

HABERMAS: A CRITICAL APPROACH\*

It was, if my memory serves me correctly, during 1970 when I and several other members of the Department of Philosophy of the London School of Economics went up to London University's Senate House in order to hear a public lecture by Jürgen Habermas. Most of us knew him only by reputation—as the youngest spokesman of the Frankfurt school. We understood him to be going to talk about current Anglo-American philosophy. My only preparation for what would be said was a knowledge of Marcuse's diatribes against this tradition in his *One Dimensional Man*.

I was somewhat taken aback to find that, rather than a fiery critique conducted from the perspective of a Hegelianized Marxism, we were offered an over-long and rather dull treatment of aspects of J. L. Austin's philosophy of language. They were delivered by an almost archetypal German academic with a slight speech impediment, in lightly ac-

\*I would like to thank the editor of *CRITICAL REVIEW*, and also my colleagues Tom Palmer and Sheldon Richman, for many useful suggestions about the style of this piece, and David Ingram's *Habermas and the Dialectic of Reason* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987); Rick Roderick's *Habermas and the Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986); and the essays by various authors in Richard Bernstein's collection, *Habermas and Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1985) for many useful suggestions about the interpretation of Habermas's views. In each case, the usual disclaimers apply. I hope to return to some of the more distinctive theses of these volumes in the course of a review of Seyla Benhabib's *Critique, Norm and Utopia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986) which will appear in a future issue of *CRITICAL REVIEW*.

Jeremy Shearmur is Senior Research Fellow, Institute for Humane Studies at George Mason University. © 1988, J. F. G. Shearmur.

cented English. At the end of all this, however, our dogmatic slumbers were stirred by Habermas's concluding with a few rhetorical flourishes in which—to at least my surprise, and in a manner that seemed scarcely related to the subject-matter of the talk—radical-sounding conclusions were drawn, before the speaker sat down to polite applause.

Today, Habermas is the subject of an ever-growing pile of books and articles. Habermas himself has written at great length, and he is almost encyclopedic in his interests. His thought is developed in the course of a continuing critical encounter with the ideas of many of the most important figures in philosophy and social theory of the last two centuries. All this is given a special frisson because of Habermas's connection with the Frankfurt school.

The leading figures of the older Frankfurt school—such as Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse—passed disapproving judgment upon much of the modern world, and many tendencies in its intellectual life. They particularly repudiated what they saw as its major intellectual addictions: scientism, subjectivism, and a merely instrumental conception of rationality. In their own eyes, they appeared as champions of Reason in a world in which all that was left of philosophy was an imperialistic philosophy of science, and a “decisionism” which limited the role of reason to the choice between “given” ends—ends which, in the view of the Frankfurt school, were in fact being dictated ever more completely by the institutions of an advanced capitalist society.

The full character of the Frankfurt school's own theoretical presuppositions was never made completely explicit in their writings. And no clear case was set out as to why one should assume their perspective to be correct. They combined an aesthetic cultural elitism, a materialist and “social” reading of psychoanalysis,<sup>1</sup> a left-Hegelian reinterpretation of Marx (from which the working class was expunged, as addicted to its chains), and Weberian historical pessimism. Indeed, *not* explicating a positive theory and *not* pausing to justify themselves to philistines and intellectual pedestrians was almost part of the game. To demand such an explanation was virtually to reveal oneself as a representative of the *petit bourgeoisie*.

### *Emancipation and Knowledge*

One reason why many people found Habermas's work interesting was that he seemed to promise a critique of modern society and of modern thought close to that of the older Frankfurt school, but developed

upon a basis that was not as obviously tendentious. For rather than some covert appeal to a dogmatically assumed Marxian or Hegelian perspective, Habermas worked through an internal critique of modern thought.

Rather than, say, repudiating the philosophy of science, he attempted to give credit where credit was due, but to put it in its place. Thus, rather than decrying the claims of scientific knowledge (social or natural) and denouncing contemporary work in the philosophy of science, he argued that science was giving us knowledge from a particular perspective; knowledge shaped by interests of a certain kind: technical interests in prediction and control. The philosophy of science, rather than being co-extensive with epistemology, was limited in its scope. Insofar as it made global claims, it misunderstood its own status.

Just what these ideas of Habermas's amount to if taken as a contribution to the philosophy of science was never made clear. It was not that Habermas championed an instrumentalistic (as opposed to a realistic) understanding of the character of scientific knowledge. This was not a dispute with which he was directly concerned. Rather, the force of Habermas's claim lay in other directions. First, in limiting the scope of science, Habermas wished to argue that there are other knowledge-constituting interests, one of which is an interest in understanding and communication. He was, by this means, able to combat the specter of scientism by calling on the tradition of hermeneutics and *Verstehen* (in his treatment of which he emphasized the themes of communication and the inter-subjectivity of knowledge). To this, however, Habermas also added a *further* knowledge-constituting interest—the emancipatory.

Here, he was concerned with themes from Marxism and psychoanalysis—and also that aspect of the thought of the Enlightenment which is captured by Kant's description, offered in his "What is Enlightenment":

Enlightenment is the emancipation of man from a state of self-imposed tutelage. This state is due to his incapacity to use his own intelligence without external guidance. Such a state of tutelage I call "self-imposed" if it is due not to a lack of intelligence, but to a lack of courage or determination to use his own intelligence without the help of a leader. . . . Dare to use your own intelligence! This is the battle-cry of the Enlightenment.<sup>2</sup>

There was in Habermas's conception of an emancipatory interest, however, an ambiguity that has troubled several of his critics. For

there are different ways in which the idea of emancipation through knowledge might be interpreted. It might be understood in terms of the idea that the truth shall make us free: that, once we have understood the character of those things which bind us, they bind us no more. Alternatively, it might be the case that, once we have understood their character and the role that they play, we have then actively to cast them off—provided that we in fact wish to do so. (This is an issue to which I will return.) A further ambiguity is added by the fact that Habermas's concern at times seems less to be with obstacles to human knowledge that might be overcome than with something closer to a Kantian conception of a critique: with the exploration of different forms of understanding, and of the intrinsic limits to each of them; limits that *cannot* be overcome. (There are further problems generated by his attempt to give a social interpretation of the Hegelian theme of the historical development of the categories of human reason; but discussion of this would take us into issues that cannot sensibly be pursued here.)

The concerns that I have just outlined led Habermas away from the ideas set out in his *Knowledge and Human Interests*. Before looking at some of his later ideas, I would like to explore a line of criticism of my own, relating to Habermas's notion of an "emancipatory interest."

Consider first the theories from which Habermas draws his notion of an "emancipatory interest." Both Marxism and psychoanalysis make specific and substantive claims about the world. Indeed, the very idea of an "emancipatory interest" is a creature of the assumption that these theories are true: that it is indeed the case that the mechanisms of the human psyche and of human social organization are such that human well-being is best promoted in certain specific ways.

But are such claims true? And by what means are the correctness of these claims to be assessed? On the face of it, it is to the very ideas with which epistemology, the philosophy of science and theories of understanding are concerned that we will need to have recourse. Thus, rather than a distinctive kind of interest here, one has, simply, specific theories, the merits of which must be appraised by just the same means as we appraise the merits of *any* theoretical claims.

What is more, it would seem to me that both Marxism and Freudian psychoanalysis are reasonably judged interesting and perhaps suggestive, but false. But what, then, of emancipatory interest?

The proponent of a distinctive emancipatory interest might still say: what of the obvious desirability of the growth of reason and of self-consciousness, and of our ability to free ourselves by becoming con-

scious of the character of the fetters that have bound us? What of the Enlightenment, as Kant characterized it; of the desirability of individuals daring to use their own reason?

These ideas are indeed attractive. But they should not be endorsed uncritically as conducive to human well-being—for reasons that Hayek has explained. Hayek argued that it is by allowing “invisible hand” mechanisms to work for us, rather than by demanding in all things the rule of Reason and conscious control, that we can coordinate our activities in ways that allow individuals freedom to use their own judgment and which achieve conditions that are to the advantage of us all. And, similarly, theoretical reflection on our need for complex institutions such as a legal system and a system of social roles may lead us to appreciate that most of us should innovate only in a somewhat circumspect manner. This—Hayek’s restatement and development of ideas from Carl Menger and from Ludwig von Mises—is a vitally important theoretical lesson that followers of the Frankfurt school still have to learn from the classical liberal tradition. Once they have done so, the *uncritical* presumption that “emancipation” is the path to freedom and progress must be rejected.

### *Politics from Epistemology*

In Habermas’s more recent work, he has moved away from his earlier theory of human interests to ideas closer to Kant’s division between factual knowledge, morality and aesthetics. But running through all his work is a deepening of his idea of political ideals being implicit within the notion of communication.

To depict adequately what Habermas does with this theme would take me far beyond the confines of the present piece. Indeed, to engage with his ideas in any detail would virtually require a book-length study. Rather than offering a compressed version of such a study, I will instead present some very tentative reactions to this phase in Habermas’s enterprise.

I am concerned here with two aspects of Habermas’s work. First, there is his enterprise of extracting values, and, indeed, political ideals from the notion of communication. Second, there is the way in which he seems, somewhat uneasily, to combine empirical and transcendental analysis—moving from specific theories such as those of Piaget and Chomsky to what at times is presented as if it were an analysis grounded in the very possibility of communication itself.

I suspect that, at bottom, what Habermas is offering is best understood as a variation on a theme in Kantian epistemology, and an exercise in metaphysics.

The Kantian theme is the one set out towards the end of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. Here Kant suggests that one may take inter-subjective agreement as a kind of surrogate for objectivity:

The holding of a thing to be true is an occurrence in our understanding which, though it may rest upon objective grounds, also requires subjective causes in the mind of the individual who makes the judgment. If the judgment is valid for everyone, provided only he is in possession of reason, its ground is objectively sufficient, and the holding of it to be true is entitled *conviction* . . . truth depends upon agreement with the object, and in respect of it the judgments of each and every understanding must therefore be in agreement with each other. . . . The touchstone whereby we decide whether our holding a thing to be true is a conviction or mere persuasion is therefore external, namely, the possibility of communicating it and of finding it to be valid for all human reason. For there is then at least a presumption that the ground of the agreement of all judgments with each other notwithstanding the differing characters of individuals, rests upon the common ground, namely, upon the object, and that it is for this reason that they are all in agreement with the object—the truth of the judgment being thereby proved.<sup>3</sup>

Such an approach is interesting as a theory of knowledge. Indeed, Karl Popper's theory of the "empirical basis" of knowledge, in his *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*,<sup>4</sup> is a development of just this idea. On Popper's account, the foundations of knowledge—that against which we test any empirical claim—consist of an open-ended inter-subjective consensus as to what is the case.

It is also striking that from such a conception one can easily generate ethical-looking imperatives. Thus, if one's concern is with truth, and if one's epistemology is such that one believes that an uncoerced consensus is the means through which truth claims should be appraised, then from one's concern for truth there is generated an interest in individuals' not being coerced—in the sense of not being under the domination of others.

Such an analysis is consequentialist, in that what matters for such a purpose is the consequences of human actions, not human intentions. What matters from the point of view of epistemology are the situations in which people find themselves, not whether those situations were brought about through voluntary transactions. It also generates a theory of ideology.<sup>5</sup> For in principle, it becomes possible to criticize an

existing social consensus on the basis of the kinds of social and economic arrangements that legitimated it (in the sense of suppressing criticism of it). Thus if, say, women are not allowed a voice—if their criticisms cannot be expressed—the fact that there is no disagreement is not grounds for a presumption that the ideas in question are true. Similarly, one might tentatively explain certain features of a consensus in terms of the kinds of criticism to which it was *not* open.

The approach may also be extended beyond the realm of factual argument, to moral issues, and perhaps even aesthetic issues too—although in these areas, one must, presumably, allow for a greater amount of pluralism than would seem appropriate in respect of our judgments about matters of fact.

These ideas—of which, it seems to me, Popper's epistemology gives us a particularly interesting model—are one way in which we can make sense of Habermas's approach. But why have I developed this as an extension of a specific epistemology, rather than following Habermas into presenting these ideas as implicit in communication *per se*? It is because such conclusions only follow if a particular epistemology is correct. If, instead, some form of epistemological elitism were correct, then every move in the direction of the social arrangements suggested by our earlier argument would be a step away from those conditions which would be productive of truth.<sup>6</sup> Habermas's way of presenting things gives a false generality to his argument. In addition, it obscures the fact that Habermas needs to explicate and defend an epistemology, not just in respect of matters of fact, but also of ethical judgment, if his approach is to be plausible.

From this perspective, the other side of Habermas's enterprise—presented as a somewhat uneasy cross between scientific naturalism and transcendental argument—also becomes more comprehensible. It may be understood as an exercise in scientific metaphysics—that is to say, as what happens if we take our current (and admittedly tentative) scientific knowledge as giving us a picture of the world that can be interpreted realistically, and can then be used by us in our task of seeking to understand ourselves and our interactions with the world.

### *Which Politics From Epistemology?*

If, however, one were to accept the epistemologically-based argument that I have sketched above, what follows at a political level? Habermas is in my view completely right to suggest that one can offer an epis-

temologically-generated critique of our social institutions. But what is the force—and the character—of that critique?

Its force is less than Habermas's approach might suggest. For such a critique is generated from our concern for truth, and for validity in our moral claims. But these are not our only concerns. And while it seems to me reasonable to take the view that it is only those interests of individuals which are, in some sense, appropriate or rational that should be accorded any normative clout by others, it is nonetheless the case that even these interests may conflict with our concern for truth. For example, we might discover that our current social practices have features that conflict in some marginal way with the ideal conditions for dialogue, but which it would be extremely burdensome to change. In such situations, there would not likely be any disagreement that our non-cognitive interests should triumph. It was for this reason that I earlier suggested that the link between our recognizing something to be an intellectual fetter and our wishing to remove it was not immediate. For we may correctly judge that it is to our advantage to keep things the way they are.

In what direction, politically, do the arguments that we can extract from our epistemological concerns lead? It seems to me that in Habermas and among his commentators there is a largely unargued presumption that they lead towards collective democratic decision-making, and beyond that to some form of socialism.<sup>7</sup>

But insofar as they take this view, I think that they are incorrect. For if we consider what in social and economic terms will provide the best safeguards for autonomy of judgment, then there is a strong case for private property rights, in the sense stressed by the classical liberal tradition. To be sure, there will be inequalities in property-holdings. But there is every reason to suppose that property will not be in the hands of those who hold just one view, and that we will stand a better chance for a diversity of views to be represented and heard than would be the case if resources were collectively held, or distributed through the processes of a majoritarian democracy. It is also important that we do not here contrast the arrangements that are likely under a liberal economic system with a mere ideal. Instead we must conduct an exercise in comparative socio-economic systems, viewing how each of them functions in realistic terms. Here it would seem to me plausible that the actual working of either "planned" economies, or even of pluralist democracies where decision-making is extensively politicized, are less supportive of individual autonomy and diversity in opinion than is a market-based social and political order.



Moreover, it is misleading to think of politics in terms of actual dialogue. For such dialogue is of a face-to-face character, while the kinds of society in which most of us wish to live are large, and depend on the division of labor and upon cooperation with many people with whom we *cannot* have face-to-face relationships, and, thus, dialogue. It simply is not the case that one can treat of politics as if it were like the deliberations of an ideal epistemological community. (To treat it in this way is to raise from the grave, once again, the specter of the *polis*-sized political community which has done so much damage through the history of Western political thought.) What is more, in ethics and politics, and in most of the things that matter to us, we are faced with a diversity of ideals and traditions which in practice generate disagreement and limits to consensus.

In such situations of disagreement, everything is to be gained from continued dialogue. But a model of democracy that demands consensus upon more than (1) the most general procedural requirements and (2) what constitutes an unacceptable situation, is making demands that are unrealistic. While I find "communitarian" writing both unattractive and unconvincing,<sup>8</sup> those writing in this vein are surely correct in stressing the diversity of actual moral and political traditions—and thus the depth of the problem facing those who picture politics as dialogue to consensus.

In the face of this diversity, it seems to me that the most plausible path for an approach like that of Habermas is, in the end, to endorse a view in which limited dialogue about general principles and minimal conditions of well-being is supplemented by the freedom of individuals to engage in experiments in living (subject, perhaps, to a requirement to face criticisms and objections to their chosen form of life). In this way, from epistemological concerns like those of Habermas or of Popper one generates not socialism or an expansive conception of democracy, but a conception of the proper scope of democracy as limited to issues of general principle (and perhaps the determination of minimal standards of life below which, if otherwise unassisted, citizens are regarded as entitled to collective assistance).

Indeed, one can take this argument further in the direction of classical liberalism. For an epistemologically generated conception of rights—what one might call "dialogue rights"—may be extended to justify individual property rights. Property may be regarded as a vehicle for the objectification of judgment—as a means by which we may learn, not least through experiments in living.<sup>9</sup>

*Capitalism and Utopia*

Habermas does not take the view that dialogue is everything. As Albrecht Wellmer brings out in an essay entitled "Reason, Utopia and Enlightenment",<sup>10</sup> Habermas sees communication—the ideas with which we have been concerned above—as complementary to issues of systematic rationalization and economic and bureaucratic organization. In Habermas's view, the problems that the older Frankfurt school discerned in the social world are not necessary, but, rather, the product of particular historical developments which place restrictions on communication.

But what, then, is to be done—what, for Habermas, will a world in which communication plays its proper role look like? Just what, as Wellmer puts it,

[would] on the one hand . . . represent the normative anchoring of the [social and economic] system in the life-world, and, on the other, would protect the communicative structures of the life-world themselves and secure a rational and democratic control of the system by the life-world?

Wellmer continues:

Habermas does not try to answer the question how such institutional structures would look in a post-capitalist society. This is quite consistent with his general position; it is not the task of the theoretician to determine what the content of a future social consensus will be.<sup>11</sup>

If Wellmer's account is correct, Habermas would seem here to parallel Marx's move of combining a refusal to discuss what an improved society might be like with an uncritical assumption that things will be better if capitalism is superseded.<sup>12</sup> But to take such a view means turning one's back on our actual achievements, and on the ways in which we may carefully move to do things better, and offering in their place a utopian fantasy—one which is simply destructive in its practical consequences.

*The Dance of the Dead*

In most of what I have written so far, I have been sympathetic and respectful towards Habermas's work. Indeed, I think that one can hardly be anything else. I do not agree with the substantive political

views that have inspired Habermas's work. I think that the epistemological ideas he has developed lead politically in a direction totally different to that towards which he is inclined. And I think that the turgid character of much of his writing is a scandal. But I nonetheless think that he has tackled problems that should form the object of serious work in normative political theory today—and that this includes the classical liberal tradition.

Habermas is correct in identifying a particular problematic, going back to the Enlightenment, to which those of all intellectual traditions must address themselves. He is also right that this work cannot be done within the confines of single intellectual disciplines as we currently receive them. An exclusive training in any one of these, on its own, simply ensures that one is trained not to be able to understand the real problems we face. One is supplied, instead, with a sophisticated problem-solving apparatus that equips one to focus on issues that are, increasingly, minute, and perhaps merely creatures of the discipline within which one is working. Habermas is also correct that one cannot sensibly divorce normative political theory and the task of trying to make sense of the world.

However, there are other respects in which those who follow Habermas are on completely the wrong track. For at a certain point, the real world seems to disappear. In Marx, views are often articulated via a "critique" of the assumptions of other writers, rather than by actually seeing if what is being asserted is true or false of the world. But such an approach is only tenable from something like a Hegelian perspective. In Habermas and many of his commentators, the actual world likewise drops away. In its place, there are clever and illuminating readings of Weber, of Freud, of Marx, and so on. That Habermas and his followers have such historical and theoretical interests is fine; that they do not show equal interest in the empirical assessment of the truth or the falsity of received accounts, theoretical or historical, seems to me terrible. What is needed is a critical interplay between theory and *real* history, and *real* anthropology, sociology and economics, rather than an elaborate dance of the dead with the Great Thinkers of the Modern Western Tradition.

\* \* \*

The reflections in this short essay are preliminary and programmatic. I have sketched an approach toward the work of Habermas and of those influenced by him which I will develop on another occasion. I have also suggested a program for research within the classical liberal tradition.<sup>13</sup> But however harshly particular arguments that I have of-

ferred may be judged, or however it may be felt that I have misunderstood or misrepresented Habermas's concerns, I would hope that this essay may be welcomed as an attempt to open up a dialogue. And that is something to which Habermas can hardly object.

## NOTES

1. Cf. Russell Jacoby, *Social Amnesia* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1977), and also my review in *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 13, no. 1 (March 1983).
2. See Kant, "An Answer to the Question 'What is Enlightenment?'" in H. Reiss, ed., *Kant's Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970). I have used the translation of this passage to be found in Karl Popper's "Emancipation Through Knowledge" in A. J. Ayer, ed., *The Humanist Outlook* (London: Pemberton Press, 1968).
3. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, II, "Transcendental Doctrine of Method," ch. 2, sec. 3; Kemp-Smith trans. (London: Macmillan, 1964), 645.
4. Cf. K. R. Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, secs. 8 and 30, and his references there to Kant's discussion of objectivity in the *Critique of Pure Reason*.
5. Cf., for a development of such ideas from a "Popperian" starting-point, my "The Religious Sect as a Cognitive System," *Annual Review of the Social Sciences of Religion* 4 (1980); and my "Epistemology Socialized?", *et cetera*, Fall 1985.
6. After writing an initial version of this argument, I discovered that essentially the same point is made in Lecture III of Hilary Putnam's *The Many Faces of Realism* (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1987).
7. Cf. Jürgen Habermas, *Autonomy and Solidarity: Interviews*, ed. Peter Dews (London: Verso, 1986).
8. Not least because they seem simply to presuppose that their communities will be left-liberal in sentiment, tolerant, and will respect the rights of women and of minorities.
9. Cf., on this, my "Abstract Institutions in an Open Society" in *Wittgenstein, the Vienna Circle and Critical Rationalism* (Vienna: HPT, 1979); my University of London Ph.D. dissertation, *The Political Thought of F. A. von Hayek*; and my "From Dialogue Rights to Property Rights," delivered at the American Political Science Association, Chicago, September 1987.
10. In Richard J. Bernstein, ed., *Habermas and Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985).
11. *Ibid.*, 56.
12. Cf., on this, my "Popper's Critique of Marxism," *CRITICAL REVIEW* 1, No. 1 (Winter 1986-87).
13. This I have pursued elsewhere. Cf. the references in note 9.