

THE RELATIONSHIP OF HABERMAS' VIEWS TO HEGEL

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COMMENT ON

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I

The topic of our symposium, “Habermas and Hegel” is provocative and perhaps even paradoxical. No contemporary thinker could be more fittingly juxtaposed with Hegel because no one has done more to raise the level of discourse concerning Hegel’s social and political philosophy. Hegel’s thought, and especially the theory of objective spirit, has provided the impulse for much of Habermas’ work as a philosopher over the past two decades. While others have contributed useful historical studies of Hegel’s texts, Habermas has argued with Hegel as one would argue with a contemporary. One result of this is that the Hegel who repeatedly surfaces in Habermas’ work has indeed become, to a significant degree, our contemporary.

The conjunction of Habermas and Hegel is nevertheless provocative. There are, I believe, at least two reasons for this. The first is that the criticism to which Habermas has subjected Hegel’s social and political thought is potentially devastating. Recognizing that Hegel’s is a theory of the basic or categorical structures of human interaction, Habermas has attempted to show that these structures are theoretically generated according to a paradigm that is radically non-interactive. Or, to use an expression that Habermas has made familiar, the paradigm for the generation of social and political categories is said to be a “monological” subjectivity or the absolute ego as reflexive self-consciousness. The second reason why one might find the joining of Habermas and Hegel provocative lies in the theoretical project which Habermas has set for himself and tried to make plausible. This project aims at showing how the elementary structures of human interaction are “determined within the framework of a theory of social evolution.”¹ If successful, this theoretical program might lay claim to being “more Hegelian than Hegel,” that is, more truthful, even than Hegel himself, to what Habermas has called “Hegel’s original insight”²: that the ego as self-consciousness can only be comprehended in terms of spirit as interaction, not vice versa.

According to Habermas, Hegel uses the notion of spirit as interaction in his dialectical criticism of other philosophical theories. Each is shown to claim a theoretical legitimation that can only be redeemed in terms of a structure of interaction. Yet the systematic opposition between the required structure of interaction and the actual structure of the theory in question reveals this theory to be monological in character and thus unable to support *its own* claim to intersubjective validity. This polemical device will be familiar to all readers who have considered the sequence of shapes described in Hegel’s PhG as manifestations of the “opposition of consciousness”: the opposition, namely, between the standpoint of consciousness, what is “for it,” and its principle of validation, what is said to be “in itself.” In each case the principle of validation, when it is itself drawn into question, shows itself to have the status of being merely “for it” while the claim that it is a principle of validation would require that the principle be embedded in the structure of communicative action and not in the structure of consciousness or self-consciousness.

¹ J. Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, tr. T. McCarthy (Boston, 1975), p. 49.

² J. Habermas, *Technik und Wissenschaft als “Ideologie”* (Frankfurt, 1968), p. 15.

As several commentators have observed (e.g. Bubner, Henrich), the most widely known books and essays by Habermas have exploited precisely this dialectical strategy of argumentation derived from Hegel's *Phenomenology*.³ In each of these an aporia is reached which manifests the need for a theory that will link and comprehend the two opposed theoretical tendencies. As directly opposed, however, each seems both to require and to negate the other. The monological method of reflective scientific theories is guided by principles that such a method cannot legitimate: either these principles are adopted from a tradition of communication not yet subjected to critical reflection or else they are simply the result of an arbitrary decision. The interpretative method of hermeneutical theories, as opposed to the nomological scientific theories, does attempt to immunize the shared traditions of communicative interaction against reflexive dissolution, but for this very reason it cannot show the interpreted structures to be universally valid independent of the particular and contingent traditions in which they are embedded.

Habermas knows, of course, that Hegel claimed to have brought this phenomenological dialectic of the "for it" and the "in itself" to its immanent consummation under the title "Absolute Knowledge." Habermas' reformulation of this same phenomenological dialectic under the titles "scientism vs. hermeneutics," or "monologism vs. interaction" has indeed revitalized the distinctive pattern of argumentation in Hegel's *Phenomenology*. But his claim that the *Phenomenology* radicalizes this aporetic opposition rather than overcoming it⁴ seems to be based more on a semantic analysis of the term "Absolute Knowledge" than upon a consideration of the argument presented by Hegel under that heading.

Needless to say, this is a question of Hegel interpretation that we could hardly be expected to resolve here. Nevertheless, if I have correctly identified the Hegelian inspiration and impulse in Habermas' philosophical work, then we can also look to Hegel for clues in our attempt to understand the second, or "systematic," phase of Habermas' philosophical project—a phase which, it should be noted, is now in its earliest stages of development. The two most characteristic features of Habermas' most recent, or systematic, work are (1) the theory of social evolution and (2) what Albrecht Wellmer has aptly called "the linguistic turn" in his thinking.

Granting, for the sake of argument, that Hegel's philosophy of objective spirit (like his entire philosophy of spirit) fails because the structures of interaction that it presents (e.g., family, civil society, the state) are actually generated or determined by the absolute movement of spirit reflecting on itself, and thus by a monological structure writ large, how can the basic structures of interaction be generated in a way that does not ultimately trace back to a monological framework? This is the task Habermas assigns to a theory of social evolution. Of course, social evolution cannot merely be understood as an empirical history, for then the desired elementary structures could not be grasped abstractly "but only picked out inductively."⁵ The problem is therefore to formulate a generative logic of social evolution that is interactional, rather than monological, at its most basic level.

³ The writings of Habermas which exhibit this strategy most clearly are: "Arbeit und Interaktion" (first published in H. Braun and M. Riedel, eds., *Natur und Geschichte: Karl Löwith zum 70. Geburtstag* (Stuttgart, 1967), pp. 132–55; "Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften" (first published in *Philosophische Rundschau*, Beiheft 5, February 1967); *Erkenntnis und Interesse* (Frankfurt, 1968), and the joint volume with N. Luhmann, *Theorie der Gesellschaft oder Sozialtechnologie* (Frankfurt, 1971).

⁴ J. Habermas, *Erkenntnis und Interesse*, ch. 1.

⁵ J. Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, p. 18.

II

Perhaps the most striking parallel between Habermas and Hegel is that both attempt to formulate a theory of categorical genesis and that in both cases the theory is prepared for or introduced by an independent “critical theory.” Thus Hegel introduces *his* theory of categorical genesis, the *Science of Logic*, with the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. The point of departure for Habermas’ theory of social evolution is an argument that philosophy has undergone a breakdown crisis. The mode of discourse which was originally born out of a critique of the truth claims of mythic and religious interpretations of the world, namely philosophy, has, in the course of its development, reduced itself to an opposed pair of methods, each of which can be shown to be irrational. These are the methods of (a) empirical-analytic and (b) interpretative or hermeneutic thinking. Each is said to be structured by an “anthropologically deep-seated interest”: either (a) an interest in technical control or (b) an interest in intersubjective communication. But taken by themselves, as guides to philosophical thinking, each leads to aporias. As Habermas attempts to show in his *Knowledge and Human Interests*, the crisis of philosophical theories guided by these two basic interests has become manifest in the development of philosophy since Hegel. But if we come to see that the interests in technical control (work) and in intersubjective communication (interaction) *are* “deep seated” and invariant, then they need not be regarded as distorting prisms of objective knowledge. It rather becomes possible to link them as the joint conditions under which a plurality of individuals structures and reproduces its collective life, comes to have a knowable experience as such.

The theory of social evolution, by which these basic structures are theoretically generated and determined, therefore takes the interests and activities of work and interaction as pre-given and linked a priori. The point is to show how the basic forms of this linkage alter. Unlike Hegel’s *Logic*, Habermas’ theory of categorical genesis does not begin with “the indeterminate immediate”; work and interaction are already determinate notions and, inasmuch as the subject matter is taken to be social or irreducibly plural, work, as socially organized, is informed by and is accordingly dependent upon a structure of interaction just as a structure of interaction is dependent upon the activity of work for its material embodiment. Because of this two-fold dependency Habermas also calls this theory of social evolution a rational “reconstruction of historical materialism.”

The theory is *materialist* because the structures it generates are, in each case, real in virtue of their participation in the reproduction of social life. But the development of work, or the forces of production, is not what gives the theory its historical significance. For, as Habermas argues, the development of work, the technical control over nature, proceeds in a merely cumulative way, with no systematically differentiable stages. The theory is *historical* because it exhibits a temporal logic (as opposed to Hegel’s a-temporal logic) of social development with definite stages in a definite sequence. These are the transformations of the structure of communicative action or interaction on the basis of which a socio-economic system is organized. Finally, the theory is said to be a rational *reconstruction* because it uncovers anonymous rule systems in terms of which any subject participates in a structure of interaction and because these rule systems can be ordered. The ordering principle is said to be the relation of reciprocity that informs *all* interactions, not merely those linked to work.

Habermas then proceeds to argue that the interactional structures that organize the material reproduction of society have proceeded in three basic stages: (1) Primitive, (2) Traditional and (3) Modern. In the first of these *kinship* systems are said to provide the organizational principle; in the

second, the principle is the *political* domination of classes and in the third it is the self-regulative market principle of *civil society*.

A student of Hegel's philosophy of objective spirit cannot fail to note that these are the same basic structures which are considered under the heading *Sittlichkeit* or Ethical Life. But whereas Hegel argues that the socialization process, by which everyone in the *modern* world is individuated, must involve *each* of these modes of ethical life, Habermas maintains that each *in turn* determines the totality of social intercourse. In other words, Hegel presents the interactive structures of the family, civil society and the state synchronically and not generatively, whereas for Habermas the structures must be presented diachronically because it is the theory of social evolution that bears the burden of generating the basic categories. As in other parts of Hegel's *Realphilosophie*, the guiding principles for the discovery of real structures in the sphere of objective spirit are already developed in the *Logic*.⁶ But since Habermas' theory of social evolution is, at one and the same time, his theory of categorical genesis and his theory of the structures of interaction, he forecloses the possibility of regarding individuation as a process involving three modes of interaction that are equally basic.

A practical motive for adopting this theoretical strategy is not difficult to detect. From the first of his major writings, Habermas has attempted to spell out a social theory "with a practical intent." In his most recent writings this has taken the form of a theory of "post-modern" society. Such a theory would make no sense to Hegel; he regarded his account of the basic structures of ethical interaction as logically complete. But Habermas, together with many Marxists, regards the structure that Hegel designates "civil society" to be, in effect, identical with liberal capitalism. In basic agreement with the young Marx, Habermas questions the universal character of the structure Hegel ascribes to civil society. (The putative reciprocity of the market structure of interaction, the exchange of equivalents, is said to be a mere ideology.)

For Hegel civil society does have a universal character because it is the one structure of interaction which is not merely necessary for individuation (like the family and the state) but is also the very same real structure for every individual. In other words, a self becomes an individual through participation in *this particular* family (e.g. the Smith family) and in *this particular* nation state (e.g. France), but civil society is unitary and global. No instance of it is susceptible of bearing a proper name. Insofar as such a structure can be systematically comprehended within a theory of the structures of interaction, the theory itself will have an internal reference to universality and will not, like hermeneutical theories of interaction as particular traditions of shared meaning, have a merely oblique reference to universal validity. Hegel's integration of such a structure into his three-fold theory of ethical interaction was the result of his three-fold logical theory of the universal, the particular and the individual *and* the result of an *antecedent* social evolution that established civil society as an implicitly *global* institution. That is a major reason why Hegel's theory of interaction and ethical individuation is a theory of the *modern world*.⁷

In Habermas' theory of social evolution, however, the modern world is not characterized by the integration of civil society into a more embracing structure of ethical interaction; modernity is instead characterized by the domination by civil society as the structure providing the determining

⁶ See Hegel, *Encyclopädie* (1830), the remark to paragraph 276.

⁷ See K. Dove, "[Alienation and the Concept of Modernity](#)" in *Analecta Husserliana* V (Dordrecht-Holland, 1976), pp. 187–204.

principle of organization for all modes of interaction. For Habermas every social formation is a distinctive way of linking work and interaction. When the determining principle or organization was kinship or familial relations, the resultant structuring of the work process was defined by the limits of a particular household or *oikos*. When the determining principle of organization became political, class differentiations arose and the work process was guided by a public structure of interaction that was functionally different from the still essentially private mode of economic reproduction. With the rise of modern civil society and the structure of market interaction as the guiding principle of organization, the public realm (*Öffentlichkeit*) is no longer differentiated from the realm of economic life.⁸

Habermas' theory of these stages in the linkage of work and interaction, his theory of social evolution, has another essential component that must be mentioned here. This is the linguistic dimension; it is critical for understanding what he calls the "inner logic" of the stages of social evolution and for making plausible his claim that a "post-modern" stage of social evolution is possible.

Each of the three structures of interaction that we have reviewed in the development from the family structure through the political structure to the market structure are regarded as institutional structures of interaction precisely because they do exhibit a systematic link between work and interaction. The pure form of interaction is, one might say, "schematized" by virtue of its embodiment in, its informing, a mode of economic reproduction, a mode of work. Considered in this way, it becomes plausible to inquire about the pure form of interaction, that is, interaction independent of its embodiment in a system of social work.

Habermas' theory of a pure form of interaction, whose conceptual articulation is still in its earliest stages, is based upon the types of reciprocity that obtain in a speech situation when all interests other than the interest in arriving at consensus about truth are "bracketed out." This is the ideal of undistorted communication that, in Habermas' theory, we necessarily affirm insofar as we engage in a process of communication at all.⁹

Each of the structures of embodied interaction, that is, modes of interaction linked with a mode of social work, may be read as a partial institutionalization of the pure form of interaction. But because the institutionalization is partial, the mode of communication obtaining at any given stage will be "systematically distorted." Nevertheless, as an institutionalization of pure interaction, each stage can be differentiated by the degree to which its particular linkage of work and interaction involves distortion.

This obviously leaves open the possibility of considering a future stage of social evolution that will embody or institutionalize the form of interaction without systematic distortion. Hence the "practical intent" of Habermas' theory of social evolution. What remains unclear to me is whether such a "post-modern" stage of social evolution could still be understood in terms of a linkage of interaction and social work. For it is the direct linkage of these two at the stage Habermas designates

⁸ For this theory of civil society see H. Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, 1958) and J. Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (Neuwied, 1962).

⁹ See J. Habermas, *Technik und Wissenschaft als "Ideologie,"* p. 163. J. Habermas, "Towards a Theory of Communicative Competence," *Inquiry* XIII (1970), pp. 360–75; J. Habermas, "Der Universalitätsanspruch der Hermeneutik," in *Hermeneutik und Dialektik* I, ed. R. Bubner et al. (Tübingen, 1970), pp. 73–103; J. Habermas, "Wahrheitstheorien," in *Wirklichkeit und Reflexion: Festschrift für Walter Schulz* (Pfullingen, 1973), pp. 211–65; K.-O. Apel, "Das Apriori der Kommunikationsgemeinschaft," in *Transformation der Philosophie* II (Frankfurt, 1973), pp. 358–435.

as modern or capitalist that seems to account for the peculiar distortion of communication at this stage.

The notion of distorted communication naturally seems to require a correlative notion of undistorted communication. And Habermas has acknowledged that the articulation of his notion of communicative action remains one of the most important pieces of unfinished business in his theoretical program. As I have tried to show, this program owes much of its inspiration to Habermas' interpretation of Hegel's failed program. Though he shares this interpretation with many readers of Hegel, Habermas stands out among our contemporaries as one who is resolved to redeem as much as he can of Hegel's original insight. Whatever the ultimate success of his program, all of us who work with Hegel can profit from his reidentification of this insight as the concept of interaction. When his notion of communicative action is presented as a theory, I am confident that we will be aided in our comprehension of Hegel as much as by any existing commentary.

In the meantime, much as I have been stimulated by Habermas' program, it remains to me an open question whether the category-generating argument of Hegel's *Logic* is, as Habermas contends, a basically monological process of absolute self-consciousness reflecting upon itself. I would rather contend that Hegel's genesis of the categories of interaction, his *Logic*, is distinguished by its absolute freedom from any reference to any real entities, including absolute consciousness as well as evolutionary society. As I noted at the beginning, this is the question of the meaning of "Absolute Knowledge" as the result of the *Phenomenology* and the beginning of the *Logic*. But in raising this question to prominence once again, Habermas has, I believe, made a singular contribution to our thinking with Hegel as our contemporary.

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