Habermas and Anarchism

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better sort of liberalism, a renovated Marxism, or some entirely new form of social movement.

The anti-authoritarian rhetoric used by deconstructionists and other post-modernists seems to suggest a connection with anarchism: however, the similarity is only skin-deep. The post-modernist refusal to accept even the possibility of rational debate leaves us with a world in which political philosophy is collapsed into power politics. While this might seem an attractively cynical explanation for many academic careers, it fails totally to present—or even to allow—a form of thinking within which radical projects can be conceived.[8] The more measured and tentative philosophy presented by Habermas seems to at least allow the potential of a significant radical philosophy.

In his writing Habermas makes almost no reference to anarchism. However, there seems to be a clear connection with a form of anarchist thinking in his stress on the importance of everyday forms of communication. In many passages there seem to be echoes of Godwin's hopes for the potential of human beings to act and create in a rational manner. Of course, Habermas's sophisticated political philosophy lacks the naive optimism which marks Godwin's work. He does not—unlike Godwin—consider that there is an unproblematic reality somewhere out there which can be just grasped through intellectual effort but—like Godwin—he does consider that attempts to discuss, to grasp and to fix meaning are an essential pat of a radical agenda to change society.

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[8] In recent years *Telos* has published a number of useful critical analyses of deconstructionism and post-modernism. amongst others see K Asher, 'Deconstruction's Use and Abuse of Nietzsche'. *Telos* 62 (1984- 5), pp.169-77; A. Weber, 'Lyotard's Combative Theory of Discourse', *Telos* 83 (1990), 141-50; and R. Berman, 'Troping to Pretoria: the Rise and Fail of Deconstructionism' , *Telos* 85 (1990), 4-16

economy. Modern capitalism is seen as a radically innovative break with medieval norms, for it is an apolitical and amoral system, which justifies its development with reference to natural law. Habermas argues that the permanent crisis within the capitalist world is centred around the legitimacy of the state and the economy within this political-cultural framework.[7] On the one hand, capitalism cannot survive without state intervention: on the other hand, the moment that the state intervenes, the economic sphere loses its apparently apolitical nature and therefore becomes liable to more sustained and divisive collective struggles. The 'solution' adopted by western societies is a type of permanent crisis management: there is a tendency to oscillate between state intervention and free market rhetoric, while other social-structural tactics are deployed to defuse any latent class struggle. (Habermas's Marxist roots can be seen in this effort to explain why the proletariat has not revolted.) Western societies are undergoing a process of further fragmentation, in which almost all aspects of life are compartmentalized in such a manner as to prevent a consciousness of the totality of social problems.

III.

Habermas's work grows more opaque when he moves on to consider solutions. His claim is that the project of modernity—a rational society, based on coherent, universally understood and accepted rules—still remains the best hope for the human race. Clearly, liberal capitalism has failed to realize this project, and the 'mixed' economies which have followed have merely operated as stopgaps. Implicit in Habermas's thinking seems to be the possibility that some new political force will take up the mantle of modernity, but it is unclear whether this will be a

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[7] His most readable account of this can be found in *Legitimation Crisis* which, despite being almost twenty years old still seems very relevant.

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Hegelian (and Enlightenment) proposal that Reason was the vital human characteristic.[4] His difference with Hegel lay in the fact that instead of seeing Reason best expressed through the conscious involvement of people with 'universal', philosophically-orientated, laws, Marx saw labour as the form of creative rationalization.[5] Habermas breaks company with Marx at this point, and argues that the vital quality which we should be stressing is the ability of human beings to create communicative structures. Many of the historical sketches he presents are attempts to trace the development of societies—conceived of as communicative structures—from the dawn of civilization to the present-day.[6] The point which Habermas stresses is the increasing complexity of social organization. Without romanticizing early human societies, Habermas sees them as characterized by a unity, a type of cultural consensus. This unity grows increasingly fragmented through the development of a separate ruling strata, operating according to a different type of communicative practices than the majority of the population.

Habermas traces the development of this ruling strata. From the quasi-familial rules of early civilization, there develops a more abstract, less personalised concept of universal law. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries society grows more complicated: in place of a simple two-tier model of state and society, or public and private, a third sphere of human activity—a 'system' in Habermas's vocabulary—emerges: the

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[4] See the essays on Hegel in Habermas's *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge, 1985)

[5] Argued in 'Historical Materialism and the Development of Normative Structures'. *Communication and the Evolution of Society.*

[6] Habermas presents successively modified versions of such historical perspectives in a number of his works. See *Legitimation Crisis* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 17-24; 'Historical Materialism and the Evolution of Society'; *The Theory of Communicative Action: Vol. 11, The Critique of Functionalist Reason* (Cambridge, 1987), pp.152-99; and The Normative Content of Modernity' in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity.*

simply that rationality is possible. Exhaustively—even over-exhaustively!—Habermas debates and analyses differing modes and interpretations of rationalism. The model of desirable rationality which emerges from his works is far from the individualistic instrumental reason criticised by Adorno: Habermas argues that the quality of 'rationality' is not one which is crudely owned by any single speaker or actor, but a quality which can only be present through its construction by many participants in an exchange. In other words, rationality may be the quality of a conversation, but not of a single speaker. It is important to stress that Habermas's argument is not that rationality is a universal characteristic shared by all communications, but simply that it is possible to imagine conditions when it becomes viable: such conditions necessarily include a degree of relative equality between the speakers.

Habermas differs from most post-modernist thinkers in focusing on actual speech, rather than on the abstract grammatical rules of language.[3] While this can hardly be described as an 'anarchist' concept, it does show that there is a certain democratic quality which is often absent in the consciously elitist thinking present in the post-modernist stress on abstract grammatical rules. There are also similarities here with Chomsky's ideas about basic, biological human capacities to express themselves through speech.

One response to these arguments by Habermas would be to say that this is obvious: there seems little need to spend some 400 plus pages labouring the point. Such comments ignore the context within which Habermas is working: he seeks to debate with post-modernists word by word, rather than merely to refute their claims.

Habermas develops his ideas to suggest a re-working of Marxism. According to Habermas, Marx accepted the original

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[3] See his *Communication Sc. the Evolution of Society* (London, 1979). pp. 1-10.

"Meaning" is a scarce resource and is becoming even scarcer."

—Jürgen Habermas

Preface

I first started reading Habermas in spring 1990, and since then I've been waiting to read an anarchist interpretation of his work. Since one has not been written—beyond some cryptic comments by Karen Goaman—I've taken on the task myself. All that follows is very tentative, but I will regard it as 'a success' if it provokes other people to respond.

I start by explaining the context within which Habermas's work has been produced, for it seems that his importance is largely due to the state of a particular set of debates at the time of his intervention.

I.

I first learnt of Habermas during a research seminar on a essay, 'The Post-Modern Condition', by Jean-Francois Lyotard. The essay, which took the form of an elegant but essentially polemical rebuttal of Habermas's thinking, irritated me enormously. I found Lyotard's style pretentious, his thought flashy rather than genuinely radical, and his politics elitist. Our debate started by examining one particular point: Lyotard's assertion that the search for a coherence in politics was an essentially fascistic urge. To my astonishment, most of the participants at the seminar took this for granted, and were unwilling to discuss this point. My response was to learn more about the writer that Lyotard was criticizing.

Today, radical political and cultural philosophers seem to be divided into two camps: the Germans (largely following vari-

eties of Critical Theory) and the French.[1] There is some common ground shared by both camps: both have been shaped by the 'linguistic turn' of twentieth century philosophy. This phrase seems to mean a number of things. In one sense, just as the philosophers of the eighteenth century Enlightenment saw mathematics as the basic model of science on which all other forms of rational thought could and should be built, so today most philosophers give linguistics a similar status. Following from this, contemporary philosophers then place great emphasis on the role language plays in actively forming concepts, mentalities, even cultures. This idea is taken to a logical extreme by (largely French) post-structuralists and deconstructionists, who argue that language actually creates—'texts speak to texts'—while authors are merely docile pawns in the wider movements of some vast linguistic growth.

The 'linguistic turn' involved a number of other issues. Having proposed that linguistics was to act as a kind of base model, it then became necessary to define the model more precisely. Initially, the work produced by Ferdinand Saussure in the early twentieth century appeared vital: Saussure differentiated between mere 'speech'—the sort of expressions that people use in day-to-day communication and 'language' which was constructed on deeper grammatical structures. It was the model of these structures which excited the first wave of structuralist thinkers: they asserted that words, events, rituals and even individuals made no sense in themselves, but could be understood as part of deeper structures. Writers such as Levi-Strauss and Roland Barthes, working in the 1950s and '60s, made use of such concepts in their respective studies on anthropology and literary criticism.

However, the second and third movements of the 'linguistic turn' produced different models of language. While Saussure, Levi-Strauss and Barthes had all, in different ways, followed a sort of rationalist approach through which study could lead to a discovery of meaning, post-structuralists and deconstructionists—such as Derrida—challenged this interpretation of the nature of language. While accepting the notion that language plays a central role in the construction of social identities and culture, they argued that it was a incoherent, illogical and deceptive medium. Reasoning—based on linguistic forms—could not lead to the discovery of meaning, because there was no meaning, no reality outside of the text: the role of the reader was to decipher, to cut through the attempt of the text to impose meaning on an essentially meaningless world.

II.

Such ideas clearly pose a sophisticated challenge to the political certainties presented by the great ideologies of the nineteenth century, and reflect the sense of uncertainty felt by many academics in the post-war world. Such thinking has become identified as 'post-modern': the certainties sought by the eighteenth century Enlightenment and its political inheritors (liberalism, socialism ... and anarchism?) have been judged redundant and so rejected.

Habermas's thinking is largely a refutation of post-modern thinking. His roots lie in the Frankfurt School-style Critical Theory (Fromm, Marcuse, Adorno, Horkheimer), but he moves away from them in proposing a re-valuation of the rationalist heritage, and developing a complex, double-edged argument.[2] First, against the post-modernists he argues

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[1] A reasonably painless guide to the current state of debate can he found in Peter Dews, *Logics of Disintegration; Post-Structuralist Thought and the Claims of Critical Theory* (London, 1987)

[2] Habermas's fullest analysis of rationalism can be found in *The Theory of Communicative Action: Vol. 1, Reason and the Rationalization of Society* (London, 1984).