

Habermas' Critical Social Theory of Knowledge: A Paradigm for 21st Century West African Socio-Political Order

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Abstract

It is common place among philosophers that knowledge possesses a pragmatic value for humans both at private and communal levels. This is evident in Habermas' critical social theory that consider knowledge as a tool at the service of human interests. Habermas rejected the prevailing positivists' conception of knowledge in epistemology and the social sciences as identification of static facts. This paper posited that Habermas' critical social theory of knowledge has a great propensity to chart a map to success for the recent socio-political consciousness, interests and anticipations in the 21st century West African socio-political order. However, this new political consciousness or awareness permeating the West African region portrays an outlook of not transcending the realm of wishful thought due to the absence of any concrete theoretical framework. With the aid of the analytical and the hermeneutical methods to explain different concepts in Habermas' position and to articulate their application in the new historical or socio-political experience of West African, the paper recommended that adopting Habermas' critical rationality as a theoretical framework will enhance the new socio-political experience in the West African sub-region. It further identified the academia, political parties, social media, media houses, organisations in religious groups as possible agents that will aid the realisation of new 21st West African socio-political dispensation.

Keywords: Critical Social Theory, Knowledge, New Political Consciousness, Positivists.

1. Introduction

Philosophy has always been central in guiding the cause of human endeavours. This is by providing both the mental framework and strategies of execution of plans with precision and appropriateness of actions geared towards the attainment of the desired goals. This finds justification in the popular dictum and truism that “Ideas rules the world”. This means that every action intended to have desired positive outcome must be properly thought through. Jürgen Habermas’ theory of knowledge emphasises dialectic between theory and practice. Habermas believes that knowledge has the pragmatic input of emancipation through inter-subjective communication. Therefore, this paper focuses on his claim that knowledge is not mere identification of static facts as proposed in the positivist tradition in epistemology and the social sciences. Instead, a theory of knowledge should identify and explain the dialectical relation that exists between knowledge and human interest. Habermas posits that the pragmatic import of knowledge involves its ability to emancipate the people. It further considers the implications of this purported link between theories and practical knowledge in Habermas’ critical social theory on the recent socio-political events in the sub-region of West African. There is a new form of political consciousness, interest and participation such as: series of mass protests in quick succession, agitations and public criticism of political leaders and their policies by the citizens, and not excluding military coup d’état in not fewer than four out of the eleven nation-states of the sub-region. This is consequent to the desire for positive transformation in the socio-political sphere of the sub-region. However, these activities have not yielded the desired success as civilian protests were usually aborted, and people were forced by government force agencies to return to the unpleasant status quo. This paper critically evaluates the socio-political events and identifies the absence of inter-subjective communication geared towards attainment of truth. Such omission is the reason why the new political awareness permeating the West African region has not gone beyond the level of wishful thought. It is, therefore, argued that adopting Habermas’ communicative rationality as a theoretical framework, there can be

an enhancement to the optimum benefit for West Africa at the wake of the new socio-political experience. As such, the advancement in the ICT and the new media will further serve as veritable means for rational communication and realisation of a new reformed West African sub-region where knowledge will serve the people's interest.

2. Habermas' Critical Social Theory of Knowledge

According to Michael Thompson, "a critical theory is a distinctive form of theory that posits a more comprehensive means to grasp social reality and diagnose social pathologies. It is marked not by a priori ethical or political values that it seeks to assert in the world, but by its capacity to grasp the totality of individual and social life as well as the social processes that constitute them. It is a form of social criticism that contains within it the seeds of judgment, evaluation, and practical, transformative activity."¹ Critical theory is, then, a radically different form of knowledge from mainstream theory and social science. A critical theory theorizes from the cultural experience and historical conditions at a point in time. It pays more attention to practical experience over the theoretical that emphasizes abstract theorising of an autonomous rational inquirer. Thomas McCarthy notes that the key interest of critical theory is to make problematic what is taken for granted in culture, so that a degree of social justice can be had by those who are oppressed.²

A critical theory of society is therefore set with the task of uncovering the social conditions under which knowledge about itself is articulated, since the way we comprehend the objective world is related to the ways we conceive of ourselves. At the same time, it was a form of thinking that is designed not only to comprehend, but also to transform: its purpose is to change not only our knowledge of the objective world – of society, of institutions, of culture, and so on – but simultaneously the nature

¹ Michael Thompson, *The Domestication of Critical Theory* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2016), 1.

² Thompson, *The Domestication of Critical Theory*, 43.

of the subject in a practical sense.³ What was central to critical theory as a form of thought was its ability to see the inherent relation between thought and action. Truly rational thought would lead to transformation, to new shapes of human activity, since it “anticipates a release of emancipatory reflection and a transformed social praxis”.⁴

Critical theory is unique for its interactive engagement with other fields of study such as social and cultural sciences, as it engages its object of study. This interaction affords a multi-dimensional approach that will enhance attainment of the truth of the object. Critical theory, according to Brian Harney has its origins in the so-called ‘Frankfurt School’ and includes the work of scholars such as Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and Jürgen Habermas. Critical theory, as a school of thought challenges dominant ways of exploring and explaining organizational phenomenon. It as an approach that studies society in a dialectical way by analysing political economy, domination, exploitation, and ideologies. The core of critical theory involves exposing existing modes of domination and oppression and offering alternative possibilities which emancipate those once excluded and silenced.⁵

A different approach is to identify dimensions of critical theory at the content level. There are six dimensions of a critical theory. The first concerns its epistemology, the next three its ontology, and the latter two its praxeology. Epistemology is a theory of knowledge, it deals with how the very concepts that constitute a theory are constituted and organized. Ontology is a theory of being, it deals with the question how reality is organized and develops. Praxeology is the study of human action, especially political action and ethics.

³ Thompson, *The Domestication of Critical Theory*, 2.

⁴ Trent Schroyer, “The Need for Critical Theory,” *The New School for Social Research* 3, No. 2, (January 1973): 31, <https://doi.org/10.1177/089692057300300205>.

⁵ Brian Harney, “Critical Theory,” *Encyclopedia of Management* 13, no. 3 (January 2015): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118785317.weom11004>.

It is pertinent to note that Critical theory was a camouflage term employed by the Frankfurt theorists in exile due to the German Nazis in the United States, where they were concerned about being exposed as communist and Marxian thinkers and therefore took care in the categories they employed. Some definitions of critical theory couple the usage of this term exclusively to the Frankfurt School or the Habermasian Frankfurt School.⁶

3. The Critic of Positivism

In the tradition of the Frankfurt School, Habermas' critical theory criticizes the positivist simplistic conception of social reality like what is natural, given, external and autonomous in relation to the cognising subject and taking existence to be in their best possible mode. Such a conception undermines the active participation of social agents in the unfolding of events, as it projects the existence of an objective reality. In that light, positivism presents an epistemic subject as one who abstract facts of reality. For the critical theorists, the social form the active participants and determinants that shape reality. Critical theory does not take reality as given; instead, social factors are central to the conception of reality. According to Sampaio, "critical theory seeks to reflect on the social factors that are at the genesis of the formation of theory, as well as on the role of theory at the level of the constitution of social reality and in the election of the guiding ends of society".⁷

Furthermore, critical theory criticises positivist conception of knowledge as mirror of reality which is purported as the given. For

⁶ Christian Fuchs, "Critical Theory," in *International Encyclopedia of Communication Theory and Philosophy*, ed. Robert Craig (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2017), 2.

⁷ Rui Sampaio, "The Hermeneutic Conception of Culture," *Philosophy of Culture* 27, no. 5 (January 1998): 83-90, <https://doi.org/10.5840/wcp20-paideia199827455>.

Habermas, this is an objectivist attitude as it “naively relates theoretical propositions to states of affairs”.⁸

It does away with the transcendental framework within which only the meaning of such propositions is constituted. As soon as it is understood that propositions are relative to the reference system previously placed in them, the objectivist illusion is shattered and frees the gaze towards an interest that directs knowledge.⁹

In Habermas’ view, “the repression of interest still remains part of that same interest”. According to Sampaio, “observation in social sciences is never pure observation, as the scientist observes on the basis of learned norms, values, contexts and concepts. This relationship of circularity between the subject and the object of knowledge comes to shake the classical ideal of objectivity.”¹⁰

Habermas further criticises the positivists for seeking to obtain useful knowledge through observable behavioural regularities which form the basis for generalisation. With this approach, positivists end up neglecting the intentional dimension of action or consciousness of social agents. Furthermore, he rejects positivist denial of any relationship between facts and values. Positivists do not accept a relationship as both belong to different category and their analysis follows as such. Instead, for him, “all knowledge should be interpreted with attention to the interests that led the actors to produce it”.¹¹ Habermas believes that it is important for any theorist to always recognise the link between what he regards as knowledge-forming interests that warrant the formation of a theory. This further entails taking cognisance of the epistemic content of the theory and the historical conditions it intends to serve.

In the bid to drive home his argument for communicative action, Habermas also raise some criticism against hermeneutic by

⁸ Paulo Vitorino Fontes, “Critique of Positivism, Hermeneutics and Communicative Reason in Habermas,” *Meta: Research in Hermeneutics, Phenomenology, and Practical Philosophy* 13, no. 2 (December 2021): 443-61.

⁹ Jurgen Habermas, *The Idea of the Theory of Knowledge as Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1968), 136.

¹⁰ Sampaio, “The Hermeneutic Conception of Culture,” 83-90.

¹¹ Craig Calhoun, “A Teoria Social e a Esfera Pública,” in *Teoria Social*, ed. Bryan Turner, trans. Rui Branco, (Algés: Difel, 1996), 437-79.

Gadamer and his refusal to accept that humans can be emancipated from both prejudice and the forces of domination.¹² Sampaio aptly states Habermas' criticism of positivism and hermeneutics as follows:

Positivism tries to reduce knowledge to the model of the empirical-analytical sciences and hermeneutics, privileging the historical-hermeneutical sciences, does not duly consider attention to the extra-linguistic factors that disturb understanding nor to the relations of domination that affect intersubjective communication.¹³

With this, Habermas proceeds to formulate his theory of the interests of knowledge as an antidote to the drawback of positivism.

4. Habermas' Interests of Knowledge

For Habermas, knowledge is consequent to three areas of human interests. This categorisation of knowledge is based on interests that propel epistemic processes. Habermas refers to these areas as 'knowledge constitutive interests'. They are different areas of human knowledge and inquiry that are expressions of distinct and basic human interests. The knowledge constitutive interests are: technical (domiciled in the natural sciences), practical (which is found in the domain of the social sciences) and emancipatory (that is consequent to critical reflection). Habermas takes up the task a systematic attempt to recover the movement of reflection by articulating the knowledge-constitutive interests that positivism had repressed.¹⁴

According to Habermas, the technical interest constitutes a unifying factor for the natural sciences in the bid to understand and control the facts of the natural world. The technical interest constitutes the empirical-analytical sciences which operate in the

¹² See Fontes, "Critique of Positivism, Hermeneutics and Communicative Reason in Habermas," 443-61.

¹³ Sampaio, "The Hermeneutic Conception of Culture," 83-90.

¹⁴ See Karl-Otto Apel, *Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1971), 174.

empirical domain and generally adopt a positivist philosophy.¹⁵ They employ the hypothetical-deductive model to establish rules of procedure for their engagement with nature and also for their critical verification. The form of knowledge that is consequent to this interest is what Habermas refers to the empirical-analytic knowledge. Furthermore, the technical interest of the natural sciences considers the relationship between man and nature, how to dominate nature, and enhance man's self-preservation. Habermas basically accepts this view of hypothesis testing in the natural sciences and some forms of social-scientific research, which he labels "empirical-analytic," in recognition of their heavy dependence on logico-mathematical analysis and empirical testing.¹⁶ However, Habermas is not at turn with the absolutization of the empirical-analytical model operated by positivism.¹⁷

The practical interest is the domain of the historical-hermeneutic or social sciences. The hermeneutic or interpretive sciences, on the other hand, focus on individuals, their actions and the meanings which underpin them, and draw on the philosophy of phenomenology.¹⁸ Unlike the empirical-analytic sciences that focus on observation and understanding of meaning of facts of nature, practical interest strives on social interactions. Social interactions produce social knowledge by binding consensual norms, which define reciprocal expectations about behaviour between individuals. The criterion of clarification of conditions for communication and intersubjectivity is used to determine what appropriate action is.¹⁹ Habermas notes that the practical interest is not inserted in instrumental rationality, but in communicative rationality, in the domain of social interaction, with the objective of

¹⁵ See John Huckle, "Environmental Education and Sustainability: A View from Critical Theory," in *Environmental Education: A Pathway to Sustainability*, ed. John Fien (Australia: Deakin University, 1993), 43–68.

¹⁶ See Huckle, "Environmental Education and Sustainability," 43-68.

¹⁷ See Fontes, "Critique of Positivism, Hermeneutics and Communicative Reason in Habermas," 443-61.

¹⁸ See Huckle, "Environmental Education and Sustainability," 43-68.

¹⁹ See Dan MacIsaac, "The Critical Theory of Jurgen Habermas," *History and Theory* (1996) (<https://www.physics.nau.edu/~danmac>), <https://physicsed.buffalostate.edu/danowner/habcritthy.html>. 31.10.2023

intersubjective understanding, of the “possible consensus of the agents within the scope of a transmitted self-understanding”.²⁰ The historical-hermeneutic sciences are based on our need to understand other people and act in the context of social traditions. However, the study of society can reveal either laws of social life or patterns of actions which are caused by unjust force and ideological mystification.²¹ Social sciences in the domain of the practical include; history, aesthetics, legal and ethnographic literary.

The last knowledge constitutive interest according to Habermas is emancipatory interest. This constitutes the domain of critical science. Despite been a separate domain of knowledge interest, its focus on emancipation demands that it is serviced by the theoretical principles of empirical and social sciences. This is the level where all the principle and theories in the empirical and social sciences are interpreted to serve the direct needs of the individual and the society. Critical sciences takes advantage of the technical control over the natural provided by the empirical sciences, and knowledge of mutual understanding, social harmony, appreciation and awareness of one another gained from the hermeneutic sciences. As John Huckle aptly puts it, this combines study of the real domain with investigations of the actual and empirical domains, and provides both knowledge of how nature and society work and how we can become involved in changing structures and processes through individual and collective action.²² Habermas opines that the “systematic sciences of action”, such as economics, sociology and politics, having as an objective similar to the empirical sciences the production of nomological knowledge, as critical sciences they are, should not be content with that. They must be at the service of the emancipation of man from the forces of nature and the oppression of man by man.²³

²⁰ Habermas, *The Idea of the Theory of Knowledge as Social Theory*, 139.

²¹ Roger Gottlieb, “The Contemporary Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas,” *Ethics* 91, No. 2 (January 1981): 280-95, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2380475>

²² Huckle, “Environmental Education and Sustainability,” 43-68.

²³ Habermas, *The Idea of the Theory of Knowledge as Social Theory*, 139.

The critical science is furnished by both the explanations and procedures of the natural sciences and interpretations of social agents and factors by the social sciences. The activities of both sciences provide basic instruments for pursuing the emancipatory desire. The emancipatory desire ignites critical reflection that seeks to detect features of personal and social life which are products of irrational constraints or unjust norms. In other words, critical science serves what Habermas terms “emancipation” freedom from individual irrationality and social injustice.²⁴ The procedure of achieving this is the core of Habermas’ theory of knowledge.

5. Communicative rationality

Habermas intends to develop a critical science of society where communication will be instrument of logic of social contradiction. To achieve this, he substituted Marxist concepts of forces and relations of production, with those of and of symbolically mediated interaction or communicative action.²⁵ A communicative process is an intersubjective consensus in a society which consists of two worlds that interrupt each other: the world of the system and the world of life. The world of the system (System) is divided into two subsystems: economy and administration; it is characterised by the strategic organisation of the economy and politics, constituting the macrostructure in which the forms of work and interaction are organised. In the system, instrumental rationality predominates, where the law serves to rationalise and legitimise the system.

In turn, the life world (*Lebenswelt*) represents culture, personality and society. It is characterised by everyday life where the communicative process takes place, where inter-subjective relations unfold. It is reproduced to the extent that it fulfils these three functions which transcend the perspective of the actor: the propagation of oral traditions; the integration of groups through

²⁴ Gottlieb, “The Contemporary Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas,” 280-95.

²⁵ Gorän Therborn, “Teoria Crítica e o Legado Marxista do Século XX,” in *Teoria Social*, ed. Bryan Turner, trans. Rodrigo Valador, (Algés: Difel, 1996), 58.

norms and values; and the socialization of future generations.²⁶ The World of life is constituted by the set of senses that allow interpreting and acting on the world, by symbolic creations that correspond to a pre-theoretical knowledge, such as traditions, art objects, immediate speech acts, personality structures and other subjective contents. Thus, for Habermas language and culture are constitutive elements of the lifeworld.²⁷

The relationship between these two worlds constitutes a problem in the Habermasian perspective, the result of instrumental rationality and excessive bureaucratisation, where the economy and power are constituted as natural truths that are not questioned, leading to the colonisation of the world of life. Communicative rationality emerges as an answer to the dominance of instrumental rationality, as an alternative to the rupture between the world of life and the system. Habermas presents the answer to this problematic in the paradigm of communicative action. Communicative action in response to negative socialist theories reopens access to an emancipatory sphere of action. Labour as the central category of Marxism is now represented by language. For Habermas, "understanding is immanent as telos in human language."²⁸ That is, due to the pre-scientific fact that people are trained to communicate through language, a line of emancipation towards understanding is already followed. Habermas intends to ground the imperative of emancipation within the social sciences, not by describing this ideal, but by affirming the steps of a theory of communicative competence, whose paradigm should be based on freedom, criticism and rationality.

Habermas defends a consensual theory of truth, which can only be defined through the notion of discourse (*Diskurs*), in which it takes the form of dialogue, characterised by argumentation in a context of reflexive communication. For this German theorist, truth

²⁶ Jurgen Habermas, *Discurso Filosófico da Modernidade*, (Lisboa: Publicações Dom Quixote, 1990), 279.

²⁷ Jurgen Habermas, *Teoría de la Acción Comunicativa. II – Crítica de la Razón Funcionalista*, trans. Manuel Jiménez Redondo (Madrid: Taurus, 1992), 177.

²⁸ Habermas, *Teoría de la Acción Comunicativa. II – Crítica de la Razón Funcionalista*, 369.

is not grounded in experience, although it may be supported by it, but within intersubjective communication. Also, according to Habermas, it is only through the argumentative process that validity claims can be legitimised. The notions of consensus, truth and argumentation and counter-argumentation presuppose an ideal communicative situation, so as to avoid false consensus, which calls for full democracy. The subject in question must seek that his speech be understandable; he undertakes to tell the truth; he undertakes to conform his attitude to the existing norms that regulate interpersonal relations and must be sincere.²⁹

6. The 21st Century West African Socio-Political Order

The West African sub-region is a political and economic designation of countries in a geographical area of Africa that comprises of Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Côte D'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo. These countries have similar historical experience that can simply be describes as pre-colonial, slavery, colonial and post-independence eras. Furthermore, these countries were decided as political entities by the colonial masters.

The region has records of post-independent crisis and political stability, including civil wars at one point or the other in the countries in the sub-region. While these have remained constant to some extent, there seems to be no beacon of hope at sight since the outbreak of Covid-19 and subsequent lockdown. In Nigeria, for instance, the socio-political sphere became further turbulent with events such as #EndSARS protests, cashless policy of the formal CBN governor Emefiele, subsidy removal from PMS. However, Ope Adetayo identifies ten of the top issues that recently defined the socio-political landscape across West Africa in 2022 as follow: Cost-of-living crisis, Return of stolen art, Floods, Coups plotters and rebels, Armed groups' expansion, Wagner in West Africa, Twitter: Here today, gone tomorrow, expansion of Google footprint in West

²⁹ Jurgen Habermas, *Moral Conscience and Communicative Actions*, trans. Christian Lenhardt and Sherrie Nicholson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 12.

Africa, Women's rights and Election fever.³⁰ This is not withstanding the leadership crisis that pervades the region like other parts of the continent.

The lack of good leadership has been the bane of the Nigeria-state and the nightmare of well-meaning developmental strides in the sub-region. Responsible political leadership is a bane to the region. Socio-political tensions thrive due to political leadership in West Africa sub-region. Nigeria, as a case study, the issue on corruption is not only in politics, rather it has eaten deep into various sectors within the Nigerian system. Right from independence, through the military regimes and the republic, the problem has been a ravaging pest. Such that even the E.F.C.C (Economic and Financial Crimes Commission) is conceived to be politicized.³¹ This remains persistent as many politicians and leaders just want to accumulate wealth for themselves and practice political inheritance.

The attitudes of the leaders have destroyed the processes for development and left the country in the hands of mediocre. Bad governance has contributed 98% of poverty in Nigeria. Governance is in the hands of the few in Nigeria who have no genuine interest in developing the country. The country is in the hands of those who plunder her resources and create vicious poverty.³²

In short, Nigeria's problem is leadership, and this incorporates the other issues. Good leadership entails selfless service and the ability to build strong principles in all areas of the people's lives. More practically, since the advent of the new government in the

³⁰ Ope Adetayo, "The Good, Bad, and The Ugly: West Africa's Big Issues in 2022: A Recap of Top Issues in West Africa in 2022, including Heated Political Campaigns And Armed Groups Gaining Ground," *Aljazeera*, December 22, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/12/22/the-good-bad-and-the-ugly-west-africas-big-issues-in-202222>.

³¹ Francis Ayodeji Adetoro, *A Critique of Obafemi Awolowo's Theory of the State* (Unpublished Bachelor's Degree Philosophy Thesis, St. Albert the Great Major Seminary, Idowu-Offoran, 2022), 51.

³² Philip Nnaemeka Agashi, "Awolowo's Political Philosophy: A Panacea for Good Governance, Ebonyi State University," *Middle-East Journal of Scientific Research* 27, no. 2 (2019): 138-43, quoted in Adetoro, *A Critique of Obafemi Awolowo's Theory of the State*, 51.

country, this socio-economic situation of the country has gone down the drain. Even recently, in the face of the difficulties faced by the citizens, the parliament passed a bill to return to the use of the old national anthem. This was signed by the president Bola Ahmed Tinubu on 29th May, 2024. This has made the citizens question the priorities of the president. The journalist Mansur Abubakar, BBC News, Kano points out that

Some Nigerians have expressed outrage after the country's national anthem was changed with little consultation. President Bola Tinubu on Wednesday signed into law the bill to revert to Nigeria's old national anthem which was dropped by a military government in 1978. The newly re-adopted anthem, which begins 'Nigeria, We Hail Thee,' was written by Lillian Jean Williams in 1959 and composed by Frances Berda. Speaking on his first anniversary in office, President Tinubu said the anthem symbolised Nigeria's diversity. But many have questioned his priorities amid the cost-of-living crisis. Reacting online, some Nigerians said the country had more pressing problems such as insecurity, rising inflation and a foreign exchange crisis.³³

This and many other instances show the questionable disposition of the government which culminates in the lack of communication with the citizens. So, following Obafemi Awolowo we must state that good governance is that which possesses peaceful social and political order embedded in liberty and the provision of basic social amenities for man in the society.³⁴ With Habermas also, there is the need to emphasize the importance of proper and acute communication between the government which could take the form of referendum, and citizens in order to maintain a good political space and also give them a sense of belongingness.

Nigeria is not only the country experiencing one form of anomaly or the other. According to the BTI Report 2024, "systemic

³³ Mansur Abubakar, "Outrage as Nigeria Changes National Anthem," *BBC News*, accessed May 29, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c3gg7z0n4jxo>.

³⁴ Adetoro, *A Critique of Obafemi Awolowo's Theory of the State*, 52.

challenges, including corruption and economic mismanagement are really affecting Ghana. These issues have deepened inequality in the country, as evident in the standard of living disparities between rural and urban areas and in the northern/southern divide.”³⁵ More so, in Cameroon, Crisis Group reports that “Cameroon is beset with two major violent conflicts but also faces rising ethno-political tensions on- and offline. The bigger conflict, between the government and separatists from the English-speaking minority, started in 2017 and has killed over 6,000 people. It has displaced 765,000 people, of whom over 70,000 are refugees in Nigeria. The country also faces a reinvigorated jihadist insurgency with deadly attacks in the Lake Chad area. The war with Boko Haram, centred in the Far North, has killed over 3,000 Cameroonians, displaced about 250,000 and triggered the rise of vigilante self-defence groups. Nascent ethnic clashes along the border with Chad have displaced thousands too. Elsewhere, and particularly following the October 2018 presidential election, ethnic discourse is heightening political tensions on- and offline.”³⁶ These examples show that more work needs to be done by government of West African countries particularly Nigeria in order to be the condition of life of their citizens.

7. Implications of Habermas' Critical Social Theory for 21st Century West African Socio-Political Order

The sub-region is not at the best position yet, it is only striving in the best situation possible. This best situation possible is the life experience in the sub-region. The interplay of Habermas' ‘the world of the system’ and ‘the world of life’ take place in this best situation possible in the sub-region. The political class occupying ‘the world of the system’ come up with policies that end up not meeting the needs of ‘the world of life’. There is need to improve intra and extra communication by the political class and the

³⁵ “Ghana Country Report 2024,” BTI Report 2024, accessed May 29, 2024, <https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/GHA>.

³⁶ “Cameroon,” International Crisis Group, accessed May 29, 2024, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/cameroon>.

ordinary citizens. In addition to understanding each other, they need to understand the working or *modus operandi* of government and government agencies including their law enforcement apparatus. This will come about through listening, articulating and proper interpretation of all feedbacks, reaction and warnings.

Dialectics of perspectives will aid situating issues rightly and interpretations properly, as different opinions shape issues under focus. No one can easily or rightly know nor interpret other minds. At the base of communicative rationality is the appreciation and recognition of others as capable rational beings. This is an anti-Cartesian solipsist conception of other minds. The recognition is the mark of the dynamism inherent in any critical theory. Basically, objectivity usually is usually initiated from an individual and later becomes collective. As such, there is need for effort to corroborate the array of theories propounded for a better Africa which fall under the headings – cultural nationalism, plaintive nationalism, race and colonial-imperialism, radical nationalism, pan-African nationalism, neo-colonialism, ideological and integral nationalism and African non-alignment in African socio-political philosophy.³⁷

So, from Habermas' theory, he is right that in the era of the democratic revolutions a public sphere emerged in which for the first time in history ordinary citizens could participate in political discussion and debate, organize, and struggle against unjust authority, while militating for social change, and that this sphere was institutionalized, however imperfectly, in later developments of Western societies. This also points to the increasingly important functions of the media and communication in politics and everyday life.³⁸ In line with this also, the impact of technology on development has been profound and far-reaching, with the potential to create transformative change in various sectors of society. As technology continues to evolve and innovate, it is essential for policymakers, businesses, and individuals to harness

³⁷ Gideon-Cyrus Mutiso and S.W. Rohio, eds., *Readings in African Political Thought* (London: Heinemann, 1974), 14.

³⁸ Douglas Kellner, "Habermas, the Public Sphere, and Democracy: A Critical Intervention," accessed May 29, 2024, <http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/>

its potential for positive development and progress while also addressing the challenges and risks associated with technological advancements. By leveraging technology effectively and responsibly, we can shape a more equitable, inclusive, and sustainable future for all.

8. Sustainable Agents of Desired African Socio-Political Sub-Region

Academia: Considering the necessity of pragmatic frameworks to drive the course of the desired sub-region, the immediate recourse for a turnaround is the academia. The academia constitutes an immeasurable treasure to generate and facilitate potent ideas to salvage any nation from any form of quagmire. Due to their exposure to vast array of ideas, theories and ideologies from different origins and experience, coupled with their creative abilities in the interpretation and application of those ideas, the academia is natural place of succour. This is further boosted by their abilities to generate or formulate viable theories that pay attentions to the natural and social variables in the sub-region. Any attempt to formulate a theory must not ignore the emancipatory demand of Habermas' critical science. This affirms that academia remains indispensable for transformation of any polity.

Political Parties: Political parties, in Africa, as elsewhere in the world play a vital role in democracy.³⁹ Political parties play a key role in organizing elections. They have a wider function of representation, not only in the sense of standing for their members, constituents or sections of the public but helping to articulate and aggregate their interests.⁴⁰ However, political parties not only provide the means by which citizens can participate in the governance process, but also structure the political landscape to enable competition between varying interests and policy

³⁹ Richard Sandbrook, "Transitions Without Consolidation: Democratization in Six African States," *Third World Quarterly* 17, No. 1 (March 1996): 76.

⁴⁰ Scott Mainwaring and Timothy Scully, eds., "Building Democratic Institutions," *The Journal of Politics* 58, No. 3 (August 1996): 924-26, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2960475>.

objectives.⁴¹ Emphatically, the importance of political parties lies in the functions they perform in modern democracies. These include the articulation and aggregating of diverse interests, recruitment and preparation of candidates for electoral office, crafting policy alternatives and setting the policy agenda, organising and participating in electoral competition and forming effective government and thus integrating groups and individuals into the democratic process.⁴² In this light, political parties serve the important function of interest aggregation, channelling disparate social groupings and interests into a common socio-political platform and thus providing a stabilizing effect to an otherwise fractious society.⁴³ Thus, at the core of political parties is the interest of the citizenry thereby leading to a wholesome development of the state. More importantly, we can agree with Habermas who, according to William E. Scheuerman wants “political decision-making to be scaled up to our globalizing economy. Democracy and the welfare state not only need to catch up to globalization if they are to survive, but can only do so when reconstituted in new and more inclusionary ways beyond the nation state. He considers it a mistake to try to shore up the nation state with outdated ideas of political identity based on common ethnicity or far-reaching cultural or linguistic sameness.”⁴⁴ This implies an unbiased and unprejudiced approach to governance and political cohesion.

Social Media: Simply, social media has reformed the way Africans communicate and socialize. People now create, share, exchange, and modify their ideas in virtual communities. In governance, social media had become a tool that both the political

⁴¹ Robert Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971).

⁴² Richard S. Katz, *Democracy and Elections* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 60.

⁴³ Carrie Manning, “Assessing African Party Systems After the Third Wave,” *Party Politics* 11, no. 6 (November 2005): 707-27.

⁴⁴ William E. Scheuerman, “Habermas and the Fate of Democracy,” accessed April, 15, 2024, <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/william-e-scheuerman-habermas-and-fate-democracy/>.

aspirants and the populace use in conflating ideologies in forms of praise, expectations and reprimanding when wrongs are committed. It is the new forum that brings people to exchange ideas and mobilize – true governance. The continuous interaction of people on these platforms creates a community discourse where people can share their views on society's problems and propagate developmental ideologies. It can support greater understanding and cohesion between people who consider themselves different from one another. This, in turn, enables citizens to be active stakeholders in understanding policies and use the impartial information provided to exercise their human rights.⁴⁵

Media Houses: In areas of socio-political development, where the media comes in development process is through what is called “development communication”.⁴⁶ This is the type of communication which is consciously packaged by the sender such that the message content or the information sent could persuade, encourage or convince the receiver or target audience to adopt an attitude and participate in actualizing a development plan or goal. At certain instances, the message sent aims at making the target audience adopt a positive attitudinal change towards a development purpose.⁴⁷ Through educating, informing and entertaining, the media makes the society, her members or the nation as well as the leadership of the very society, aware of the importance and need to undertake certain process or processes of national development. Also attached to these three basic roles of media is another role of persuasion, where media are seen as virile tools of applying persuasive efforts

to influence people's actions towards a particular direction. The mass media are therefore seen for their role in furnishing the

⁴⁵ Johannes Bhanye, Ruvimbo Shayamunda, and Rungamai Chipso Tavirai, “Social Media in the African Context: A Review Study on Benefits and Pitfalls,” *ResearchGate* (July 2023): 17, DOI: 10.1007/978-3-030-68127-2_366-1.

⁴⁶ Isa Muhammad Inuwa, “Role of the Media in National Development,” accessed January, 21, 2024, <https://www.gamji.com/article6000/NEWS7617.htm>

⁴⁷ Inuwa, “Role of the Media in National Development.”

public with necessary information to achieve development or change goals. In essence, media is to help chart a course for the public in line with the agenda setting theory, thereby creating in the minds of the people, issues that should be viewed as priority issues including development programmes and policies.⁴⁸

Organisations in Religious Groups: Religion is of great importance in Africa in that most people engage in some form of religious practice from time to time, and many profess membership of some formal religious organisation, traditional, Muslim, Christian or otherwise. Many Africans voluntarily associate themselves with religious networks, which they use for a variety of purposes – social, economic and even political – that go beyond the strictly religious aspect.⁴⁹ Religion plays an indispensable role in fostering values such as honesty, integrity, openness, forthrightness and tolerance.⁵⁰ Such values are crucial for the development of good economic and democratic political systems. African economic and democratic political systems are still grossly underdeveloped. Signs of underdevelopment are evident in weak economic institutions and in the almost total absence of robust opposition parties in countries such as Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Ghana, Togo and Malawi, but also many others. The low level of forthrightness and transparency within political and economic institutions and by leaders is hindering social progress as this fosters corruption and stifles the development of civil societies. The indirect influence of religious culture on economic and political culture through the transference of religious values to these could therefore benefit

⁴⁸ Chinenye Nwabueze, “Mass Media and Community Mobilization for Development: An Analytical Approach,” *International Journal of Communication*, 1, No. 1 (2005): 1-6.

⁴⁹ “The Role of Religion in African Development,” CASADE, accessed January 1, 2024, <https://casade.org/development-security/the-role-of-religion-in-african-development/>.

⁵⁰ Ogbu U. Kalu, “Harsh Flutes: The Religious Dimension of the Legitimacy Crisis in Nigeria, 1993-1998,” in *Religions in Africa: Conflicts, Politics and Social Ethics: The Collected Essays of Ogbu Uke Kalu 3*, eds., Wilhelmina J. Kalu, Nimi Wariboko, and Toyin Falola (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2010), 31-64.

economic and political institutions in Africa.⁵¹ We can therefore note that religion is useful in mobilising resources that would not otherwise have been mobilised to address community problems. It assists in raising consciousness about community problems among people who would not otherwise be aware of those problems. It creates linkages between social groups that would not normally exist. Religious communities such as churches assist in empowering social groups that usually have little influence.⁵²

9. Conclusion

From the foregoing, we have seen that for Habermas, knowledge is not simply a reflection of an external reality, but is shaped by the language and social practices through which it is produced. This means that our understanding of the world is always mediated through language and social interaction, and is therefore always partial and contingent. Habermas believes that when individuals engage in open and honest communication, they are more likely to arrive at objective and valid knowledge, as opposed to when they are guided by self-interest or ideology. Furthermore, he argues that the public sphere is a crucial site for the production and dissemination of knowledge. The public sphere is a space where individuals come together to engage in rational debate and discussion about matters of common concern. In this way, the public sphere serves as a check on the power of dominant institutions and ideologies, and allows for the creation of alternative forms of knowledge and understanding. He also believes that it is important to be critical of ideology and to strive for a more reflexive and self-aware form of knowledge production that takes into account the ways in which power and inequality shape our understanding of the world.

⁵¹ Simon Peter I. Agi, "Religion and the Consolidation of Democracy in Nigeria," in *Civil Society and the Consolidation of Democracy in Nigeria*, ed. O. E. Uya, (Ibadan: Daybis, 2008), 123-38.

⁵² Obaji M. Agbiji and Ignatius Swart, "Religion and Social Transformation in Africa: A Critical and Appreciative Perspective," *Scriptura* 114, No. 1 (2015): 11.

On its practicality, Habermas' critical social theory of knowledge is deeply influenced by his commitment to democracy and the idea of a just and inclusive society. A truly democratic society is one in which individuals have the freedom to engage in open and honest dialogue with one another, and in which power is distributed in a fair and equitable manner. In this way, Habermas' theory of knowledge is not just a scholarly endeavour, but a political and ethical project aimed at creating a more just and democratic society. Within the African purview therefore, Habermas' critical social theory of knowledge offers a rich and insightful analysis of the ways in which knowledge is produced, distributed, and used in society. By emphasizing the role of language, communicative rationality, the public sphere, the lifeworld, ideology, and democracy, Habermas provides a powerful framework for understanding how knowledge shapes our understanding of the world and our relationships with others.