

A NOTE ON HABERMAS

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In a previous piece on the Heathwood website, we argued that Frankfurt School critical theory falls into two distinct periods.¹ In the first, which runs from the 1920s until the 1970s, the School's writings remain challenging and forward-looking and inspirational. In the second, during which Habermas and (following Habermas) Honneth are the main figures, Frankfurt School theorising loses its critical and revolutionary edge. In the present contribution, we add detail to these generalisations.

Our discussion focuses on Habermas. What exactly happened in the early 1970s? At what stage in Habermas's development did the Frankfurt School lose its way? If these questions are raised, a specific text is brought into prominence: Habermas's 'Wahrheitstheorien' (or 'Theories of Truth') published in 1973.² Our view is not that the 'Wahrheitstheorien' is the point where things go wrong in the Frankfurt School's development. On the contrary, we regard the text as a signal and far-reaching achievement. Things go wrong when, as is the case, Habermas breaks with the 'Wahrheitstheorien' and its radical claims.

In order to perceive the radicalism of Habermas's 1973 position, some quasi-technical discussion of philosophical issues is inescapable. In the 'Wahrheitstheorien', Habermas champions a *consensus* as distinct from a *correspondence* theory of truth. For a correspondence theory, truth is an accurate picturing of reality. For a consensus theory, truth is an agreement between human individuals. It is not, indeed, *any* agreement but what would be agreed upon if certain conditions were fulfilled. In the more attractive versions of consensus theory – and, we propose, the Habermas of 1973 defends such a version – the requisite conditions are ones where open-ended and unrestricted discussion would take place.

In a moment, we shall focus on the 'Wahrheitstheorien' in greater detail. Before doing so, however, we should like to offer some thoughts on how consensus-based and correspondence-based conceptions of truth are to be seen. Is there not something fundamentally subjectivist, or relativist, about the notion that truth consists in agreement or consensus? By contrast, does correspondence theory not have an “objective” or scientific ring? This first-off impression arises, perhaps, because the

1 Richard Gunn and Adrian Wilding 'Is the Frankfurt School Still Relevant?' Heathwood Institute and Press 19 April 2014.

2 J. Habermas 'Wahrheitstheorien' in H. Fahrenbach, ed., *Wirklichkeit und Reflexion* (Neske: Pfullingen 1973) pp. 211-65. See, for discussion, T. McCarthy *The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas* (Cambridge: Polity Press 1984) pp. 299-310.

notion of “correspondence” focuses on theory's relation to its object: is this object accurately mirrored? The notion of “consensus”, by contrast, relates theory to the subjects by whom truth-claims are made.³ Be this as it may, we think that the first impression of *consensus theory as subjectivist* and of *correspondence theory as objectivist* is mistaken. One of the weaknesses with a correspondence theory is that, despite its objectivist appearance, subjectivism lurks within it. If truth *just is* an accurate mirroring of reality, as correspondence theory asserts, how can we be certain – other than by an appeal to subjective feelings – that such a mirroring takes place? Whereas a correspondence theory of truth rests its final appeal upon subjective certainty, consensus theory operates differently. In what we have termed the “attractive” versions of consensus theory, the emphasis falls on *reasons which must be given in and through discussion* if a claim is to count as true. Rather than grounding truth on subjective sensation, reasons – whether they turn on empirical evidence or hermeneutical sensitivity or conceptual rigour – are given their due.

How does all of this relate to Habermas's 'Wahrheitstheorien'? Our reply is that the Habermas of 1973 addresses the issues just raised. The claims of a correspondence theory of truth are raised only to be dismissed: 'Sense-certainty or [appeals to] the objectivity of experience are not appropriate models of truth'.⁴ The claims of consensus theory are put in correspondence theory's place: 'The consensus theory of truth has the merit of distinguishing between intersubjective validity-claims and merely subjective feelings of certainty'.⁵ The form of 'consensus' which Habermas defends is one where an 'ideal speech situation' obtains.⁶ An ideal speech situation is, amongst other things, one where 'there is a symmetrical distribution of the chances for all participants in the discourse to choose speech acts and carry them out'.⁷ In short, it is one where – as in consensus theory's “attractive” version – an argument may be followed where it leads. In a situation where all participants may employ all forms of speech act, discussion may be open-ended and unrestricted. In such a situation, claims *which understand themselves as truthful* may be made.

In the present short paper, we do not carry discussions of truth-theory further. Our aim is to illustrate the far-reaching nature of Habermas's 1973 argument, and this (we submit) we have done. A point, which concerns the history of ideas, calls for comment, however. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, Habermas's 'Wahrheitstheorien' echoes themes in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Hegel's *Phenomenology* (1806) starts from a critique of subjective certainty and, at the end of a lengthy discussion, refers to non-alienated interaction (or “mutual recognition”). In 1973, Habermas criticises the subjective certainty of correspondence theory as a prelude to discussion of an ideal speech situation. Hegel's *Phenomenology* sees 'science' – not merely *love of wisdom* but *wisdom itself*⁸ – as becoming possible, if

3 It does so by drawing attention to the conditions under which agreement is reached.

4 'Wahrheitstheorien' p. 233.

5 Ibid. p. 230.

6 Ibid. pp. 234, 252-60.

7 Ibid. p. 255. See McCarthy *Critical Theory* p. 306.

8 G.W.F. Hegel *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1977) pp. 3-4.

and only if mutual recognition prevails. For Habermas, similarly, the notion of truth points towards discourse in an ideal speech situation. These comparisons are the more telling because, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, revolutionary theory drew sustenance from the *Phenomenology*. In highlighting the notion of an ideal speech situation, the Habermas of 1973 in effect reminds radical and revolutionary thinkers of the utopia – the utopia of mutual recognition – which is at the centre of their dreams.

Such a reminder would have been sufficient to establish the 'Wahrheitstheorien' as an irreplaceable revolutionary classic. In the event, however, it acquired no such reputation. It became overshadowed, so we propose, by changes in Habermas's thinking. In the light of these changes, the 'Wahrheitstheorien' came to strike Habermas as a flawed and wrong-headed and mistaken text. For our part, we agree with Habermas that the 'Wahrheitstheorien' (together with related lines of thought in his earlier work) is incompatible with his work of the 1980s onwards.⁹ But our assessment of Habermas's earlier and later work clashes with what is, in effect, an orthodox opinion. We regard the earlier Habermas (including the Habermas of the 'Wahrheitstheorien') as making a significant and, indeed, a seminal contribution to the Frankfurt School tradition. By contrast, we regard the later Habermas – the Habermas who turns against the 'Wahrheitstheorien' – as dulling the edge of critical theory and making his peace with an alienated (an unemancipated) world. His later works lack the challenge – the challenge of *orienting thought towards mutual recognition* – that his earlier writings contain.

Let us trace the change from an earlier to a later Habermas in greater detail. In an Appendix to his *Knowledge and Human Interests*, Habermas refers to a 'non-authoritarian and universally practised dialogue' from which 'our idea[s] of true consensus are always implicitly derived'. The passage continues: 'To this extent the truth of statements is based on anticipating the realization of the good life'.¹⁰ The Appendix dates from the mid-1960s, and the just-quoted passage points forward to the perspectives of the 'Wahrheitstheorien'. We may take it as a base-line from which, in his post-1973 writings, Habermas subsequently departs.

By the 1980s, this departure had become a feature of Habermas's writings. A text published in 1982 makes the departure explicit: from an 'ethic of discourse' – he tells us, retracting his earlier position – standards for 'something like an ideal form of life' cannot be inferred.¹¹ Stating the point differently: an image of universally practised dialogue cannot do duty as an image of emancipated life. Or in the words of an interview given by Habermas in 1979: 'One should not imagine the ideal speech

9 In a recent collection of his essays, Habermas has criticised the 'Wahrheitstheorien' as 'somewhat speculative' and 'hasty': see J. Habermas *Rationalitäts- und Sprachtheorie: Philosophische Texte Band 2* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2009) p. 24.

10 J. Habermas *Knowledge and Human Interests* (London: Heinemann 1972) p. 314.

11 J. Habermas 'A Reply to my Critics' in J.B. Thompson and D. Held, eds., *Habermas: Critical Debates* (London: Macmillan Press 1982) p. 261.

situation as a utopian model for an emancipated society'.¹² Such formulations prise the notion of emancipation away from what (referring to Hegel) we have termed mutual recognition. In effect, they undo – or seek to undo – the work of the 'Wahrheitstheorien'. If the 'Wahrheitstheorien' reminds radical theory of its mutually recognitive focus, the just-quoted formulations direct theory towards less challenging goals.

Which goals? The 1982 text that we have cited warns that 'mediations' between life and discourse are not to be ignored.¹³ The mediations which Habermas has in mind are, we suggest, social institutions. The passage from 1982 refers to Albrecht Wellmer, who argues that an emancipated society is one where a 'new *institutionalization* of freedom' takes place.¹⁴ For Habermas, this means that social institutions such as a legal system (distinct from morality) and the state must exist in a "modern" society – even a "modern" society where, allegedly, emancipation has occurred. Differentiation between institutions is, for the later Habermas, the hallmark of modernity; if emancipation is pictured as a *de-institutionalisation of society*, then (so he considers) a regression to pre-modern superstition is entailed. Habermas's turn to institutionalist thinking is, we submit, one with deep implications – historical, political and philosophical. We comment briefly on each.

(i) In turning to institutions, Habermas embraces a distinctive picture of history: the notion of a transition to a socially unspecific "modernity" is emphasised, and the notion of a transition from unemancipated to emancipated society is downplayed. The most far-reaching event in history is, according to this conception, the transition from a "pre-modern" (or institutionally undifferentiated) to a "modern" (or institutionally differentiated) world; all that lies ahead for the future is that a few relatively minor wrinkles are ironed out. This shift in historical perspective is, for evident reasons, one which academia has found welcome: for example, it is foregrounded in Honneth's post-Habermasian discussion of recognition.¹⁵ The shift replaces the perspectives of Marx and Hegel's *Phenomenology* – the guiding lights of earlier Frankfurt School thinking – with those of Weberian sociology.¹⁶

(ii) Habermas's turn leads to a less-than-revolutionary political position. No longer is emancipation seen as a matter of bringing unconstrained interaction into being. No longer is an emancipated life seen as one where mutual recognition prevails. Instead, it is pictured as existence where a preferred set of social institutions obtain. These

12 J. Habermas *Autonomy and Solidarity* (London: Verso 1986) p. 90.

13 Habermas 'Reply' p. 261.

14 A. Wellmer 'The Critique of Critical Theory: Reason, Utopia and the Dialectic of Enlightenment' *Praxis International* Issue 2 (1983) p. 101; see also p. 107.

15 A. Honneth 'Redistribution as Recognition: A Response to Nancy Fraser' in N. Fraser and A. Honneth *Redistribution or Recognition?* (London: Verso 2003) pp. 138-44.

16 Max Pensky has drawn attention to the circumstance that 'Honneth like Habermas demonstrates his extreme indebtedness to the tradition of German philosophical sociology from Weber to Luhmann, wherein modernity is to be taken primarily as a process of differentiation': see M. Pensky 'Social Solidarity and Intersubjective Reason: On Axel Honneth's *Struggle for Recognition*' in D. Petherbridge, ed., *Axel Honneth: Critical Essays* (Leiden: Brill 2011) p. 138.

institutions are not seen as *at issue* in the to-and-fro play of unrestricted and open-ended recognition; instead, they are seen as channelling discussion and recognition in predetermined ways. This *channelling* is what disturbs us: when it is present, so too is conformity and the inertia of institutional existence. In a word, the later Habermas infects emancipation with an all-too-familiar alienation. The later Habermas pictures emancipation as a condition where (in Hegel's words) 'spiritual masses [*geistige Massen*]' obtain.¹⁷

(iii) The philosophical implications of Habermas's turn concern truth. Above, we have drawn attention to Habermas's 1973 endorsement of consensus theory. Here, we note that, as the focal point of his theory shifts from universal dialogue to institutions, his endorsement of a consensus view of truth is withdrawn. In a world where institutions *channel* interaction, unrestricted and open-ended discussion – the form of discussion which underpinned “attractive” consensus theory – is no longer plausible. If emancipation is no longer seen in terms of mutual recognition, consensus theory's plausibility is undermined. To these remarks, we must add that a Wellmer-inspired turn to institutions is not the *only* reason for Habermas's breach with consensus theory. Besides the social reasons just referred to, he responds to a conceptual worry: surely *truth* – truth *qua* truth – involves a “surplus” over and above warranted or agreed-upon *belief*? And does consensus theory focus on warranted belief alone, leaving truth *qua* truth out of account? In the present connection, we do not take up the question of truth's alleged “surplus”. (In passing, we note that we regard the notion of such a “surplus” as misconceived. Worries about truth's alleged “surplus” are worries about whether theory accurately mirrors its object. The notion of a “surplus” makes sense only if, tacitly, a correspondence view of truth has been assumed – or reintroduced.) For Habermas, anxieties regarding truth's “surplus” over warranted belief play a large part in his turning against consensus theory.¹⁸ We do not, here, seek to reduce philosophical to social issues. Nor do we comment on the two-part or 'Janus-faced' conception of truth which the later Habermas defends.¹⁹ We note, however, that, once mutual recognition has been cast aside, objections to consensus theory are apt to appear more pressing. If the only world which seems possible is a world of institutions, truth is apt to be pictured in “correspondence” (as distinct from “consensus”) terms.

Standing back, now, from Habermas's development we offer some observations. One is that critics and commentators are mistaken when they take up stances “for” or

17 Hegel *Phenomenology* p. 300. For a discussion of 'spiritual masses' (or social institutions), see R. Gunn and A. Wilding 'Revolutionary or Less-than-Revolutionary Recognition?' Heathwood Institute and Press (www.heathwoodpress.com) 24 July 2013.

18 On issues underlying Habermas's move away from consensus theory, see J. Habermas *Truth and justification* (Cambridge, Ma.: MIT Press 2005) pp. 37-8, 249-53. For examples of the extensive literature associated with, and commenting upon, this change of view, see C. Lafont 'Truth, Knowledge and Reality' *Sorites* Issue 1 (April 1995); A. Wellmer 'Truth, Contingency and Modernity' *Modern Philology* Vol. 90, Supplement (May 1993); B. Fultner 'The Redemption of Truth: Idealization, Acceptability and Fallibilism in Habermas's Theory of Meaning' *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* Vol. 4, No. 2 (1996); A. Seeman 'Lifeworld, Discourse and Realism: On Jürgen Habermas's Theory of Truth' *Philosophy and Social Criticism* Vol. 30 (2004).

19 On the later Habermas's 'Janus-faced' conception of truth, see *Truth and Justification* pp. 241, 253.

“against” Habermas. Habermas as a unitary theorist is a myth. There are, as we have argued, two fundamentally opposed Habermases: an “earlier” Habermas, whose greatest work is the 'Wahrheitstheorien' of 1973, and a “later” Habermas whose work takes an institutionalist turn. Both the earlier and the later Habermas are, of course, complex figures; neither may be endorsed (and neither may be deplored) outright. This said, the earlier Habermas carries critical theory forward; from his writings, the revolutionary left may learn. By contrast, the later Habermas is a disappointment. Lines of thought which follow in the later Habermas's footsteps are liable to lead in a non-revolutionary – in a word, a conformist – direction.

Second, we may refine an earlier judgement. In our 'Is the Frankfurt School Still Relevant?', we contrasted Frankfurt School writings between the 1920s and 1970s with Frankfurt School writings of the Habermasian and Honnethian period. On the basis of the above discussion, we alter our position slightly: the division between a “radical” and a “non-radical” Frankfurt School falls, not *between* pre-Habermasian and Habermasian thinking, but *within* Habermas. The division is that between the “earlier” and the “later” Habermas. Stated differently, the period during which Frankfurt School theory retains a revolutionary edge is *exactly* a half century. The half century is that between 1923 (when the *Institut für Sozialforschung* was founded) and 1973 (when Habermas's 'Wahrheitstheorien' was published).²⁰ In the years subsequent to 1973, the sky began to darken.

Thirdly, and finally, we offer a thought about the future. Revolutionary events associated with the Occupy movement have foregrounded issues of participatory democracy. Whatever may be the long-term outcome of such events, the resources of “horizontal” political organisation remain to be tapped. If nothing else, hierarchy and the institutionalisation of power are viewed with the gravest suspicion. Is it possible that, in the period of struggle launched by Occupy, Habermas's 1973 arguments find a fresh significance? Is it possible that, for a generation of Occupy-influenced readers, Habermas could count as the author of the 'Wahrheitstheorien' – rather than the institutionalist author of more recent years? If not merely Habermas but the Frankfurt School as a whole is to be judged accurately, thoughts such as those we have voiced must be debated.

20 For a survey of the Frankfurt School in its earlier decades, see M. Jay *The Dialectical Imagination* (London: Heinemann 1973).

