

KASSEL ROUNDTABLE ON HABERMAS: GERMAN PERSPECTIVES

Jürgen Habermas and critical policy studies

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Introduction

The eightieth birthday of Jürgen Habermas in June 2009 was the occasion for a number of scholars from various disciplines in the social sciences and humanities to take a fresh look at an impressive oeuvre that has been more than 50 years in the making.¹ Undisputably, Habermas is regarded as one of the most influential academic thinkers of our times in the fields of philosophy, sociology, linguistics and political science. In addition, his contributions as a public intellectual have triggered many a political debate – on the future of the EU, the politics of globalization, US foreign policy, constitutional patriotism, and the politics of historical memory, to mention just a few of his more recent political interventions (for Habermas' role as a public intellectual see Holub 1991).

In the academic field of policy studies, different parts or strands of Habermas' work have, over the last four decades, inspired the establishment of critical policy studies. In retrospect, the relevance of Habermas' contribution to this new area of study can be seen on three different levels.

Firstly, Habermas has, since the early 1970s, contributed to *meta-theoretical* debates among policy scholars about basic questions of social philosophy and theories of society. Habermas has been read as an author who re-conceptualized the tradition of critical theory in the tradition of the Frankfurt School of Western Marxism. From his early book on *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989; first published in 1961) to his *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1984 and 1987) and his later writings on *The Future of Human Nature* (2003), Habermas intended to lay the ground for a 'Theory of Society' which would be capable of formulating a critical perspective on the processes of reification and alienation in modern capitalist societies (see White 1988, Iser 2009, Strecker 2010).

Secondly, Habermas' work has stimulated debate on *methodological* level in the field of policy studies. It started with his early critique of positivism and neo-positivism, in the 1960s, and was complemented in the 1970s by his critique of Gadamer's hermeneutics (Habermas 1988, 1980).² It was, in particular, Habermas' claim, in his book *Knowledge and Human Interest* (1971), that Freudian psychoanalysis might serve as a paradigmatic case for an emancipating and participatory social science which laid the ground for the search for post-positivist methodologies among scholars of public policy (see Fischer

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1980). Thus Habermas' attack on positivism, and his attempt to overcome the shortcomings of pure hermeneutic alternatives, became a crucial stepping stone for the post-positivist movement in the social sciences.

Thirdly, Habermas became a prominent point of reference for critical policy scholars as a result of his contributions to the field of *democratic theory*. Starting in the 1950s with a radical-democratic reformulation of Franz L. Neumann's famous statement that democracy is the realization of human freedom through political participation (see Habermas 1973, originally published in German in 1958; see as the source for Habermas reference Neumann 1957), Habermas became politically engaged in his early days as a proponent of a socialist and participatory concept of democracy.³ His outspoken support for the protest movements against German re-militarization in the 1950s, as well as his support for the protest movements of the late 1960s and his engagement with democratic university reform, created his public image as an advocate of participatory democracy. This interpretation of his democratic aspirations was confirmed by the final chapters of his programmatic essay, *Legitimation Crisis* (1975). Even after the publication of *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1984 and 1987), in which he integrated systems theory into his theory of society to such a degree that, in the end, system media such as 'money' and 'power' seemed to dominate the realm of politics, Habermas insisted on the relevance of participatory politics by social movements. The starting points for political participation were placed by him within the sphere of the lifeworld where they were expected to defend communicative rationality against the colonization of the lifeworld by the instrumental rationality of systems imperatives. The development of Habermas' ideas about democracy culminated, provisionally, in his book *Between Facts and Norms* (1996), which made him, and continues to make him, one of the most widely-read authors of the concept of 'deliberative democracy'. Throughout Habermas' 50-year involvement with different approaches to dealing with the normative core of democracy, his thoughts and concepts have served both as a source of inspiration and as a starting point for critique for a number of scholars of critical public policy who have been interested both in radical democracy and in a sociological analysis of public discourse. In particular, in the 1990s, his work was cited as a normative and methodological cornerstone for the movement towards a more democratic society (see Arato and Cohen 1992). His procedural reformulation of deliberative democracy seemed to permit the bridging of the gap between radical normative intuitions and empirical research.⁴ The theory of deliberative democracy, in its Habermasian version, seemed to offer a concept in which practical public policy problems could be settled in a way that would emphasize the egalitarian, participatory and rational promises of modern democracy all at the same time (see Fischer and Forester 1993, Dryzek 2000).

Looking back after all these years, Habermas' enormous and productive influence on critical policy studies cannot be doubted. But what about today? To what extent is the work of Habermas still important to empirically oriented policy studies? Habermas (2006) himself was never reluctant to acknowledge the importance of empirical research for his own theoretical approach. But will bringing his theoretical work to bear on empirical research on public policy issues continue to yield benefits?

The four articles in this 'Round Table' section of 'Critical Policy Studies' are devoted to a re-assessment of Habermas' contribution to the field from two perspectives. One perspective focuses on the implications of Habermas' work for current theories of democracy; the other on basic categorical and conceptual questions in the field of policy research. To contextualize the contributions of the four articles, however, it may be helpful to point out some particularly controversial (or stimulating) issues which may come to mind when one reads some of Habermas' more recent books and articles.

For more than 55 years, starting with the publication of his first articles on Heidegger's philosophy and his sociological studies of consumerism, Habermas has shown a tremendous capability and willingness to learn from challenges to his critiques. More than once he has reacted to substantial objections to his ideas by making radical theoretical changes and revisions. The best known of these changes are those that led him away from his early, Adorno-like cultural critique, first to an epistemological foundation for critical theory, and subsequently to a theory of communicative rationality.⁵ However, Habermas' later work too has constantly undergone revisions, mostly triggered by the need to bring in new topics and to respond to his critics. Due to the vast amount of literature by and on Habermas, it can be easy to overlook some of these less well-known revisions, even though they may be of importance from the point of view of policy studies. With respect to the articles in this 'Forum' section, I want to mention three of these minor changes.

Although Habermas is still a critic of positivism (as well as of rational choice) in the social sciences, he has distanced himself from his harsh and polemical attacks of the 1960s. As early as 1982, in the new German edition of his book on positivism, he acknowledged the relevance of mainstream empirical research in the social sciences. As a consequence, he developed the concept of 'rational reconstruction' as a suitable methodology for empirical policy research (e.g. into the deliberative quality of public discussion⁶). Unfortunately, Habermas has never developed this idea very far (see Koller 2009, see also Habermas 2005). And so it comes as less of a surprise when one gets the impression, in some of his other writings, such as *Between Facts and Norms*, that he has returned to a traditional distinction between political philosophy (which deals only with normative issues) on the one hand and empirical social sciences (which use all sorts of methodologies) on the other. Thus we are left without answers to some questions about the methodological potential of Habermas' more recent work: what is left of his critique of positivism, which inspired the early post-positivist movement? And what can post-positivist scholars today learn from the work of Habermas?

Another source of interest in Habermas among the critical policy research community has been the justification of political participation mentioned above. Habermas, however, has distanced himself from most of his early writings on democracy. In a new (2009) German edition of his selected works, Volume 4 (Habermas 2009b) – in which he groups his main articles on political philosophy – includes no article written earlier than 1992. Habermas has justified this editorial decision with the argument that it was not until he had completed work on his book *Between Facts and Norms* that he fully understood the role of democracy in modern societies (see Habermas 2009b). Since this book, however, Habermas has carefully distinguished between the mode of 'routine politics' within the institutions of the political system and the mode of 'exceptional politics', in which citizens get more deeply involved in political participation. According to Habermas, this model is normatively sufficient as long as a professional public sphere controls the political apparatus. In some of his more recent writings, Habermas (2001) has introduced an additional distinction between a 'voluntaristic' and an 'epistemic' understanding of democratic politics. According to this, democratic procedures do not draw their legitimizing force from political participation (the voluntaristic approach) but from a deliberative process whose structure gives reason to expect rationally acceptable results (the epistemic approach). Since Habermas sides with the 'epistemic' approach, this leaves open the question of to what extent political participation is seen by him as a source of democratic legitimacy and to what extent it is a disruptive factor within the machinery of rational, organized political processes. In his more recent writings, Habermas (2008) has wavered between the two visions of democratic politics. Nevertheless, he is raising important questions for critical policy

scholars: to what extent does empirical research confirm the posited difference between the two understandings of democratic politics? How can the degree of political rationality be measured empirically? Could/should it be measured at all? And what kind of institutional reforms might bridge the hiatus between the voluntaristic and the epistemic dimensions? It is less productive to blame Habermas' later work for having retreated from the early political radicalism; it would be more productive to deal with the question of irrationality and power in modern democracies within a larger empirical framework.

There are many other aspects of his work in which Habermas has made changes, clarifications, concessions, and revisions over the last couple of years. One of the main clarifications has concerned the different types of discourse. With the publication of *Erläuterungen zur Diskursethik* (1991), he began to differentiate between three types of discourse – moral, ethical, and pragmatic – each with its own communicative claims and internal logic (see Habermas 1993). Other changes relate to a new distinction between 'strong' and 'weak' modes of communicative action (see Habermas 2004), and there has been a revision of the status of 'imperatives' in speech acts so that these are now both strategic and illocative (see Habermas 2009a, pp. 14–46). To what extent are these categorical and conceptual differentiations relevant to empirical research on public policy issues? What does the distinction between weak and strong forms of communicative action mean for empirical discourse analysis? To what extent can the revised role of imperatives within Habermas's linguistic framework reinvigorate the empirical identification of arguing and bargaining in political deliberations? And how can the analysis of political debate make use of the distinction between the three types of discourse?

Naturally, not all of these questions will be exhaustively discussed in the following four papers. However, these four contributions indicate that, for critical policy studies, Habermas's work has not only proved an inspiration in the past; it may equally well serve as a productive force for the future.⁷

Notes on contributor

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Notes

1. See for example the collaboration of a number of international scholars in the *Habermas-Handbook* (Brunkhorst 2009).
2. For this debate on methodology, see the classical study by Richard Bernstein (1978).
3. This position can be found in the last two chapters of his *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989), too.
4. On Habermas's theory of deliberative democracy see: Chambers (1996), D'Entrèves Passerin (2006).
5. These early changes and revisions are reconstructed by McCarthy (1978).
6. On Habermas' concept of rational reconstruction see Pedersen (2008). On the example of discourse analyses see Habermas (2006).
7. The papers in this 'Forum' are based on statements given at a Roundtable on 'Jürgen Habermas and Critical Policy Studies – A Reassessment' at the 4th International Conference in Interpretative Policy Analysis (IPA) at Kassel University, 27 June 2009. We would like to thank Frank Fischer for his initiative to organize the Roundtable.

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