

Symbolic Interaction

VOLUME 15
NUMBER 3
FALL 1992

Official Journal of the
Society for the Study of
Symbolic Interaction

SPECIAL FEATURE:
Habermas, Pragmatism,
and Critical Theory

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 **JAI PRESS INC.**

Greenwich, Connecticut
London, England

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Introduction: Habermas, Pragmatism, Interactionism

A few years ago I was asked to organize a panel on Habermas and pragmatism for the Midwest Sociological Society. I knew a fair amount about pragmatism but not nearly enough about Jürgen Habermas at the time, and so, I took the invitation as an opportunity to learn more about his ambitious attempt to weld together American pragmatism and European critical theory. After the panel, David Maines, the editor of *Symbolic Interaction*, asked me to organize a special journal issue around the themes of our panel. I accepted the offer and, in turn, invited Jürgen Habermas to respond to our critiques. He took up the challenge, and we hope to publish his rejoinder in one of the following issues.

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All authors who contributed to this collection welcome the growing interest in American pragmatism and interactionist sociology among European scholars. This interest marks a break with the Continental tradition that used to downplay philosophical pragmatism as a crude attempt to legitimate American capitalism. Jürgen Habermas's Theory of Communicative Action (TCA) is the most ambitious effort to-date to salvage "that radical democratic mentality which is present in the best American traditions and articulated in American pragmatism" (Habermas 1985, p. 198). While hailing the prospects for a trans-Atlantic dialogue, most writers on this side of the Atlantic agree that European thinkers tend to read pragmatism through the distinctly continental lenses. Indeed, Habermas's work shows vestiges of rationalism, and he does appear to underestimate pragmatism's native roots when he describes American pragmatism as "a missing branch of Young Hegelianism" (Habermas 1986, p. 193).

Halton is probably the sharpest critic of Habermas among the writers presented in this issue (although he comes down even harder on Rorty's prag-

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matism). Habermas, in his view, offers an excessively rationalistic account of experience and social interaction and an overlay intellectualized perspective on democracy. What Halton misses the most in Habermas's theory is the pragmatist emphasis on the unity of nature and culture, mind and body, cerebral and emotional faculties, which TCA tears asunder in a manner more consistent with the dualism of rationalist thought than with the radical empiricism of Peirce, Dewey, James, and Mead. It is this privileging of reason over sentiment, according to Halton, that is largely responsible for the horrors of modernity with its destruction of the self, bureaucratic engagement, and unabashedly totalitarian proclivities.

Antonio and Kellner are more sympathetic to Habermas's treatment of modernity, though they also decry his neo-Kantian tendency to split cognitive, moral, and aesthetic faculties, which is at odds with pragmatism's philosophical monism. Habermas's epistemology, they stress, does not overcome the spectator theory which Dewey and pragmatists rejected in favor of a signally pragmatist view of knowing as participating. Nor does Habermas fully dispense with the foundationalist bias, palpable in his determined effort to ground democratic procedures in a transcendental a priori—an attempt inimical to the pragmatism's historicist leanings.

While critical of TCA, our contributors concede that pragmatists and symbolic interactionists have a lot to learn from Habermas and critical theory. Sciulli and Hinkle are especially concerned about the interactionists' apolitical stance and scant attention they pay to the structural sources of inequality. The issues of legitimation, power asymmetry, and unequal access to democratic discourse, according to these critics, have not been adequately tackled by symbolic interactionists who, along with their pragmatist predecessors, tend to idealize American society and overestimate its potential for democratic renewal. Habermas's foundationalism, Sciulli insists, is in the end preferable to the pragmatist historicism, for the latter inevitably slides into moral relativism. By contrast, Habermas's approach, in spite of its shortcomings, lays out procedural standards of rationality which promise to furnish a foundation for democratic discourse.

Joas's article offers a historical overview of European critical theory and its proponents' ambivalence about pragmatism. His discussion exposes a long standing bias that critical thinkers have harbored against the American tradition in general and pragmatist philosophy in particular. Even after the Frankfurt School thinkers moved beyond their misconceptions about the pragmatist project (e.g., their belief that the pragmatist notion of "adaptation" spells "conformism"), they still insisted on the theoretical superiority of European thought. The question they consented to ponder was how to marry American *methods* to European *theory*, never the other way around.

Since Habermas's relevant works have become available in English only

recently, (the second volume of his *Theory of Communicative Action* was translated in 1987), a brief overview of his critical theory and its ties to pragmatism and interactionism might be useful for readers less familiar with Habermas's extensive corpus. What follows should be seen not so much as a definitive statement on Habermas as setting the stage for subsequent discussions.¹

* * *

The term "critical theory" is commonly used today in connection with the Frankfurt School, and in the broadest sense, it refers to the project of emancipation which seeks to open up society by subjecting it to a critique through standards set up by reason. A cross between the French Enlightenment and German idealism, critical theory combines the former's determination to purge society from oppression with the latter's liberating insight that obsolete practices are due in large measure to reason's own unreflexivity. Its early version was endorsed by the young Marx ([1843] 1972, p. 82), who urged that "self-understanding (equals critical philosophy) by our age . . . is a task for the world and for us." Early critical theory goes back to transcendental idealism and is predicated on the assumption that "the search for truth is founded on open self-expression, free dialogue, and convincing and being convinced through argument—at root, that is, on contradicting and criticizing one's opponent" (Marcuse [1934] 1968, pp. 16–17). This liberal program appeared faded and threadbare to the Frankfurt School thinkers, who found liberalism ill-equipped to withstand 20th century totalitarianism and embraced Weber's gloomy forecast about reason's imminent demise. The Frankfurt School's defeatist stance did not imply that its members rejected the values of liberal democracy as such. In the 60's, Horkheimer (1978, p. 233) pointedly warned his colleagues on the left that "Serious resistance against social injustice nowadays includes the preservation of the liberal traits of the bourgeois order. They must not disappear but be extended to all." Still, old school critical thinkers have little to say about practical ways of safeguarding and advancing liberal values. Habermas's theory of communicative action can be seen as a return to critical idealism and a liberal democratic agenda via pragmatism. In TCA, democratic ideals have received a new grounding in the immanent communicative standards of reason, while the commitment to rational critique has been reinforced through a rigorous program of freeing communications from systemic distortions.

Several ideas derived from philosophical pragmatism are relevant for understanding the newest turn in critical theory. The first one is Peirce's insight into communication as a fundamental property of reality and a condition for objective knowledge. Contrary to Cartesian philosophy, the solitary knower

cannot fathom the world in its complexity and growth, for he lacks the perspectival view (or what Mead would later call "sociality") needed to grasp things' multiple relationships. Only through social intercourse as a member of a community of inquirers, can the knower survey an object in several perspectives at once and thereby learn its true nature (or rather natures). That is to say, we must meet certain social conditions in order to secure a hold on objective reality. These conditions are best realized in the scientific community whose members continuously advance hypotheses, stage experiments, and in the process form beliefs on which humans can act. Each member of such a community of inquirers has the right—and a duty—to state one's ideas clearly, communicate them to others, hear everybody out, and criticize established views, which are routinely revised as new evidence is brought to bear on the problem at issue. Uncoerced communications among free and rational human beings are thus required for any knowledge to be judged rational and objective. So thoroughly is the question of truth imbedded in the communication process that any attempt to separate it from the community's collective efforts is bound to hypostasize our knowledge. Hence, Peirce's ([1868] 1955, p. 247) famous assertion that "the very origin of the conception of reality shows that this conception essentially involves the notion of a COMMUNITY."

The second idea that appealed to critical theorists was articulated by John Dewey. It stipulates that the conditions for acquiring objective knowledge are fundamentally the same as the conditions for establishing a democratic community. In Dewey's (1939, p. 102) words, "freedom of inquiry, toleration of diverse views, freedom of communication, the distribution of what is found out to every individual as the ultimate intellectual consumer, are involved in the democratic as well as in the scientific method." This idea effectively extends Peirce's argument about communications and collective inquiry into the socio-political domain, where it is reformulated as the program of freeing communications from distortions inhibiting political inquiry and community building. The most insidious distortion is depriving members of society from the right and/or practical opportunity to participate in public discourse. Limiting access to political inquiry impedes the formation of public—the sole legitimate subject of the political process. By freeing collective inquiry from domination and bringing in individuals previously excluded from public discourse, on the other hand, we make society more rational, open, and humane. Ultimately, Dewey (1916, p. 134; 1939, p. 102) contends, the prospects for democracy "rests upon persuasion, upon the ability to convince and be convinced," upon "the improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion and persuasion. That is *the* problem of the public."

One more precept that resonates with the project of critical theory highlights the key role of symbols in society. Articulated in Peirce's semeiotics and quite independently developed by George Mead, this line of inquiry en-

lightens us about the fact that human symbols do more than name things: they also mesh with objects they describe, carve them out from the chaotic flow of things, actively participate in their objective being. This idea is somewhat counter-intuitive. When we say "planet," "horse," "man," we know these to be signs standing for things out there which exist apart from the naming process. But what about "devil," "witch," "enemy of the people"? The collective process of signifying is instrumental in setting in motion some sort of reality that is objective in its social consequences, certainly for the thousands of "witches" burned on the stake in medieval times and millions of "enemies of the people" who perished in the Russian gulags. "Language does not simply symbolize a situation or object that is already there in advance; it makes possible the existence or the appearance of that situation or object," writes Mead (1934, p. 78). "Symbolization constitutes objects not constituted before, objects which would not exist except for the context of social relationships wherein symbolization occurs." In our everyday life, we constantly confront objects that appear to subsist on their own, independently from our sense-bestowing practices, yet it is our own routine and largely unreflexive reliance on traditional symbols that perpetuates social orders and their unique political species, be they slaves and owners, plebeians and patricians, masters and serves, or capitalists and laborers. Understanding the constitutive power of symbolization, its capacity to mystify and reify, is a must if we want to break its stranglehold over our lives and reclaim control over our own destiny. An emancipated society is the one where our reason "becomes not only self-conscious but also self-critical" (Mead 1934, p. 255). To facilitate the emergence of such a society is the task of pragmatist philosophy and its sociological counterpart. Pragmatism, in this sense, is a critical undertaking founded on the premises that "philosophy is criticism, having its distinctive position among various modes of criticism in its generality; a criticism of criticisms, as it were" (Dewey [1929] 1958, p. 398).

Turning to Habermas, we can see that he shares many insights with pragmatists. His starting point, of course, is derived from classical critical theory, which observes that late capitalism has spun a prodigious culture industry that generates false needs and consumerism. Mass media are singled out for the blame, as they obfuscate collective inquiry and reinforce the power of the propertied classes to manipulate public agenda. Unlike other members of the original Frankfurt School, however, Habermas does not buy the pessimistic conclusion that the forces of modernity are irredeemably hostile to the public sphere and that they inexorably escape democratic control. He pins his hopes for emancipation on the fact that the ossified social order can be deciphered and transcended on the micro-level, in routine symbolic interactions, where oppressive structures are reproduced in the structures of interpersonal communications.

Every time we enter a symbolic transaction, according to Habermas, we state facts, assert norms, claim to be sincere, and thereby wittingly or unwittingly reinforce certain institutional order. Our statements have illocutionary force which derives from society and empowers us in dealing with other people. We need to harness this force in order to emancipate ourselves from reified symbolic forms and regain control over macro institutions. We relieve society from systemic distortions by methodically redeeming factual, normative, and aesthetic validity claims immanent in our assertions and establishing a discursive consensus about the most rational policies we can follow. Society that satisfies these conditions approximates what Habermas ([1968] 1971; [1976] 1979) calls "the ideal speech situation." These idealized conditions are met when (a) every interested individual has a practical chance to participate in discourse, (b) participants shun purely strategic motives, (c) validity claims are discursively redeemed, (d) policies are adopted by uncoerced consensus, and (e) rational decisions are subject to continuous revision. What we have here is a blueprint for democratic society which fully releases the "emancipatory potential built into communication structures themselves" (Habermas [1981] 1987, p. 390). Emancipated society, in short, is nothing else than a rational community of publicly minded individuals bent on a collective quest for the true, the good, and the beautiful.

Habermas's debt to pragmatism and interactionism is unmistakable. He deftly used the pragmatist idea of symbolic interaction, in which he found a prototype for his notion of *Verständigung*—communicative action aimed at reaching understanding. His vision of rational society shows a family resemblance with pragmatism in as much as it calls for an unlimited universe of discourse which draws all humans into its orbit and offers every individual a chance to criticize old beliefs and articulate new symbols in a quest to make society more inclusive and responsive to its members' needs. At the same time, Habermas draws on pragmatism selectively: he picks up on those ideas that show the pragmatists' debt to rationalism and glosses over others that reflect pragmatism's empiricist and romantic roots. "Pure rationalism, complete immunity from prejudice, consists in refusing to see that the case before one is absolutely unique. It is always possible to treat the country of one's nativity, the house of one's father, the bed in which one's mother died, nay, the mother herself if need be, on a naked equality with all other specimens of so many respective genera. It shows the world in a clear frosty light from which all fuliginous mists of affection, all swamp-lights of sentimentality, are absent. . . . But the question remains, 'Are not the mists and vapors worth retaining?'" (James [1890] 1950, p. 674). The pragmatist answer to this query is a resounding "yes." The program articulated in TCA is more in line with the rationalist tradition.

The first objection to TCA a pragmatist is likely to raise is that it equates

reason with verbal intellect and downplays nonverbal intelligence. Habermas seems to exclude feelings, sentiments, and emotions from communicative competence, relegating all noncognitive phenomena to the background and treating them more as a threat to reason than its legitimate peer. His intellectualist bias is in sharp contrast to the pragmatist view of intelligence native to our feelings and sentiments. "Reason, anyway, is a faculty of secondary rank," stated Peirce (1976, p. xxi); "Cognition is but the superficial film of the soul, while sentiment penetrates its substance." Pragmatists acknowledge that crude emotionalism can distort our understanding, but according to Dewey ([1922] 1950, p. 195), "the conclusion is not that the emotional, passionate phase of the action can be or should be eliminated in behalf of a bloodless reason. . . . More 'passions,' not fewer, is the answer." The special role that pragmatists assign to sentiments has to do with their greater sensitivity to objective uncertainty and indeterminacy which pure reason "relieved from the pressure of action and experience," of "all the provincial limitations of the given context" (Habermas [1981] 1984, p. 25; [1981] 1987, p. 399) tends to gloss over for the sake of theoretic clarity. As viewed from the pragmatist angle, the project of emancipation is bound to fail unless it engages the entire range of experience—unless it moves beyond pure reason toward embodied reasonableness.

Another objection that pragmatists raise concerns Habermas's "consensus theory of truth" ([1971] 1973, p. 19; [1981] 1984, pp. 8–42). According to this theory, all truth claims must be validated within discourse, through grounding or systematic adjudication of reasons. Participants in discourse are called upon to take an unambiguous "yes/no position" on each validity claim and then act on a rationally acquired conviction until a better argument appears which necessitates a revision of the initial belief. The pragmatist theory stipulates that truth is a practically accomplished unity of knowledge and reality. We cannot pass judgment on a statement's truth value until we have acted upon it, until we have manipulated things according to our notions about them, and it is only after our knowledge passes such a pragmatic test can we say that it is true. In pragmatist philosophy, meaning is determined operationally and is inexorably tied to means we use to demonstrate the proposition's truth status. Which is why pragmatists prefer to talk about pragmatic certainty rather than logical truth. While the former is ascertainable *in actu*, by discursive as well as nondiscursive means, the latter is attainable *in theoria*, solely by way of advancing "good reasons."

Equally problematic for philosophers and sociologists celebrating the pluralistic universe we inhabit is Habermas's predilection for consensus as a rational outcome of uncoerced communication. The ideal speech situation requires that "all participants pursue illocutionary aims without reservation in order to arrive at an agreement that will provide the basis for a consensual

coordination of individually pursued plans of action" (Habermas [1981] 1984, pp. 295–296). The broader the consensus, according to this theory, the more perfect rationality. Universal consensus is the ultimate goal of communicative action, and anything that falls short of such unanimity is a blemish on our communicative resolve. In pragmatist reckoning, rationally motivated consensus is not the only legitimate product of uncoerced discourse—rationally motivated dissensus is an equally desirable outcome that must be encouraged rather than feared as an affront to communicative ethics. A dissenting attitude is imminently rational in that it points to conflicting potentialities of being and alerts us to risks and uncertainties inherent in alternative lines of action.

Finally, Habermas's quest for a rational society which he grounds in "the possibility of settling disagreements by adducing reasons" and "motivation through 'good reasons'" (Habermas [1981] 1987, p. 74; [1976] 1979, p. 200) differs from the pragmatist concern for sane existence in the world of uncertainty. "Another meaning of 'rational' is, in fact, available. In this sense, the word means something like 'sane' or 'reasonable' rather than 'methodical.' It names a set of moral virtues: tolerance, respect for the opinion of those around one, willingness to listen, reliance on persuasion rather than force" (Rorty 1987, p. 40). Society so defined leaves ample room for an honest difference of opinion, accepts a hefty margin of uncertainty, and values an intelligent agreement to disagree as much as rationally motivated consensus. Pragmatist intelligence calls for ambivalence as an imminently rational emotion which helps us wade through the absurdities of daily life with our sanity intact and our critical abilities undiminished. "Because intelligence is critical method applied to goods of belief, appreciation and conduct, turning assent and assertion into free communication of shareable meanings, turning feeling into ordered and liberal sense, turning reaction into response, it is the reasonable object of our deepest faith and loyalty, the stay and support of all reasonable hope" (Dewey [1929] 1958, pp. 436–437).

The rather cursory criticism offered above should not be taken to mean that Habermas got pragmatism all wrong or that pragmatists and interactionists have nothing to learn from TCA. Quite to the contrary. Habermas's reevaluation of critical theory has brought into sharp focus the critical dimension of pragmatism, its interest in emancipation, freedom of communications, and equalization of participatory rights—concerns which are yet to be fully appropriated by contemporary interactionists. His analysis illuminates the weaknesses endemic to pragmatist and interactionist thought, namely their proponents failure to grapple head-on with the vital macro-micro linkage, with the relative paucity of theoretical and empirical studies tying together system-theoretic and action-theoretic frameworks. Our joined efforts should be seen in this light.

While each article collected in this issue stands on its own and should be

judged on its merit, these essays complement each other in an important way. They all show that the cross-fertilization between the continental and American traditions is beneficial to both sides. As European thinkers take a second look at pragmatism and American democracy, American pragmatists and interactionists will be squaring off with the issues of power and inequality. I hope that this fruitful dialogue will continue in the future.

NOTE

1. For a more detailed discussion of the interfaces between pragmatism and critical theory see Shalin (1992).

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