

## **Critique of Positivism, Hermeneutics and Communicative Reason in Habermas**

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### **Abstract**

In general, Jürgen Habermas is considered one of the main authors of the Frankfurt School and one of the greatest intellectuals of the Western world still among us. His research conceives of communicative reason as an alternative to instrumental reason and recovers the emancipatory content of the project of modernity. We will begin by presenting his critique of positivism and then discuss his dispute with Gadamer over hermeneutics. Habermas adopts hermeneutics, albeit with some criticism, as a facilitator of self-reflection that enables the errors of both objectivist social science and the vulgar analysis of language to be revealed to the social sciences. This is followed by this thinker's perspective on the interests that guide knowledge and, finally, we will undertake an approach to the theory of communicative rationality, which affirms the universalist optimism of Habermas, based on a healthy pluralism that allows human consensus.

**Keywords:** Habermas; critique of positivism; hermeneutics; interests of knowledge; communicative rationality

### **Introduction**

Jürgen Habermas, a contemporary German philosopher and sociologist, born in 1929, is considered by many to be the main heir of the Frankfurt School. He tried to overcome the pessimism of his predecessors as to the possibilities of realising the project of modernity, inspired by the Enlightenment. With a vast published work he asserts himself as one of the most influential thinkers of our time.

This paper aims to present, through research and bibliographical analysis, an approach to the work of Jürgen Habermas in his epistemological contribution, of great

importance in the social sciences in general and critical theory in particular. Based on the work of Habermas and his scholars, it aims to reveal the most significant aspects of his contribution both to the theory of knowledge, more specifically to epistemology, and to the renewal of critical paradigms in the area of social and political philosophy. The approach presented here is structured into four parts: the first seeks to present Habermas's critique of positivism; the second presents some of the most significant aspects of the debate between Gadamer and Habermas around hermeneutics; this is followed by Habermas's perspective on the interests of knowledge and, finally, the fourth part undertakes an approach to the theory of communicative rationality, which significantly contributes to the renewal of critical theory by the Frankfurt School.

### **1. Criticism of Positivism**

The German Sociological Association held a debate in 1961 about positivism in sociology and dialectics as explanatory models in the social sciences. This debate between Karl Popper, influenced by members of the Vienna Circle, and Theodor Adorno, representative of the Frankfurt School, together with Max Horkheimer, both formulators of critical theory, became important in the path of Jürgen Habermas (Fontes 2019).

In the first place it is necessary to highlight the radical opposition of critical theory, associated to the Frankfurt School, in relation to traditional theory. Positivist sociology, by treating social reality as if it were a natural given, external and autonomous in relation to the cognising subject, accepts the existing as the possible, without criticising the world as it is presented to us (Sampaio 1998). Scientific rationality, claiming to be neutral in relation to values, has removed from its analysis all questions regarded as subjective and irrational, neither questioning nor criticising the ends. In turn, critical theory focuses on “exploring the social world beyond the dimensions that are taken for granted” (Calhoun 1996, 447), integrated into the contemporary consciousness of any given time, critical theory “seeks to reflect on the social factors that are at the genesis of the formation of theory, as well as on the role of theory at the level of the constitution of social reality and

in the election of the guiding ends of society” (Sampaio 1998, 2). The contradiction between positivism and critical theory becomes evident.

The Frankfurt School, influenced by Marx and Hegel, among other authors, takes as its starting point the social whole as a network of contradictions (Sampaio, 1998). It argues that sociology should make use of dialectics and not only the hypothetical-deductive method of an empirical nature. Habermas, being part of the second generation of that school, replaces the Marxist concepts of forces and relations of production, key concepts of Marx's social dialectics, by the concepts of labour (which involves, in the same way, instrumental action and rational choice) and of symbolically mediated interaction or communicative action (Therborn 1996, 58). By distinguishing different types of action and knowledge interests, as we shall see below, he affirms the perspective of conflict between the everyday world and the social system.

Influenced by Husserl's phenomenology, he considers objectivist the attitude that “naively relates theoretical propositions to states of affairs”. Such an attitude considers theoretical propositions as representatives of the relations between empirical magnitudes, as something existing in itself and, analogously,

It does away with the transcendental framework within which only the meaning of such propositions is constituted. As soon as it is understood that propositions are relative to the reference system previously placed in them, the objectivist illusion is shattered and frees the gaze towards an interest that directs knowledge. (Habermas 1968, 136)

Thus, the author continues, “the repression of interest still remains part of that same interest”.

As we can see, Habermas' critique of positivism affirms the impossibility of separating the subject from the object in the social sciences, which invalidates naturalism's ideal of objectivity and conflates it with an analysis of the interests of knowledge, which will be the subject of analysis later in this paper. Observation in social sciences is never pure observation, as the scientist observes on the basis of learned norms, values, contexts and concepts. This relationship of circularity between the subject and the object of knowledge comes to shake the

classical ideal of objectivity (Sampaio 1998) and justifies critical theory: “Representations or descriptions are never independent of standards. And the choice of such standards is based on attitudes which require critical evaluation through arguments, because they can neither be logically derived nor empirically proved” (Habermas 1968, 141).

Another shortcoming of positivism is that it neglects the intentional dimension of action. Positivist sociology seeks above all empirical behavioural regularities in order to obtain generalisations, aiming at technically useful knowledge. In turn, the dialectical theory of society must analyse and understand the meaning and consciousness of social agents. Habermas relies on Hermeneutics by valuing questioning and criticism with a view to the self-understanding of social groups (Sampaio 1998).

A third shortcoming of positivism lies in the relationship between facts and values, a classic theme in sociology. For positivists there should be no such relationship, as they are completely distinct spheres, since science is limited to describing reality and should not issue prescriptions or value judgements. Reduced to the analysis of empirical regularities it subscribes to an instrumental rationality (a Weberian concept) that by rationalising the means does not rationalise the ends, it does not call into question norms and values. For Habermas, this rationality can have perverse consequences; in which irrationalism in relation to values can lead to extreme situations, as was the case with German Nazism.

“In Habermas's perspective, all knowledge should be interpreted with attention to the interests that led the actors to produce it.” (Calhoun 1996, 473) Whenever a theorist analysed a theory he or she should locate the relationship between the knowledge-forming interests that led to theoretical production, as well as the historical conditions within which the theory had been produced and the epistemic content of that same theory. Habermas, like the Frankfurt theorists before him, drew on Marx and Freud in developing a conception of critique capable of establishing how objective knowledge could relate to intersubjectivity and the capacity for action (Calhoun 1996, 461). Thus, just as psychoanalysis makes possible an intersubjective relationship, in which doctor and patient annul

the barriers to communication and make possible the understanding and conscious control of previously repressed motivations. Similarly, critical theory constitutes an intersubjective and communicative enterprise, which must accomplish this task in a society that is similarly incapable of recognising the true sources of its history (Calhoun 1996, 461).

Habermasian rationality goes beyond the limits of empirical science, expanding to all argumentative and communicative processes directed to intersubjective consensus. Communication assumes the role of special relevance of rationality not only at the level of choices and practices, but also at the level of empirical science, since the subject always starts from presuppositions in the understanding of reality. Habermas concerned with the structural change of the public sphere, far removed from the model of bourgeois public space of the eighteenth century, considers that it has decayed until today. Discourse in the public sphere was based on rational-critical argumentation, in which regardless of the identity of its proponents or opponents, the best argument was decisive (Calhoun 1996, 461). The public sphere offered a model of public communication that could potentially realize the ideal of rational guidance of society.

The 18th century public sphere was elitist and as a greater number of citizens were incorporated into it and into public opinion, along with government intervention in the economy, the prominence of multinationals and the emergence of welfare states, political and social decisions moved further and further away from the public sphere (Calhoun 1996, 462-463). Habermas, in the same way as his predecessors of the Frankfurt School, named the phenomenon of media communication in mass society, together with the breakdown of the differentiation between society and state due to the "administered society", as the most significant transformations that occurred in the structures of the public sphere.

While Horkheimer and Adorno emphasized the contradictions and negativity of modernity, without however projecting a better alternative, even if utopian (Therborn 1996, 53), Habermas did not hold back on the pessimism of his predecessors, he tried to base his critique not on historical

developments and the otherness of contexts, but on the definition of universal conditions of human life based on an evolution in communication. With universal pragmatics he founded an optimistic orientation for critical theory (Calhoun 1996, 464). Habermas transposed to his following work on communicative action the unfinished potential of the enlightenment project of modernity. Habermas adopts Hermeneutics, albeit with some criticism, as a facilitator of self-reflection which enables the errors of both objectivist social science and the vulgar analysis of language to be revealed to the social sciences (Hekman 1986, 188). However, Habermas does not fail to state that the hermeneutic perspective presents limitations for the social sciences, as is highlighted below.

## 2. Criticism of Hermeneutics

Besides the already presented debate around positivism, another no less important one for epistemology and for the study of the social sciences was at the centre of German academic life for a decade: the debate between Gadamer and Habermas around Hermeneutics. It is worth noting that there are more points that unite than separate the two authors, both of them sharing a fundamental orientation: the critique of instrumental reason. Habermas considers the hermeneutic perspective superior to the Wittgensteinian analysis of language and to phenomenology (Hekman 1986, 187). Hermeneutics introduces a dimension of analysis that was missing: historicity and self-reflexivity, useful for the social sciences because it reveals the errors of objectivist science and the common analysis of language.

Habermas highlights, however, important limitations in the application of the hermeneutic perspective to the social sciences. It remains incomplete by not including reflection on the limits of hermeneutic understanding itself (Hekman 1986, 188-189). Habermas refuses Gadamer's claim of universality of hermeneutic understanding, asserting that there is something beyond "the dialogue that we are". Whereas Gadamer reaffirms that this dialogue sets the limit of our understanding. For Habermas hermeneutic understanding should be the first step in understanding, but not the last. For Gadamer, in the wake of

Wittgenstein, language is not only and above all a system of signs or representations that somehow represents objects, but an expression of the human way of "being in the world" (Giddens 1996, 74).

Gadamer affirms and defines prejudice as a universal element of understanding, and that even after hermeneutic analysis, prejudices remain prejudices. Habermas objects in that once prejudice becomes transparent, it need not continue to be regarded as prejudice. Prejudices, for Gadamer, are presuppositions of knowledge, making it possible, through recourse to the model of the fusion of horizons. Because whenever the cognising subject opens up to the object, even if the object is another subject, in the fusion of two different horizons, the prejudices of each subject are put to the test and may be corrected and even abandoned in the course of the opening to the other. According to Sampaio (1998), the notion of fusion of horizons is interesting to say the least, it contains within itself a consensual theory of truth, while rejecting objectivism and constituting an alternative to radical relativism.

Following Hekman's analysis (1986, 189-194), Habermas's objection to the theoretical construction of prejudice goes beyond the methodological perspective and focuses on the core of Gadamer's approach: his evaluation of Enlightenment thought. Gadamer's flaw is that he does not admit the tradition of modernity that began with the Enlightenment. More specifically, Gadamer rejects the element of the Enlightenment that is most significant for Habermas: 'the claim that reason can emancipate human beings from both prejudice and the forces of domination'. Gadamer presents the universality of hermeneutics against Habermas's claim by presenting the possibility of transcending the prejudices that pre-form our consciousness.

On other levels of the debate surrounding Hermeneutics, Habermas's basic objection to Gadamer's position is that it makes criticism impossible. The latter rejects such an objection outright, asserting the main work of Hermeneutics as the separation of true and false prejudices. It is understood that more than a discussion about the existence of critical reason, what is at issue is its definition and its

limits (Hekman 1986, 195). Gadamer focuses our critical capacity within history, in which historicity makes possible and expands our understanding. In turn Habermas sees historicity as limiting our understanding and tries to remove emancipatory interest from history.

Gadamer situates hermeneutic critical reflection as the analysis of vulgar language, not understanding Habermas when he affirms the possibility of communication outside vulgar language. Another criticism related to Habermas's theory calls into question the parallel between social theory and psychoanalysis. For Gadamer, unlike the psychoanalyst, the social theorist does not cease to be part of society and, therefore, cannot see from outside as the psychoanalyst does with his patient.

Habermas considers hermeneutics to be an indispensable first moment in the method of understanding the social sciences, contrary to the position of Gadamer, who states hermeneutics as an analysis of the fundamental nature of human understanding (Hekman 1986, 196). According to Giddens (1996, 75), the social sciences for Habermas are both hermeneutic and nomological (almost naturalistic), in which critical theory necessarily complements these perspectives.

Habermas declares the failures of positivism and hermeneutics in privileging a certain type of knowledge and suppressing other types. Positivism tries to reduce knowledge to the model of the empirical-analytical sciences and hermeneutics, privileging the historical-hermeneutical sciences, does not duly consider attention to the extralinguistic factors that disturb understanding nor to the relations of domination that affect intersubjective communication (Sampaio 1998). With the intention of projecting the conception of the social sciences resulting from this critique, Habermas presents a doctrine of the interests of knowledge.

### **3. The interests of knowledge**

Habermas divides research processes into three categories, demonstrating the connection between them of logical-methodical rules and interests that guide knowledge (Habermas 1968, 136). This work should be done by a critical

theory of science, as the Author states, in order to avoid the pitfalls of positivism.

The first interest of knowledge is the technical interest, which brings together the empirical-analytical sciences. These sciences act according to the hypothetical-deductive model, establishing rules for the construction and application of theories to reality, but also, as Habermas states in the same text quoted above, for their critical verification. Empirical knowledge is presented as a possible prognostic knowledge, in which facts and the relations between them are apprehended descriptively. It is important to stress, according to the author, that “the relevant facts in the experimental sciences are only constituted as such through a previous organisation of our experience, in the circle of functions of instrumental action” (Habermas 1968, 138). The technical interest concerns the relationship between man and nature, the domination of hostile nature, inscribed in the domain of work, it contributes to man's self-preservation. Habermas's opposition is against the absolutization of the empirical-analytical model operated by positivism.

The historical-hermeneutic sciences are situated in another methodological framework, referring to the practical interest, where “neither the theories are already deductively constructed nor are the experiences organised with a view to the success of the operations. Instead of observation, it is the understanding of meaning which opens access to facts” (Habermas 1968, 138). Here the rules of hermeneutics must be followed in order to make the statements possible. The practical interest is not inserted in instrumental rationality, but in communicative rationality, in the domain of social interaction, with the objective of intersubjective understanding, of the “possible consensus of the agents within the scope of a transmitted self-understanding” (Habermas 1968, 139).

These two interests of knowledge mentioned above fall within the classical distinction between empirical sciences and human sciences. Now, for Habermas (1968, 139), the “systematic sciences of action”, such as economics, sociology and politics, having as an objective similar to the empirical sciences the production of nomological knowledge, as critical sciences

they are, should not be content with that. They must be at the service of the emancipation of man from the forces of nature and the oppression of man by man. We are faced with the third interest of knowledge: the emancipatory interest. Here Habermas applies the model of psychoanalysis, influenced by Freud, to social theory. In the same way that the patient can free himself through awareness of his pathology, through reflection which puts an end to systematically distorted communication, the individual can free himself from oppression. The methodological framework which evaluates the validity of this category of research is assessed by the concept of self-reflection. “This frees the subject from dependence on hypostatised powers. Self-reflection is determined by an emancipatory interest in knowledge. The critically oriented sciences share it with philosophy” (Habermas 1968, 140).

We can affirm that the three great dimensions of socialisation: labour, language and domination, correspond to the three interests of knowledge. Habermas, in addition to his critique of positivism and hermeneutics, seeks to rehabilitate the ideals of the Enlightenment, affirming reason in its critical and emancipatory dimension. It is on the basis of the philosophy of language and, more specifically, through the theory of communication that Habermas will overcome his epistemological difficulties.

#### **4. Communicative rationality**

Habermas' *Theory of Communicative Action* (1981) aims to develop a critical assessment of forms of life and concrete epochs in their totality, without projecting norms granted by any philosophy of history. Thus, a clear evolution has taken place: it is the ambition of a critical science of society, in particular of its communicational structure, that serves as the basis from then on to constitute an evolving knowledge of history, created as a logic of social contradiction. This is the possibility that allows for the economy of a philosophy of history, however pessimistic. Habermas does not stop at the impasse of first-generation critical theory; he opens new perspectives for the direction of praxis.

Habermas replaces the Marxist concepts of forces and relations of production, key concepts in Marx's social dialectics, with those of labour (which involves instrumental action and rational choice alike) and of symbolically mediated interaction or communicative action (Therborn 1996, 58). By distinguishing different types of action and knowledge interests he affirms the perspective of conflict between the everyday world and the social system.

Habermasian rationality goes beyond the limits of empirical science, expanding to all argumentative and communicative processes directed to intersubjective consensus. Communication assumes the role of special relevance of rationality not only at the level of choices and practices, but also at the level of empirical science, since the subject always starts from presuppositions in the understanding of reality.

For Habermas, society presents itself in two dimensions, or two worlds that interpellate each other: the world of the system and the world of life. The world of the system (*System*) is divided into two subsystems: economy and administration; it is characterised by the strategic organisation of the economy and politics, constituting the macrostructure in which the forms of work and interaction are organised. In the system, instrumental rationality predominates, where the law serves to rationalise and legitimise the system. In turn, the life world (*Lebenswelt*) represents culture, personality and society. It is characterised by everyday life where the communicative process takes place, where intersubjective relations unfold. It is reproduced to the extent that it fulfils these three functions which transcend the perspective of the actor: the propagation of oral traditions; the integration of groups through norms and values; and the socialization of future generations (Habermas 1990, 279). The World of life is constituted by the set of senses that allow interpreting and acting on the world, by symbolic creations that correspond to a pre-theoretical knowledge, such as traditions, art objects, immediate speech acts, personality structures and other subjective contents. Thus, for Habermas (1992, 177) language and culture are constitutive elements of

the lifeworld. This, according to Silvério Rocha-Cunha (2008, 240):

brings together the references of descriptions, of prescriptions, of lived experiences, in a dimension of true existence, in the plurality of the I that is a we, it is the reflexivity that accompanies the architecture and grammar of the verb, it is a discursive polyvalence that cannot be contemplated by the organised discourse of science, ethics and even aesthetics.

The relationship between these two worlds constitutes a problem in the Habermasian perspective, the result of instrumental rationality and excessive bureaucratisation, where the economy and power are constituted as natural truths that are not questioned, leading to the colonisation of the world of life. “This disconnection of system and life-world is experienced within modern life-worlds as an objectification of life-forms.” (Habermas 1990, 322) Habermas affirms the perspective of conflict between the everyday world and the social system, and radically opposes the universalisation of science and technology, that is, against the penetration of scientific, instrumental rationality into spheres of decision where another kind of rationality should reign: communicative rationality. Communicative rationality emerges as an answer to the dominance of instrumental rationality, as an alternative to the rupture between the world of life and the system. Habermas presents the answer to this problematic in the paradigm of communicative action.

Communicative action in response to negative socialist theories reopens access to an emancipatory sphere of action. In the context of a linguistic turn in many fields of the social sciences, Habermas departs from the Marxist paradigm of production and creates the paradigm of communicative action itself. Labour as the central category of Marxism is now represented by language. For Habermas (1999, 369) “understanding is immanent as telos in human language”. That is, due to the pre-scientific fact that people are trained to communicate through language, a line of emancipation towards understanding is already followed. His aim is therefore to “analyse the preemptive knowledge of competent speakers, who can intuitively distinguish themselves when they try to exert

influence on others and when they understand themselves with them” (Habermas 1999, 369).

Habermas intends to ground the imperative of emancipation within the social sciences, not by describing this ideal, but by affirming the steps of a theory of communicative competence, whose paradigm should be based on freedom, criticism and rationality. Habermas defends a consensual theory of truth, which can only be defined through the notion of discourse (*Diskurs*), in which it takes the form of dialogue, characterised by argumentation in a context of reflexive communication. For this German theorist, truth is not grounded in experience, although it may be supported by it, but within intersubjective communication. Also, according to Habermas, it is only through the argumentative process that validity claims can be legitimised. The notions of consensus, truth and argumentation and counter-argumentation presuppose an ideal communicative situation, so as to avoid false consensus, which calls for full democracy. Without claiming to be utopian, Habermas points to this path as the regulating ideal of communicative action.

The theory of communicative action establishes an internal relation between praxis and rationality. It investigates the assumptions of rationality of everyday communicational praxis and elevates the normative content of acting oriented towards mutual understanding to the conceptuality of communicational rationality (Habermas 1990, 81).

Habermas, engaged in the construction of a theory of communicative competence, presents the universal pragmatics, whose function “is to identify and reconstruct universal conditions of possible mutual understanding” (Habermas 1996, 9). The fundamental type of social action is constituted in its orientation towards intersubjective consensus, which carries over to certain validity claims of the communicative process: The subject in question must seek that his speech be understandable; he undertakes to tell the truth; he undertakes to conform his attitude to the existing norms that regulate interpersonal relations and must be sincere (Habermas 1996, 12).

Also, according to Habermas, these validity presuppositions establish the indeclinable presuppositions of all

communicative action, that is, the presuppositions of intelligibility, truth, correctness and veracity. The first is intralinguistic, the second points to the relation existing between language and the objective world, the third refers to the intersubjective plane, while the last relates language to subjective interiority. The last three validity claims thus correspond to the spheres of cognition, interaction and subjective expression.

In which nothing is immune to criticism and only the best argument is recognised, in a communicative situation that cannot be distorted by relations of domination and where everyone should have the right of access to public debate.

Habermas's work serves several purposes in developing the theory of communicative action, based on argumentation and counter argumentation, on intersubjectivity and the search for validity and consensus within communication. Habermas intends to rehabilitate modern reason through recourse to the paradigm of communication. He intends to establish a rational dialogue between the life world and the system, according to Pilar Damiano de Medeiros (2010), contributing to the emergence of an authentic public sphere and to the revitalisation of civil society in post-industrial societies.

We cannot fail to make reference, in a general way, to the criticisms of Habermas. One of them has to do with the impossibility of achieving a dialogue without domination when we have social actors with different cultural and political capitals. There are authors such as Edward P. Thompson ([1963] 1988) who criticise Habermas's thesis for being too idealistic and for not considering the role of the non-systemic media that emerge as a reaction to the colonisation of the system. Franz Hinkelammert, in turn, in his work *Crítica a la razón utópica* (1990) when criticising the assumptions of Soviet thought and formal theories in general, includes a critique of Habermas.

Habermas in abandoning the particular expressiveness of concrete life for the normative formulation of a Discourse Ethics is criticised by some theorists as having led to cultural impoverishment insofar as it extrapolates the Western way of life. Thinkers such as Alasdair MacIntyre (2006) and Charles

Taylor (1989) criticise Habermas's discourse ethics for prioritising the just over the good. Their criticism starts from the consideration that moral agents are socially and historically conditioned and act for various motivations other than just the impartial consideration of all individuals. On the other hand, these authors claim that the choice of certain conditions that enable the validity of moral norms would link Habermasian ethics to a particular *ethos*, with its values to be constituted in a specific historical process and which cannot be considered universal. The accusation that discourse ethics pushes aside questions of the good life, without realising that it is itself based on a notion of the good, casts doubt on the priority of the just proposed by Habermas.

Building on objections such as this, Axel Honneth (2011) aims to reformulate critical theory in the terms of a social theory of recognition. The theory of recognition, drawing on the Habermasian paradigm of communication and the Hegelian and Marxist legacy of critical theory, proposes an original model of articulation in the form of “mutual dependence” between a normatively founded social philosophy and a sociology invited to present these norms to the verifiability of facts. Honneth critically examines the tradition of the Frankfurt School based on the achievements of sociological research. It is from these developments operated on the basis of sociological knowledge that he will sketch the features of a project, albeit primarily philosophical, of reformulating a social theory that distances itself from some essential points of the Habermasian model, such as the radical separation between the lifeworld and the system and the insufficient thematisation of conflict. These developments go beyond the limited scope of this paper and will be presented in another research project.

Here, it is important to emphasize, following the reasoning of Rocha-Cunha (2015, 208) this great achievement of Habermas, the clear distinction between the systemic world, which appears as an abstract entity that issues independent imperative normatives, which enable its continuous stabilization, and the social world of the life of humans, which implies interpretations and justifications. Hence the Habermasian thesis that there is an internal relationship

between meaning and validity, a thesis that has evident political importance, since the consensus established by people always has at its base, not a simple empirical and circumstantial agreement - as would happen if human action were guided only by instrumental interests - but an agreement enlightened by reason, where “it is the actors themselves who seek the consensus and submit it to the criteria of truth, fairness and veracity” (Habermas 1999, 144), in a relationship in which the objective world, the subjective world and the social world matter. And if it is true that daily life is full of confused communication, the truth is, as Habermas underlines, that the teleological structure of action is always present, insofar as the actors must possess the capacity to project ends and to act in function of goals. Now, adds Habermas (1999, 146), “only the strategic model of action is content with an explanation of the characteristic features of action immediately oriented towards success”, since the other models specify “the conditions under which the actor pursues his goals - conditions of legitimacy, of self-presentation, or of the agreement obtained in communication”. Thus, as Rocha-Cunha (2015, 208) underlines, we find ourselves before “the regulating ideal which is the ideal linguistic situation, in which the actors proceed as if they were all in circumstances that allow a free and critical dialogue, and which also allows measuring and comparing the facts with the should be”.

Habermas instead of enhancing the critical dimension by comparing historically and culturally specific social constitutions, proposed, as we have seen, a set of universal conditions of human life, based on a broad idea of evolutionary progress in communication. Habermas turned away from history in order to recover the basis for optimism (Calhoun 1996, 463-464). With universal pragmatics he founded an optimistic orientation for critical theory. Habermas transposed the unfinished potential of the Enlightenment project into his later work on communicative action. To rehearse the answer to that scepticism, “through the reconciliation between individual consciousness capable of thinking the monstrosity and the social consciousness that segregates and renews it through appearance, has been the Habermasian task” (Rocha-Cunha

2008, 239). Habermas believes that sociological, psychological and philosophical perspectives can unite through language, if it is considered as an autonomous system, since communicational rationality does not exempt any validity requirement from possible critical examination, since only in human communication can validity requirements be met.

## **5. Final considerations**

Habermas's epistemological reflection aims to overcome the pessimism of the Frankfurt School and the danger of instrumental rationality, already enunciated by Max Weber. Involved in the debate around positivism in German sociology, he reveals himself to be an outspoken critic of the positivist paradigm in the social sciences. However, we cannot affirm Habermas as an enemy of objectivity and empirical research, but rather opposes a positivist interpretation of that which prevents sociology from asserting itself as a critical theory of society.

Habermas opposes the instrumental conception of sociology, quite present since its birth, when it aims to reproduce the social order through the knowledge it produces with a view to the ends previously given by the social system. On the contrary, seeking to reflect on the ends, he strongly defends the critical vocation of sociology, in an umbilical relationship with philosophy.

Habermas's epistemological reflection seeks to overcome the insufficiencies of objectivism and relativism, relying on the hermeneutic paradigm, searching for a solution for social emancipation. Exploring new ways of organising society, he seeks human emancipation, drawing inspiration from the Enlightenment ideal by affirming communicative rationality in detriment of instrumental rationality. As an alternative to the colonisation of the world of life by the system, Habermas proposes a theory of communicative action, based on the universal presuppositions of language and on the potential of individuals, in an attempt to reach an intersubjective consensus. Habermas intends to establish a rational dialogue between the world of life and the system, contributing to the emergence of an authentic public sphere.

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