



The books that Habermas hasn't written

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Abstract

The article provides an overview of Jürgen Habermas's intellectual work of the last five decades. Through an analysis of the recent republication of the philosophical essays in a boxed set of five volumes, it shows the relevance of the 'linguistic turn' in philosophy for the discursive foundation of the human sciences. Following the development of his thought from social theory, epistemology, ethics, political and legal theory to postmetaphysical philosophy and theology, it offers a handy introduction to the most sociological of the great philosophers of the 20th century.

Keywords

communicative action, Jürgen Habermas, linguistic turn

Professional sociologists may not have read much of Jürgen Habermas's oeuvre, but they certainly have heard of him. For 50 years, the leading figure of the second generation of the Frankfurt School has set the intellectual agenda not just in philosophy, but also in sociology and cognate disciplines. His debates with Karl Popper, Hans Georg Gadamer, Niklas Luhmann or John Rawls are part of the curriculum. His many scholarly articles on major figures in philosophy and social theory, such as Marx, Weber or Parsons, Lukács, Adorno or Foucault, are important contributions in their own right. Each of his hefty books is already a classic in the field and has spawned a small cottage industry of commentary and critique. See: *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962), *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1968), *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1981), *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1985) and *Between Facts and Norms* (1992), each of these hefty books is already a classic. On 28 June 2009, Jürgen Habermas celebrated his 80th birthday. The occasion was seized by his editor in Frankfurt to publish a student edition of philosophical texts in a boxed set of five volumes.¹ Each of the volumes comes with an introduction that justifies and contextualizes the selection of some 1600 pages of the vast corpus of Habermasiana. In a short preface to the whole

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collection, the author stresses that the 36 articles are not to be thought of as 'Collected Papers' in the strict sense. Rather they are a systematic and thematic selection that replaces a series of monographs that he has *not* written on such important topics as the philosophical foundations of sociology, universal pragmatics, the theory of language and rationality, discourse ethics, political philosophy and international law or postmetaphysical thought. As such the articles can be considered as preliminary studies to unwritten books. The selection of the texts by Habermas himself reveals what he thinks of as his contribution to the philosophical tradition of the 20th century. With the exception of a single text, all texts postdate his break with the philosophy of the subject. To the extent that there are no texts from the 1960s or the 1970s, it seems evident that Horkheimer's successor wants to be remembered not so much for continuing (or discontinuing) the Frankfurt School as for his contribution to the 'linguistic turn', in fact, a turn to symbolically mediated action and to a discourse theory of society, ethics, law and politics.

A quick glance at the table of contents suffices to show the range of his interests, as well as the discursive thread that connects them and gives them their systematic unity. The first volume contains essays at the frontier of sociology and philosophy that aim to clarify the philosophical foundations of the theory of communicative action. While the first volume gathers significant texts on language, communication and the coordination of action, the life-world and the system, rationalization and modernization that prepare, announce and accompany the publication of the *Theory of Communicative Action* in 1981, the next three volumes move away from sociology and communicative action to philosophy and discourse. One way or another, all three explore the role of discourse and consensus for the discursive foundation of validity claims. The second volume contains formerly published articles on the consensus theory of truth, the third on discourse ethics and the fourth on legal theory and democracy. The fifth volume is the only one that contains unpublished pieces. Defending a weak concept of philosophy, it focuses on the relation between philosophy, science and religion.

Although the architectural composition of the set reminds one of a solid, yet elegant edifice of the High Renaissance with communication at the base, discourse at the middle and universal consensus in the cupola, it may perhaps better, though slightly irreverently, be compared to a Frankfurter sausage of discursive theory (Vols 2–4) sandwiched between a slice of social theory (Vol. 1) and one of postmetaphysical philosophy (Vol. 5). Be that as it may, the set may be read either forwards, starting with the earlier communicative grounding of sociology, moving from communication to discourse, or backwards, starting with a deflated conception of philosophy that banks on consensus and is developed in direct exchange with the human sciences. As the set-up follows a chronological line, from the 1970s to the present, one can trace the learning process as so many developmental stages of a universal philosopher on the long way from the *Gauss Lectures* and *Between Facts and Norms* all the way to *Between Naturalism and Religion*.

Although it would be worthwhile to present the books in more detail, I limit myself here to a quick outline of each unwritten book, based on a reading of the introductory texts to each volume. For social theorists, the first volume with essays from the gestation period of the *Theory of Communicative Action* is definitely the most interesting. Breaking with the philosophy of the subject, which conceives of history as a reflexive process of emancipation in which humanity becomes conscious of itself, Habermas proposes

nothing less than a critique of sociological reason. With the intention of putting sociology on new foundations – the volume is significantly entitled: *Linguistic-theoretical Foundation of Sociology* (*Sprachtheoretische Grundlegung der Soziologie*) – he reformulates the central problems of social theory in terms of the philosophy of language. What is social action? How is society possible? What determines social change? These are indeed the questions to which the most sociological of the philosophers seeks to give an answer in his theory of communicative action. The basic move that initiates the linguistic turn in sociology is to substitute the everyday practices of communication for the transcendental consciousness of the philosopher. The attempt to detranscendentalize the subject of reason effectuates a socialization of neo-Kantian epistemology. By replacing the epistemic practices of the knowing subject by the speech acts of ordinary actors, the analysis is dislocated from the constitution of the object of knowledge to the constitution of society. In and through communication, actors are able to reach understandings about the situation of action, coordinate their actions and act in concert. Communication is not the end, but a means. Sociologically speaking, it functions as a means to coordinate the action of *ego* and *alter* in a common plan. Habermas would not be Habermas, however, if he did not introduce validity claims into speech act theory and conceive of communication as a rationalizing force. Through speech acts, actors enter into contact with each other and seek a common definition of the situation. Language is structured in such a way that speech acts automatically bring validity claims, which transcend the situation, into the situation. By a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’, hearers can accept or decline the validity claims of the speakers. In any case, with the possibility of a public testing of the validity claims, the analysis shifts out from a sociological theory of communication to a philosophical analysis of discourse, which is the subject of the second volume.

With the introduction of the life-world, understood as a cultural resource that structures the situation of action, the transition from a social theory of action to a theory of society is accomplished. Although the concept of *Lebenswelt* was initially coined by Husserl, Habermas wants to avoid the egological premises of transcendental phenomenology and has recourse instead to the American pragmatism of George Herbert Mead. With Mead, we pass from monadic intersubjectivity to symbolically mediated interaction. The rationalization of the life-world can be thought of as a complex learning process whose logic and stages can be systematically reconstructed by a ‘developmental sociology’ that is also a theory of cultural evolution which undergirds his theory of social change. The rationalization of the life-world opens the way to a rationalization of the system. With the complexification of society and the differentiation of subsystems, the coordination of action becomes progressively uncoupled from the life-world and mediated by abstract symbolic steering media like power and money that standardize the situation of action and regulate social practices from without. When power and money start invading the life-world ‘like colonial masters’ (but note that Habermas has not a single world to say about colonization as such), social pathologies ensue. The disintegration of the sources of meaning and solidarity that keep the life-world together leads to egoism and anomie, alienation and meaninglessness, apathy and powerlessness. Mediation turns into alienation; rationalization into reification. Today, the system is out of control. Civilization is off track; modernity is derailed, and although everybody is

aware that something is seriously amiss and something has to be done, the world has become too complex for easy solutions. The task of a self-understanding of modern societies in terms of chances and risks, possibilities and pathologies, no longer pertains to a speculative philosophy of history, as was the case in the Hegelian tradition from Marx to Adorno, but to a philosophically informed sociology of the present that points to countervailing tendencies.

Initially, questions of language, meaning and rationality were treated in the context of a theory of society. The sociological context explains why communication is pragmatically understood as a mechanism of the coordination of action and why rationalization is analysed from the Weberian perspective of a theory of modernity. When action moves to the background and the validation of truth claims comes to the fore, discourse is understood not so much as a medium of action in concert, but as a dispositive of truth. In the second volume, which collects articles on the theory of meaning, rationality and truth, communication is still analysed pragmatically, but the focus is now on the epistemic practices of scientists and on the conditions of possibility of reaching a consensus. Like his friend and colleague Karl Otto Apel, who introduced him to the pragmatism of Peirce, Habermas tries to bridge the divide between an analytic philosophy of ordinary language (the second Wittgenstein, but also Austin and Searle) and continental hermeneutics (Dilthey, Heidegger and Gadamer). Although he now qualifies the phrase according to which 'rational understanding is built into language as its telos' and revokes his concept of the 'ideal speech situation' as a misleading one that suggests an ideal form of life (rather than formal conditions of genuine understanding), the main intuitions of his consensus theory, as exposed in an early article on theories of truth, still hold. When actors talk to each other and genuinely seek understanding with each other about something in the world, as happens in a philosophical seminar, they cannot avoid bringing expressive, normative and epistemic validity claims into play. Moreover, by engaging in a discussion about the validity claims concerning the subjective, social and objective world, they necessarily and inevitably presuppose the existence of an ideal (egalitarian and democratic, open and inclusive) 'unlimited community of communication'. With this quasi-transcendental presupposition and projection of an ideal community, a kind of 'tribunal of reason' is established within the life-world. When people reflexively move from communication to discourse in order to test validity claims, they counterfactually assume that in and through discussion they can reach a consensus and, thus, arrive at the truth (not eternal truth, but 'truth for the time being').

In the third volume, dedicated to discourse ethics, Habermas extends the consensus theory of truth to the domain of practical reason and defends the cognitivist thesis that truth can be reached not only on theoretical, but also on practical questions. Initially introduced in the political context of questions concerning the legitimacy of a social order that privileges private over universal interests, the cognitivist thesis in ethics continues the tradition of social contract theories. Like Rawls, whose *Theory of Justice* was published at about the same time as *Legitimation Crisis*, Habermas works with the fiction of what we could call an 'original discourse' (rather than an 'original position') in which participants would be motivated by no other motive than the cooperative research of the truth and in which no other force would prevail than the 'force of the better

argument'. Searching for a consensual solution of practical problems that would be acceptable to all who are concerned by the problem if such an open discussion were to take place, the participants would performatively realize the conditions that Kant sought to express in his categorical imperative. By the mere fact of engaging in such a discourse, the participants would realize the formal conditions, such as freedom, equality and solidarity, that allow for testing if a norm satisfies the criterion of universality or not.

If discourse ethics aims to reformulate Kant's moral philosophy in communicative terms, the discourse theory of democracy and law proposes the same for republican theories of popular sovereignty. Retrospectively, *Between Facts and Norms* appears as a systematic attempt to revisit and rework some of the themes that Habermas had developed in his book on the public sphere. Thematically, this classic monograph anticipated the turn to discourse, but philosophically it was still largely written within the Frankfurter tradition of the philosophy of the subject. The essays on political theory that are republished in Volume 4 are more recent. Proving, if that were still necessary, that the more philosophical and technical writings on democracy, the rule of law and the challenges of globalization are shot through with, and hardly separable from, the more political considerations of a public intellectual, some of them are excerpted from his collected interventions in the public sphere (*Kleine politische Schriften* [*Short Political Writings*], some 12 volumes up till now). This political context, no doubt, explains why Habermas finds it necessary to contextualize his principled defence of inclusion, participation and deliberation with a reference to national-socialism. Without mentioning that, like so many of his age (e.g. Luhmann, Dahrendorf, Günther Grass), he had been a member of the *Hitlerjugend*, he describes the fascist regime as 'a political pathology from which one can learn something'. As therapy and as a remedy against the permanence of authoritarianism, and the occasional resurgence of fascism, he advocates deliberative democracy; as a cure he prescribes the formation of a discursively enlightened political will of the citizens as a countervailing power against autocracy, populism and despotism. Indeed, his own insistence on the vital importance of civil society (against the state), the public sphere (against the manipulation of the masses) and deliberative democracy (against decisionism) can only be understood as an antidote to the nationalism and its presumption of the homogeneity of the people, the authoritarianism of an acclamative democracy that emphasizes the identity of the leader and the led, as well the existential decisionism of sheer power politics, that characterized national-socialism.

Taking an explicit stand against the intellectual currents of the early *Bundesrepublik*, Habermas rebukes not only the anti-liberalism of the admirers of Carl Schmitt and the defenders of technocracy à la Luhmann, but also the Frankfurt School whose theory of society only represents a sophisticated version of a theory of totalitarianism. As an alternative he proposes a communicatively revised liberal-republican theory of deliberative democracy and the rule of law. In accordance with the main tenets of his procedural discourse theory, he argues that government is legitimate not so much because it represents the 'general will', but because its policies are, ideally and counterfactually, the result of the public deliberation of all who are concerned by the decision. In a complex articulation of the republican principle of democracy and the liberal principle of the rule of law that forms the core of his discursive theory of law, he devises an institutional scheme in which political power, which implements policies, is authorized and legitimized by the rule of law, while law, which generates validity and legitimacy, is

implemented by the state. Aware of the fact that globalization undermines his state-centric conception of democracy, he moves from the national to the trans- and the post-national level of international law and proposes a republican constitution for world governance without world government. In spite of the fact that – or, perhaps, precisely because of it – the current juncture of world politics does not leave much space for hope, he insists on the realizations of the 20th century, such as the creation of the UN, the universal acceptance of human rights, the proscription of war. Confidently, he outlines the contours of a democratic world society.

The fifth and final volume of the set consists of less technical and more meditative essays on the tasks of a postmetaphysical philosophy, its cooperation with the sciences and its relation to religion. From the onset, Habermas distances himself from critical theory and its grand narrative of emancipation. The conception of philosophy as the midwife of history, which he defended up to *Knowledge and Human Interests*, may be that of Honneth; it certainly is no longer his. The Hegelian–Marxist idea according to which philosophy can, thanks to a scientific–philosophical reflection on its own context of emergence and application, help humanity to attain consciousness of its own alienation inevitably reifies the self of self-reflection into a generic subject. Humanity cannot act ‘with will and consciousness’. At best, emancipation refers to a learning process by which a subject experiences how to change itself when it learns to see itself through the eyes of the others. As soon as the linguistic turn is taken, the philosophy of consciousness has to make room for a philosophy of communication between subjects who are engaged in a common search for truth without metaphysical guarantees. From now on, philosophy has to content itself with rational reconstructions of the formal conditions that make rational understanding between subjects possible. Nothing more, but, it cannot be stressed enough, also nothing less. Although philosophy can no longer pretend to have privileged access to the whole, the truth, the whole truth, nevertheless, as a stand-in for the universal, it has to maintain an orientation to the whole alive. In constant dialogue with the sciences, both natural and social, its task is to bring questions of truth from outside into the specialized sciences and to remind the experts that their specialized knowledge is not the whole of knowledge; rather it finds its goal, its ground and its unity in the life-world. In a lengthy, heretofore unpublished manuscript that explores the pragmatic connections between the life-world and the sciences, Habermas argues against the hard scientism of biogenetics and neurobiology, claiming that an objectivating knowledge that makes systematic abstraction of common sense cannot reduce the world without remainder. Through a philosophical reflection on the grounding of the sciences into the life-world, he shows that the perspective of the observer finds its necessary complement in the perspective of the participant; the latter cannot be eliminated without incurring a ‘performative contradiction’. In another, shorter unpublished piece on post-secularism, he takes a strong stand against enlightenment fundamentalists and contends that religion will not go away. In their relations with religion, neither philosophy nor the sciences can play the role of the inspector of reason. Rather than excommunicating religion, Habermas calls for a dialogue between faith and science, so that the former can become reflexive and the latter can learn from the former what it has lost and translate its semantic contents into more secular language. Of all the volumes, the last is definitely the most personal one. My wager is that it will soon be followed by an intellectual biography in which the

greatest philosopher of the second half of the 20th century pays his debts to his predecessors and contemporaries.

Habermas is not always an easy read. His thinking is complex and his writing overworked, while his style is heavy and rather professorial. To properly understand the books he has not written, one should, ideally, have read the ones he has written. That may be asking too much of your average sociologist, but to the extent that all major authors of the western canon (including the major sociologists) have been integrated into his discursive theory of society, his work offers, in fact, a shortcut to an intellectual history of western civilization. Looking back at half a century of solid theorizing and philosophizing, the reader is struck by the coherence of his intellectual project, the complexity of its elaboration and the clarity of its basic intuitions. At the end of the day, the whole system of thought can perhaps be understood as a complex deduction from the simple conviction that language is the bridge that connects people and that communication is a countervailing force against arbitrary power. In spite of all the misery and domination, there is progress. In dark times like ours, this is a simple and reassuring thought.

Note

1. *Philosophische Texte. Studienausgabe in fünf Bänden*; Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2009.

Biographical note

Frédéric Vandenbergh is Professor of Sociology at the State University of Rio de Janeiro in Brazil. Working at the intersection of sociology and philosophy, he has published in the main journals of social theory in French and English. His most recent books are: *A Philosophical History of German Sociology* (London: Routledge, 2009) and *Teoria social realista* (Belo Horizonte: UFMG, 2010). His personal webpage is at <http://frederic@iesp.uerj.br>

Résumé

L'article offre une vue d'ensemble des cinq dernières décades de la production intellectuelle de Jürgen Habermas. C'est à travers l'analyse des essais philosophiques, récemment republiés et présentés dans un coffret de cinq volumes, que l'article montre la pertinence et l'intérêt du 'tournant linguistique' en philosophie pour les fondements discursifs des sciences humaines. Il suit le développement de la pensée de Jürgen Habermas, qui va d'une théorie sociale, de l'épistémologie, de la morale, à travers une théorie politique et juridique, jusqu'à une philosophie et une théologie post-métaphysiques. Il offre ainsi une introduction utile à l'œuvre du plus sociologique des grands philosophes du vingtième siècle.

Resumen

El artículo proporciona una revisión del trabajo intelectual de Jürgen Habermas de las últimas cinco décadas. A través de un análisis de la reciente reedición de ensayos filosóficos en una serie de cinco volúmenes, se muestra la relevancia del 'giro lingüístico' en la filosofía para la fundación discursiva de las ciencias humanistas. Siguiendo el desarrollo de su pensamiento desde la teoría social, la epistemología, la ética, la teoría política y legal hasta la filosofía post-metafísica y teología, se ofrece una práctica introducción al más sociológico de los grandes filósofos del siglo veinte.