

The Language Paradigm in Contemporary Social Theory : Marx, Habermas, and Bourdieu in Comparative Perspective

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KEY WORDS Language. Work. Communication. Ideology. Historical Materialism. Public Sphere. Cultural Production. Human Development. Marx. Habermas. Bourdieu.

ABSTRACT Major schools of thought have addressed, in one way or another, problems regarding human language, its origins, social functions, the nature of the relationship between language and people's perception and understanding of the world and, more generally, the contribution of language and communication to the development of human societies. This essay examines how the problem of language is dealt with by three eminent social theorists: Karl Marx (and his close collaborator Frederick Engels) within the framework of their *historical materialism*, Jürgen Habermas in his *theory of communicative action*, and Pierre Bourdieu in his *theory of social space*.

Human language has been indispensable part of theoretical disputes ever since philosophical speculation established its origins in antiquity. No school of thought — from the legalists in ancient China, the sophists and the epicureans in ancient Greece, to Baconian philosophy, Hume and Berkeley later on, and more recently Saussurian structural linguistics and Freudian psychology — have failed to address, in one way or another, problems regarding human language, its origins, social functions, and the nature of the relationship between language and people's perception and understanding of the world.

In this esse I briefly examine how the problem of language has been dealt with by three eminent social theorists: Marx, Habermas, and Bourdieu.

I

Marxism claimed from the outset to be endowed with an emancipatory mission: rectifying a fundamental distortion in the history of human thought that was most remarkably represented by Hegel, putting human thought and human history — which Hegel understood, but "upside down," as in a *camera obscura* — "back

on its feet". Dialectical and historical materialism, which Marx and Engels founded in the mid 19th century, claimed thus to put an end to the speculation which starts from consciousness, from representations, hence from illusions. For Marx, it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being. On the contrary, it is their social being that determines their consciousness. Marx and Engels assigned a central role in their social theory to the "practical-critical" activity, which they understood as "revolutionary practice". In *Theses on Feuerbach* Marx wrote:

All social life is essentially *practical*. All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice (Marx and Engels, 1989: 122).

The concept of *practice* became central in Marx's theory and served as the nucleus of Marxist revolutionary ideology. Although Marx did not discuss questions of linguistic theory at any length, he and his collaborator Engels approached the problem of language from the perspective of its relationship with material-social activity, with human consciousness and, more generally, with ideology as a specific form of human consciousness. According to them, human consciousness and language are indispensably and dialectically connected to one another. Their association is as much *historical* ("language is as old as consciousness"; they are both originate from work), as it is *actual*, in the sense that language is "the immediate actuality of thought". There is no consciousness, Marx and Engels imply, without language. Language is "the real, practical consciousness that exists also for other men, and for that reason alone it really exists for each individual as well" (Marx and Engels 1989: 51). Like consciousness, language comes into being with the need, the necessity, for communication and social intercourse in the

broadest sense. In their view, language is not merely the instrument of a pre-existing consciousness; it is at once the natural and the social medium of consciousness. Being inseparable from language, consciousness is itself, "from the very beginning, a social product, and remains so as long as men exist at all" (ibid : 51).

As far as ideologies are concerned, they have their own foundations in the division of labor on one hand, and in language on the other. In Marx's view, ideologies reflect the most important division in society, that between physical and intellectual labor, between *creative action* — operations upon things with the aid of tools and machines — and *action on human beings* by means of nonmaterial instruments, the primary and most important of which is language. Marx and Engels argued that abstract ideas have no power in themselves, but people who hold power — economic or political — make use of ideas in order to justify and legitimize their own interests, their actions, and their rule. As Marx puts it, "liberal phrases are the idealistic expression of the real interests of the bourgeoisie". According to Marx and Engels (1989: 64), "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, *i.e.* the class which is the ruling *material* force of society, is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* force". For, in the final analysis,

the ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance (Marx and Engels, 1989 : 64).

Marx emphasized in particular the *ideological* dimension of language. In his view, ideologies can only find their way to persuade individuals and social groups through language. They supply vocabularies, formulations, turns of thought which are also turns of phrase (see Lefebvre, 1969). What people actually do, what results from their praxis, their roles in the division of labor and their real actions in society, enters human consciousness only by way of language. Through language, ideologies thus mediate between praxis and consciousness. Furthermore, ideologies — conservative as well as revolutionary ones — create their own language and intro-

duce it into the social consciousness. People's outlook is thus formulated in the medium of language. Marx and Engels tried to situate language within praxis, in relation to ideologies, social relationships, social classes, and the class struggle that goes on in capitalist society. According to them, when the bourgeois speaks of "human rights," "human conditions," etc. he actually means bourgeois rights, bourgeois conditions, etc. He does not distinguish between the two because his very language has been fashioned by the bourgeoisie.

Language on its part — not only the language of ideologists (*e.g.* philosophers, writers, politicians) but also of all those who speak — may distort the practical reality in which people live. For language is full of errors and illusions, trivial truths as well as profound ones. With this, Marx reminds us of Francis Bacon's epistemological doctrine of the four barriers of human knowledge, of which, what Bacon calls *idola fidei*, represents those errors and illusions of human consciousness that are inherently produced by the inadequacy of language by which people communicate their thoughts to one another.

II

Jürgen Habermas's project of "reconstructing" historical materialism, as he says, by taking Marx's theory "apart and putting it back together again in a new form in order to attain more fully the goal it has set for itself" (Habermas, 1979: 95) is based primarily in the distinction between "labor" and "interaction". Habermas defines "labor"—"work", or "purposive-rational action" — as activity governed by technical rules that are rooted in empirical knowledge designed to transform nature for human purposes (Habermas, 1970: 92). "Interaction," on its part, is defined as "communicative action," or "symbolic action" that is governed by norms designed to achieve consensus on social issues through a process of articulating needs, defining reciprocal behavior expectations, and evaluating different validity claims.

Habermas believes Max's social theory is reductionistic in its monological focus on material production, therefore he attempts to overcome the one-sidedness of Marx's work and re-think history and society within a new concep-

tual framework. To accomplish his project, Habermas, like Foucault and Bourdieu, draws on the resources of the “linguistic turn” in philosophy and social theory, the transcontinental product of Anglo-American philosophy and European Semiotics and Structuralism, which rethink the traditional problems of consciousness as problems of language. Rejecting Marx’s fundamental paradigm of base and superstructure as too reductionist Habermas, as argued by Honneth (1991), attempts to open a new domain of social action irreducible to the domination of nature. Where Marx is concerned primarily with the technical and economic basis of human evolution and social change, Habermas focuses on the evolution of communicative rationality, on the moral-practical learning processes whereby human agents acquire skills of communication as a key factor of social progress. Habermas believes it is imperative to subordinate technology to human needs, to the realm of “the communication of acting men”.

The introduction of the concept of “communicative action” became Habermas’s point of departure for his reformulation of Marx’s social theory, which he ambitiously claimed to transpose into a paradigm of linguistic communication and expand it to large areas — the public sphere, education, citizenship and the like — of the “lifeworld,” a key methodological term in Habermas’s work, which he perceives as a horizon of consciousness that includes both the public and private spheres in which identity formation and communicative action take place.

Criticizing the positivism of Marx’s later writings Habermas sought to turn Marx’s early work into a more effective springboard of an immanent critique of capitalist society by emphasizing its hermeneutic aspect. Like Marx, Habermas assumes that the origin and development of human life depend upon two elements — social labor (or *instrumental action*), and language (or *communicative action*) — which are irreducible to each other. Like Marx, Habermas also rejects Hegel’s idealistic and deterministic interpretation of history that reduces human agency to a mere vehicle for the self-actualization of Reason. Both Marx and Habermas view history as a human product whereby human beings dynamically and continuously transform themselves as

they transform their natural and social environment. However, unlike Marxism, Habermas’s theory of society remains largely *unhistorical*. It is concerned above all with the analysis and the critique of modern societies and does not set this analysis within a theory of history which undertakes to explain *all* the forms of human society and their transformations (Bottomore, 1984). Whereas Marx analyzes history primarily as the development of the productive forces, the division of labor, and technical rationality, Habermas views history mainly as the development of normative structures, moral and legal worldviews, identity formations, and communicative skills. The contrast in their perspectives represents the differences between the paradigms of production and communication. Habermas’s theory largely neglects economic analysis intending to subsume the concept of “labor” and “common activity” (*praxis*) under that of “communicative action” and “discussion” (*lexis*).

Through a focus on communication rather than production, Habermas seems to reject what Marx takes to be the fundamental criterion of the specifically human. According to Marx and Engels (1978: 150), “Men can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion or by anything else you like. They themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to *produce* their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organization”. Habermas (1979) notes that hominids, not just humans, reproduced their existence through social production involving rules for instrumental and communicative action. Whereas Marx views language primarily as a mode of socialization, whose basic dynamics involve material production, Habermas attempts at separating language from labor, granting far more importance to the role of language in social integration. Habermas argues that language, with labor, is the key factor that separates humans from animals and the basis of all social evolution. In other words, language is a fundamental medium for the production and reproduction of intersubjective life. In Habermas’s view, it is language that demonstrates our essential sociality. Moreover, language serves as a kind of “meta-institution” on which all social institutions are dependent, for social action is consti-

tuted only in ordinary communication among speaking and acting subjects. Habermas sees action primarily as a process of communication and intersubjective understanding and defines societies as "networks of communicative actions".

This said, however, Habermas's conception appears to have a close affinity with Marx's theory.¹ For in the final analysis, Habermas believes that "the concept of social labor is fundamental, because the evolutionary achievement of socially organized labor and distribution obviously precedes the emergence of developed linguistic communication, and this in turn precedes the development of social role systems" (ibid : 137). Yet, whereas Marx deals primarily with the interaction among human beings in the production process, as determining all the other forms of social interaction, Habermas focuses his analysis on patterns of ordinary language usage that people share in everyday communicative interaction. Habermas claims that the distinction between *work* and *interaction* as irreducible categories first turned up in Hegel's early writings but was subsequently abandoned by Hegel. Marx discovered the distinction independently, but he, too, failed to uphold it. Where Marx allegedly conflated work and interaction under the category of social practice, Habermas separates them as two distinct forms of rationality, practice, and integration. According to Habermas, "system integration" occurs in the realm of work whereas "social integration" occurs in the realm of communicative action.

In Habermas's view, Marx's concepts of "forces and relations of production" and "mode of production" do not provide the best means for understanding the evolution of human societies and the periodization of human history. Rather than the main motor of history, Habermas, interprets the development of the productive forces "as a problem-generating mechanism that *triggers but does not bring about* the overthrow of relations of production and an evolutionary renewal of the mode of production" (Habermas, 1979: 146). The concepts "work" and "interaction" are, therefore, better "suited for reconstructing the sociocultural phases of the history of mankind" (Habermas, 1970: 114). Habermas employs thus a new criterion for the periodization of human history, that is the "principle

of social organization".² According to this criterion, stages of social development are differentiated based on successive advances in the forms of moral-practical consciousness. With this, Habermas seems to refuse Marx's economic determinism that subordinates all social dynamics to production and technical knowledge in favor of broader normative structures and forms of social integration which, alongside new productive forces, are due to "the institutionalization and exploitation of new forms of knowledge" (Habermas, 1986: 168).

The dual realms of work and interaction in Habermas's theory suggest that societies develop according to dynamics that relate to processes of control over both outer and inner nature. The control of outer nature takes place in the realm of *production*. Here, human beings learn how to gain mastery over nature; throughout history they acquire and accumulate technical knowledge that is deposited in the productive forces of society. The control of inner nature takes place through *socialization*. Here, human beings develop skills in communication and acquire practical knowledge that is deposited in worldviews (moral and philosophical systems), in identity formation, and also in critical knowledge. Habermas seeks to combine both perspectives into social theory in his attempt to reconstruct historical materialism. According to Habermas, human evolution proceeds through the advancement of *both* kinds of knowledge, technical and moral-practical. Proceeding through the distinction between work and interaction, Habermas's intellectual enterprise seeks to achieve emancipation from both external and internal nature. Emancipation from external nature can be achieved through the production of technically exploitable knowledge; emancipation from internal nature succeeds through the replacement of institutions based on coercion with institutions organized around communication that is free of domination. The latter occurs not through productive economic activity, but through critical activity in the realm of communication. Furthermore, the realms of work and interaction carry different kinds of validity claims. In the realm of work there are *truth* claims requiring *verification*; in the realm of communicative action there are *normative* claims requiring *legitimation*.

Unlike Foucault, who regards language and interaction primarily in terms of domination, Habermas sees them as the means of attaining a freely constituted social consensus. Habermas implies that the very nature of language as communication means that both the speaker and the hearer of speech have an *a priori* interest in understanding each other with regard to their "common concern," thus leading to agreement among them. "Our first sentence," Habermas (1971: 314) asserts, "expresses unequivocally the intention of universal and unconstrained consensus". Habermas makes it a central aspect of his project analyzing the implicit and explicit nature of basic human competence required for such communicative action. His assumption is that in the communicative process each participant will be drawn into reflecting upon their own position in this process. For Habermas, this means that the structure of language is fundamentally hermeneutic. It calls for participants to engage in interpretation at all levels, thus heightening the degree of each individual's self-understanding as this derives from his/her interaction with others. This, Habermas believes, is the very telos of language. Language, although it is not seen as a transparent medium, allows communication among individuals or groups to take place; where communication fails, it means that there is a pathological form of language use. Following this rationale, Habermas takes another step away from Marx, defining ideology as distorted communication rather than false consciousness.

Unlike Horkheimer's and Adorno's pessimistic account of reason in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Habermas seeks to recover a basis for optimism. He maintains a positive orientation to action, shifting away from history (Calhoun, 1995) and showing a larger appreciation of the partially independent role that ideas, symbolic representation, "mimesis," and language have in the struggle for social emancipation. Like Marx and unlike Foucault, Habermas has a Hegelian vision of history as fundamentally progressive in nature, as having definite developmental tendencies that lead towards a state of human freedom and emancipation through a process of differentiation, differentiation that is understood as involving technological, economic, and political dynamics (Marx), as well as moral and prac-

tical consciousness. In Habermas's view, such a process of differentiation leads to a state where cultural traditions, social systems, and value claims require rational justification in light of universal interests. These interests are best defined and represented through communicative action. As argued by Bottomore (1984), Habermas's theory of language and communication emerges thus as both a theory of truth and at the same time a doctrine of emancipation. In Habermas's view, emancipation is the very basis of social life and language — like reason — embodies an innate human interest in emancipation. The potential for emancipatory change lies in communicative, or discursive, rationality and practices that embody it, such as the democratic public sphere. Habermas is concerned with upholding the Enlightenment values of freedom, democracy, individuality, rationality, with understanding how they have been threatened by developments within modernity, and with demonstrating how these values can be anchored in actual social institutions through advancing existing forms of communicative action. The rationality that informs such action is based on raising and evaluating validity claims within an intersubjective context oriented towards achieving rational consensus over values and policies. Habermas believes that through communicative action and rational discourse, people can act cooperatively in a "goal-directed manner" for reaching understanding, hence resolving — at least in principle — all significant differences. The concept of communicative action presupposes language as "the medium of a kind of reaching understanding, in the course of which participants, through relating to a world, reciprocally raise validity claims that can be accepted or contested" (Habermas 1984: 99).

A speaker who utters a statement *p* with a communicative intent, raises the claim that the statement *p* is true; a hearer can respond to this with a "yes" or a "no". Thus with the assertoric mode of language use, communicative acts gain the power to coordinate actions via rationally motivated agreement (Habermas, 1987a: 30).

Habermas strongly believes in the ability of individuals to continuously master their basic communicative skills, narrowing thus their po-

litical and cultural differences. Communicative action in Habermas's theory aims ultimately at a rational agreement between *ego* and *alter*. Out of context of their "preinterpreted lifeworld," rational discourse enables individuals to negotiate among *themselves* definitions of situations, seeking consensus about various matters of truth and practical action, achieving valid agreements and "collectively desired goals". All that is needed is developing an ethics of discourse ("communicative ethics"), a "formal pragmatics," by which two or more speaking and acting subjects can fully explore and mobilize the "rationality potential of action oriented to reaching understanding" that is contained in linguistic communication (Habermas, 1984: 95).

For the communicative model of action, language is relevant only from the pragmatic viewpoint that speakers, in employing sentences with an orientation to reaching understanding, take up relations to the world...in a reflective way (Habermas, 1984: 98).

Habermas's analysis of communication seeks to provide norms for non-dominating relations to others, as well as a broader notion of reason. According to Habermas, any speech act raises general validity claims that relate to "the comprehensibility of the utterance, the truth of its propositional component, the correctness and appropriateness of its performative component, and the authenticity of the speaking subject" (1973: 18). Comprehensibility, truth, rightness, and sincerity are therefore the *a priori* norms of all communicative action, if only implicitly understood as such. Agreement is achieved through the implicit or explicit recognition of the validity of these claims. In all agreements, Habermas (1979: 97) asserts, we find "a never silent although seldom redeemed claim to reason".

Assuming that all genuine attempts at communication have implicit in them claims to validity (truth, appropriateness, and honesty), it is suggested that conceptions of truth and justice and genuine legitimacy of consensual agreements emerge only from conditions that correspond to an "ideal speech situation". In an "ideal speech situation" all parties have equal opportunities to engage in dialogue without undue domination by one party, without restriction, and without ideological distortion. An "ideal speech

situation" is thus a prerequisite for an authentic democratic public sphere where citizens can determine social policy under conditions of uninhibited, noncoerced, nonmanipulated discourse. It is only in an "ideal speech situation" where communication involves the participation of the entire public and is free from domination that an agreement can take on the form of "communicatively achieved consensus". In Habermas's view,

Communicative reason finds its criteria in the argumentative procedures for directly or indirectly redeeming claims to propositional truth... [And] it brings along with it the connotations of a noncoercively unifying, consensus-building force of a discourse in which the participants overcome their first subjectively biased views in favor of a rationally motivated agreement (1987b: 284, 315).

Whenever language manifests itself as the embodiment of institutionalized power relations, the outcome can only be a "systematically distorted" communication (Habermas, 1977: 358). Because Habermas emphasizes that the realization of the emancipatory impulse inherent in human language presupposes conditions of unconstrained, undistorted communicative action, a key task of his theoretical project is to analyze distorted conditions of communication within capitalist society, to further the development of critical consciousness, and to assist the undertaking of a movement that can deepen civic participation and democratize the existing social institutions.

III

Whereas Habermas suggests as a corrective alternative to Marxism his *theory of communicative action*, Bourdieu introduces a more critical alternative, which he labels *theory of social space*. Bourdieu's is a sharper break with Marxism, most essentially, with its economic approach and the theory of class, which he considers as too reductionist. Bourdieu claims that by reducing the social world to the economic field alone, which is simply organized around the opposition between two antagonistic classes, Marxism produced a world image that is one-dimensional, ignoring the positions occupied in the different fields and sub-fields of the social

space, particularly in the space of *cultural production*. With Foucault and Habermas, Bourdieu believes that due to significant historical changes that have occurred since Marx's time, new forms of power and resistance have emerged that are structured around issues of cultural and psychological identities rather than economic domination and exploitation, and hence, the sources of power domination and political change no longer resolve around class struggle and the critique of political economy.

Bourdieu's abiding thesis is that the ruling class does not dominate overtly. It does not force the ruled to conform to its will; nor does it dominate in capitalist society through a conspiracy where the privileged would consciously manipulate reality in accordance with their own self-interest. Rather, the dominant class in capitalist society is the beneficiary of economic, social, and symbolic power, symbolic power which is embodied in economic and cultural capital and which is imbricated throughout society's institutions and practices and reproduced by these very institutions and practices.

As proposed by Bourdieu, the notion of cultural capital extends the Marxist idea of economic capital. The possessors of this form of capital exert considerable power over other groups in society, using it to gain preferred occupational positions and to legitimate their claims to a greater share of economic capital as well as to the existing social order. A dominant class, Bourdieu implies, has the symbols through which it can establish hegemony. In his view, every society is characterized by an inherent symbolic struggle for the production of common sense and, most importantly, for the monopoly of the legitimate right to *official naming*. It is the state, Bourdieu (1994: 107) asserts, that monopolizes "the legitimate usage of physical and symbolic violence".

To a large extent, Bourdieu's underlying theoretical stance was presented in his early 1970s essay *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. In Bourdieu's theory *language* is an essential component of *symbolic capital*, without which there can be no cultural production. Language has a "symbolic" as well as a "real" value; it can be employed as an arbitrary mark of identity surplus to its use as a means of communication

(Bourdieu, 1991). Furthermore, it is suggested that language is the incarnation of symbolic power. It serves as the central mechanism of ideological and cultural control and domination. This being said, however, the constitutive power which is granted to ordinary language lies not in the language itself but in the group which "authorizes it and invests it with authority" (Bourdieu 1995, 21).

Official language, particularly the system of concepts by means of which the members of a given group provide themselves with a representation of their social relations (e.g. the lineage model or the vocabulary of honor), sanctions and imposes what it states, tacitly laying down the dividing line between the thinkable and the unthinkable, thereby contributing towards the maintenance of the symbolic order from which it draws its authority (Bourdieu, 1995: 21-22).

Bourdieu further argues:

Any language that can command attention is an "authorized language," invested with the authority of a group; the things it designates are not simply expressed but also authorized and legitimated. This is true not only of establishment language but also of the heretical discourses which draw their legitimacy and authority from the very groups over which they exert their power and which they literally produce by expressing them: they derive their power from their capacity to *objectify* unformulated experiences, to make them public—a step on the road of officialization and legitimation (1995: 170-171).

Like Habermas, Bourdieu does not seem to reject Marx thoroughly; he aims to correct and complement Marx's theory by overcoming its one-sidedness and making room for a more comprehensive understanding of the social reality. The monopoly over language and over the mode of thought, Bourdieu implies, is one of the means by which dominant groups in society ensure their own primacy. Reiterating Marx, Bourdieu asserts that those who occupy dominated positions in the social space are also situated in a dominated position in the field of symbolic production. According to Bourdieu:

In class societies, everything takes place as if the struggle for the power to impose the legitimate mode of thought and expression that is unceasingly waged in the field of the production of symbolic goods tended to conceal, not least from the eyes of those involved in it, the contribution it makes to the delimitation of the universe of discourse, that is to say, the universe of the thinkable, and hence to the delimitation of the universe of the unthinkable (1995: 170).

Both Habermas and Bourdieu provide valuable supplements and corrections to Marx's social theory. Their theoretical frameworks however are most usefully constructed as supplements to Marx's paradigm of production rather than as efforts to replace it. Just as Habermas's theory of communicative action and Bourdieu's theory of social space illuminate phenomena difficult to see through the lens of material production, there are elements in Marx's analysis of society — including his concept of language praxis, and ideology — indispensable for a critical social theory, that cannot be captured either by a Habermasian communication model or by Bourdieu's model of social space. In the final analysis, the paradigm of the linguistic utterance is a poor substitute for that of production.

NOTES

1. This is not a place for a detailed analyses of Habermas's relationship with Marxism. Habermas himself has admitted that he approaches social theory as a "Marxist theoretician" concerned to "carry on the Marxian tradition under considerably changed historical conditions" (See Thompson and Held, 1982: 220). In *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, Habermas argues that although Marx's historical materialism needs revision in many respects, its "potential for stimulation has still not been exhausted" (1979: 95). Rockmore (1987; 1989) comments that Habermas's attitude towards Marxism has evolved through various stages of development — interpretation, critique, reconstruction, and abandonment — over a period of three decades. According to this author, Habermas's initial enthusiasm for historical materialism was first altered to a more critical awareness of fundamental problems within Marxist theory, then to an attempt to remedy these problems, and finally to a belief that Marxism is inherently flawed and needs to be redefined within Habermas's own theoretical framework of communicative action. For other detailed and informed accounts on Habermas's relationship with Marxism see Sensat (1979), Thomas (1979), Heller (1982), and Roderick (1986).
2. By "principle of social organization" Habermas (1979: 153) means "those innovations which become possible through learning processes that can be structured in a developmental logic, and which institutionalize a new societal level of learning".

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