

Peace Through Conversation

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Peace Through Conversation

—David Martin Jones—

“WHAT WE’VE got here is a failure to communicate.” Thus the captain of prison 36 addresses the eponymous hero of Stuart Rosenberg’s 1967 movie *Cool Hand Luke* after his failed attempt to escape from the prison chain gang.

Jürgen Habermas, Germany’s leading public intellectual, would endorse the prison captain’s insight but not his response (which in Luke’s case entailed more physical punishment). Indeed, Habermas’s most recent pronouncements on the globe’s current difficulties—from burgeoning inequality and environmental degradation to the Iraq War and transnational terrorism—argue that all these problems would be best addressed through a process of uncoerced communication. Rational deliberation would lead to agreement on a set of universal norms that all parties could accept and follow. Their application could be mediated through a reformed United Nations resembling a parliament of world citizens. In the words engraved above the BBC’s Broadcasting House: “Nation shall speak peace unto nation”—except that there would be no nations either, but global citizens.

Given his understanding of this pro-

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gressively evolving global cosmopolitanism, Habermas regards the events of September 11 (although “monstrous”) as the consequence of “the spiral of violence [that] begins as a spiral of distorted communication.”¹ He further contends that the “hegemonic” and “unilateral” intervention of the United States and its coalition partners in Iraq is a cause of further miscommunication and escalating global violence. How did he come to such an understanding of national and international politics? And why are his numerous works regarded with reverence not only among left-leaning social scientists from Aberystwyth to Zurich, but also by the German foreign minister and the new bureaucratic class that manages European integration?

To explore this strange marriage between a pedantic German academic idealism and the Eurocratic elite’s increasing preoccupation with “an emerging global public sphere [and] a new universalist . . . order” of world citizens, let us trace the intellectual evolution of Europe’s most “passionate public intellectual.”²

¹In Giovanna Borodori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 19.

²Eduardo Mendieta, “America and the World”, www.logosjournal.com. See also Habermas, *A Berlin Republic: Writings on Germany* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1998), p. vii.

The Life and Times of a Frankfurter

JÜRGEN HABERMAS was born in 1929 in a small town in Germany. Growing up in the Third Reich left the young Jürgen with an enduring suspicion of the nation-state, the German disposition to authoritarianism, and conservative thought in general. The events of his adolescence added an ambivalent respect for the United States and its imposition upon the infant West German republic in 1945 of a constitution guaranteeing democratic rights. These influences molded his subsequent political thought, which projects onto a universal canvas his profound anxiety about Germany and its modern fate. These anxieties are mixed with often bitter reflections upon the evolution of German philosophy and its shift from 18th-century Enlightenment rationalism to an irrationalism whose exponents in the 1930s, like Martin Heidegger and Carl Schmitt, gave intellectual credibility to the Third Reich. In order to negate this past and its possible influence on the future, Habermas seeks to revive in Germany, Europe and ultimately the world the more progressive aspects of the German Enlightenment, from Kant through Marx to Habermas himself. Habermas sees his mission—and that of the cosmopolitan intellectual everywhere—as being to inculcate a rational spirit of criticism that endorses constitutionalism and radical democracy but exposes the injustices of capitalism, globalization and the market. He considers the norms that emerge from this deliberative procedure the basis for a moral and just world society.

Educated at Göttingen and Bonn universities, Habermas came to prominence in the mid-1950s as the leading second-generation exponent of the Marxist-flavored Frankfurt school of critical theory. Unlike the first generation Frankfurters, who included Herbert Marcuse and Theodor Adorno, and unlike a later gener-

ation of French post-structuralist thinkers, whose work rejected science and reason as carriers of liberation, Habermas remained committed to what he terms “the unfinished project of modernity.”

Because modernity is unfinished, Habermas can endorse those of its features compatible with critical theory, while exposing those that obstruct progress to a more just state of affairs. He agrees, for instance, with Kant’s argument that modernity entails release from the self-incurred tutelage of tradition and its progressive replacement by the rule of reason. Kant thought that history revealed a developmental process from self-determining nation-states to universal perpetual peace between equal ethical commonwealths regulated internally and externally by law. Habermas endorses this teleology. But he seeks to demonstrate its emergence in terms of communication, rather than through “an untenable philosophy of history.”³

As Habermas tells it, the Enlightenment opened a space for criticism to flourish free from political intimidation. This public sphere’s emergence—but also its potential for manipulation by the developing administrative power of the modern state—forms the subject of his dissertation upon *The Limitations of the Public Sphere* (1962). Here and in his subsequent work, Habermas shifts ambiguously between a positive assessment of the liberal project that treats government as a human contrivance for the satisfaction of human wants, and a negative view of “strategic” or instrumental reason that orchestrates the alienating administrative organization of the modern state. Habermas shares with the early Marx the view that while critical reason made the public sphere possible, capitalism and its related sub-systems deformed that sphere and the “lifeworld” of the

³*The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 2 (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), p. 375.

family and its networks of spontaneous association.

Rather than trace this crisis of modernity, as Marx had done, to the capitalist mode of production itself, the Frankfurt school located it in the cultural sphere. The Left, in other words, got out of the structure industry and invested in culture. Crises now occur when radical groups in the public sphere reject the ideological domination of the system, expose its contradictions, and reassert the lifeworld, or its “methodological objectification” society.⁴ Hence, the central problem of the modern condition is one of legitimation (or how the state accounts for its burgeoning administrative power), rather than one of economic distribution.

Positive and Negative Reason

SO HABERMAS's philosophy, like the modern condition he exposes, faces both ways: towards the system and its mechanisms of dominance and distortion; and towards the *possibility* of a moral political order. He reveals the tensions that inhere in modernity's two faces while abandoning neither reason nor its promise of emancipation. Still, reason presents something of a difficulty for Habermas. For it is both responsible for the deformations of capitalism *and* indispensable to the public sphere and the pursuit of universal truth and justice. He resolves this contradiction by distinguishing between two forms of reason. A flawed instrumental reason, of a means-ends variety, supports capitalism and its administrative systems, while a morally positive, communicative reason of a “quasi-transcendental” character thrives in an uncontaminated public sphere and offers the promise of universal liberation.

Elaborating the distinctive *modus operandi* of what we might term negative and positive reason and their socio-political consequences becomes, therefore, the central task of the Habermasian project.

In order to establish this, Habermas calls upon a vast array of scholarship that renders his later works both formidable and obscure or, more precisely, formidably obscure. His recipe begins with ideas from Kant and Marx as well as the German and Continental schools of hermeneutic philosophy, throws in ingredients from the American pragmatism of Charles Peirce and Herbert Mead, spices them with a touch of psychoanalysis, adds a pinch of the sociology of Max Weber, Emil Durkheim and Talcott Parsons—and finally serves up an academically fashionable but ultimately indigestible stew of discourse ethics.

This *mélange* comes together in his major two-volume work, *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1981). Here Habermas reveals the web of language and media that makes social action possible and the manner in which it both enables and distorts communication in the public sphere. The root of all contemporary problems, he believes, lies in the distorted communication that modern technology, through the promotion of universal education and the mass media, paradoxically makes possible. True social emancipation, therefore, lies not in ownership of the means of production, but in a public sphere where “no force but that of the better argument is exercised.”⁵ Unmasking the fault lines between “system” and “lifeworld”, the theory envisages a new politics where post-material protest movements would draw sustenance from the lifeworld to enhance race, gender and environmental awareness.

Habermas develops this insight further in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (1983). This requires him first to expose the fallacy that the act of reasoning requires the conscious activity of a knowing subject. Not

⁴Ibid.

⁵*Legitimation Crisis* (London: Heinemann, 1976), p. 108.

so. Meaning and, by extension, true reason and morality, only emerge through a pragmatic and inter-subjective process. This insight was crucial for Habermas's evolving understanding of discourse ethics. As he somewhat ponderously explains: "in communicative action the creative moment of the linguistic constitution of the world forms *one syndrome* with the cognitive-instrumental, moral-practical and expressive moments of the intramundane linguistic functions of representation, interpersonal relation and subjective expression."⁶ More precisely: You and I communicate inter-subjectively, therefore I am.

On this "syndrome", Habermas erects a model of uncoerced communication. Its enlightened application would supposedly transform bourgeois democracy into a positive rational, radical, deliberative alternative to itself, while simultaneously reshaping the instrumental practice of law into a normative procedure that would ultimately bring about a just cosmopolitan order of global citizens. How does mere conversation acquire such remarkable political properties?

Just Cosmopolites Talking

BY ENTERING a conversation, Habermas claims, we make a number of assumptions about ourselves, our interlocutors and the world. We assume a common practice of reason and morality. Habermas contends that "every person who accepts the universal and necessary communicative propositions of argumentative speech and who knows what it means to justify a norm of action . . . presupposes as valid the principle of universalization."⁷ Moreover, every norm arrived at argumentatively ideally fulfills the condition that "all affected can accept the consequences and side-effects its general observance can be anticipated to have for the satisfaction of everyone's interests." In

other words, there is no need to establish some ideal or goal beyond discourse. If you understand properly what you are doing in talking and arguing, you will eventually discover a normative structure. Discourse generates norms and "only those norms can claim to be valid that meet (or could meet) with all affected in their capacity as participants in a practical discourse."⁸

Such a conversational model has evident practical and moral consequences.

[U]nder the pragmatic presuppositions of an inclusive and non-coercive rational discourse among free and equal participants, everyone is required to take the perspective of everyone else, and thus project herself into the understanding of self and world of all others; from this interlocking of perspectives there emerges an ideally extended we-perspective from which all can test in common whether they wish to make a controversial norm the basis of their shared practice.⁹

A great deal follows from this. By each person placing "herself" in the position of every other person, we collectively arrive at universal norms that transcend our baser interests and their instrumental reasoning. Following our better norms, rather than self-interested calculation, we arrive at a discursive version of the General Will. In this procedure, good norms triumph by the "unforced force of the better argument."¹⁰ Bad arguments, bad practice and regressive aspects of our heritage are exposed. And a just world

⁶*The Philosophic Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1987), p. 339.

⁷*Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1990), p. 86.

⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 65–66.

⁹"Reconciliation through the Public Use of Reason", *Journal of Philosophy* (March 1995), pp. 117–18.

¹⁰*Between Fact and Norms* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), p. 306.

order discursively arises. Normative consensus carries with it the distinct aroma of Rousseau's positive view of freedom.

Habermas inexorably draws out this aroma in his influential but little read tome, *Between Facts and Norms* (1992). Here he outlines an "architectonic" scheme in which the normative principle informing the practice of law is identical to the principle of democracy. These principles, he further alleges, emerge from the discourse principle "equiprimordially" with the principle of morality or universalization.¹¹ In other words, when our ancestors first grunted to each other, their protean and uncoerced discourse intimated law, democracy and moral freedom.

In spite, or perhaps because, of its *obscure* architectonics, discourse ethics enabled Habermas to link his normative preoccupations with the emerging moral concern in the American and British academy (and on the European and Anglospheric Left more generally) about rendering democratic processes more ethical and just. From the 1970s onwards, a number of American political and legal theorists from John Rawls and Ronald Dworkin to a host of feminist and communitarian thinkers had deliberated over the just procedures that might rectify the unjust distributions of markets and representative governments. But it was Habermas who offered an appealingly abstruse argot and a critical synthesis of Anglo-American and Continental schools of thought for renovating the democratic project in the context of a "world domestic policy."

Significantly, this interest in radicalizing the democratic project coincided with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the apparent end of ideological history. Worse still, the Soviet collapse signified the triumph of an instrumentalist reason where market-oriented democracies successfully promoted economic individualism. For radical democrats, this triumph was an occasion for desperation rather

than celebration. But it is out of desperation, as all good Habermasians know, that new progressive possibilities and academic research grants are born. Those on the campus and bureaucratic Left who might otherwise have had to re-evaluate their utopian commitment to endless redistribution and affirmative action in the wake of the collapse of socialism could instead take heart from the fact that the spread of markets and democracy inexorably led to legitimation crises on a global scale. Indeed, such crises serendipitously invited radical democrats to project their discursively achieved and universalizable norms onto a regional and global stage.

For the apparently successful democratic societies of the West were an illusion. They suffered, Habermas diagnosed, from the debilitating moral deficit brought on by the practice of instrumental reason. Only those informed by an awareness gained in uncoerced deliberation in protest groups or international non-governmental organizations were alive to this. Unmasking the rapacious egoism at the core of contemporary democratic practice could occur only if citizens did not use their

communicative liberties *like* individual liberties in the pursuit of personal interests, but rather use them as communicative liberties. Law can be preserved as legitimate only if enfranchised citizens switch from the role of private legal subjects and take the perspective of participants who are engaged in the process of reaching understanding about the rules of their life in common.¹²

Those who take this role seriously participate in social movements of a global provenance—like the Greens who resist the administrative power of the state and promote values that are inclusive of the

¹¹*Faktizität und Geltung* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1992), pp. 136–38.

¹²*Between Fact and Norms*, p. 462.

non-Western “other.” The emergence of social movements that act locally but think globally presages the emergence of a “reconfigured” political power drawing upon the resources of an increasingly globalized lifeworld.¹³

The End of the National Interest

“THERE IS no constitutional state without radical democracy”, claims Habermas.¹⁴ Yet paradoxically, radical democracy requires the withering away of the state. This is because radical democrats contend that “the social and ecological reconstruction of industrial capitalism” requires the puncturing of the illusion that such matters can be treated “from our nationally limited perspectives.” Radical democracy must ultimately transcend the nation-state and promote international legal regimes and supranational institutions as the stepping stones to a world society composed of global citizens. As the nation-state loses its world-historical significance, the norms arrived at in internationally inclusive committees like the Davos World Economic Forum will ineluctably extend across the globe.

“The hollowing out of the sovereignty of the nation-state will continue”, Habermas predicted in 1989, “and requires us to develop capacities for political action on a supranational basis.”¹⁵ On the basis of this highly questionable prediction, Habermas promotes the region, rather than the democratic nation-state, as the harbinger of a cosmopolitan legal order. Indeed, the global tensions generated by “power pragmatic” nation-states like the United States could only be overcome if

large continent-wide actors like the EU . . . and ASEAN develop into empowered actors capable of reaching transnational agreements . . . taking over responsibility for an ever more closely tied transnational network of organizations, conferences and practices.

Only with global players of this kind, that are able to form a counterbalance to the global expansion of markets running ahead of any political frame, would the UN find a base for the implementation of high-minded programs and policies.¹⁶

This high-minded task evidently became more urgent after 9/11 and finds confirmation in the events that followed. Fundamentalism has appeared on Habermas’s world-historical stage as a dialectical response to global oppression brought about by, of course, “pathological” communication. America and its allies can only respond with “the civilized barbarism of coolly planned death.”¹⁷

But desperate crises “pregnant with progressive futures” once again come to the aid of the Habermasian project. American nationalism, seeking to divide and weaken Europe during the Iraq War, only served to heighten (among more enlightened Europeans) a consciousness of their common political fate and shared identity. Consequently, a more united Europe could both “throw its weight on the scale to counterbalance the hegemonic unilateralism of the United States” and “defend and promote a cosmopolitan order on the basis of international law against competing visions.”¹⁸

To correct the global descent into a U.S.-orchestrated barbarism, intellectuals, Europeans and cosmopolites everywhere must promote a program of political transformation. Fortuitously, Europe already offered a form of “governance beyond the nation-state.” The core European states, France and Germany,

¹³Ibid., p. 374.

¹⁴*Berlin Republic*, p. 74.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 168.

¹⁶*Philosophy in a Time of Terror*, p. 40.

¹⁷Habermas and Jacques Derrida, “February 15, What Binds Europeans Together”, *Constellations* (September 2003), p. 289.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 294.

must now forcefully promote the deepening of European institutions, formulate a common foreign and security policy, and give expression to a common European will through an inclusive European constitution.

In 2003, therefore, we encountered the strange spectacle of the aging radical democrat joining forces with his erstwhile post-modernist sparring partner, Jacques Derrida, whose irrationalism he had once dismissed as the ugly twin sister to the instrumentalist reasoning of capitalism and the administrative state. They issued a joint manifesto to recommend enhanced European cooperation as the basis of “a post-national constellation.” The Europe-wide protests against the Iraq War on February 15, 2003 announced in their view the spontaneous emergence of a European public sphere and the premonitory snufflings of a common European will. Core Europe constitutes, they asserted (not wholly coherently), the basis of a common identity that is both inclusive and yet “acknowledges the other in his otherness.”

Habermas as the avid proponent of European integration obviously strikes a chord among the elites that run the managerial project of the European Union. Given that he also considers rule by committees, or “comitology”, a potential source of legitimation for a new European deliberative order, that is not altogether surprising.¹⁹ His normative approach to international relations similarly finds favor at the UN and among international lawyers, whose non-accountable power it would augment and legitimize.

Thus, despite his radical democratic posture, Habermas stands revealed as an elitist both in his style of thinking (and writing), and in the democratically deficient orders, regional and cosmopolitan, he endorses. The erstwhile democrat finds salvation in the elite, and the radical finds himself respectable at last. His work strikes any realist as utopian, but that has

only enhanced its cachet in the teaching of what passes for international relations theory in university departments across the planet. This emerging idealist orthodoxy, following Habermas, assumes that all international issues can be solved through more open communication and inclusive dialogue.

From this Olympian cosmopolitan viewpoint, U.S. hegemony represents a greater threat to international order than Al-Qaeda. Similarly, super-states and even middling European nation-states, with their unjust pursuit of national interests, violate and inhibit the norms generated through open dialogue that would otherwise establish a world domestic policy. University presses and academic journals churn out papers and books devoted to *Global Ethics for the New Century* or *Justice, Dialogue and the Cosmopolitan Project*.

From this applied Habermasian perspective, a marriage-guidance-counsel approach to foreign policy would solve all the world's problems. If Osama bin Laden, Jacques Chirac, Kofi Annan, a suitably amenable post-Kerry Democrat, a couple of mullahs, a (moderate) rabbi and the odd Swedish *sandalista* could sit around an uncoerced table, they would arrive discursively at mutually acceptable norms. Violence—itself a construct of the otiose nation-state—disappears. For all a just global governance regime requires is the odd “therapeutic” intervention and the occasional international “police” action.

Idealistic Delusion

DESPITE ITS appeal to elite fashions in bureaucracy and academia, the normative doctrine that Habermas and like-minded internationalists promote is both logically flawed and dangerously confused. Incoherence is built into the “architecton-

¹⁹“Why Europe Needs a Constitution”, *New Left Review* (September/October 2001), p. 13.

ics” of the discourse model from which all else follows. From its rationalist structure, which requires “everyone to take the perspective of everyone else”, communicative reason excludes from the outset those of a conservative disposition who might find value in history and custom. The principle of universalization dismisses tradition as “regressive” prejudice. Yet for a conservative, it is the prejudices of a particular tradition, not reason, that “renders a man’s virtue his habit and not a series of unconnected acts.” Ultimately, discourse ethics reduces “morality to a technique”, to be acquired by training in communication skills rather than an education in a tradition of behavior.²⁰

Indeed, the problem with applying the communicative model to the international order is that it assumes that law and norms emerge unproblematically from enlightened discourse between rational actors. The assumption fails to recognize that law requires authority, not truth or enlightenment, for its enactment. Some men and some governments are irrational, and in such circumstances, whether in Darfur or Baghdad, it may be better if force, rather than endless dialogue, prevails.

Moreover, even if we grant that common law and international law intimate norms we might all ultimately accept, their practical implementation in the absence of a known authority can itself lead to disagreement rather than consen-

sus. In the real world, as any episode of *Curb Your Enthusiasm* demonstrates, the application of a norm is subject to prudential interpretation among the parties who, in principle, accept it.

Above all, norms conflict. This is particularly evident in international relations, where the norms that might promote a people’s democratic right to self-determination frequently conflict with an international right to intervene to prevent genocide. Here, casuistry rather than consensus prevails, even among those on the side of a world domestic society. Thus, we find Habermas defending the NATO intervention in Kosovo in 1999 to prevent genocide and promote democracy but condemning the U.S.-led coalition’s intervention in Iraq in 2003 to...well, prevent genocide and promote democracy. Never too keen on instrumental reason, Habermas finds himself arguing that the means somehow justify the end.²¹ By contrast, when Habermas defends deeper European integration in spite of its democratic deficit, the cosmopolitan end justifies the undemocratic means. In actual practice, Habermas leaves us with nothing but ambiguity.

And only in the movies is nothing a “really cool hand.” □

²⁰To adapt Michael Oakeshott’s *Rationalism in Politics* (London: Methuen, 1981), p. 35.

²¹See “America and the World”, pp. 2, 5, 10–15.

Thus, the Czechoslovak Government was to be given a bare forty-eight hours to issue the necessary orders and only four days in which to evacuate the whole of the Sudeten Lands. It is characteristic of Hitler’s methods of argument that, when the Prime Minister pointed out that this was a sheer dictate (the word always applied by Hitler to the Treaty of Versailles) imposed on a country voluntarily surrendering a part of its territory without having been defeated in war, the Chancellor replied: “It is not a dictate; look, the document is headed by the word ‘memorandum.’”

—Sir Neville Henderson

Failure of a Mission 1937–1939 (1940)