

## THE NOTION OF AGENCY IN SOCIETAL STRUCTURE: HABERMAS' PERSPECTIVE

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### **Abstract**

*This paper explores the reconceptualization of human agency within rigid societal structures through Habermas' critical theory. While traditional structuralist perspectives often diminish individual agency, Habermas' dualistic framework of system and lifeworld offers a dialectical approach to understanding how actors navigate, resist, and transform institutional constraints. By analysing Habermas' theory of communicative action and the public sphere, this study interrogates the potential for emancipatory agency amid systemic domination. The paper also argues that communicative rationality—rooted in deliberative discourse—enables agents to challenge reified structures, fostering democratic renewal. Again, it highlights the tensions between systemic imperatives (e.g., markets, bureaucracy) and the lifeworld's normative potential, proposing a revised model of agency that balances critique and praxis.*

### **Keywords**

*Agency; hegemony; communicative action; emancipatory interest; autonomy, Self-reflection; moral duty*

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*Dr. Himanshu Sekhar Samal*

The notion of agency in societal structure refers to the capacity of individuals or groups to act independently and make choices within the confines of the larger societal framework. The concept of agency is integral to understanding how people interact with, resist, and shape the social structures around them. These structures—such as social norms, cultural practices, laws, institutions, and economic systems—can both constrain and enable agency. In other words, societal structures influence what kinds of actions are possible, but individuals or groups can still exercise agency within those limitations. Agency is often seen as an individual's ability to make independent choices and act on them, exercising free will. Agency, in this sense, exists within a social structure that may offer a limited amount of freedom to the individual. On the other hand, societal structures e.g., class, race, gender, institutions limit or shape individual agency. The structures of power and privilege—economic, political, cultural—often create boundaries around what individuals can do. For example, an individual's ability to act may be constrained by their socio-economic status, race, or gender identity. Structuralists like Marx and Foucault argue that these structures influence and even determine individual behaviour in profound ways. Now the question arises how much freedom or choice does an individual actually have within societal structures? This tension between agency (individual action) and structure (social forces) is central to discussions of power, inequality, and social change. Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony (Gramsci, 2014, P.68) suggests that societal change is also a result of transforming dominant ideologies through collective action, critical thought, and the creation of alternative narratives. Agency in Habermas's framework is constrained when the system such as the bureaucratic state, capitalist economy etc. dominates the lifeworld, reducing people's ability to engage in meaningful, democratic communication. He argues that agency is fully realized when individuals engage in communicative action and dialogue aimed at mutual understanding, free from coercion, within the public sphere. Again Habermas argues that agency is best expressed when individuals and groups come together to reclaim the public sphere, engaging in free, equal communication to create a more just and participatory society. The key challenge is how individuals can exercise agency when the system imposes constraints on the lifeworld. Emancipatory agency refers to actions that critique and transform societal structures that restrict human freedom and well-being. Emancipation requires recognizing how structures of power such as capitalism, patriarchy, and racism—limit individual and collective agency. So it can be analysed by saying that the abolitionist movement which ended slavery, the women's suffrage movement, and the anti-apartheid movement all represent historical examples of how emancipatory agency has challenged deeply entrenched societal structures.

## **Habermas' Position on Agency**

For Habermas, agency is not just about individuals making choices within a pre-existing framework of social structures. Instead, agency is realized through communicative action—a process where individuals come together, engage in dialogue, and seek mutual understanding to resolve conflicts or make collective decisions. Communicative action refers to the idea that humans can only fully realize their agency through language and communication, not in isolation or through instrumental (goal-oriented) action alone. In communicative action, individuals engage in discussions aimed at reaching a consensus that is free from domination, where all participants have equal opportunities to contribute. This type of agency is interpersonal and dialogical, implying that true freedom (and agency) involves participation in a democratic discourse that allows for genuine consensus-building.

Habermas's concept of the public sphere plays a crucial role in understanding how agency functions within society. The public sphere is a domain where individuals come together as equals to discuss and debate issues of common concern, separate from the state or the market. The idea of the public sphere is closely tied to democratic participation and rational-critical debate as forms of collective agency. Habermas argues that individuals can only fully realize their agency when they participate in the public sphere, where they can engage in free and rational discourse. It is within this space that individuals collectively shape the direction of society through their actions and dialogue. For example, the rise of social media platforms has created a new "public sphere" where people can engage in democratic deliberation on a global scale.

### **1. Communicative Action and the Lifeworld**

Habermas' notion of *communicative action* shifts the focus from the individual's capacity for rational autonomy, typically associated with liberal, rights-based models of agency, to the *intersubjective* processes of communication. In his view, human beings are inherently social and rational, but their rationality is expressed through dialogue and shared understanding in everyday life.

- **Autonomy in the Traditional Sense:** In classical liberal theory (especially in Kantian terms), autonomy is largely about individual self-governance, the ability to reason and act independently according to one's own moral principles.
- **Habermas' Shift to Collective Rationality:** Habermas argues that real autonomy is not just about individual self-determination but also about the *collective* ability to engage in rational discourse and come to shared agreements. His model places emphasis on *communication* over isolated, individual decision-making.

Dr. Himanshu Sekhar Samal

The lifeworld is key in this shift. It's a concept Habermas uses to describe the shared, taken-for-granted background of meaning that we all rely on in communication. It's not merely a set of individual interests but a collective web of understandings, norms, and practices.

## 2. Shift from Legal Autonomy to Democratic Discursive Agency

In the traditional liberal model, rights and autonomy are often seen as individual entitlements that must be protected and exercised. For Habermas, autonomy is not just about protecting individual rights but about the capacity to participate in a collective, deliberative process.

- **Democracy as Discourse:** Habermas' concept of deliberative democracy places a premium on *public discourse* as the basis for legitimate political authority. The legitimacy of laws, policies, and political decisions, according to Habermas, depends on whether they can withstand the scrutiny of rational public debate in an inclusive and equal manner. Here, the agency of individuals is not exercised in isolation but through active participation in a collective communicative process.
- **The Public Sphere:** In his early work, Habermas famously analyses the *public sphere* as a space where individuals come together to discuss and form public opinion. This space transcends individual autonomy and is about collective rationality, where individuals become part of a broader communicative framework that is essential for democratic legitimacy.

## 4. Critical Theory and the Role of Power

Habermas was also concerned with the role of power in communication. He draws attention to how modern societies are often shaped by unequal power relations that limit true communicative freedom. Thus, his idea of discursive empowerment is not simply about individuals voicing their views in a neutral space; it's about creating an egalitarian discursive environment where power disparities (such as those based on class, gender, or race) are addressed.

- **Empowerment through Discourse:** Habermas believes that the most effective way to challenge unjust power structures is through collective discourse, where power is not exercised by coercion or manipulation but through reasoned argumentation. Here, empowerment is collective because it arises from dialogue that fosters mutual understanding and collective action aimed at social change.

Habermas shifts agency from individual autonomy to collective discursive empowerment in several ways:

- **Rationality and Autonomy:** His theory moves away from individual, abstract autonomy to a model where rationality and agency are developed through collective communication and shared understanding.
- **Discourse Ethics:** The “ideal speech situation” emphasizes the importance of inclusive, democratic discourse, where agency is shaped through collective deliberation.
- **Democratic Legitimacy:** Habermas sees democratic agency as arising from the participatory process of discourse, not merely from individuals asserting rights in isolation.
- **Empowerment in Equality:** By focusing on communicative equality and the challenge of unequal power structures, Habermas provides a vision of empowerment that is inherently collective and oriented toward social transformation.

Habermas’ analysis of knowledge is primarily articulated through his theory of communicative action. It is an attempt to establish a connection between methodological rules and knowledge-constitutive interests. The notion of Knowledge-constitutive interests as a link between scientific methodology and social action. Knowledge-constitutive interests or cognitive interests are transcendental in the sense that they are necessary for particular types of knowledge. They are fundamental orientations to knowledge and action rooted in the underlying conditions of the evolution of the human species. For Habermas’ there are three distinctive types of knowledge such are empirical-analytic, historical-hermeneutic, and critical-dialectical. Empirical-analytical knowledge is that which is embodied in both the natural sciences, and economics, sociology, and political science. Empirical-analytic sciences are aimed at the discovery of nomological knowledge about natural and social relations. Their particular status as knowledge is constituted by their interest in technical control, in increasing the possible extent of human domination over natural and social reality. These sciences provide us with the information that is required for rational, feedback-controlled instrumental activity.

Now it can be asked two questions that what does Habermas mean by ‘technical interest’? And in what sense is this interest ‘constitutive’ of knowledge? Concerning the answer to the first question, Habermas does not mean that scientists typically engage in their enquiries intending to discover laws that can be used for instrumental control. Rather, it is related to an essential characteristic of the manner in which the human species historically transforms itself to labour, productive activity upon nature, by which the human species reproduces itself biologically and culturally. This productive activity both requires and generates a specific ‘interest’ in technical

*Dr. Himanshu Sekhar Samal*

control. Thus Habermas maintains that his concept of interest is neither purely empirical nor purely transcendental. And concerning the answer to the second question, about 'constitution'. Habermas argues that technical interest constitutes knowledge at two related levels. First, it provides a criterion for what is to count as 'real', that is, for what counts as an 'object', about which the propositions of empirical-analytic science give us knowledge. In relation to the technical interest, what is real, is what can be detected, measured and manipulated in the situation of controlled experiments, in which information is received through our perceptual mechanism. Second, the technical interest determines the general character of the standards employed in assessing the truth and falsity of statements made about these objects

However, Habermas makes two major points about empirical-analytic knowledge: he criticizes the positivistic interpretation of it, and he argues that it is too restrictive for social phenomena. Habermas argues that the dominant approach to the philosophy of science has treated a distorted view of analytical-empirical knowledge as the paradigm for all knowledge. And he terms this approach 'positivism' or 'scientism'. Habermas is critical of the 'positivistic self-understanding' of analytical-empirical knowledge, which fails to recognize its underlying technical interest. Moreover, he claims that Popper himself has been consistently critical of elements of positivism, although he has never taken these criticisms to the logical conclusion.

Therefore, Habermas's criticism of the empirical-analytic approach in social science is that it is unduly restrictive. Specifically he criticizes its empiricism in favour of a realist or essentialist position, according to which it is necessary that theory grasps the real structure of the social totality. (H. Albert, 'The Myth of Total Reason' in Adorno, et al., op. cit., p. 169 n. Keat and Urry see it as an argument for realism, although they criticize him, as does.... *Social Theory as Science*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975.) The historical-hermeneutic knowledge of the cultural sciences is constituted by the practical interest. It works through a cycle of interpretation (the hermeneutic circle) in which theorizing always depends upon a prior understanding of the object of knowledge. It aims to relate ordinary utterances and social products to the social life-world in which they are constituted.

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is the interpretive understanding of linguistic communication in everyday discourse. Hence historical- historical-historical-historical-historical-hermeneutic knowledge yields ‘interpretation’ and is structured into the process of ‘understanding’. Interpretations are practically relevant knowledge, in the sense that they aid ‘mutual understanding in the conduct of life’ (Russell Keat and John Urry, P. 223.)

The form of knowledge that Habermas distinguishes from the other two is by recognizing their limitations and the need to reconcile them in a higher synthesis. It is that constituted by the emancipatory interest, that is, an interest in human autonomy and responsibility. This is a form of knowledge that involves self-reflection (Keat and John Urry. P. 225) and is itself involved in critical theory. To understand what Habermas means by these claims is to criticize and oppose positivism. His central criticism of positivist philosophy is that it is unable to account for the epistemological status of its own claims. Consider the principle proposed by many logical positivists in the twentieth century, that all statements are either empirical (synthetic), a priori (analytic), or meaningless. Here the objection is that this principle conforms to neither of the two ‘meaningful’ types of statement allowed by it. Again it has the paradoxical character of being meaningless if true. Habermas would regard it as a philosophical claim, for which various grounds could be developed: but such grounds could not justify it in either of the ways that logical positivists allow as legitimate types of knowledge.

Habermas’s critical theory, agency refers to the capacity of individuals or groups to act independently, to reflect upon their situation, and to make informed choices that can shape their world. The concept is central to his work, particularly in his theories of communicative action, democracy, and the role of the individual in the public sphere. Agency, for Habermas, is closely linked to the idea of rational autonomy and the ability of people to engage in dialogue and collective decision-making processes. Agency in Habermas’s theory is embedded in the notion of communicative action. Unlike instrumental action, which is driven by strategic goals or a means-ends logic, communicative action involves mutual understanding and the alignment of action through dialogue. Here, individuals are seen as agents who can engage in rational discourse, where they exchange arguments, critique norms, and come to a shared understanding or consensus. In this context, agency is expressed in the ability to participate in communication that is free from domination, allowing individuals to construct meanings together. Agency in Habermas’s framework is also central to his idea of deliberative democracy.

Habermas’s concept of agency is linked to rational autonomy, which means being able to act according to principles one has autonomously chosen, based on

*Dr. Himanshu Sekhar Samal*

rational deliberation rather than being influenced by external pressures or unconscious biases. Critical self-reflection is the means through which individuals can develop this autonomy. Habermas makes a distinction between the lifeworld and the system in his theory. The lifeworld is the realm of shared cultural meanings, everyday social interactions, and communicative action. Critical self-reflection is central to agency within the lifeworld because it allows individuals to reflect on the social structures, norms, and values that shape their interactions and identities. In his vision of deliberative democracy, Habermas places a strong emphasis on the need for individuals to critically reflect on their own positions and the reasons behind their beliefs in order to participate meaningfully in public discourse. Democratic deliberation requires citizens to articulate their positions, consider the arguments of others, and revise their own views based on reasoned discussion. Critical self-reflection in this context is essential because it encourages citizens to question their own biases, assumptions, and interests. It helps prevent individuals from simply promoting their own narrow perspectives or acting out of self-interest. Through reflection, individuals can engage with others in a way that promotes mutual understanding, allowing for more inclusive and democratic decision-making processes.

Habermas criticized positivism primarily because he believed it limited the scope of human understanding and neglected important aspects of social life, particularly in relation to human agency, meaning, and communication. His critique centres on several key points:

**Reductionism:** Habermas argued that positivism reduces social phenomena to mere observable data, ignoring the deeper meanings, intentions, and social contexts that shape human behaviour. According to him, positivism fails to account for how individuals interpret the world and construct meanings through communication. Habermas believed that this reductionism was insufficient for explaining social life and its underlying structures.

**Instrumental Rationality:** Positivism emphasizes a form of 'instrumental' or 'technical' rationality, which is primarily concerned with achieving goals efficiently through objective, scientific methods. Habermas believed that this overlooks other forms of rationality, particularly 'communicative rationality', which involves the pursuit of mutual understanding and consensus in human interaction. He saw positivism as overly focused on controlling nature and neglecting human relationships and social integration

**Neglect of Human Subjectivity:** Positivism, in Habermas's view, fails to account for the role of human consciousness, communication, and social interaction in shaping knowledge. Human beings are not just passive objects of observation;

they actively interpret and give meaning to their experiences through communication. Habermas emphasized the importance of subjective experience and communicative action, which he felt positivism had overlooked by focusing solely on objective data. Moreover, Habermas believed that positivism's focus on objectivity and the external world disregarded the subjective experiences of individuals, which are central to understanding human society. His concept of 'lifeworld' (the shared background of beliefs, practices and norms) is essential to understanding human action, which positivism fails to capture adequately.

**Inability to address Normativity:** Positivism, according to Habermas, avoids questions about values, ethics and norms, focusing only on what can be empirically observed and measured. Habermas believed that social theory should not just describe reality but also address normative issues, such as what is just or ethical, and be concerned with social change.

**Lack of Emphasis on Communication:** Habermas emphasized that social reality is created through communication and interaction. He proposed the concept of 'communicative rationality', which stresses the role of language and dialogue in shaping human understanding and social order. Positivism, however, tends to treat knowledge as objective and external to the communicative processes that are central to human society. **Failure to Address Social Change:** Positivism's focus on scientific neutrality and objectivity, Habermas argued, made it incapable of critiquing or transforming social structures. In contrast, for Habermas, philosophical knowledge involves self-reflection, by which we reflect upon particular features of human existence and especially upon the nature and status of human knowledge itself. Thus Habermas regards the examination of the relation between technical and practical interest, and their respective forms of knowledge, as itself a case of self-reflection, which positivism, though its implicit abolition of philosophical knowledge, cannot comprehend.

## **Conclusion**

I would like to conclude by mentioning that agency in societal structure is not just about individual freedom or action in isolation; it is always entangled with and influenced by the broader systems of power, culture, economy, and politics. Social structures shape the possibilities for action, but individuals and groups exercise agency in response to, and often in opposition to, these structures. The interplay between agency and structure is dynamically shaped by historical, cultural, political, and economic forces and it is through both individual action and collective struggle that social change is made possible. The notion of agency in societal structures requires recognizing that individual freedom and social constraints are not fixed.

Dr. Himanshu Sekhar Samal

Agency is an ongoing, dynamic process, shaped by the complex interaction of individual actions, cultural norms, institutional forces, and social movements. It's about understanding how people navigate, negotiate, and challenge the social forces that surround them, while also acknowledging the significant constraints that often shape their options and decisions.

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