The recent work of Jürgen Habermas

Reason, justice and modernity

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Introduction

The aim of this book is to introduce the recent work of Jürgen Habermas and show its significance for ethics, social theory and the philosophy of the social sciences. By "recent" I mean what he has written since *Knowledge and Human Interests* appeared in English in 1971. Without a doubt there is a unity of perspective which runs through all of Habermas's thought. Nevertheless, around 1970 some distinctive new themes and directions began to emerge. These include the ideas of communicative rationality, universal pragmatics, communicative ethics, the ideal speech situation, a reconstruction of historical materialism and a legitimation crisis in advanced capitalism. Through the 1970s Habermas refined and modified these ideas. In 1981, he published the German edition of *The Theory of Communicative Action.* This massive and complex work combines the various strands of his recent thought into one synthetic vision of modernity and critical theory. Naturally, then, my analysis will focus closely on this text, but also on subsequent essays and books which further elucidate the topics presented there. In this introduction, I want to give some general sense of the direction Habermas's work has taken over the period I will be considering.

One of the most distinctive (and contested) aspects of this work has been its commitment to a universalistic perspective on rationality and ethics. This appears in Habermas's notion of universal pragmatics, which asserts that competent speakers raise certain invariable, universal validity claims, and in his belief that in argumentation over specific claims we also impute an ideal speech situation, which provides us with a rational basis for testing the truth or legitimacy of these claims. The contestability of these assertions, made in the early 1970s, became even more apparent by the end of that decade when the general philosophical climate began to change markedly. The universalist, rationalist tradition of the Enlightenment came under increasing fire from various quarters. Contextualist and relativist positions were articulated by analytic philosophers, moral and political theorists, social anthropologists, feminists and post-structuralists.

Habermas has tried to meet this shift in philosophical consciousness in a

way which admits some of their insights, but which nevertheless retains a clear emphasis on universalism. From the perspective of this book, I am interested in two aspects of this endeavor: the notion of communicative reason and ethics, on the one hand, and the theory of modernity and modernization, on the other.

The challenge facing communicative reason and ethics can perhaps be brought into focus most simply by drawing attention to the fact that a number of contextualist philosophers have shown a tendency to assign, however reluctantly, some sort of favored status to moral appeals which stress equality as well as mutual recognition and appreciation of different forms of life.[1] I will discuss this further in chapter 1 but, for the moment, the question which is raised is: Can such appeals be more systematically elaborated and possibly accorded some sort of universally valid defense? Or do such appeals have an ineradicably vague or abstract quality, which can only be removed at the cost of culturally concretizing them and thus making their validity contextual? Habermas's communicative ethics attempts to answer the first question in the affirmative and show that the ideas of equality and mutual recognition can be articulated in a way which is not totally vague or indeterminate. Chapters 3 and 4 will examine this effort.

The second challenge with which the changing philosophical climate has confronted Habermas is the necessity of developing a sophisticated defense of modernity. In terms of his analysis of universal validity claims, the result of this pressure can be seen in his moving from assertions about what is implicit in the speech actions of all actors to assertions about "the intuition of competent members of *modern* societies."[2] With this shift, Habermas takes on the burden of defending a vision of modernity which corresponds to his interpretations of subjectivity and reason.

Habermas's critical defense of modernity will be misconstrued, however, if it is understood simply as his response to a change in the philosophical climate. His underlying concern is with the historical situation he sees reflected in this changed climate. He sees a "new obscurity" facing Western industrialized countries, based on a growing sense on the political center and left that their traditional economic and political programs no longer have the same power to illuminate situations and motivate action.[3] These programs – orthodox socialism and welfare-state liberalism – have always drawn their motivating power from values deeply embedded in the Enlightenment and the revolutionary traditions of the nineteenth century. Thus, to say that these programs are exhibiting signs of exhaustion is also to raise deep questions about some of the central values of modern culture.

In this situation only the neo-conservatives seem untroubled by an obscured vision. They point self-confidently to the cause of the currrent ills of industrialized, capitalist society: precisely those values in modern culture upon which welfare liberalism and socialism are constructed. The ascendence of these values, the neo-conservatives argue, has made modern culture deteriorate into a soup of permissive secular hedonism.[4] And it is this cultural degeneracy that is responsible for our present problems, not the economic and political structures of capitalism.

The task for Habermas is one of presenting an interpretation of modernity that defends key aspects of modern culture and shifts the critical focus back to the economic and political systems. Yet he must, at the same time, develop this focus in such a way that he can show why the traditional economic and political programs of welfare liberalism and socialism are themselves too closely entangled in the logic of modernization underlying these systems; in short, he must explain why these programs no longer appear to offer convincing responses to our current malaise. The interpretation which Habermas thinks will accomplish these ends is one which turns on developing the distinction between the achievement of a *modern culture*, on the one hand, and the processes of *societal modernization*, on the other.[5] The particular thesis he offers emerges from his rethinking of Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of modernity in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, his ingenious appropriation of Weber and finally his own notion of how communicative reason is distinguished from both instrumental and functional reason. As I will show in chapter 5, his argument is that Western modernization has constituted a "one-sided" – and thus distorted – development of the rational potential of modern culture. He refers to these distortions with the concepts "colonization of the lifeworld" and "cultural impoverishment." It is only from such a perspective, Habermas argues, that we can adequately expose the causes of the new obscurity as well as gain some new normative "self-assurance" drawn from our own cultural resources.[6]

Of all the current philosophical positions that have challenged the values of modernity, the one which Habermas finds most intellectually provocative is post-structuralism.[7] The critique of reason and modernity which emerges from the work of post-structuralists, such as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, engages him in an especially acute way. For one thing, the post-structuralist critique of the entwinement of instrumental reason and domination has some strong affinities with the work of Habermas's theoretical ancestors in the Frankfurt School. Hence in one sense the post-structuralists are following out critical theory's own lead in exposing the operation of power in places previously unseen by other radical critics of bourgeois

society. And yet this new departure seems to include an aesthetic drift, in relation to which all ideas of collective political action and the potential of a more just society become deeply problematic. It is this general implication of post-structuralism which is most disturbing to Habermas. The basis of his dispute with post-structuralism is perhaps best summed up in his remark that critical theory must try "to formulate an idea of progress that is subtle and resilient enough not to let itself be blinded by the mere appearance [*Schein*] of emancipation. One thing, of course, it must oppose: the thesis that emancipation itself mystifies."[8]

I will bring Habermas's work into a dialogue with post-structuralism in parts of chapters 2 and 5, but most fully in chapter 6. The primary emphasis will be on Foucault's work, partly because of its more explicit social and political character and partly because of the instructive way he treats the problem of modern subjectivity.

This problem emerges most explicitly for Habermas in *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne,* where he traces the philosophical discourse on modernity from Hegel to Foucault. Already in Hegel, the modern subject appears as both distinctive achievement and source of anxiety. He/she is the free, rational subject of both knowledge and action; but the activity of such a subject seems inevitably corrosive of the possibility of a free ethical life with others.[9] Habermas argues that neither Hegel nor later critics of modernity have adequately laid the problem of subjectivity to rest. Chapter 6 will discuss this problem as it relates to Foucault.

Ultimately Habermas wants to claim that adequately handling the problem of subjectivity requires a radical paradigm change in philosophy and social theory. Along with the radical critics of modernity, from Nietzsche to Adorno to the post-structuralists, Habermas argues that the paradigm of a "subject-centered" "philosophy of consciousness" is "exhausted." But these critics, he maintains, all remain entangled in the *aporias* of this paradigm, however much they struggle against it. An adequate critique – as well as an adequate defense – of modernity can be mounted only by shifting to the "paradigm of understanding."[10] This paradigm is focused on the structures of intersubjectivity which are implicit in the understanding achieved in ongoing linguistic interaction, or "communicative action" as Habermas calls it. Making this communicative model plausible has been the underlying goal of all of Habermas's work since around 1970, and these efforts come to fruition in *The Theory of Communicative Action.*

Although Habermas presents numerous arguments as to why his approach is superior to its competitors, he believes that ultimately its persuasiveness will depend in large degree on the success of the research pro-

gram for the social sciences which can be built upon it. His inspiration here is the early interdisciplinary work of the Frankfurt School in the 1930s, rather than Horkheimer and Adorno's later writings.[11] I will be using this notion of a critical research program as a central orienting idea throughout the present work.

In chapter 1, I try to provide a way of locating the different levels of such a program, building upon the work of those who have applied Imre Lakatos's notion of a research program to the social sciences. The key insight here is that the "core" of any social science research program must be constituted at least partially by some account of subjectivity or human agency.[12] Now it might seem rather strange to speak of Habermas's account of subjectivity, given the distance he tries to put between himself and traditional subject-centered philosophy of consciousness. However, an account of subjectivity can be derived in more than one way. For example, rational choice theory develops an account of the subject which does indeed build upon the tradition in which each agent inhabits a monological world of cognition and volition. Habermas, on the other hand, constructs an account of subjectivity which is derived from his analysis of the structures of intersubjectivity implicitly presupposed by ongoing interaction. In both cases, a minimal model of the subject is presented – that is, one sketched out in terms of reason and action – but the underlying theoretical positions yield quite different views of these two concepts.

In chapter 1, I will point out some of the problems with other contemporary ways of handling the concepts of action and rationality. This sets the stage for chapter 2, where Habermas's communicative account is presented. This conceptual core structures all of the other aspects of his work. Succeeding chapters elucidate this connection in relation to communicative ethics (chapters 3 and 4), and the interpretation of modernity and contemporary capitalism (chapters 5 and 6).

Recasting his thought as a research program is not something Habermas did simply because he wished to return to the founding spirit of the Frankfurt School. Rather, it constitutes a fundamental acceptance of the tentativeness and fallibility of his basic concepts. Once they are interpreted as part of the core of a research program, they can no longer be advanced with the self-confidence of orthodox Marxism or the tradition of German idealism. And in this sense Habermas is explicitly distancing himself from the lingering foundationalism that characterized a work such as *Knowledge and Human Interests*. Ultimately, the basic conceptual framework must be judged by how "progressive" his research program is over a period of time.[13] And yet what it means for a research program in the social sciences to

be progressive is anything but clear.[14] Certainly it must generate cogent interpretations and explanations, as do research programs in the natural sciences. But "success" for a social science research program may also depend partially on the practical, normative insight it generates. In this sense, I think Habermas would stake his claim on the ability of his communicative model simultaneously to give modernity grounds for a "self-assurance" to be found in its own cultural resources, and yet also to locate the sources of the new obscurity in the increasing "colonization of the lifeworld" and "cultural impoverishment" in advanced industrial societies.

The reader will no doubt quickly sense that my treatment of Habermas is fairly sympathetic. This is partially a result of the fact that I do agree with a number of Habermas's positions; but it is also partially the result of the nature of the task in hand: introducing a body of work whose density, scope and complexity continue to make it relatively inaccessible and easily misunderstood. If nothing else, I hope this book clears away some of the underbrush of misunderstanding and thus establishes a fairer basis from which criticism of Habermas's project can proceed.