Jürgen Habermas (b. 1929)

“Jürgen Habermas is arguably not only today’s leading social theorist, but also the leading defender of modernity and rationality in the face of the assault on those ideas by postmodernists (and others)” (Ritzer 2000).

Received his doctorate from U. of Bonn in 1954. Associated with Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt for much of his career.

Habermas draws from Marx, Weber, Schutz, Parsons and others for his theorizing.

Habermas argues that communication, not work (as Marx would have it), is the most important human phenomenon. He criticizes communication that is distorted by social structures. He believes that undistorted communication is possible and we should work toward it.

In the “ideal speech situation,” speech is uncoerced. The best arguments win, not those backed by power.

Habermas believes the life-world (micro-world of interaction and communication, society from perspective of acting subject) has potential to resist the economic structure of society and the state (“system”). He sees two possible directions for society: (1) colonization of the life-world or (2) a democratic solution.

The “colonization of the life-world” refers to the encroaching of formal or instrumental rationality into the substantive rationality (reason) of the life-world.