

Limiting Economical Instrumental Action: Basic Income in Habermasian Perspective

Emanuele Murra

15th International BIEN Congress - Re-Democratizing Market

Montréal, 27-29 June 2014

1. Introduction: Why this paper

In searching of good reasons to introduce Basic Income, political scientists and philosophers analysed this policy from the point of view of many philosophical and political theories. But in this effort, few attention was dedicated to the theory of society elaborated by Jürgen Habermas.

Proponents of basic income claims a sort of “multi-effect” for this policy, that could solve problems in many different fields, but most of the time is not clear how this would be possible. It is my belief that Habermas’ theory of modern complex society can offer a good heuristic explanation for this “basic income multi-effect”.

In the paper I will argue that intrusiveness of administrative and economical imperatives in the organisation of every day life (what Habermas calls colonisation) is the cause at the very root of the problems contemporary societies are struggling with and that unconditional basic income can stop this colonisation, and then relieve contemporary society from its pathologies.

2. A new society is born

The main question of Habermas’ social theory is *how members of a society can coordinate their action without violence, guarantee reciprocal understanding and then reproduce society itself during the time.*

On the basis of Weber studies, Habermas says that in pre-modern societies this was secured through the mythical vision of the world and the authority of the sacred. Social, political, economical institution and roles were understood as defined and justified by a tradition and this was necessary and sufficient to legitimate them.

During modern age, traditional certainties were eroded by the inner logic of scientific discovery, by the end of European religious unity, the emerging of different and competitive world visions, by the search of a non religious ground for laws and social norms. This is what Weber, with alluring expression, calls disenchantment of the world and Habermas, less charmingly define as the rationalisation process of lifeworld.

From this moment, when some aspect of society is putted in doubt, the lost consensus cannot be regain with a reference to the dominion of the sacred. Only dialogue oriented towards a rational agreement based on reasons (the habermasian *validity claims* of truth, rightness and thoughtfulness) can achieve it. This is what Habermas call *Communicative Action*.

Anyway, this linguistification of the sacred is not the only change produced in the rationalisation process. In parallel we can notice a delinguistification among forms of material reproduction thanks the definition of systems in which the moral questions for the action are neutralised and what count is the efficient achievement of the purpose. In modern society, and not before, *Bureaucracy* and *Market* start to be organised as independent sub-areas of society.

3. Lifeworld and systems

Going a bit deeper in the analysis, in traditional society, with a mythical vision of the world, the authority of the sacred was sufficient and necessary to legitimate social, political and economical institutions. And these institutions were overlapping: political and economical roles were usually established following lines of descent; production were made mainly for consumption and only a part, the surplus, was intended for the exchange; further more, the exchange was heavily regulated by religious and social norms.

With the disenchantment of the world this unity and the roles overlapping went lost for ever. The disempowering of tradition and the corresponding rationalisation process led to a splitting of social reproduction in two dimensions: symbolic and material. Meanwhile symbolic reproduction takes place in the lifeworld through the medium of language, material reproduction, in modern society, is delegated to the systems of bureaucracy and market. The first, through the medium of *power*, ensures social order and loyalty of citizens; the second, through the medium of *money*, ensures the efficiency of production and distribution of goods and services.

Habermas defines lifeworld as a “always already”. As a place in which communicative action is realised and reciprocal understanding is possible. It is a repository of shared meanings that contain at least three fields: the elements of the culture, the social institutions and all that social elements needed for the correct development of personality. From this shared and unproblematic background, a background we are not normally aware, single segments could be put in doubt and modified through communicative actions. In problematic situations social actors attempt to gain again understanding through communication, searching a new consensus based on the agreement on the validity claims that social actors sustain during a rational and open dialogue. Thanks to this process of doubt and new agreement, lifeworld is rationalised and is modified. Any segment of the background can be thematised and criticised, but not all of it at once. During the critic of the singular element we need to stand somewhere, we need a general - even if provisory - consensus on other elements without which communicative action and reciprocal understanding would be impossible.

The reducing of the authority of the sacred, and the increasing of social complexity, multiplied occasions to put in doubt single element of our lifeworld. The burden of communication increase too, and with it the risk of dissent, disagreement and misunderstanding. The complexity of modern society is in the meantime the reason and the consequence of the delegation of the functions of material reproduction to self-regulating systems that act strategically and purpose-steered.

This is a point of paramount importance: the process that leads to the emerging of market and bureaucracy as distinct from the everyday social life is evolutive. This differentiation was an adaptive answer to the changes happened in the lifeworld at the beginning of modern age. A complex society need the lightening of the communication burden that self-regulating systems can assure. Without systemic differentiation no hope that a complex society can survive: after the disenchantment of the world there is no way back.

4. Prometheus enchained

Then, if the differentiation is a progressive movement, what we have to worry about? The problem is that the communicatively structured lifeworld becomes more and more crushed by strategically organised systems with their purpose-steering action: “Communicatively structured domains of life are being subordinated to the imperative of autonomous, formally organised systems of action” (TCA, I, *Introduction*). The metaphor Habermas uses is colonisation. Systems colonised domains in which meaning is created by communicative action of social actors, and in this way they produce a loss of meaning (Weber) and social pathologies.

I list here three pathologies for each systems, one for each area in which life world is structured: culture, social integration, socialisation. About culture, market influences political choices about education and cultural investment, awarding institutions and knowledge fields that can be economically more productive; about social integration, labour market asks more and more for a breaking of social bound. If not every time true, from many people look abroad for work is not a free choice but a necessity: work abroad or starve at home. About socialisation, even when really efficient, market exposes some group to critical situations (as Sen studies show). The distribution of market benefits is far to be lead from some egalitarian principle, and this can produce exclusion and poverty.

With refer to bureaucracy, Habermas show how the loyalty of citizens in contemporary society is strictly connected with welfare institutions. But as organised today, the administrative power (1) realises a strong control on life choices, as the access to welfare benefits is most of the time limited to specific request about participation to labour

market or education system, (2) it transform the communicative relationship through the citizens and the State in a clientelistic one, replacing communicative action (expression of needs, looking together for a rational solution) to strategic action (citizens: how much I can gain from welfare state? State: how I can achieve loyalty with less expenditure?), (3) through conditioned welfare state bureaucracy impress on people a stigma difficult to delete.

Finally, the colonisation process is dangerous for systems too, as these pathologies produce a lack of trust in the positive effects of market and a lack of loyalty to political institutions. Lack that leads to economical crisis and delegitimation of democratic decision making.

5. A Trojan Horse

The dilemma to which find solution is, then, how to maintain independent systems (self-regulated and ethical neutralised areas) but stop their colonisation on lifeworld.

In *Theory of Communicative Action* Habermas claims for the building of a dam around the lifeworld in order to keep out the systems media (money and administrative power). Habermas claims for a strong *public sphere* where politicians and policy makers have to explain their ideas through communicative action, showing their reasons and claims for their validity, a public sphere that rests on an adult *civil society*, made by informal political, social and cultural debates, NGOs and volunteering associations. Communicative power in lifeworld can shift the position of the border between lifeworld and systems. Later, in *Between Fact and Norms*, he speaks about “sensors for the exchanges” between lifeworld and systems that can help communicatively generated will, a will fixed in validly produced laws and norms, into the systems themselves.

This strategy, that we can call *counter-siege model*, has at least two weaknesses. First is that actually Habermas lacks to explain how to reinforce civil society and force politicians and policy makers to commit themselves with validity claims and not only with arguments of efficacy and efficiency. Second, Habermas lacks to explain how new legal regulation, communicatively generated through the democratic production of laws, could force systems in taking into account the needs of lifeworld. Systems are by definition blind

to normative reasons and ethical considerations: they act strategically in order to efficiently achieve their aims and no law can modify this aspect of systems.

Then, is it possible an other strategy to stop systemic colonisation? I think it is, and that it passes trough the use of some non-linguistic instrument, so to say, a tool that is already “strategic” and purpose steered exactly like systems are. I call this the *Trojan horse model* because, as informatics trojan horses are programs that attack others programs making them to do what they want, the non-linguistic tools I’m claiming for will use the same systemic media but producing a self-restraining effect on systems. I think that unconditional public policies are actually this kind of tools, and among them I’m going now to speak about a specific unconditional policy: basic income.

6. Room for self decision

With the introduction of unconditional basic income, systems themselves will produce an area on which their strategic rationality will have no direct influence. Basic income will answer to two fundamental issues: the need to secure independence to the symbolic process of lifeworld (social integration) and the need of stability of system (systemic integration). Instead of an open war “lifeworld vs systems”, a war that lifeworld is loosing, what here is proposed is an allegiance: make of systems the protectors of at least some fundamental area of lifeworld. In this model, systems still work purpose steering, looking for efficiency (for efficient production and maximisation of loyalty) but in the meantime are promoters of lifeworld freedom.

We can now see the effects of basic income on the problems that systemic colonisation produced. About the pathologies due to market colonisation. First, distribution of part of the market gains equally and unconditionally reduce economical vulnerability and with it the social exclusion connected with poverty. Second, UBI make less compelling the need to move looking for jobs; people will have more freedom to choose if accept a less paid work in the place where his/her family and social network is or a better paid job that can involve the breaking of this network. Third, the necessity of the material reproduction limits the time that we can spend in political/social/cultural activities. The informed public sphere and active civil society Habermas thinks about are impossible

without giving people a real possibility to invest time in this kind of non-remunerative activities, a chance that basic income can offer. We can avoid that lifeworld become a field only for specialists only if we can give to the average citizen time to be informed and acquired same basic competence on the topics on which democratic institutions have to deliberate on.

Looking now at the pathologies produced by bureaucracy, unconditionality *per se* avoid both, the stigmatisation and the clientelistic attitude of citizens. Still, as money are a undetermined benefit, it is the citizen who can choose how to use them to implement the idea of good life he/she has and not the Bureaucratic power using its welfare state instrument to control and discipline what are in practical the choices of the poors, as rich citizens rarely needs welfare state facilities.

7. “Democratising” Market?

I want to finish my intervention with a look on the general title of the Congress. Behind the idea of re-democratising market there is the claim that we need to bring back economic exchanges into the direct dependency of lifeworld again.

What I said in this paper leads to a different conclusion. Even if there was a time in which economy was completely leaded by social decision, under the form of traditional/religious rules, social roles, lines of descendent, the emerging of the Market as an independent system for exchanges of goods and services has been necessary to the development of the modern complex society. Without the automatisation allowed by a self-regulating system this complexity would be impossible. If is true - as history can show - that never goods and wealth were produced and distributed with such efficiency as within the market economy model, bring back the economical exchanges in the sphere of lifeworld is not only impossible, but undesirable. What contemporary democracies needs is to stop lifeworld colonisation continuing to benefit of the fruits of the self-regulating Market. As to say: not democratise market but free from its imperatives some core zone of personal decisions.

In this paper I argued that the introduction of unconditional policies, and especially a universal basic income, we can introduce in Market and Bureaucracy something similar to a trojan horse that, maintaining the independence of systems, can refrain them to interfere with, or at least reduce their influence on, some important choice of social actors about culture, social interactions and social choices that shapes our personalities. In this way basic income can help to reproduce a more strong and transparent public sphere and civil society. As Van Parijs states, there is a maximum level of basic income that correspond to the higher basic income that does not interfere with the efficiency of the market. But from the null point of today to the maximum basic income possible does exist a large range to experiment the introduction of basic income, with the awareness that higher the level of basic income, larger will be the lifeworld zone secured by the imperatives of systems.