

CAN THERE BE AN EMANCIPATORY RATIONALITY?

KAI NIELSEN
University of Calgary

I

Jurgen Habermas's writing, as much as that of Wilfrid Sellars or Talcott Parsons, is stodgily technical. Indeed Habermas is very much like a parody of a German professor. Why then should he interest the Left and in general command so much critical attention? It is partly—in spite of its manner—the originality and sophistication of his work, bridging in a remarkable way philosophy and the human sciences, and it is partly the intent of his abstract and architectonic work. In speaking of his intent here I am referring to his commitment to develop a systematic critical social theory which will show how society can and should be transformed. His baroque methodological arguments in both *Theory and Practice* and *Knowledge and Human Interests* are designed as prolegomena to such a critical theory of society. It is indeed tempting to remark, as Paul Piccone has, that in spite of his own self-image of what he is doing, he in fact shipwrecks on, or at least has become becalmed in, communication theory. Yet, tempting as it is, I think such a judgement is too facile. There are many of us who in a broadly cultural sense could be said to be Marxists—that is we believe in a thoroughly socialist transformation of society and we are in agreement with much of the Marxist assessment of bourgeois society—but we remain nonetheless very skeptical about many of the key theoretical elements in Marxist theory.

¹ Paul Piccone, "Review of Martin Jay's *The Dialectical Imagination*", *Telos*, No. 16 (Summer, 1973), p. 149.

Perhaps we are —coming out of our particular culture— overly skeptical, but be that as it may, we are skeptical about the theoretical foundations both of what Marcuse would call fetishized Marxism and of the Hegelianized Marxism of the early Frankfurt School. Here Habermas, with a distinctive theoretical perspective, thoroughly, if perhaps overly eclectically, integrating contemporary philosophical and sociological work along with Hegel, Freud, and Marx, offers an interesting and hopefully emancipatorily useful new systematic theory of society. Critical minds will, of course, approach it warily, but given our interests in liberation and given our skepticism about Orthodox Marxism, we will approach it hopefully as well.

The above is one rationale for an interest in Habermas. Another related one comes naturally to anyone who is concerned to articulate a critical theory of society which will serve as a guide for a socialist transformation of society, but who is also convinced, roughly on the grounds laid out by Peter Winch and Charles Taylor, that the logic of the social sciences is *sui generis* and that a critical science of society cannot be modelled on the natural sciences.² Habermas is of interest in this connection, for he argues sustainedly that we can have it both ways. As part of his penetrating critique of scientism and positivism, Habermas argues that the human sciences are *sui generis*, but he tries to go beyond a purely hermeneutical conception of the human sciences, with their at least seeming relativistic implications, to develop a critical-hermeneutical theory of society. For anyone with social concerns —and with such non-unity of science beliefs about the human sciences, Habermas's endeavour will seem, in spite of its deadly Germanic manner, very interesting indeed. My foot

² Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science* (New York: Humanities Press, 1958) and "Understanding a Primitive Society", *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 1 (1964), pp. 307-324. Charles Taylor, "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man", *The Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. XXV, No. 1 (September, 1971). Kai Neilsen, "Social Science and American Foreign Policy", in Virginia Held *et al.* (eds.), *Philosophy, Morality and International Affairs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 286-319.

wears that shoe and such considerations fuel my interest in Habermas.

The corpus of Habermas's theory is extensive, varied and constantly growing. Even if it were in my range of competence, I could not hope here to appraise it as an evolving totality. I shall instead fasten on some central aspects of his thought, namely his treatment of scientism, rationality and emancipation. I shall for the most part leave aside here two very central tasks which a more thorough appraisal of Habermas should undertake: (1) an appraisal of his appraisal of Marx and Marxism and (2) a detailed examination of his critique of positivism and scientism. My examination will in part touch on a facet of the latter, but what I say about this larger issue will be anything but decisive, for the issues here are very complex, theoretically central, and Habermas's account is intricate and ramified.

Like his Frankfurt antecedents, Habermas has a conception of our societies as irrational societies and he seeks to articulate a conception of a rational society. Like Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse he sees scientism and positivism—the latter being a conception they construe very broadly—

³ The principal references to Habermas in the text are the following: Jürgen Habermas, *Toward a Rational Society*, translated by Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970); Jürgen Habermas, *Theorie und Praxis* (Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Suhrkamp Verlag, fourth edition, 1971); Jürgen Habermas, *Erkenntnis und Interesse* (Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1968). Pages references to these works will be given in the text and taken from the English translations. The following abbreviations for the texts will be used and given by the page number in the text: *Toward a Rational Society* (RS), *Theorie und Praxis* (TP), *Erkenntnis und Interesse* (KI). Other works of Habermas's referred to will be referred to in the standard manner in footnotes. I should add here that Habermas in his "Why More Philosophy", *Social Research*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (Winter, 1971), pp. 633-654, gives an important overview of his conception of the role of philosophy and its relation to critical theory. (The German text is in his *Philosophisch-politische Profile* (Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1971).) For two important statements of issues which engage me in the above text which are supplemental to the principal works referred to, see Habermas's "Summation and Response", *Continuum*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Spring-Summer, 1970), pp. 123-133 and "A Postscript to Knowledge and Human Interests", *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (June, 1973), pp. 157-189. The German text occurs as a Postscript to the second German edition of *Erkenntnis und Interesse*.

as key ideological agencies in the maintenance of irrational and repressive societies. Scientism is the belief that science, and science alone, can give us genuine knowledge; what cannot be established and sustained scientifically cannot be rationally believed. Science, scientism would have it, is our sole authority for fixing belief. "What", as Bertrand Russell once put it, "science cannot tell us mankind cannot know". It is, according to these Frankfurt theorists, this belief in the intellectual supremacy of science and the sufficiency of technology for ordering life which is the core ideology and indeed the most beguiling ideal of our time and which finds its most exacting philosophical expression in positivism, which, according to Habermas, "stands and falls with the principle of scientism", i.e. the principle "that the meaning of knowledge is defined by what the sciences do and can thus be adequately explicated through the methodological analysis of scientific procedures".

Habermas argues that this distinctive ideology of scientism in effect persuasively and narrowly redefines "rationality" such that, for scientism, rationality consists in taking the most effective means to the achievement of ends whose determination, where they are fundamental ends, is not subject to reflection or discursive assessment. They are, epistemologically speaking, like tastes which we just accept or reject but which are not matters of knowledge and are not subject to rational determination.⁴ The very category moral or normative knowledge is for scientism a Holmesless Watson.

Scientism, Habermas believes, is a fetishizing of science and this fetishizing, he further believes, is a key feature

⁴ There is a sense, as Paul Edwards shows, in which we can and do argue about tastes, but there is also an important sense, as he also claims straightforwardly in the positivist tradition, in which we cannot argue about tastes or about the truth of fundamental values. See Paul Edwards, *The Logic of Moral Discourse* (Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press, 1955). It should be remembered that Habermas and the Frankfurt School generally use "positivist" in a very broad sense such that even such opponents of logical positivism as Popper, Wittgenstein and his followers and indeed analytic philosophers generally all count as positivists. Popper, Ayer, Russell, Hagerstrom, Carnap, Sellars and Quine are paradigm cases.

and indeed in effect an irrational and mystifying feature of our culture. It distorts our understanding of ourselves and our world. In this way a technocratic consciousness comes to dominate our lives. This scientistic way of viewing things comes to be an effective ideological tool in both capitalist and state capitalist societies rendering invisible or preventing the legitimation of a reflective, critical rationality, rooted in human communication and dialogue. Such communicative interaction, given scientistic conceptions, could not constitute knowledge; it is not, where "rationality" is so narrowly defined, a rational activity.

The core thrust of *Knowledge and Human Interests* is to show how such a reflective rationality is possible and that scientism is an ideology and indeed — if that is not a pleonasm — a narrowing and harmful ideology. In a way which scientism either ignores or unjustifiably discounts, it is possible to engage in systematic rational reflection on our interest in making a rational determination of fundamental human ends. As Sara Ruddick has well put it, "In Habermas's overview the inability to distinguish between practical and technical interests, hermeneutic and experimental science, communicative interaction and instrumental reason, is the nucleus of technocratic consciousness and the precondition of its power".⁵ In exposing this scientistic ideology and in offering a systematic and, in intention at least, a rigorously argued alternative conception of knowledge, which is neither romantically anti-scientific nor scientistically fettered, Habermas's abstract epistemological and methodological work has a political and an emancipatory thrust.

II

By concentrating on his crucial Chapter Seven in *Theory and Practice*, I want to examine his explication and defense

⁵ Sara Ruddick, "Critical Notice of *Knowledge and Human Interests*", *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. II, No. 4 (June, 1974), p. 569.

of a conception of a substantive and committed critical rationality, which he takes to be an integral part of a critical theory of society. I shall not limit my remarks to the arguments of that chapter but they will be at the centre of my attention.

In the last section of that chapter Habermas argues that even such (in his sense) an arch-positivist as Karl Popper has in effect a conception of rationality that goes beyond technological rationality but that in other respects Popper's methodological conceptions are so hobbled by uncritical and unjustified scientific assumptions that his theory of rationality cannot break free of its crippling positivistic fetters.

In seeing something of what Habermas's own account of a comprehensive critical rationality would come to and how it is not hobbled in the way Popper's is, it is worth following out his argument with Popper (*TP*, p. 281). Popper, as I have remarked, is not content to identify rationality with technological rationality (*TP*, p. 276). Like Habermas, and indeed like Marx, he sees rationality culminating in enlightenment — critical insight — and in adult autonomy (*TP*, pp. 276 and 247-8). But, unlike the Frankfurt school and like the pragmatists and logical positivists, Popper identifies knowledge with empirical scientific knowledge and, like meta-ethical non-cognitivists, he not only denies that an ought can be derived from an is but he also makes a sharp demarcation between knowing and valuing. Yet in criticizing dogmatism (rationalistic or irrationalistic metaphysics, religion and the like) Popper's aim, like the philosophers of the early Enlightenment, is enlightenment and emancipation. But in following out the logic of his own positivist position, Popper argues that he cannot in turn justify his *preference* for the attainment of a world in which the citizens would have such an enlightened consciousness. That for him is merely an article of *rationalistic faith*. There is, he believes, no justifying his commitment to a critical rationalism. He just plunks for it for such "ultimate stances" can only be

the object of a decision or a commitment. That is to say, they are just decisions or subscriptions of principle. There is no way of supporting such a commitment to a critical rationalism by either observations or by deductions from hypotheses which are in turn empirically tested. There is in short no evidence we could appeal to show that such a fundamental moral claim is true. Instead we must, severally, and unavoidably individually, just decide how to commit ourselves. What is involved here is not a matter of knowing or understanding but of valuing. And this comes down to a matter of decision and commitment.

For Popper, as for many positivists, to will rationally — to attain an enlightened consciousness — is to will to establish, maintain or alter social norms and institutions by the thorough and careful use of scientific information (*TP*, p. 277). Rational citizens, Popper argues, will act in accordance with the technically correct strategies which are available to them. Science, of course, determines what they are. Like the conceptions of instrumental reason, Popper's conception of rationality appears to be a purely formal, context-independent conception, but, Habermas argues, appearances are deceptive here, for Popper actually identifies rationality with the adopting of specific procedures (*TP*, p. 277). What is the rational thing to do or believe must be in accordance with those procedures and, in addition, remain open to "concretization in terms of the requirements of accepted value systems" (*TP*, p. 277). To adopt the scientific attitude, which seems to be taken by Popper to be roughly equivalent to having an enlightened consciousness, is to conform to the rules of scientific methodology, to accept "the customary norms of scientific discussion", to be aware of the duality of fact and commitment, and to "know the limits of intersubjectively valid knowledge", which is taken to be identical with empirical knowledge. Moreover, Popper claims, such an attitude will be fallibilistic and it will, in particular, not take any social or personal norms as absolute

— as unquestionably true or self-evident; such norms and indeed all substantive beliefs as well will be taken to be open to critical investigation and possible revision. A norm or cluster of norms — fundamental norms apart — is acceptable to a critically comprehensive rationality so construed only if norm or norms have been “tested and evaluated on the basis of available evidence” in the social life-context in which the norm or norms occur. Fundamental norms, however, are simply up for decision or commitment. They are not and cannot be known to be either true or false.

In societies such as our own, Popper argues, rational persons will have such a scientific attitude and they will govern their discussions and their social policies in accordance with the guides expressive of this attitude. Not to have the cluster of attitudes captured under the umbrella term “the scientific attitude” is at least in our cultural *milieu*, to fail to attain an enlightened consciousness and to be diminished in one’s rationality.

Habermas, commenting on these contentions, remarks that here “Popper has fictitiously extended methodology to the principles of political discussion, and thus he has also extended the forum of scientific researchers examining methods and discussing empirical-theoretical questions to embrace the political public sphere as a whole” (*TP*, p. 278).

We should be careful here to ascertain with some considerable exactitude Habermas’s intent: if, on the one hand, it is to make the social-political point that in societies such as we know them, there is precious little of such enlightened discussion in anything like a public sphere governed by such critical attitudes, then it seems to me he is plainly right. If, on the other hand, as I believe is more probable, he is claiming as well that for some conceptual methodological reason, such an extension is inappropriate and that to have rational attitudes in such domains takes a somewhat different characterization, then it seems to me that what he says requires scrutinizing and stands very much in need of consider-

able clarificatory amplification and argumentative support.

Such Popperian attitudes, I would argue, are not sufficient for rationality in societies such as our own or for a future socialist society, but they may very well, given a certain reading and with certain essential but not terribly radical modifications, be necessary. No sensitivity to the dialectics of enlightenment should obscure that. In our *milieu*, commitment to them and the capacity to act in accordance with them, given certain important modifications and qualifications, is part of what it is to be a rational person. The essential modifications and qualifications are these; we must beware, except as a point of departure, of just uncritically accepting the accepted value systems; we must have a developed sense of where and how we can (where we can at all) apply scientific procedures and where we cannot; we must be cautious about what is built into talk about “the duality of fact and commitment”; and, finally, we must avoid arbitrarily *persuasively* defining “intersubjectively valid knowledge” in a scientistic manner which equates such knowledge *in all domains* with empirical knowledge such that the latter becomes pleonastic. These modifications and qualifications are not unimportant and scientistic thinking falls into error in not making them, but it does in Popper’s hands highlight claims, which with those modifications are indeed crucial elements of an enlightened consciousness. It is indeed unlikely that simply on the basis of even a careful and imaginative utilization and application of scientific norms, we can come rationally and humanely — that is enlightenedly — to alter social norms and institutions, but it still is at least plausible to claim that such an employment of scientific information would be, for us standing where we stand in history, an inescapable feature of *such* an alteration.

I do not think Habermas means to deny claims such as these, but in any critique of scientism we must be careful not to deny them or the critique will degenerate into a form

of anti-scientific irrationalism. Here Popper is not very original — we are back to Holbach and the early Enlightenment — but what he says on this score is in general sound enough as far as it goes.

Indeed, as it is well-known, Popper is a defender of a liberal conception of society and the above conception of rationality *encapsulates* certain central liberal values, but, as Habermas in effect shows, such values are not the exclusive property of a liberal social order (*TP*, pp. 278-282). Even more significant is the recognition that if those conceptions of a form of humanly and socially enlightened rationality were ever actually to become a social reality in societies such as ours, there would have to be a radical transformation of the existing social order. And indeed Habermas's contention here is just to the point, for it is evident enough that our societies are very far from realizing such a conception of rationality. It is an ideal we play lip service to but hardly a social reality. And it could not become a reality under the present socio-economic order. Advanced capitalist societies are administered societies and no doubt will become even more so. In such a society, such a conception of rationality plainly could not be a social reality. Either capitalism, at least as we know it, goes or such a conception of rationality remains a Quixotic, unachievable ideal.

Habermas also remarks, appropriately enough, that if the having of such rational attitudes had the politically liberating consequences that Popper believes it has, such that "lack of rationality... coincides with freedom denied and deprivation of happiness", then rationality could not be the morally neutral notion it is taken to be by positivism (*TP*, p. 279). A "positivism which reflected on itself could no longer detach reason's interest in emancipation from its concept of rationality" (*TP*, p. 279). However, an acceptance of this is quite compatible with a refusal to follow Popper in talking of a commitment of pure faith in rationality or

to an acceptance of the claim that we are involved here in a groundless commitment. Rather we need to come to recognize that inherent in rational discussion itself is a commitment to enlightenment: to an enhancing of our powers, our self-fulfillment or self-realization and our liberation.

In spite of his official scientific stance with its allegedly normatively neutral conception of rationality, the actual conception of rationality Popper works with is not “divested of its normative elements” (*TP*, p. 279). In addition to the considerations I have already trotted out, there is, as well, in the setting out of the rules of scientific methodology to which rational people are committed, an appeal to such conceptions as “a good theory”, “a satisfactory argument”, “a true consensus”, “a fruitful perspective” in which there is quite obviously an inextricable mixture of descriptive and normative contents (*TP*, p. 279). It is not the case that we could set out in a comprehensive manner what it is to be rational and leave it an open question whether being rational may or may not be at least *prima facie* desirable. Rationality is not a normatively neutral notion such that we can first make up our minds about what “being a rational person” consists in and then go on to consider whether being rational is a good thing. The fact that rationality has this normative content also means that it is not and cannot be the formal, contextless conception that positivists sometimes take it to be. We do not and cannot first find out what it is rational to do and then start again from scratch in deciding what it is that we *should* do.

This, of course, conflicts with Popper’s typically positivist notions; that is, it conflicts with his sharp division between knowing and valuing, between interest and rationality and, of course, with his conception of knowledge as being identical with normatively neutral empirical knowledge. If, as Popper claims, a rational person must have an enlightened consciousness and rational actions must, generally speaking, be in their very nature liberating, such a decisionalist account,

separating valuing and knowing — separating conceptions of good and human understanding — cannot be correct. Even his own employment of the concept of rationality conflicts with these positivistic notions. Yet while this is so, it is also surely true that we can often know some x to be the case and indeed know that most people value that state of affairs and still not value x ourselves. But an acceptance of this need not in turn commit us to decisionalism.

What we need to recognize, Habermas claims, is that the rationality captured by the concept of committed rationality and by the concept of reason embedded in our lives as social beings is identical with an interest in emancipation. It is not clear to me what Habermas means or indeed could mean by saying reason or rationality is identical to an interest in emancipation or indeed to any interest. I see no grounds at all for making that claim unless it is just a loose way of saying what I am about to say, namely that, everything else being equal, one cannot be reasonable, be acting rationally, if one's actions undermined one's own emancipation or blocked one's enlightenment. (The *ceteris paribus* qualification is necessary because one is not alone in the world.) We could not correctly speak of a critical comprehensive conception of rationality that was not interested in enlightenment and emancipation. That would be a conceptual impossibility, for the concepts are tied together logically. This seems to me a correct or at least a plausible point, but this, as far as I can see, need not lead to any claim about identity; rather we are only claiming the existence of a conceptual tie between rationality and an interest in emancipation. Yet this weaker claim seems to me to be sufficient to establish Habermas's claim that rationality rather than being a morally-neutral, purely formal notion is in reality a substantive conception carrying a certain normative freight.

Contrary to the beliefs of decisionalists, it is, Habermas argues, quite in order to try to establish the legitimacy of certain systems of moral thought in terms of

the satisfaction of human needs, the fulfillment of human desires and the avoidance of unnecessary suffering. But these criteria, if they are to be at all adequate to such a task, must be clarified in such a way that we would have articulated a conception of need satisfaction “historically appropriate to the developmental state of society . . . as well as a concept of suffering and ‘unnecessary’ suffering valid for the epoch” (*TP*, p. 280). It is of the utmost importance, Habermas contends, that “the criterion selected would have to be derived as such from the objective complex of underlying interests” and justified in terms of such interests (*TP*, p. 280). But that, he further claims, in turn “presupposes a comprehensive concept of rationality, and especially one that does not hesitate to reflect on its own inter-relationship with the historical stage of the development attained by the knowing subjects” (*TP*, p. 280). It must have, as a conception of a historically fully-evolved comprehensive rationality, a well-articulated conception of human beings making and controlling their history with will and self-consciousness (*TP*, p. 244). The rationality of the human species is exhibited in its ability to extricate itself from the distorting influence of its own conceptions and to create new and more adequate conceptions. Rationality, the making of history and the achievement of enlightenment are conceptually tied. “The ability to make history grows in direct proportion to the growth of the self-consciousness of the Enlightenment, of learning how to exercise rational control over history” (*TP*, p. 250). This means, of course, that we will have to have developed a sophisticated technological rationality and that we can by utilizing it, control nature, but it means more than that, for it also means that we have grown self-reflective about our ends and that we come to be humans who will choose what we choose reflectively after a cogent examination of our alternatives and with an understanding of our preferences and interests. In gaining such a mastery, we attain that adult autonomy which is in effect appealed to in

every rational discussion (*TP*, p. 281). We have in such a situation — that is where such conditions are realized — “the convergence of reason and commitment, which the philosophy of the great tradition considered to be intimately linked. . .” (*TP*, p. 281). To make this conception of rationality an operative social reality, a very first step, Habermas argues, is to break through the dominant ideology of our time — scientism — which identifies rationality with a proper part of rationality, namely instrumental reason. In breaking the link in the minds of people affected by that ideology, we must make clear that reason and commitment are not polar opposites and show again the coherence and appropriateness of a conception of committed reason. In overcoming that scientific ideology, we must come to see that rationality also, and essentially, consists in controlled and dialectically ramified reflection on the ends of life. When, in addition to the natural sciences and their associated technologies, we have developed a critical science (theory) of society, we will have advanced toward that control of our history — of our destinies — that a comprehensive rationality seeks. A critical theory of society aims to attain what myth, religion and philosophy always sought, namely an adequate conception of the unity and coherence of the world, most particularly and demandingly of the social world. Where there is an adequate comprehensive, critical rationality, it gives us such a picture of the world — a picture which is indeed quite foreign to scientism and its attendant conception of instrumental reason.

III

Habermas, however, does not just want to give us a picture of the world. Traditional legitimations — myths, religions, traditional metaphysical systems — have done this as long as we have had cultures; that is to say, as long as a recognizably human life has existed. Habermas, without

making their scientific assumptions, accepts at least most of the positivistic critique of such traditional legitimations (*RS*, pp. 95, 114 and *TP*, p. 262). Without what he takes to be Marx's scientific residues, Habermas wants not just a picture of the world, but, with this enlarged conception of rationality, he also wants a critical science of society — a critique — which is disciplined and systematic and in an appropriately testable manner will show the way to an emancipatory transformation of life. This critical science of society may in reality be a critical-hermeneutical science, as it has been claimed Habermas in effect shows, his intentions to the contrary notwithstanding; but be that as it may, as a science, and without being objectivistic, it must have some objective and appropriately testable constraints. Habermas plainly wants, as did Marx, to gain an understanding of, and to bring under control in the interests of critical reason, i.e. emancipation, the structural changes that can be attained in societies and indeed more generally of societies as a whole. Standing where we are our interest here is, of course, most centrally in capitalist societies, though as Habermas points out, there is room for a similar interest in bureaucratic socialist or quasi-socialist societies.

My trouble is not with the aim, for I too seek to articulate such a critical science of society, but with certain key conceptions and assumptions built into Habermas's attempt to give a systematic statement of such a theory. In following out and reflecting on the arguments against Habermas I am about to marshal, it is important to consider whether they are rooted in unjustified and perhaps unjustifiable scientific assumptions. I, of course, do not believe that my skepticism is so rooted. Yet self-deception is easy in such matters.

What I shall try to do in the space remaining is to wrestle with Habermas's conception of a committed comprehensive rationality — a conception I am basically in sympathy with, though still skeptical about.

In doing these two things I shall not be fussy about

Habermas. It would be easy enough to be fussy, for, as I lamented at the outset, Habermas is a difficult and opaque writer. As a sympathetic reviewer remarked in *Radical Philosophy*: “there is a considerable obscurity and complexity of style and content. I’ve found it difficult, even where I thought I understood what he was saying, to then write it down so that it still made sense. . .”⁶ With such writing one can be endlessly fussy and indeed I do not want to say that being fussy about his account would always be evasive nit-picking and that it could have no salutary role, but it is not what I am going to do here. I deplore, as much as anyone, his Germanic manner and I am not for a moment convinced that the subject matter makes such obscurity at all necessary — that the form and the content must go together — but I also believe that all the same, and in spite of this plain deficiency — a deficiency which makes reading Habermas onerous — that Habermas’s work is significant and worthy of sustained study. So in the light of that judgement, I shall not be fussy. I shall rather give Habermas, as I have already in my exposition, a sympathetic reading and working with that reading, I shall try to assess the soundness of certain of his claims. This, of course, runs the risk — unavoidable in any case with such a writer — of misinterpretation. But even these sympathetic misinterpretations, if such they be, make what are at least arguably important claims worthy of examination. I, of course, hope I have got Habermas right, but even if I have not I think the position I have attributed to him is significant in its own right.

Habermas sets out a narrative in which Holbach, Fichte and finally Marx are seen, each in his own distinctively evolving way, as articulating and defending a critically comprehensive, normatively substantive conception of reason as a weapon against dogmatism. Historically speaking,

⁶ Russell Kent, “Review of *Theory and Practice*”, *Radical Philosophy* 10 (Spring, 1975), p. 36.

Habermas remarks, "Marx for the last time identifies reason with a commitment to rationality in its thrust against dogmatism"⁷ (*TP*, p. 262). After Marx, powerful intellectual forces built up against the very possibility of so construing things. Starting in the last half of the nineteenth century, positivism, pragmatism and historicism broke up such a conception of rationality and turned the tide concerning what was regarded as dogmatic. "The hitherto undisputed attempt of the great theories to reflect the complex of life as a whole is henceforth itself discredited as dogmatic" (*TP*, p. 262). Reason — human rationality — is on such accounts given a more modest role; interest, commitment, ideas concerning suffering, oppression, adult autonomy (*Mündigkeit*) and a will to emancipation, to happiness and to ascertaining one's identity are all treated as elements which have no *intrinsic* link to rationality (*TP*, p. 263). Indeed with some positivists they are thought to be non-rational, purely emotional or purely ideological considerations.

It is unclear to me to what extent Habermas's conviction about rationality and critical theory is justified. Is critical theory actually capable of reflecting the complex of life as a whole? In attempting this grand design, in attempting to step in where great tradition in philosophy has failed, he does, as we have seen, try to defend a return to a conception of a *comprehensive critical reason*. Here reason, again as we have seen, is construed as "the talent for adult autonomy and with sensibility to evils of the world" (*TP*, p. 258). A rational human being will be such a person — that is he or she will have such sensibilities and he or she will act in a certain way. Moreover, such a person will have "a coherent total consciousness" (*TP*, p. 255). Such persons must have, to be rational persons, certain distinctive interests, namely interests in human adulthood, in the autonomy of action and in the liberation from dogmatism (*TP*, p. 256).

⁷ What he says about Popper seems to gainsay this. Perhaps Habermas had in mind the last historically significant theorist.

That is to say, these *interests of reason* are interests in human emancipation, liberation and the attainment of enlightenment.

There are, however, difficulties with the very conceptions used in the specification of committed reason. They are normative conceptions and positivists of an extreme sort will treat them as pseudo-concepts with expressive and evocative forces but with a minimal cognitive meaning. They are, they will argue, hardly critical instruments to be used in responsible scholarly argument, for in reality they are ideological notions to be used persuasively in ideological struggles. While this positivism, as philosophers such as Phillipa Foot have shown, carries with it unsupportable assumptions and claims, it does *in effect* raise legitimate questions about the problematical nature of these normative concepts.⁸

Habermas is in part at least aware of some of these difficulties, but he still does not adequately face them. Even if, as I believe one should, one rejects a non-cognitivist or decisionalist account of ethics with its descriptive/evaluative dichotomy and its sharp distinction between evaluating and knowing, there still are, as again Phillipa Foot's later work shows, and as MacIntyre's and Phillips's do as well, severe problems about attaining a *rational* consensus or a "true consensus" over the criteria of application of such normative concepts as Habermas uses in his characterization of committed reason.⁹ Concepts such as enlightenment, emancipation, adult autonomy, sensibility to the evils of the world, and liberation are troubling concepts concerning which there is much disagreement and little understanding concerning how, if at all, to attain a rational consensus or a "true consensus" about them. And the same is true for dogmatism,

⁸ Phillipa Foot, "The Philosopher's Defense of Morality", *Philosophy*, Vol. 27 (1952), pp. 311-328; "Moral Arguments", *Mind* (1958); "Moral Beliefs", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* (1958); and "Goodness and Choice", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume* (1961).

⁹ Phillipa Foot, "Morality and Art", *British Academy* (1970); Alasdair MacIntyre, "The Essential Contestability of Some Social Concepts", *Ethics*, Vol. 84, No. 1 (October, 1973), pp. 1-9; D. Z. Phillips and H. O. Mounce, *Moral Practices* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970).

interests and self-identity. One does not have to be a Herman Hesse or an A. J. Ayer to be skeptical about what enlightenment, emancipation, adult autonomy or liberation is. These concepts appear at least to be, as “true champions” and “true democracy” paradigmatically are, what W. B. Gallie and Alasdair MacIntyre (both vigorous opponents of positivism) have called *essentially contested concepts*.¹⁰ Their criteria of application are not agreed on and there is no non-arbitrary, non-dispute-engendering method for attaining consensus — let alone a “true consensus” — about just to what or to whom they should be applied.

Take such notions as liberation, enlightenment, emancipation and human adulthood. Do we have sufficient agreement concerning what the core criteria of those concepts are to enable us to attain a consensus — what Habermas calls a “true consensus” — about their proper application to such diverse people as Baader, Strauss, Kissinger, Bellini, Marcuse, Dahrendorf and Sweezy? Do we agree ourselves about which of these men have these characteristics and to what degree? Even if we can rule out — as I do not believe we actually can — Baader, Strauss and Bellini as manifestly irrational and not go in a vicious circle, we still would have live disagreements concerning Marcuse or Sweezy, on the one hand, and Kissinger or Dahrendorf on the other. Yet by any conventional standards all four would be said to be rather clear examples of rational, informed human beings. But we do not agree about who, if any of them, are in any extensive sense enlightened, liberated or emancipated human beings. Such men do not agree about it themselves and there is no general agreement about how to settle that issue. That is to say, we do not agree, even in twentieth century western cultures — which are hardly the world — about what human emancipation, liberation, mature adulthood and enlightenment consist

¹⁰ MacIntyre, *op. cit.* and W. B. Gallie, “Essentially Contested Concepts”, in Max Black (ed.), *The Importance of Language* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968).

in or about how they are constituted and this strongly suggests that the criteria of critical reason are not settled and that we do not even seem to know how in some non-arbitrary way to proceed toward a settlement. Because of this the concept of reason — so construed — remains a troubling and at least a seemingly essentially contested concept. Perhaps sustained and careful reflection of the kind Habermas urges philosophers to return to would carry us out of the dark night here. But such reflection on such a cluster of concepts has not to my knowledge been carried out and we cannot reasonably presume on what its answer will be. Perhaps it will show that such conceptions are so essentially contested that they are relativized to historically determinate cultures with diverse and incommensurable ideological frameworks. Perhaps, alternatively, as I both hope and suspect, the relativism and contestedness here are not that deep or that non-arbitrarily ineradicable and thus these concepts are not that essentially contested. Perhaps, after all, in *ideal* conditions, with rather more adequate information than we in our situations in fact have, and in conditions not reflecting the heat of moral and political debate, we could and would agree about the application of such concepts concerning such individuals and thus show in our very linguistic behaviour some considerable agreement about their core criteria. And to say we never are or will be in these ideal conditions is not to say they cannot be approximated or serve as a heuristic ideal to give us our bearings.

However, skepticism here is, to put in minimally, understandable and it is in part for reasons such as these that writers on morality such as Rawls, Brandt and Gauthier try to make do with more astringent, normatively neutral conceptions of rationality. I think they come to grief over this, but, unless and until Habermas can do something to show that his key concepts here are not so relativized and so essentially contested so as to make an objective, truth-based consensus impossible, it would appear to be the case

that their at least apparent essentially contestable character undermines or at least seriously weakens his account of rationality which in turn is an essential element in his critical theory of society.¹¹

¹¹ As I shall try to show on another occasion, Habermas's talk about ideal speech situations, true consensus and a consensus theory of truth does not extricate him from the difficulties I have raised about criteria for emancipation. We have in those accounts some further *necessary* conditions for emancipated consciousness, but "true consensus" is on his account not sufficiently determinate for us to identify, even fallibilistically, in many problematic situations, cases of false consciousness. That is to say, we do not have the means to distinguish when it is that people have false consciousness and when it is they have an emancipated consciousness. There can be some agreement about some cases, but we have not got much beyond that. At least it is not the case that Habermas's account helps us out much here.

RESUMEN

El autor examina algunos aspectos de la Teoría Social de Jürgen Habermas, a saber su versión del cientismo, de la racionalidad y la emancipación. El cientismo es la creencia de que sólo la ciencia nos puede dar conocimiento genuino, que lo que no está sostenido y establecido por la ciencia no se le puede creer racionalmente. Esta ideología encuentra su mejor expresión en el positivismo.

Para el cientismo los fines fundamentales no son cuestiones de conocimiento o de determinación racional; son más bien como gustos, se los tiene o no, se aprueban o no. La racionalidad consiste —según el cientismo— en usar los medios más efectivos para llevar a cabo esos fines así aceptados.

Habermas opone a este cientismo otra teoría de la racionalidad, a saber, la racionalidad reflexiva y crítica que discute sistemáticamente esos fines humanos fundamentales.

Karl Popper ejemplifica el caso de alguien que rebasa esa tesis cientista aunque sólo parcialmente. Popper identifica racionalidad con racionalidad tecnológica, conocimiento y conocimiento científico, separa conocimiento y valor y propone como fines últimos la ilustración y la emancipación advirtiendo que no puede ofrecer justificación alguna para esos fines: no hay evidencia o demostración que puedan fundarlos o justificarlos. La adopción de tales fines es cuestión de una decisión individual, es cuestión no de conocimiento sino de valoración y por ello, compromiso.

La ciencia determina lo que son los hombres. Ellos actúan de acuerdo a estrategias disponibles de acuerdo a los sistemas de valor aceptados y conforme a las limitaciones de todo conocimiento. No hay normas absolutas; por el contrario, toda norma está sujeta a escrutinio crítico y a posible revisión. No sucede así con las normas fundamentales.

Habermas critica a Popper pero no es claro si lo que él dice es que esa idea de Popper no tiene posibilidad de realizarse en las esferas públicas de nuestras sociedades o bien que hay una razón conceptual y metodológica que hace inapropiado el extender esas actitudes racionales. Si es esto último, se necesita mayor clarificación y más argumento del que Habermas provee.

El autor sostiene que la tesis de Popper es necesaria pero no suficiente para asegurar la racionalidad en sociedades como las nuestras o para sociedades socialistas futuras. La ciencia no basta para transformar las normas sociales y las instituciones pero sí se

requiere de ella. Para que esas formas de racionalidad ilustrada llegasen a convertirse en realidad social tendría que haber una transformación radical del orden social existente.

Según Habermas el positivismo considera a la racionalidad como algo moralmente neutro y esto es falso, pues el concepto de racionalidad va ligado al concepto del interés de emanciparse. La discusión racional implica el compromiso de ilustrar, de acrecentar las fuerzas propias, de autorrealización y liberación propia. De otra parte, la decisión de ser racional no es algo que contemplemos primero y luego decidamos hacer porque sea conveniente o porque sea un deber. Todo esto choca con la posición de Popper. Habermas dice que la racionalidad es idéntica al interés en emanciparse. Esto puede interpretarse como la tesis de que los conceptos de racionalidad y los de ilustración y emancipación están ligados lógicamente (no que sean idénticos sino que están conceptualmente ligados).

También aparece una conexión conceptual entre la racionalidad, el hacerse de la historia y la realización de la ilustración, porque según Habermas, el hacer historia requiere de la autoconciencia producida por la ilustración y de aprender a ejercer control racional sobre la historia. Esto hace que, por ejemplo, al desarrollar una racionalidad compleja para controlar la naturaleza, se origine una autoconciencia acerca de los fines perseguidos, un examen de las alternativas y de nuestras preferencias e intereses. Esto llevará a formar una teoría crítica de la sociedad —una racionalidad crítica— que provea una imagen de la unidad y coherencia del mundo y del mundo social en particular que permita el control de nuestra historia.

El positivismo separa la racionalidad de la decisión acerca de qué hacer. Esto lo constituye en un decisionalismo. Habermas extiende el concepto de racionalidad que el decisionalismo había limitado. Pero no se detiene ahí, quiere además una ciencia crítica de la sociedad que siendo disciplinada, sistemática y comprobable muestre la vía para una transformación emancipatoria de la vida. Aunque la idea de esta ciencia sea por demás deseable, no lo son, sin embargo, los términos en que Habermas la expone. No lo es, específicamente, su concepción de una racionalidad comprensiva y comprometida. Y no es que uno quiera presentar remilgos sino que la manera germánica de hacer filosofía que padece Habermas hace difícil comprenderlo y fácil mal interpretarlo. En cualquier forma, la posición discutida, sea de Habermas o no, es interesante ella misma.

Según Habermas, Marx fue el último que sostuvo una concepción comprensiva de la racionalidad en que la razón se identifica con el compromiso de la racionalidad de atacar al dogmatismo. El positivismo, el pragmatismo y el historicismo rompen esa concepción total y les asignan a la razón y la racionalidad un papel más modesto,

a saber, el interés, el compromiso, ideas acerca del sufrimiento, la opresión, la autonomía adulta, el deseo de emanciparse, la felicidad y la afirmación de la identidad propia. A todos ellos se los trata como elementos sin relación alguna con la racionalidad. En la versión positivista se los considera como manifestaciones puramente emocionales o ideológicas pero no racionales.

Habermas quiere dejar esta particularización y volver a la idea de una razón crítica comprensiva. Razón aquí es "el talento para la autonomía adulta con sensibilidad para los males del mundo". La persona racional será un ser así que actúa con una conciencia coherente total. Esas personas actúan con intereses de la razón que son intereses en la emancipación, la liberación y el logro de la ilustración. Son entes que tienen, en suma, una razón comprometida.

Los conceptos que en el párrafo anterior especifican la noción de razón comprometida son conceptos normativos que tienen una naturaleza problemática y Habermas no encara adecuadamente esas dificultades. Por ejemplo, aún si uno elimina la dicotomía entre evaluar y conocer, surgen dificultades en lograr acuerdo sobre los criterios de aplicación de conceptos como los de ilustración, emancipación, autonomía adulta, sensibilidad a los males del mundo, liberación y otros que usa Habermas. Ellos son *conceptos esencialmente controvertidos* según la frase de W. B. Gallie y A. MacIntyre. No hay acuerdo en los criterios de aplicación y no hay método libre de arbitrariedad y disputa para lograr ese consenso. Los filósofos sociales usan esos términos con significados incompatibles. De otra parte, podemos presentar ejemplos claros de seres humanos racionales e informados pero no igualmente ilustrados, liberados o emancipados. Por consecuencia, podemos concluir con que el concepto de razón (y de racionalidad) fundado en aquellos conceptos es un concepto igualmente controvertido.

La explicación de la dificultad apuntada antes que presentan todos esos conceptos puede consistir en el hecho de que todos ellos son relativos a culturas históricamente determinadas con diversos e incommensurables marcos de referencia ideológicos. Quizá por el contrario, ese relativismo es superficial y en condiciones propicias podrían encontrarse constantes de aplicación. Quizá no se puedan lograr del todo esas condiciones propicias pero sí pueda lograrse un creciente acercamiento a ellas.

Es pues, comprensible este escepticismo que no será eliminado sino hasta que gentes como Habermas puedan mostrar que esos conceptos clave no son relativos ni son esencialmente controvertidos. Hasta ese entonces la teoría crítica de la sociedad y la tesis de la racionalidad en que se apoya permanecerá seriamente debilitada.

(Resumen de Enrique Villanueva)