Habermas, Modernity and the Welfare State
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S peaking retrospectively in 1981, Habermas defined his own major intellectual concern from the late 1950s onwards as lying in the constitution of »a theory of modernity, a theory of the pathology of modernity from the viewpoint of the realization - the deformed realization - of reason in history«.[1] Paralleling this concern with modernity has been Habermas's continuing interest in the promise and the »deformed realization« of the »social welfare state project«, an interest that can be traced from his earliest work on public spheres (of the early 1960s) down to his most recent studies of new social movements in West Germany.

This paper assesses the strengths of the Habermasian account of the development of, and prospects for, the contemporary welfare state as it emerges from his analysis of, and continued defence of, the project of modernity. It will be suggested that despite the strengths of Habermas's work, the same critical weaknesses underlie both his defence of modernity and his understanding of the welfare state.

Habermas and the Redemption of Modernity

In essence, modernity has rested upon the belief that the exercise of reason can inform progressive development towards individual and societal self-realization. It is an articulation of the confident claims of the Enlightenment; the replacement of myth and religion by science and reason; the replacement of tutelage to superstition and irrationality by self.direction through the exercise of reason; the displacement of the cyclical fatalism of human existence by the promise of evolution and progress; the expectation that reason and philosophy could be married to (indeed, could only be realized in), the requirements of practical, sensuous life. For Habermas, the more optimistic Enlightenment thinkers »had the expectation that the arts and sciences would promote not only the control of natural forces, but would also further understanding of the world and of the self, would promote moral progress, the justice of institutions, and even the happiness of human beings«. This is an optimism which »the twentieth century has shattered«.[2]

Now even the keenest advocates of the project of modernity (including Hegel and Marx) recognized that its realization might be difficult. But there also exists, alongside and almost as longstanding as the project of modernity itself, a more deepseated

1. J. Habermas, "The Dialectic of Rationalization", *Telos*, 49, 1981.
2. Habermas, "Modernity versus Postmodernity", *New German Critique*, 22, 1981.

questioning of its most fundamental premises - that is a belief that the claims of reason to inform progressive development towards individual and societal self-realization were not just difficult to vindicate in practice but indeed profoundly mistaken in intent. The anti-modernists refute the claimed association between reason and emancipation that modernity shares with the Enlightenment. Their counter-argument is that the relationship between the practical application of (Western, instrumental) reason and emancipation is precisely the opposite of the indicated by the Enlightenment. The meta-narratives of Reason and of modernity do not foster self-realization; they do not *disclose* but rather *mask* the exercise of power - so that »Reason itself destroys the humanity it first made possible«.[3] For Habermas, the coming of Nietzsche signifies a decisive formalization of this anti-modernist sentiment and the origins of something like a post-modernist position.

Habermas's ambition is to show that these criticisms of modernity (from Nietzsche to Foucault) are mistaken. He suggests that the development of modernity has been one-sided and does display many of the weaknesses which its critics very effectively isolate. He accepts that the project of modernity has in some sense been *distorted*. However, these weaknesses and distortions are seen not to be intrinsic ti the project of modernity itself. The drastic conclusions of the opponents of modernity - that the project of modernity should be abandoned - are not justified by their critique. Broadly, Habermas's claim is that, suitably reconstructed, the project of the Enlightenment/Modernity can still be progressive and realizable.

Habermas sets out to defend this claim through a consideration of the historical development of the philosophical discourse of modernity and the parallel discourse of counter-modernity. He argues that the project of modernity had (and still has) an authentically emancipatory potential, but insists that this has been substantively suppressed by a number of »wrong turns« in its philosophical and historical development. Most fundamentally is this weakness to be retraced to the experience of Hegel and Marx. Habermas speculates that »the discourse of modernity took the wrong turn at the first crossroads before which the young Marx stood when he criticized Hegel«.[4]

Indeed,

the parallels between Hegel and Marx are striking. In their youth, both thinkers hold open the idea of using the idea of uncoerced will formation in a communication community existing under constraints of cooperation as a model for the reconciliation of a divided bourgeois society. But later on, both forsake the use of this option.[5]

For Marx, the alternative was to embrace *the paradigm of production*, in which, echoing Habermas's earlier work, it is suggested that the category of intersubjectivity is subordinated to the generalized category of labour. Habermas is centrally concerned »to trace how the transformation of the concept of reflection ends up in the concept of production, how the replacement of 'self-consciousness' by 'labor' ends up in an

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3. J. Habermas, *The philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Polity Press, Cambridge 1987, p. 110.

4. *Ibid.,* str. 74.

5. *Ibid.,* str. 63.

aporia within Western Marxism«, as, indeed, within the historical project of modernity more generally.[6]

For Habermas, the key to this (and subsequent) 'wrong turns' lies in the unsatisfactory resolution of the philosophical problem of the 'paradigm of consciousness' or 'the philosophy of the subject'. Habermas insists that this problem of the self-constituting and self-contradictory subject had been recognised throughout the discourse of modernity, (and was not simply unearthed by its more recent critics). But he also maintains that the philosophers of modernity never satisfactorily resolved the challenge posed by 'the philosophy of the subject'. This is both the point of agreement between Habermas and the post-modernists, but also the perspective from which he criticizes them.

Thus the one point in the critique of modernity that Habermas endorses is that »the paradigm of the philosophy of consciousness is exhausted«.[7] But he entirely rejects the conclusions to which this insight is said to give rise. For Habermas, the recognition of this difficulty is as old as the philosophical discourse of modernity itself and can be responded to in terms of a *reconstruction* of the philosophy of modernity, built upon a reversing of those 'wrong turns' taken at strategic points in its development. In essence, this means replacing the model of subject-centred reason

with the model of unconstrained consensus formation in a communication community standing under cooperative constraints ... [an orientation] to communicatively structured lifeworlds that reproduce themselves via the palpable medium of action oriented to mutual agreement.[8]

Here we return to Habermas's familiar claims about universal pragmatics and the ideal speech situation.

Communicative reason finds its criteria in the argumentative procedures for directly or indirectly redeeming claims to propositional truth, normative rightness, subjective truthfulness, and aesthetic harmony ... This communicative rationality recalls older ideas of logos, inasmuch as it brings along with it the connotations of a noncoercively unifying, consensus-building force of a discourse in which the participants overcome their at first subjectively biased views in favor of a rationally motivated agreement. Communicative reason is expressed in a decentred understanding of the world.[9]

For Habermas, the advocates of postmodernity have made the mistake of identifying the limitations of a particular form of (subject-centred) reason as a limitation of *all* forms of reason. Habermas's claim is to have reconstituted the traditional but problematic claims of the supporters of modernity by purging this tradition of its association with an (exhausted) subject-centred reason and redeeming it through the appeal to the claims of intersubjective or communicative reason.

Modernity and the social welfare state project

The philosophical discourse of modernity is seen always to have been concerned with

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6. *Ibid.*, str. 59.
7. *Ibid.*, str. 296.
8. *Ibid.*, str. 295.
9. *Ibid.*, str. 314-5.

its relationship to political praxis. Habermas is insistent that his own recasting of modernity in terms of the suppressed element of communicative reason has just such practical implications in terms of our understanding of the contemporary problems of the »social-welfare-state-project«. Just like modernity, the welfare state is seen to have been a »disappointment« for these who were its keenest proponents. Habermas argues that the architects of the welfare state project, (primarily social democratic parties and trades unions), were principally motivated by the desire to enhance opportunities for the self-realization of workers by freeing them from the most oppressive aspects of commodification. The post-war welfare state was a part of »the Utopian project of labor«.[10] But while their ambition lay in the emancipation of labour, the day-to-day *practice* of the welfare state has increased the colonization of the life-world and expanded the control of external forces over the individual and her/his free development. Thus Habermas sees the action of the founders of the welfare state being almost exclusively directed towards »the taming of capitalism«, and this primarily through the use of state power which they (mistakenly) regarded as neutral or 'innocent'. In fact, in the promotion of 'welfare legislation programmes ... an ever tighter net of legal norms, and of governmental and supporting bureaucracies has been drawn over the everyday existence of potential and actual clients'. The *intention* was to liberate the lifeworld from subjection to commodification, but the *outcome* has been the subordination of the lifeworld to *both* commodification and (state) bureaucratization. Habermas concludes:

In short, inherent in the project of the social [welfare] state is a contradiction between goal and method. Its goal is the establishment of forms of life which are structured according to egalitarian standards and which at the same time open up arenas for individual self-fulfillment and spontaneity. But apparently this goal cannot be achieved directly through a legal and administrative transformation of political programmes.[11]

Consequently, »the programme of the social welfare state ... is losing its capacity to project future possibilities for a collectively better and less endangered way of life.«[12]

This may be related directly to the traditional constitution of modernity which has operated with the twin construct of economy/commodification and state/bureaucratization. If the emancipatory purpose of the welfare state project is to be realized, this requires the promotion of a third strand - a sphere oriented around the generation of solidarity and meaning, defence of the integrity of the lifeworld, and sustained through intersubjective, discursive will-formation. If »the project of the social welfare state were not simply carried on or abandoned, but rather continued at a higher level of reflection«, as Habermas recommends that it should be, it would need to become »reflexive to a certain extent and aim at taming not just the capitalistic economy, but the state itself«.[13]

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10. Habermas. "The New Obscurity: The Crisis of the welfare state and the exhaustion of utopian energies", v *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 1, (2), 1986, str. 1-18.

11. *Ibid.*, str. 9.

12. *Ibid.*

13. Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, str. 63.

This third »lifeworld« sub-system, (alongside the economy and the state), could be identified with a civil society not reduced to »the sphere of needs«; or more properly with the new politics of autonomous public spheres:

Autonomous public spheres would have to attain a combination of power and intelligent self-limitation, that would make the self-regulating mechanisms of the state and economy sufficiently sensitive to the goal-oriented results of radically democratic formation of public will.[14]

It is through these independent public spheres that the integrity and autonomy of a plurality of lifestyles and life projects (which was a part of the promise of modernity) could be redeemed. It was this that the philosophy of both the young Hegel and the young Marx had promised but which had been supressed by the 'wrong turn' that embraced the dominance of the paradigm of production. In this way could the authentic promise of modernity finally be realized through a reconstitution of the »social welfare state project«.

Politically, neither the neo-conservatives nor traditional social democrats can respond adequately to this challenge, Habermas recommends a third force built around the insights of »the dissidence of the critics of growth«, seen, for example, in the new social movements of West Germany, as the likely architects of a reconstruction of the welfare state project.

Assessment

Habermas's view of the necessity of a (re)activation of a third sub-system (lifeworld/public spheres) and his account of weaknesses in the contemporary welfare state is challenging. At the same time it raises a vast number of difficulties and here I pose just three key questions which seem to me to be suggested by Habermas's incomplete treatment of modernity and the welfare state:

1) Is it really appropriate to speak of the welfare state as it has developed in advanced capitalism as »the Utopian project of labour«? At best, the welfare state may be understood as a compromise of the interests of capital and labour. It was widely introduced by non-socialist forces and often in the face of trades union opposition. Only the most sanguine social democrats have represented the welfare state as if it were a realization of »the Utopian project of labour« - and then only under very particular conditions. Rarely, if ever, has the welfare state protected its working class constituency against commodification - and such success may be institutionally inconsistent with the survival of welfare states.

2) Is the idea of unconstrained communicative competence and autonomous public spheres really an adequate (or appropriate) model for describing an alternative welfare strategy within advanced capitalist societies? If so, what would public spheres look like and what institutional arrangements would or could underpin them? What would the processes for achieving discursively-formed decisions look like? Who (if not the state) will uphold the autonomy or public spheres, mediate potential disputes between them and secure the rights of individuals?

14. *Ibid.*, str. 15.

3) What social forces/resources can be mobilized to make the third sub-system effective over against commodification and bureaucratization? After all, the architects of the welfare state solution, insofar as they were concerned to limit the effects of commodification, were driven to embrace the state [often reluctantly] as the only effective force *that could counterbalance the social powers of capital*

We should remain cautious in our criticism of Habermas, especially were this to suggest an endorsement of the (still less persuasive) argument of post-modernists of the New Right. Perhaps at this stage, it is more appropriate to endorse Martin Jay's comment at an earlier stage of Habermas's odyssey:

Not only is modernity an uncompleted project, so, too, is Habermas's enormously ambitious attempt to salvage its still emancipatory potential. [15]

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15. Martin Jay, "Habermas and Modernism", v *Habermas and Modernity* (Ur. R. Bernstein), Polity Press, Cambridge 1985.