lifeworld(s) Today

Jan Lüdert

PhD Student, Dept. of Political Science, University of British Columbia, Vancouver

“Toleration is historically the product of the realization of the irreconcilability of equally dogmatic faiths, and the practical improbability of complete victory of one over the other.”

Isaiah Berlin – The Originality of Machiavelli

One result of late capitalist expansion is the socio-cultural resistance of Indigenous peoples around the world against the “forces of cultural uniformity” and the “appropriation of Indigenous peoples’ sovereignty” by the modern state (Niezen 2003, 2). These grievances, with their basic assumptions, are - I argue - encapsulated in Jürgen Habermas’ conceptualization of the “colonization of the lifeworld.” While the social ontology of his theory is primarily concerned with the constitution of late 20th century society, it also provides a repository to investigate the struggle against the colonization of lifeworld(s) under which Indigenous communities *within* states presently find themselves subsumed. Consequently, I depart from his rather Eurocentric discussion of “archaic tribal societies” that, as he argues, “more or less approximate” an ideal typical “homogenous lifeworld.” Instead, I aim to illustrate how Indigenous societies struggle for their distinct identity as it is affected by the pathologies following from the colonization of *their* particular lifeworld(s) today. Accordingly, I do not treat Indigenous groups as bygone ideal types, nor as closed social systems in which the “kinship calculus” serves as a “basic boundary setting mechanism” (Habermas 1989, 193). On the contrary, I view them as resisting collectivities and uncomfortable elements of the modern state that are often in the way of a market economy in search for (and dependent on) a “never-ending resource supply” (Mander and Tauli-Corpuz 2006, 3). In light of their pursuant and observable discontent with dominant society, they provide a site of analysis for the, as Habermas rightly espouses, delicate equilibrium between system and lifeworld. Given the aforementioned qualification, I incorporate his insights into an explanation for the ongoing resistance of Indigenous peoples against statist and capitalist encroachment into their lifeworld(s). Here I am in opposition to Habermas, who in my reading wrongly idealizes tribal societies as spatiotemporally detached from market economies and “*without* recourse to a state’s power of sanction” (Habermas 1989, 193). I contend that - given current realities - Indigenous societies in fact have to strategically negotiate the validity of social norms *vis-à-vis* states and market economies more directly, which Habermas himself fails to acknowledge. To be clear, I appreciate his search for and conceptual grounding in an “empirical foothold in archaic societies, where structures of linguistically mediated, normatively guided interaction immediately constitute the supporting social structures.” I want to augment this historical-evolutionary analysis, however, by incorporating the reality in which Indigenous peoples currently are situated as *doubly colonized* communicative actors (Habermas 1989, 190). First it seems appropriate to survey Habermas’s conceptualization of system and lifeworld, and the colonization of the former on the latter to then move to a discussion outlining the dilemma of negotiating the colonization as well as rationalization of lifeworld(s) for Indigenous peoples.

At the heart of Habermas' theory of communicative action lies the distinction between lifeworld and system. The lifeworld is understood as the "horizon within which communicative actions are 'always already' moving" (Habermas 1989, 165) while the system, in turn, denotes structures and established patterns of instrumental action, such as "the steering medium of money," in which the "state apparatus becomes dependent upon the media-steered subsystem of the economy." In turn, this forces the state to assimilate its "power to the structure of a steering medium: power becomes assimilated to money" (Habermas 1989, 204-205). As such, lifeworld and system, in Habermas' work, are the particular sites of communicative and instrumental action, respectively.

Communicative interaction presupposes a framework of common understanding – that is, shared norms and values – in which both hearer and speaker can, in a hermeneutical practice, negotiate a horizon of everyday encounter. Such a world of "actual reach" arises in a "pragmatic relation" to three worlds, namely the objective, social and subjective, in which "communicative utterances are always embedded" simultaneously (Habermas 1989, 166). These objective, normative and subjective *worlds* – always present yet seldom explicitly thematized – are the background against which communicative action takes place. Actors consequently rely on each other to cooperate and interpret - via speech - not "point blank to something in a world" but by relativizing their utterances in reference to these three worlds (here understood as an inter-subjective framework for mutual understanding of the world and its subjects within). Or, as Habermas eloquently puts it:

Coming to an understanding [Verständigung] means that participants in communication reach an agreement [Einigung] concerning the validity of an utterance; agreement [Einverständnis] is the intersubjective recognition of the validity claim the speaker raises for it. Even when an utterance clearly belongs only to one mode of communication and sharply thematizes one corresponding validity claim, all three modes of communication and the validity claims corresponding to them are internally related to each other (Habermas 1989, 166)

As a result, the lifeworld is viewed as the basis for social integration and cohesion in its utilization of a "cultural stock of knowledge that is 'always already' familiar" and implicitly collectively recognized (Habermas 1989, 171). It therefore provides an enabling stage for agreement in its provision for critical reflection and possible disagreement in its appearance as "a reservoir of taken-for-granted, of unshaken convictions that participants in communication draw upon in cooperative processes of interpretation" (Habermas 1989, 170). It is important to reiterate that, for Habermas, the concept of lifeworld connects to, and is reliant upon, *all* three worlds previously mentioned. Communicative actions are consequently not only processes of interpretation that test cultural knowledge against the existing world, they are at the "same time processes of social integration and socialization" (Habermas 1989, 175). Thus, every time a consensus between participants in a communicative act is reached, it too implicitly recognizes situational themes or contexts of relevance [*Verweisungszusammenhänge*] that in a circular relationship restock and cultivate the overall significance of the lifeworld itself (Habermas 1989, 168). In this way communicative action and lifeworld are reciprocal and constitute each other

over time. The concept of lifeworld - in a Habermasian sense - represents the discursive means for the symbolic and cultural perpetuation and evolution of society *en large*. On the one hand it represents the socio-cultural plane on which everyday speech acts and pursuant discourses are carried out and, on the other, ensures a more or less stable - as discursive - transmission of traditions, symbols and knowledge in which speech acts are embedded and made available for communicative participants. The lifeworld is, in short, the communicative locale for affirming individual agency and forming cultural identity.

In order to meaningfully outline social structural dynamics of modern society Habermas adds a system conceptualization to supplement that of the lifeworld. Indeed, a structural level of analysis directly stems from the lifeworld analysis and, as Habermas proposes, is needed to move beyond one that is squarely based in a subjective *Verstehen* tradition. In this conceptualization, societal evolution is viewed as a two-sided rationalization process of a larger social system *and* the more immediate understanding of lifeworld (Habermas 1989, 19). Habermas explains that a “systems-theoretical perspective is relativized by the fact that the rationalization of the lifeworld leads to a directional variation of the structural patterns defining the maintenance of the system” (Habermas 1989, 183). Thus, whereas the lifeworld concept travels well in investigating the internal inter-subjective perspective of “more or less trivial everyday knowledge,” it deflects concurrently from everything that “inconspicuously affects a sociocultural lifeworld from outside” (Habermas 1989, 184). Instead, a systemic vantage point permits the uncovering of the three “fictions” a lifeworld idea unreservedly presupposes, namely the “autonomy of actors,” the independence of culture “from external constraints” and, finally, the “transparency of communication” (Habermas 1989, 184). Habermas here explicitly acknowledges the limitations of communicative action itself in as far as “goal-directed actions are coordinated not only through processes of reaching understanding, but also through functional interconnections” that neither are intentional nor necessarily perceived by communicative actors within the reach of everyday practice. In relation to the market, he writes:

The market is one of those systemic mechanisms that stabilize nonintended interconnections of action by way of functionally intermeshing action consequences, whereas the mechanism of mutual understanding harmonizes the action orientations of participants. Thus I have proposed that we distinguish between social integration and system integration: the former attaches to action orientations, while the latter reaches right through them. (Habermas 1989, 185)

While Habermas does not simply demonize systems, he indeed sees structures of rationality in such institutional orders as the market and statist bureaucracies; notwithstanding, he is explicit about the ordering of both in that a “provisional concept of society as a system” has to fulfill “conditions for the maintenance of sociocultural lifeworlds” (Habermas 1989, 186). As such, Habermas is not unsympathetic to instrumental rationality or to the institutions that embody its logic, such as the modern state and the market economy. He certainly acknowledges that they can perform crucial and needed societal functions and that eliminating or ignoring them neither is desirable nor feasible. Social evolution, he holds, “gets differentiated both as system and as lifeworld” and is “measured by the increase in a society’s steering capacity, whereas the state of development of a symbolically structured

lifeworld is indicated by the separation of culture, society, and personality.” (Habermas 1989, 187) Habermas is more subtle in his critique of modernity, which uncovers instead a parasitic tendency of the – especially money and power - system to intrude, dislocate and even damage lifeworlds. This movement of “uncoupling” is a form of colonization of the system on the resources of meaning that stem from the lifeworld. This “uncoupling” of the system from the rationalization of the lifeworld should be viewed with suspicion as it gives rise to harmful “social pathologies” that could eventually lead to social disintegration. He states:

Members... in norm-free structures... behave toward formally organized action systems, steered via processes of exchange and power, as toward a block of quasi-natural reality...society congeals into a second nature. Actors have always been able to sheer off from an orientation to mutual understanding, adopt a strategic attitude, and objectify normative contexts into something in the objective world, but in modern societies, economic and bureaucratic spheres emerge in which social relations are regulated only via money and power. Norm-conformative attitudes and identity-forming social memberships are neither necessary nor possible in these spheres; they are made peripheral instead. (Habermas 1989, 189)

Such a transfer from language over to steering media such as money and power entail an “uncoupling of interaction from lifeworld contexts,” insofar as they detach from traditional lifeworld spheres by usurping its social integrative functions. They thus not only *bypass* “processes of consensus-orientated communication,” they in fact *replace* it with a problematic “symbolic generalization or rewards and punishments” that devalue and ultimately technicize the lifeworld (Habermas 1989, 215). Thus, by robbing the potential for cooperative interpretation and critical reflexivity, they co-opt and spoil the necessary health of the lifeworld that sustains the system in the first place (Habermas 1989, 216). Such instrumentalization of the lifeworld “takes on the character of deception, of objectively false consciousness” giving rise to “*structural violence* that, without becoming manifest as such, takes hold of the forms of intersubjectivity of possible understanding” (Habermas 1989, 219). Thus restricting and distorting communicative action in such a way that the “interrelation of the objective, social, and subjective world gets prejudged for participants” (Habermas 1989, 219). Here, Habermas, in search of “analytical perspective,” argues that

societies organized around a state, a need for legitimation arises that, for structural reasons, could not yet exist in tribal societies. In societies organized through kinship, the institutional system is anchored ritually, that is, in a practice that is interpreted by mythical narratives and that stabilizes its normative validity all by itself. (Habermas 1989, 220).

It is this last ideal-typical treatment of a progressive social evolution that, while conceptually appreciated, nevertheless detracts from the reality in which Indigenous peoples are situated. Habermas, here, in his proposition of a Eurocentric normative project, privileges rationality that allows room for a system of enhancing instrumental rationality like the state and its bureaucracies, as well as a lifeworld-

related communicative rationality that is characterized by self-reflexivity and the understanding that personal norms and values are subjectively relative, although he treats “basic categories of myth” as a confusion of validity with relations of effectiveness (Habermas 1989, 225). In his division of lifeworld and system, Habermas argues that in “tribal societies systemic mechanisms have not yet become detached from institutions effective for social integration...” (Habermas 1989, 197). He thus, to my reading, puts a premium on a public and private divide that is not necessary for a stable lifeworld to exist. This of course is contestable and I do not have the space to discuss it here as it would lead us into a discussion whether an increased rationalization of the lifeworld is indeed what has resulted in detached spheres of the privatized household and paternal statehood. Nevertheless Indigenous peoples contest that their threatened lifeworld – while perhaps socially and structurally undifferentiated and less stratified– still is what they desire and want to retain, as it is the resource of their collectively recognized knowledge - the basis for their culture and forms of communication. Jeannette Armstrong from the Okanagan for instance states that,

The Okanagan perception of the self and of the dominant culture has to do with the “us” that is place: the capacity to know we are everything that surrounds us, to experience our humanness in relation to everything else and thus to know how we affect the world around us. The Okanagan word for “our place on the land” and “our language” is the same. We think of our language as the language of the land. This means that the land has taught us our language. The way we survive is by speaking the language that the land has offered us as its teaching. (Armstrong 2006, 37)

As such, here and elsewhere, a more precise understanding is necessary to analyze contingent Indigenous realities and their concomitant resistance, one that views both a process of modern colonization and acculturation as problematic for the lifeworld(s) over which Indigenous groups intend to maintain control, ownership and responsibility. Thus, while I am in general agreement with his conceptualization of modern society, I am skeptical that a Habermasian model of a western rational society provides the right type of departure point to discuss the general validity of a universalizable understanding of “how human beings should live on earth (Mander and Tauli-Corpuz 2006, 4). While Habermas presents social development as essentially progressive, Indigenous groups around the world argue that it, however, depends upon the destruction of Indigenous resources that are both necessary for their material and cultural survival (de la Cadena and Starn 2007). In relation to these realities, it is an error to assume that an evolutionary transition from segmented “archaic societies,” within which ascribed identities exist, toward a modern “individualistic and state-controlled socialization has already come to its conclusion” (Niezen 2003, 208). Indigenous peoples are, in fact, caught between seemingly incompatible lifeworld(s). This in turn has very different manifestations for individuals and communities around the world and is too context specific as to allow a general point of departure within the confines of this paper. Yet it does, at minimum, and again in line with Habermas, bring to the fore the “irresistible irony of the world-historical process of enlightenment,” one in which the ongoing rationalization of the lifeworld enables increased systemic complexity that becomes so “hypertrophied

that it unleashes system imperatives that burst the capacity of the lifeworld they instrumentalize” (Habermas 1989, 190). The realities of many Indigenous groups around the world in all its facets highlight this catch-22 situation more vehemently than in many situations of the aforementioned uncoupling of system and lifeworld in modern societies *per se*. Indeed the notion of uncoupling seems less helpful as many Indigenous groups did not grow organically within an increasing complex web of social and system integration but were often forced – by processes of colonization – to adapt to them *ex nunc*. James Tully has coined this latter process poignantly “internal colonization” as involving a form of domination in which “societies coexist and exercise total domination over the territories and jurisdiction which Indigenous peoples refuse to surrender.” With the result, Tully explains, that “continuous unresolved contradictions and ongoing provocation” prevail (Tully 2000, 40). In this light Indigenous lifeworld(s) are being increasingly threatened, for instance, by the “commodification of Indigenous culture.” In this way Indigenous peoples have to negotiate within, what Stewart-Harawira calls, the increasing need of a “homogenization of world views “ involving new as well as changing “constructions of reality” for Indigenous peoples (Stewart-Harawira 20085, 18). Thus, while Habermas conceptualizes the social development, integration and uncoupling of lifeworld and system in modernity he pays little attention to the existing overlap that I wanted to emphasize. Indigenous peoples still hold cosmological and ontological understandings that challenge the orthodoxy of dominant society. Indigenous people are thus, from within their often already marginalized position, confronted with an urgent dilemma to either relinquishing the traditional cosmologies based on an understanding on “oneness and interconnectedness” with their natural surrounding or join and acculturate to modernity without looking back (Stewart-Harawira 20085, 19). Regardless of this impasse the immediate lifeworld(s) within which Indigenous peoples are situated come with often-grave consequences for them. The “social pathologies” that result from the “reification” of a progressive monetarization and bureaucratization not only threaten the communicative infrastructure of modern society; they indeed destroy Indigenous societies in their onslaught. They cost lives.

This in my mind should give reason to begin a more systematic revision of a modernity that accentuates monetary efficiency and paternal bureaucracies without questioning the resulting pathologies for Indigenous peoples and other marginalized groups. A decrease in shared meaning and mutual understanding, what Habermas calls anomie, as well as the erosion of social bonds and disintegration is nowhere as pressing as in Indigenous communities around the world. The ongoing alienation and demoralization of Indigenous groups vis-à-vis dominant society should thus in my mind be (re)theorized in building on the important groundwork Jürgen Habermas has provided us with. A starting point given the resilience of Indigenous resistance could be a more directly deliberative democratic process or, as Isaiah Berlin would put it, tolerance and respect.

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