The Lab's Quarterly

"The Lab's Quarterly" è una rivista di Scienze Sociali fondata nel 1999 e riconosciuta come rivista scientifica dall'ANVUR per l'Area 14 delle Scienze politiche e Sociali. L'obiettivo della rivista è quello di contribuire al dibattito sociologico nazionale ed internazionale, analizzando i mutamenti della società contemporanea, a partire da un'idea di sociologia aperta, pubblica e democratica. In tal senso, la rivista intende favorire il dialogo con i molteplici campi disciplinari riconducibili alle scienze sociali, promuovendo proposte e special issues, provenienti anche da giovani studiosi, che riguardino riflessioni epistemologiche sullo statuto conoscitivo delle scienze sociali, sulle metodologie di ricerca sociale più avanzate e incoraggiando la pubblicazione di ricerche teoriche sulle trasformazioni sociali contemporanee.

The Lab's Quarterly

2020 / a. XXII / n. 4 (ottobre-dicembre)

LIBRI IN DISCUSSIONE

MONOGRAFICO

La disputa sull'ortodossia della Teoria critica

A cura di
Luca Corchia

GROUNDING GROUNDED?

di *William Outhwaite*[*]

Abstract

This comment on the exchange between Stefan Muller-Doohm/Roman Yos and Fabian Freyenhagen aims to put the debate in the context of the broader question of the relative merits of earlier and later critical theory. I agree with Muller-Doohm and Yos in suggesting that the approaches of Horkheimer and Adorno on the one hand, and Habermas on the other, to the question of Begrundung are less far apart than Freyenhagen claims.

Keywords

Begrundung; Habermas; Adorno; Horkheimer; Apel

[*] WILLIAM OUTHWAITE è Emeritus Professor in sociologia presso la Newcaste University.
Email: William.Outhwaite@newcastle.ac.uk

***

J oining a debate in which the protagonists have thoroughly addressed each other's claims, I shall aim here merely to contextualise the discussion. As in the case of Hegel and Marx, adherents of critical theory have often polarised between enthusiasts for the younger version and those who prefer the later one, the latter notoriously characterised, in Althusser's interpretation of Marx, as "mature" and "scientific". In the case of critical theory, there has been a welcome turn to a re-examination of the work of Horkheimer and Adorno, as in the recently launched *Berlin Journal of Critical Theory,* which has its goal «to focus on the critical theory of the first generation of the Frankfurt School and to extend its theories to our age»[1].

Among the precursors of this trend I would point in particular to two critical theorists from the Anglosphere, Gillian Rose and Jay Bernstein[2]. Rose's doctoral thesis, which became her first book, was on Adorno, in which she wrote of the Frankfurt School's «particular fusion of the Idealism, which arose in opposition to neo-Kantianism, with the revival of Marxism» (1978: 2) Three years later, in *Hegel Contra Sociology*, she was writing that both Lukács and Adorno had tried unsuccessfully «to break out of the neo-Kantian paradigm of validity and values. Their work has achieved renown as an Hegelian Marxism, but it constitutes a neo-Kantian Marxism» (1981: 27) Habermas, in turn, "mistreats" Hegel in order to establish his own methodologically oriented critical theory (Ivi: 36)

In her critique of Habermas, Rose had an ally in Jay Bernstein, who has argued that Habermas's sociological account of the colonisation of the life-world «[...] theoretically colonises the very existence it aims to protect. The aphoristic procedure of [Adorno's] *Minima Moralia* can thus usefully be seen as a corrective to theoretical colonisation; it aims to express as well as reflect (on) the experience of the individual» (2001: 45)[3]. Bernstein (1995) had earlier argued for a much more speculative model of critical theory, oriented more strongly to Adorno than to Horkheimer or Habermas, and thus, in his terminology, to issues of meaning and the problem of nihilism rather than to those of exploitation and justice.

---

[1] This article draws in part on one for the *Berlin Journal* (Outhwaite 2017)

[2] I am less familiar with the German scene, and sadly ignorant of much that has been written in Italy.

[3] There are parallels to Bernstein's critique in the work of Seyla Benhabib and Nancy Fraser.

In a more polemical intervention, a conference report which was also a brief critique of the aridity of certain parts of the North American Habermas industry, Peter Osborne wrote that Habermasians celebrate the fiftieth Anniversary of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* "tied firmly to the mast", for «how are followers of Habermas to celebrate *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in the wake of their forced marriage to functionalist sociology and Rawlsian political theory?» (1998: 53-54).

It is to be expected that a *parti pris* for early over later critical theory, or vice versa, will lead to some caricaturing of the alternative. Habermas, perhaps more in his earlier work than more recently, has tended to emphasise the aporia in which Horkheimer and Adorno had ended up after the war, identifying himself more fully with the early programme of critical theory to whose outputs his access was impeded by Horkheimer's notorious concealment of the back numbers of the *Zeitschrift*.

This however leads me to the main point I wish to make in this short contribution, which is to address the diversity, as well as the continuities and affinities, in critical theory, which have emerged in the course of the exchange between Freyenhagen and his critics. Habermas explicitly, and Horkheimer implicitly, stress the discontinuities in their respective approaches, though both are also drawn on occasion to stress their continuing concerns.

I think that Müller-Doohm and Yos have convincingly demonstrated that Horkheimer and Adorno were indeed concerned to ground their theorising both in their analysis of current realities and in the theoretical resources of the intellectual traditions which they so impressively mastered. Of the two, Horkheimer was more prone to present critical theory "in genereller Perspektive" (2018: 791), but we should also note Adorno's meticulous concern with language, both his own and that which he analysed with a care matched only, perhaps, by J.L. Austin (who was beginning his career at Oxford while Adorno was there). Horkheimer was closer to what we might call the standard Marxist totalising gesture well expressed by Lukács, «For every genuine Marxist there is always a reality more real and therefore more important than *isolated* facts and tendencies – namely, *the reality of the total process*, the totality of social development» (1970: 18). Adorno's approach to language is driven rather by a Benjaminian impulse to blow things apart from the inside in a process of demystification. In other words, Horkheimer's conception of critique is context-theoretic; Adorno's is concept-theoretic. As Wiggershaus puts it,

For Horkheimer, dialectics in the first place meant thinking in relative totalities, and served a critical theory of the sciences as evidence that an alternative to the

narrowness of the various scientific disciplines and metaphysics existed. For Adorno, dialectics meant the possibility of demythologizing and demystifying a broad spectrum of current phenomena. This linked him with Bloch and Benjamin (1994: 189).

The distinction is only a rough one, because Horkheimer also engaged in demystificatory conceptual analysis and Adorno was *also* concerned to stress the social totality, not least in the form of totalitarianism and other pathological manifestations of Herrschaft. A thinker like Marcuse is probably somewhere between these two poles.

The question, then, is whether a more explicit grounding of critical theory of the kind attempted by Habermas is possible or necessary. As we know, he made three attempts: first, with his conception of an empirically falsifiable philosophy, second, with the "cognitive interest" model and finally with his conception of communicative action, which underpins his analyses of morality, law and politics. All three however, I suggest, were driven more by substantive concerns than by a search for formal foundations.

For Habermas, there were probably two main contexts for his initial approach to these issues. One was his writing on Marxism, initially in a book review (1955) and then, at Gadamer's request, in his longer *Literaturbericht* of 1957 republished in *Theorie und Praxis.* Here, Habermas picked up from Merleau-Ponty to express his own view that the «Anspruch des Marxismus, zugleich Theorie der Gesellschaft und der Veränderung dieser Gesellschaft zu sein', can be tested according to whether it performs better than other theories […] er könne die Bedingungen der Möglichkeit einer empirisch überprüfbaren Geschichts-philosophie angeben – und stelle selber eine Geschichtsphilosophe dieser Art dar» (1971: 305-306) At the beginning of the 1960s he expanded on this theme in *Zwischen Philosophie und Wissenschaft – Marxismus als Kritik* and *Kritische und konservative Aufgaben der Soziologie.*

The other main reference point was the Positivismusstreit, beginning in 1961 with the initial bout between Adorno and Popper and continuing in print two years later with Habermas's exchange with Hans Albert. Here Habermas, in terms very close to those of Horkheimer, stressed the need to see «den gesellschaftlichen Lebenszusammenhang als eine die Forschung selber noch bestimmende Totalität», with the result, as Müller-Doohm noted, that social science is bound to what Habermas calls «die hermeneutische Explikation von Sinn» (2014: 155). The "cognitive interest" model emerges fairly directly out of these considerations, though Habermas also sees it as a way of grounding critical theory.

The communicative paradigm, similarly, emerges out of a long-

standing sense, expressed in his Frankfurt inaugural lecture of 1965, that «Das, was uns aus Natur heraushebt, ist […] der einzige Sachverhalt, den wir seiner Natur nach kennen können: *die Sprache.* Mit ihrer Struktur ist Mündigkeit für uns gesetzt». (Habermas 1968: 163). As Müller-Doohm notes, this echoes a passage in a letter of 1941 from Horkheimer to Adorno: «Die Rede an einen richten, heiβt im Grunde, ihn als mögliches Mitglied des zukünftigen Vereins freier Menschen anerkennen» (2014: 127-8). Habermas works this model out formally in terms of validity claims, but these are again embedded in active discursive processes of assertion and justification, rather than postulated, in the more abstract formulation of Apel (1967) as an "a priori of communication".

Habermas and Apel do indeed develop their models of discourse and discourse ethics in parallel, but with significant differences of emphasis, summed up in the terminological difference between, respectively, universal and transcendental pragmatics. Apel traced these differences in his contribution to the volume he edited in 1976 and in his earlier essay, significantly entitled *Das Problem der Letztbegründung im Lichte einer transzendentalen Sprachpragmatik* (Apel 1976a). In the 1976 volume Apel writes:

> Transzendentalpragmatische Voraussetzungen der Kommunikation sind nicht "Präsuppositionen" im Sinne der empirisch-pragmatischen Kontext-Bedingungen einer nachweisbar regelmäßig erfolgreichen Kommunikation [...] Eine *universalpragmatische Theorie* kann [...] Voraussetzungen als solche der "kommunikativen Kompetenz" [...] Aber zwingend nachweisen lassen sich die jetzt gemeinten Voraussetzungen m.E. nur aus der *trans-zendentalpragmatischen Refleionsperspektive*, d. h. aus der Perspektive von Dialog-Partnern, die [...] gezwungen sind, sich auf solche "Präsuppositionen" zu besinnen, die sie als Bedingungen der Möglichkeit aller kommunikativen Verständigung notwendigerweise akzeptiert haben (1976b: 117).

Apel returned to this theme in what must be one of his last essays, restating his position on a transcendental Letztbegründung of discourse ethics in opposition to Habermas.

> Habermas hat [...] die zuerst vertretene *Begründung* der Ethik in einer Diskurs-Präsupposition aufgegeben und die hier relevante *normative Relevanz* des von uns anzuerkennenden *Diskursaprioris* auf die *moralisch neutrale* Funktion einer "formalen" Diskursbedingung *reduziert* (2014: 97).

The details of Apel's position need not concern us here (See, for example, Gethmann and Hegselmann 1977; Bremer 1995; Dorschel et al 1993; Kettner 2009). The point is that Habermas has resisted this approach

(1976: 198-204; 1986: 352-357). Not, perhaps, sufficiently vigorously to satisfy Freyenhagen, but perhaps strongly enough to suggest that what he means by Begründung is closer to a hermeneutic process of drawing out the implications and presuppositions of a form of life than a strictly transcendental process. Even Apel seems to concede the importance of contextual elements of this kind, as least in the domain of applied ethics:

> Hierbei muss der Fall berücksichtigt werden, dass es zu keiner Verständigung über Normen kommt, sondern nur zu Verhandlungen, in denen es um strategische Vorteile geht, oder gar zu kriegerische Auseinandersetzungen. In diesem Fall ist die Dimension der Teleologie erforderlich: um ein letztes Ziel im Auge zu haben, um in dieser Situation [...] zur Begründung der Ethik zu stehen. Und dann braucht man die Werte im Sinne einer geschichtsbezogenen Verantwortungsethik (2014: 115).

A significant modification of Habermas's approach can be found in *The Inclusion of the Other.* Although Habermas does not go as far in the direction of a greater openness to difference as the title perhaps suggests, he stresses that he is defending

> den vernünftigen Gehalt einer Moral der gleichen Achtung für jeden [...] Das postmoderne Miβtrauen gegen einen rücksichtslos assimil, siereden und gleich-schaltenden Universalismus miβversteht den Sinn dieser Moral (1996: 7).

He responds, among other things, to critiques of the formalism of his model:

> Eine moralische Verbindlichkeit kann sich aus der gleichsam transzen-dentalen Nötigung unvermeidlicher Argumentationsvorausssetzungen alleine nicht ergeben; sie haftet vielmehr den speziellen Gegenständen des praktischen Diskurses an – den in ihn *eingeführten* Normen, auf die sich die in der Beratung mobilisierten Gründe beziehen [...] Die hier nur skizzierte Begründungsstrategie teilt sich die Bürde der Plausibilisierung mit einer genealogischen Fragestellung, hinter der sich gewisse modernitätstheo-retische Annahmen verbergen (Ivi: 63).

For critics such as Honneth, Benhabib and Fraser, Habermas does not go far enough in this direction. On occasion, as in his largely misconceived critique of Foucault, and his suspicion for a time of Bourdieu, he has seemed to pose demands for forms of justification which are beside the point in relation to thinkers so manifestly motivated by concerns which he shares. Critical theory, for Honneth, is alive and well as resuscitated by Habermas; but it needs to be tweaked back into a direction which

recalls Marx's early concern with a wide variety of social conflicts and the claims raised within them.[4] Most important of these, I think, is Honneth's bold rehabilitation of a strong notion of social pathology. This makes explicit something which had been latent in much of critical theory. The theme of suffering, of misdevelopment and "damaged life" (Adorno 1951/1954), pervades the work of the first generation of critical theorists, and Habermas' reworking in *Theory of Communicative Action* of Marxist, Weberian and indeed Parsonian theory contains a substantial discussion of social pathologies. In Honneth's formulation, it is the conceptual model of the

> Verschränkung von Theorie und Geschichte, das die Einheit der Kritischen Theorie in der Vielheit ihrer Stimmen begründet: Ob in positiver Form beim frühen Horkheimer, bei Marcuse oder Habermas, ob in negativer Form bei Adorno oder Benjamin, stets bildet die Vorstellung, daβ ein geschichtlicher Bildungsprozeβ durch die gesellschaftlichen Verhältnisse auf eine nur praktisch zu behebende Weise enstellt worden ist, den Hintergrund der verschiedenen Entwürfe (2007: 30).

Müller-Doohm's biography cites a remark from Habermas himself, in the Wuppertal conference of 2012: «Wer kennt schon seine wirklich spekulativen Motive?» (2014: 563). As Müller-Doohm (2014a) goes on to spell out, Habermas is more conscious than most people of the creative tension between intuitions which emerge from one's life and the demands of scholarship and truth. As Habermas said in an interview:

> In meinen Überzeugungen gibt es doch auch einen dogmatischen Kern. Ich würde lieber die Wissenschaft fallen lassen, als diesen Kern aufweichen zu lassen – denn das sind Intuitionen, die ich nicht durch Wissenschaft erworben habe, die überhaupt kein Mensch durch Wissenschaft erwirbt, sondern dadurch, daβ er aufwächst in einer Umgebung mit Menschen, mit denen man sich auseinandersetzen muβ, und in denen man sich wiederfindet (1985: 205-206).

And yet, «Wenn man sich an Wahrheitsfragen orientiert...dann darf man nicht, wie es Heidegger und Adorno gemeinsam versuchen, Wahrheiten an der Wissenschaft vorbei produzieren wollen und so auf irgendeine höhere Einsicht setzen» (Ivi: 204).

Scientific claims must then be grounded, as Müller-Doohm and Yos

---

[4] One could draw a parallel between Honneth's development of a Habermasian framework and Boltanski and Thévenot's development of Bourdieu's "critical sociology" into a "sociology of critique" – in other words, the social critiques formulated by lay members of society. See Susen 2007; Susen and Turner 2014.

stress, but in an awareness of the broader motivations underlying their Fragestellungen, which will typically include the sorts of responses to injustice invoked by Freyenhagen. The dilemma between formalistic Begründung and decisionism seems to me a false one in relation to the trajectories of critical theory.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

APEL, K-O. (1967). Das Apriori der Kommunikationsgemeinschaft. In Id., *Transformation der Philosophie*, Bd. 2. *Das Apriori der Kommunikationsgemeinschaft* (pp. 358-435). Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp.

APEL, K-O. (1976a). Das Problem der Letztbegründung im Lichte einer transzendentalen Sprachpragmatik. In B. Kanitscheider (Hg.), *Sprache und Erkenntnis. Festschrift für Gerhard Frey zum 60. Geburtstag* (pp. 55-82). Innsbruck: Amoe.

APEL, K-O. (1976b). Sprechakttheorie und transzendentale Sprachpragmatik zur Frage ethischer Normen. In Id. (Hg). *Sprachpragmatik und Philosophie* (pp. 10-173). Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp.

APEL, K-O. (2014). Transzendentalpragmatik – Drittes paradigma der Ersten Philosophie. In S. Rapic (Hg), *Habermas und der historische Materialismus* (pp. 87-103). Freiburg: Karl Alber-Verlag.

BERNSTEIN, J. M. (1995). *Recovering Ethical Life. Jürgen Habermas and the Future of Critical Theory*. London: Routledge.

BERNSTEIN, J. M. (2001) *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

BREMER, M. (1995). Ist die Transzendentalpragmatik Letztbegründet oder Holistisch?. *Journal for General Philosophy of Science*, 26: 153-168.

DORSCHEL, A., KETTNER M., KUHLMANN W. & NIQUET M. (1993). *Transzendentalpragmatik*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp.

GETHMANN, C. F. & HEGSELMANN, R. (1977). Das Problem der Begründung zwischen Dezisionismus und Fundamentalismus. *Zeitschrift für allgemeine Wissenschaftstheorie*, 8(2): 342-368.

HABERMAS, J. (1968). *Technik und Wissenschaft als Ideologie*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp.

HABERMAS, J. (1976). Was heißt Universalpragmatik?. In K-O. Apel (Hg), *Sprachpragmatik und Philosophie* (pp. 198-204). Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp.

HABERMAS, J. (1985). *Die neue Unübersichtlichkeit*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp.

HABERMAS, J. (1986). *Entgegnung*. In A. Honneth, H. Joas (Hg),

Kommunikatives Handeln. Beiträge zu Jürgen Habermas' "Theorie des kommunikatives Handelns" (pp. 327-405). Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp.

HABERMAS, J. (1996). *Die Einbeziehung des Anderen*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp.

HONNETH, A. (2007). *Pathologien der Vernunft. Geschichte und Gegenwart der Kritischen Theorie.* Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp.

KETTNER, M. (2009). Pragmatizismus. In H. Brunkhorst, R. Kreide & C. Lafont (Hg.), *Habermas-Handbuch* (pp. 26-29). Stuttgart-Weimar: Metzler.

LUKÁCS, G. (1924). *Lenin.* London: NLB, 1970.

MÜLLER-DOOHM S. (2014a). *Habermas. Eine Biographie*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp.

MÜLLER-DOOHM S. (2014b). Der innere Kompass. Das Intuitive als geistige Quelle bei Jürgen Habermas. In S. Farzin & H. Laux (Hg), *Gründungsszenen soziologischer Theorie* (pp. 80-89). Wiesbaden: Springer.

OSBORNE, P. (1998). Anniversary blues. *Radical Philosophy*, 89: 52-54.

OUTHWAITE, W. (2017). Generations of Critical Theory?. *Berlin Journal of Critical Theory*, 1(1): 5-27.

ROSE, G. (1978). *The Melancholy Science. An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno.* Basingstoke: Macmillan.

ROSE, G. (1981). *Hegel contra Sociology*. London, Athlone Press.

SUSEN, S. (2007). *The Foundations of the Social: Between Critical. Theory and Reflexive Sociology*. Oxford: Bardwell Press.

SUSEN, S. & TURNER, B., (2014) (eds.), *The Legacy of Pierre Bourdieu: Critical Essays*. London: Anthem Press.

WIGGERSHAUS, R. (1986). *The Frankfurt School.* Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994.

2020 / XXII(2 - aprile-giugno)

ROBERTO CIPRIANI, *Presentazione*;

MARIELLA NOCENZI, ALESSANDRA SANNELLA, *Quale conflitto sociale nell'era dei robots e dell'intelligenza artificiale?*;

RICCARDO FINOCCHI, MARIELLA NOCENZI, ALESSANDRA SANNELLA, *Raccomandazioni per le future società*;

FRANCO FERRAROTTI, *La catarsi dopo la tragedia. Le condizioni del nuovo umanesimo*;

MARCO ESPOSITO, *La tecnologia oltre la persona? Paradigmi contrattuali e dominio organizzativo immateriale*;

ALEX GIORDANO, *Tecnica e creatività – Societing 4.0. Per un approccio mediterraneo alle tecnologie 4.0*;

PAOLO DE NARDIS, *Conflittualità urbana, AI e digitalizzazione*;

VITTORIO COTESTA, *Tecnica e società. Il caso della Fabbrica integrata Fiat a Melfi*;

ANTONIO LA SPINA, *Trasformazioni del lavoro e conflitti*.

LUCIO MEGLIO, *Evoluzione tecnologica e tecnologie educative in una società conflittuale*;

MARTINA DE SOLE, *Aspetti orizzontali dell'IA, Gli aspetti di genere*;

RENATO GRIMALDI, SANDRO BRIGNONE, LORENZO DENICOLAI, SILVIA PALMIERI, *Intelligenza artificiale, robot e rappresentazione della conoscenza*;

MICHELE GERACE, *Il conflitto ideale*;

ANGELO ROMEO, *Maria Cristina Marchetti (2020),* Moda e politica. La rappresentazione simbolica del potere.

DOMENICO MADDALONI, *Edmond Goblot (2019).* La barriera e il livello. Studio sociologico sulla borghesia francese moderna. *A cura di Francesco Pirone*;

LUCA CORCHIA, *Francesco Antonelli (2019).* Tecnocrazia e democrazia. L'egemonia al tempo della società digitale.

2020 / 22(3 - luglio-settembre)

MARIA CATERINA FEDERICI, ULIANO CONTI, *Vilfredo Pareto. Dialogo postumo con la modernità*;

DONATELLA PACELLI, *Vilfredo Pareto oggi. Ancora un talento da de-ideologizzare?*;

Maria Cristina Marchetti, *Rileggere Weber e Pareto. Ragione e sentimento nella teoria dell'azione sociale*;

MINO GARZIA, *Pareto e la matematica*;

ALBAN BOUVIER, *La théorie des croyances collectives de Pareto. Essai de reconstruction et d'évaluation de la théorie des « dérivations » et des « résidus » du point de vue des recherches contemporaines*;

FRANCESCO ORAZI, FEDERICO SOFRITTI, *La sfida della digitalizzazione in Italia. Transizione forzata e welfare tecnologico ai tempi del Covid-19*;

LUCA BENVENGA, MICHELE LONGO, *Kropotkin. Mutualismo e Anarchia*;

ANDREA BORGHINI, *Paolo De Nardis (2019).* Il crepuscolo del funzionalismo. Appunti di teoria sociale;

SIMONE TUZZA, *Philippe Combessie (2020).* Sociologia della prigione, a cura di Sabina Curti;

DARIO LUCCHESI, *Nick Couldry, Ulises A. Mejias (2019).* The Costs of Connection. How Data is Colonizing Human Life and Appropriating It for Capitalism