

interpretation

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The Most Recent Thinking of Jürgen Habermas

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Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne. By Jürgen Habermas. (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1985.)

Die neue Unübersichtlichkeit. By Jürgen Habermas. (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1985.)

I

The New Left's distinguishing claim is that cultural formations can determine the forms that industrialization takes and hence are themselves worth taking seriously as determinants. In other words, where the Old Left held that economics determines culture, the New Left holds that culture, including politics, can determine economics. This being the case, the New Left addresses itself to intellectuals rather than flesh and blood workers, and in keeping with this shift in addressee, it also perceives its opponent to be an intellectual class of neo-conservatives rather than the flesh and blood old conservatives of the business (or capitalist) class. This is all a matter of standing Marx on his head, but it gives us the key we need to understand the most recent thinking of the prolific spokesman of the Frankfurt School, Jürgen Habermas.

That thinking is contained in two volumes published in German in 1985. At first glance neither of them seems to fit the model sketched above, but upon reflection—that is to say, with interpretation—both prove to be understandable in terms of the dominant cultural thread of Habermas's thinking. The first book, *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne*, is bound to be taken as one of Habermas's major works. It consists of a well-integrated set of lectures, for the most part given in the United States, now being translated and prepared for publication by the MIT Press in late 1986. The title is best rendered as *The Philosophical Discourse on the Modern*, and the body of the book is best understood as a philosophical defense of the modern and a criticism of thinkers who might be called postmodern because they try to break out of what Max Weber ambivalently called the "iron cage" of modernism's rationality.

The second book's title is ungainly in German—*Die neue Unübersichtlichkeit*—and it is best to put it into equally ungainly English as *The New Shortsightedness*. It is made up of newspaper features, introductions to other books, and otherwise unpublished papers from Habermas's files. In other words, it is a collage in which Habermas's purer thinking is applied. It will most likely not be translated in accessible book form, which is too bad, for it very nicely complements the first book.

The two books, taken together, strongly suggest that there is a coherent cutting edge to Habermas's latest thinking. On the one hand, he is going back to the drawing board to construct a powerful philosophical defense of enlightenment as being essential to the modern. On the other hand, he is testing his philosophical vision against counterenlightenment reality, and although he may be pleased by the test results, the fact that he feels a need to defend the modern and criticize the postmodern (read: counterenlightenment) suggests that Habermas feels that the intellectual opposition may be gaining the upper hand.

II

In the *Philosophical Discourse on the Modern*, Habermas defends the modern period as an Age of Reason, and this is meant in a literal sense not to be depreciated. All previous ages are taken by Habermas to be ages of unreason or ages of emerging reason. They are dominated by one or another form of *mythos*, but the modern age is dominated by *logos*, by reason itself, and this makes it absolutely different and absolutely superior to every other age of European history.

In other words, Habermas is a Hegelian who holds the modern to be the embodiment of Absolute Mind. What this means can be put in the following way: whereas every past mythological age can be refuted by reason, the modern age, as the Age of Reason, cannot be refuted by another reason. It is *Catch 22*, Hegelian style: reason cannot be refuted by another reason without simultaneously confirming the absolute primacy of reason. Hence the modern age is absolute. Any attempt to step out of it, any attempt to initiate a postmodern age, is a deception, an effort at counterenlightenment, a regression to myth.

In the *Philosophical Discourse on the Modern*, Hegel is considered first by Habermas and taken to be the ultimate *modern* thinker because he understood the absolute quality of reason in the modern age. Absolute here means, if I read Habermas correctly, that dialectic is not simply a matter of talking-things-through (the literal, classical meaning of the term), but is also a term that adequately describes the underlying structure of historical reality. In other words, dialectical thinking is a reflex of real historical relationships. The recognition of this absolute quality of reason is what distinguishes the *modern* as an age of history.

Over against this Hegelianism, Habermas considers a variety of more recent thinkers who might be called *postmodern* because they do not accept the argument about absolute reason. In one way or another, Habermas then takes all these thinkers to be less than rational or, even, irrational. Nietzsche, Heidegger, Bataille, Derrida, and Foucault are all taken to be thinkers who understood that they could not break out of the Age of Reason by means of yet another act of reason. They therefore resorted to acts of *unreason* to escape Weber's iron cage of modernism.

Nietzsche, so this argument goes, sought to clear the way for the coming of

Dionysius, a god of wine and passion rather than reason. Heidegger sought the *Destruktion* of the European metaphysical tradition that had led to the Age of Reason, and Heidegger's irrationality inspired the book burning of 1933. Derrida today seeks the *deconstruction* of the written text and a return to the spoken word as a way out of the iron cage of rationality, and Foucault did his research in insane asylums because only there could he find Europeans who were *out-of-their-minds*, so to speak, and thereby catch a glimpse of a world beyond reason. In short, Habermas's book is an extended argument documenting the "end of philosophy," the absolute triumph of the modern, and the hopelessness of anything called postmodern, which here means post-Hegelian.

Habermas's *Diskurs* is in my opinion a brilliant but deeply biased book. In the currently fashionable debate over the meaning of the *postmodern*, Habermas narrowly concentrates the Modern in the absolute rationalism of Hegel. The result is that many of the most interesting thinkers since Hegel are necessarily made to appear irrational simply because they disagree. I repeat: if rationality is defined as an absolute and closely assigned to Hegel, then irrationality is no more than a matter of disagreeing with the absolute rationality of the modern. Therefore the postmodern, which by definition disagrees, can be characterized narrowly as a counterenlightenment movement rather than as a movement that says something new (nothing really new can be said from the point of view of Absolute Reason).

In a fashion, this manifest bias has its clear value. In none of Habermas's previous books has he been so obviously the Hegelian rationalist, and this finally is the local significance of this book: it sheds a retrospective light on all of Habermas's previous books and helps to throw into sharp relief just how rationalist they really were. But the greater significance of Habermas's Hegelianism lies in what it allows him to do with the postmodern. This term is accorded an extreme definition synonymous with irrational, reactionary, counterenlightenment, and, yes, counterrevolutionary. It is not within the purview of Habermas's urbane style to go all the way down this list, but he does not stop too far short of its Marxian *Endstation*. The dice are clearly loaded against the postmodern.

III

In the *New Shortsightedness*, Habermas continues his critique of any effort to refute the absolute reason embodied in the modern age. The second book lacks the philosophical argument of the first but makes up for this by applying Habermas's thinking to the contemporary world. As already noted, it is a collection of newspaper articles, interviews, introductions to other books, and otherwise unpublished papers written recently by Habermas. It is seemingly a jumble of unrelated pieces, but with the help of the sharp Hegelian focus of the first book, it finally comes together nicely.

The argument of one piece can be used to illustrate the structure of Habermas's applied thinking. Habermas defends *modern* architecture against the re-

cent phenomenon of *postmodern* architecture. I believe this argument is significant because it is a political argument. That is to say, architecture really does have to do with the actual making of the city, the *polis*, and it cannot help but have political significance. It shapes the public space, and for better or worse, we do well to be conscious of it. I am thus looking at Habermas's comments on architecture as an indirect political argument.

The conventional modernist formula that form-follows-function is taken by Habermas to be an absolute, and the classical examples of modernism in the buildings of Wright, Mies van der Rohe, or Corbusier are taken to be buildings that cannot be improved upon. Granted there was a decline in post-World War II modernist architecture, but this is no reason to abandon the functionalism that determines it. Here, in the modernist claim that form ought to follow function, I take Habermas to be restating the basic Marxist proposition that economics ought to determine politics. Habermas's latent Marxism also dictates his view of postmodernism. The signature of the postmodernist movement is its willingness to freely quote the past, and this suggests to Habermas its reactionary quality. Archaic values are resurrected and put into place, the public place, in the form of stone. The details are literally tablets handed down to us from on high. They thus represent for Habermas an attempt to give an outdated definition to essentially public spaces.

However intriguing it is to read the politically conscious Habermas as architectural critic, an even more interesting section in the second book is his lengthy piece on political neo-conservatism. This topic may come as a surprise for those who are not aware that there is such a thing as *neu-Konservatismus* in Germany, and so therefore it has the potential to provoke an intense response. The reader is initially inclined, after the piece on architecture, to equate neoconservatism with postmodernism and assume that Habermas will simply pour the same arguments into different containers. But this prejudgment is quickly overcome as the reader is pulled up short by one of the more unexpected moves of this book.

Habermas does a comparison of American and German neo-conservatism that is remarkable for its generous treatment of the distant American phenomenon and is helpful insofar as it allows the American reader to become oriented in respect to German neoconservatism. What impresses Habermas about American neoconservatism is its commitment to democratic values and its reliance on interpretive sociology to make its case. Habermas is careful not to lay too much praise on American neoconservatism, but considering the source, this is a most remarkable treatment. Partly, however, Habermas is generous toward American neoconservatism so that he can set it off against German neoconservatism, which is taken by Habermas to be undemocratic and basically unsociological (read: unrealistic) in its presentation of itself. But then this sketch of German neoconservatism turns out to be startlingly incomplete—that is to say, Habermas does not really make the neoconservative argument—and because of this incompleteness, which could be called one-sidedness, it is clearly wrong. Where Habermas

can be let off lightly for his shortcomings as an architectural critic, the same cavalier generosity cannot be accorded his view on German neoconservatism.

The German neoconservative argument—and here I am following the thinking of Carl Schmitt, Arnold Gehlen and Joachim Ritter—begins with a move that distinguishes *neo* from *old* conservatism in Germany.¹ Where old conservatives hold that there is still life in traditional institutions like the family or the church, neoconservatives draw out the logic of Nietzsche's claim about the death-of-god and accept the corresponding demise of traditional institutions based on religious sanction. Therefore, because of this religious skepticism, German neoconservatives are themselves enlightenment thinkers, and it is precisely this that makes them so menacing to Habermas.

Let me put this key point in a different way. By definition, the institutions of any traditional society depend upon a divine sanction. Indeed, *tradition* makes no sense if it is not the passing down from generation to generation of the sanction that was originally revealed at creation. Correspondingly, and also by definition, any and all modern societies are modern precisely because they cease to believe in a divine sanction for worldly institutions. God is not necessarily dead, but the deity is at least put on hold in respect to societal institutions. Therefore, a new sanction is needed for societal institutions, and philosophy's claim is that reason (*logos*) provides this sanction. The definition of *modern* therefore has to do with the reasoned sanction provided by a philosophy that understands itself as the new authorizing agent, fully operating under the dictates of *logos*.

Habermas, as a modernist in the above sense, has no problem if he is dealing with traditionalists, but he has a real problem if he is dealing with someone or some group that claims to be providing a better reason than he and can back up the claim with persuasive argument. This is what the German neoconservatives claim and as someone who has, I presume, read his Plato and understood the enlightened desirability of putting an opponent's argument in the best possible light, Habermas falls far short of his own enlightenment standard. He does not admit that German neoconservatives are also modern enlightenment thinkers. He treats them as reactionaries and thereby avoids their argument.

That argument continues as follows: while accepting the liberation from god and the corresponding release from the restrictions of tradition, German neoconservatives also claim that relativization of traditional structures without a corresponding provision of a new reasoned sanction for worldly institutions is a shortcoming in the articulation of enlightenment. Freedom mandates a legitimate basic constitutional order. This sounds like a contradiction—*freedom mandates order*—but for German neoconservatives it is a dialectical truth of the first water. Freedom is not the elimination of all order. Under such conditions, as Dostoev-

1. There is no adequate study of German neoconservatism, but by consensus the founding fathers are Carl Schmitt, Arnold Gehlen, and Joachim Ritter. More recent neoconservatives are Ernst Forsthoff, H. Schelsky, and Günter Rohrmoser. Habermas is familiar with the writings of all of these thinkers.

ski's Grand Inquisitor would have it, everything or nothing is permitted. The allowance of something, rather than everything or nothing, is premised on the existence of some legitimate order. Hence the dictum that freedom mandates order, and hence the German neoconservative insistence on the provision of legitimate—and that means constitutionally restricted—authority of some type.

The needed concept of order is to be found in limited, constitutional government (the *Rechtsstaat*), and German neoconservatives are committed in principle to supporting this embodied principle of order. This argument, now political, may be put slightly differently. The European Enlightenment was originally characterized by premises acceptable to reason, namely, that traditional forms of community were unreasonable because they unnecessarily repressed human freedom. These premises were also restated as political goals, and with their achievement—that is to say, with the political relativization of the traditional authority of family, church, and principality—the goals of the European Enlightenment were reached and the premises thereby made academic. But absolutist enlightenment continued, more or less like a rebel without a traditional cause, or more accurately, like a rebel whose cause it was to eliminate all forms of authority, even the rational authority of the *Rechtsstaat* that guarantees the freedoms achieved by the Enlightenment. The contemporary revolutionary Left thus tends to be absolutely—and this means mindlessly—antiauthoritarian, and German neoconservatism draws the line because this position is irrational.

German neoconservatives, in the application of this political thinking, see an integral connection between the student movement of the 1960s, the terrorism of the 1970s, and the peace movement of the 1980s.² They argue that a red thread of absolutist antiauthoritarianism runs through these so-called liberation movements. This antiauthoritarian attitude constitutes the unreason of dissident German intellectuals and pits them against the legitimate authority of the Federal Republic which, however faulty and clumsy under Helmut Kohl, is nonetheless a real *Rechtsstaat*. Specifically, the German Federal Republic is a representative democracy, and the German neoconservatives are to be found defending this classical Enlightenment political form.

In opposition, the German New Left seeks to arrive at a *direct democracy*, a phenomenon which has its charms at the local level of Green Party meetings (although even here the charm is wearing thin) but which at the level of the German nation-state has proven to be dangerous illusion. The reason is not hard to find. Direct democracy is for German neoconservatives the equivalent of Habermas's famed *ideal speech situation*. Writ small, direct democracy and ideal speech situations are perhaps desirable models of decision-making. But writ large—that is to say, projected onto the nation-state—problems of a different magnitude arise, and Habermas has never recognized these. Direct democracy writ large, call it plebiscitary democracy, is not a liberation from all extraneous authority. It is rather an invitation to the tyranny of powerful private interest groups or, if they

2. See Günter Rohmoser, *Revolution—Unser Schicksal?* (Stuttgart: Seewald, 1974).

are extinguished, to the tyranny of a single, absolute authority, like the bodily needs of the people. Like Rawls's famed veil of ignorance, Habermas's ideal speech situation is only apparently a device for excluding outside interests from determining political decisions. In reality it is a device for ensuring that a certain kind of decision will always be made, and this is one that compels decision-makers to decide in favor of equality. Coercionless coercion (*zwangsloser Zwang*), Habermas once called this essential characteristic of the ideal speech situation, and this is for German neoconservatives hardly a reasonable basis for a political constitution.

Habermas's second book, *The New Short-sightedness*, is a disappointment because it continually refers back to contemporary German neoconservatism as the intellectual opponent of the New Left but never once adequately confronts the philosophical-political argument made above and suggestively referred to in his pages. This is too bad, for coupled with the first book, *The Philosophical Discourse on the Modern*, Habermas's most recent thinking is liable to have a strong influence in the next few years on the American academic debate over *postmodernism*. It would have been ideal if Habermas had actually locked horns with his chosen opponent, but these books pull up just short of that confrontation.

IV

Cultural formations, shorn of their divine sanction, are ripe material for relativization, and relativization means that they will be understood as the expression of one or another human interest in domination. In this respect, the only difference between Habermas and Karl Marx is that Habermas believes that free-floating cultural formations still have influence, even a decisive influence, in the world. Marx, perhaps mistakenly, wrote off culture, the residue of the departed gods, as now being fully determined by economics. Habermas does not disagree with this as a basic Enlightenment goal, but his claim—deeply informed by his reading of Freud—is that archaic cultural forms are nonetheless still possessed of the dead power of tradition that can determine action, even economic action.

Culture, shorn of its divine sanction, becomes mere *convention*, and the question why anyone should obey convention is a legitimate one, with or without Marx's opinions on the issue. In a traditional society, that is to say, in a society still more or less centered on infallible authority, culture is a mode of ensuring temporal continuity by passing divinely sanctioned values from one generation to another. But when Judaism or Christianity ceases to be a religion and becomes a *way-of-life*, the children are going to ask *why* and are not going to be satisfied with the answer that this is the-way-it-has-always-been. In the absence of god, they will want good reason. The issue then is whether mere convention can be reformulated as reasoned argument.

Habermas has never persuaded himself that an autonomous political commu-

nity ought to exist, but I believe the reasoning here presented makes the argument that is missing from his thinking. In the presence of an established and functioning deity, culture does not need reason, but in the absence of such an otherworldly establishment, human beings need reasoned political discourse to provide agreed-upon norms and prevent this or that private human interest, even the private interest of bodily needs, from overwhelming and privatizing the painstakingly created public forum. This sounds at first glance like a formula for cultural authoritarianism, and in a fashion it is just that. It is similar in motivation to the enlightenment reason that loaded the United States Constitution with guarantees against the excesses of majority rule. Indeed, if one is to believe Madison in *Federalist # 10*, the United States Constitution is a conspiracy of enlightenment reason against the dictates of the populist body.

Put differently, authority in a desacralized world must be a reasoned thing, and this implies that mind find it within its scope to erect limitations to even its own activities, especially when these are determined by the compelling “arguments” of the body. Such reasoning leads logically to the idea of the limited constitutional state, or in German, the *Rechtsstaat*. Habermas has never been clear that this is the direction of his reasoning. I would argue that in Habermas’s latest books, especially the *Philosophical Discourse on the Modern*, what he is really attempting to do is secure the condition of the possibility of absolutist intellectual culture in the modern world, what one German commentator once called the *Diktatur des Sitzfleisches* (the Dictatorship of the Sitting Class, namely, intellectuals). This involves convincing us of the absolute inescapable necessity of reason as an inescapable consequence of the death-of-god. But it also involves the substitution of a new worldly absolutism—the bodily functions that should determine the mind’s form—for the otherworldly absolutism that has passed away. The suspicion here—and I fully credit German neoconservatives like Arnold Gehlen for arousing this suspicion³—is that in substituting worldly absolutism for otherworldly absolutism, we have made no change at all. Only by shifting from absolute to limited authority do we meaningfully record the death-of-god, and Habermas does none of this.

Like postmodernism in architecture, German neoconservatism is a mixed experience. I wish I could say it was humorous, but it is hardly this. More often than not, it is heavily Germanic in the way it is expressed and received. But insofar as its argument can be construed lightheartedly and not as a manifesto issued from a crenelated castle tower, it is not putting forth a program of consistent traditional values, designed to do combat with the dragons of a godless modern world. It is rather arguing for a *Rechtsstaat* that will secure the open society or, the same thing put differently, will secure a space in which all values may be set to play.

Play suggests games, and the chief character of any genuine game is that it is

3. Arnold Gehlen, *Moral und Hypermoral* (Bonn: Atheneum, 1969) and *Einblicke* (Frankfurt, 1979), referred to on pp. 45–47, 55 of *Die neue Unübersichtlichkeit*.

not serious. Above all, this means that there is no end outside of the playing of the game. Similarly with the *Rechtsstaat*, its own legitimacy depends upon it having no ulterior motives or goals. Just as functionalism is a goal that is ulterior to the forms of an authentic architecture, so too the social functions that form Habermas's thinking and cause him to question the legitimacy of the *Rechtsstaat* are ulterior motives to legitimate politics. This primacy of politics is a rather embarrassing claim in the modern world, but it is still the claim that is central to German neoconservatism.

German neoconservatism actually does take politics *seriously* because it does not take it to be an expression of some forces or purposes outside itself. Habermas, in contrast, questions the legitimacy of the *Rechtsstaat* because he does not, finally, take politics seriously. Somewhere in his soul Habermas believes that economics, which is morbidly serious, ought to determine politics. His New Left claim that politics, as an aspect of culture, can determine economics is only a claim about what is in fact the case in a less than utopian reality. What Habermas wants is the banishment of the city itself, at least the city that still controls its destiny, and this is, after all, the only kind of city worth keeping.