Habermas on social irrationality

Habermas e a irracionalidade social

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Abstract: This paper seeks to identify what constitutes social irrationality within the Habermasian framework. The discussion is structured in two parts: first, I delineate the definitions of rationality and irrationality in Habermas's work. I argue that while social rationality and irrationality are most prominent within the intersubjective world and the sphere of communicative rationality, they are also identifiable within the domains of epistemic and teleological rationality. Second, I examine the extent to which Habermas's concept of rationality offers answers to practical issues arising from social irrationality.

Keywords: Habermas; communicativ rationality; epistemic rationality; rationality; social irrationality; teleological rationality.

Resumo: Este artigo tem como objetivo identificar o que pode ser considerado como irracionalidade social na obra de Habermas. Este tema será abordado em dois momentos: primeiro, apresentarei as definições de racionalidade e irracionalidade na obra de Habermas. Argumentarei que, embora a racionalidade e a irracionalidade sejam mais evidentes no mundo intersubjetivo e no domínio da racionalidade comunicativa, elas também podem ser identificada no domínio da racionalidade epistêmica e teleológica. Em segundo lugar, analisarei até que ponto o conceito de racionalidade na obra de Habermas pode fornecer respostas para questões práticas relativas à irracionalidade social.

Palavras-chave: Habermas; racionalidade comunicativa; racionalidade epistêmica; racionalidade; irracionalidade social; racionalidade teleológica.

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In recent years, several global phenomena have reignited the debate surrounding social irrationality. The COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, offered numerous examples, from the rejection of scientific data—evidenced by anti-vaccine movements and the promotion of unproven medical treatments—to protests that escalated into the vandalism of public infrastructure as a means of opposing social distancing measures. This broader trend encompasses climate change denialism and political movements that undermine the foundations of constitutional democracies through misinformation and unjustified resentment, as exemplified by the 2021 January 6 U.S. Capitol attack and the 2023 January 8 Brasília attacks.

These events represent social phenomena that can be scrutinized through the lens of social irrationality—a concept whose interpretation shifts significantly depending on the specific theory of rationality employed. This paper seeks to identify what constitutes social irrationality within the Habermasian framework. The discussion is structured in two parts: first, I delineate the definitions of rationality and irrationality in Habermas's work. I argue that while social rationality and irrationality are most prominent within the intersubjective world and the sphere of communicative rationality, they are also identifiable within the domains of epistemic and teleological rationality. Second, I examine the extent to which Habermas's concept of rationality offers answers to practical issues arising from social irrationality.

I – Rationality and Social Irrationality

Through the method of rational reconstruction , Habermas aims to uncover elements of an inherent, yet under-explored, rationality within the reproduction of society as a whole (cf. HABERMAS, 2008, p. 24). Given that former religious and metaphysical worldviews have been superseded by modern science and pluralism—conditions that permit only a formal rather than substantive concept of rationality—his theory offers a procedural framework. As Habermas notes: "[t]here is no pure reason that might don linguistic clothing only in the second place. Reason is by its very nature incarnated in contexts of communicative action and in structures of the lifeworld." (cf. HABERMAS, 1990, p. 322) Thus, his analysis centers on the structures of justification[2].

Since the mid-1970s, Habermas has distinguished between two primary forms of rationality: *teleological* (instrumental and strategic) and *communicative*. The former refers to the use of resources, efficiency, and the relationship between means and ends, while the latter concerns the possibility of "identify[ing] and reconstruct[ing] universal conditions of possible understanding" (HABERMAS, 1976, p. 1; 1984, p. 8).

More recently, in *On the Pragmatics of Communication* (1998) and *Truth and Justification* (1999), the philosopher has further specified the roles, scopes, and interrelationships of these types of rationality. To avoid a purely subject-centered approach, Habermas notes in *On the Pragmatics of Communication* that he does not find "the proposal to reduce rationality to a disposition of rational persons promising." (HABERMAS, 1998, p. 308). Instead, he maintains that the predicate 'rational' applies "to refer to *beliefs*, *actions* and *linguistic utterances* because, in the propositional structure of knowledge, in the teleological structure of actions, and in the communicative structure of speech, we come upon *varios roots of rationality*." (HABERMAS, 1998, p.

[2] See also Dutra, 2005, p. 42.

308-309). In this sense, rationality has three distinct roots (*Wurzeln*)[3], namely, epistemic, teleological, and communicative. (cf. HABERMAS, 1998, p. 309; HABERMAS, 2004, p. 105).

Epistemic rationality is defined by the propositional structure of knowledge, consisting of judgments that are subject to being true or false—for instance, the contemporary claim that the Earth is flat is demonstrably false. Within this framework, "knowledge is intrinsically of a linguistic nature" and therefore lies within the scope of justification and criticism. Knowledge recognized as true should not, however, be considered an unconditional truth, as epistemic rationality only recognizes truth in the sense of its justified acceptability in a given context. In this regard, it is emphasized that "the explicit 'knowing what' is bound up implicitly with a 'knowing why' and insofar points toward potential justifications" (HABERMAS, 1998, p. 312).

Irrationality, accordingly, is not synonymous with falsehood. As the philosopher notes, "[w]hoever shares views that turn out to be untrue is not *eo ipso* irrational. Someone is irrational if she puts forward her beliefs dogmatically, clinging to them although she sees that she cannot justify them" (HABERMAS, 1998, p. 312). Epistemic irrationality is thus identified with a failure of justification rather than an error in reasoning. In this sense, the ancient belief in a flat Earth was an understandable error—not an act of irrationality—given the limited information available at the time. Today, however, maintaining that the Earth is flat is irrational because the claim can no longer be justified. This correlation between irrationality and the absence of justification extends to the other roots of rationality as well.

Teleological rationality is associated with intentional action. The rationality of an act is measured by whether the agent achieves a desired result through deliberately chosen and employed means. Within this framework, a successful actor is considered to have acted rationally only if he: "(i) knows why he was successful (…) and if (ii) this knowledge motivates the actor (at least in part) in such a way that he carries out his action for reasons that can at the same time explain its possible success" (HABERMAS, 1998, p. 313-314). Irrationality in this context consists of selecting inappropriate means to achieve desired ends. To illustrate, a student might establish the goal of passing an exam but, instead of studying, relies solely on luck. In doing so, she acts irrationally because such means lack a grounded relationship to the intended outcome. The irrationality lies not in the goal itself, but in the agent's failure to orient her action toward means that can objectively explain or justify the potential for success.

Purposive-rational action also requires reflexivity and adaptation to possible justifications. According to Habermas, "there is a relationship of mutual reference between the rationality of the action and the forum of a discourse which an actor's decisive reasons for making his decision—determined *ex ante*—could be tested" (HABERMAS, 1998, p. 314). In this vein, teleological rationality is argued to be intertwined "with the two other core structures of knowledge and speech" given that "the practical considerations by means of which a rational plan of action is carried out are dependent on the input of reliable information (about expected events in the world, or about the behavior and the intentions of other actors)" (HABERMAS, 1998, p. 314).

Conversely, it is important to clarify that such information is accessible strictly through linguistic representation, focusing exclusively on the goals chosen by the agent based on her per-

[3] Habermas employs the term "roots" (*Wurzeln*) of rationality to describe these distinct origins; however, in some passages he alternately uses the terms "Structure" (*Struktur*) or "core structures" (*Kernstrukturen*) of rationality. See HABERMAS, 2004, pp. 104, 105, 110.

sonal interests—independent of others' concerns or any form of external debate. In this regard, "elementary action-intentions and simple practical inferences, too, are linguistically structured. Just as propositional knowledge is dependent on the use of propositional sentences, so too is intentional action essentially dependent on the use of intentional sentences" (HABERMAS, 1998, p. 314-315).

Communicative rationality, in turn, manifests as the "unifying force of speech oriented toward reaching understanding" (HABERMAS, 1998, p. 315). On this basis, it is argued that:

> We do not call only valid speech acts rational but rather all comprehensible speech acts for which the speaker can take on a *credible* warranty in the given circumstances to the effect that the validity claims raised could, if necessary, be vindicated discursively (HABERMAS, 1998, p. 315-316).

In this context, the rationality of a speech act remains intrinsically linked to its potential justification, as it is through argumentation that implicit validity claims are thematized and examined based on reasons. This inherent rationality is anchored in the internal connection between:

> (a) the conditions that make a speech act valid, (b) the claim raised by the speaker that these conditions are satisfied, and (c) the credibility of the warranty issued by the speaker to the effect that he could, if necessary, discursively vindicate the validity claim (HABERMAS, 1998, p. 316-317).

These validity claims are specified as follows*: truth claims*, which refer to facts within the objective world; *claims to truthfulness*, involving statements that reveal subjective experiences to which the speaker has privileged access; and *claims to the rightness* of norms and commands, which pertain to the search for recognition within an intersubjectively shared social world. Accordingly, within the framework of communicative rationality, irrationality occurs when the requisite justifications for these validity claims are not provided. Based on these definitions, irrationality is fundamentally characterized by the absence of the justification necessary to sustain each respective type of rationality.

In presenting these three roots of rationality, Habermas offers two essential caveats. First, these structures exist on the same level; that is, communicative rationality does not function as an overarching framework, but is rather one of three central structures interwoven by discursive rationality. Second, these structures cannot be conceived in a mentalist fashion, as "epistemic and teleological rationality are not of a prelinguistic nature". (HABERMAS, 1998, p. 309). While the first warning highlights the social character of rationality—insofar as it pertains to intersubjective interactions[4], the second emphasizes that the use of language can be both communicative and non-communicative.

Regarding the first caveat, discursive rationality is defined as a procedural rationality inherent in the practices of justification. It is associated with the capacity to engage in argumentative practices—specifically, the practice of criticizing and justifying problematic claims by providing reasons and arguments. This type of activity is what Habermas calls "discourse"; he employs the term "discursive rationality" to refer to the comprehensive set of competencies a speaker must acquire to participate in argumentation as a reflexive form of communication. This is further clarified in the following passage:

> The rationality of a person is proportionate to his expressing himself rationally and to his ability to give account for his expressions in a reflexive stance. A person expresses himself rationally insofar as he is oriented performatively toward validity claims: we say that he not only behaves rationally but is himself rational if he can give account for his orientation toward validity claims. We also call this kind of rationality *accountability*

[4] See REED; MOORE, 2019, p. 379.

> *(Zurechnungsfähigkeit)*.
> Accountability presupposes a reflected self-relation on the part of the person to what she believes, says, and does; this capacity is entwined with the rational core structures of knowledge, purposive activity, and communication by way of the corresponding self-relations (HABERMAS, 1998, p. 310).

The alignment of rationality with accountability serves as a cornerstone for Habermas's delineation of the scope of his theory. As explained in *Truth and Justification*, rationality is a supposition within contexts of action oriented toward reaching understanding—a supposition "that anyone engaged in communicative action must assume." Under this assumption, "a subject who is acting intentionally is capable, in the right circumstances, of providing a more or less plausible reason for why she did or did not behave or express herself one way rather than another". Consequently "[s]omeone who cannot account for her actions and utterances to others becomes suspect of not having acted reasonably or "accountably" [*zurechnungsfähig*] (HABERMAS, 2003, p. 94).

Habermas draws a parallel between his definition of accountability and Kant's conception of freedom (HABERMAS, 1998, p. 310; 2003, p. 94). This comparison highlights the fundamental differences between communicative rationality and Kantian practical reason. While Kantian theory links freedom to moral standards and purposive rationality, Habermas maintains that accountability is evaluated through the validity claims raised according to the core structures of knowledge, action, and speech. In this sense, accountability "involves more than just practical reason. Accountability consists, rather, in an agent's general ability to orient her action by validity claims". (HABERMAS, 2003, p. 95).

In Kant's philosophy, practical reason establishes universal laws and possesses both a categorical sense of obligation and a transcendental sense of certainty. It also suggests that autonomous action is a possibility, rather than being merely counterfactual. Conversely, rationality within communicative action does not constitute an obligation, even regarding moral or legal conduct. Instead, it delineates what it means to act autonomously. It presupposes that all participants are responsible agents who position themselves based on validity claims. (cf. HABERMAS, 2003, p. 96). In essence, communicative rationality differs from Kantian practical reason by encompassing a broader array of validity claims—incorporating truth and truthfulness alongside rightness. For Habermas, its role is not to dictate norms of conduct directly, but rather to provide the framework for an orientation toward validity claims within processes of argumentation and justification (HABERMAS, 1996, p. 4-5)[5].

Habermas acknowledges that everyday practices show that communicative actors are not always motivated by good reasons. Nevertheless, from this empirical standpoint, he maintains that the accountability of agents is—much like Kant's idea of freedom—a counterfactual presupposition. Conversely, "the supposition of rationality is a *defeasible* assumption and not *a priori* knowledge. It 'functions' as a multiply corroborated pragmatic presupposition that is constitutive of communicative action. But in any given instance, it can be falsified." (HABERMAS, 2003, p. 97) This implies that the assumption of rationality in communicative action "is open to being contradicted by experiences that participants have precisely through engaging in this practice." (HABERMAS, 2003, p. 99). Precisely because rationality constitutes a defeasible assumption rather than a priori knowledge, "discursive rationality owes its special position not to its foundational but to its integrative role." (HABERMAS, 1998, p. 309).

[5] On this topic, see also LAFONT, 1999, pp. 317.

This leads to the second essential caveat: none of the three structures of rationality is pre-linguistic in nature. Even epistemic and teleological rationality—despite their potentially monological or non-communicative forms—cannot be detached from linguistic mediation. Ultimately, both are linked to communicative rationality through the integrative function of discursive rationality. This conceptual link is clarified in the following terms:

> the reflection of the rational person who distances himself from himself, the rationality inherent in the structure and in the procedure of argumentation is *mirrored* in a general way. However, it becomes clear at the same time that on the integrative level of reflection and discourse, the three rationality components – knowing, acting and speaking – combine, that is, form a syndrome (HABERMAS, 1998, p. 311).

This multifaceted 'syndrome' underscores that rationality is not a monolithic entity, but a complex integration of functions. To better grasp how this integrative role of discursive rationality and the social nature of rationality operate in practice, the distinction between the communicative and non-communicative uses of language is particularly illuminating. In this view, non-communicative language is characteristic of epistemic and teleological rationalities; in these realms, linguistic usage does not depend on an interpersonal relationship between speaker and hearer within a communicative context. That is to say, language users are not pursuing illocutionary goals. Thus, the non-communicative use of language "for purposes of pure representation or for a plan of action played through mentally is due to a feat of abstraction that merely suspends the reference—which is *always present virtually*—of propositions to truth, or of intentions to the seriousness of what is resolved" (HABERMAS, 1998, p. 319).

Epistemic and teleological rationality may, therefore, employ language in both communicative and non-communicative modes. In contrast, communicative rationality is inherently dependent on the communicative use of language. Manifested through arguments and imperatives—rather than declarative or intentional propositions—this communicative use is pragmatic in origin, relying on interpersonal relations and illocutionary meaning. As Habermas clarifies, propositions and intentions "can be divested of the illocutionary meaning of acts of asserting and announcing without losing their meaning, whereas even in *foro interno* an imperative without an illocutionary component would no longer be an imperative." Accordingly, communicative rationality "is first embodied only in a process of reaching understanding that operates by way of validity claims whenever speaker and hearer, in a performative attitude directed to second persons, (want to) reach understanding with one another about something in the world" (HABERMAS, 1998, pp. 319-320).

In terms of the communicative use of language, a fundamental distinction is drawn between 'weak' and 'strong' modes of reaching understanding. This conceptual difference is clarified as follows:

> Now, of course, it makes a difference whether agreement (*Einverständnis*) concerning a fact exists between participants or whether they both merely reach an understanding (*sich verständigen*) with one another concerning the seriousness of the speaker's intention. *Agreement* in the strict sense is achieved only if the participants are able to accept a validity claim for the *same* reasons, while *mutual understanding* (*Verständigung*) can also come about when one participant sees that the other, in light of her preferences, has good reasons in the given circumstances for her declared intention—that is, reasons that are good *for her*—without having to make these reasons his own in light of his preferences (HABERMAS, 1998, p. 320-321).

The *weak mode of reaching understanding* is analyzed through declarations of intent and simple imperatives. Within this line of reasoning, statements such as "I will travel tomorrow" or commands like "sit down" do not seek to produce consensus, despite being illocutionary acts. This constitutes a weak sense of reaching understanding because, while validity claims are raised

and may be accepted or rejected, they do not require shared normative agreement. In the case of the declaration "I will travel tomorrow," for instance, the speaker gains assent by showing that the action is rational in light of her preferences; thus, teleological rationality assumes a mediating role. It is therefore sufficient for the hearer to have good reasons to trust the speaker's intent, even without sharing the underlying reasons.

Here, a distinction is drawn between "publicly intelligible reasons" (characteristic of the weak mode) and "generally acceptable reasons" (characteristic of the strong mode). In this way, intentional declarations and imperatives—notwithstanding their success-oriented nature—still "move within the horizon of a mutual understanding based on validity claims and thus still within the domain of communicative rationality." Their illocutionary success does not require raising claims to rightness; instead, it is "in turn measured in terms of claims to truth and truthfulness even if this is only with reference to the preferences of the speaker (…). The hearer assumes that the speaker means what she says and holds it to be true" (HABERMAS, 1998, p. 323).

The *strong mode of reaching understanding*, on the other hand, is explored through the analysis of promises, declaratives, and commands—speech acts that invoke normative validity claims. This mode emerges when the truth of statements is thematized or when they are situated within normative contexts that invite such thematization. For instance, the assertion "I will sign a contract tomorrow" may be understood merely as an intentional declaration; however, depending on the context or the line of questioning, it could signify a promise through which a speaker commits herself to an action. This shift in meaning is articulated as follows:

> the illocutionary meaning and validity basis of the utterances change. Normative reasons do not determine the prudential assessments of *arbitrary closing* decisionmaking subjects; they determine rather the decisions of subjects who *bind their wills* and are thus able to enter into obligations. In contrast to the case of 'naked' declarations of intentions and 'simple' imperatives, normative reasons are not actor-relative reasons for one's own (or another's) purposive-rational behavior—as in the case of assertions—actor-independent reasons; however, unlike the reasons for assertions, they are not reasons for the existence of states of affairs but rather for the satisfaction of normative binding expectations (HABERMAS, 1998, p. 324-325).

In this sense, promises, declaratives, and commands constitute speech acts that carry a claim to validity grounded in practical discourse. Grasping the illocutionary meaning of such acts requires familiarity with their specific normative context. This relationship is further clarified in the following terms: "[i]nsofar as the participants intersubjectively recognize a normative background (…), they can accept regulative speech acts as valid for the same reasons" (HABERMAS, 1998, p. 325).

It becomes clear, therefore, that not every use of language is communicative, nor does all linguistic communication seek to reach understanding in the strong sense. However, the most important element for conceptualizing social rationality—and its irrational counterparts—is that the use of language to reach understanding extends beyond the boundaries of communicative rationality to encompass epistemic and teleological rationalities as well. The core structures of rationality are thus inextricably linked to discursive praxis, as they consistently refer back to the level of argumentation: the sphere in which they are critically tested. This conceptual synthesis is captured in the following terms: "'practical reason' is not an elementary phenomenon but rather goes back to an entwinement—effected within the framework of social interactions—of epistemic and teleological rationality with communicative rationality" (HABERMAS, 1998, p. 325).

Thus, while the social character is most evident within the realm of communicative rationality, the mediating function of discursive rationality reveals how these structures are intertwined; consequently, any failure of epistemic or teleological justification may also be regarded as a manifestation of social irrationality. This sociocultural dimension of rationality is further articulated in the following terms:

> (…) the operations of 'reason' take the form of a circulation of linguistically linked reasons. For reasons circulate, so to speak, between their forms, which are symbolically consolidated in sociocultural ways of life, on the one hand, and the flow of communication and corresponding thought and consciousness processes of the acting subjects, on the other (HABERMAS, 2024, pp. 161-162).

In essence, for Habermas, rationality—across all its structures or roots—is inherently social by virtue of its anchorage in language. Consequently, irrationality, understood as the denial of the justifications required by each specific form of rationality, is likewise a social phenomenon.

II – Rationality, irrationality and justification

A question that arises is how effectively this concept of rationality can address the social, political, and legal problems caused by irrational practices. Discussing the connection between this theoretical framework and practical concerns in a recent series of interviews, Habermas asserts that: "it is precisely in questions of democratic and legal theory that the genuine power of practical reason proves its worth." (HABERMAS, 2024, p. 178-179). In the same vein, when addressing reason's potential to tackle social and political challenges in earlier political essays, specific phenomena are identified as inherently irrational. These include poverty, the threats posed by the arms race, the aggressive depletion of natural resources, and ecological instability, as well as the deprivation of rights and the vulnerabilities faced by individuals and minorities. In this context, he characterizes the task of reason in the following terms: "[r]eason is there to give voice to this negativity, to lend our voice to those who are silenced by pain, to 'bring the unreasonable to reason'—in opposition to the existing unreasonable (…)." (HABERMAS, 1990a, p. 84).

To what extent, however, can this concept of rationality generate obligations, and can it establish a normative basis for social, political, and legal practices? The answer is affirmative, though it entails a procedural requirement rather than a substantive one (cf. COOKE, 1994, p. 43). When applied to the spheres of morality, politics, and law, this procedural approach provides a "framework of acceptability" that functions as a filter for social irrationality. Within this framework, irrational content is identified and potentially excluded from norms of action insofar as agents fail to provide the justification required by the corresponding validity claims[6].

In what follows, I intend to explore the moral, political, and legal dimensions of social irrationality by focusing on the distinction between justifications connected to claims to truth and those pertaining to rightness.

As discussed above, rationality is treated as a presupposition that participants in argumentative processes must necessarily assume. Following the detranscendentalization of reason initiated by the linguistic turn, the criterion for the objectivity of knowledge is situated within the public justificatory praxis of a communication community (cf. HABERMAS, 2003, p. 249). Nevertheless, to avoid the pitfalls of contextualism and historicism, the aim is to show that rationality

[6] In previous research, I have explored how this framework is mobilized to address phenomena categorized as social irrationality—most notably hate speech. See CONSANI, 2025, p. 191; CONSANI, 2023, p. 562; for a contrasting perspective on this topic, see also GALUPPO; SILVA, 2021, p. 131.

resides within a perspective of immanent- transcendence. According to this view, "participants in communication can neither understand nor misunderstand one another unless there is a presupposition of rationality" (HABERMAS, 2003, p. 86; p. 93). It is precisely upon these presuppositions that the possibility of transcendence is grounded. In *Truth and Justification*, at least four presuppositions essential to establishing the relationship between immanence and transcendence are outlined: (i) the common objective world; (ii) the accountability of acting subjects; (iii) the unconditionality of validity claims; and (iv) discourse as the ultimate forum of justification.

(i) *The common objective world*: According to Habermas, "[d]etranscendentalization leads, on the one hand, to the embedding of knowing subjects into the socializing context of a lifeworld and, on the other hand, to the entwinement of cognition with speech and action" (HABERMAS, 2003, p. 88-89). This implies that to reach an understanding about something in the world, subjects must necessarily operate from within their shared lifeworld. Yet, in doing so, they presuppose "'the world' as the totality of independently existing objects that can be judged or dealt with." The objective world is thus defined as one that 'is "given" to us as "the same for everyone"' (HABERMAS, 2003, p. 89).

The idealist transcendental perspective is thus superseded by a commitment to internal realism. While the former "conceives the totality of objects of possible experience as a world 'for us,' as a world of appearances," the latter acknowledges that "everything that can be represented in true statements is 'real,' although facts are interpreted in a language that is always 'ours'" (HABERMAS, 2003, p. 90). In this sense, the orientation toward truth acquires an essential regulative function for fallible justificatory processes. Drawing a comparison to Kantian philosophy, the following clarification is provided:

> Even after objective knowledge is detranscendentalized and tied to discursive justification as the 'touchstone of truth,' the point of Kant's injunction against the apodictic use of reason and the transcendent use of the understanding is preserved. Only now the boundary separating the transcendental from the transcendent use of our cognitive capacity is not defined by sensibility and understanding, but by the forum of rational discourse in which the convincing power of good reasons must flourish (HABERMAS, 2003, p. 92).

The orientation toward truth thus serves a regulative function, grounded in both the presupposition of a shared objective world and the requirement for justifications rooted in the lifeworld. Drawing further parallels with Kantian thought, Habermas maintains that "in the course of detranscendentalization, the theoretical ideas of reason step out of the static 'intelligible world' and unleash their dynamics within the lifeworld." (HABERMAS, 2003, p. 92). Immanent-transcendence implies that disputes over the correct interpretation of the world must be transcended from within—that is, from the perspective of participants who interpret their world from the situated horizon of their habits and traditions.

(ii) *The accountability of acting subjects*: This presupposition was introduced previously during the analysis of the scope of communicative rationality. Habermas emphasizes that while the presupposition of a shared objective world addresses the relationship between subjects and objects from a descriptive perspective, the accountability of acting subjects opens onto the normative dimension of the social world. This entails a reciprocal attribution of rationality that agents must grant one another when engaging in communicative action. Participants assume that their interlocutors are both rational and accountable for their utterances and actions. As such, they are expected to justify their positions by mobilizing rationality across its epistemic, teleological, and

communicative structures—drawing upon the full spectrum of validity claims (truth, truthfulness, and rightness) within an argumentative process that remains inherently open to fallibility. (cf. HABERMAS, 2003, p. 93-99)

(iii) *The unconditionality of validity claims*: Within the scope of formal pragmatics, transcendental projection carries a weak, detranscendentalized sense. This perspective distinguishes between a vertical dimension of world-relation—where idealization consists of anticipating the totality of possible references—and a horizontal dimension of intersubjective relations, characterized by the mutual assumption of rationality between subjects. Validity claims are understood in this same light, under the premise that "[i]f reaching understanding, and thereby coordinating action, is to be possible at all, then agents must be capable of taking a warranted stance on criticizable validity claims and of orienting themselves by such claims in their own actions" (HABERMAS, 2003, p. 99).

Regarding validity claims, idealization involves a preliminary abstraction from deviations, individual differences, and limiting contexts. Here, the tension between immanence and transcendence reveals a dual movement. On the one hand, "[t]he presupposed objectivity of the world is so deeply entwined with the intersubjectivity of reaching an understanding about something in the world that we cannot transcend this connection and escape the linguistically disclosed horizon of our intersubjectively shared lifeworld." Conversely, this situatedness does not preclude universal reach, as "[w]e are able reflectively to transcend whatever our given initial hermeneutic situations are and attain intersubjectively shared views on disputed matters" (HABERMAS, 2003, p. 100). Although the justificatory processes for truth and rightness differ—as examined below—the discursive process remains the vital link, given that it "increases the responsive potential by which rationally accepted claims to validity prove their worth." (HABERMAS, 2003, p. 102)

(iv) *Discourse as the ultimate forum of justification:* In analyzing this assumption, Habermas demonstrates how the previous presuppositions converge. In particular, he highlights the relationship between validity claims in the objective and social worlds, noting that it is within the forum of discourse that agents refer to objects through the propositional content of their statements while simultaneously addressing norms as elements of the social world. In this context, he defines rational discourse as "a process that ensures the inclusion of all those affected and the equal consideration of all the interests at play." Such equality plays a crucial role in the pursuit of understanding because "in view of the idea that only those norms equally good for all merit recognition from the moral point of view, such discourse presents itself as the appropriate method of conflict resolution" (HABERMAS, 2003, p. 105).

To ensure that the discussion of contested validity claims within a discourse does not lose its cognitive purpose, participants must subscribe to a structurally mandatory egalitarian universalism. At first glance, this universalism carries a formal-pragmatic meaning rather than a moral one. In this context, the rational acceptability of validity claims is ultimately grounded in reasons capable of withstanding objections under demanding communicative conditions. Habermas recognizes that "if this is the intuitive meaning that we associate with argumentation in general, then we also know that a practice may not seriously count as argumentation unless it meets certain pragmatic presuppositions" (HABERMAS, 2003, p. 106).

There are four unavoidable pragmatic presuppositions at play, namely: *inclusivity* (whereby

those capable of making relevant contributions cannot be excluded); *the equal distribution of communicative freedoms* (granting equal opportunity to contribute); *truthfulness* (the requirement that participants express their sincere thoughts); and *the absence of external or internal constraints* (ensuring that positions are motivated solely by the force of the arguments themselves) (cf. HABERMAS, 2008, p. 82; 2003, p. 106-107). Admittedly, "[t]hese argumentative presuppositions obviously contain such strong idealizations that they raise the suspicion of a rather tendentious description of argumentation;" nevertheless, it is essential to recognize that these presuppositions, "no matter how counterfactual, are by no means mere constructs. Rather they are operatively effective in the behavior of the participants themselves. Someone who seriously takes part in an argument de facto proceeds from such presuppositions" (HABERMAS, 2003, p. 107-108).

Accordingly, the aforementioned presuppositions function within this theoretical scope as a 'framework of acceptability' connected to the very structure of language. Although these assumptions appear highly idealized, the reconstruction of rationality within social practices reveals their presence whenever one engages in argumentation aimed at mutual understanding—even if only counterfactually. This matter is taken up below through an analysis of the distinction between truth and justification, as well as the differentiation between justifications concerning claims to truth and those concerning claims to rightness.

Regarding the relationship between truth and justification, Habermas's theory has changed over the years, shifting from an epistemic and anti-realist perspective to a non-epistemic view with realist elements. An epistemic conception holds that the truth of a proposition depends on its justification. Such perspectives are commonly associated with anti-realism, since propositional truth is not seen as depending on things being as the propositions state they are. One problem with these anti-realist stances is that they may lead to contextualism or relativism. In this sense, it becomes more difficult to address issues of social irrationality, as evaluative criteria can be rendered more flexible by the justifications presented. A non-epistemic perspective, in turn, maintains that the truth of a proposition does not depend on whether someone has a justification for believing it. This view is generally associated with realism, as it is consistent with the understanding that propositional truth depends not on us, but on the world (cf. ZUIDERVAART, 2017, p. 103).

Zuidervaart identifies three distinct stages in the development of Habermas's concept of truth: a) *consensus theory* (developed in the early 1970s, wherein Habermas proposed an epistemic conception of truth, explaining it through the conditions under which truth claims are justified); b) *formal pragmatics* (beginning with *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas distinguishes more clearly between truth and justification. In this stage, he replaces his earlier consensus theory with a formal-pragmatic theory of meaning rather than focusing on truth per se. Thus, "in place of a consensus theory of truth, he proposes a formal pragmatic theory of meaning"); and c) *pragmatic realism* (since the 1996 publication of his essay *Richard Rorty's Pragmatic Turn*, Habermas has emphasized the distinction between truth and justification, as well as their internal relationship, arguing that truth cannot be reduced to rational assertibility. In *Truth and Justification*, he further develops his defense of the 'Janus-faced' nature of truth—incorporating realist elements concerning truth and anti-realist elements regarding justifica-

tion) (cf. ZUIDERVAART, 2017, p. 105)[7].

In Truth and Justification, Habermas himself identifies two distinct concepts of truth within his work: the first is a procedural definition—the discursive concept of truth; later, he moves toward defending a pragmatic concept. The discursive concept favored identifying truth with ideal or rational assertibility[8] as a way to escape the dilemmas that arise when one recognizes, through formal pragmatics, that the reality we encounter is not 'naked,' but already permeated by language. Within this context, the challenge lies in upholding claims to universal truths that transcend context without reverting to a realist perspective that denies that our knowledge of truth is mediated by linguistic and social interactions. This tension leads to the following observation:

> The attempt to combine the language-transcendent understanding of reference with a language-immanent understanding of truth as ideal assertibility promised a way out of this dilemma. On this view, a statement is true if and only if, under the rigorous pragmatic presuppositions of rational discourse, it is able to withstand all efforts to invalidate it, that is, if and only if it can be justified in an ideal epistemic situation. Inspired by C. S. Peirce's famous suggestion, K.-O. Apel, H. Putnam, and I have all at one time or another defended some version of such *a discursive concept of truth* (HABERMAS, 2003, p. 36, italics added).

From this perspective, the meaning of truth was tested within argumentative praxis by appealing to the unavoidable pragmatic presuppositions of discourse—namely, inclusivity, the equal distribution of communicative freedoms, truthfulness, and the absence of external or internal constraints. Thus, on the one hand, the discursive concept of truth was developed "to take account of the fact that a statement's truth—absent the possibility of direct access to uninterpreted truth conditions—cannot be assessed in terms of 'decisive evidence,' but only in terms of justificatory, albeit never definitively 'compelling,' reasons." On the other hand, to avoid falling into contextualism, it was maintained that an "idealization of certain features of the form and process of the practice of argumentation was to characterize a procedure that would do justice to the context-transcendence of the truth claim raised by a speaker in a statement by rationally taking into account all relevant voices, topics, and contributions" (HABERMAS, 2003, p. 37).

In reassessing his theory, Habermas considers the discursive concept of truth not as incorrect, but as insufficient, since it fails to explain what authorizes us to regard a supposedly ideally justified statement as true (cf. HABERMAS, 2003, p. 252). Furthermore, he argues that the discursive conception is counterintuitive, insofar as truth is not a concept linked to success; instead, a proposition "is agreed to by all rational subjects because it is true; it is not true because it could be the content of a consensus attained under ideal conditions" (HABERMAS, 2003, p. 101). Given these challenges, in dialogue with critics such as Wellmer (1992) and Lafont (1999), he acknowledges a gap between truth and rational assertibility, stemming either from the inherent fallibility of justification itself or from the fact that the conditions necessary to eliminate such fallibility remain beyond human reach (cf. HABERMAS, 2003, p. 38). As he notes: "[t]hese objections have prompted me to revise the discursive conception of rational acceptability by

[7] See also FULTNER, 2019, p. 446-449; STRYDOM, 2019, p. 555.

[8] In his analysis of the differentiation of rightness from truth in Habermas's work, Strydom emphasizes the distinction between the process of argumentation (assertibility) and its result or success (acceptability). *Rational assertibility* acts as a regulatory idea that guides the direction and conduct of the argumentative process, referring to the effort to defend a proposition in accordance with the internal requirements of the matter in question. *Rational acceptability*, on the other hand, concerns the closure or conclusion of the process, representing the "achievement" of the argument—that is, the moment when the claim of validity is effectively recognized and accepted by the participants after discursive scrutiny. Despite their differences, both concepts can be characterized as forms of ideal justification. (cf. STRYDOM, 2019, p. 560-562)

relating it to a *pragmatically conceived, nonepistemic concept of truth*, but without thereby assimilating 'truth' to 'ideal assertibility'" (HABERMAS, 2003, p. 38, italics added).

The pragmatic concept of truth, in turn, establishes a distinction between truth and rational assertibility or justification. Habermas continues to assert that there is a connection between truth and justification that is "*epistemically* necessary (i.e., we can only come to know what is true by means of providing reasons)" but "not *conceptually* necessary (i.e., truth cannot be defined in terms of justification or vice versa)" (FULTNER, 2019, p. 447; cf. HABERMAS, 2003, p. 38). Thus, although the gap between truth and rational assertibility cannot be bridged theoretically within discourse, it is bridged pragmatically through action (cf. HABERMAS, 2003, p. 92). Since participants in an interaction cannot suspend their truth claims, these claims function as certainties that guide their actions (cf. HABERMAS, 2003, p. 252-253). In this way, "the pragmatic role of a Janus-faced truth that establishes the desired internal connection between performative certainty and warranted assertibility" is revealed (HABERMAS, 2003, p. 253).

From this perspective, the objectivity of knowledge is ensured because the objective world links truth to reference, connecting the truth of statements with the objectivity of what is stated. The objective world guarantees this objectivity either by imposing a limit—a certain unavailability—on the range of possible interpretations, or by being the same for everyone. Today, for instance, one can no longer truthfully claim that the Earth is flat; such a claim is no longer open to interpretation, as we are all referring to the same objective world. These elements of unavailability (*Unverfügbarkeit*) and identity (*Identität*) are highlighted in the following passage:

> The concept of the 'objective world' encompasses everything that subjects capable of speech and action do not 'make themselves' irrespective of their interventions and inventions. This enables them to refer to things that can be identified as the same under different descriptions. The experience of 'coping' accounts for two determinations of 'objectivity': the fact that the way the world is not up to us; and the fact that it is the *same* for all of us. Beliefs are confirmed in action by something different than in discourse (HABERMAS, 2003, p. 254)[9].

Thus, in the realm of action, the unavailability and identity of the objective world safeguard the objectivity of justifications, as these are tested through their contact with the world. This demarcation of objectivity is what connects the pragmatic conception of truth with realist elements. In short, this perspective is pragmatic because it maintains a link between truth and justification, recognizing that we only access truth through the provision of reasons. At the same time, it incorporates realistic elements by anchoring the concept of truth in the unavailability and identity of the objective world. These elements prevent truth from being reduced to mere justification, as the objective world itself offers resistance and puts our claims to the test.

In the realm of discourse, however, the process functions somewhat differently. The varying roles of justification within the spheres of action and discourse are better understood by analyzing the distinction between claims to truth and claims to rightness. This distinction is addressed in the following passage:

> Moral validity claims lack the reference to the objective world that is characteristic of claims to truth. This means they are robbed of a justification-transcendent point of reference. The reference to the world is replaced by an orientation toward extending the borders of the social community and its consensus about values. If we want to specify the difference between rightness and truth more precisely, we have to examine

[9] There is a stronger emphasis on the concepts of "unavailability" (*Unverfügbarkeit*) and "identity" (*Identität*) in the original German than in the English translation. Cf: "Unverfügbarkeit und Identität ler Welt sind die beiden Bestimmungen von 'Objektivität', die sich us der Erfahrung des 'Coping' erklären: Überzeugungen 'bewäh-em' sich im Handeln an etwas anderem als im Diskurs" (HABERMAS, 2004, p. 321).

> whether and, if so, how this orientation toward an ever more extensive inclusion of other claims and persons can make up for the missing reference to the world (HABERMAS, 2003, p. 257).

The consensus reached through discourse carries different implications for the truth of empirical statements than it does for the rightness of moral judgments and norms. In the context of the objective world, the truth of a statement simultaneously denotes a fact. Facts owe their factuality to being rooted in a world of objects that exist independently of any description. This interpretation implies that a consensus on a statement may prove false in light of new evidence, no matter how carefully reached or well-founded it may be (the flat-earth thesis again serving as an example). As noted above, within the realm of truth claims, objectivity is ensured by an objective world circumscribed by the conditions of unavailability and identity.

Regarding claims to rightness, the distinction between truth and ideal warranted assertibility disappears. In the case of moral validity, there is no equivalent to the ontological interpretation of validity that characterizes truth. To highlight this difference, Habermas points out that "[w]hereas successful learning in the sphere of empirical problems may *result* in agreement, learning in the moral domain is *assessed* in terms of how inclusive such a consensus reached through reason-giving is." (HABERMAS, 2003, p. 257). Unlike claims to truth, the consensus reached through discourse does not establish facts; rather, it establishes a norm that must merit intersubjective recognition. Those involved proceed from the assumption that such recognition can be secured under the approximately ideal conditions of rational discourse. Consequently, the validity of a normative statement is not understood "in terms of the *obtaining* of a state of affairs, but as the *worthiness of recognition* of a corresponding norm on which we ought to base our practice. A norm worthy of being recognized cannot be denied by a 'world' refusing to 'play along.'" (HABERMAS, 2003, p. 257-258). Thus, while truth remains a non-epistemic concept—established within the context of justificatory practices but not reducible to their results—rightness functions differently: "[s]ince the 'validity' of a norm consists in that it would be accepted, that is, recognized as valid, under ideal conditions of justification, 'rightness' is an epistemic concept" (HABERMAS, 2003, p. 258).

If rightness is an epistemic concept, what ensures the unconditionality and universality of claims to rightness? Regarding unconditionality, this is grounded in the criterion of inclusivity. While the objective world is circumscribed by the determinations of unavailability and identity, the social world is bound solely by the determination of identity; this, in turn, necessitates the equal inclusion of all claims and individuals. In the social dimension, participants must construct an inclusive 'we-perspective' and promote the reciprocal adoption of perspectives. According to Habermas,

> Following this constructivist conception, the unconditional nature of moral validity claims can be accounted for in terms of the universality of a normative domain that *is to be brought about*: Only those judgments and norms are valid that could be accepted for good reasons by everyone affected from the inclusive perspective of equally taking into consideration the evident claims of all persons (HABERMAS, 2003, p. 261).

Universality, in turn, is also ensured by the egalitarian nature of rules that serve the equal interests of all those affected. This is supplemented by the perspective of procedural justice, which requires that rules be justified and applied impartially (cf. HABERMAS, 2003, p. 264).

III - Final Remarks

This article examines the concept of social irrationality in Habermas's work to assess its po-

tential for addressing contemporary forms of irrationality. It begins by outlining his account of rationality to clarify what may properly be regarded as irrational. Given that Habermasian concepts are rooted in formal pragmatics—which analyzes the rationality embedded in language and social practices—rationality across all its structures (epistemic, teleological, and communicative) is intrinsically social. However, it is in communicative rationality that this social character manifests most prominently. At its core, rationality is defined by the requirement to provide justifications for the validity claims raised in argumentation, whether these concern knowledge, action, or speech. Irrationality, accordingly, arises when an interlocutor fails to provide the expected justification for a given claim. Habermas thus associates irrationality with dogmatism or the absence of justification.

This concept of rationality is operationalized through specific idealizations—namely, presuppositions regarding our relationship to the objective and social worlds. These pragmatic assumptions underpin a "framework of acceptability" in which justifications are offered and validity claims determine what is deemed rational. Thus, Habermas's distinction between claims to truth and claims to rightness is crucial for identifying and addressing phenomena of social irrationality.

To conclude, I will test these concepts against specific instances of social irrationality. First, one can examine truth claims within the context of scientific denialism during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the onset of the crisis, investigating the efficacy of existing drugs, such as hydroxychloroquine, was a legitimate scientific hypothesis and thus not irrational. However, the persistent advocacy for such treatments—even after robust clinical evidence had proven their ineffectiveness—marked a clear departure from epistemic rationality. Figures such as the French physician Didier Raoult, who became a global proponent of unproven therapies, failed to provide the justifications required for their claims to truth.

Drawing on Habermas's theory of rationality, this behavior can be considered social irrationality because it violates the presupposition of an identical and unavailable objective world. By disregarding the "resistance" offered by empirical data, these actors retreated into dogmatism. When a validity claim to truth is raised despite a clear lack of grounding in empirical facts, it ceases to be an invitation to discourse and becomes an ideological imposition. In this sense, the irrationality of the chloroquine defense lies not in the initial hypothesis but in the refusal to abandon a claim that the objective world had already proven false. In this case, dogmatism supplanted the rational requirement for justification.

In the socio-political sphere, Habermas identifies—as noted earlier—specific irrational phenomena, such as poverty and the deprivation of rights. These conditions fail to find justification on the basis of claims to rightness. According to this framework, the primary criterion for validating a norm is its "worthiness of recognition," a status that is inextricably linked to the equal inclusion of all persons and their claims. Applying these criteria makes it clear that social phenomena such as poverty or the deprivation of rights cannot be validated within the scope of moral or legal norms. Furthermore, these criteria are valuable in assessing the legitimacy of social struggles, allowing for a distinction between progressive movements that strive for inclusion and regressive[10] groups that seek to maintain privilege and discrimination.

[10] For a discussion on democratic regression in Habermas's theory, see WOLKENSTEIN, 2025.

Building on this distinction, one can analyze the disparate legitimacy of movements such as Black Lives Matter, the January 6th Capitol riot, and the January 8th Brasília attacks through the lens of the claims to rightness. The Black Lives Matter movement is grounded in a struggle for universal inclusion and the recognition of rights systematically denied to a marginalized group; its goals align with the "worthiness of recognition" as they seek to expand the democratic "we-perspective." In contrast, the invasion of the Capitol and the attacks in Brasília represent a regressive effort to undermine democratic institutions and exclude the voices of a legitimate majority in favor of maintaining a particularistic privilege—the attempt by a specific group to assert its own will, identity, or political preference as superior to the universal rules of the democratic process.

A greater challenge arises when social movements seeking inclusion and recognition also resort to violence, public disorder, or property damage—as occurred in isolated instances during the Black Lives Matter protests. In such cases, even if the underlying claim is initially legitimate, the use of force represents a rupture with the communicative pursuit of mutual understanding, thereby undermining its legitimacy. Nevertheless, Habermas's theory of rationality provides the normative benchmarks necessary to distinguish legitimate social struggles from regressive ones. Furthermore, it offers a robust framework for identifying when the actions of a progressive movement transgress the discursive boundaries essential to democratic dialogue.

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