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ТЕОРИЯ КОММУНИКАТИВНОГО ДЕЙСТВИЯ И ИДЕЯ ПОСТСЕКУЛЯРНОГО ОБЩЕСТВА ХАБЕРМАСА: КРИТИЧЕСКАЯ ИНТЕРПРЕТАЦИЯ В РАМКАХ КИТАЙСКОЙ ВЕРСИИ НЕОМАРКСИЗМА

ТАН ЮНБО¹⁾

¹⁾Белорусский государственный университет, пр. Независимости, 4, 220030, г. Минск, Беларусь

Аннотация. Эксплицируются основные положения теории коммуникативного действия Хабермаса и подчеркивается, что она органично сопрягается с его идеями о роли политической публичной сферы в развитии демократических основ и институтов западных обществ. Отмечается, что перспективным выходом из тупиков радикально секуляризованных социумов может стать идея постсекулярного общества Хабермаса. Выявляются социально-конструктивные, идеологически ангажированные и утопические стороны идей и концепций коммуникативной рациональности, делиберативной демократии, постсекулярного общества. Осмысливается практика модернизации современного Китая, характерные для него технологии социального управления и духовные традиции взаимопроникновения светских и религиозных компонентов в культурной жизни.

Ключевые слова: Ю. Хабермас; коммуникативное действие; публичная сфера; делиберативная демократия; секуляризация; постсекулярное общество; неомарксизм; китайская версия неомарксизма.

THE THEORY OF COMMUNICATIVE ACTION AND THE IDEA OF A POST-SECULAR SOCIETY BY HABERMAS: CRITICAL INTERPRETATION IN THE CHINESE VERSION OF NEO-MARXISM

TANG YONGBO^a

^aBelarusian State University, 4 Niezaliezhnasci Avenue, Minsk 220030, Belarus

Abstract. The article explicates the fundamental tenets of Habermas' theory of communicative action, emphasising its organic alignment with his ideas on the role of the political public sphere in the development of democratic foundations and institutions in Western societies. It notes that Habermas' idea of a post-secular society may offer a promising way out of the impasses of radically secularised societies. The article explores the socially constructive, ideologically engaged, and utopian aspects of the ideas and concepts of communicative rationality, deliberative democracy, and post-secular society. It also examines the modernisation practices of contemporary China, its characteristic technologies of social governance, and the spiritual traditions of the interpenetration of secular and religious components in the cultural life.

Keywords: J. Habermas; communicative action; public sphere; deliberative democracy; secularisation; post-secular society; neo-Marxism; Chinese version of neo-Marxism.

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Автор:

Тан Юнбо – аспирант кафедры философии и методологии науки факультета философии и социальных наук. Научный руководитель – доктор философских наук, профессор А. И. Зеленков.

Author:

Tang Yongbo, postgraduate student at the department of philosophy and methodology of science, faculty of philosophy and social sciences.
yongbo.tang@mail.ru

Introduction

As a leading figure in contemporary Western Marxism, Jürgen Habermas introduced the concept of a post-secular society in response to the pressing existential challenges of modernity. This concept addresses the paradox of an increasingly secularised society in which religion persists and even strengthens. His theory critically examines and systematises the relationship between secular rationality, democratic constitutionalism, and religious belief, advocating for either a recognition or a reconstruction of traditional understandings. In essence, this represents a critique of the conventional secular worldview, offering a renewed theoretical perspective on the self-evident realities of contemporary society [1, p. 8].

The theoretical and practical manifestations of Marxism's Sinicisation within contemporary Chinese socialism share methodological and strategic affinities with neo-Marxist innovations in Marxist theory and

practice. Thus, it can be considered a Sinicized version of neo-Marxism. Examining Habermas' concept of a post-secular society through the lens of a Sinicised neo-Marxism not only expands the scope of its conceptual connotations and applicable social contexts but also fosters deeper reflections on the relationship between science and religion, secular rationality and religious belief, within the trajectory of China's modernisation. This approach represents a new interpretative perspective on Habermas' theory, an intellectual inquiry into the Sinicization of Marxism, and a deeper engagement with neo-Marxist thought. Given this, the present study aims to analyse the Chinese adaptation of neo-Marxism through the lens of J. Habermas' concept of a post-secular society. Based on this analysis, it will further explore the value and limitations of J. Habermas' concept of a post-secular society from the perspective of the Chinese adaptation of neo-Marxism.

The public sphere as a field of rational communicative action

Since its inception, Marxism has also been interpreted within the domain of Western philosophical thought, primarily through the lens of Western philosophical traditions, methodologies, and conceptual frameworks. This interpretation, known in Chinese academia as «Western Marxism», approaches Marxism systematically from the standpoint of Western philosophical traditions and their modern developments. Although fundamentally aligned with the traditions of social democracy or reformism (and having distanced itself from classical Marxism as early as the Second International) it has nevertheless proposed critical perspectives on classical Marxism and introduced theoretical innovations rooted in contemporary social realities. These contributions provide valuable insights for the further Sinicisation and innovative development of Marxism. Among contemporary Western Marxists, J. Habermas stands out as the most influential figure and is widely regarded as one of the most prominent philosophers of our time. His thought is intricate and profound, and among his many contributions, his concept of a post-secular society has had a particularly significant impact, serving as a crucial framework for understanding his philosophy and ideas.

Rational definition of the public sphere by J. Habermas. As a prominent figure of the Frankfurt school and a leading representative of neo-Marxism, J. Habermas developed a complex and profound intellectual system. Building upon and advancing Kantian philosophy, he defended the categorisation of science and religion as outlined by I. Kant and upheld the legitimacy of the Enlightenment. J. Habermas argued that while humanity's scientific exploration of the unknown in nature is immensely valuable, it remains inherently limited. The modernity grounded in scientific discourse and values, he asserted, is still an «unfinished project». Nota-

bly, his theory of communicative action offers a powerful critique of postmodernist trends that have exerted significant influence in contemporary Western thought [2, p. 10].

The theory of communicative action also reflects J. Habermas' original epistemological insights. From an epistemological standpoint, he adhered to the idea of human cognitive interests, arguing that all knowledge originates from human interests. This laid the theoretical foundation for his rationalist construction of communicative action theory. His rationally grounded theory embraces a consistent universalism, not directed toward any specific nation, ethnicity, or particular group, but instead rooted in reflections on the human condition and its future. The premise of his concern for common human issues lies in humanism, specifically a strong endorsement of the bourgeois doctrine of human rights. Therefore, while J. Habermas holds that secular democratic constitutionalism is worthy of respect, he contends that when politics conflicts with human rights, the universal value of the latter must prevail [3, p. 126]. From this universalist perspective, J. Habermas' theory of communicative action and his concept of the public sphere, along with his reflections on science, social critique, and his efforts to reconstruct Enlightenment rationality, have had a profound impact on contemporary Western philosophical discourse.

Rationally based public sphere and the construction of idea of a post-secular society. J. Habermas' formulation of the concept of a post-secular society is rooted in a concrete socio-historical context. Since the advent of capitalism, the apparent conflict between secular rationality and religious faith has seemingly driven the process of modernisation, in which secularisation was expected to advance alongside scientific

progress and globalisation. Over the past two centuries, it was widely assumed that secularisation would manifest as the gradual decline of religious influence. However, in contemporary reality, religious forces have not only failed to wane but also have, in certain regions, undergone a resurgence. Even in countries and regions where religious influence has traditionally been weaker, religious or quasi-religious beliefs persist, defying long-standing expectations of their gradual disappearance. This discrepancy between secularisation theory's predictions and the persistence of religious faith highlights a fundamental mismatch between traditional secularisation paradigms and actual social developments.

In modern society, the public sphere formed through interpersonal communication necessitates the exploration of a path toward mutual reconciliation, due to individual differences in perspectives on religion and science. These divergences reflect deeper epistemological distinctions, traditionally framed in philosophy as the dichotomy between rationality and irrationality. However, J. Habermas advocates for a rational examination of the relationship between religion and science, viewing it as one of the most fundamental social relations that shapes communication within the public sphere of human society. It is through this lens that he formulates his foundational vision of a post-secular society.

The prevalence of issues within public actions in the public sphere, arising from the absence of rational guidance, reveals the limitations of traditional secularisation theories, which fail to adequately address the complexities of contemporary reality. As a result, the need for a critical reinterpretation of these theories becomes both evident and necessary [4, p. 5]. It is precisely in response to these theoretical shortcomings that J. Habermas introduced the concept of a post-secular society. In 2005, he published his monograph «Between naturalism and religion», which compiled eleven essays written between 2001 and 2005. Through these essays, J. Habermas progressively articulated his concept of a post-secular society. More specifically, in his 2003 essay «Faith and knowledge», he explicitly engaged with the limitations of traditional secularisation theories and proposed the need for a revised understanding of the relationship between secularism and religion in contemporary society. In these papers, J. Habermas gradually introduced his concept of a post-secular society. More specifically, in his 2003 works «Faith and knowledge» and «Pre-political foundations of the democratic constitutional state», he assessed the notion of secularisation and, for the first time, proposed the concept of a post-secular society. In 2008, J. Habermas further elaborated on issues related to a post-secular society in his article «Notes on a post-secular society» [5, p. 485].

In J. Habermas' view, instrumental action is primarily manifested in the realm of labour, whereas communicative action is oriented toward mutual understanding and

consensus among agents (Lat. *consensus* – agreement or accord). It is essential to emphasise that communicative action is not synonymous with mere communication. As J. Habermas clarifies, «...to avoid misunderstanding, let me reiterate: communicative action is not identical with communication itself. Language is a medium of communication that serves the purpose of mutual understanding. And whenever actors aim at mutual understanding to coordinate their actions, they pursue a specific goal... Communicative action refers to a type of interaction coordinated through speech acts, but it is not reducible to the speech act itself»¹ [6, p. 150–151]. Its aim is to direct human endeavors toward intersubjective understanding. J. Habermas contends that self-consciousness arises through the process of affirming one's existence, which inherently includes the awareness of the *Other*; the *I* acquires self-knowledge through interaction with the *Thou*. Intersubjectivity compels individuals to reflect on their limitations, opening the possibility for a mode of interaction that transcends the instrumental use of others for self-advancement – a form of communicative praxis that may evolve into new modes grounded in cooperation and mutual recognition of personhood [7, p. 38–39].

Communicative action constitutes one of the core concepts of the theory of communicative action. Its essence lies in the actors' orientation toward reaching understanding, fostering mutual agreement, and resolving divergences: «Communicative action is a form of interaction in which participants coordinate and unify their action plans to achieve consensus, and this consensus is assessed through intersubjective recognition of validity claims... When communicating within a propositional framework, both the speaker and the hearer perform the function of jointly sustaining the shared lifeworld. Communicative action employs language as its medium and achieves mutual understanding by coordinating the efforts of communicative subjects... As a functional dimension of understanding, communicative action serves the continuity of tradition and the renewal of cultural knowledge; on the level of action coordination, it promotes social interaction and facilitates solidarity; and in terms of socialisation, it contributes to the formation of individual identity» [6, p. 41–42].

The interaction and communication between the private and the public, and their role in the construction of society, form one of the most pivotal themes in J. Habermas' thought. In his view, publicity or the public sphere (Germ. *Öffentlichkeit*) represents a complex phenomenon. This complexity, as J. Habermas conceives it, does not lie in the interdisciplinary integration of fields such as jurisprudence, political science, or the philosophy of history, but rather in an approach that warrants its own autonomous perspective. As early as antiquity, the polis was conceived as a domain shared by all free citizens (anc. Greek *koine*), distinct from the

¹Here and further translated by us. – T. Yo.

private sphere of the individual (anc. Greek *oikos*), which pertained to personal affairs (anc. Greek *idia*). Social life did not merely unfold in the marketplace (anc. Greek *agora*), nor was it confined to any specific space; instead, it was constituted through linguistic interaction (anc. Greek *lexis*), which could take the form of juridical discourse or be transformed into collective praxis (anc. Greek *praxis*) [8, p. 306–307].

According to the model constructed by J. Habermas, publicity is not constituted through the formation of specific social structures, but rather established in its spiritual and ideological form. Publicity represents a transversal dimension of society, originating in the Hellenistic period and continuously evolving throughout history, while its foundational ideas have remained intact. In modern society, an entirely new form of publicity has emerged. The private and the public spheres exhibit a dualistic structure. The separation of individual life has gradually evolved, accompanied by the establishment of mechanisms that protect personal privacy. This development has reinforced the connection between the public and the state. The formation of civil society (or bourgeois society) emerged from the interconnection of various private interests once liberated from feudal constraints. This process led to the rise of a system of public opinion, which bears the political function of integrating the Third Estate and exercises critical oversight over the exercise of power. This public sphere is autonomous, safeguarding the process of free self-organisation among equal subjects from interference by state or class interests. Its principal weapon is the force of persuasive argumentation [9, p. 120].

According to J. Habermas, contends that truth is communication, and genuine communication is fundamentally concerned with the pursuit of truth. Communication is embedded within the system of action; however, actors can act only upon achieving an understanding of the situation in which they find themselves. Communicative action reconstructs the social field into a living world composed of several key dimensions: culture – the sphere in which individuals generate and assimilate knowledge; community – wherein individuals construct and sustain a specific relational field, that is, solidarity; socialisation – the process through which individuals first form their personality and subsequently become actors, coordinated through the communicative medium of language. Communicative action takes precedence over goal-directed behaviour; the processes of social integration, socialisation, and institutionalisation unfold within a culturally interpretative and communicative realm. Every individual act within society entails a comparison between newly emerging meanings and preexisting cultural meanings. Thus, J. Habermas asserts: «What I mean by culture is the reservoir of interpretive knowledge that participants in interaction draw upon to reach understanding about something in the world. What I mean by society is the legitimate or-

der through which participants realize solidarity by establishing their belonging to a social group. And what I mean by personality is the set of competences that enables subjects to use language and action, to participate in reaching understanding and to establish their own identity thereby» [6, p. 44]. Therefore, for J. Habermas, the essence of communication lies in the socially recognised identity of the individual, while communicative action constitutes the mechanism for maintaining or renewing consensus, and thereby ensuring social stability.

At the heart of communication lies mutual understanding, which involves not only the speaker's intention to reach agreement and the mutual suspension of subjectivity, but also the shared nature of the lifeworld. One of the central components of J. Habermas' theory is the tension between the lifeworld and the system. The latter is understood as the realm of instrumental relations associated with the market and the state. J. Habermas argues that the lifeworld is increasingly being colonised by the system. The system is parasitic in structure, as its development depends on the reproduction of the lifeworld. It rationalises the lifeworld and subordinates it to the imperatives of the economy and state governance. In this context, discourse must come to the fore: «In discourse, we attempt to regenerate the consensus that was previously achieved in communicative action through argumentation... Discourse also manifests a "compulsion" to cooperate, but it is a nonviolent compulsion – the power of the better argument. In discursive communication, it is the non-coercive force of the argument that prevails. Argumentation is regarded as the primary path to the continued pursuit of consensus» [6, p. 176]. Ultimately, the dialectical reconstruction of the theory of communicative rationality points toward its realisation in practice – that is, the unfolding of the transformative potential immanent within reality. Thus, the dialectical reconstruction of communicative theory advances toward its actualisation, guided by the intention to release the inherent transformative capacities embedded in the fabric of the real.

The fundamental connotation of Habermas' theory of communicative action in the public sphere from the perspective of a post-secular society. A post-secular society is defined in relation to the secularised society. In this context, a secularised society refers to one in which the functional differentiation of social subsystems has increasingly confined religious institutions and communities to their core function of providing spiritual solace, compelling them to relinquish their competitive influence in other social domains. Secularisation implies a diminishing role for religion in society, potentially leading to its retreat from the public sphere. However, the contemporary reality presents an entirely different scenario. Religious activities worldwide are experiencing a resurgence, accompanied by issues stemming from religious proselytism

and radicalism. The evolving presence of religion has altered public perceptions of secularisation, as its influence on social and political life continues to expand. The introduction of the concept of a post-secular society reflects a shift in contemporary consciousness: although some still firmly believe in the progressive secularisation of religion, it remains an enduring phenomenon with an undeniably significant role in the public sphere.

While J. Habermas introduced the notion of a post-secular society, he did not explicitly define its intrinsic meaning. However, based on his extensive series of essays, monographs, and academic discussions since the turn of the 21st century, the concept of a post-secular society can be understood in two primary dimensions. First, a post-secular society is not one in which secularisation has been completed, but rather one where secularisation remains an ongoing process, continuing as a fundamental developmental trend. Second, the continuous secularisation driven by modern politics, economics, and technology has not validated the tenets of secularism, nor has it resulted in the complete privatisation, marginalisation, or ultimate dissolution of religion through the triumph of scientific rationality. On the contrary, religion has not only persisted in an era of advanced scientific and technological progress but also has shown no signs of decline; in certain regions and nations, it has even witnessed a revival [10, p. 10]. Consequently, the secularist assumptions inherent in traditional theories of secularisation, particularly regarding the anticipated relationship between secular rationality and religious belief, fail to adequately interpret the complex interplay between religion and science in contemporary society. This necessitates a critical reevaluation and reinterpretation of these theories to accurately delineate the relationship between religion and science. Such an analysis would help establish an appropriate mode of coexistence between the two, effectively regulate their interactions, and, on this basis, address broader issues concerning the relationship between science and religion, knowledge and faith, the public sphere and religion, secularism and religion, democracy and constitutionalism vis-à-vis religion, as well as the deeper philosophical and spiritual dimensions of reason and religion [11, p. 108]. In J. Habermas' view, if current trends persist, religion is not necessarily destined to lose its significance and influence. As a staunch advocate of democracy and civil society, he argues that religious communities are fully entitled to claim comprehensive participation in public life. On their part, religious groups must first acknowledge the existence of other religions and worldviews, and be willing to examine these alternatives without questioning the unique salvific claims of their own doctrine. This entails, among other things, the recognition that «autonomous processes of cognition should not be in conflict with interpretations related to salvation» [12, p. 131–132]. Ultimately, «religious citizens ought to adopt an epistemic stance

that recognises the priority of secular modes of reasoning in the political sphere» [12, p. 132]. Should both parties be willing to shoulder this demanding responsibility, a post-secular society could emerge as a stable and mutually beneficial model of coexistence, enabling people with different worldviews to live together peacefully. Evidently, J. Habermas' concept of a post-secular society, while rooted in the discourse on the relationship between religion and secularism, extends beyond this foundation to engage with profound questions about contemporary values and the management of key societal relationships. As such, it is a highly significant concept, articulating an essential and influential philosophical perspective.

From the perspective of a post-secular society, J. Habermas offers his own reflections on the concept of the public sphere. As one of the most influential Western theorists of the public sphere, he attributes to it a dual meaning: on one hand, it refers specifically to bourgeois publicity; on the other, it denotes a particular phenomenon existing within society. In his seminal work «The structural transformation of the public sphere», J. Habermas introduces the notion of the «public» and locates the public sphere in an intermediate space between the state and society. He conceptualises it as a public domain free from the interference of political power and independent of official influence.

According to J. Habermas, the public sphere is a unique social phenomenon that emerged at a specific historical stage (in capitalist society) developing from the private domain after the dismantling of despotism under monarchical or imperial rule. It is a relatively autonomous space for interpersonal communication formed by individuals or groups engaging in rational communicative actions. Within this public sphere, citizens enjoy freedom of speech and are expected to express their views on public affairs based on rational deliberation. In other words, citizens possess the right to exercise critical public opinion.

These ideas constitute the core elements of J. Habermas' concept of the public sphere. Clearly, this theory serves as a crucial foundation for his concept of a post-secular society, reflecting his epistemological commitment to rationality and aligning theoretically with his views on the relationship between science and religion.

The concept of deliberative democracy and the J. Habermas' communicative paradigm. Like most philosophers, J. Habermas, in his epistemological reflections on the public sphere grounded in rationality, not only delineates the boundaries between the public sphere and governmental authority but also attempts to construct a normative relationship between the public sphere and politics that aligns with his value commitments. Deliberative democracy emerges as J. Habermas' practical response to the relationship between the public sphere and political authority. At its core, his model of deliberative democracy remains

a profound engagement with the question of democracy itself. Developed in the West during the 1990s, deliberative democracy has become one of the most significant outcomes in contemporary political science discourse on democracy.

Deliberative democracy embodies the pluralisation of democratic actors; it can be seen as a paradigmatic adjustment in response to the increasingly diversified and dynamic social stratification resulting from differentiated interests in contemporary Western societies. It effectively compensates for the limitations of electoral or representative democracy, which often fail to generate political consensus amid plural value systems. By enabling effective dialogue and cooperation among citizens, groups, and governments, it offers a means to reconcile public disagreements, foster civic responsibility and morality in the public sphere, and ultimately establish political consensus. In this way, deliberative democracy provides a robust theoretical framework for maintaining social order and enhancing governmental legitimacy in modern political practice.

A foremost advocate of deliberative democracy in the West is J. Habermas. His ideas are not only central topics in the realms of philosophy and sociology but also have become focal points in contemporary political theory. Building on the principles of deliberative democracy, J. Habermas further refines his theory of interpersonal communication within the public sphere, crafting a communicative paradigm congruent with his vision of a post-secular society. An inquiry into Habermas' theory of communicative action and his post-secular ideals (and an analysis of how these ideas are critically interpreted within the Sinicised context of Marxism) must begin with an understanding of the concept of deliberative democracy and his communicative paradigm.

The connotation of Western deliberative democracy. Deliberative democracy, also referred to as discursive democracy, is a theory advanced by Western scholars that champions liberty and equality. It advocates that citizens should engage in public deliberation, offering reasons to persuade others or revising their own preferences by accepting alternative views. Through rational deliberation based on a careful consideration of the public good, legislation and policymaking attain political legitimacy.

The term «deliberative democracy» was first introduced by American political scientist J. Bessette in 1980, in his article «Deliberative democracy: the majority principle in republican government», where he emphasised citizen participation and equal deliberation. In 1996, another American scholar, J. B. Bohman, systematically examined the preconditions for realising deliberative democracy in his book «Public deliberation: pluralism, complexity, and democracy». In 1998, the book «Deliberative democracy», edited by J. Elster, was published, arguing that deliberation and discussion should replace voting as the primary political decision-making mechanism.

Later, influential Western thinkers such as J. Rawls and J. Habermas also published important works on deliberative democracy. These scholars identify themselves as deliberative democrats, asserting that its essence lies in rationality, with truth as the ultimate aim of rational inquiry. They regard broad-based public deliberation and dialogue oriented toward the common good as the fundamental pathway to achieving deliberative democracy. J. Rawls and J. Habermas contend that only laws and policies formed through an inclusive and genuinely fair deliberative process possess legitimacy, and that this legitimacy is the political precondition for continued citizen participation and cooperation with the government.

Hence, the Western deliberative democracy is marked by three salient features: legitimacy, transparency, and accountability. It represents a new trajectory in the development of democratic theory in the contemporary West.

Concept of deliberative democracy by J. Habermas. As one of the leading proponents of deliberative democracy in the West, Habermas' theory exhibits two prominent features. On the one hand, his concept of deliberative democracy is firmly rooted in social reality. The evolution of modern Western civil society and the public sphere, the inherent deliberative elements of Western parliamentary democracy, and the crises facing contemporary representative democracy together form the empirical foundation of his theory. Specifically, the crisis of Western representative democracy provides the practical conditions for the emergence of Habermas' theory, while the development of civil society and public sphere thought furnishes the operational setting for its application. Moreover, the deliberative elements already embedded in parliamentary systems offer a practical pathway for integrating deliberative and representative democratic models. Based on these premises, J. Habermas constructs a rational public sphere and model of public deliberation that mediates between the conflicting interests of various social classes in contemporary Western society (particularly a model that is eminently practicable). Hence, compared to other theorists, J. Habermas' model of deliberative democracy is marked by a high degree of real-world operability.

On the other hand, the theoretical articulation of J. Habermas' deliberative democracy is characterised by a considerable level of abstraction. This abstractness stems from the fact that J. Habermas' project is oriented toward resolving the crisis of Western representative democracy through a framework premised on ideal communicative conditions that presuppose an ideal speech situation, free and equal discursive interaction, and the achievement of rational consensus. These prerequisites remain largely unattainable in actual Western societies. Nevertheless, the reason for positing such transcendental conditions is precisely to rescue Western democracy and to reconstruct its normative foundation and legitimacy. As such, J. Habermas' concept provides

both a normative vision and a theoretical guide for the partial realisation of deliberative democracy in practice.

The communicative paradigm under the concept of deliberative democracy. In constructing the concept of deliberative democracy, J. Habermas concurrently endeavors to establish a communicative paradigm grounded in the principles of deliberation. In 1992, he published his seminal work on legal philosophy «Between facts and norms», where he not only introduced the concept of deliberative politics but also sought to construct a paradigmatic model for democratic governance based on deliberation. In subsequent writings, such as «Three normative models of democracy: on the concept of deliberative politics», J. Habermas conducted a comparative analysis of two dominant strands of Western democratic theory (liberalism and republicanism) from the perspectives of civic identity, legal rights, and the structure of political will. Building on this analysis, he further elaborated concept of deliberative democracy. J. Habermas advocates extending deliberative democracy to encompass both the autonomy of the public sphere and the expression of opinion and will within a constitutional state, incorporating these elements into the institutional processes of democracy in order to achieve a higher level of intersubjectivity in political life. He argues that deliberative democracy, grounded in this elevated inter-

subjectivity, rests upon the legal and philosophical foundation of reflecting the autonomous public's will and opinions, institutionalised through a democratic process that enables opinion formation and will articulation. The precondition for all this is the linguistic interaction among individuals within the public sphere, which simultaneously shapes the communicative paradigm of citizenship under deliberative democracy. As long as citizens recognise the legitimacy of the political order forged through deliberation, the rational communicative power freely exercised within the public sphere will thrive within civil society. This process will be continually driven by institutionalised political practices and socio-cultural forces within the constitutional state, thereby giving rise to a communicative paradigm among citizens that sustains and advances Western democratic politics.

Evidently, Habermas' theory of the communicative paradigm emerges from his deliberative democratic ideals and is closely linked to his concepts of the public sphere and rational discourse. It not only addresses the foundational question of how individuals in a post-secular society can participate in policymaking and legislation through rational deliberation, but also offers theoretical guidance for restoring legitimacy to democratic politics amid the crisis of representative democracy in the West.

A post-secular society as a phenomenon of public deliberation and social consensus from the perspective of neo-Marxism

Neo-Marxism, also known as contemporary Marxism, emerged in the 1950s as a Western Marxist school of thought developed through critical reinterpretations of Stalinism. Rooted in humanism, neo-Marxism reexamines and revises classical Marxist principles, retaining foundational doctrines such as class struggle, while incorporating ideas from Hegelian philosophy, anarchism, liberalism, and rational choice theory. Through its rebellious posture, it expands both the themes and the forms of Marxism. The philosophical foundation of neo-Marxism upholds essential classical Marxist tenets while drawing extensively from Western modern philosophy, particularly humanist thought [13, p. 149]. It rejects the absolutism of Marxism, asserting its fallibility and emphasising that its core lies in its methodology. Neo-Marxism advocates the application of Marxist methodology to concrete realities, emphasising rational choices grounded in human needs, rather than passive acceptance of historical inevitability as proposed in classical Marxism.

Though many neo-Marxist perspectives possess limitations, or even flaws, its commitment to theoretical innovation and its grounding in human needs offer a valuable framework for adapting Marxist thought to contemporary social realities. It also opens a novel interpretative path for understanding the Chinese version of neo-Marxism. J. Habermas' reflections on con-

temporary Western socio-political issues are deeply rooted in his theories of public deliberation and social consensus. His concepts, ranging from communicative rationality and deliberative politics to the formation of a communicative paradigm within the public sphere, are all fundamentally shaped by his overarching framework of public deliberation and consensus. Analysing J. Habermas' system of thought through the lens of neo-Marxism helps illuminate contemporary developments in Western democratic theory and practice, offering insights into the nature of a post-secular society, and providing theoretical references for contemporary Marxist democratic politics and socialist reforms.

Analysing Habermas' theories of public deliberation and social consensus from a neo-Marxist perspective. The public sphere constitutes the primary arena of secularisation and serves as a foundational precondition for the formation of principles and models of modern democratic politics. J. Habermas constructs grand vision of a post-secular society on this very foundation by proposing public deliberation and social consensus as solutions to the crisis of Western representative democracy. His post-secular society is conceived as a rationally grounded public sphere, where the mechanisms of public deliberation and social consensus offer avenues for resolving various social contradictions in Western societies.

Contrary to traditional secularisation theories that exclude religion from public discourse, J. Habermas permits religion to enter the public domain. This is due to the enduring presence of both religion and science in reality, where reconciliation between the two reflects the practical manifestation of public opinion shaped through rational deliberation. J. Habermas affirms the general normative relationship between the public sphere and modern democratic constitutionalism, recognising that such a system should be built upon consensus formed through deliberation in the public domain. However, he identifies a contradiction between this framework and the exclusion of religion, which conflicts with his theory of communicative rationality [14, p. 42].

To resolve this tension, J. Habermas revises traditional concept of public sphere to permit religious discourse within public spaces. He underscores the constructive elements of religion, suggesting that it offers emotional sustenance to certain groups, contains cognitively meaningful content of universal significance, and functions as a communal spiritual bond and source of psychological comfort. Especially in the post-secular reality of contemporary European society, religion is an inescapable fact [15, p. 23].

Clearly, although J. Habermas' concept of public sphere appears to engage with conventional secularisation debates, its core concern lies in the value and function of religion within secular societies. He contends that religion is inherently interlinked with modern democratic constitutionalism. His acknowledgment of religion's presence and positive potential in the public sphere presents valuable insights when viewed from a neo-Marxist perspective.

In the context of rapid modernisation, socialist democratic politics within the public sphere may differ from European constitutional democracy, yet they represent a higher form of democracy – one that genuinely embodies popular sovereignty. Socialist nations must also contend with the objective existence of religion in public life. Under the neo-Marxist lens, contemporary socialist states generally maintain a tolerant stance toward religion, as reflected in dominant public discourse and political reality, treating it as part of their cultural heritage and worthy of preservation.

Thus, J. Habermas' concept of public sphere, seen through the perspective of neo-Marxism, can serve as a valuable reference for socialist countries in reconciling the relationship between socialist democratic politics and religion. Nevertheless, such applications must be adapted to specific national contexts, as the historical and institutional dynamics between religion and constitutional democracy in Europe differ from those in socialist political systems.

The essence of public deliberation and social consensus in a post-secular society from a neo-Marxist perspective. J. Habermas' concept of a post-secular society is grounded in public deliberation and social con-

sensus within the public sphere. It embodies a Western democratic response to the crisis of representative democracy – an attempt to mediate among diverse social strata through rational negotiation. Without fundamentally altering the framework of representative democracy, J. Habermas revitalises the legitimacy of Western political systems, laws, and policies by invoking the power of rational knowledge to realise the broadest spectrum of public opinion within the capitalist model. This results in a democratic political foundation rooted in the mechanisms of public discourse and consensus formation. Consequently, J. Habermas directly addresses contemporary social dilemmas in Western democracies and the resulting representational crisis. His epistemological approach calls for the establishment of a public space independent of political power, where rational reconciliation can take place. Through public deliberation in this space, social consensus may be achieved, thus creating a political architecture built upon these deliberative processes, all the while permeated by ideals of liberty and equality. J. Habermas' post-secular vision, along with his emphasis on public deliberation and consensus, reflects both a pursuit of freedom and equality and their pragmatic realisation in contemporary society. This serves as a significant reference point for neo-Marxism, which also seeks to address concrete realities while promoting class reconciliation under the ideals of socialism.

Neo-Marxism, while upholding the general principles, positions, and methodologies of Marxist philosophy, stresses the necessity of integrating Marxism with the unique realities of each nation that encompass both present socio-political conditions and deep-rooted historical and cultural traditions, including those considered part of a nation's excellent traditional culture. In terms of its drive for theoretical innovation, neo-Marxism does not fundamentally diverge from classical Marxism. Although it has critically reinterpreted and in some instances diverged from core tenets of classical Marxism, it continues to affirm the ideal prospects of socialism and communism. Above all, it remains grounded in Marxist positions, perspectives, and methodologies, while advocating for their integration with specific societal realities, as well as historical and cultural contexts. Its incorporation of Hegelian thought, humanism, and anarchism reflects a continuity with Western intellectual traditions, positioning Marxism as a critical engagement with Western historical and cultural paradigms. Thus, both classical Marxism and neo-Marxism share a commitment to innovation – an intrinsic strength of Marxist theory as a system that is inherently open, fallibilistic, and capable of adaptation. It allows for localised reinterpretations and applications across diverse nations, cultures, and social conditions [16, p. 131].

Clearly, since China's implementation of the reform and opening-up policy, the theoretical trajectory of classical Marxism has overlapped with the practical concerns of neo-Marxist inquiry. The societal issues

addressed by neo-Marxism, such as the market, industrial economy, science and technology, modernity, and the centrality of the human subject, closely mirror those targeted by the Sinicisation of Marxism during this period. Indeed, the discursive expression of classical Marxism within the context of China's reform policies has increasingly taken on characteristics of neo-Marxist thought. As such, the post-war evolution of classical Marxism can be interpreted through a neo-Marxist lens, or at the very least, as a nationalised version of neo-Marxism shaped by the specific historical and social practices of individual countries.

The value of public deliberation and social consensus in a post-secular society from the perspective of neo-Marxism. From the perspective of neo-Marxism, J. Habermas' concept of a post-secular society holds significant theoretical value. First and foremost, J. Habermas acknowledges the process of secularisation and identifies it as a prevailing and likely enduring trend in contemporary and future societal development. This recognition contributes to a deeper neo-Marxist understanding of modernity, aiding Marxism's role in guiding national modernisation by assessing the trajectory of technological advancement and industrial upgrading. It advocates allocating more resources and energy toward the public sphere and further unleashing the potential of modern science, technology, and capital within the framework of modernity.

The theory of communicative action and the idea of a post-secular society by J. Habermas in the conceptual space of the Chinese version of neo-Marxism

From a practical perspective, Marxism remains one of the most influential and relevant ideologies in the contemporary world. Its formidable impact is not only derived from the intellectual depth and theoretical appeal endowed by its scientific and truthful nature but also from its role as a transformative force in the practice of socialism with Chinese characteristics. This practice has profoundly reshaped the global order and may even alter the course of human history. Therefore, based on the realities of Chinese socialist practice, it is entirely reasonable to affirm that Marxism is both a great ideology and a profound philosophy, whose veracity is beyond dispute. However, within the framework of Chinese socialism, it has been consistently emphasised that Marxist theory must be adapted to the specific national conditions of China (an ongoing process of Sinicisation). In other words, while Marxism is acknowledged as both a truth and a science, it is regarded as a universal rather than an absolute truth. Only through its application to specific historical and social contexts can it be considered genuine Marxism.

From the neo-Marxist perspective, interpretations of Chinese neo-Marxism vary across different historical junctures. If one accepts neo-Marxism's revisionist reading of classical Marxism, then the theoretical de-

Second, while J. Habermas critically engages with traditional secularisation theory, he does not repudiate it. His critique focuses primarily on its neglect or marginalisation of religion. In concept of a post-secular society, J. Habermas takes religion seriously and emphasises its positive role. His inclusive and tolerant approach to religion offers valuable insight for socialist countries undergoing social transformation, providing a framework for managing the complex relationships between science, knowledge, rationality, politics, and religion. Given the religious landscape in socialist nations, comprising both believers and, more predominantly, non-believers, this framework may guide policy innovation grounded in religious realities. For believers, his model may inform religion-sensitive policies; for non-believers, it offers a rational approach to reconciling science, knowledge, reason, and belief.

Third, J. Habermas' views on science and technology and his call to reconstruct Enlightenment rationality provide further theoretical inspiration. They may help socialist countries more fully appreciate the modern value of science and technology, comprehend their social roles, and navigate the relationship between technological development and human subjectivity, guarding against the instrumentalisation and commodification of rational consciousness.

Developments of Marxism in the Chinese context could, to some extent, be considered a form of neo-Marxism. Thus, the founding of the Communist party of China in the 1920s, the rise of Eastern European neo-Marxist interpretations in the 1950s, and the period following China's reform and opening-up are often seen by scholars as key temporal milestones in understanding the formation of a Chinese version of neo-Marxism [17, p. 14].

In fact, the so-called Chinese version of neo-Marxism is merely one interpretive lens informed by neo-Marxist theory. From the standpoint of Marxism and its Sinicisation, there is no distinct Chinese neo-Marxism per se [18, p. 123]. Given the neo-Marxist emphasis on engaging with reality and addressing the material needs of real people, alongside China's post-reform socio-theoretical transformations, this paper argues that the concept of Marxism and its Sinicised theoretical articulations prior to reform and opening which upheld Marxism as the sole truth do not align with the fundamental characteristics of neo-Marxism. Accordingly, the reform era should be regarded as the starting point for the emergence of a Chinese version of neo-Marxism [19, p. 29].

The purpose of introducing the concept of a Chinese version of Neo-Marxism is merely to offer a theoretical perspective from which to understand Marxism

and the achievements of its Sinicisation [20, p. 2]. Although neo-Marxism has theoretical limitations, its methodology for problem-solving, its theoretical development strategies, and even some of its core ideas continue to hold reference value for the contemporary innovation of Marxism in China.

The Chinese neo-Marxist interpretation of the public sphere. The public sphere is a central concept in J. Habermas' construction of a post-secular society. His concept of the public sphere emphasises a higher level of intersubjectivity, proposing that under the condition of rational knowledge, many of the contradictions within contemporary Western society such as those between science and religion can be reconciled through public discourse.

Although J. Habermas permits the presence of religion and advocates for its reconciliation and coexistence with science, he does not consider religion the dominant force in modern society. Rather, he acknowledges its objective presence and the intensification of its manifestations in certain domains. Conversely, he posits that science and technology are the primary productive forces and will ultimately become the ruling forces of modern society, resulting in an inevitable unification where political, economic, and cultural dimensions are all integrated within the technological system.

The Chinese version of neo-Marxism also places great emphasis on the public sphere, particularly as the development of the market economy and the continuous improvement of market mechanisms have driven government reform. This has led to a gradual withdrawal of the government from various operational domains, laying an economic foundation for the advancement of the public sphere and clarifying the relationship between the government and public space.

Furthermore, China's understanding of science and technology shares many similarities with J. Habermas' views. For instance, China likewise asserts that science and technology are the primary productive forces and highlights their role in advancing modern cultural development, driving consumption, and invigorating capital markets. All these efforts are premised on China's rational positioning of the relationship between science and religion within the public sphere [21, p. 65].

Nevertheless, a significant divergence exists between the Chinese neo-Marxist perspective on the public sphere and J. Habermas' view. While China highly values the role of the public sphere in constructing modern society, it does not regard it as a realm free from governmental regulation. Instead, its understanding of the public sphere is situated within the Marxist national theory' critique of Western civil society. It emphasises the need to construct a civic society rooted in each country's historical culture and practical realities.

The Sinicised neo-Marxist interpretation of the theory of communicative action. In J. Habermas' construction of a post-secular society, rationality provides

its fundamental philosophical underpinning. His concept of public communicative action is firmly grounded in this rational philosophical foundation, which is vividly manifested in his understanding of science and technology. J. Habermas' perspective on science and technology draws theoretical inspiration mainly from K. Marx's theory of alienation, G. Lukács' theory of ideology, M. Weber's theory of rationalisation, and the Frankfurt school's critique of instrumental rationality. He regards science and technology as the primary productive forces, and views them as ideologised constructs of technique and scientific knowledge. J. Habermas believes that the development of modern science and technology will gradually attain a dominant position in the social process, leading to the alienation of consumption and capital, the ideologisation of culture, and the scientification of political issues [22, p. 86].

Evidently, although J. Habermas acknowledges the existence of religion in his notion of a post-secular society, he does not diminish the significance of science and technology in modern society. His objective recognition of the reality of religion does not alter his traditional secularist understanding that secularisation occupies the principal status in social development. While J. Habermas claims that the idea of a post-secular society adheres to universalism and bears universal significance consistent with the developmental trajectory of contemporary human society, in reality, it primarily corresponds to the European social context. On one hand, Europe exhibits highly developed levels of science, economy, and modern democratic constitutional governance, reaching a state of high civilization; on the other hand, religious forces persist as an objectively recognised and widely respected social fact, and continue to exert a profound influence on values. This influence permeates both the internal and external policies and actions of Europe and the United States of America in the process of globalisation, becoming a key to understanding the deeper value-driven motives behind all actions taken by Western nations [23, p. 156].

According to J. Habermas, religion is not the master of modern society; rather, he describes it as an objectively existing phenomenon that has gained renewed visibility in certain respects. On the contrary, he asserts that science and technology constitute the primary productive forces and will become the ruling power in modern society, inevitably leading to identity and unification; science and technology will shape a unified political, economic, and cultural framework, integrating everything into a techno-scientific system. J. Habermas' efforts to reconcile science and religion in the public sphere are imbued with the brilliance of rationality. This rationality serves as a guiding principle in modern Western societies, enabling citizens to participate in democratic deliberation through rational communicative action, thereby forging social consensus and legitimising government, policy, and law. It provides a valuable

reference for realising reconciliation across various social strata in contemporary Western societies.

Likewise, the Chinese version of neo-Marxism must rationally guide civic engagement in political life through rational communicative action, in order to prevent irrational behaviours from misleading government decision-making and legal interpretation. The Sinicised neo-Marxist interpretation of science and technology shares considerable common ground with J. Habermas' views. Today's China advocates strongly for the integration of science, technology, and cultural knowledge, as well as for a renewed public enlightenment across all social strata. This effort aims to foster a rational force that enables a harmonious relationship between societal development and government politics.

The Sinicised neo-Marxist interpretation of Habermas' idea of a post-secular society. Habermas' idea of a post-secular society embodies a strong spirit of social critique, which is intimately connected to the various ideas he expresses within this framework, especially the rational basis of communicative action in the public sphere, deliberative democracy, and its behavioural paradigms. The core issue he explores remains the relational dynamics among individuals from different social strata in contemporary society. The theoretical point of departure for J. Habermas lies in his recognition of the problems inherent in traditional secularisation theory, particularly its binary opposition between the transcendence and immanence of religion.

According to J. Habermas, an individual's stance on religious issues, especially for Christians in Europe, is a matter that permeates both the surface and deeper structures of social life, having a profound and even decisive impact on personal development and societal progress [24, p. 98]. Traditional secularisation theory, inherited from the Middle Ages, upholds the opposition between the transcendence and immanence of the world's major religions, including Christianity. This di-

chotomy can lead individuals either toward contemplative detachment and self-enclosure (as seen in the introspective emphasis of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism in China) or toward excessive self-transcendence and radical subjectivism, as exemplified in Europe's Enlightenment era critique of religion. The result was the creation of a secularised human being, defined by a strong sense of self-transcendence in response to the religious notion of a supernatural God.

In response to this, J. Habermas critiques traditional secular society and begins from the factual coexistence of the secular and the religious. He advocates avoiding the opposition between transcendence and immanence, seeking to reconstruct and reconcile the dualities that emerged since the Enlightenment (dualities between Enlightenment and religion, secular and religious, reason and religion, knowledge and faith) through a harmonisation rooted in the integration of transcendence and immanence. This reconfiguration aims to offer modern individuals and modern society a more reasonable spiritual grounding and a meaningful life path [25, p. 166–168].

From the perspective of Sinicised neo-Marxism, J. Habermas' idea of reconciling transcendence and immanence in his post-secular critique does not fully align with the realities of China's traditional culture. However, the Chinese neo-Marxist interpretation of this reconciliation mainly inherits from Marxist thought, which unites the ideal of communism with the practical realities of non-communist societies, essentially integrating the «heavenly kingdom» with the inevitably imperfect «human world». This too reflects the principle of uniting transcendence and immanence. Therefore, whether viewed from the standpoint of classical Marxism or from the lens of Sinicised neo-Marxism, J. Habermas' notion of reconciling transcendence and immanence, as revealed in his post-secular critique, has long since been internalised within the developmental theories of contemporary China.

Conclusions

As one of the most prominent contemporary Western philosophers and a key representative of Western Marxism, J. Habermas presents a body of thought that is both complex and profound, characterised by systematic coherence and internal logic. His concept of a post-secular society is closely intertwined with his broader theoretical framework – it not only serves as a critical pillar in the evolution of his philosophical system but also provides essential theoretical foundations and justificatory grounds for many of his other theoretical propositions [26, p. 152]. At the same time, J. Habermas' articulation of the post-secular society centers on a critique of traditional secularisation theories, which, in essence, offers a critical interpretation of various sociocultural issues prevalent in contemporary Western societies. His intention is not to oppose Western societal structures or institutions; on the contrary, he aims to pro-

vide a rational interpretation of fundamental relational problems in Western society, including the interaction between secularism and religion, the relationship between scientific ideals and religious belief, and other associated philosophical and sociological questions. His ultimate goal is to offer intellectual guidance and practical solutions for the betterment of individual and societal life [27, p. 122].

As a leading figure in Western Marxism, J. Habermas' development of the concept of a post-secular society is deeply entangled with numerous Marxist theories; indeed, Marxism constitutes a significant theoretical source for his concept. The Chinese version of neo-Marxism, while rooted in the specific conditions of China, largely inherits the core principles of classical Marxism and incorporates innovative elements. Interpreting J. Habermas' post-secular society from this perspective

represents not only a non-Western lens through which to examine his theory, but also contributes meaningfully to the ongoing theoretical innovation of Marxism in contemporary China. This approach holds valuable implications for addressing similar issues faced by contemporary China. These problems that parallel those confronted by the Western societies J. Habermas critiques. Nevertheless, such an endeavor requires an objective understanding of both the theoretical value and the limitations of J. Habermas' concept, as viewed through the lens of Sinicised neo-Marxism.

While J. Habermas' concept of a post-secular society offers valuable insights for neo-Marxism with Chinese characteristics, its theoretical limitations are equally evident. When articulating his notion of a post-secular society, J. Habermas asserts a commitment to universalism, arguing that his critique of contemporary society applies not only to Germany or Western countries, but also possesses a general applicability consistent with the current trajectory of human social development [28, p. 122]. However, the central problem he identifies in the post-secular context (the conflict between secularism and religion) is clearly situated within the specific socio-cultural context of Western societies [29, p. 1993]. As such, his efforts to reconstruct the relationship between secular and religious domains on the basis of present realities, and to define an order between them, lack genuine universality. The religious landscapes of countries and regions beyond the West differ significantly; many of these societies diverge substantially from the Euro-American model.

Moreover, while J. Habermas advocates a rationally grounded relationship between democratic constitutionalism and religion, he simultaneously upholds

the primacy of human rights over state sovereignty in the context of domestic affairs. This stance has been used by Western powers as a theoretical pretext for humanitarian intervention in the internal affairs of other nations and regions. Although deeply influenced by K. Marx, J. Habermas critiques both contemporary realities and the traditional positions of classical Marxism from a humanistic standpoint. His articulation of a post-secular society ostensibly captures the ongoing relevance and supposed profound influence of religion in the contemporary West. However, this view arguably exaggerates the role of religion. While religion certainly continues to exist (and in some cases, is experiencing signs of revival) in various countries and regions across the globe, the rapid advancement of science and the resurgence of rationality suggest that, even in Europe, religion will continue to function within a secularising process. Given the dynamics of scientific progress and industrial transformation, the social status and value of religion in most countries and regions today is far less significant than what J. Habermas implies in his idea of a post-secular society [30, p. 45].

As technological advancement and social evolution continue, human rationality is likely to return to a more balanced state. In response to instrumental reason and the utilitarian application of science, industry, and politics (a legacy of Enlightenment rationality) there is a compelling need to reconstruct Enlightenment rationality in a way that affirms humanistic values and nurtures the inner world of individuals. Nonetheless, this existential reconciliation need not rely solely on religion. Contemporary China's core socialist values and cultural confidence in socialism are equally capable of fulfilling this mission.

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