

# The Spirit of Modernity and its Fate: Jürgen Habermas

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Jürgen Habermas's ongoing opus is organised around distinctive conceptualisations of 'modernity', 'crisis', and critique'.\* The *Theory of Communicative Action* (2 volumes, Boston, 1984 & 1987), in which these internally related concepts are articulated into a theory of rationality, was written by Habermas to revivify the project of Frankfurt School Critical Theory. In *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*,<sup>1</sup> far and away his best book to date, Habermas attempts to unlock what he takes to be the closures and aporias of the various rival projects of modern Continental philosophy – and especially of poststructuralism – with the keys of his theory of communicative action.

## Modernity, Crisis, and Self-Reassurance

What does it mean to say that Habermasian critical theory and poststructuralism are rivals? To understand the significance of this question, we need to follow Habermas back to where he locates the beginnings of the philosophical discourse of modernity – in Hegel. Modernity, Habermas informs us in the preliminary lecture, is characterised by a distinctive consciousness of time. The past loses its legitimating weight, the present is loosened from the totality of Tradition and appears as a moment of permanent transition towards an indeterminate and problematic

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Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, translated by Frederick Lawrence, Oxford, Polity Press, 1990. xx + 430 pp., £10.95 pb., 0 7456 0830 2.

Jürgen Habermas, *The New Conservatism*, edited and translated by Shierry Weber Nicholson, introduction by Richard Wolin, Oxford, Polity Press, 1989. xxxv + 270 pp., £29.50 hb., 0 7456 0679 2.

Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, translated by Thomas Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence, Oxford, Polity Press, 1989. xix + 301 pp., £29.50 hb., 0 7456 0274 6.

Axel Honneth and Hans Joas (eds.), *Communicative Action*, translated by Jeremy Gaines and Doris L. Jones, Oxford, Polity Press, 1991. ix + 301 pp., £35.00 hb., 0 7456 05540.

David Rasmussen (ed.), *Universalism vs. Communitarianism*, Cambridge, Mass. and London, M.I.T. Press, 1990. 297 pp., £24.75 hb., £12.50 pb., 0 262 18140 1 hb., 0 262 68063 7 pb.

future. Since modern consciousness is no longer anchored in Tradition, its turning away from an exemplary past under the pressure of an onrushing and unforeseeable future must be continuously renewed. With Hegel, this modern consciousness of time catches up with philosophy. Philosophy must conceive of itself *in* its time, and this means it must conceive of itself historically. But as soon as philosophy does this, it transpires, philosophy must take on what Habermas calls the problem of modernity's self-reassurance. What is this problem?

In turning away from Tradition, modernity must generate its norms *out of itself*. Now this condition of unconditionality is precisely what specifies the rational. Oriented by the horizon of a rational form of life, Enlightenment thought understood a critique of tradition and religion which culminated with Kant. But from the perspective of a philosophy whose own concept was tied to the modern consciousness of time, Hegel could view Kant as merely reflecting (rather than conceiving) the historically rooted instabilities of the modern world. For Hegel, this instability is attributed to a 'sundered harmony of life', to real 'diremptions' which are reflected in the organising categorial oppositions of Kantian philosophy: 'nature and spirit, sensibility and understanding, understanding and reason, theoretical and practical reason, judgement and imagination, I and non-I, finite and infinite, knowledge and faith' (p. 20). These abstract oppositions testify to the concrete 'estrangement of spirit' in modern conditions of life, an estrangement which Hegel captures in the notion of 'positivity'.

For Hegel, Habermas tells us, 'positivity' represents both the 'signature' and the 'need' of the modern age. The spirit of modernity *emerges* as a reaction to the positive form into which Christianity had degenerated: a form at once sustained by the subordination of the individual's reason to time-honoured authority, and scarce in resource for nourishing solidarity between individuals. Out of the exhausted spirit of positive religion, there breathes a new principle of 'subjectivity'. Informed by this principle, modernity aspires towards new-found values; self-consciousness, self-determination, and self-realization. But the Enlightenment critique of religion, performed in the name of reflective reason and the sovereignty of the rational subject, only substitutes one form of positivity for another. Reason, as articulated by the Enlightenment and paradigmatically by Kantian philosophy, leaves itself without a motivating power for the individual who must act, and without a unifying power for the collective which must mediate individuals. Incapable of 'interesting the heart and of having an influence upon feelings and needs' (p. 26), the reason of the Enlightenment merely perpetuates the diremptions which the principle of subjectivity wrought in spite of itself. In the positive, the principle of subjectivity in which the

rational takes its modern form discloses its Janus face. The self-consciousness which was the promise of the reflective knowing subject turns to objectification of self. The self-determination promised by the purposively acting subject turns to objectification of other. Subject-centred reason, articulated in the philosophy of consciousness from Descartes to Kant, paradoxically produces subjects who are divided within and between themselves.

Thus the problem of the self-grounding of modernity turns into a problem of self-reassurance. Self-reassurance is required because, as Hegel conceived it, the experiential and public consequences (not clearly distinguished by Habermas) of a normative orientation derived from subject-centred reason undermine a form of life so oriented. Hegel's critical intuition, then, concerns modern identity's intrinsic tendency, or fateful disposition, towards crisis. The spirit of modernity, articulated as the principle of subjectivity, is immanently at odds with itself. Positivity refers to a withdrawal of what inspires from reason, both personally and institutionally, both privately and publicly. Since this motivating and unifying power is just what moderns demand of reason, it thus refers to a spirit estranged from itself. But if modern identity is to be reassured rather than displaced or rejected, it must be by way of 'a dialectic residing in the principle of Enlightenment itself', for, as we have seen, the spirit of modernity is such that it cannot borrow its norms from an exemplary past.

And so the birth of the philosophical discourse of modernity came to pass. Habermas recounts how Hegel saw the problem of

modernity's self-reassurance as the fundamental problem of the new philosophy. But with its modern consciousness of time, the form of philosophical thought fundamentally changes – the concept of philosophy must henceforth incorporate a critical 'diagnosis of the times' (p. 52). Habermas then makes an ingenious move. The philosophical discourse of modernity, the rival critical self-understandings of modernity reflected in post-Hegelian philosophical discourse from Marx to Nietzsche and Heidegger, from Bataille to Foucault and Derrida, can be reconstructed as if we were contemporaries in dialogue with the Young Hegelians. The problem of modernity's self-reassurance, conceived as the need for philosophy is generalised from Hegel to the various rival traditions of Continental philosophy.

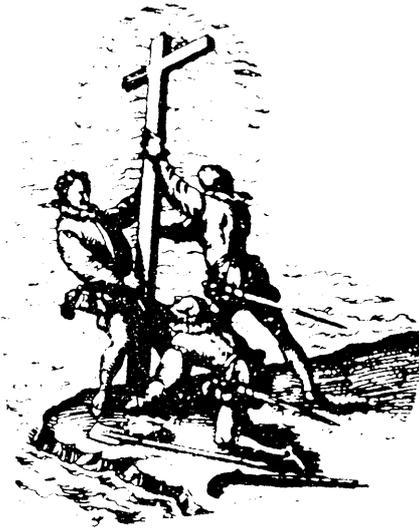
This move enables Habermas to construct a complex and compelling dramatic narrative in which the interlocutors struggle over a common domain: the critique of subject-centred reason as the principle of modernity. Habermas's argument is that these philosophers unwittingly get caught up in the very Reason to which their critique is directed. He then attempts to show how his own theoretical approach can overcome the internal inconsistencies, biases, and occlusions – in short, the 'narrow-mindedness' – of the 'Reason' with which his rivals collude, and hence to solve the problem which motivates both his own and his interlocutors' critical projects. Only by way of orienting thought and action towards an 'enlightened Enlightenment' can modernity critically reassure itself.



### The Three Ways

The times are certainly infused by a profound spirit of hesitancy, of ambivalence, by precisely a lack of reassurance, concerning the very normativity of a rational form of life. Habermas sees poststructuralism as a condensation of this spirit. The norm of a rationally ordered society is challenged by way of an unmasking genealogy which traces 'rational' practices back to an ancestry of power and disciplinary control (Foucault). The ethic of rational thought is tempered by dangers of closure, of a shutting-off to the openness of Being and meaning (Derrida). Habermas's reading of these and other post-philosophers is necessarily selective and confessedly oversimplified (though in the case of Derrida, this acknowledgement is hardly an excuse; his discussion focuses almost exclusively on Derrida's pre-1968 writings). But the central message is convincing: that these themes of discipline and closure, power and Being, testify to the need for self-reassurance of a project which understands itself in terms of its putative rationality. If, following Habermas, we call that project modernity, they testify to the philosophical problem of modernity's self-reassurance.

In the story told by Habermas, poststructuralist thought can be traced back to a crossroads at which the philosophical discourse of modernity stood after being set on its way by Hegel. All



parties to the discourse stand together where Hegel had left off: the point of critique of the 'positivism of reason'. But, though they share the same point of departure, they then follow three different paths. The left Hegelians choose the way of 'praxis philosophy'. It takes them far, approaching the *cause* of modernity's lack of self-reassurance in the capitalist political economy, but eventually gets blocked by the insuperable methodological hurdle of history conceived as the externalization and reappropriation of the essential powers of a subject 'writ large'. A second path, leading off to the right, is taken by the conservative 'Old Hegelians' in reaction to *praxis* philosophy. But those who follow this path confuse cause with effect. It is the third path which Habermas explores most in these lectures. This takes leave of modernity, conducting a 'counter-discourse' to Enlightenment, rather than a dialectic of Enlightenment. It is the way of the 'total critique of reason' for which Nietzsche is the entry point. After Nietzsche, this totalizing critique divides into two. One conducts its critique by way of an unmasking of reason, and leads through Bataille to Foucault. The second proceeds by way of a critique of metaphysics, and leads through Heidegger to Derrida.

This counter-Enlightenment turn is distinctive in that the burden of reassurance is lifted from the claims of reason, and transposed to a version of the 'other of reason' be it 'power', 'Being', the heterogeneous', or 'différance'. Once taken, this leads inexorably to a form of critique which cannot make sense of its normative presuppositions. Habermas makes the now familiar formal objection that any 'total critique of reason' is bound to get caught up in a 'performative self-contradiction': the very performance of its critique commits it to norms which it simultaneously denies. More subtly, Habermas argues that in conceiving reason according to an 'exclusion model' which will admit of an 'other', the totalizing critique of reason implicitly reproduces, in an undialectical inversion, the very subject-centred reason which it is supposed to overcome – 'the other of reason remains the mirror image of reason in power' (p. 309). But what most irritates Habermas is that post-Nietzschean total critique lacks a determinate standard before which the object of critique can be brought to account. This orientation, Habermas contends, is invariably characterised by a hope of 'expectant indeterminacy' which can only be registered by a form of 'extraordinary discourse' that resists argumentative validation. It is nourished by a 'potential for excitement' exiled by reason, but which avenges itself as the indeterminate fate of the Dionysian god who is coming.

Limit experiences of mystical revelation and aesthetic/erotic rapture, Habermas reminds us, have repeatedly been called upon

as a subversive counterforce to the rigidities and positivities of Enlightenment. This to and fro of reason and its other, with its presupposed exclusion model of reason, is perpetuated to the point of exhaustion, Habermas suggests, by Nietzschean total critique culminating in Foucault. If the critique of reason is to proceed in a determinate manner, it must do so within an alternative paradigm to subject-centred reason and the philosophy of consciousness. How will the other of reason figure in this alternative paradigm? We must take this question back to the beginnings of the discourse of modernity – to the young Hegel.

## Reconciliation

The Kantian oppositions between universal and particular, I and non-I, nature and spirit etc., were seen by Hegel not as exclusions between reason and non-reason, but as diremptions in need of reconciliation. It was as a 'dirempted totality' that the young Hegel saw modernity in crisis and in need of reassurance. Such a 'diremptive' model of reason offers what is crucially lacking in 'total critique': a determinate standard to which the object of critique can be brought to account. It is the standard of a reconciled ethical totality or 'undamaged intersubjectivity'. According to Habermas, the young Hegel once stood at the threshold of a critique of modernity undertaken in the light of this standard when, in *The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate*, he described the dialectic of the moral life as a process of division and fateful reconciliation. The subject-object relation thus appears as a product of 'division and usurpation' of a prior intersubjective harmony which avenges itself in the longing of each for reconciliation with the other. Since the subject is mediated by the structures of intersubjectivity in which reason is deposited, Habermas can claim that 'any violation of the structures of rational life together, to which all lay claim, affects everyone equally' (p. 324). And this, Habermas says, is the insight which offers a way out of subject-centred reason. The disfigurement of the mediating totality avenges itself on *all that is mediated* as a causality of fate. Since human beings are mediated communicatively through language, Hegel's insight suggests a shift towards a communicative paradigm of reason. Modernity's fateful disposition towards crisis and need for self-reassurance would then take on a *determinate* character. Habermas expounds the effect of this shift in the following crucial passage:

The theory of communicative action can reconstruct Hegel's concept of the ethical context of life (independently of the philosophy of consciousness). It disenchant the unfathomable causality of fate, which is distinguished from the destining of Being by reason of its *inexorable immanence*. Unlike the 'from-time-immemorial' character of the happening of Being or of power, the pseudo-natural dynamics of impaired communicative life-contexts retains the character of a destining for which one is *at fault oneself* – though one can speak of fault here only in an intersubjective sense, that is, in the sense of an entanglement that, however things stand with individual accountability, communicative agents would have to ascribe to communal responsibility (p. 316).

Habermas identifies two different kinds of 'entanglement'. First, there is the entanglement of cultural rationalization. Here, the differentiated dimensions of cultural modernity – the cognitive instrumental, the moral/practical, and the aesthetic/expressive – become stuck like a 'tangled mobile'. There is a one-sided rationalization of everyday life around the cognitive/instrumental dimension, and a splitting-off of expert from everyday cultures.

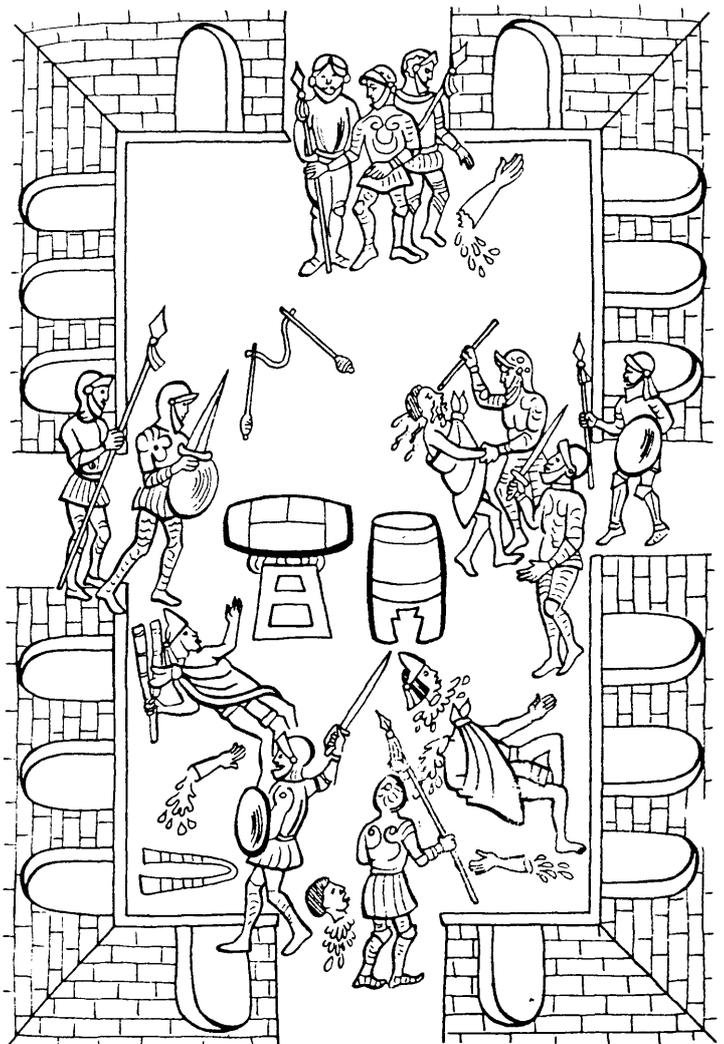
The foreshortening and distortion of the aesthetic moment of communicative reason, Habermas suggests, is repeatedly thematised in the counter-discourse to modernity since Nietzsche. It is also claimed to respond, however, to the more important entanglement of societal rationalization. This is the key to Habermas's diagnosis of the times. Before turning to it, I want to mention an entanglement within which Habermas's *Discourse* itself gets caught.

For Habermas, the problem of modernity's critical self-reassurance must be addressed by appeal to a standard of 'undamaged intersubjectivity', understood in terms of 'non-distorted communicative relationships', which, when divided, initiates a 'causality of fate'. Further, this ideal must be of modern provenance, for there can be no resort to traditional models (for instance, the Greek *polis* or the early Christian community). The causality of fate must be disenchanting to satisfy the modern requirement of self-grounding. However, Habermas's reconstruction of what Hegel means by an ethical totality is never made explicit. On the contrary, various candidates are suggested at different points in the text. He sometimes refers to it as 'the lifeworld'; at others he implies reference to a 'rationalized lifeworld' and a 'balanced' lifeworld. At still other points, he suggests it is more akin to his 'ideal speech situation', or Apel's 'ideal communication community'. The ambiguity here is no small matter, since this is just the point in poststructuralist thought where Habermas himself wedges the objection of indeterminacy. Moreover, trouble is in store whichever of these candidates gets the nomination: either because of implausible assumptions built into the criteria themselves, or because, once made plausible, they no longer fit (and explain) Hegel's insight. On the former matter, Habermas's critics have been voluble.

### Communicative Action

The concluding lectures of *Discourse* summarise what Habermas takes to be the main achievements of *The Theory of Communicative Action*, the topic of the essays collected in the volume *Communicative Action* (first German publication 1986). Most of the contributors take issue with either the coherence of the basic categories or Habermas's social theory, or with their relevance for a critical diagnosis of the age, or both. Several of the articles have already been published in English in various journals. But the volume also includes a substantial reply by Habermas, in which (contrary to a view held by some of his more sympathetic critics) he emphasises the importance he attaches to the philosophical foundation of his social theory. He then attempts to clarify some of the confusions he recognises in his earlier formulations of it. Concerning the foundations of his theory of meaning and action, Habermas's contribution to this volume also represents a significant advance upon those earlier formulations.

As I suggested, the major difficulties with Habermas's programme can perhaps best be appreciated in terms of the constraints imposed by the philosophical discourse of modernity. Habermas offers a diagnosis of the times consonant with the dynamic of Hegel's causality of fate; the communicative context and resource of self-formation (the lifeworld) is colonised by an alien economic/bureaucratic system. Society as a system is, according to Habermas's usage, theoretically comprehensible as a self-managing *functional* organism. The rationality of a system is measured in terms of its functional efficiency in *self-preservation*. This it achieves by way of a growth in *complexity* and material production. System-maintenance depends upon maximally efficient integration of action consequences, and this is achieved by steering media. Put at its crudest, the argument is



that modernity unfolds as an uncoupling of 'lifeworld' from 'system'. Within the functional subsystems of economy and bureaucratic state, action integration is mediated not communicatively, but by the 'delinguistified' steering media of money and power. These can then react back and mediatize or instrumentalize the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld. There comes a point, however, when the integrity of the lifeworld is threatened by systemic mediatization. At this crisis point, the economic/bureaucratic system colonizes the lifeworld. The result is a pathological systemically-induced reification of the lifeworld. It is the positivism of reason which has motivated the philosophical discourse of modernity since Hegel.

Such a conceptualisation, Habermas thinks, has a distinct advantage over its rivals in that it allows for a collaboration between philosophical reflection and social-scientific empirical research. The sociologically slanted contributions to *Communicative Action* hotly dispute the force of this claim. Thomas McCarthy's 'Complexity and Democracy; or the Seductions of Systems Theory' brings into particularly clear focus a widespread dissatisfaction with Habermas's appeal to systems theory. Not only is systems theory claimed to be methodologically otiose ('We do not need the paraphernalia of social systems theory to identify unintended consequences'), but its categories (like 'feedback loops' and 'control mechanism') slide over just those complex and internally contradictory tensions within the capitalist economy they are supposed to explain. Not surprisingly, this criticism is reasserted by other Marxist critics represented in the volume. It is not at all adequately dealt with in Habermas's reply.

Indeed, considering that the thesis of internal colonization is supposed to be a reworking of Marx's notion of real abstraction, to short-circuit the problem by simply consigning it to the paradigm of *praxis* philosophy, as Habermas does, is quite astonishing. Equally important for McCarthy is the loss from view of the idea of 'a theoretically generalized narrative' which once expressed the essential emancipatory intent of Critical Theory. Several critics make much of just how problematic the distinction between system and lifeworld really is. Although many of these criticisms are important, I want to move on to two articles, appearing here for the first time in English, which I think highlight what, from a philosophical perspective, are the most trenchant criticisms of Habermas. Connected to McCarthy's worries about the elision of an emancipatory narrative in the communicative paradigm shift in Habermas's critical theory, they also bear on fundamental difficulties in Habermas's purported resolution of the problem of modernity's self-reassurance.

The first difficulty is developed in a convoluted but fascinating way by Martin Seel. I take the crux to be this. According to Habermas's theory, communicative rationality covers the competence argumentatively to redeem the whole breadth of the *differentiated* validity claims of truth, rightness, and authenticity. In addition to this literal reading, however, communicative reason must mediate or allow for the interplay between these separated validity claims. Habermas typically speaks of this meaning of communicative rationality metaphorically. As we have seen, for example, he compares the lack of this interplay to a 'tangled mobile'. In a nice Derridean move, Seel shows just how much the literal meaning of communicative rationality relies, in its claim to rationality, on its metaphorical meaning. The capacity to interrelate the validity claims of argumentation is itself constitutive of reason, though it cannot be arrived at by way of the validity-redeeming reason of argumentation. One could take this problem further. The three validity claims correspond to the value-spheres of science and technology, morality and law, and art and art criticism, which become ideally autonomous in a rationalized lifeworld. Habermas refers diagnostically to a one-sidedly rationalized lifeworld, a lifeworld in which the claims of the aesthetic are muted. But if the criterion of an 'intact intersubjectivity' is to function as a standard of a balanced rationalization, then where is the validity claim which can be brought to bear in the critique of imbalance? It looks as if the lost 'harmony of life', which Habermas recognised in Hegel as the motivation for the discourse of modernity, is also lost on Habermas's reconstruction of Hegel.<sup>2</sup>

Recall Habermas's claim that Hegel's causality of fate must be 'disenchanted' if it is to satisfy modernity's self-grounding requirement. Habermas attempts to do this by conceiving the unifying force of reason procedurally. The procedural conception of practical reason is challenged by Charles Taylor. The nub of Taylor's position is that, as soon as reason becomes procedural, it *loses* its force. The point is a telling one given the problem of reassurance. For that is just the problem of the withdrawal of what in-spires or empowers from reason. The point is telling in another way too. Habermas's reply to it shows the gap between post-Kantian and neo-Aristotelian frameworks of discourse. The question then is, can the nature of this disagreement be articulated within Habermas's theoretical framework? Arguably not, since rational agreement or disagreement is conditioned by the separation of the three validity claims in that framework, yet this condition is itself unreasonable to an Aristotelian like Taylor.

Of course what is at issue here are competing

projects, not contestable validity claims. And this suggests that Habermas's contribution to the philosophical discourse of modernity, which he claims to make from 'the ordinary perspective of a participant who is recalling the course of an argument' (p. 59), is best understood – in the manner I have been presenting it – as the defence of a project against rivals over the same domain (even though *in* such a presentation the nature of that project is seen to alter). Moreover, it is precisely Habermas's passionate allegiance to the project of Enlightenment which makes *Discourse* such a wonderfully compelling book. This is not so much because he impartially reconstructs and addresses the validity claims of the poststructuralists. It is more because he constructs a narrative which, by its very nature, defends one particular project against its rivals. That the defence takes this narrative form is no accident. It *must* do so if it is to do the work which is avowedly required of it; that of articulating a *paradigm change* of critical self-understanding.

### Universalism v. Communitarianism

The view that paradigm changes can be rationally justified only retrospectively in narrative form, and that this form is essential to defending a project against rivals over the same domain, has of course been defended by Alasdair MacIntyre for some time now.<sup>3</sup> But MacIntyre uses this view to subvert the claims of the modern project. Amongst these claims, MacIntyre forthrightly challenges modernity's aspirations to universality in the moral domain. Against 'universalism', MacIntyre defends 'communitarianism'.

Most of the essays in *Universalism vs. Communitarianism* concern the relative viability of a universalist and so-called communitarian ethics. The contributors take Rawls and Habermas as representatives of universalism. This is opposed, in different essays, to doctrines espoused by MacIntyre, Taylor, Walzer, and Gadamer. There are several different controversies here, ranging over problems of moral justification, the nature of moral experience, the relationship between moral and legal discourse, the political application of norms, the meaning of democracy, and the critique of liberalism. It is the *overlap* of these which is confusing. The vagueness of the terms 'universalism' and



'communitarianism', which generates this confusion, is recognised by several of the contributors. Their efforts are mostly directed towards a refinement of the issues, a task most admirably achieved in Kenneth Baynes's article.

Perhaps the most fundamental issue is now to make politically effective sense of what might be called 'the pull of the ethical' in a world of many ethics. For Alessandro Ferrara ('Universalisms: procedural, contextualist, and prudential'), this pull is equivalent to the demand for universality. He considers two ways of reconciling this demand with the recognition of plurality: first, Habermas's 'procedural universalism', then Walzer's and (more sympathetically) MacIntyre's 'contextualist universalism'. After briefly identifying some of the shortcomings of each, he offers a schematic 'prudential universalism' which combines the best in both around the idea of a 'core of human subjectivity' indicated by convergences between different (unnamed) schools of psychoanalysis. Worries about the appropriateness of Ferrara's terms notwithstanding (why not talk about procedural, contextualist, and prudential conceptions of *practical reason*, thereby avoiding oxymorons like 'contextualist universalism'?), his proposal of a psychoanalytically informed Aristotelianism is very suggestive.

Again, Habermas's appeal to a 'procedural universalism' must be understood as a move made under the constraints of the philosophical discourse of modernity. Modernity must create its normativity out of itself. This means that the pull of the ethical cannot be conceived as a traditionally given content to the good life. The universality of a moral claim (the pull of the ethical) can only be redeemed at a formal level, that is, at the level of the procedure through which the claim is generated. So far, so Kant. But Kant's procedure of self-willed universalizable maxims of action, entrenched in subject-centred reason, left 'I' and 'non-I' unreconciled. Moving, however, to an intersubjective or communicative paradigm of reason is supposed to allow for this reconciliation. Habermas argues that virtual to everyday communicative action, that is, to the process through which the modern subject is mediated, is an ideal procedure which obliges participants in discourse to lay claim only to principles acceptable to all those affected by them. 'I' is reconciled with 'non-I' in the post-conventional moral consciousness of a self which recognises the claims of a 'generalised other'. The Enlightenment project, Habermas contends, 'is unthinkable without the idea of a universal confederation against betrayal'. But in a pluralist modern world, this intuited commitment to justice must be translated into a political principle of *impartiality*. Habermas's 'discourse ethics' attempts to clarify and ground the link between solidarity, universality, and impartiality.

Ferrara, Rolf Zimmerman, Michael Kelly, and Hubert and Stuart Dreyfus rehearse some of the many difficulties which beset Habermas's approach to ethics. Of course, the following are outstanding. First, the separation of the form and content of moral claims is notoriously difficult to uphold. Second, there is the problem of reconciling actual and ideal conditions of justification. Third, Habermas is said to be insufficiently 'context-sensitive' both in his defence of the peculiarly modern segregation of

the three validity claims, and in his treatment of the ineliminable moment of ethical 'judgement'. Habermas's reply ought to be that, all things considered, the modern framework is the *best available*. But he does not make this move. Rather, his justification refers to an *ideal* framework of pure communicative action which is immanent to modern discourse and processes of self-formation. For Habermas, this position has the advantage of opening a space for the critique of historically but ideologically distorted traditions. For his critics, it has the distinct disadvantage of being burdened by an equally ideological quasi-scientific, eurocentric (even androcentric) evolutionism.

But, Habermas insists, with the emergence of modernity comes the promise of a unique source of resistance against ideological distortions. This is the promise of a public sphere of democratic will-formation. Now Habermas's interest in democratic will-formation, correctly identified by Bayles as a key underlying motivation of discourse ethics, goes back to his earliest writings. In his first major book, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (first published in German in 1962), Habermas employs historical evidence drawn from various socioeconomic, political, and literary sources to document the rise and fall of the category of the liberal public sphere. Two themes are particularly worthy of attention. First, there is the (admittedly embryonic) historical *achievement* of democratic processes of opinion formation in modern societies (e.g. a free press). Second, there is the tendency for these processes to *disintegrate* under the pressure of expanding market and state/bureaucratic forces (e.g. the mass media). These particular themes are worth mentioning because they are connected to a development to which Habermas has paid increasing attention: the rise of conservatism.

### The New Conservatism and Beyond

In the preface to *Discourse*, Habermas directs the reader to a collection of his political writings described as 'supplements' to his philosophical study. With the publication of *The New Conservatism*, a translation of a selection of these writings (many of which have already appeared in English, though most in different translations), English readers can now readily take up the suggestion that the philosophy be considered alongside the politics. What emerges most conspicuously from the political essays is the German backdrop against which Habermas's thought is set. Habermas is hyper-sensitive to an entrenched Teutonic ambivalence towards, precisely, the Enlightenment project. The disastrous historical manifestations of this ambivalence, without doubt, inform Habermas's stance towards Western rationalism through and through. He takes seriously the historical lesson that the collective political 'choice in favour of the West', as he puts it, cannot be taken for granted. The project of modernity, what is undertaken in the light of this choice, is as *precarious* as it is incomplete.<sup>4</sup>

Consequently, the greatest care must be taken to distinguish between 'progressive' tendencies of modernity and those which, despite radical appearances, threaten to undermine that progress. The 1980s, the period during which all the essays collected here were written, have tended towards conservatism. Habermas teases out various strands of this tendency, from architecture to the welfare state. Neo-conservatism affirms the achievements of societal modernization (technological progress and system expansion), while negating the achievements of cultural modernism (the avant-garde). The latter, the neo-conservatives allege, is the cause of a 'spiritual/moral crisis', a lack of social cohesion, which only religion can rectify. They thus call for a revival of traditional values and roles. They attribute modern discontents to the under-



mining of tradition by an individualistic cultural modernity.

Habermas's response is twofold: first, these critics confuse cause (socially undesirable by-products of capitalism) with effect (anomie); and second, they diffuse the 'explosive force of universalistic principles of morality' in order to 'minimise the burden of moral justification incumbent on the political system'. The neo-conservative appeal to tradition serves as a re-endorsement rather than as critique. Habermas is undoubtedly correct in identifying one motive behind the turn to tradition; but appeals to tradition are not necessarily neo-conservative. To be sure, modernity's consciousness of time buffers it against conservatism. Yet Habermas by no means proposes a forgetfulness of the past. On the contrary, he attacks the forgetfulness of the gains made by the Enlightenment tradition (for instance, the public sphere) of the so-called 'young conservatives' with their anti-modernism or total critique. That total critique should be referred to as a form of conservatism may seem quite baffling. It can only appear otherwise if the following question is addressed: what kind of remembrance is compatible with modernity's consciousness of time at the end of the twentieth century?

This is the key problematic which guides Habermas's contributions, included in this volume, to the German 'historians' dispute'. The question of German identity is raised against the background of historical controversy over the nature and extent of the crimes of the Third Reich. In line with his theories about moral development, Habermas advocates a post-conventional 'constitutional patriotism' showing allegiance to universal principles of justice. But this allegiance must be tempered by a recognition of responsibility for past crimes. And here, of course, the shadow of Heidegger unconceals itself.

It is precisely the failure of Heidegger to acknowledge responsibility for his *own past* which most upsets Habermas. And Habermas's detailed reconstruction of Heidegger's sordid collusion with National Socialism makes very upsetting reading. Not only Heidegger's quietism, but his falsification of textual archives declaring his support for Hitler, is evidenced. I was reminded here of an anecdote told by Hubert Dreyfus, who upon visiting Heidegger asked for his opinion of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, a copy of which was on his desk. 'Dreck' (muck), Heidegger replied. If *that* is muck, what colloquialism is strong enough to describe Heidegger's lectures in the *Introduction to Metaphysics*, where he eulogises the 'inner truth and greatness of the Nazi movement'?

The charge of textual falsification arises out of a dispute dating back to 1953, which began by Habermas putting the following question to Heidegger: "Can even the planned mass murder of millions of people, about which all of us know today, be made understandable in terms of the history of Being, as a fateful error?"<sup>5</sup> Not the fateful dispensation of Being or of power, but a causality of fate for which one is 'at fault oneself', ascribable communally, is Habermas's answer. The avenging nexus of guilt of which Hegel spoke must today be incorporated into an 'atoning remembrance' of the past.

If all there were to diagnose about the political climate of the past decade were the rise of conservatisms, things wouldn't be very hopeful. But countering this tendency, Habermas perceives and welcomes the democratizing potential of the new social movements (especially the women's movement), which demand a decentralization of political structures and the formation of autonomous public spheres. But in this, as elsewhere, Habermas is surely too formal in his diagnosis. Feminist theorists have already articulated misgivings concerning Habermas's failure to address the material-economic foundation of women's oppression.<sup>6</sup> In at least one other respect, however, I think that a diagnosis of the kind offered by Habermas is directly pertinent to

something which is becoming of increasing significance to the content of feminist protest today. By focusing on communication, the Habermasian approach simultaneously focuses on its occlusion and betrayal, that is *on violence*. A critique of violence is precisely what Critical Theory becomes with Habermas's communicative transformation of it. This is seen by some as a rationalizing purification, as a neutering of the heterogeneous pleasures of the feminine text. But do the times afford such a luxurious basis for critique?<sup>7</sup> The colonisation of the lifeworld of woman by man's violence, its foreshortening and distortion into a horizon of fear, is surely a more appropriate paradigm of crisis.

## Conclusion

Critical Theory, as a reflective theory with practical intent which is a product of its time, must account for its own need as given by its time. The last lecture of *Discourse* concludes with what, in its philosophical context, is a startling reference to Reagan's Star Wars programme. Concerning the power of SDI ideology, Habermas remarks:

The idea that the capacity to compete on an international scale – whether in markets or in outer space – is indispensable for our very survival is one of those everyday certitudes in which systemic constraints are condensed (pp. 366-67).

Whether or not this is an idea perpetrated by the ideologues of system expansion, we can at least say – and in the mildest terms – that eight years after being written the urgency of the critical intuition expressed here has in no way diminished.

## Notes

- 1 First published in German in 1985. The hardback edition of the English translation under review was originally published in 1987. I shall henceforth refer to it as *Discourse*. Unless otherwise specified, all my quotations will be taken from it.
- 2 Habermas does distinguish between two different kinds of critique: 'rational reconstruction' and 'methodically carried out self-critique' (p. 300). The latter has a narrative form modelled upon a psychoanalysis. I am suggesting that Seel, Taylor, and indeed McCarthy, offer reasons for thinking that these two modes of critique are not just different, but that rational reconstruction only takes a critical form *within* a presupposed narrative self-critique. For more on the critical potential of Habermas's depth hermeneutic reading of Freud and its problematic connection with rational reconstruction, see Jay Bernstein's excellent 'Self-Knowledge as Praxis: Narrative and Narration in Psychoanalysis', in Cristoper Nash, ed., *Narrative in Culture*, London, Routledge, 1990, pp. 51-77.
- 3 See Alasdair MacIntyre, 'Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science', *The Monist* 60 (1977), pp. 433-72, and most recently *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, London, Duckworth, 1990, especially pp. 118-22.
- 4 This political point fits ill with Habermas's sociological insistence upon the irrevocability of modern structures of thought and action.
- 5 *The New Conservatism*, pp. 161-62, first printed in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 25 July 1953.
- 6 See Seyla Benhabib and Drucilla Cornell, eds., *Feminism as Critique*, Oxford, Polity, 1987, especially Nancy Fraser's article, 'What's Critical about Critical Theory? The Case of Habermas and Gender'.
- 7 See Kate Soper, 'Feminism, Humanism, and Postmodernism', *Radical Philosophy*, 55, p. 16.