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The Frankfurt School and the young Habermas: Traces of an intellectual path (1956–1964)

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to discern intersections between the intellectual path of the young Habermas and the issues addressed by the *Positivismusstreit*, the dispute between Popper and Adorno about methodology in the social sciences. I will present two perspectives, focusing on different temporal moments and interpretative problems. First, I will investigate the young Habermas' relationship to the intellectual tradition of the Frankfurt School: his views on philosophy and the social sciences, normative bases of critical theory and political attitudes. Second, I will reconstruct Habermas' contemplation of the *Positivismusstreit*, in light of his social scientific research programme in the 1960s. The thesis supported is that Habermas developed a position diverging from those of Adorno and Horkheimer, and that his position reasserted the agenda of the 'first critical theory'. This article highlights the discontinuity between the first and the second generation of the Frankfurt School, the constructive openness to other philosophical and sociological traditions, as well as the aporias of a theory of knowledge not yet oriented towards the programme of reconstructive sciences.

Keywords

Frankfurt School, *Positivismusstreit*, young Habermas

Introduction

The aim of this study is to discern intersections between the intellectual path of the young Habermas and the issues addressed by the *Positivismusstreit*, the dispute between Popper and Adorno about positivist and dialectic methodologies in social sciences. In so doing, I present two perspectives, focusing on different temporal moments and interpretative problems.

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From a biographical perspective, a preliminary question of intellectual positioning arises: was Habermas' conception of the social scientific discipline in the 1960s the same conception held by Adorno and the Frankfurt School at the turn of the 1950s? The first line of enquiry, then, concerns the young Habermas' relationship to the intellectual tradition of the Frankfurt School. What were his views on the normative foundations of critical theory, the relation between philosophy and social sciences, and political participation? I would like to support the thesis that the position developed by Habermas diverged from the one contemporaneously developed by Adorno and Horkheimer, to the extent that Habermas recovered the research programme of the early critical theory.

Approaching my second line of enquiry from a philological perspective, I shall reconstruct the thematic cores and argumentative lines of Habermas' reflection on the *Positivismusstreit*, in light of his scientific activity in the 1960s. Summarising the position of Habermas in the controversy, we can identify three main argumentations. (1) A first critique concerns the positivist conception of science, which provides a regulatory ideal detached from the actual context of the practice of research, both with respect to the context of the 'discovery' and the context of the 'justification'. On this point, Habermas does not stray from the Frankfurt School. By objectifying themselves through self-reflection, philosophy and social sciences too can avoid the risk of becoming purely ideology. (2) A second critique relates to reductionism of the empirical-analytical methodology that dominates the positivist tradition. There is a symbolic reproduction of social life, which characterises the process of identity construction, social interaction and cultural transmission. Social theory should be able to investigate these processes with other methods – empirical-hermeneutic – and to influence them even if only through the clarification of meaning. Even in this respect, there are no elements of originality compared to the Frankfurt School. (3) The most interesting aspect of the Habermas' reflection, although still preliminary, concerns the attempt of quasi-transcendental or phylogenetic foundation of the forms of experience – cognitive-instrumental and communicative – at the base also of the different sciences, empirical-analytic and empirical-hermeneutic. Already outlined during the *Positivismusstreit*, the proposal represents the greatest break with the masters of the Frankfurt School. However, the attempts to develop a theory of knowledge and society and to provide the normative basis for the critical theory will remain unfinished until the beginning of the next decade, when Habermas will be placed fully in the programme of reconstructive sciences.

The trajectory of the Institut für Sozialforschung

In 1956, Jürgen Habermas became researcher at the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt and teaching assistant to Adorno, who was at that time Professor of Philosophy and Sociology at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University, also in Frankfurt. Adorno's interest had been sparked by some articles that the young Habermas had published in important newspapers and periodicals: the *Frankfurt Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ)*, the *Handelsblatt*, the *Frankfurter Hefte* and the *Merkur*.

The attention of the leftist academic world was initially attracted by Habermas' review essay, published in the *FAZ* on 25 July 1953 [1977], of the 1935 course *An Introduction to Metaphysics* in which Heidegger drew comparison between 'future men' and Nazi

leaders, and wrote about the ‘inner truth and greatness’ of that movement. Heidegger’s text outraged Habermas (1990 [1989]) who, in his own words, had ‘fed’ on the ‘incredibly innovative’ *Sein und Zeit* – now, he discovered Heidegger’s thinking to be ‘corrupted and dragged into the maelstrom of the diagnostic neoconservatives of the time’ (p. 103). Adorno completely agreed with the linkage the young Habermas had made between Heidegger’s philosophical writings of ‘the turn’ (*die Kehre*) and his philosophical positions during the Nazi regime.

The intellectual affinity between Adorno and Habermas was confirmed at the time of the latter’s first proper essay, published in the August 1954 issue of the *Merkur*. ‘Die Dialektik der Rationalisierung’ is a study on the alienation of industrial labour and mass consumption – whose common condition is subsumed under the concept of ‘compensation’ – and a proposal to expand the category of rationality from the technical sphere to the practical-moral one. In this essay, Habermas dovetailed the conservative critique learned from academic texts by Hans Freyer, Arnold Gehlen, and Helmut Schelsky with a Hegelian-Marxist criticism he had read in Karl Löwith’s (1941) interpretation of European culture, György Lukács’ (1923) reification theory in *History and Class Consciousness*, and the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* by Horkheimer and Adorno (2002 [1947]). A theoretical compatibility, fine prose, and democratic ideals brought Habermas close to Adorno’s thought and drove him to a critical conception of modern rationalisation, although this was only provisionally based upon a theory of society.

What did Habermas as a new researcher know about the ‘old’ Frankfurt School? He had heard about the scholars of the Institute for Social Research and appreciated their ‘integrity’ after their return to German university. In an academic reality strongly compromised by the Nazi past, and now dominated by a conservative and anti-modernist cultural orientation,¹ ‘unscathed figures’ like Horkheimer, Adorno, Hannah Arendt, and Karl Löwith displayed ‘intellectually redeeming traits’ (Habermas, 1990 [1988]: 30), and allowed their students to attempt ‘unprejudiced reception’ of German theoretical traditions, for instance, applying philosophical approaches to social problems. But in the early 1950s, the Institute was far from coherent or systematic. Habermas (1992 [1988]) would later recall,

I didn’t think of it that way at the time. For me there was no critical theory, no coherent theory. Adorno wrote critical essays on culture and held seminars on Hegel. He made contemporary a certain Marxist background. That was it. (p. 98)

A young scholar had little hope of discerning lines of continuity and discontinuity with the critical theory of the 1930s. The studies of the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* were no longer available since the advent of Nazism and, despite the insistence of Habermas and Heinz Maus, Horkheimer was firmly opposed to republishing them. Habermas (1992 [1988]) recalls,

when I became Adorno’s assistant in 1956, the intellectual past of the Institute for Social Research was not accessible to the new students. [...] Horkheimer had a great fear that we would get to the crate in the Institute’s cellar that contained a complete set of the *Zeitschrift*. (pp. 96, 97)²

So why did the Director, together with Adorno, hide the pre-war editorial production, censor many passages from the manuscript of *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (1944) and delay the German translation of Horkheimer's *Eclipse of reason* (1947) until 1967? What had become the Frankfurt School after the American exile?

The Institute for Social Research had been reconstituted in the Federal Republic a few years earlier. In 1950, thanks to the promotional skills of Horkheimer³ – who, in the previous year and with the support of the command of the allied troops, had regained the Chair of Social Philosophy abolished in 1933 – the necessary funds were collected from the Office of the U.S. High Commissioner for Germany, the City of Frankfurt, the Society for Social Research, and private lenders (Jay, 1996 [1973]: 282). These close ties with German and American political institutions in a period dominated by McCarthyism and the *Adenauerschen Restauration* led Horkheimer to prudently hide the subversive contents of studies from the 1930s about the theory of revolution and to mitigate the critical contents of the theory of failure of civilization. Horkheimer thus directed the activities of the Institute towards empirical research that its funding institutions had an interest in commissioning, and for which they showed clear appreciation. The delicate situation of the Institute is described by Rolf Wiggershaus (1995 [1986]):

The Institute was re-established without Horkheimer having realized that an Institute that was no longer financially independent would sooner or later have to take on research contracts. Nor did he see that it would be difficult for Critical Theorists, in a period of restoration, not to fall into moral dilemmas. (p. 443)

The Institute resumed its research work with an investigation into the political consciousness of Germans, being the attitudes of citizens towards the occupying powers, foreign policy, the new democratic regime, and their co-responsibility for Nazi crimes. It was a collective research programme, revisiting topics of previous programmes at the Institute about authority (1936) and prejudice (Adorno et al., 1950). The material collected on the opinions of the German citizens was important, but the critical potential of the results was not allowed to emerge, because of the will of Horkheimer to avoid any result that could be construed as provocative. For this same reason, the publication of the research programme *Gruppenexperiment* by Friedrich Pollock was delayed for 5 years.

In 'Schuld und Abwert', Adorno (1955b) claimed, radically for the times, that 'anthropological conditions' for manipulative mass psychology continued to exist, as did a susceptibility to totalitarian systems, caused by the technological and economic tendencies that were developing in society as a whole' (Wiggershaus, 1995 [1986]: 474). In addition to his studies in theoretical philosophy, aesthetics, music, and literary criticism of mass culture, Adorno participated intensively in the empirical projects of the Institute,⁴ managing to establish himself as an expert in social research. This experience helped him to focus his ideas about methodology in the social sciences, and he presented these ideas at the political sociology conference *Die gegenwärtige Situation der Soziologie* held in Marburg in February 1951, and in the paper *Zur gegenwärtigen Stellung der empirischen Sozialforschung in Deutschland*, wherein he introduced the first dermatology congress, organised by the Institute in December of the same year. In these interventions, Adorno attempted to expound a methodologically positivist, and socially administrative, concept

of sociology; asserting a general theory of society ‘able to highlight, strictly and without mystifications, the objectivity of the social event, objectivity that is widely removed from the individual and also from the collective consciousness’ (Adorno, 1972 [1951]: 482). However, his sociology remained hypothetical. Even Adorno did not take his analyses seriously as critical empiricism. He would go on to develop his more famous, more philosophical project (Adorno, 1973 [1966], 1983 [1956], 1984 [1970]).

By the early 1950s, the Frankfurt School had not only almost completely lost interest in transforming capitalist society, but it was also no longer able to develop major empirical research that might be put at the service of social theory. The School’s proposal to combine European ideals and American methods ended up being an empty formula. Its work was no longer centred on the reformulation of Marxian social theory with the aim of actualising its emancipatory ideals. Its critical theory no longer intended to scientifically expose the irrationality of the status quo through determinate negation of the contradictions between ideology and reality – to promote, at the level of praxis, the conditions allowing oppression to be overcome. A shift in interpretative framework from the theory of failed revolution to the theory of failed civilization – entailing the substitution, as forces of history, of class struggle for the conflict between man and nature – corresponded to a curbing of any practical orientation towards conservation of residual spaces of ‘sense’, ‘self-determination’ and ‘solidarity’.⁵

Moreover, the Institute was no longer a centre of aggregation involving scholars from different social sciences. The collective and interdisciplinary programme that Horkheimer had announced when he became Director in 1931, with the aims of ‘putting a large empirical research apparatus in the service of social-philosophical problems’ and of elaborating a general theory of society that could historically contextualise of social phenomena, had been confirmed with the inauguration of the *Zeitschrift* (1932) and made a true manifesto with Horkheimer’s essay ‘Traditional and Critical Theory’ (1972 [1937]). Society was to be considered as a ‘totality’, comprising ‘the connection between the economic life of society, the psychical development of individuals, and the changes in the realm of culture in the narrower sense (to which belong not only the so-called intellectual elements, such as science, art, and religion, but also law, customs, fashion, public opinion, sports, leisure activities, lifestyle, etc.)’ (Horkheimer, 1993 [1931]: 11, 12). This ambitious programme had been systematically abandoned.

In the 1950s, the Institute experienced a period of crisis that threatened its very survival. The conflict that animated the decisions of the Director of the Institute, between the desire to find regeneration in theoretical philosophy and the need to protect the Institute’s position by marking its distance from ‘old’ critical theory, was at the same time product and inevitable producer of drastic staff cuts. At the time of its postwar reconstruction, the Institute for Social Research had a very small team: just Horkheimer, Adorno, Pollock, and a few young researchers such as Heinz Maus, Diedrich Osmer, and Egon Becker. Erich Fromm had been detached long since Walter Benjamin was dead, Herbert Marcuse was kept at a distance, Franz Neumann was occasionally consulted, Otto Kirchheimer and Karl August Wittfogel were increasingly sporadic interlocutors, and contacts with Henryk Grossmann and Franz Borkenau were severed. Leo Löwenthal and Felix Weil, who had until the 1940s belonged to the inner circle of Horkheimer’s collaborators, were

losing any remaining contact. Horkheimer turned his interests to strictly philosophical issues, albeit with a feeling of depleted intellectual creativity, and considered retiring.

The short stay of Ralf Dahrendorf at the Institute between July and August 1954 provides further evidence of the rarefied research ambitions and mimetic cultural attitude of the new course. Having gained his PhD in sociology at the London School of Economics and Political Science, Dahrendorf was hired as an assistant to Horkheimer and entrusted to the guidance of Adorno, who hoped to continue his studies in theoretical sociology with Dahrendorf's input. However, it was precisely the experience of research conducted closely with Adorno that convinced the young scholar to leave the Institute; he quickly moved to Saarland University, where he obtained his teaching qualification with the study *Soziale Klassen und Klassenkonflikt in der industriellen Gesellschaft* (1957). Dahrendorf (2002) is clear on the reasons for his choice:

The legendary Frankfurt Institute performed standard research activities through surveys. When they tried something new it appeared useless, and when they had something useful it was not that new. [...] Adorno, and especially Horkheimer, sought recognition by an environment marked by market economy and the choice of the Western camp. This means that they were detaching themselves, in more or less imperceptible steps, from the leftist, even marxist attitude which was ascribed to them. (p. 169)

The organisational challenges and moderate orientation emerged in the affair of the survey commissioned from the Institute for Social Research by Mannesmann, a major German heavy industrial company that was one of the founders of the anti-Bolshevik League, a financier of the Nazi Party and, after the war, the object of anti-cartel measures. The Institute's and its collaborators' methodological unpreparedness in the field of industrial sociology, and the personal disinterest of Director in the research, risked compromising the survey's outcome. Only the return in 1955 of the young Ludwig von Friedeburg – assistant to Horkheimer in 1951, now expert in opinion polls thanks to his work at Noelle-Neumann's Allensbach Institute – avoided the failure of the assignment. Horkheimer assigned von Friedeburg the direction of the empirical research department of the Institute and results followed shortly. The survey, carried out with a quantitative methodology that did not take into account working conditions and power structures, fully appeased the commissioner while dissatisfying the trade unions (von Friedeburg, 1955). Horkheimer as Director of the Institute intervened in defence of the research report, pleased to have finally found a very professional empirical scholar with no interest in critical social theory.

The interest of the business community in the Institute for Social Research grew to the point that the Kuratorium for the rationalisation of the German economy proposed financing the creation of some positions for assistants in industrial and business sociology. The Institute's openness to remunerative commissioned works, which did not correspond to the traditional interests of the Frankfurt School, was moderately criticised by Adorno (1955a), who insisted to Horkheimer that the next assistant had absolutely to 'be able to teach theoretical sociology' (pp. VI, 1–5). The following year, Jürgen Habermas was hired by the Institute.

Habermas and the recovery of the first critical theory

Under Adorno's direction, Habermas immediately began working on the research project *University and Society*, begun in 1952. In 1957, the synthesis *Das chronische Leiden der Hochschulreform* (Habermas, 1969 [1957]) deployed two principles of critical theory, proposing a context analysis of the relations between the academic and scientific development, and investigating dialectic tension between the normative self-representation of the sociocultural university institutions and their factual reality. In the tradition of Frankfurt Institute, the project sought to renew a fruitful relation of social science with concrete practice, not only on the instrumental-technical but also on the practical-moral level – assuming this task to be a 'ferment' and a 'guide to right living'. Adorno's influence was felt in addressing the concept of 'self-reflection', according to which every academic specialisation should entail reflection upon the epistemological conditions of knowledge, and upon the socio-historical conditions of the discipline's own generation, organisation and utilisation.

In 1957, the Institute started the research group for *Sociological Investigation of the Political Consciousness of Frankfurt Students*, entrusting its leadership to Habermas, Christoph Oehler and Friedrich Weltz. The survey, carried out through semi-structured interviews and protocol analysis, was concluded by the end of that year. Habermas, who had taken care of most of the drafting of the report, was commissioned to write its introduction the following year. Titled 'Einleitung: Über den Begriff der politischen Beteiligung', the introduction justified the adopted research methodology and stated the conceptual framework of the survey, foregrounding the categories 'political habitus', 'political tendencies' and 'model of society'. It also offered a reconstruction of the main sociological doctrines about the 'evolution of the rule of law to an organ of collective security' as key to the social-historical and political context of the age. Again, the project's reference to the structural data of its respondents' situated experiences and actions recalls the methodological assumptions of the social research of the first critical theory:

The topic of our investigation is the political participation of students, participation which can be judged only by examining the circumstances in which it is or it is not developed. Abstractly researching 'participation', without referring to the situation and the meaning that can be acquired from the situation, there is the risk to consider it a phenomenon by itself. What is instead needed is an outline and a general picture of the history and developments of the Federal Republic, as background and condition for possible participation.

Habermas (1961 [1958]: 13)

The proposed hypothesis was that the new relation between organised capitalism and mass democracy was determining a series of consequences: first, the bureaucratisation of the private and public spheres, with the erosion of spaces of autonomy in the workplace and in general consumption; second, the dominance of technocrats, politicians, and pressure groups in representative institutions and public administration; and third, the exclusion of workers, consumers, and citizens from political decisions. The contradiction Habermas wanted to highlight is that while a progressive politicisation of society was taking place

as a result of State intervention in all spheres of the lifeworld, it was taking place concurrently with a depoliticisation of the masses.

The introductory essay concludes by recalling the method of the critique of ideology, elucidated by a quotation from Adorno's and Horkheimer's (2002 [1947]) *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (p. 202), and providing a sense of its application in the field of political participation:

The analysis of the development of the liberal rule of law and of its current structure follows the rules of the critical theory, that leads to freedom precisely because *it accepts the bourgeois ideals, whether those which that order's exponents still proclaim, in however distorted a form, or those which are still discernible as the objective purpose of institutions, both technical and cultural, despite all the manipulation. [...] It gives voice to the contradiction between belief and reality, paying close attention to phenomena conditioned by the time.* The faith in freedom and in political influence of the citizen is opposed to the reality of the current situation.

Habermas (1961 [1958]: 50)

The research was not received well by Horkheimer, who at first asked Friedeburg to make further investigations – to check results and confront the 'dilettante, often irresponsible treatment of the empirical material'. Horkheimer then advanced his opposition to Habermas' introduction, finding him guilty of wanting to replace autonomous philosophy with a practical philosophy of history, and of expressing too radical criticisms of German democracy: 'Such declarations are impossible in the research reports of an institute that depends on public funding from this shackling society'.⁶ As explained by Wiggershaus, 'Horkheimer had become a convinced defender of the CDU slogan "No experiments!," and his view was that the Institute could not gain any respect with a publication of this sort. Adorno argued, in favour of it [...] But Horkheimer (1988 [1967]) stuck to his position' (pp. 554–555). The publication of 'Student und Politik' was not authorised in the series 'Frankfurter Beiträge zur Soziologie', nor in any other series from the publisher Europäische Verlagsanstalt, directly linked to Horkheimer. It appeared, almost without any reference to the Institute for Social Research, 3 years later in the 'Soziologische Texte' series published by Luchterhand, when it became one of the most discussed studies of the early 1960s.

Horkheimer had already been displeased by a long essay that Habermas had published in 1957 on the 'Philosophische Rundschau'. It was an extensive review on the philosophical debate around Marx and Marxism, privileging a reading of Marx as a critic of capitalist alienation and theorist of Western revolution, in favour of orthodox Soviet materialism as developed from the scientific Marxism of Engels. With respect to the theory of classes, however, Habermas (1957) conceived of overcoming reification and domination through a 'solidarity' already existent in the mutuality involved in building of a space of dialogue.

Even while Horkheimer was trying in every way to hide all the writings that could let people understand the nature of the first Frankfurt School and was discouraging every similar research programme, Habermas (1988 [1967]) was retracing the path of the critical theory of society through the reconstruction of its intellectual sources:

In retrospect, I sometimes have the impression that a student can recreate a segment of the critical theory of the thirties if he systematically works his way from Kant through Hegel, including Schelling, and then approaches Marx via Lukacs. [...] When this sunken continent later resurfaced – in the 1960s with the student protests – and entered the consciousness of us former assistants at the Institute, I didn't have the impression that what was occurring was completely new. (pp. 96–97)

At the end of 1958, Habermas proposed to Horkheimer the design of a research project on the changes of structure and function of bourgeois public opinion, with which (and with Adorno's agreement) he would present his application for habilitation in Frankfurt. The Director asked him instead to realise an extended study about Richter and, due to the young Habermas' opposition, was forced to accept his resignation. Adorno's efforts at mediation were to no avail.⁷ Habermas' first period of employment at the Institute had lasted a little over 2 years. The reason for the break, paradoxically, was his excessive adherence to the conception of critical theory of the first Frankfurt School. In the first year, perhaps even more paradoxically, he had adhered to the same vision of the object, method, and function of social sciences that had Horkheimer (1972 [1959]) supported; in the following year, he had a dispute with René König at the 14th Conference of German Sociologists, anticipating the themes of the *Positivismusstreit*.

The study programme about public opinion and the demand for habilitation were welcomed by Wolfgang Abendroth, Professor of Political Science at the University of Marburg. Of socialist ideas, Abendroth had appreciated Habermas (1953) review essay on Heidegger. Habermas stood with Abendroth in solidarity with the Socialist German Student Union (SDS), in open conflict or clash when its positions deemed too radical by the leaders of the parent organisation, the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), which adopted a reformist political line at its 1959 Bad Godesberg Congress. Abendroth introduced Habermas to the social democratic trade union literature about the law and status of Weimar Germany, which addressed the issue of constitutional development in the liberal and bourgeois regime as a product of the struggle between social classes.

After having presented, in 1960, an essay about the relationship between historical materialism and the social sciences in the context of a critical theory with practical-political intentions and scientifically falsifiable (Habermas, 1973 [1960]), in 1962 he published the book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Habermas, 1989 [1962]),⁸ in which he systematically developed all the issues that were barely sketched in the aforementioned introduction to the research project on the political consciousness of students. Although it was a successful exercise of the theoretical conception of society that the Frankfurt School had encouraged, the book was published by Luchterhand without any reference to Habermas' past membership in the Institute for Social Research. The study, which still ranks among his best publications, examined the emergence of social structures in bourgeois public opinion: its political functions, its ideas and its ideology. It goes on to explore the issue of its political role in the transition from the capitalist-liberal regime to mass society. Habermas' diagnoses of the disintegration of the public sphere in favour of a rational deployment of 'publicity' in service of easy consensus, and of the colonisation of economic and political organisations in every sphere of public and private life, conquered both audiences and critics. The book was well received by leading

German sociologists (such as Renate Mayntz, Ralf Dahrendorf and Kurt Sontheimer) and placed Habermas among the intellectuals most appreciated by the student movement that was gaining relevance in the international political arena.

As to Habermas' (1973 [1961]) academic endeavours, the previous year he had been appointed as a Privatdozent at Marburg, where he delivered the keynote address on the theme *The Classical Doctrine of Politics in Relation to Social Philosophy*, which opened the cycle of studies culminating in the publication of the issue of *Theorie und Praxis* (Habermas, 1963 [1962]) dedicated to the dualism between technical knowledge and practical knowledge as the cornerstone for the interpretation of the development of modern society. Also in 1961, shortly before being appointed Privatdozent, upon a proposal from Hans-Georg Gadamer and Karl Löwith Habermas (1973 [1962]) was appointed Extraordinary Professor of Philosophy at Heidelberg, where he took charge with an inaugural lecture about Hegel's critique of the French Revolution.

The Positivismustreit

In October 1961, the Congress of the German Society for Sociology on 'Logic of the Social Sciences' took place; it was to be remembered for the polite debate, between Adorno and Popper. Habermas (1963 [1962]), who never severed relations with the 'master' but was beginning to mature his own conception about the theoretical foundations of social sciences, was later to intervene in this debate on several occasions: with the conference *Kritische und konservative Aufgaben der Soziologie*, held during the Berlin University Conference in 1962, with the essays 'Dogmatism, Reason and Decision: On Theory and Practice in a Scientized Civilization' (Habermas, 1973 [1963]) and 'The Analytical Theory of Science and Dialectics' (Habermas, 1976 [1963]) – the latter included in the book edited by Horkheimer for Adorno's 60th birthday; and finally, in 1964, with his reply to Hans Albert, 'A Positivistically Bisected Rationalism' (Habermas, 1976 [1964]).

In summarising the position of Habermas in the controversy over positivism, starting from the framework of critical theory that he was reworking at the time, we can identify three discursive cores useful to the discussion about the 'logic of social sciences'.⁹

1. The first objection, sociological in character, concerns the fact that the positivist conception of science provides a regulatory ideal detached from the actual context of the practice of research, both with respect to the context of the 'discovery' and the context of the 'justification'. Neglecting the real conditions in which and for which researchers act, positivism ends up considering science as a kind of unhistorical and asocial 'third world' subject only to logic. Anything beyond the relationship between observational and theoretical propositions is inaccessible to critical discussion and is abandoned to mere decision:

According to positivistic prohibitive norms, whole problem areas would have to be excluded from discussion and relinquished to irrational attitudes, although, in my opinion, they are perfectly open to critical elucidation.

(Habermas, 1976 [1964]: 199)

For Habermas, it is not possible to ignore all the psychological, social (economic, political, relational) and cultural factors that affect the research process in its various phases, from the choice of the problem to the definition of the hypotheses, the formulation of the operational plan, the data collection, coding and analysis, and the interpretation of results. All such factors are the specific objects of the social sciences.

If the emancipatory potential of critical theory takes shape through comparison between factual reality and the normative idea, this also applies to the social sciences. By 'objectifying themselves' through self-reflection, they too can avoid the risk of becoming purely ideology. On this point, explicated in *Kritische und konservative Aufgaben der Soziologie* (Habermas, 1963 [1962]: 237) and stressed again in 'Dogmatism, Reason and Decision' (Habermas, 1973 [1963]: 281–282), Habermas does not stray from the Frankfurt School.

2. Habermas does not deny that the empirical-analytic sciences also promote research on sociocultural phenomena. However, the positivist interpretation of these processes and practices is too restrictive. On the cognitive level, the social sciences aim not only at the description of states of fact, discovery of more or less causal correlations, and conditioned forecasts; on the practical level, they are not satisfied only by the instrumental success of the actions they inspire. In other words, they are not only 'an auxiliary science for rational administration' (Habermas, 1976 [1963]: 141). They should also be able to investigate, by other methods, the symbolic representation of social life in processes of identity construction, social relation, and cultural transmission. Sociology should be able to influence these processes even if only through the clarification of meaning. The rational discourse extends to what happens in the objective world, but also to what happens in the psychic, social, and cultural world(s). As Habermas (1976 [1964]) clarifies in his reply to Albert, within the epistemological and methodological framework of the empirical-analytic sciences is not even possible to formulate these problems. But this does not mean that they are devoid of meaning, or that they are unnecessary to the discussion:

They arise objectively from the fact that the reproduction of social life not only poses technically soluble questions; instead, it includes more than the processes of adaptation along the lines of the purposive-rational use of means. Socialized individuals are only sustained through group identity, which contrasts with animal societies which must be constantly built up, destroyed and formed anew. [...] Questions concerning this realm of experience, because they cannot be answered by technically utilizable information, are not capable of explanation by empirical-analytical research. Nevertheless, since its beginnings in the eighteenth century, sociology tried to discuss these very questions. In so doing, it cannot do without historically-orientated interpretations. (pp. 222–223)

The interpretation of meanings and the discovery of their internal and external reasons require the methodology of the empirical-hermeneutic sciences. Even in this indication, there are no elements of originality.

3. The most interesting aspect of Habermas' preliminary reflection on positivism concerns the pragmatic theory of cognitive interests at the bases of different experiences and different sciences.

First, Habermas (1976 [1963]) proposes a quasi-transcendental or anthropological foundation for the experience at the base of empirical-analytic science. In the cognitive-instrumental sphere of social actions in particular, the validity of the observational propositions follows from the pre-reflexive experience that individuals hold of what happens in the world (experiment and systematic observations are a stylised form of this experience).

It is here that the hermeneutic pre-understanding, concealed by the analytical theory of science, is formed, a pre-understanding which first makes possible the application of rules for the acceptance of basic statements. (p. 155)

In this experiential context, we assume as valid those theories that are effectively able to lead us to the resolution of technical problems:

In the last instance, therefore, the empirical validity of basic statements, and thereby the plausibility of law-like hypotheses and empirical scientific theories as a whole, is related to the criteria for assessing the results of action which have been socially adopted in the necessarily inter-subjective context of working groups. (p. 154)

Habermas (1976 [1964]) does not consider relevant the accusation moved by Albert that social science relapsed into the instrumentalism criticised by Popper:

It is not the theories themselves which are instruments but rather that their information is technically utilizable. Even from a pragmatic viewpoint the failures, whereby law-like hypotheses founder under experimental conditions, possess the character of refutations. The hypotheses refer to empirical regularities; they determine the horizon of expectation of feedback-regulated action, and consequently can be falsified by disappointed expectations of success. (p. 208)

If we assume observations, laws, and theories to be valid until proven otherwise, it is because of a disposition towards technical explanations rooted in the phylogeny of the human species:

The interest in the sustenance of life through societal labour under the constraint of natural circumstances seems to have been virtually constant throughout the previous stages in the development of the human race. For this reason, a consensus concerning the meaning of technical domination can be achieved without any difficulty, in principle, within historical and cultural boundaries; the intersubjective validity of empirical-scientific statements which follows the criteria of this pre-understanding is therefore secured. Indeed, the high level of intersubjectivity of this type of statement retroactively causes the very interest upon which it is based – and to whose historically and environmentally neutral constancy it is indebted – to fall, as it were, into oblivion.

Habermas (1976 [1963]: 155)

The postulate of value neutrality affirmed by the positivist conception of scientific knowledge is therefore attributable to the character of obviousness typical of a cognitive-instrumental interest in everyday life.

Second, if the objectifying attitude towards the world is founded in instrumental action, the interpretive attitude is based upon the communicative action that pre-reflexively orients towards understanding and agreement, and is made explicit in science through discourse:

The critique moves from the argument to the attitude, and from the attitude to the argument, and acquires, in this movement, the comprehensive rationality which, in the natural hermeneutics of everyday language, is still, as it were, naturally at work. In the sciences, however, this rationality must be re-established between the now-separated moments of formalized language and objectivized experience by means of critical discussion.

Habermas (1976 [1964]: 219–220)

Even this practical interest in understanding and agreement has its basis in the phylogenetic process of human language. Habermas recovers the idea of a pluralistic approach that is open to different methodological points of view (e.g. observer vs participant), different theoretical objectives (e.g. description and causal explanation vs understanding and narrative explanation), and different practical purposes (e.g. control vs agreement). In this context, social theory as a critical theory must combine empirical-analytic sciences and historical-hermeneutic sciences, maintaining cognitive interest towards the clarification of the material and symbolic relations of domain that hinder the emancipation of human beings.

But what are the normative criteria that make criticism possible? Habermas believes himself to have solved the aporias of the dialectical conception of the first phase through quasi-transcendental research. The emancipative interest is now founded, albeit counterfactually, in the a priori of experience and reasoning, whose genesis is related to the anthropological spheres of work and language. These themes would be the subject of *Knowledge and Human Interests* (Habermas, 1971 [1965]), his inaugural lecture as Professor of Philosophy and Sociology in Frankfurt (the Chair that had been created for Horkheimer), delivered 28 June 1965. What is missing from the theory of cognitive interests, however, is the reconstruction of the logic of development of cognitive and moral learning.

In various chapters of his two books published at the end of the decade, *On the Logic of the Social Sciences* (Habermas, 1988 [1967]) and *Knowledge and Human Interests*, Habermas attempted to solve this problem by confronting the main contemporary philosophical and sociological currents. From comparison between the phenomenological, linguistic and hermeneutic currents, he came to the conclusion that epistemological discussions about the logic of scientific theories and methodological discussions about their relationship with the natural and social experience were still inadequate to explain the transcendental-pragmatic structure of the intersubjectivity of both experience and of reasoning. In a similar fashion, both the previous attempts of ‘dialectic demonstration’, in the framework of the Hegelian phenomenology of the spirit and the Marxian philosophy of the praxis, had been ensnared in ‘aporetic consequences’. However, by Habermas’

(2003 [1999]) own admission, at the end of the 1960s his purpose to strengthen the theoretical foundation of social sciences was ‘spinning its wheels’ (p. 13).

Notes

1. In the prime of Habermas’ university studies (1949–1954), there were eight Chairs of Sociology in the Federal Republic of Germany. Besides Horkheimer, there were René König (who succeeded Leopold von Wiese in 1949), Otto Stammer, Arnold Gehlen, Helmut Schelsky, Gerhard Mackenroth, Max Graf Solms and Werner Ziegenfuss. The prevailing approach in the sociology of the time was a conservative one.
2. I received a communication from Stefan Müller-Doohm stating that, at that time, the young Habermas had consulted an integral edition of the *Zeitschrift*. This will be documented in Habermas’ intellectual biography, whose publication is planned for the Spring of 2014.
3. In a document aimed at potential financial sponsors, Horkheimer (1950) praised the Institute as a synthesis between the ‘extension of the German tradition of social philosophy and the humanities’ and the ‘most advanced empirical research methods of modern American sociology’, emphasising its possible consulting role in dealing with Germany’s pressing challenges (p. IX 70).
4. For details on Adorno’s activities in the decade 1950–1960, see Müller-Doohm (2005 [2003]).
5. For an explanation of the main reasons for abandonment of the original configuration of critical theory, see Horkheimer (1972 [1969]).
6. Letter, Horkheimer to Adorno, Montagnola, 27 September 1958.
7. Adorno had been first appointed Vice-director (1950) and then Co-director (1955) of the Institute, at the same level as Horkheimer. In 1956, the year Habermas joined the Institute, Adorno had become ordinary professor, after having passed through the phases of extraordinary professor (1949), supernumerary professor (1950) and permanent extraordinary professor (1953). Despite the position he had reached, Adorno maintained a subordinate institutional and personal attitude towards Horkheimer, upon whom he had always relied for protection, promotion, and advice.
8. Habermas (1962 [1960], 1964, 1970 [1964], 1974 [1964], 1989 [1964]) published other essays about the idea and ideology of bourgeois public opinion and the transformations of public opinion.
9. The *Positivismusstreit* initially sparked interest mainly in Germany (Baier, 1966; Buttemeyer, 1975; Huussen and Kee, 1972; König, 1972; Ley and Müller, 1971; Pilot, 1968; Schnadëlbach, 1972; Tuschling, 1978; Wellmer, 1971) and among European scholars closer to German culture (Digilio 1968–1969; Garceau, 1977; Gozzi, 1974; Totaro, 1974; Van Parijs, 1978). Between the 1970s and 1980s, as a result of the first systematic reception of the debate (Bernstein, 1976; Frisby, 1976; Giddens, 1977; Held, 1980; McCarthy 1978; Rasmussen, 1976; Rockmore, 1979; White, 1979), it garnered increasing attention in English-speaking countries, with essays by Brand (1977), Factor and Turner (1977), and Overend (1979), the dispute between Ray (1979, 1982) and Wilson (1981), and the intervention of Keat at the Annual Conference of the British Sociological Association in April 1980. Meanwhile, Habermas had abandoned his attempt at articulating an anthropological foundation of the theory of knowledge and of society, in favour of the reconstructive model, and his relations with the positivist tradition had become more independent from the Frankfurt legacy. Subsequently, some scholars have provided a historical perspective on the positivism dispute, taking into account the philosophical and scientific development of Habermasian positions. Among these, see the essays by Komesaroff (1986), Keuth (1989), Dahms (1994), and the recent volume edited by Neck (2008) with contributions from Dahms, Engländer, Gröbl-Steinbach, Keuth, and Wohlgenuth. For full reference details of all these sources, see Corchia (2013).

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