Communicative Action and Just Global Institutions

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Jürgen Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action (TCA) is both the site of and method from which discursive communication and consensus formation occurs to reconstruct civil society. This transformation emerges from rationale communication, independent from state and market interests, which spark emancipatory progress that reclaims sites of knowledge colonized by the "system." Groups and individuals mobilize when political and social systems violate their expectations or rights. For Habermas, this occurs when the administrative structures of society infiltrate the traditional areas of life that are ordinarily regulated by individuals. [1] In other words, when money and power (what Habermas calls "steering media") command and influence what people do in the voting booths, in home, on the farm, in the workplace, and more broadly, in global economic institutions, people will contest and reclaim control of these essential and sacred areas of life. Thomas Pogge theorizes and advocates changing unjust global institutions into human rights and justice honoring institutions. Pogge argues for a shift in how individuals relate to global institutions, justice, and human rights. He wants each individual to (re)claim their moral responsibility and realize the unforgiving global economic and social institutions are (re)produced through each of us. Through this inner transformation we can, as individuals and groups, begin to change these systems.

The purpose of this paper is to apply Habermas' TCA and Pogge's discussion on justice, human rights, and global institutions. Through this explanation and analysis, I will show how TCA is a conduit for Pogge's ideas. To do this, I will provide a brief explanation of Habermas' TCA, which includes — communicative action, systems, lifeworld, and the colonization of the lifeworld. Then, I will combine this framework with Pogge's arguments and insights and show how these two celebrated authors' theories are parallel and complimentary.

Communicative action refers to a verbal engagement between at least two people who are capable of action. The actors in this interpersonal relationship "seek to reach an understanding about the action situation and their plans of action in order to coordinate their actions by way of agreement." [2] Communicative action works to establish social relationships, transport meaning, and to express one's self. In principle, communicative action orders, interrogates, and negotiates life. There are two separate types of social action. Habermas makes a clear distinction between communicative action and what he calls strategic action. He posits, "social actions can be distinguished according to whether the participants adopt either a success-oriented attitude [strategic action] or one oriented toward reaching understanding [communicative action]." [3] With strategic action, "non-linguistic means are used to manipulate the situation so that it is in people's `interest' to cooperate... [w]hen language is used, it merely transmits information or expresses power." [4] In essence, individuals are treated as objects and their affirmation or understanding of the action is not required or considered. With communicative action, Habermas notes, consensus is a necessity — "the very outcome of interaction is even made to depend on whether the participants can come to an agreement among themselves on an intersubjectively valid appraisal of their relations to the world." [5] Participants obtain consensus and understanding by relating their own experiences with others by making validity claims upon the speaker's assertions.

Validity claims question the statement made in communicative processes. Validity claims are essential to TCA since consensus and agreement are necessary for a successful communicative action. A speaker can accept or contest another's validity claim through three avenues of rationalization. One of Habermas' students, Joseph Heath, states succinctly: Truth claims concern the way things are in the physical world, rightness claims concern the way things are in the social world, understood as the totality of legitimately ordered interpersonal relations, and sincerity claims concern the way things are in the subject's private domain of inner experience. [6]

If a speaker rejects a validity claim, then communicative action moves on to discourse where individuals further debate their claims. I will not be discussing Habermas' theories of discourse in this paper. [7]

Communicative action occurs on the foundation of background knowledge and tradition. Habermas terms this foundation the "lifeworld." Habermas explains: [s]ubjects acting communicatively always come to an understanding in the horizon of a lifeworld. Their lifeworld is formed from more or less diffuse, always unproblematic, background convictions. This lifeworld background serves as a source of situation definitions that are presupposed by participants as unproblematic...The lifeworld also stores the interpretive work of preceding generations. It is the conservative counterweight to the risk of disagreement that arises with every actual process of reaching understanding [8]

Communication is the way we transmit and reproduce our lifeworld. The lifeworld is "at once a horizon and a limit to discussion and interpretation...what constitutes the very content of inter-subjective understanding." [9] There are three functions that pass on our lifeworld to others: cultural reproduction, social integration, and socialization; "[w]e pass on cultural understandings, learn to live together under certain rules, and form our identities, by talking and communicating with one another." [10] When steering media (money and power) replace ordinary language in reproducing the lifeworld, Habermas terms this "the colonization of the lifeworld." This colonization is akin to destroying local language and cultures by an imperial power enforcing its own self-interest. [11] Habermas described

colonization of the lifeworld as akin to, ”colonial masters coming into a tribal society — and forc[ing] a process of assimilation upon it." [12]

Systems colonize the lifeworld. A system attains social order through procedural integration achieved and designed by anonymous actors whose interest is based in steering media. The free market economy is the primary example of a system. [13] No particular person sets the price of a particular commodity. It is based on the actions of producers and consumers coordinating supply and demand. While systems are necessary in advanced capitalist societies, the infiltration of steering media eventually captures essential processes of humankind. When money and power invade into these integral parts of our existence, there emerge ”more and more complex networks that no one has to comprehend or be responsible for." [14] This effectively uncouples human interactions with the lifeworld. [15] Our coordination of actions occurs not through communicative action, but through steering media. [16] Therefore, actions arise without understanding, but instead with a quasi-mechanical process that ”occurs behind the backs of the participants." [17] Habermas sees the colonization of the lifeworld as a social crisis that individuals should counter with rational communicative action.

Through communicative action, individuals can disrupt and critically reassess the systems that contain oppressive norms, institutions, and practices. Through a critical process of discourse and communication, more universally acceptable norms can emerge. [18] Habermas sees such conflicts as, ”resistance to tendencies toward a colonization of the lifeworld." [19] And they originate ”along the seams between system and lifeworld." [20] In other words, the conflicts occur in spaces where the essential variables of morality, tradition, culture, and association meet the lifeless, complex, and fragmented processes of autonomous systems.

Pogge’s critique of global economic and social institutions provides the discourse and strategies to obtain successful communicative actions. Because of our global institutional interconnectedness, we can no longer hold differing views of justice that correlate with our own history and culture. We must accept that some systems we engage in have negative effects in other parts of the world. Global governance deeply affects human lives through non-domestic means and should be reformed to universally protect individuals. [21] This reformation must result in a just global governance institution. Pogge defines Justice as, ”the morally appropriate and...equitable treatment of persons and groups." [22] For Pogge, creating just global institutions is the first step towards altering the script of humanity’s misplaced interconnectedness. Essentially, Pogge is asking us to recreate our lifeworld concerning our concept of justice, and through this process, decolonize it from coercive and unjust institutional systems. This begins and ends with communicative action.

Pogge asks his readers to consider how we, as Americans or citizens of advanced capitalist societies, take part in human rights violations. This self-reflection exercise allows individuals to meditate on their roles in a globalized world. Importantly, Pogge defines human rights as ” claims on coercive social institutions and secondarily as claims against those who uphold such institutions." [23] Pogge’s definition is not directed towards governments and its agents, but to the structure of social institutions itself. Global institutions create cruel inequities. Citizens manage these institutions and should recognize their power and responsibility to reform their domestic and global institutions to deliver a system based on justice and equality. Pogge states, ”any institutional design is unjust if it foreseeably produces massive avoidable human rights deficits. Such an institutional order, and participation in its creation or imposition, harms those whose human rights avoidably remain unfulfilled." [24] By recognizing how our own involvement, acquiescence, and indifference to these unjust institutions reproduce these disparate effects, we can, effectively, communicate this positionality to others. Pogge is asking us to create a lifeworld that honors human rights and accepts our complicity with their violations.

Through communicative action, individuals can shift how they interact with the world and create positive results. Pogge argues, ”it is undeniable that one’s interest and situation influence what one finds morally salient, what notions of justice and ethics one find appealing and compelling, and which reforms one regards as available rather than utopian." [25] The lifeworld contains this moral reality. Communicative action shapes and reproduces the lifeworld. By convincing individuals that humanity is intimately tied together, their (un)involvement in global institutions have negative effects, and it is in their interests to change these unjust global institutions, change on a microcosmic level begins to form and develops into a social movement. This process only occurs through communicative action. Validity claims will confront ideas such as Pogge’s, but as stronger and more salient discourses emerge as humanity evolves, the three worlds (truth, rightness, sincerity) come into alignment with the ideas of justice and human rights. Pogge elaborates on how our personal beliefs shape our society: Enduring respect of human rights is...sustained not just by the country’s constitution, its legal and political system, and the attitudes of its politicians, judges, and police. It is sustained more deeply by the attitudes of its people, as shaped also by the education system and the economic distribution. [26]

Socialization and education are the keys to producing alternative ways of being. The lifeworld is the battleground of ideas.

Steering media — money and power — has become a foundational factor for socialization in advanced capitalist societies. Certain systems of interaction, economic and social, that reproduce inequality, became the norm in how people view themselves and the rest of the world. Simple phrases like ”they need to pull themselves up by the bootstraps" and ”more for you means less for me" are an accepted slogan for global and domestic policy. Commodification, bureaucratization, and capital permeation objectify our social rationalizations and cultural reproduction into distorted realities whereby the texture and affluence of the lifeworld is lost to mechanical loops. This technicization results in automatic responses that further degenerate social and cultural values resulting in static societies steered by the systems processes.

Economies and political administrations are now steered more by money and power than by people. Fluctuations and crisis in the market influence policy more than democracy. One author notes, ”[a]s the complexity of the system increases, its rationality no longer coincides with the rationality of any individual." [27] People can exploit labor and environment, displace people, annihilate species, violate human rights, and pollute waterways while navigating the social order of the system. What Pogge and Habermas are asking of us is to stop and consider how this system is validated and how we automatically accept and use systems for our own self-interest. Essentially, rational understanding of the system is decoupled — ”[a]ctors no longer need to agree with or even understand the goals of the system in order for their actions to assume a pattern in pursuit of those goals" [28] The colonization of the lifeworld reproduces the system with or without the actors complicity.

The colonization of the lifeworld occurs, in many instances, behind our backs, and in other instances, with prearticulated definitions and meanings. The complexity of these global institutions permits policies and legal enforcement mechanisms to operate beyond most citizens’ comprehension, and when most citizens do interact with these mechanisms, a specialist class (legal, medical, political) formats the interaction. Habermas notes: [t]his gives rise to a structural violence that, without becoming manifest as such, takes hold of the forms of intersubjectivity of possible understanding. Structural violence is exercised by way of systemic restrictions on communication; distortion is anchored in the formal conditions of communicative action in such a way that the interrelation of the objective, social, and subjective worlds gets prejudged for participants in a typical fashion. [29]

Colonization of the lifeworld is nuanced, yet violent, especially when occurring over time. Individuals responses and thoughts, in many respects, are resultant from the previous generations colonization of the lifeworld, and; thus, the unjust system is now an established norm. This norm does not remain in power because of its inherent truth or rightness, but through structural violence. Pogge argues, ”[w]e live within a global economic order that is structured in accordance with the interests of the affluent high-consumption countries and coercively imposed by them." [30]

The affluent countries coerce through two significant methods. The first occurs at the negotiation table. Advanced capitalist societies have an advantage in bargaining power and expertise and ”do not consider the interests of the global poor as part of their mandate." [31] The second occurs through military force. The US has military bases around the world and gives billions of dollars in military aid, all to reproduce the current system. Habermas contends ”the established powers are less and less dependent for their own reproduction on the labor and willingness to cooperate of those who are impoverished and disenfranchised." [32] This occurs both domestically and internationally. The system is constantly reinforced to continue the ascension of the advanced capitalist societies, and their beneficiaries, through uneven developmental processes. Human rights and justice are not the foundation of these systems; their promotion and protection are not always in alignment with the interests of the advanced capitalist societies.

Habermas and Pogge, ultimately, see system changing movements transpiring through different methods. Pogge offers grand solutions such as the Democracy Fund, Health Impact Fund, Global Resource Dividend , all which require redistribution of wealth and large political motivation. [33] Habermas, on the other hand, sees change occurring through grass root movements, not through redistribution of wealth. [34] Examples of these would be La Via Campesina, anti-capitalist movements, and environmental movements , in other words , social movements that operate outside of the system. Habermas states these modern conflicts: no longer flare up in domains of material reproduction; they are no longer channeled through parties and associations; and they can no longer be allayed by compensations. Rather, these new conflicts arise in domains of cultural reproduction, social integration, and socialization; they are carried out in subinstitutional — or at least extraparliamentary — forms of protest; and the underlying deficits reflect a reification of communicatively structured domains of action that will not respond to the media of money and power. [35]

Despite the difference in their processes of action, they are complimentary. One begins from below, the other from above. Both will occur through communicative action. [36]

Pogge's call to change unjust institutions begins with Habermas' TCA. Individuals' lifeworlds are shaped by their culture, society, and socialization. First, recognizing that unjust and uneven institutions that reproduce and depend on inequality have colonized the lifeworld, the discourse and communication exchanges should begin to change. Pogge demonstrates that "[m]ost citizens of the developed countries reconcile themselves to massive and avoidable poverty abroad by not holding such poverty against the global economic order as they would hold similar poverty within a national society against its domestic economic order." [37] This reasoning applies to power and wealth as well. Individuals in advanced capitalist societies become concerned when the domestic inequality gap of power and money begin to grow. [38] This same concern needs to broaden and include the lesser and least developed countries. The divide between domestic and international, compatriot and stranger, definitions and meanings, requires that we take part in a movement to alter the systems that produce disparate inequalities. Communicative action is a path through which consensus and action emerge. Unfortunately, consensus has not been reached and it may be a long and arduous process to do so. Only 38 of 145 countries are on track for the millennium goals. [39]

TCA provides a theoretical framework through which we can analyze Pogge's ideas of global justice. Pogge's argument is that "the citizens and governments of the wealthy societies, by imposing the present global economic order, significantly contribute to the persistence of severe poverty and thus share institutional moral responsibility for it." [40] By embracing this moral responsibility, we begin to consider our thoughts and actions. Taking part in communicative action spreads the knowledge and discourse demanding change. In effect, decolonizing the lifeworld from these unjust institutions. Pogge believes "[individuals] responsibility is to work for an institutional order and public culture that ensure that all members of society have secure access to the objects of their human rights." [41] This is an intimate process that occurs through our own self-reflection and through communicative action. We as individuals have to educate others and ourselves so that we can share enlightened thoughts and arguments, reach consensus, and begin or join a social movement that will work to alleviate the suffering that exists in this world today.