

# Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action<sup>1</sup>

*Frederik van Gelder*

Habermas's *Theory of Communicative Action* (TcA) is one of those books – flanked by preparatory investigations, comments, elaborations, retractions, reformulations, special studies, translations in ten languages, a sheer unmanageable and multinational secondary literature – that one approaches with the respect that is due to the *pièce de résistance* of a celebrated savant. Presenting itself as both a new 'Logic of the Social Sciences' as well as a reactualisation of Horkheimer's old project of a 'dialectical logic' of the present as 'history', it is not a work that is easily 'glossed'. For however much Habermas himself resists this characterisation, and however much one should immediately qualify it, this is a 'philosophical system' in at least the sense that the claims it raises are systematic, substantive-empirical, interdisciplinary in their ramifications, and historiographic/political all at once.

So how does one do that? If the Philosophy of Science as this has been taught in the West for at least a century, at the deepest level at which this is possible, at the level of its logic and its epistemology, is in some essential sense misconstrued, (or at the very least misleadingly 'reductionistic'), if the methodological absolutism that it teaches is, as it were, a false hypostatization, then this cannot fail but to have the most far-reaching consequences across all of the disciplines – starting with the Social sciences and the Arts. In a very determined way, it is the meaning of the words 'science', 'logic' and 'reason' that are being held up to the light, being reinterpreted, recast, regrounded, reformulated, 'reconstructed' – a 'paradigm-change' in the sense of Thomas Kuhn if ever there was one. If on top of that it seeks to

---

1 1981. Abbreviated throughout by *TcA*.

take up once again, with the ‘system/lifeworld’ distinction, what in Marx’s \*Critique of Political Economy\* was once called a ‘real abstraction’, then it becomes clear why this is one of those books that demand a lot more than the study of the book itself. The recent four-volume publication on Habermas by David Rasmussen and James Swindal<sup>2</sup>, by seventy or more specialists in their field, covering Philosophy, Philosophy of Science, Hermeneutics, Ethics, Epistemology, Linguistic, Law, Sociology, Gender Studies, Political Science, Historiography – for a start – makes it clear just what one has let oneself in for when one says: let’s discuss Habermas’s *TcA*.

\*\*\*

Let me start by putting the book in the context of the time in which it was written, and with that aspect of it that attracted, within academic circles, the most attention.

There were two important developments, one in the social sciences generally and other in philosophy, from about the sixties onwards, that prepared the ground for Critical Theory in general and for Habermas’s methodological innovations (including substantive research in language) in particular.

- The first was the so-called ‘hermeneutic’ turn.<sup>3</sup> Ever since Talcott Parsons, basing himself on the biological sciences and then on Max Weber, showed that no ‘systems theory’ kind of approach to society at the ‘macro’-level can forego some way of thematising the symbolic- and meaning-systems of social actors, sociologists pondered what on the German side of the divide had been discussed, from at least Dilthey onwards, as the problem of ‘verstehen’. In addition to a revival of interest in Max Weber, this brought with it an appreciation of the need to introduce a diachronic element in sociological theory altogether<sup>4</sup> – some of it stimulated by Winch’s confrontation

---

2 David Rasmussen and James Swindal (eds.) 2001: *Jürgen Habermas*, (4. vols.) Sage Publications.

3 c.f. Georgia Warnke (2001): „Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology“ in: Rasmussen and Swindal (eds, op. cit.): Habermas, vol. 1.

4 c.f. on this: George E. McCarthy (2001): *Objectivity and the Silence of Reason – Weber, Habermas, and the Methodological Disputes in German Sociology*. „While issues of the philosophy of social science are being widely discussed in the American academy today, there also appears to be a resistance to these discussions from many of the social scientists themselves as they continue to define more strictly, around behaviorist and

of Science with its own history.<sup>5</sup> When one adds to this the various phenomenological and sociology of religion schools of the sixties and seventies<sup>6</sup>, then it is clear that there was, even before Habermas came upon the scene, a widely felt need for a way out of the impasse created by an all too positivistic (self)conception of the social sciences.<sup>7</sup>

- The second is a related theme within analytic philosophy itself. The logical empiricism from which it originated was based on the modern image of nature as something entirely freed from the old notions of substance and form,<sup>8</sup> but on these premises – the position of classical materialism – the role of the observing scientist and his/her

positivist criteria, the concepts, methods, and theories appropriate to scientific inquiry.“ ... „Both Weber and Habermas are concerned with issues of objectivity and values in relation to science; both inquire into the nature of empirical facts and historical evidence, theory construction, and methods of validation and testing; both view value relevance and human interests as central to the construction of science; both reject the metaphysics of positivism and the epistemology of realism; both attempt to integrate the methods of understanding (interpretation) and explanation (causation) into their sociological analysis; both recognize the methodological importance of rationalization and reification; and both relate their methodological writings to concrete empirical research. Also central to both authors is a concern with the role of reason in voicing values and ethical choices in social science.“ (p. 1, ff.) (c.f. also: J. Mahoney and D. Rueschemeyer, 2003, eds.: *Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences*, CUP.)

- 5 And hence providing the inspiration, inter alia, for a number of very successful HPS departments at major universities.
- 6 Alfred Schutz, Berger and Luckman, (*The Social Construction of Reality*) Harold Garfinkel's *Ethnomethodology*, Clifford Geertz' assimilation of sociology of religion with anthropology (*Available Light: anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics*, Princeton 2000.), The Chicago School's 'participant observer' series.
- 7 In Economics there have always been dissidents, from Baran and Sweezy to Ernest Mandel to Susan George, who have kept alive Marx' Critique of Political Economy; In Anthropology there has been not only Talcott Parsons but also the so-called 'neo-Darwinian synthesis', from Huxley to Bertalanffy, the Leakys and the 'higher primate' people – Jane Goodall, Diane Fossey, through to Rumbaugh and the 'gestural origins of speech' debates. In linguistics there has been from the start Noam Chomsky, in developmental psychology Jean Piaget, in Semiotics Charles Morris, in Literature George Steiner. In Psychology, with its uncomfortable three-way split between philosophy, psycho-analysis and the pharmaceuticals industry, the Lacan-school is not the only one to have kept alive the notion of a non-reductionist approach to the psyche.
- 8 "Most philosopher-scientists of the scientific revolution took the modern image of nature very seriously: they considered it as the true image, while hylemorphism and many assumptions inherent in common sense were deemed to be mistaken. As a consequence, these philosopher-scientists had to argue that the mental aspect of human beings either does not belong to (material) nature at all (Cartesian dualism) or is somehow reducible to something that at first sight seems to exclude it (materialism a la Hobbes or La Mettrie)." (Herman Philipse: „Analitici & Continentali – Bridging the Analytic-Continental Divide“; Tel-Aviv 1999.)

consciousness becomes difficult to account for. ‘Mind’ becomes a residual artefact that, on analytic principles, one can neither comfortably ignore nor satisfactorily ‘explain’. This did not in itself present insurmountable difficulties for as long as it was formal logic and mathematics (and hence the proximity to the natural sciences) that defined the core interests and preoccupations of philosophy in the ‘analytic’ mode<sup>9</sup>, but it did begin to matter once, with the ‘later’ Wittgenstein, it turned out that the foundations of logic and mathematics were much more directly linked to ‘ordinary language’ (and hence to ‘subjectivity’) than had been claimed. If there’s an indissoluble link between logic and language on the one hand, between sense certainty and its necessary communication via a symbol system on the other, then the barriers between formal logic and empirical descriptions, between ‘mind’ and ‘matter’, between theory and subjective states, begin to seem a lot less iron-clad than logical empiricism had maintained all along. Theories of truth going back to Frege and Russell, themselves Cartesian in their categorical separation of *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, (things of the mind and things of perception), seemed vulnerable at the very level at which Russell in particular had originally established his reputation: the foundations of mathematics and logic. Epistemologies which held that every question of meaning is in principle translatable into the language either of formal logic or into the description of objects and processes, seemed overly reductionistic once Austin and Searle demonstrated that truth and objectivity could be reduced neither to formal logic nor to pure descriptions devoid of the symbolism of a natural language.<sup>10</sup>

- 
- 9 Thomas McCarthy speaks of „... the very peculiar postwar spectacle of mainstream Anglo-American philosophy flowing along for decades with virtually no influx from the human sciences. This was peculiar in both senses of the term. Not only was it distinctive of analytic philosophy that after a century of development of specialized modes of inquiry tailored to comprehending sociocultural phenomena, it all but ignored them except for persistent attempts to assimilate them to the natural sciences. It was also very queer. Since philosophy itself is a form of reflection on human thought and action, it might naturally be assumed to have especially close relations to those sciences that have developed other reflective approaches to the same domain.“ Thomas McCarthy: „Philosophy and Social Practice: Avoiding the Ethnocentric Predicament“ in: A. Honneth, T. McCarthy, C. Offe, A. Wellmer (eds., 1992:) *Philosophical Interventions in the Unfinished Project of Enlightenment* (FS Jürgen Habermas) MIT, p. 242.
- 10 Not that the ‘linguistic turn’ (i.e. Wittgenstein and then Austin and Searle’s demonstration of the ‘language-’ and ‘symbol’-mediatedness of all perceptions, and hence the shift of focus from sense perceptions to speech acts) has shaken the old objectivistic

\*\*\*

It was at this juncture in the English-language debates that Habermas began to make an impact with a powerfully anti-empiricist and anti-positivist series of works that straddled both of these areas with remarkable success: both the Social Sciences and Philosophy proper.<sup>11</sup>

What Habermas offered – although this was visible only from the German side of things – had already been prefigured in two central notions of Adorno: the principled ‘non-identity’ of thought with its object, and thought’s critical reflection on itself as constituted by something ‘outside of itself’ – not in the post-Cartesian positivist-dualist manner, not in the manner of the ‘Transcendental Subject’ of German Idealism, but by the ‘objective contradictions’ (the ‘totality’) of a fractious and war-ridden Capitalist society. This was the position that Adorno had defended at the time of the ‘Positivist Dispute’, and it had been Habermas’s task at the time, as Adorno’s assistant, to back him up in this. (That’s how Habermas originally won his spurs.) But it was the way Habermas acquitted himself of that task back in the sixties, that was already then a harbinger of things to come.

For Adorno’s critique of positivism in general – and of Popper in particular – for all its trenchant persuasiveness, was vulnerable to sceptical rebuttal in two areas: in its unapologetic invocation of Hegelian categories, and

---

paradigm; it merely moved to pastures new – to cognitive science, neurophysiology, linguistics. Its central axiom has remained, as it already was in Russell’s *History of Western Philosophy*, that History and the Philosophy of Science ‘are one’. But if the natural sciences are the only possible foundation for a rational and objective understanding of reality, there is this single, disturbing exception: an understanding of our own psyche, an understanding of what in a long English-speaking tradition is called, in unmissably Aristotelian terminology, ‘Mind’, – not coincidentally the title of one of the oldest journals of philosophy. If, within analytic philosophy, there’s something worthy of being termed a ‘contradiction’ in the dialectical sense, then it would be this. No amount of expertise in neurophysiology or cognitive science is going to help us decide those pressing ‘identity’ questions which Kant, more than two centuries ago, expressed in his famous ‘wer bin ich, wo gehe ich hin, was soll ich tun’.

11 "At that time discussions of the methodology of science were still dominated by logical positivism. Kuhn’s pathbreaking work, published a few years earlier, had only begun to make itself felt among philosophers of natural science; in the philosophy of social science it was, and was to remain for some time to come, only a distant rumbling. Thus Habermas’s main concern was to challenge the hegemony of ‘empirical-analytical’ concepts of social science, to show, in particular, that access to the symbolically structured object domain of social inquiry called for procedures similar in important respects to those developed in the text-interpreting humanities." (T. McCarthy: „Introduction“ to Habermas: *On the Logic of the Social Sciences*, op. cit.)

its somewhat aloof relationship to the specific concerns of the Social Sciences themselves.<sup>12</sup> The first vulnerability meant that the weaknesses of the Hegelian system, especially its notion of a dialectical ‘totality’ of universal and particular, played directly into the hands of the critics – who, quoting Popper, could make short shift with what they held up as an illusory, immodest, and potentially dangerous ‘myth of total reason’.<sup>13</sup>

The second meant that there was no obvious way of operationalising the concepts of dialectical reason for the practice of the individual sciences.<sup>14</sup> Already in Habermas’s contributions to the Positivist Dispute itself<sup>15</sup> it was clear that the task that he had set himself was to strengthen Adorno’s position with regard to both of these points: an ‘imminent critique’ of formal logic, of positivism in general, and secondly, a ‘Logic of the Social Sciences’ that would free it methodologically from ‘scientism’, – i.e. from logical-analytic reductionism – while at the same time show much greater receptivity to individual research problematics.

But how does one do that: an ‘imminent critique’ (or a ‘determinate negation’) of ‘positivism’? The established schools within Philosophy of Science – since Russell, Whitehead, Moore in England, the ‘Vienna Circle’ in Europe, Dewey, Peirce and William James in the U.S., orient themselves towards ‘evidence-based’ research, towards the ‘hypothetico-deductive method’, to the analysis of concepts and theories, and to the obvious and overwhelming success of the natural sciences. What does it involve, against this background, to pursue, as Habermas has now done for half a lifetime, a qualitatively *different* kind of science?

12 Something which Adorno was himself the first to concede: „Als schuldig an einem wahrhaften Mangel jedoch, der der Diskussion im Wege stand, müßten beide Referenten [Popper u. Adorno – fvg] sich bekennen: beiden gelang die volle Vermittlung zur Soziologie als solcher nicht.“ *GS* vol. 8, p. 281.

13 K. Popper (1962:) „What is Dialectic?“ in: *Conjectures and Refutations*. „The whole development of dialectic should be a warning against the dangers inherent in philosophical system-building. It should remind us that philosophy should not be made a basis for any sort of scientific system and that philosophers should be much more modest in their claims. On task which they can fulfill quite usefully is the study of the critical methods of science.“ (p. 335.) Similarly Hans Albert (1976): „The Myth of Total Reason: Dialectical Claims in the Light of Undialectical Criticism“ in: Adorno et al.: *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, op. cit.

14 Despite Adorno’s own pioneering work in the *Authoritarian Personality*, and despite the unjustly neglected *Gruppenexperiment* – the first major empirical study carried out by Horkheimer and Adorno after their return to Germany. (c.f. „Schuld und Abwehr – Eine qualitative Analyse zum Gruppenexperiment“ – originally in *Frankfurter Beiträge zur Soziologie*, 1955. Reprinted in Adorno *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 9, p. 122ff.)

15 "The Analytic Theory of Science and Dialectics" and „A Positivistically Bisected Rationalism“ in: Adorno et.al. (ed., 1976): *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*.

The strategy that he has consistently pursued, all the way through to the *TcA* itself, has been to probe, in very many variations, the following question: what does it mean, and what are the consequences, if the objectivating stance itself,<sup>16</sup> that we must of necessity learn to adopt before we can do ‘science’ in any meaningful way at all, becomes an object of investigation in its own right? Let me approach the *TcA* – in which, at the epistemological level, the above question stands so central – by retracing three of the steps that led up to it.

\*\*\*

1.) The first step consisted in taking up the old C.P. Snow notion of ‘two cultures’ and making the case that for the Social sciences there was no alternative but to find some way of combining the methods of both the natural sciences and the humanities.

„Whereas the natural and the cultural or hermeneutic sciences are capable of living in a mutually indifferent, albeit more hostile than peaceful, coexistence, the social sciences must bear the tension of divergent approaches under one roof, for in them the very practice of research compels reflection on the relationship between analytic and hermeneutic methodologies.“<sup>17</sup>

That is, the first step in Habermas’s challenge to the ‘empirical-analytical’ methodology of the social sciences consisted in the demonstration that the object-domain of society, and everything within it, was already sym-

16 ‘Stance’ = ‘Grundeinstellung zur Welt’, literally: fundamental orientation towards the world. (McCarthy renders this with „basic attitudes: *TcA* vol. 1, p. 238. ‘Stances’ seems to me to emphasise the active, agency aspect of ‘Grundeinstellung zur Welt’ better than the much more passive ‘attitudes’ does.) There are, according to the *TcA*, three such stances that are demonstrable in the linguistic structure of all natural languages: objectivating, norm-conformative, expressive, corresponding to the anthropological universals of outer nature, social integration, ego-integration.

“Language is the medium through which speakers and hearers realize certain fundamental demarcations. The subject demarcates himself: (1) from an environment that he objectifies in the third-person attitude of an observer; (2) from an environment that he conforms to or deviates from in the ego-alter attitude of a participant; (3) from his own subjectivity that he expresses or conceals in a first-person attitude; and finally (4) from the medium of language itself. For these domains of reality I have proposed the somewhat arbitrarily chosen terms: external nature, society, internal nature, and language.

The validity claims unavoidably implied in speech oriented to reaching understanding show that these four regions must always simultaneously appear.” („What is Universal Pragmatics?“, *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, p. 66.)

17 J. Habermas (1988): *On the Logic of the Social Sciences*, p. 3.

bologically pre-structured in a way that the natural sciences have no need to take into account. In making this case he could of course have appealed to well-established phenomenological, hermeneutic, linguistic, literary traditions on both sides of the Atlantic, whose methods had been based on exactly that presupposition for centuries. But Habermas aimed at a great deal more than bringing explanatory and interpretive approaches into some kind of spurious unity, or to argue for the primacy of one over the other.

2.) The second step consisted in contrasting the methodological debates with substantive ones in such a way that – quite contrary to the conventional way of starting with ‘pure theory’ and then moving over to the application thereof – there is a permanent and characteristic tension between both: the ‘theory’ side and the substantive side. This was already clear in Habermas’s elegant demonstration, in the *Logic of the Social Sciences* (1967), that the very plausibility of functionalist explanations in Anthropology and Sociology – in the study of self-regulating systems generally – depends on the existence of purposiveness in one guise or another. It is precisely this ‘purposiveness without purposeful activity’ (which in the biological sciences had in any case been uncontested since Darwin) that positivism must, on its assumptions, deny dogmatically:

„What is crucial here for the positivist expounding the logical unity of the science is that the causal connections among the variables in a self-regulating system, as well as those between the system and its environment, can be analysed without reference to a meaning or goal that is anchored in reality itself. Teleology is a matter of formulation, not a formulation of the matter.“<sup>18</sup>

3.) The third step consisted in an intense study of language itself, in all its many facets, which he already announces in the ‘Logic’ book. („Today the problem of language has taken the place of the traditional problem of consciousness: the transcendental critique of language takes the place of that of consciousness.“<sup>19</sup>) It would lead him, in a series of papers remarkable for their range, incisiveness and influence, to the idea of a linguistic foundation for Sociology, to the study of the linguistic side of communicative pathology, and above all to the universal structures of communication that are embedded, it now seems, in all natural languages.<sup>20</sup> (These he terms ‘universal pragmatic’ structures to emphasise that this is not a theory in the tra-

18 op. cit. *On the Logic of the Social Sciences*, p. 81. The debate here is between Hempel and Nagel on the one hand, Parsons and functionalism on the other.

19 p. 117.

20 c.f. J. Habermas (2001): *On the Pragmatics of Social Interaction – Preliminary Studies in the Theory of Communicative Action*. MIT.

ditional sense of the term but empirically demonstrable competences that we all possess by virtue of being normally – in the statistical sense – socialised actors or agents within a modern society<sup>21</sup>, and which we are able to access only by a process of reflection, i.e. by leaving the ‘objectivating’ stance for some other standpoint.<sup>22</sup>)

\*\*\*

It is only in the *TcA* that these three steps, the themes described, are woven together into a single systematic work:

- the critique of positivism (by confronting it with those substantive studies in sociology and social psychology that make positivism’s own premises untenable),
- the universal structures of communication in our species (our automatic invocation, every time we act communicatively, of validity-claims in the areas of the cognitive-factual, the moral-practical, the expressive-subjective),
- a ‘species-history’, in the form of a ‘rational reconstruction’ of the way these modern communicative structures (this system of validity-claims) must have evolved historically,

---

21 "What is Universal Pragmatics?" in Habermas (1979): *Communication and the Evolution of Society*.

22 A standpoint which, for all of Habermas’s determined rejection of the transcendentalism of the old ‘Philosophy of Reflection’, bears a remarkable resemblance to the transcendentalism of Apel’s Philosophy of Reflection. (c.f. Karl-Otto Apel, 1992: „Normatively Grounding ‘Critical Theory’ through recourse to the Lifeworld? A Transcendental-Pragmatic attempt to think with Habermas against Habermas“ in: Honneth et. al. (eds.) *Philosophical Interventions in the Unfinished Project of the Enlightenment*.)

This difficulty he has in pinning down just this what this realm is in which we find ourselves when we reflect on the ‘stances’ has to do with the two different roles that Habermas has played ever since the twin publications *Knowledge and Human Interests* and *Theory and Practice*. There’s Habermas the philosopher, and then there’s Habermas the critic of contemporary politics and society. Philosophically he has only the most minor of quibbles with the full-blown transcendentalism of Karl-Otto Apel, politically the ‘colonisation of the life-world’ by the ‘objectivating stance’ is attributed to the Parsonian ‘media’ of power and money. So are these ‘stances’ anthropological universals comparable to Chomsky-like ‘deep structures’ underlying all natural languages, or are they the key to what is so threatening and ominous about Globalization? How does it relate to that ‘intersubjectivity’ which the psychoanalysts circumscribe with the term ‘transference-countertransference situation? These are all issues that lead back to the reasons that Habermas names for the necessity of the ‘paradigm-change’ from ‘work’ to ‘interaction’, which was originally introduced as a critique of Marx but then, over the years, comes to include ‘early’ Critical Theory.

- a ‘diagnosis of the times’ in as much as the ‘systems’-perspective, reflecting the reality of power and money in the world today, impinges upon and ‘colonises’ the life-world – by squeezing the latter dry of every form of rationality other than the objectivating stance. (Leading to the characteristic pathologies of modernity in the areas of ego-integration, motivation, primary socialisation, education, and international relations.<sup>23</sup>) It is necessary to keep all three of these areas in mind when one sets out to interpret sentences like the following:

„If we assume that the human species maintains itself through the socially coordinated activities of its members and that this coordination is established through communication – and in certain spheres of life, through communication aimed at reaching agreement – then the reproduction of the species also requires satisfying the conditions of a rationality inherent in communicative action.“<sup>24</sup>

\*\*\*

The core concept is that of a ‘stance’ – or rather: the three validity-claims, and through these, the three ‘stances’ (objectivating, norm-conformative, expressive) of which we become aware by reflecting upon the validity claims that we automatically raise when we address sentence ‘p’ to at least one alter ego with the purpose of seeking an agreement. These ‘stances’ are central in all three of the areas mentioned: epistemology, macro-history, politics, and by tracing out the implications of these stances in each, it becomes clear why I started this paper by calling the *TcA* a philosophical system.<sup>25</sup> (Not in the everyday sense that we speak of a particular author hav-

23 Habermas: „Legitimation Problems in the Modern State“ (in *Communication and the Evolution of Society* op. cit.), as well as *Legitimationsprobleme im Spätkapitalismus*, 1973.

24 p. ix.

25 It’s of interest that in the Rasmussen/Swindal Reader, Habermas’s work is treated more as a ‘system’ in the traditional philosophical sense than that it concentrates on specific areas in psychology, anthropology, law, and so on. (It does that also, but very clearly from within the perspective of the Habermas-school itself.) That this program has been immensely influential, at least academically, needs hardly to be pointed out. But that’s not the same as saying that reflecting on the validity claims which each of us, as members of *H. sapiens*, need to raise before a communicative act in the sense of Habermas can succeed is an equivalent for what once went under ‘Realabstraktion’, even if, for those who still know their ‘early Critical Theory’, there is no difficulty in recognizing in the ‘validity claims/discourses’ or ‘lifeworld/system’ distinctions echoes of Horkheimer and Adorno. But what provided the ‘critique of idealism’ of early Critical Theory its force was its historical context: Critical Theory, Ideologiekritik, and resistance to Na-

ing a particular ‘world-view’ or ‘system’, but in the original philosophical sense of being able to pursue, for many different individual fields, of some central idea.) It is also the case that by tracing out the relation of the ‘objectivating’ stance in the three fields mentioned – epistemology, macro-history, politics – that what I said above begins to make sense, namely that the objectivity of the stances must be kept analytically distinct from the objectivating stance itself; the former is meant to indicate objectivity in the general, post-Kantian sense of referring to what is independent of our purely subjective perceptions of it; the latter as a subjective competence, something that needs to be learnt in the course of a contingent socialisation process. (Reminiscent hence of the Kantian ‘aprioris’, but here understood not in the ‘transcendental-conditions-for-the-possibility-of’ sense, but as real structures of ‘communicative competence’ with a real history.)

This is how Thomas McCarthy, the translator of the *TcA*, and the person who first presented all of this to an English-speaking readership summarises it:

„Habermas argues that our ability to communicate has a universal core – basic structures and fundamental rules that all subjects master in learning to speak a language. Communicative competence is not just a matter of being able to produce grammatical sentences. In speaking we relate to the world about us, to other subjects, to our own intentions, feelings, and desires. In each of these dimensions we are constantly making claims, even if usually only implicitly, concerning the validity of what we are saying, implying, or presupposing – claims, for instance, regarding the truth of what we say in relation to the objective world; or claims concerning the rightness, appropriateness, or norms of our social lifeworld; or claims to sincerity or authenticity in regard to the manifest expressions of our intentions and feelings. ...

The key to his [Habermas’s] notion of reaching understanding (*Verständigung*) is the possibility of using reasons or grounds to gain intersubjective recognition for criticizable validity claims. This possibility exists in each of the three dimensions

---

zism and Fascism ‘were one’: It’s in this vein that Adorno could write, long after the war, that „... the continued existence of National Socialism within democracy [is] potentially more threatening than the continued existence of fascist tendencies against democracy.“ (quoted in Matustik, op. cit., p. 284). So what’s the contemporary equivalent thereof, and how does one get there from an analysis of validity claims? There can be no doubt that the notion of ‘communicative action’ (and the ‘stances’ which this presupposes) can be traced back to a central theme in the entire dialectical tradition, namely the critique of idealism, of *Ideologiekritik*. It is this which invites a comparison between the ‘stances’ (or the validity-claims of ordinary language) in Habermas and the notion of non-identity in Adorno, something which, as far as I can tell, has not yet been carried out in any serious way.

mentioned above. It is not only claims to propositional truth and to the effectiveness of means for attaining ends that can be criticized and defended with reasons; the claim that an action is right or appropriate in relation to a certain normative context, or that such a context deserves to be recognized as legitimate, can also be discussed in this way; as can the claims that an utterance is a sincere or authentic expression of one's own subjective experiences. That is, in each of these dimensions it is possible to reach agreement about disputed claims by way of argument and insight and without recourse to force other than that of reasons or grounds. In each dimension there exists a "reflective medium" for dealing with problematic validity claims – that is, modes of argumentation or critique that enable us to thematize contested validity claims and to attempt to vindicate or criticize them."<sup>26</sup>

\*\*\*

So much for the epistemological side of the *TcA*.

Before saying something about the much more overtly 'political' Habermas of recent years, let me return to a theme briefly touched on above, but which got sidelined in my consideration of the 'stances'; I mean: the relationship of the *TcA* to Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*, or more generally: the relationship of Habermas to Critical Theory.

In the history of Critical Theory the *TcA* is widely recognized as a watershed and a milestone. This is usually meant in two senses: as the most important example of what 'Critical Theory' could still mean today, in terms of a systematic analysis of the „paradoxes of capitalist modernisation“ (Honneth) and as the proof of what it was about so-called 'early' Critical Theory that was supposed to have been such a „dead end“<sup>27</sup>.

Habermas's biographer argues – rightly, in my view – that to understand the arguments behind that endlessly repeated insistence on the necessity for a 'paradigm-change' away from the philosophy of history towards an analysis of language, one needs to take in more of the biographical-political context in which Habermas was working during the seventies – roughly the decade after the death of Adorno than has been done until now.<sup>28</sup> This is

---

26 Thomas McCarthy: „Translator's introduction“ in: *TcA*, vol. 1, p. 17 ff.

27 McCarthy's term: *TcA*, vol. 1, p. xix.

28 Wiggershaus gives the three themes under which this 'paradigm-change' from 'work' to 'interaction' is carried through in the *TcA* and elsewhere: „Die Defizite der Kritischen Theorie bezeichnete Habermas mit den Stichworten normative Grundlagen; Wahrheitsbegriff und Verhältnis zu den Wissenschaften; Unterschätzung demokratisch-rechtsstaatlicher Traditionen. (Wiggershaus: „Weil für Adorno und Horkheimer mit Faschismus, Stalinismus und dem Holocaust der letzte Funke von Vernunft aus der

my impression also, and I can only say that if one wants to understand why, over the years, the relationship between the Adorno-school and the Habermas-school has been less than entirely cordial, one would have to go in that direction.

At the end of vol. 2 of the *TcA* at any rate, in his account of the relationship of the *TcA* to the program of HuA, there's that locus classicus that's become something of a doctrinal benchmark for the whole of the subsequent Habermas School – and at the same time as a kind of effront to the Adorno school: the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is supposed marks a regression to the older philosophy of history on the grounds that it abandons the „historical-materialist assumption of a dialectical relationship between the forces of production and the relations of production“. It is this „abandonment“ of this premise of Marx that is supposed to open the door to those „pseudonormative declarations concerning an objective teleology of history“ that have made an entirely different type of normative ‘regrounding’ of CT necessary, to wit: that grounding to be found in the universalistic validity claims of natural languages.<sup>29</sup> For the followers of Adorno, this has never been convincing.<sup>30</sup> Perhaps one could put it like this: to understand the *TcA* one has to understand not only the theoretical issues but just as well the political controversies that formed Habermas in those years<sup>31</sup>, and of which the *TcA* was also the result. It's worth reconstructing the theoretical situation in which he found himself and the range of options available to him after the publication of *Erkenntnis und Interesse* in 1968. That's probably the one way to go if one wants to understand the reasons for the highly

---

Realität verschwunden war, sahen sie keinen Anknüpfungspunkt mehr für eine ideologiekritisch verfahrenende Theorie, die in den missbrauchten Ideen ein Stück existierender Vernunft entzifferte. Zur Quelle und Rechtfertigung der Kritik wurde eine mimetische Sensibilität, die ihr Vorbild in der ästhetischen Erfahrung moderner Kunst hatte und sich von daher die Kraft zu bestimmter Negation zutraute. Das ging im Falle Adorno gut, eignete sich aber nicht zur Verallgemeinerung. Aussichtsreicher war es in Habermas' Augen, die Aufmerksamkeit auf die Spuren und existierenden Formen einer kommunikativen Rationalität zu richten, die eine Rekonstruktion so tief liegender normativer Grundlagen der kritischen Gesellschaftstheorie zuließen, daß sie von einer Dekomposition der bürgerlichen Kultur, wie sie sich damals in Deutschland vor aller Augen vollzogen hat, nicht berührt worden wäre." Wiggershaus 2004: Jürgen Habermas, op. cit, p.118.) Jürgen Habermas, op.cit, p. 118.

29 *TcA* vol 2, p. 561. (german version.)

30 c.f. Gerhard Bolte (ed., 1989): *Unkritische Theorie – Gegen Habermas*. Zu Klampen; Claudia Rademacher (1993): *Versöhnung oder Verständigung? Kritik der Habermasschen Adorno-Revision*; also the Conclusion of Brian O'Connor's Adorno's *Negative Dialectic*, 2004, MIT.

31 c.f. Martin Beck Matustik (2001): *Jürgen Habermas: A Philosophical-Political Profile*.

peculiar ambivalence of Habermas to Adorno. Much of my own work at the old IfS in Frankfurt has consisted in a detailed, step-by-step comparison of the shifts in meaning, from Horkheimer and Adorno through th Habermas, of the central concepts of ‘reflection’, ‘subjectivity’, ‘objectivity’, ‘dialectic’.<sup>32</sup>

But let me turn now, in the last part of this paper, to the more directly political aspect of the *TcA*, and of Habermas’s work in general.

I would like to do that in the following way, that I read out a couple of pages I wrote for a recent Dutch Social Theory lexicon. It carries the title:

### *Morality and Legitimacy after 9/11*

„After 9-11“ is not just a section title of one of Habermas’s most recent books: *The Divided West*.<sup>33</sup> It is also a reminder that coming to terms with Habermas the philosopher and author requires of the reader a critical appropriation and understanding of the tectonic shifts taking place in the world today. Fundamentalism and terror, faith and knowledge, religion and rationality, the polarisation within the Western World: these themes all feature prominently in his recent work. But there is something else as well: since his official retirement as university professor in 1994 (where ‘retirement’ doesn’t quite fit a man whose tireless appearances at congresses and prize ceremonies all over the world never ceases to amaze) he seems driven by more than just the general urgency which all intellectuals feel in the face of the current international crisis. For Habermas-the-post-war-German-intellectual, for the sociologist and philosopher taking pride in his self-presentation as a product of Allied ‘re-education’ after 1945, the current US Administration’s break with that principle of multilateralism which had guided its foreign policy for at least since Franklin D. Roosevelt and the founding of the United Nations seems to have been something of a personal shock. For the man whose admiration for the “historical achievement”<sup>34</sup> of the bourgeois constitutions of the modern era grew in the course of a life-long analysis of the causes of the collapse of the Weimar Republic, every new manifestation of „hegemonic unilateralism“<sup>35</sup> on the part of the US must evoke apocalyptic associations with the disasters which befell Europe and the rest of the world after the last ‘sonderweg’ (path of

32 Frederik van Gelder (1990): *Habermas’ Begriff des Historischen Materialismus*.

33 Cambridge, 2006, Polity Press.

34 c.f. Rolf Wiggershaus: *Jürgen Habermas*, 2004, p. 17

35 Jürgen Habermas, *Der gespaltene Westen*, 2004, p. 90

unilateralism) of a great power. If historical parallels for our current situation are appropriate at all – he says three months after the collapse of the Twin Towers – it is not that of Pearl Harbor,

„but rather with the aftermath of August 1914. The outbreak of World War I signaled the end of a peaceful and, in retrospect, somewhat unsuspecting era, unleashing an age of warfare, totalitarian oppression, mechanistic barbarism and bureaucratic mass murder. At the time, there was something like a widespread foreboding. Only in retrospect will we be able to understand if the symbolically suffused collapse of the capitalistic citadels in lower Manhattan implies a break of that type or if this catastrophe merely confirms, in an inhuman and dramatic way, a long-known vulnerability of our complex civilization.“<sup>36</sup>

But whether or not it makes sense to look for personal-psychological reasons behind this much more ‘political’ Habermas of recent years,<sup>37</sup> what is clear enough is that this is no longer the patiently reasoning logician of the Social Sciences on the podium, the scholarly historian of ideas, or the philosopher ‘deducing’ the world in its entirety from the first principles of communicative action. This is a persona who has left academia behind him, whose words – suffused with a powerful sense of moral and political urgency – are addressed to a general public, both European and international.<sup>38</sup> Less than a lifetime after the liberation of the concentration camps, the spectre of one more militant nationalism let loose upon the world stage – whatever the nature of the original provocation may have been – has set not only Habermas’s teeth on edge. „The Bush government has, with empty moral phrases, placed on hold the 220-year old Kantian project of

---

36 Giovanna Borradori: *Philosophy in a time of Terror – Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, U. Chicago Press, 2003, p. 26/27

37 "...it was the caesura of 1945 that first led to an eye-opening experience for my generation, one without which I would hardly have ended up in philosophy and social theory. Over-night, as it were, the society in which we had led what had seemed to be a halfway normal everyday life, and the regime governing it, were exposed as pathological and criminal. In this way, the confrontation with the heritage of the Nazi past became a fundamental theme of my adult political life. My interest in political progress became focused on conditions of life that escape the false alternative of ‘Gemeinschaft’ oder ‘Gesellschaft’, ‘community’ or ‘society’. What I have in mind are, as Brecht puts it, ‘friendly’ forms of coexistence that neither forfeit the gains in differentiation of modern societies nor deny the dependence of upright individuals on one another – and their reciprocal reliance on one another." Habermas: „Public space and political public sphere – the biographical roots of two motifs in my thought“. (Kyoto commemorative lecture, Nov. 11, 2004) c.f. also Martin Beck Matustik: „The Ghosts of 1945“, in *Jürgen Habermas, A Philosophical-Political Profile*, 2001.

38 c.f. Deutsche Welle, 03.06.2003: “Philosophizing about Europe’s Rebirth”.

the legalisation of international relations.<sup>39</sup> In answer to the question of an interviewer, whether the „War on Terror“ has turned, in the US, into a „War on Civil Rights“, he says, in the appropriately titled „An Interview on War and Peace“:

„The militarisation of life domestically and internationally, the bellicose politics, the adoption of the methods of the opponent, bringing back the Hobbesian State to the world stage at the very moment that the globalisation of the markets seems to be marginalising politics altogether – none of this would have been acceptable to the politically sophisticated American public if the US Government had not used the shock of 11 September as the pretext for exerting pressure, for the spreading shameless propaganda, and for creation of a pervasive atmosphere of insecurity. The systematic intimidation and indoctrination of the public, the limitations imposed on the spectrum of legitimate opinion in the months of October/November 2002, when I was in Chicago, was for me, a European observer etched with his own history [gebranntes Kind], irritating. This was no longer ‘my’ America.“<sup>40</sup>

This is more than ‘politics’ in the liberal sense of private opinions based on individual values, however much one should respect Habermas’s own insistence that his political-journalistic interventions and his philosophical publications should not be treated as if they’re all part of a seamless web, to be conveniently pigeon-holed under the personifying label of ‘Habermas’ philosophy’.<sup>41</sup> He is not the only one to fear that the current US Administration’s undermining of the UN and other international organisations has weakened the very basis of international order at a time when economically the world has become integrated as never before. Not the only one, cer-

39 *Der Gespaltene Westen*, 101.

40 *Der Gespaltene Westen* 95

41 "Ich komme, in dem, was ich beabsichtige – man weiß ja nie, was man wirklich tut – Max Weber auf halbem Weg entgegen, indem ich verschiedene Sphären auseinanderzuhalten versuche: diese politisch-publizistischen Dinge, dann ‘richtiges’ Philosophieren (was ich, paradox gesagt, nur noch gebrochen fortsetzen kann, obwohl meine Intentionen darin am ungebrochensten zum Zuge kommen). Ferner die im engeren Sinne wissenschaftliche Arbeit, schließlich die Lehrpraxis und, wenn die Zeiten danach sind, die politische Praxis, die übers publizistische hinausgeht. Ich halte diese verschiedenen Arbeitsformen auseinander, aber ich sage nicht, daß dies eine Arbeitsteilung ist, wo eins mit dem anderen nichts zu tun hätte oder wo es sich um eine Kombination verschiedener Rollen handelte. Ich möchte vielmehr jede dieser Rollen so spielen, daß die jeweils anderen gleichzeitig sichtbar bleiben. Was mich entsetzlich ärgert, was mich trifft, sind die Aggressionen von Leuten, die bei mir diese Rollendifferenzierung nicht sehen, geschweige denn respektieren, und alles durcheinander rühren..." (Habermas’s interview in „Ästhetik und Kommunikation“, quoted in Wiggershaus, op. cit., p. 120.)

tainly. But it has taken Habermas's special genius to have transported arguments which have been common currency since the Dialectic of Enlightenment out of the philosophical seminar into the public domain; to have made them plausible to a mass audience. Venerable theorems on the 'dialectic' of subject and object, of the 'end of the subject', assume a new quality when one encounters them in those international arenas in which war and peace, invasion and diplomacy, security versus Human Rights are being hammered out.

Seen with the benefit of hindsight, from this 'post-9/11' perspective, Habermas's intense preoccupation with moral theory and law – going back to at least *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (1990), the Tanner Lectures of 1986, the work on discourse ethics,<sup>42</sup> and then the systematic work *Between Facts and Norms* of 1996) – appears in a new light. If modern society is „characterised by the pluralism of gods and demons“<sup>43</sup>, in which vested interests are capable of exercising power through the imposition of spurious moralisms which cannot bear scrutiny in the light of careful analysis, then the relationship between moral-ethical values, law, democratic procedures becomes the arena in which the crucial conflicts of modernity will manifest themselves from now on. And nowhere more obviously so than in international relations. Habermas as a defender of international organisations, a defender of the 'Kantian' project for the constitutionalisation of international law – „Does the constitutionalisation of International Law still have a chance?“ he asks in *The Divided West*.

It is perhaps too early to speak – in analogy to the „Positivist Dispute“ of a generation ago – of a „Moralism Dispute“ (or of a 'legal' turn in Critical Theory) when one is trying to characterize Habermas's recent critiques of Michael Walzer and others who defend the notion of a 'Just War' solely on moral-ethical grounds. But whatever label is going to be attached to them in future, the intellectual battle lines are clear, and questions concerning the probity of official justifications for the mobilization of military might in the contemporary world are not going to go away:

„Even an ultramodern power such as the USA can regress to the false universalisms of the Age of Empires if, in the area of international justice, it replaces positive law with [subjectively understood] morals and principles. From Bush's point of view 'our' values are universal values that all other nations had better accept if they know what's good for them. The false uni-

---

42 Justification and application: remarks on discourse ethics, 1993.

43 Tanner Lectures, p. 241

versalism is an ethnocentrism masquerading as a general principle ... [Michael] Walzer develops his criteria, however reasonable they may sound, solely from moral principles and ethical considerations, disregarding entirely that legal framework which ties judgements concerning war and peace to the due process of inclusive and non-partisan procedures for the establishment and enforcement of norms.<sup>44</sup>

But there are two more strands to his thinking in recent years, and they too are touched on in his important acceptance speech in the Paulskirche in Frankfurt, on the occasion of the Peace Prize bestowed on him by the German Publishers and Bookseller's Association, which had happened to have been scheduled only a few weeks after the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon. („The War on Terror is no war, and in terrorism there is also – I emphasise the word also – the wordless and fateful clash of worlds which, beyond the mute violence of terrorists against rockets, is going to have to find a common language.“<sup>45</sup>)

In some ways these strands are more familiar: the unintended consequences of science and technology on the one hand – in this case the dangers of genetic engineering – and on the other hand the dangers of religious fundamentalism. The dangers of a renascent eugenics movement, this time spurred on by commercialisation and profit rather than by the reactionary Darwinism of the German Right of the interbellum, he had sketched out in *The Future of Human Nature* shortly before<sup>46</sup>, and this would doubtlessly have been the topic of his address if the attacks in the US had not intervened. But these two themes are placed in a context which in some ways brings Habermas closer to his predecessors Horkheimer and Adorno (once much-criticised for their ‘pessimism’) than it does to the author of the *TcA*. Namely as aspects of a different ‘dialectic’ within modernity, the tension between Faith and Reason. The secularized world is beleaguered not so much by the enemy ante portas, as it is by forces let loose by the processes of secularisation itself, in which an unfettered instrumental reason and religious fundamentalisms threaten us as two sides of the same coin. A threat in the face of which it is not so much the universalistic assumptions embedded in all natural languages that could show the way forward, as a better understanding of the way in which a secularised world is dependent upon the

---

44 *Der Gespaltene Westen*, 102

45 "Glaube, Wissen – Öffnung. Zum Friedenspreis des deutschen Buchhandels: Eine Dankrede" *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 14.10.2001.

46 Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2001

‘translation’ of moral-ethical values whose ultimate foundation is religious.

„The lost hope for resurrection leaves in its wake a most palpable void. Horkheimer’s justified scepticism against Benjamin’s overly effusive hope in the healing power of anamnestic memory is not, it seems to me, a denial of the helpless impulse to alter the unalterable.“

This is a Habermas who is closer – at least on this occasion – to the Negative Dialectics than he is to his own work of a decade ago.