

RODERICK'S 'SOCIAL' AMNESIA: HABERMAS AND THE PRODUCTIVIST PARADIGM

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Rick Roderick, *Habermas and the Foundations of Critical Theory*. London: Macmillan, 1986. 194 pp.

The critical reception of the Frankfurt School in North America is frustrating and exasperating for both the uninitiated and experts in the field. The path to understanding critical theory is strewn with landmines of wrongheaded and mean-spirited interpretations. David Held surely understates the case when he states that critical theory has had more than its share of inadequate critical literature.¹

Fortunately, the situation has recently been reversed. There are now a number of solid works on critical theory. Habermas' work especially, which has always found a better reception in North America than the earlier Frankfurt theorists, has found more serious treatment, not only in Thomas McCarthy's careful and compendious *The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas*, but in discussion in recent works such as Held's *Introduction to Critical Theory*, John Keane's *Critical Theory and Public Life* and Seyla Ben-Habib's *Critique, Norm and Utopia*. Rick Roderick's, *Habermas and the Foundations of Critical Theory*, is, in some respects, a welcome addition to this literature. In this work, which is intended as an overview of Habermas' work for non-experts, Roderick states that he aims to avoid the "dismissive" readings of Habermas and to take Habermas' position seriously (pp. 2-3). At the same time he wants to provide a *critical* reading of Habermas based on the presumption that, in contrast to Habermas' argument, the "productivist" paradigm advocated by Marx is fundamentally sound. Roderick's book represents, in some respects, an advance over many earlier interpretations of the Habermasian project. He emphasizes the relationships and tensions of Hegelian, Kantian and Marxian perspectives. With the exception of

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Ben-Habib, his is one of the first works to discuss the *Theory of Communicative Action* in much detail. However, Roderick's attempt to cover the whole of the Habermasian corpus in the short span of 175 pages seems to me an impossible task, and bound to lead to some interpretive lacunae. In the first three chapters of Roderick's work, which are often quite good, these lacunae are minimized. Roderick generally succeeds in his attempt to take Habermas seriously. However, the final chapters of the book are problematic. Roderick's discussion of the theory of communicative action, in my view, fails to carry out the aim of providing a non-dismissive critique of Habermas. It simply does not take seriously enough the major argument of this work: the connection of meaning and validity. Finally, Roderick's conclusion needs more careful development. His defense of the productivist model against Habermas' critique fails to engage fruitfully the two positions. These flaws weaken a promising attempt to guide us through Habermas' work.

One of the strong points of Roderick's interpretation is his stress on the Hegelian dimension of Habermas' enterprise. He sides, I believe correctly, with those (like Bernstein) who stress the continuing presence of Hegelian elements in Habermas's thought. Roderick extends this interpretation beyond *Knowledge and Human Interests*, where conventionally Habermas' Hegelianism is said to end, to Habermas' later work on reconstruction (and implicitly to *Theory of Communicative Action*). Citing a little known 1976 discussion by Habermas, Roderick shows that Habermas' understanding of his later project is still informed by a self-conscious Hegelian accent. Habermas argues this along four dimensions. (1) "The reconstruction of universal presuppositions of paradigmatic types of cognition and communication." This Kantian notion is "integrated into Hegel's philosophy;" (2) The "rational reconstruction of developmental patterns for the genesis of transcendental universals." Habermas sees this as parallel to Hegel's search for a logic of development; (3) the phenomenology of self-reflection: the analysis of that process of critique that moves from Kant through Hegel and Marx to Freud; and (4) rational history, "which can explain the observational and narrative evidence of empirical regularities, not in terms of nomological theories, but in terms of the internal genesis of the basic conceptual structures."² Habermas associates this first with Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, but also with the philosophies of nature and history. This is essentially a reformulation of Hegel's conception of history as history of the development of the Idea.

This is an interesting formulation by Habermas. While it may not satisfy all those who deny the Hegelian aspect of Habermas' project, it does demonstrate some of the linkages between Habermas' early and later work. Habermas sees a striking parallel between his use of a "genetic epistemology" and the notion of a logic of development in Hegel. Roderick points out

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some of the limitations of those interpretations which view Habermas' later work as a move away from a Hegelian position in toto.

Roderick does not, however, deny the presence of other elements in Habermas' later thought. He also recognizes the Kantian dimension in Habermas' thought. This is especially clear in some of Habermas' use of Weber in *Theory of Communicative Action* (though this is not discussed as fully as I would have liked). Against Hegel, Habermas argues with both Kant and Weber that Reason can not be viewed as a homogeneous totality. It is, in modern society, differentiated into heterogeneous elements (i.e., art, science and morality). Roderick does a good job, though a bit too briefly, of separating these strands of thought in Habermas. I would, however, have liked him to be more thoroughgoing in applying this analysis in the text. The interesting remarks of the first chapter are, too often, not followed up in the following chapters.

Roderick is less successful, I believe, in coming to terms with two other aspects of Habermas' thought. The first is Habermas' relationship to foundationalism. Roderick claims that Habermas attempts "to provide a 'foundation' for . . . critical social theory. This attempt directly counters the current vogue of 'anti-foundationalism'" (p. 8). Here Roderick casts his conceptual net too broadly; Habermas' position is really neither foundational nor anti-foundational. While Habermas clearly rejects the anti-foundationalist argument of Rorty, since it denies judgements of truth or validity to have value beyond a particular culture or community, his own alternative, the theory of argumentation, does not rest on an ultimate foundation or standard external to human activity. The notion of a 'foundation' can not be reduced to the claim that we can come to a rational agreement or find a basis for truth. Foundationalism is the claim that there is an unchallengeable standard of truth that is absolutely certain and beyond doubt. (These alternatives are treated in Bernstein's book *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*.)

Habermas accepts neither of these alternatives. He takes up a theory of argumentation derived from, among other sources, Peirce's pragmatic theory of truth. Peirce rejected both the Cartesian framework, and relativist theories of knowledge. There is no ultimate foundation for knowledge and, hence, no claim to knowledge is beyond the possibility of challenge or change. Everything *could*, on the level of logical possibility, be other than it is. But this is not the level on which questions of truth are decided. Logical possibility has little to do with questions of truth. Truth is a relation of evidence, principles, and grounds (or in more common terms, theory and data). The force of the better argument obtains. Truth is a matter of giving reasons which can be justified in the process of argumentation. Roderick misses this pragmatic argument in Habermas. This has ramifications for his interpretation; we shall see that when Roderick takes up the *Theory of*

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Communicative Action, his inability to come to terms with this aspect of Habermas' thought leads to significant misunderstandings.

Roderick gives a good, if brief, overview of Habermas' early writings, stretching from the 1957 article "The Philosophical Discussion of Marx and Marxism" through to *Knowledge and Human Interests*. Naturally this discussion is selective, it focuses to a large extent on Habermas' relation to Marx and critical theory. Roderick contests Habermas' Marx-interpretation from a praxis-oriented point of view. He wants to claim that we can recover a dimension of Marx's theory of human activity which is non-instrumental and creative. Clearly Roderick's sympathies lie with this version of Marx.

Roderick's interpretation of Habermas stresses the development of Habermas' conception of rationality. The first generation Frankfurt School theorists incorporated, through Lukàcs, a stress on the critique of instrumental reason. This departed from Marx's stress both on a critique of political economy and his critique of idealism. Marx held that the abstract ideals of the philosophers have to be realized in the world and criticized for their abstractness. But following the analysis of "rationalization" given by Lukàcs and Weber, the increasing "rationality" of modern life lead not to a realization of the ideals of the true and just life, but to a new form of domination. To be sure, neither Lukàcs nor the Frankfurt theorists (nor for that matter Weber) accepted this truncated form of rationality prevalent in late capitalism as a reflection of Reason in the classical sense. Nonetheless, the changed constellation of forces it represented led to a fundamentally different conception of the task of a critical theory. In light of a thoroughgoing instrumental rationalization of society, which not only truncated the classical conception of rationality, but negated the possibility of resistance, the heritage of philosophy gained a renewed significance as the repository of Reason. For the Frankfurt theorists, the task is no longer to overcome philosophy — to realize it in the world: that opportunity has passed. Rather it is to maintain allegiance to the heritage of Reason as a truly revolutionary force and to criticize its deformation in contemporary society. However, Roderick holds that the Frankfurt theorists maintain an allegiance to immanent critique as the method of a critical theory which will maintain awareness of these ideals. This latter point would seem to need clarification, especially in Adorno. It is not clear the extent to which Frankfurt theorists held these ideals to be immanent in advanced industrial society. Their critique may have been "utopian".

Roderick interprets Habermas' project as a continuation of the Frankfurt School's critique of the rationality of modern society and as an attempt to redeem a concept of rationality that can ground that critique. According to Roderick, Habermas only gradually comes to see the necessity for a departure from the position of the earlier Frankfurt theorists in the direction of a reformulated conception of rationality. At first, his

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conception stays within the ambit of Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse. For example, in works such as *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (Structural Transformations of the Public Sphere), and in many of the essays in *Theory and Praxis*, Habermas retains allegiance to the Frankfurt School method of immanent critique (p. 43). Here, as in Marx, critique proceeded by way of comparing bourgeois ideals to their historical embodiments. However, Roderick holds that Habermas becomes uneasy with this procedure from the time of his second contribution to the Positivism dispute (translated under the title "A Positivistically Bisected Rationalism"), due to the relativistic implications of the method of immanent critique. If immanent critique takes as its standard the values of a particular society, it can not escape the charge of relativism. It must implicitly assume a philosophy of history that can distinguish between what men can be and what they currently are. Implicitly, the Frankfurt theorists relied on Marx's philosophy of history. However, for Habermas, this dependence needs to be reexamined. This, according to Roderick, is the motive for the reexamination of the Marxian philosophy of history that culminates in *Knowledge and Human Interests*. Roughly, Habermas concludes that Marx's theorizing can not be taken completely as a guide today because it does not consistently make the distinction between instrumental and communicative forms of action. While Marx does make the distinction between the mode of production and the relations of production in his historical and analytical writings, he does not root this in a categorial level. At the same time, he tends to fall into a scientism that reduces human action to the form comprehensible by the methods of the natural sciences. Marx does not, in a theoretically satisfactory way, conceptualize the social dimension of symbolic activity as later hermeneutic theorists, such as Dilthey, do.

In most respects, I would agree with Roderick's interpretation. However, I would like to make one addendum which I believe has consequences for Roderick's later discussions of Habermas. Roderick does not take sufficient account of the difference between the earlier Frankfurt School's analysis of the Dialectic of Enlightenment and Habermas' use of a concept of the socio-political public sphere as a basis for his theory of rationality. The notion of a political public, taken in part from Arendt and the Aristotelian heritage, in Habermas' view, holds the potential for rationalization in the positive sense. It is constitutive of a form of rationality unrecognized in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. This is not simply an issue of whether Habermas retains a notion of immanent critique. In introducing a distinct and separate socio-political sphere in which rationality is constituted, Habermas introduces a radically different notion of rationality than that found in the Marxian tradition. For the socio-political tends to be reduced to an effect of the economic, even in the work of sophisticated Marxists like those of the Frankfurt School.

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The best discussions in the book, however, are in Chapter three. This chapter discusses the transition in Habermas' thought from the theory of knowledge-constitutive interests found in *Knowledge and Human Interests*, to the later emphasis on communicative action. The exact relationship of these two aspects of Habermas' thought has not received much attention. Roderick provides a start in that direction. He summarizes the major debates surrounding *Knowledge and Human Interests*, and indicates some of the shortcomings that led Habermas to modify this position (pp. 62-73). Here, the conflict between the Kantian and Marxian dimensions of Habermas' project, according to Roderick, comes into play. Habermas can not affirm at the same time the Kantian position that the categories of thought are independent of nature, and the Marxian position that nature is the ground of mind. This dilemma, plus Habermas' unease with the Hegelian notion of a unified subject-object as the basis of the philosophy of history, led Habermas to reconceptualize both the foundations of his theory of rationality and his philosophy of history. Roderick also provides a solid discussion of major aspects of Habermas' transitional works. He has clear and useful discussions of Habermas' linguistic reformulation of critical theory, both in relation to Chomsky and in relation to Austin and Searle, and a discussion of the untranslated essay "Theories of Truth." This chapter would be useful to those struggling with Habermas' shifting perspectives.

While Roderick treats this transitional stage lucidly, the same cannot be said for his discussion of *Theory of Communicative Action*. This is both surprising and disappointing, but I believe the reason lies in the aforementioned inattention to Habermas' pragmatic argumentation theory. Roderick's discussion does not clearly focus on the sections of *Theory of Communicative Action* in which the foundations of rationality are formulated. Thus, his selection of passages for discussion does not, it seems to me, give a clear picture of this book and its central arguments for a theory of rationality. Roderick does not see the full significance of the social dimension of rationality in Habermas' work.

Essentially, Roderick attempts to deny the central premise of Habermas' theory of communicative action: the internal relationship between understanding and validity (more precisely for this discussion, the *orientation* toward agreement — *verständigungsorientieren*). In Roderick's view, Habermas exploits the ambiguity involved in the terms 'understanding' and 'agreement':

The fact that it makes sense to say I understand you, but I don't agree with you, shows that there is a difference between the two [understanding and agreement]. On the other hand, the fact that it doesn't make sense to say 'I agree with you, but I don't understand what you

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say' shows that there is a connection between the two. What is the connection? Here, one might plausibly say that 'agreement' *presupposes* 'understanding.' But the reverse is clearly not the case. I can understand what you say at the grammatical level, at the semantic level, and at the pragmatic level, without agreeing with you. Thus 'understanding' does not presuppose 'agreement' . . . Habermas' failure to distinguish these two cases weakens both the first and second step in his argument (p. 159).

Roderick wants to argue that communication is constituted not only through agreement, but through disagreement, dispute and conflict. By limiting his focus to agreement, Habermas' approach is too narrow to capture the complexity of communication.

This argument badly mistakes Habermas' position. When Habermas employs the conception of action oriented to reaching agreement, he does not put forward the claim that understanding is literally a constant unanimous agreement. Rather, he claims that the structure of rationality is discursive and, hence, that rationality does not refer to a truth beyond human intention, nor to a pure immediacy beyond works, but comes to be in the acting and speaking. We do not need to agree in order to understand one another, but we need to be related in a form of rationality that takes its bearings from the possibility of agreeing and disagreeing over reasons for action.

Habermas argues that one of the bases of rationality lies in the ability to give accounts. At any time, individuals can be asked by others (or may ask of themselves), why they act in a certain way. Intentionalists think that we have understood another when we understand the reasons why individuals acted as they did.

However, we supply (or we have attributed to us) motivational explanations only in the process of giving accounts and justifications. What makes intentional accounts 'rational' is not merely their internal coherence, but the fact that there are criteria through which others can accept such accounts. We may not have to agree with these accounts, but we have to understand them as accounts and be capable of making a judgment on the rationality of these accounts. (Are they good reasons? Is there evidence to believe such an assertion? Are the principles or grounds of the assertion valid?) This is what Habermas means when he speaks of understanding oriented to agreement. In his sense, understanding means more than being able to grasp the intentions of another. In order to do this we have to be able to judge whether the reasons given are good ones within the context of an intersubjectively constituted communicative praxis.

Roderick does not fully come to grips with this aspect of Habermas' thought. He does not, for example, discuss section 1.4 of *Theory of*

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Communicative Action in which Habermas puts forward a compelling argument that description and evaluation can not be separated. I can not fully discuss this argument here. My point is not that Roderick has to agree with Habermas, but that, if he really wishes to take Habermas seriously, he can't be satisfied with a simple dismissal of Habermas' central contention, one that isn't even accurate, but ought to interrogate critically these central arguments.

In his final chapter, Roderick attempts to provide an alternative to Habermas' use of the communication paradigm. He argues that the "productivist" paradigm used by Marx can be successfully reconstructed to account for the problems of modern society. Roderick rejects the arguments of Baudrillard and Habermas that the productivist paradigm is inherently instrumental. Actually, in *Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas does not make this claim. What he does claim is that the productivist paradigm cannot successfully conceptualize the intersubjective bases of rationality. Marx's theory, then, can still provide standards for the practical transformation of society.

Roderick makes some good points against Habermas' sometimes one-sided interpretation of Marx. However, I don't believe that he provides many good reasons to accept his contention that the productivist paradigm is superior to Habermas' model. His major argument against Habermas is that the focus on 'normative foundations' of critical theory "would be unnecessary if Habermas did not accept the empirical thesis that capitalist society no longer legitimates its power by appeal to norms" (p. 165). This assertion ignores one of the major theoretical shortcomings of the productivist paradigm which the theory of communicative action is meant to redress. Habermas' search for normative foundations is not based purely on empirical questions — it is a meta-theoretical one. It addresses the "social deficit" of Marxian theory. It is meant to revalorize the socio-political dimension of life downplayed by Marx.

Here Roderick's intention to provide a "serious" reading of Habermas and the critical strategy he develops in the final chapter clash. This is much less of a problem in the first three chapters which make a genuine contribution to the literature on Habermas. Roderick is strongest when he treats those aspects of Habermas' thought that are most easily related to the Marxian tradition (including its German heritage). He is, however, clearly unsympathetic to the "linguistic turn" in Habermas' thought. Especially in the final chapter, Roderick develops an interpretation of the productivist paradigm that essentially excludes a serious confrontation with Habermas' position. I found it curious that in a work devoted to a thinker who has seriously criticized the productivist position, it would be considered sufficient to provide a few rather unconvincing criticisms of Habermas followed by a restatement of some basic Marxian theorems. If Habermas'

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position can be dismissed that easily, why devote a whole book to his thought? It seems to me that a different strategy in the final chapter would have been more fruitful. If Roderick had avoided defining the communicative and productivist paradigms in a mutually exclusive way, a strategy which leads Roderick back to the terrain of the "dismissive" readings he hopes to avoid, and had instead looked for the areas where a critical discussion could occur, this would have been a much better work. Roderick ends up denying the power of a theory of communicative action instead of coming to terms with it.

Roderick *could* have pursued this critique, in what I believe would have been a theoretically fruitful way, if he was less committed to rehabilitating Marx as *the* solution to the theory-praxis problem. He could have turned, for example, to a social theorist like Castoriadis, who has attempted to integrate the insights of a philosophy of praxis with a renewed attention to the social and political dimensions of life. He could also have looked to those within the critical theory tradition who have tried to reformulate the distinction between instrumental and communicative action.³ Roderick does not pursue this path, I believe, because it would have led too far astray from the Marxian project that is his 'idée fixe.' In the end, Roderick seems to say that Marx is all we need to provide a social theory adequate to late capitalist society. We should abandon flighty theories which study 'normative foundations' and return to hard-headed "investigations of class, the state and economy, as well as the massive cultural apparatus" (p. 173). We learn from Roderick that the "proletariat has not 'disappeared'. Rather it has been fragmented" (p. 172). Habermas' Weberian claims that modern society is differentiated into art, science and morality "only ideologically express an empirically ascertainable and contradiction-ridden form of social life, a form that can be overcome" (p. 171). If slogans were currency, Roderick would be a rich man. Would that it were so easy.

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Notes

1. David Held, *Introduction to Critical Theory*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).
2. "Response to the Commentary of Bernstein and Dove," in D.P. Verene ed., *Hegel's Social and Political Thought* (1980), pp. 247-8.
3. See for example John Keane, "On Tools and Language: Work and Interaction in Habermas," *New German Critique* 6 (1975): 82-100; Axel Honneth "Work and Instrumental Action," *New German Critique* 26 (1982): 31-54. For a selection of Castoriadis in English see *Crossroads of the Labyrinth* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984).

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