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Part I

INTRODUCTION

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1 Reason, modernity, and democracy

One of the most distinctive features on the intellectual landscape of the last decades of the twentieth century is the intensity with which doubts have been raised about the conceptual foundations of Western modernity. Hard questions have emerged about the predominant modern understandings of reason, subjectivity, nature, progress, and gender. With the exception of the last topic, one might argue that these questions emerged in this century in their most powerful form within two streams of German philosophical reflection. In the immediate post–World War II years, Martin Heidegger wrote his “Essay on Humanism” (1946) and “The Question Concerning Technology” (1949), and he continued for the next thirty years to articulate a thorough critique of most of what the modern West has held dear.¹ In 1947 Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer published their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, developing the claim that the systematic pursuit of enlightened reason and freedom had the ironic long-term effect of engendering new forms of irrationality and repression.² These critiques had an immense impact both on the initial shape of the work of Jürgen Habermas and on its continued evolution.

The very extremity of these critiques, as well as their association with fascism in Heidegger’s case and Marxism (however unorthodox) in Horkheimer and Adorno’s, made them highly contentious from the start. Their real effect – and it was often achieved at second or third hand – was never one of convincing a large audience to embrace some new, alternative moral-political vision; rather, it brought prevailing interpretations of reason, progress, nature, and subjectivity to a new level of explicit questioning. These intellectual assaults, coupled with shattering world events of the mid-twentieth century,

4 INTRODUCTION

have ensured that modernity's self-understanding will never have the level of self-assurance that it once possessed.

For Heidegger, the loss of confidence was virtually complete, and many of those influenced by him, especially contemporary post-structuralists and postmoderns, lean in the same direction. Similarly, Horkheimer and Adorno felt little reason for optimism when they considered the intellectual and political resources the West could bring to bear to heal its self-inflicted wounds. The choices seemed to be either strutting self-confidence or total loss of confidence. And yet, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* one could still detect an appeal being made to some ideal of reason and freedom that might provide the illumination, however weak and uncertain, necessary for finding a path out of modernity's difficulties.³ Neither Horkheimer nor Adorno wanted, or was able, however, to make this gesture more convincing in the years that followed.

Their appeal to reason and freedom had its roots in the pre-World War II era, when they had been among the founders of the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt. The institute members carried out a wide range of philosophical and social investigations sharply critical of the economics, politics, and culture of Western societies. Although they considered themselves to be on the left politically, their attachment to Marxism became looser and looser, especially as the character of Stalin's regime in the Soviet Union became increasingly apparent. Horkheimer coined the term "critical theory" in the 1930s to describe their stance.⁴ As originally conceived, critical theory would have the role of giving new life to ideals of reason and freedom by revealing their false embodiment in scientism, capitalism, the "culture industry," and bourgeois Western political institutions.

The members of the institute were forced to flee Nazi Germany, and most of them settled in the United States. It was during this time in exile that the *Dialectic* was written. After the war, Horkheimer and Adorno reestablished the institute at the University of Frankfurt. Among the young philosophers who became associated with it was Jürgen Habermas. During this period, Horkheimer and Adorno became ever more disillusioned about the world around them. Adorno began to articulate a mode of thinking he called "negative dialectics" that resisted any affirmative thinking whatsoever about ethics and politics.⁵ And Horkheimer was drawn increasingly

Reason, modernity, and democracy

5

toward theology.⁶ Habermas, however, resisted these changes of direction.

Beginning in the 1960s, he charted a course for himself which, in its spirit and deepest moral commitments, has not changed in any fundamental sense.⁷ He was convinced that one could retain the power of his predecessor's critique of modern life only by clarifying a distinctive conception of rationality and affirming the notion of a just or "emancipated" society that would somehow correspond to that conception.

Thus Habermas's philosophical journey begins with a departure from the positions of Horkheimer and Adorno's later years; but it is a departure that Habermas has always felt better retains the spirit of the Frankfurt School's prewar period. The tension with Adorno's later work is especially interesting. For Habermas, his growing pessimism and the totalization of his critique of Western modernity constituted something of a failure of nerve. In this regard, there is a subtle and disturbing affinity between Adorno and Heidegger. From the depths of such a total critique, what sort of politics is likely to capture the imagination? Heidegger's early association with Nazism and his lifelong refusal to renounce it thoroughly carry, for Habermas, a lesson that cannot be forgotten or downplayed. When his *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* appeared in the 1980s, the list of those who threatened too extremely the continuity of that discourse included not only Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, and Derrida, but also Horkheimer and Adorno.⁸ In this regard, one finds certain resonances in the present volume between some of the issues raised in the first essay by Romand Coles concerning Adorno, and those raised in the last two essays concerning the challenge to Habermas from postmodernism.

Many readers of *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* are perplexed at the intensity and relentlessness of Habermas's attack on his opponents. Adding to the perplexity is the fact that one of the hallmarks of his career has been an extraordinary openness to critical discussions. Such perplexity can be at least partially dispelled if one remembers that the stakes involved with totalized critiques of modernity are very high for a German who, like Habermas, has historically rooted worries that certain figures of thought may either lend themselves (even if unwittingly) to disparate forms of politics or provide insufficient resources for effective resistance to

6 INTRODUCTION

them. One simply cannot understand Habermas's work as a whole without attending to this historical rootedness. Max Pensky's contribution to this volume draws this connection out in its various dimensions.

Habermas's project, as it emerged in the 1960s, had two major components. First, he set himself the daunting task of developing a "more comprehensive" conception of reason, by which he meant one that was not reducible to the instrumental-technical or strategic calculations of an essentially monadic, individual subject.⁹ Moreover, it was only in terms of such a broader conception that one could begin to sketch the outlines of an "emancipated" or "rational" society.¹⁰

The effort to think about reason differently bore its first fruit in 1965, in "Knowledge and Human Interests: A General Perspective," his inaugural lecture delivered upon assuming a professorship at Frankfurt. The thesis was soon expanded into a book of the same name.¹¹ There he postulated the existence of three anthropologically deep-seated interests of human beings, to which three categories of knowledge and rationality correspond. We have "knowledge-constitutive interests" in the technical control of the world around us, in understanding others, and in freeing ourselves from structures of domination: a "technical," a "practical," and an "emancipatory" interest.¹² Following Horkheimer and Adorno, Habermas found that modern society has fostered an unbalanced expansion of the technical interest in control: The drive to dominate nature becomes a drive to dominate other human beings. Habermas's speculation upon how to alleviate this distortion revolved around reasserting the rationality inherent in our "practical" and "emancipatory" interests. Entwining these two interests in a distinctive fashion, Habermas announced that a rational basis for collective life would be achieved only when social relations were organized "according to the principle that the validity of every norm of political consequence be made dependent on a consensus arrived at in communication free from domination."¹³

This idea became the guiding thread of Habermas's project. He soon found, however, that it could not be adequately fleshed out using the epistemological framework of knowledge-constitutive interests.¹⁴ He decided instead to pursue his aims through an exploration of the ongoing "communicative competence" displayed by all

speakers of natural languages.¹⁵ The heart of this endeavor was an explication of the implicit mastery of rules for raising and redeeming “validity claims” in ordinary language. Insofar as actors wish to coordinate their action through understanding rather than force or manipulation, they implicitly take on the burden of redeeming claims they raise to others regarding the truth of what they say, its normative rightness, and its sincerity. When claims are explicitly challenged, they can only be redeemed in, respectively, “theoretical discourse,” “practical discourse,” or further interaction that reveals whether the speaker has been sincere.¹⁶ The fundamentals of this “linguistic turn” in Habermas’s work – the turn to the theory of communicative rationality and action – are laid out in Georgia Warnke’s essay.

With this shift, Habermas established a conceptual framework out of which he has continued to work until the present. There have been many modifications and elaborations, but as he says, “my research program has remained the same since about 1970.”¹⁷ The task of making plausible the theory of communicative action and rationality is an enormous one, and his writings from this point on are best seen as pursuing various but interrelated paths toward this goal. For Habermas, there is no single, straightforward line of argument that will make his case in knockdown fashion. Plausibility at this philosophical level is gained only piecemeal, by showing in a variety of contexts how the theory of communicative action and rationality generates more conceptual, moral, and empirical insight than alternative approaches.¹⁸ Four contexts are particularly important: methodological discussions in the social sciences, accounts of the character of modernity and the societal rationalization associated with it, controversies in contemporary moral philosophy, and contending views about the legitimacy of the liberal, democratic state.

In the broadest methodological sense, Habermas’s account of reason and action offers a new conceptual “core” to the research tradition of critical theory. It thus provides a means of generating coherence across a broad terrain of research in the social sciences. At the end of his monumental two-volume work, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, he explicitly harkens back to the institute’s efforts in the 1930s to pursue a wide range of interconnected, interdisciplinary studies.¹⁹ John Dryzek’s essay explores the general implica-

8 INTRODUCTION

tions of Habermas's approach for the philosophy of the social sciences.²⁰

The Theory of Communicative Action is best known, however, for the striking perspective it provides on how we should understand modernity. An underlying goal of the book is to elaborate how the communicative approach to reason and action helps us both to critique certain aspects of modernity and yet to clarify the value of other aspects in such a way as to give us some grounds for "self-reassurance."²¹

Habermas offers a two-level interpretation of the modern world, in which a distinction is drawn between the rational potential implicit in "cultural modernity" and the selective or one-sided utilization of that potential in "societal processes of modernization."²² The cultural potential of modernity constitutes the critical standpoint from which particular aspects of Western modernization can be judged negatively. What Habermas means by this is that modern culture has made available a "rationalized lifeworld" – one in which actors consistently carry the expectation that the various validity claims raised in speech are to be cognitively distinguished, and that they have to be redeemed in different ways. As such a lifeworld emerges, an increasing number of spheres of social interaction are removed from guidance by unquestioned tradition and opened to coordination through consciously achieved agreement. Simultaneously with this advance in communicative rationalization, there also occurs an advance in the rationality of society as measured from a functionalist or systems perspective. This latter sort of rationalization means that there is an expansion of social subsystems that coordinate action through the media of money (capitalist economy) and administrative power (modern, centralized states). The initially beneficial expansion of these media has progressed to the point, however, that they increasingly invade areas of social life that have been or could be coordinated by the medium of understanding or "solidarity." Modernization in the West has thus generated a pathology: an unbalanced development of its potential. Habermas refers to this phenomenon as a "colonization of the lifeworld" that brings in its wake a growing sense of meaninglessness and dwindling freedom.²³

This imbalance is one that can be resisted; it is not an unbreakable "iron cage" in Max Weber's sense. Habermas sees palpable signs

of the rejection of the smooth unfolding of functionalist reason in various new social movements that have emerged since the 1960s, whose common denominator is their concern not so much with “problem of *distribution*, but [with] questions of the *grammar of forms of life*.”²⁴ Whether the questions arise in the form of a critique of productivist civilization as in the ecological movement, or in the form of a rejection of scripted identities as in feminism or the gay and lesbian rights movement, they all constitute resistance points to further colonization. Such opposition is of course conceived by Habermas to be progressive only to the degree that its concerns can be articulated in ways that accord with the universalist normative bent of communicative rationality; that is, only to the degree that resistance to colonization of the lifeworld is carried out so as to build upon the cultural potential of modernity rather than reject it, as is the case with exclusivist appeals to national identity.

The strong, universalist position on rationality and morality, and the claim that the modern West – for all its problems – best embodies these values, has, not surprisingly, run into intense opposition. For a broad array of poststructuralist, postmodern, and feminist thinkers, this sort of universalism is merely a sophisticated variant of earlier, deleterious forms. And, like them, it functions merely to blind the West to the ways in which it both drives itself in ever more disciplinary directions and engenders “others” who fall short of the demands carried by its criteria of reason and responsibility. Such critiques are sometimes premised on a fairly significant misunderstanding (sometimes nonreading) of Habermas’s work – but not always. The two essays in this volume that engage such issues do so from a position of adequate understanding and no small degree of sympathy. Tracy Strong and Frank Sposito raise the problem of the “other” of reason from within the Kantian tradition of philosophy as a whole and suggest that its shortcomings have to be more adequately confronted by anyone who, like Habermas, draws so deeply upon that tradition. Axel Honneth’s essay carries a similar tone. He surveys various critiques of Habermas that have emerged out of postmodern and feminist concerns and shows how they contain ethical insights to which Habermas has failed to do full justice. (The last part of Nancy Love’s essay is also relevant to these issues.)

In the somewhat less hostile context of analytic moral philosophy, Habermas has exhibited a great willingness to elaborate his uni-

IO INTRODUCTION

versalist perspective and defend it at length against alternative positions. He has tried to show generally why a communicative ethics provides the best way of comprehending the universalist core of the Western understanding of morality. This has necessitated, first, defending the priority he grants to a deontological approach to morality, which delineates “the moral point of view” in terms of procedural justice and rights, over a teleological one, which understands morality as oriented first and foremost around a substantive notion of the good. Second, Habermas has had to distinguish his own deontological view from those of Kant and contemporary philosophers such as John Rawls.²⁵ The essays by Warnke and J. Donald Moon survey these efforts and assess their success.

Even as the importance of the communicative approach to reason and ethics was becoming more widely recognized in the 1980s, a persistent criticism of Habermas remained in regard to what was perceived as his failure to address adequately institutional, political questions. His ethical perspective and critique of Western rationalization seemed to distance him radically from the existing institutions of liberal democracy. That was acutely evident in his *Legitimation Crisis*, written in the early 1970s.²⁶ Like many other critics of the legitimacy of liberal democracies written in that decade, Habermas contended that such systems were beset by difficulties likely to drive them into a crisis resolvable only by radical democratization. But the precise shape of this more just society – what he had earlier called “emancipated” – remained obscure. Up through the early 1970s, Habermas continued to think in terms of a fundamental transition from a liberal, constitutional state to some sort of socialist system with more radicalized democratic institutions.²⁷ By the time *The Theory of Communicative Action* appeared in German in 1981, however, it was clear that this perspective was undergoing substantial modification.²⁸ As said earlier, Habermas there affirms certain modes of resistance in advanced industrial societies, but such opposition is never conceived as directed toward a wholesale replacement of liberal states. The primary image one is left with is struggle at the margins. Healthy democratic impulses seem largely confined to the periphery of organized politics; from there they merely try to resist further systemic encroachment. The force of communicative reason, as manifest in new social movements and

Reason, modernity, and democracy

II

other upwellings of radical “public spheres,” can, in effect, only hurl themselves against an administrative Leviathan.

Even though the precise institutional implications of Habermas’s conception of democracy remained unclear through the 1980s, there were other aspects of it that were developed in enough detail to permit a fruitful engagement with various issues in democratic theory. Mark Warren’s essay investigates how a discursive perspective brings about something of a “paradigm shift in how we think about the location and legitimacy of radically democratic expectations” (see Chapter 8).

The broad suggestiveness of Habermas’s perspective for democracy has finally been brought into the context of a more detailed analysis of political institutions with the publication of his *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, which appeared in German in 1992.²⁹ In *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas had certainly regarded the emergence of modern law, with its universalism and orientation to individual rights, as a significant evolutionary step in moral-practical learning. But this positive quality was seen largely as something that has kept us from recognizing the degree to which law in the welfare state has in fact become a vehicle for expanding administrative power (a problem Habermas treated under the theme of “juridification” [*Verrechtlichung*]).³⁰ Thus, although modern law is understood in that book as deeply ambivalent, its negative side is what receives the most distinctive treatment. This one-sidedness is corrected in *Facticity and Validity*. The essays by Kenneth Baynes and Simone Chambers explore the various issues raised by this significant addition to Habermas’s corpus.

Within the new perspective, law’s role as an instrument of stability and social control is retained; only now that capacity is displayed as being in perpetual “tension” with the distinctive and positive normative quality it takes on in modern politics.³¹ The institutions of modern law, such as basic rights and constitutions, provide a means by which actors can maintain, in a historically new way, a collective sense of “validity” and “solidarity” no longer adequately carried by traditional institutions. The former institutions can assume this role because they can be understood as representations of the idea of a self-determining community of free and equal subjects