

# Truth and Habermas' Paradigm of a Critical Social Science

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I  
At the end of his book on the logic of the social sciences Habermas states that in a society characterized by 'domination' and 'repression', i.e. in society as we know it today, critical sociology should be limited to a functionalism in which full attention is paid to the non-normative conditions of social action. In this functionalistic framework tradition should be understood in its relation to societal labour, and political domination and social action should be analysed from the point of view of both their 'objective' and 'subjective' significance. Our analytical categories should therefore be related to the categories in terms of which the acting individuals interpret their own action. This kind of functionalism does not aim at general theories like those striven for in the empirical sciences, but at general interpretations of the kind we encounter in psycho-analysis (4, p. 193).

Habermas' reference to psycho-analysis here is not merely fortuitous. On the contrary. He regards the clinical procedures of psycho-analysis as clear examples of that 'emancipatory self-reflection' and 'explanatory understanding' he considers to be the methods most suitable for a 'critical' social science. Since in psycho-analysis these procedures are applied in a science which, according to Habermas, can boast of valid results, psycho-analysis is the paradigm science for 'critical' social science.

It is, however, precisely, this matter of validity which constitutes the Achilles' heel in Habermas' line of reasoning. When he remarks that in psycho-analysis hermeneutics is related to achievements the strictly scientific character of which seemed thus far to be the prerogative of the natural sciences, the innocent reader may rightly wonder what, exactly, Habermas is talking about (6, p. 262-263). And in that whole erudite, and sometimes subtle, treatise entitled *Erkenntnis und Interesse* he will not find a satisfactory answer to this question.

Popper has summarized the case against psycho-analysis in the following observation:

'Clinical observations, like all other observations, are *interpretations in the light of theories* . . . and for this reason alone they are apt to seem to support those theories in the light of which they were interpreted. But real support can be obtained only from observations undertaken as tests (by 'attempted refutations'); and for this purpose *criteria of refutation* have to be laid down beforehand: it must be agreed which observable situations, if actually observed, mean that the theory is refuted. But what kind of responses would refute to the satisfaction of the analyst not merely a particular analytic diagnosis but psycho-analysis itself? And have such criteria ever been discussed or agreed upon by analysts?' (13, p. 38 n.3)

To this kind of objection Habermas does not possess any convincing rejoinder. He claims that psycho-analytical interpretations find their confirmation in an 'act of memory' by the patient. The patient recognizes some suppressed memory in the tale of the analyst and is induced to face this unflinchingly. However, when the patient refuses to recognize himself in an interpretation constructed by the analyst, this does not necessarily imply that the interpretation is wrong. It is quite possible that the patient's resistance is so strong that he cannot face this particular truth about himself, as Habermas has also admitted. On the other hand, the acceptance of an interpretation does not say much about its status either. This may be due more to the 'helpful dreams' of the patient (as Freud pointed out) rather than its accuracy. As Ernest Nagel has remarked: 'There is at any rate some ground for the suspicion that the interpretations are frequently imposed on data which are themselves manufactured by the psycho-analytic method' (12, p. 52). However, as Münch points out, a theory *can* be tested in the procedures of psycho-analysis but, unfortunately, it is not a psycho-analytic theory. It is a theory which merely states that if a patient is offered a certain interpretation in a certain form, he will accept it (11, p. 122ff).

## II

Taking these objections into account and noting, with astonishment, Habermas' vast confidence in the scientific character of the psycho-analytical method, one is inclined to wonder whether the right criteria are being applied here. Is it fair to apply concepts of 'science' and of 'truth' which Habermas himself would reject as showing some undue bias towards 'neo-positivistic' philosophies of science? It is considerations such as these which lead one to pay more attention to Habermas' views on these matters. What theory of truth does *he* entertain? And how is it related to his convictions about the scientific and paradigmatic character of psycho-analysis?

Not very long ago Habermas developed a consensus theory of truth in which

his notion of the 'ideal speech situation' played a preponderant role. However, he has not made things altogether easy for himself on this point. In a really consistent theory of this kind the criterion for truth is the last consensus achieved. But Habermas is not satisfied with this. He wants somehow to distinguish between a 'true' and a 'false' consensus, and that is why in Habermas' theory truth remains dependent on a criterion other than consensus. 'The conditions', he says, 'under which a consensus can pass as real or reasonable or, at any case, truth-guaranteeing, cannot be made dependent again on a consensus'. (10, p. 240).

We call a proposition true, says Habermas, when its predicate belongs to the object mentioned. For a consensus theory of truth this implies that a statement can be called true when anybody who engages in conversation with the speaker would attribute the same predicate to the same object. 'Anybody' means all those people with whom the speaker would strike up a conversation if his life's history could coincide with the history of humanity as such. As this can clearly not be the case for any speaker at all. Habermas tries to delimit his definition of truth with the help of the concept of 'competence'. The more competent those few people are who are in consensus with the speaker, the less inclined others will be to withhold their agreement. Hence the question arises how to distinguish between competent and incompetent conversation partners.

Who then are competent? Competent are those who are 'judicious' (*vernünftig*). But who are 'judicious'? The answer is: all those who are capable of observation and asking questions? That is: all those who are not merely able to indicate the methods for observation etc. but who can really maintain these methods, who will really apply them. (9, p. 129-130)

Habermas now translates 'judiciousness' into 'veracity'. The 'judiciousness' (*Vernünftigkeit*) of a speaker can be judged on the basis of the 'veracity' of his statements. When is a speaker 'veracious'? When he really has the intentions which he has made known in the performance of the 'speech act' . . . when he wants, for example, to stick to a promise he has made, or defend a statement he has made, or when he is serious and in good faith in giving a warning. In short, the 'veracious' speaker is prepared to take the implications of his speech act seriously (9, p. 132). We can formulate the following proposition regarding this kind of speaker: 'S shows his real disposition in the performance of speech act y'.

Habermas himself points out, however, that thus far we have been merely following a circle: 'We cannot decide the question concerning the veracity of utterances by pointing to the truth of propositions, if, before that, the question concerning the truth of propositions made us point to the veracity of utterances' (9, p. 132). We saw above that, for Habermas, taking the im-

plications of one's 'speech act' seriously constituted the criterion for 'veracity'. In accordance with this Habermas now translates 'veracity' into the 'correctness' ('Richtigkeit') of action. And whether or not action is correct is decided by the answer to the question whether or not the appropriate rules for that action have been followed. We will leave aside the fallacious line of reasoning by which Habermas tries to establish that we are dealing here with a 'practical' question, hence with the distinction between what is and what ought to be. Beckermann has dealt effectively with this argument (cp. 1). What is important here is that, once again, Habermas is forced to acknowledge that he has still not broken through his circles. The answer to the question whether somebody is following a rule, and the reciprocal question – asked by the subject of investigation – whether the investigator can take over the role of this subject, is, according to Habermas, in the last analysis dependent on the consensus between both these subjects (9, p. 134). I will not comment on the somewhat idiosyncratic view of sociology (betraying, *inter alia*, the influence of Winch) implied in this statement. I just want to draw attention to the fact that we still have not found here the consensus-independent criterion to distinguish between a 'true' and a 'false' consensus.

### III

In order to escape from these difficulties Habermas now tries to situate his criterion of truth in the structural sphere of an 'ideal speech situation', rather than in a personal sphere. This ideal speech situation is characterized in terms of the possibilities it provides for those engaged in a discourse to perform certain 'speech acts'. What then are speech acts? Habermas follows Searle on this point and though Searle's definition does not excell in clarity, it is better than that of Habermas:

'... speaking a language in performing speech acts, acts such as making statements, giving commands, asking questions, making promises and so on ... the unit of linguistic communication is not, as has generally been supposed, the symbol, word or sentence, but rather the production or issuance of the symbol or word or sentence in the performance of the speech act. To take the token as a message is to take it as produced or issued token. More precisely, the production or issuance of a sentence token under certain conditions is a speech act and speech acts are the basic or minimal units of linguistic communication'. (quoted in 9, p. 102 n.3; cp. also 12, p.7)

If we keep in mind that the speech act, for Habermas, is not only the unit of linguistic communication but something very near to the basic unit for sociological investigation, his opinions on these matters become somewhat clearer. In performing the speech act, says Habermas, that deed is done which is indicated in the 'performative' expression used in the utterance. Following

Austin Habermas distinguishes two levels in these utterances: the level of 'saying something' versus that of 'doing something' ('locutionary level' versus 'illocutionary level'). He has also talked of 'linguistic' versus 'institutional significance' (7, p. 367 and 9, p. 103). Utterances have, in addition to the significance of their purely propositional part, a significance which is related to the speech situation as such. They have an illocutionary force'. Performative utterances used in 'speech acts' constitute the linguistic representation of that 'illocutionary force', that is to say, of the 'universal pragmatic force of 'utterances':

'Expressions of this kind retain no given pragmatic feature of contingent speech situations; they explain the meaning of certain idealized features of speech situations in general which the speaker must master if his competence is to be adequate for participating at all in situations of potential speech. A theory of communicative competence can thus be developed in terms of universal pragmatics'. (7, p. 367)

Habermas believes it is possible to present a pragmatics of this kind, orientated to the question how communication in ordinary language is possible, with the help of five classes of 'dialogue-constitutive universals', that establish in the first place the form of intersubjectivity between any competent speakers capable of mutual understanding . . . (they) generate and describe the form of intersubjectivity which makes mutuality of understanding possible' (7, p. 369).

Habermas also thinks that his concept of the ideal speech situation can be adequately described in terms of these classes and a further subdivision of one of them (the 'performatives'). I will indicate these classes below but will first say here something more about Habermas' ideal speech situation and his closely related concept of 'communicative competence'.

## IV

What is communicative competence? Habermas develops his ideas about this in a critical comment on Chomsky's concept of 'linguistic competence'. Chomsky created this concept to indicate the remarkable discrepancy between one's knowledge of a language and his experience in speaking it. A language consists of only a limited number of elements. Yet, anyone who has a command of that language can produce and understand an unlimited number of sentences and judge whether a certain sequence of expressions has been produced in accordance with the rules. Hence the competent speaker knows more than he can have learned via the contact with his linguistic environment. This is especially conspicuous in the learning of a language by children. Thus, for Chomsky, linguistic competence means the command of an abstract sys-

tem of rules, based on an inborn linguistic apparatus. Habermas calls Chomsky's model 'monological' since it ascribes intersubjectivity of meaning to the fact that the 'sender' and 'receiver' in a communication process have both been programmed beforehand, as separate entities. Against this Habermas calls his model of 'communicative competence' 'dialogical', the main idea being that the application of 'linguistic competence' must be based on a 'structure of intersubjectivity':

'This structure is generated neither by the monologically mastered system of linguistic rules, nor by the extra-linguistic conditions of its performance. On the contrary, in order to participate in normal discourse the speaker must have at his disposal, in addition to his linguistic competence, basic qualifications of speech and symbolic interaction (role-behaviour), which we may call *communicative competence*. Thus communicative competence means the mastery of an ideal speech situation'. (7, p. 367)

For Habermas 'communicative competence' is related in the same way to the 'ideal speech situation' as 'linguistic competence' is to the abstract system of linguistic rules (7, p. 369). Hence we can conclude here that real communication will not be possible if those engaged in conversation do not have some relation to the 'ideal speech situation', which is itself unreal. According to Habermas this is indeed the case. He characterizes this relation to the ideal speech situation by the term 'anticipation'. I will return again to this below.

## V

Habermas describes the ideal speech situation in terms of the classification and sub-classification of the 'dialogue-constitutive' universals. The 'pragmatically' most important part of the speech acts, the 'performative sentences', constitute one of the five classes of these universals. Habermas subdivides this class into (a) 'communicatives' — which express the significance of utterances as utterances e.g. to say, to speak, to ask, to answer, to contradict etc.; (b) 'constatives', which express the significance of the cognitive use of propositions, e.g. to assert, to describe, to explain, to inform, to tell etc.; (c) 'representatives' — which indicate the significance of expressing the intentions, disposition etc. of the speaker, e.g. to reveal, to disclose, to hide, to abandon, to cover up, etc.; (d) 'regulatives' which indicate the significance of the relation of the speaker to rules which can be followed or infringed, e.g. to order, to demand, to forbid, to promise, to confirm etc.

In ordering the speech acts as communicatives, constatives, representatives and regulatives, says Habermas, it appears 'that we have here exactly the right means for the construction of the ideal speech situation' (2, p. 122). Only that speech situation is ideal in which communication is not merely undisturbed



by influences from outside, but also free from compulsion generated by the structure of the communication itself. What are then the specific conditions for this ideal situation in terms of the subdivision of universals referred to above? Firstly, all the participants in a discourse should have an equal chance to use 'communicatives', 'constatives' and that part of the 'regulatives' relevant for issuing warnings and making recommendations. If the chances to give or make interpretations, assertions, explanations and justifications are equally distributed then the condition has been created for the submission of each 'pre-judice' to criticism (9, p. 137 and 10, p. 255 ff.). Secondly, only those speakers should be admitted to the discourse who have, as actors, equal chances to use 'representatives', that is to say to express intentions, feelings and dispositions. Thirdly, the admission to the discourse should be limited to those who have, as actors equal chances to use 'regulatives', that is to say to order or to resist, to allow or to forbid, to promise and be promised and to give or ask account of things:

'Then only the full reciprocity of expectations concerning behaviour . . . guarantees that the formally equal distribution of chances to start and continue a speech, can be factually used to suspend the compulsion of reality and to enter into an area of communication which is divorced and freed from experience and action'. (10, p. 256)

## VI

The distinction between action and that form of communication which constitutes a (free) discourse is quite fundamental to Habermas' theory of truth, but has only fairly recently been introduced by him. In the new epilogue (1973) of *Erkenntnis und Interesse* he admits that, in this book, he has not made a sufficient distinction between problems of 'object-formation' on the one hand and problems of validity on the other. In order to be able to do just this he has elaborated (inter alia in his recent treatise 'Wahrheitstheorien') on the distinction between 'action' and 'discourse'.

To Habermas 'action' constitutes an 'area of communication' in which we tacitly postulate and accept the claims to validity implied in assertions in order to exchange the information relevant to action. The discourse, however, constitutes a form of communication which is characterized by argument, the theme of which is constituted by claims to validity which have become problematical. Here there is no exchange of information but of arguments.

Now, in the ideal speech situation it should not only be possible to move freely from 'action' to 'discourse', but also between the different levels of discourse. What does this demand mean? It should be possible to pose the question whether the language in which a certain argument is couched fits

the 'object area' on which the argument centres. Habermas is, however, fairly vague about the way in which this should be done. A direct approach is not possible. 'This direct approach would only be possible for a metaphysical spirit which is not spirit of our spirit' (10, p. 250). What, then, is possible for the non-metaphysical spirit? According to Habermas the formal properties of a discourse should be such that its level can always be changed. It should be possible in this way to recognize that the language of argument is inappropriate and should be revised. 'We are dealing here . . . with a switching up and down between the concept and the thing' (8, p. 250). Habermas distinguishes four different steps in this whole process of 'revision' and 'radicalization' of the discourse. As far as the 'theoretical' discourse is concerned, this process results in an answer to the question what knowledge we can and should accept as knowledge, hence in a normative concept of knowledge. As far as the 'practical' discourse is concerned, its result consists of an answer to the question which knowledge we should want to have (10, p. 252-255).

It remains incomprehensible how Habermas can, within the context of his other convictions, talk about the 'fitness' of conceptual systems at all. He cannot appeal to observational and experimental experience in order to compare conceptual systems with the things for which they stand. In one of his earlier essays he already stated explicitly that all reality is *interpreted* reality and denied emphatically the epistemological independence of facts from theories (7, p. 241). In his recent essay 'Wahrheitstheorien' Habermas still defends the same point of view. The data which serve to confirm or to refute, he says there, have been selected to such an extent by the chosen language (of discourse) that 'experience' cannot constitute an independent 'Instanz der Überprüfung' (10, p. 247). But if the data are so totally defined by the chosen conceptual system, it remains unclear how one can measure the 'fitness' of this system by comparing it with things, how one can appeal to 'experiences with an external, objectivated reality . . .' (9, p. 250). Furthermore, it is not easily understood how one can describe the role of 'interests' in the whole process of the acquisition of knowledge the way Habermas does, and at one and the same time leave room for the supposition that a chosen language system show a lack of 'fitness'. If it is true that the role interests is so fundamental that the norms for knowledge issuing from them are always acknowledged before any discussion is possible, then the conceptual systems based on these interests simply cannot show a lack of fit (cp. 3, p. 106 and 2, p. 260-262).



## VII

Hence it remains unclear what kind of discourse should be conducted in the ideal speech situation, at any case as far as this demand for the possibility of 'changing the levels' of discourse is concerned. It is equally unclear how Habermas can think that his concept of the ideal speech situation provides an answer to the question which consensus-independent criterion can serve to distinguish between a 'true' and a 'false' consensus. The true answer to the question whether or not the situation in which a discourse is conducted is characterized by the properties of the ideal speech situation depends, in a consensus theory of truth, on a consensus. This argument cannot be dismissed by referring, as Habermas does, to the ideal speech situation as 'counterfactual' and talking, instead, of an 'anticipation' of this situation as being a critical norm for each achieved consensus (cp. 2, p. 263-264). I will leave aside the question whether we really in each discourse, 'anticipate' the ideal speech situations as Habermas argues. It is merely my concern here to point out that this 'anticipation' cannot provide the consensus-independent criterion for which Habermas is looking. Somehow he must be convinced of this himself, because he recommends a different 'methodological guideline' to get out of the difficulties we encounter here. This 'guideline' is provided by psycho-analytical discourse (10, p. 259).

## VIII

So here Habermas' argument, concerning the question posed at the beginning of this article, has turned full circle. It is not his theory of truth which can help us out of the difficulties we encounter in his opinions on the scientific character of therapeutical discourse. No it is exactly this discourse which provides the way out when Habermas' theory of truth leads us into a blind alley.

The remarkable thing is now that both Habermas' painstaking elaboration of the concept of the ideal speech situation and his distinction between action and discourse turn out to be largely irrelevant as far as this particular form of discourse is concerned. Far from acknowledging this as a deficiency in terms of his own 'system' Habermas blandly turns it into a virtue inherent in this remarkable form of discourse. In order to make this clear I should elaborate on the distinction he makes between different claims to validity. His basic distinction here is between 'discursively redeemable' and 'discursively irredeemable' claims to validity, of which he mentions the following: (1) the 'comprehensibility' of a statement, (2) the 'truth' of its propositional part (3) the 'rightness' of its performative part and (4) the 'veracity' of the speaking subject. According to Habermas of these claims only (2) and (3) are 'discur-

sively redeemable' (10, p. 220ff). However, this does not seem to be the case with the psycho-analytical form of discourse in which a claim to truth and a claim to veracity can be redeemed simultaneously. Furthermore, this kind of discourse is not freed from the compulsion of action and experience as the 'normal' discourse is, but 'entwined', in a remarkable way, with the 'action-experience system' (10, p. 260). A true interpretation enables the patient, who has thus far deceived himself and others, to arrive at veracity in his own utterances.

The therapeutical discourse has, allegedly, another remarkable property. It has emancipatory power, thought it does not start from an ideal speech situation. 'The effective equality of chances in the fulfillment of dialogue roles . . . has to be constructed between the unequally equipped conversational partners' (10, p. 260). Thus, in the therapeutic discourse a true consensus is not achieved because it takes place in an ideal speech situation. Habermas reverses this sequence. The ideal speech situation is achieved because therapist and patient reach, somehow, a consensus (10, p. 260). Hence, the results of the therapeutical discourse are not only untestable for others, apparently they have to be taken on faith by the patient as well. His possibilities for criticism only arise when the 'ideal speech situation' (together with his own 'veracity') has been brought about after consensus has been reached. In other words: when the patient no longer feels the need to criticize anymore.

In fact Habermas is still clinging here to a conviction which he already voiced in his inaugural oration and from which all the hostile and not-so-hostile criticism to which his views have since been subjected does not seem to have deterred him:

'It is not fortuitous that the critical suspension of judgement appropriate for the standards of all other processes of knowledge does not apply in the case of the standards of self-reflection. In this case they are certain. The concern with emancipation from quasi-natural authority is not just a vague idea that hovers before one's eyes: it can be *a priori* comprehended. What raises us above nature is indeed the only fact of which, due to its very nature, we *can* have knowledge: namely, language. The idea of autonomy (Mündigkeit) is given to us with the structure of language. With the very first sentence the intention of a common and uncompelled consensus is unequivocally stated'. (8, p. 50)

We can evaluate this statement only as a 'manoeuvre', as one of Habermas' most trenchant critics, Michael Theunissen, once said (15, p. 38). Indeed. Perhaps one is not being unduly harsh when one extends the distrust, implicit in Theunissen's words, to Habermas' theory of truth as well.

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