



In Defense of a Sceptical Rationalism: A Reply to Seyla Benhabib

Author(s): Benjamin Gregg

Source: *Theory and Society*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Jan., 1987), pp. 159-163

Published by: [Springer](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/657083>

Accessed: 06/08/2014 16:30

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Springer is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Theory and Society*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

In defense of a sceptical rationalism

A reply to Seyla Benhabib

BENJAMIN GREGG

Beijing Foreign Studies University, China

My critic claims that I assume “that any defense of the paradigm shift in critical theory from instrumental to communicative reason does ‘violence’ to the Hegelian-Marxist tradition and to early critical theory”; that I thereby evoke post-modernists like Rorty and Lyotard who accuse Critical Theory of the “terrorism of reason”; that my evaluation of Habermas’s program is “largely negative.” I disagree. My review attempts to show that her book is strongly Habermasian and that this program is marked by certain immanent problems. The difficulties I identify are hardly fatal to Habermas’s project, nor do they amount to its rejection – any more than Benhabib’s own immanent Habermas-critique does. Like her, I object not to Habermas’s project itself, but to certain of the ways he attempts to carry it out. In identifying problems, I marshal the views of Rorty and Lyotard, but also those of Habermas’s “loyal opposition,” including Thomas McCarthy, Anthony Giddens, Joel Whitebook, and Axel Honneth. Postmodernism may just be capable of holding some valid observations on the Hegelian/Marxist/Critical Theory tradition – observations whose validity is not necessarily vitiated by what may be the overall fallaciousness of the postmodernist position. Insofar as both Critical Theory and postmodernism reject foundationalism, for example, each may possess perspectives plausible to the other. The plausibility of certain postmodernist perspectives need not require Critical Theory to abandon, for example, its commitment to certain universalist ideals of theory that are rejected by postmodernism.

In the name of mature feminism, Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson recently proposed (in an unpublished manuscript) a selective appropriation of Lyotard. On the one hand, they say, feminist theory should share Lyotard’s rejection of essentialism and ahistoricism, of “metanarratives” insensitive to historical and culture diversity. (To reject theories that universalize the theorist’s own era, culture, class, and ethnic group is not

Theory and Society 16: 159–163 (1987)

© Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, Dordrecht – Printed in the Netherlands

necessarily a repudiation of, for example, a universalistic ethics.) On the other hand, feminist theory must avoid Lyotard's mistake in precluding a significant aspect of normative political theory: the critique of broad axes of stratification that cut across boundaries separating relatively discrete practices and institutions – relations of repression along lines such as gender, race, or class. This particular argument suggests how one might approach a clearly problematic position in a way more fruitful than its outright, complete rejection. And in any case, acknowledging the insightfulness of some of Rorty's or Lyotard's opinions does not make one a postmodernist – any more than acknowledging certain difficulties in Habermas's work makes one an anti-Habermasian.

Benhabib contends that my thesis – that her presentation of Kant, Hegel, Horkheimer, and Adorno tends toward a philosophy of history culminating in Habermas – is based on my confusing her method with the substantive assumptions of the very *Geschichtsphilosophie* she wants to reject. Contrary to what Benhabib says, I do indeed address the question of whether the author actually redeems her claims; paragraph twenty-one of my review makes explicit her *stated* rejection of *Geschichtsphilosophie*. Yet this question is less significant than the question of what the author *in fact* realizes. And what she realizes is a *geschichtsphilosophische* perspective: how can Habermas's paradigm shift *not* but appear as the immanent telos of a tradition from Hegel to Adorno when that tradition is presented as being unable to realize its goals of freedom, autonomy, justice, and happiness primarily for one reason: its adherence to the very “subject philosophy” that is overcome for the first time by Habermas's communicative theory?

In her response, Benhabib does not address herself to any of the specific arguments or examples I use in my review to substantiate my thesis about her orientation. Instead, she simply reiterates the claim made in her book: that she rejects *Geschichtsphilosophie*. But an author's stated intentions do not of themselves prove that the author's actual work in fact coincides with those intentions, and on my reading of *Norm, Critique and Utopia*, Benhabib sometimes tends to be a *Geschichtsphilosoph* despite herself. To substantiate this claim I would simply refer to the specific arguments and examples of my review – until such time as their falsity is demonstrated or persuasive counter-arguments are offered.

Benhabib also claims that I “cannot distinguish between [my] . . . evaluation of the Habermasian program and [her] own analysis of the paradigm shift in critical theory.” The basis for the claim is that I do not

mention the concepts, central to her book, of “norm” (which she also terms the “politics of fulfillment”) and “utopia” (what she also calls the “politics of transfiguration”). In fact, I explicitly thematize this dualism in several paragraphs: in the sixth (the tension in the early Marx between fulfilling the achievements of bourgeois revolutions and the transfiguration of those achievements in new modes of association); the seventh (Hegel’s transfigurative ideal of freedom prevents him from fulfilling the gains of modernity); the eighth (a critical social theory must incorporate an explanatory-diagnostic perspective on social crisis – the standpoint of “fulfillment” – as well as an anticipatory-utopian one – the standpoint of “transfiguration”); the seventeenth (the schism in normative philosophy since Hobbes between a legalistic-juridical (“norm”) and a democratic-participatory (“utopia”) ethos is almost but not quite subverted by Habermas); the eighteenth (the categorial inadequacy of Habermas’s formalist, cognitive model to accommodate a “politics of transfiguration”); and the twentieth (Benhabib’s own argument for the necessary complementarity of the legalistic-juridical and democratic-participatory perspectives). About one-fifth of my review is devoted to discussing the very dualism Benhabib says I ignore. True, I do not use the word “norm” – but rather Benhabib’s own synonyms of “politics of fulfillment,” “legalistic-juridical ethos,” or “explanatory-diagnostic perspective;” nor do I employ the word “utopia” – but rather her own synonyms of “politics of transfiguration,” “democratic-participatory ethos,” or “emancipatory-utopian perspective.” In paragraph nineteen I cast my own characterization of the utopian aspirations of older Critical Theory in terms of this very dualism: the aspirations of happiness (a “politics of utopian transformation”) *through* Enlightenment (a “politics of norm fulfillment”), and of revolution (“utopian transformation”) *via* reason (“norm fulfillment”).

Benhabib further contends that “Because [I misjudge] the extent to which [she wants] to save the utopian intentions of early critical theory and to criticize Habermas in their light, [I] also [misevaluate] interpretations of new social movements.” First, I do not see the causal, logical, or other connection that Benhabib evidently sees between my critique of what she says about early Critical Theory, and my critique of what she says about the new social movements. Second, my review does not judge – hence can hardly misjudge – Benhabib’s desire to save the utopian intentions of early Critical Theory. On the contrary, in paragraph nineteen I state that Habermas disregards “the utopian aspirations of older Critical Theory.” On this particular point, my critique of Habermas does not differ from Benhabib’s own. Third, insofar as she argues

for the necessary complementarity of a “politics of fulfillment” and a “politics of transformation” – of community qua rights and entitlement *and* qua needs and solidarity (*Critique, Norm, and Utopia*, 342); insofar as she criticizes Habermas’s communicative ethics for not quite realizing this complementarity (*ibid.*); insofar as she sees that new social movements as “on the one hand [fighting] to extend the universalist promise of . . . justice and entitlements – and on the other [seeking] to combine the logic of justice with that of friendship” (*ibid.*, 352) – Benhabib views the new social movements as concretely embodying the unification of “norm” and “utopia.” She describes this nexus as “the moment of communicative utopia” (*ibid.*) “beyond the philosophy of the subject” (343). The new social movements are the *only* empirical instance of this nexus she cites; does she mean that no other significant instances exist? If these movements *embody* or *realize* this nexus, are they not then its *carrier*? And, given that they provide Benhabib’s sole example, are they not its *sole* carrier? This reading of Benhabib’s argument directly contradicts both her opposition to any notion of a subject of history, and her account of the new social movements’ self-understanding: that their particularity does not represent universality, that they do not speak in the name of the social totality, that they do not occupy any privileged historical position. To this extent, Benhabib would seem to be implying in part what she claims to reject.

Be that as it may, I suspect in any case that she somewhat overestimates both the social and historical significance of the new social movements, and the extent to which they embody the “communicative utopia” she envisages. The 1980s are conservative, if not reactionary times, in the United States as in Western Europe, and unfortunately but not surprisingly the new social movements have been greatly eroded in recent years. One thinks for example of the tremendous vitiation of the international peace movement following the stationing of Pershing II and Cruise Missiles in Europe since November 1983; of the profound self-doubts and loss of orientation felt by the National Organization of Women on its twentieth anniversary in 1986; of the failure of the Greens movement to establish itself as a significant national political force anywhere outside of West Germany. Benhabib is absolutely right: current Critical Theory must strengthen moments of situated and contextual critique against transcendental flights from the concrete; but it must *also* strengthen such critique against a utopian misapprehension of contemporary social reality, against allowing emancipatory hopes for transforming the status quo to overwhelm hard, critical acuity in understanding it.

But there is a more fundamental issue at stake here. Habermas, like Marx before him, is profoundly motivated by Hegel's *Versöhnungsphilosophie*, his metaphysics of reconciliation. Yet historical experience since the Enlightenment (which reanimated the original, Greek notion of a reconciling *logos*) would urge that this heroic thrust of the Hegelian legacy be tempered by the more sober, ambivalent stance of, say, Max Weber – and Weber's philosophical antecedents in Kantian *Entzweiungsphilosophie*, with its recognition of fundamental, inescapable epistemic and normative irreconcilabilities in human experience.

Critique, Norm, and Utopia is also guided by the former model of Promethean utopian energies whose emancipatory promise will be redeemed at best only very partially. The ideals and goals of such a model are inherently valid, and for that reason should be ever sought, *malgré tout*, despite the often subtle and increasingly sublime forms of social injustice and repression that preoccupy thinkers like Adorno and Foucault to the point of social-scientific and political resignation, or to the point of radically one-sided visions of a totalitarian society. Unlike Adorno or Foucault, Habermas renders critical social theory productive again precisely by reintroducing a distinctly inspiring moment into the theoretical equation. Adorno views contemporary society within the dualism of organization and individual – whereby the individual, having lost its ego-capacities, no longer provides any alternative to the repressive order. Foucault sees society within the dualism of power-apparatus and human body, whereby neither pole can be a source of human dignity, justice, or truth. But Habermas's dualism of system and lifeworld retains, in the latter pole, a *positive* conception of rationality informed by a deeply rooted emancipatory vision. Yet there is a danger here of an obfuscating, while almost romantic faith in the Ought, a faith insufficiently tempered by a dismayed and disenchanting appreciation of the Is. Such an appreciation need not occlude the difference between “having grounds for fear” and “misusing fear”; the strongest opponents of anti-humanism do not construct negative utopias, do not live from fear. One does *not* betray the ideals of the historical Enlightenment, of the cultural legacy of Western rationalism, of the “project of modernity,” by assuming a cautious and sceptical attitude toward the possibility of the genuine realization of these ideals. Contemporary critics must continue and redouble their efforts to render obsolete the well-known observation of a nineteenth-century critic: “Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.”