

## Situating Jurgen Habermas' Communicative Rationality and Deliberative Democracy in the Context of Democracy in Nigeria

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### Abstract

This paper discusses the relevance of Jurgen Habermas' ideas on communicative rationality and deliberative democracy in the context of democracy in Nigeria. The paper recognizes that despite different viable efforts forwarded in terms of good policies, genuine transformative change is still a mirage. The paper critically assesses the situation and points to a gap in communication created as such by ethnic diversity. For as it appears, we are a bundled people unable to understand ourselves. As a direct effect, this has created varied agitations in the different amalgamated regions: the militant's agitation for resource control in the Niger Delta; the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) agitation in the South East for independence and secession; the Afenifere in the South West for self-determination; and the Northern menace of Boko Haram, Killer herdsmen and farmer-header clashes. The paper argues that each of these agitations reflects a pattern of communication that embody at its core a genuine concern of the people. Using the expository, analytic and evaluative methods, the paper explores how the concepts of 'communicative rationality' and 'deliberative democracy' as explained by Jurgen Habermas can be applied to address the aforementioned challenges that impedes democracy in Nigeria and promote more inclusive and participatory decision-making processes.

**Keywords:** Nigeria, Jurgen Habermas, Communicative Rationality, Deliberative Democracy, Diversity

### INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to propose Jurgen Habermas' communicative rationality and deliberative democracy as a viable theoretical framework in the context of democracy in Nigeria. It is an analysis and evaluation of the challenges in communication in Nigeria as a result of ethnic diversity. Communicative rationality as defined by Habermas, is the ability of individuals to engage in reasoning and argumentation based on shared values and norms [1]. This requires participants to transcend their individual interests and engage in dialogue that is free of coercion and manipulation [1]. Habermas believes that this form of rationality can be achieved through dialogue and communication – through engaging in dialogue, individuals can build common understanding and shared goals, leading to more effective and inclusive decision-making processes. Deliberative democracy, on the other hand, emphasizes the importance of inclusive and participatory decision-making [2]. This requires a democratic process that allows for the free and equal participation of individuals [3], irrespective of their culture,

socioeconomic or political status. What it supposes is that in a deliberative democracy, different perspectives and opinions are heard and taken into account, leading to a more inclusive and fair decision-making processes.

Nigeria as a country is faced with a lot of challenges: the militants agitation for resource control in the Niger Delta – the Southern part of Nigeria; the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) agitation in the South East for independence and secession; the Afenifere in the South West for self-determination; and the Northern menace of Boko Haram, Killer herdsmen, and farmer-header clashes. Each in its own right and influence has colored and affected our supposed perception – communication (understanding) of each other and of course the national interest of 'one Nigeria'. Our current state of underdevelopment and inability to get anything working as we see it elsewhere is a direct lack of effective and responsible enquiry and understanding of the main reasons as contained in the varied agitations and struggles. That these have somehow created other

smaller issues such as kidnapping and hostage-taking, cultism, and ritual killing, armed robbery and the upsurge of yahoo-yahoo boys by way of individual interpretation and response to happenings in the system need no emphasis. It is the supposition of this paper that it is all connected to the problem of gap in communication and non-inclusivity as it is in the system. We are all to blame for this hermeneutic deficit that creates the gap that obstruct [and prevent] necessary dialogue and the application of appropriate solutions [4].

This paper is divided into three (3) sections: the nature of political sphere in Habermas: a reflection on Nigeria's political hermeneutics; Habermas' thought on democracy, its characterization, and the possibility of a successful democratic system in Nigeria. This paper adopts an expository, analytic, and evaluative method and forwards arguments such as that the core concerns of the amalgamated regions can be addressed. And that the recognition – understanding, and application of Habermas' concepts such as cognitive interest, deliberative democracy, capitalism, communicative action, communicative power, and discourse are necessary ideas for a rational and democratic process of decision-making essential to ensuring inclusivity of governance and political stability in Nigeria.

## The Nature of Political Sphere in Habermas: A Reflection on Nigeria's Political Hermeneutics

Jurgen Habermas, having viewed the social sphere, has continued to maintain that it is chiefly communication that can bring about a stable political and economic atmosphere. For him therefore, the community which is constitutive of individuals in society, either stands as a peaceful abode for the people or a place of chaos based on how the community accepts the idea of communication. For the past five decades, the public sphere has been at the top of Jurgen Habermas' theoretical agenda. He has explore the historical meaning of the concept, reconstructed its political foundations in communication, and repeatedly diagnosed its ongoing crises. In the contemporary climate, a systematic look at Habermas' lifelong project of rescuing the modern public sphere seems an urgent task [5]

Habermas' aim is to bring the project of rescuing the public sphere before us as a task that requires mobilization of communicative currents between social practices and institutional structures that are already in place in liberal democracies. As such, a commitment to rescue the public sphere goes into bigger battle against systemic imperative within the capitalist democracies that contrive to shatter the conditions necessary to sustain communicative flows forward and back between its interdependent layers [5]. If we are to believe what many sociologists are telling us, the public sphere is in a near-terminal state. Our ability to build solidarities with strangers and to agree on the general significances of needs and problems seems to be collapsing. The cultural potentials appears endangering from a variety of quarters: from the neo-liberal attempt to universalize the norm of the market and interpret democracy as another form of consumerism of the most recent effort of the security state to constrain civil liberties in the face of terrorism [6]. What this implies is that democracy, if not properly conceptualized, is merely a capitalist's pursuit of government of

the upper class and consumerism, monopoly of the market system, and control of economy by the few. If democracy must be taken to the grass root and made available to every citizenry, it must be built upon communication among opposing groups with opposing interest to reach consensus that is objective. If Habermas is to write today (2023), he would have taken advantage of the social media of communication. According to Habermas structural transformation of the public sphere is a large part of a social history of the development of democracy in Europe [6]. In his work, he has returned explicitly to the problems of democratic organization of government given the complexity and pluralism of late capitalist societies. Habermas is most concerned to respond to the problem of life in complex, multicultural societies [6]. The one who is a citizen of a country (*demos*) is also a member of the Anglican Church, Ijaw (*Ethnos*) or any other tribe. The two must be separated. Though he accepts that *Ethnos* is the basis of *lifeworld* but the *ethnos* is not fix to the political sphere. For Habermas, and this is the major point in this paper, for any state (say Nigeria for instance) to have successful democracy, she must put aside ethnicity and upholds the *Demos* character. This is why America remains great. There are over 350 ethnic and racial communities in America, but there is only one America and each one upholds the dignity and pride of the nation. This is the communicating *Demos* at work. Nigeria's case is a radical opposite. An average Nigerian still operates at the level of *ethnos* – my tribe, only my people, and my culture. And this is why our system is merely that of representative democracy rather than communicative democracy.

## Habermas' Thought on Democracy, Its Characterization, and the Possibility of a Successful Democratic System in Nigeria

So many philosophers and sociologists, as well as, political scientists have written about democracy in the most verbose manner but Jurgen Habermas put a rather new dimension to this discourse. It had been taken for granted that democracy is people's rule and that it involves all. Yet the practices of democracy on different spheres does not prove that it is for all citizenry in some quarters. It still appears mixed up with federalism, aristocracy, and even monarchism in some states. What Habermas, therefore, focuses on is, what should be happening within democratic government? And that for him, is communication, rationality, public freedom, control of the state by rule of law, and public opinion. There should be a consensual government and freedom from capitalist greedy excesses. In that case, Habermas distinguishes himself by prescribing a participatory democracy which he called communicative democracy. Truly, where there is communication and sincerity of purpose, politicians will be seen more as people of integrity than liars.

Jurgen Habermas achieves this aim by characterizing democracy to consist of critical concepts – the general meaning of which will help us know who Habermas is and what his position is. For at the core of philosophization, a philosopher's thought is always circular and a sort of system building. The so revered concepts which meaning if properly interpreted and practiced will impact Nigeria's democratic system in many great ways are as follows:

## Cognitive interest

These are pre-conditions (or dispositions) natural in human that make knowledge possible. Cognitive (or knowledge-constitutive) interest are the conditions for survival of the human species that stimulate human beings to generate knowledge about the physical world, and about the social world, and about the exercise of political power. This is the basis for socio-political consciousness for Habermas and it is an attribute of all cognitive persons. By this I mean that everyone must get involved in politics and in societal activities for this is what is happening around me - around us! To reiterate it as Habermas phrased it, in order to flourish, it is in the interest of human beings to be able to control and reshape their physical environment, to communicate with each other, and thereby maintain society, to live free of political oppression [7]. In the pursuit of each of these interests, humans will inquire into, and thus generate knowledge about the natural world, society, and politics. Little wonder an axiom says that "knowledge is power". Every citizen must care to know and get involved in the public or political sphere by contributing tax, voting, promoting patriotism, and staying loyal to the state. And beyond that, try to analyze the fair distributive method of resources and also ensure that this is achieved. A judge who pays heavy tax for instance will not be bought over by a politician who committed financial scam, for the burden of his tax makes him get involved in the affair of government to ensure that his hard-earned money is used properly. This is the mentality that makes Britain (a state with little or no natural resources) to remain one of the leading economics of the world. The supposition is that there is no one usage for the term 'Owokeme' [meaning 'our man' in Ijaw linguistic communication] or as it is said "one good term deserves another" and many other such witty sayings; for everyone is involved in running the state. To Habermas therefore, this knowledge will in turn be linked to certain form of action: the use of technology to control nature; improve communication and understanding; and emancipation of the oppressed [7].

## Deliberative Democracy

Understood literally, democracy means a society rule by the people. In practice, what is known as direct democracy, where the citizens have a direct say in political decision, is rare. Something close to this was only found in Greek city state where the citizens had the right to be involve in decision-making and vote policy. But this system excluded women and slaves. At best, we have a representative democracy, which elected senators or members of the parliament make decisions on their behalf. This is the problem Habermas throughout his career, has been concerned within the workings of democratic government, and the accountability and responsiveness of government to its people [6]. This concern is expressed in some of his earliest works, such as his study of the political attitudes of students in the late 1950s in West Germany. In his recent work, he has returned explicitly to the problems of the democratic organization of government given the complexity and pluralism of late capitalist societies. Indeed, Habermas suggests that a sense of common citizenship (and not common ethnicity) may be formed through constant debating over the Constitution. This was what elites in Nigeria a few years ago were clamored for

in the democratic government headed by Olusegun Obasanjo. They agitated for CONFAB – a national conference for the public, not the regular hi/nay sledgehammer funded meeting of the members of the House of assemblies – the members of which may not have the people of their constituencies in mind. In effect, the constitution (or system of rule of law) guarantees that all citizens have equal rights to challenge any legal reform, and to receive a seasoned reply to their objections, rather than the right to rule on the policies offered to them by political parties. In countries like the United State of America where democracy is advanced, parties play equal roles though but citizens determine the polity'. The basic concepts in the kind of democracy Habermas suggest therefore are: *demos* rather than *ethnos*, debate (or commutation) rather than the constitution. Hence, we can say his is a constitutive democracy as compared to what we have in Nigeria.

## Capitalism

The later Habermas had problem with capitalism. (His former view that promote bourgeois capitalism and posit a male-dominated society as characteristic of the public sphere was critiqued by Seyla Benhabib, Dena Goodman, Landes, and Freser, mostly feminists). For him, capitalism leads to the colonization of the *lifeworld* or the social sphere by few individuals using psychology that produces consumerism and technology to make citizen continue to consume in large scale what only the capitalists produce [8]. On this, Microsoft and Bill Gate is a good example. And at a point, Gate was sued by the American Government for been greedy and earning from almost every American who was using a computer, with his Microsoft Word 2000. Monopoly was the secret of this sort of possibility. We have his likes in Nigeria. They are business tycoons but also government agents and or partners who economically control national wealth since they possess economic power. Habermas have a problem with this sort of setup that breeds sheer inequality and widens the gap between the rich and the poor. Habermas explored the social history of capitalism in one of his first books, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989). In the mid-1960s his primary concern was with the role that science and technology play in contemporary capitalism, not merely in driving its economic expansion, but also in so far as models of natural scientific and technological thinking shape social planning, and begin to invade the everyday social activities and exchange of ordinary people. This he calls scientism. It makes people consumerists and individualistic and slims up communication 'as such' so to say. Habermas moves away from the broadly neo-Marxist ground of his early work, in order to use Niklaus Luhmann's system theory as a key resource in making sense of, and criticizing capitalism [8]. Thus, while he abandoned something of the simple Marxist model of capitalism, Habermas continued to see capitalism as a social formation that is ridden by crisis, and as being unstable in the long term. The very improvements that it offers to the people's lives, in terms of better education, greater political emancipation, and long-term material security may provide grounds for a widespread questioning of values of capitalism and the continuing political inequalities that it sustains.

## Communicative action

This is meaningful interaction between persons. This is a major topic of Habermas' mature work: *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1987). For Habermas, communication entails the establishing or maintenance of a social relationship between two or more individuals [2]. As such, for as long as actions are meaningful, it will involve some sort of appeal to ordinary language. By this Habermas is just talking about being straightforward in what one communicates and avoiding mere propaganda. A leader, for instance, must be true to his words or manifesto and citizens should communicate their interest in making government work especially those in public service. If a lecturer who is paid by the government to teach does not come to the classroom but portrays to the government that he is active in lecturing, he/she communicates falsehood. This perhaps is the reason why growth Nigeria's democracy is at snail pace. Governors use the media to showcase works that they did not carry out. Insecurity is in every sphere. Communicative action is distinguished from strategic action in that the latter does not presuppose the need to establish any shared understanding [2]. In strategic action, one person can simply seek to manipulate another, without the second person necessarily understanding what is going on, or consenting to it.

## Communicative power

This, Habermas defines as the influence that citizens may exert upon a state, through the rational discussion of their interest, values, and identities in the public sphere [10]. The term is introduced by Habermas in his later work on law. It explores relationship between peoples or public opinion, as those subject to law, and official process through which these laws are enacted. Habermas' argument is that public institutions such as community and educational groups, churches and voluntary organizations, and the mass media can ideally act as channels [11] through which public opinion is transformed into communicative power that in turn is transformed by the state into administrative power so that it can be realized as enforceable laws that will constrain and direct the actions of citizens [11]. Applying this to Nigeria's case, many of the administrative policies used should have been debated in the mainstream Nigerian university by professors and other scholars. What it translate to is that Nigeria under-uses her professors and that is the reason why doing very serious work to attain a professorship may no longer be fashionable or be a requirement in a few years coming. Realistically, this should have been an avenue to stabilize government through public opinion. Little wonder that universities have become economic ventures that almost every church wants to erect a private university, not for intellectual excellence per say.

## Discourse

This is a process of scrutinizing positions within communication where participants are subjected to discussion and criticism, in order to be accepted or rejected. This concept is important to Habermas in his building up of the theory of communicative and universal pragmatics.

## Conclusion

All of the various concepts by Habermas to describe an ideal democracy is never a utopic one. When applied properly and with the right attitude, the result is robust. Habermas' idea of democracy can drive in any state for it is more of an attitude philosophy than a system or structural philosophy. Viewed from the Nigerian lens, proper attitude by every citizen will yield a booming political and economic result before the year 2030. The bane of Nigeria's problems is that her citizenry is described or identified along the line of ethnicity, which is *Ethnos* rather than having a Democratic nationalist attitude which is *Demos*. Hence, there had been, and will continue to be, ethnic battles of the closet of ethnic groups. The Yenizue-Gene Epie community and Ekowe community/Southern Ijaw conflict in Bayelsa state, Ishekiri - Urobo clashes in Delta state, Ibibio- Anan crisis of Cross River state, Ezilo- Izah massacre, Egun - Awori cold war in Ogun state, Jos - Fulani genocide of Plateau state, and the Boko Haram menace in Borno and the entire northern Hemisphere; and at the continental level the 1994 Hutu-Tutsi genocide, Ivory Coast guerilla war and even what is happening in Sudan now are evidence that even in post 21<sup>st</sup> centuries Nigerians (Africans) are still chronically colored in ethnicity which defiles all civility. Consequently, we cannot affirm that Nigeria is one people. To uphold or accentuate the Nigerian Identity by every citizen as *Demos* will bring rapid growth to the Nigerian Democracy.

Nigeria is not the only multi-ethnic nation in the world. Many of her kind had taken their destinies into their hands by resorting resolutely to an attitude of Habermas' Communicative Democracy which had yielded good results. The focus of Nigeria should be radical advancement in science and technology rather than delaying growth with federal character, quota (or zoning) system, or amnesty policy. These projects glorify ethnicity to the detriment of political and economic growth. The Oputa panel would have been a breakthrough for Nigeria. It is a sort of what Habermas called constitutive Democracy and Communicative action and Communicative power which empower the citizens to be active participants in government. The problem we still have is that we are grossly docile people; our docility was inflicted by the experience of the Biafar- Nigeria war and the long military regime. Given that, upholding the rule of law and insisting on the integrity and credibility of government personnel will further stabilize democracy in Africa and Nigeria in particular.

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