

HABERMAS AND LYOTARD ON POST-MODERNITY

Richard Rorty

In *Knowledge and Human Interests* Habermas tried to generalize what Marx and Freud had accomplished by grounding their projects of "unmasking" in a more comprehensive theory. The strand in contemporary French thought which Habermas criticizes as "neoconservative" starts off from suspicion of Marx and Freud, suspicion of the masters of suspicion, suspicion of "unmasking." Lyotard, for example, says that he will

use the term "modern" to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse of this kind [i.e., "a discourse of legitimation with respect to its own status, a discourse called philosophy"] making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of the Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth.¹

He goes on to define "postmodern" as "incredulous towards metanarratives" (PC, xxiv), and to ask "Where, after the metanarratives, can legitimacy reside?" (PC, xxiv-xxv). From Lyotard's point of view, Habermas is offering one more metanarrative, a more general and abstract "narrative of emancipation" (PC, p. 60) than the Freudian and Marxian metanarratives.

For Habermas, the problem posed by "incredulity towards metanarratives" is that unmasking only makes sense if we "preserve at least one standard for [the] explanation of the corruption of *all* reasonable standards."² If we have no such standard, one which escapes a "totalizing self-referential critique," then distinctions between the naked and the masked, or between theory and ideology, lose their force. If we do not have these distinctions, then we have to give up the Enlightenment notion of "rational criticism of existing institutions," for "rational" drops out. We can still, of course, have criticism, but it will be of the sort which Habermas ascribes to Horkheimer and Adorno: "they abandoned any theoretical approach and practiced ad hoc determinate negation . . . The praxis of negation is what remains of the 'spirit of . . . unremitting theory'" (EME, p. 29). Anything that Habermas will count as retaining a "theoretical approach" will be counted by an incredulous Lyotard as a "metanarrative". Anything that abandons such an approach will be counted by Habermas as "neoconservative," because it drops the notions which have been used to justify the various reforms which have marked the history of the Western democracies since the Enlightenment, and which are still being used to criticize the socio-economic institutions of both the Free and the Communist worlds. Abandoning a standpoint which is, if not transcendental, at least

"universalistic," seems to Habermas to betray the social hopes which have been central to liberal politics.

So we find French critics of Habermas ready to abandon liberal politics in order to avoid universalistic philosophy, and Habermas trying to hang on to universalistic philosophy, with all its problems, in order to support liberal politics. To put the opposition in another way, the French writers whom Habermas criticizes are willing to drop the opposition between "true consensus" and "false consensus," or between "validity" and "power," in order not to have to tell a metanarrative in order to explicate "true" or "valid." But Habermas thinks that if we drop the idea of "the better argument" as opposed to "the argument which convinces a given audience at a given time," we shall have only a "context-dependent" sort of social criticism. He thinks that falling back on such criticism will betray "the elements of reason in cultural modernity which are contained in . . . bourgeois ideals," e.g., "the internal theoretical dynamic which constantly propels the sciences — and the self-reflexion of the sciences as well — *beyond* the creation of merely technologically exploitable knowledge" (EME, p. 18).

Lyotard would respond to this last point by saying that Habermas misunderstands the character of modern science. The discussion of "the pragmatics of science" in *The Postmodern Condition* is intended to "destroy a belief that still underlies Habermas' research, namely that humanity as a collective (universal) subject seeks its common emancipation through the regularization of the 'moves' permitted in all language games, and that the legitimacy of any statement resides in its contribution to that emancipation" (PC, p. 66). Lyotard claims to have shown that "consensus is only a particular state of discussion [in the sciences], not its end. Its end, on the contrary, is *paralogy*" (PC, pp. 65-66). Part of his argument for this odd suggestion is that "Postmodern science — by concerning itself with such things as undecidables, the limits of precise control, conflicts characterized by incomplete information, 'fracta', catastrophes, and pragmatic paradoxes — is theorizing its own evolution as discontinuous, catastrophic, non-rectifiable and paradoxical" (PC, p. 60).

I do not think that such examples of matters of current scientific concern do anything to support the claim that "consensus is not the end of discussion." Lyotard argues invalidly from the current concerns of various scientific disciplines to the claim that science is somehow discovering that it should aim at permanent revolution, rather than at the alternation between normality and revolution made familiar by Kuhn. To say that "science aims" at piling *paralogy* on *paralogy* is like saying that "politics aims" at piling revolution on revolution. No inspection of the concerns of contemporary science or contemporary politics could show anything of the sort. The most that could be shown is that talk of the aims of either is not particularly useful.

On the other hand, Lyotard does have a point, the point he shares with Mary Hesse's criticism of Habermas' Diltheyan account of the distinction between natural science and hermeneutic inquiry. Hesse thinks that "it has been sufficiently demonstrated [by what she calls "post-empiricist" Anglo-American philosophy of science] that the language of theoretical science is

irreducibly metaphorical and unformalizable, and that the logic of science is circular interpretation, re-interpretation, and self-correction of data in terms of theory, theory in terms of data.”³ This kind of debunking of empiricist philosophy of science is happily appropriated by Lyotard. Unfortunately, however, he does not think of it as a repudiation of a bad account of science but as indicating a recent change in the nature of science. He thinks that science used to be what empiricism described it as being. This lets him accuse Habermas of not being up to date.

If one ignores this notion of a recent change in the nature of science (which Lyotard makes only casual and anecdotal attempts to justify), and focuses instead on Lyotard's contrast between “scientific knowledge” and “narrative,” that turns out to be pretty much the traditional positivist contrast between “applying the scientific method” and “unscientific” political or religious or common-sensical discourse. Thus Lyotard says that a “scientific statement is subject to the rule that a statement must fulfill a given set of conditions in order to be accepted as scientific” (PC, p. 8). He contrasts this with “narrative knowledge” as the sort which “does not give priority to the question of its own legitimation, and . . . certifies itself in the pragmatics of its own transmission without having recourse to argumentation and proof.” He describes “the scientist” as classifying narrative knowledge as “a different mentality: savage, primitive, under-developed, backward, alienated, composed of opinions, customs, authority, prejudice, ignorance, ideology” (PC, p. 27). Lyotard, like Hesse, wants to soften this contrast and to assert the rights of “narrative knowledge.” In particular, he wants to answer his initial question by saying that once we get rid of the *metanarratives* legitimacy resides where it always has, in the first-order narratives:

There is, then, an incommensurability between popular narrative pragmatics, which provides immediate legitimation, and the language game known as the question of legitimacy . . . Narratives . . . determine criteria of competence and/or illustrate how they are to be applied. They thus define what has the right to be said and done in the culture in question, and since they are themselves a part of that culture, they are legitimated by the simple fact that they do what they do. (PC, p. 23)

This last quotation suggests that we read Lyotard as saying: the trouble with Habermas is not so much that he provides a metanarrative of emancipation as that he feels the need to legitimize, that he is not content to let the narratives which hold our culture together do their stuff. He is scratching where it does not itch. On this reading, Lyotard's criticism would chime with the Hesse-Feyerabend line of criticism of empiricist philosophy of science, and in particular with Feyerabend's attempt to see scientific and political discourse as continuous. It would also chime with the criticisms offered by many of Habermas' sympathetic American critics, such as Bernstein, Geuss, and McCarthy. These critics doubt that studies of communicative competence can do what transcendental philosophy failed to do in the way of providing “universalistic” criteria.⁴ They also doubt that universalism is as vital to the needs of liberal social thought as Habermas thinks it. Thus Geuss, arguing

that the notion of an “ideal speech situation” is a wheel which plays no part in the mechanism of social criticism, and suggesting that we reintroduce a position “closer to Adorno's historicism,” says:

If rational argumentation can lead to the conclusion that a critical theory [defined as “the ‘self-consciousness’ of a successful process of emancipation and enlightenment”] represents the most advanced position of consciousness available to us in our given historical situation, why the obsession with whether or not we may call it ‘true’?⁵

Presumably by “rational argumentation” Geuss means not “rational by reference to an extra-historical, universalistic, set of criteria” but something like “uncoerced except in the ways in which all discourse everywhere is inevitably coerced — by being conducted in the terms and according to the practices of a given community at a given time.” He is dubious that we need a theoretical account which gets behind that vocabulary and those conventions to something “natural” by reference to which they can be criticized. As Geuss says, the “nightmare which haunts the Frankfurt School” is something like Huxley's *Brave New World*, in which

agents are actually content, but only because they have been prevented from developing certain desires which in the ‘normal’ course of things they would have developed, and which cannot be satisfied within the framework of the present social order.⁶

To take the scare-quotes out from around “normal,” one would have to have just the sort of metanarrative which Lyotard thinks we cannot get. But we think we need this only because an overzealous philosophy of science has created an impossible ideal of ahistorical legitimation.

The picture of social progress which Geuss' more historical line of thought offers is of theory as emerging at dusk, the belated “self-consciousness” of emancipation rather than a condition for producing it. It thus has links with the anti-rationalist tradition of Burke and Oakeshott, as well as with Deweyan pragmatism. It departs from the notion that the intellectuals can form a revolutionary vanguard, a notion cherished even by French writers who claim to have dispensed with Marx's metanarrative. On this account of social change, there is no way for the citizens of *Brave New World* to work their way out from their happy slavery by theory, and, in particular, by studies of communicative competence. For the narratives which go to make up their sense of what counts as “rational” will see to it that such studies produce a conception of undistorted communication which accords with the desires they presently have. There is no way for us to prove to ourselves that we are not happy slaves of this sort, any more than to prove that our life is not a dream. So whereas Habermas compliments “bourgeois ideals” by reference to the “elements of reason” contained in them, it would be better just to compliment those untheoretical sorts of narrative discourse which make up the political speech of the Western democracies. It would be better to be frankly ethnocentric.

If one is ethnocentric in this sense, one will see what Habermas calls “the

internal theoretical dynamic which constantly propels the sciences . . . beyond the creation of technologically exploitable knowledge" not as a *theoretical* dynamic, but as a social practice. One will see the reason why modern science is more than engineering not as an ahistorical teleology — e.g., an evolutionary drive towards correspondence with reality, or the nature of language — but as a particularly good example of the social virtues of the European bourgeoisie. The reason will simply be the increasing self-confidence of a community dedicated to (in Blumenberg's phrase) "theoretical curiosity." Modern science will look like something which a certain group of human beings invented in the same sense in which these same people can be said to have invented Protestantism, parliamentary government, and Romantic poetry. What Habermas calls the "self-reflection of the sciences" will thus consist not in the attempt to "ground" scientists' practices (e.g., free exchange of information, normal problem-solving, and revolutionary paradigm-creation) in something larger or broader, but rather of attempts to show how these practices link up with, or contrast with, other practices of the same group or of other groups. When such attempts have a critical function, they will take the form of what Habermas calls "ad hoc determinate negation."

Habermas thinks that we need not be restricted, as Horkheimer and Adorno were, to such merely socio-historical forms of social criticism. He views Horkheimer, Adorno, Heidegger, and Foucault as working out new versions of "the end of philosophy":

no matter what name it [philosophy] appears under now — whether as fundamental ontology, as critique, as negative dialectic, or genealogy — these pseudonyms are by no means disguises under which the traditional [i.e., Hegelian] form of philosophy lies hidden; the drapery of philosophical concepts more likely serves as the cloak for a scantily concealed end of philosophy.⁷

Habermas' account of such "end of philosophy" movements is offered as part of a more sweeping history of philosophy since Kant. He thinks that Kant was right to split high culture up into science, morality, and art and that Hegel was right in accepting this as "the standard (*massgebliche*) interpretation of modernity" (I-17). He thinks that "The dignity specific to cultural modernism consists in what Max Weber has called the stubborn differentiation of value-spheres" (EME, p. 18). He also thinks that Hegel was right in believing that "Kant does not perceive the . . . formal divisions within culture . . . as diremptions. Hence he ignores the need for unification that emerges with the separations evoked by the principle of subjectivity" (I-17). He takes as seriously as Hegel did the question "How can an intrinsic ideal form be constructed from the spirit of modernity, that neither just imitates the historical forms of modernity nor is imposed upon them from the outside?" (I-18).

From the historicist point of view I share with Geuss, there is no reason to look for an intrinsic ideal that avoids "just imitating the historical forms of modernity." All that social thought can hope to do is to play the various historical forms of modernity off against one another in the way in which, e.g., Blumenberg plays "self-assertion" off against "self-grounding."⁸ But because Habermas agrees with Hegel that there is a "need for unification" in

order to "regenerate the devastated power of religion in the medium of reason" (I-18), he wants to go back to Hegel and start again. He thinks that in order to avoid the disillusionment with "the philosophy of subjectivity" which produced Nietzsche and the two strands of post-Nietzschean thought which he distinguishes and dislikes (the one leading to Foucault, and the other to Heidegger), we need to go back to the place where the young Hegel took the wrong turn (III-30). That was the place where he still "held open the option of using the idea of uncoerced will formation in a communication community existing under constraints of cooperation as a model for the reconciliation of a bifurcated civil society" (III-15). He thus suggests that it was the lack of a sense of rationality as *social* that was missing from "the philosophy of the subject" which the older Hegel exemplified (and from which he believes the "end-of-philosophy" thinkers have never really escaped — see III-30).

But whereas Habermas thinks that the cultural need which "the philosophy of the subject" gratified was and is real, and can perhaps be fulfilled by his own focus on a "communication community," I would urge that it is an artificial problem created by taking Kant too seriously. On this view, the wrong turn was taken when Kant's split between science, morals, and art was accepted as a *donnée*, as *die massgebliche Selbstausslegung der Moderne*. Once that split is taken seriously, then the *Selbstvergewisserung der Moderne*, which Hegel and Habermas both take to be the "fundamental philosophical problem" (see I-12), will indeed seem urgent. For once the philosophers swallow Kant's "stubborn differentiation," then they are condemned to an endless series of reductionist and anti-reductionist moves. Reductionists will try to make everything scientific ("positivism"), or political (Lenin), or aesthetic (Baudelaire, Nietzsche). Anti-reductionists will show what such attempts leave out. To be a philosopher of the "modern" sort is precisely to be unwilling either to let these spheres simply co-exist uncompetitively, or to reduce the other two to the remaining one. Modern philosophy has consisted in forever realigning them, squeezing them together, and forcing them apart again. But it is not clear that these efforts have done the modern age much good (or, for that matter, harm).

Habermas thinks that the older Hegel "solves the problem of the self-reassurance of modernity too well," because the Philosophy of Absolute Spirit "removes all importance from its own present age . . . and deprives it of its calling to self-critical renewal" (II-28). He sees the popularity of "end-of-philosophy" thought as an over-reaction to this over-success. But surely part of the motivation for this kind of thought is the belief that Hegel too was scratching where it did not really itch. Whereas Habermas thinks that it is with Hegel's own over-success that philosophy becomes what Hegel himself called "an isolated sanctuary" whose ministers "form an isolated order of priests . . . untroubled by how it goes with the world," it is surely possible to see this development as having been Kant's fault, if anybody's, and precisely the fault of his "three-sphere" picture of culture. On this latter view, Kant's attempt to deny knowledge to make room for faith (by inventing 'transcendental subjectivity' to serve as a fulcrum for the Copernican revolution) was provoked by an unnecessary worry about the spiritual significance, or insignificance, of modern science. Like Habermas, Kant thinks that modern

science has a "theoretical dynamic," one which can be identified with (at least a portion of) "the nature of rationality." Both think that by isolating and exhibiting this dynamic, but distinguishing it from other dynamics (e.g., "practical reason" or "the emancipatory interest"), one can keep the results of science without thereby disenchanting the world. Kant suggested that we need not let our knowledge of the world *qua* matter in motion get in the way of our moral sense. The same suggestion was also made by Hume and Reid, but unlike these pragmatic Scotchmen, Kant thought that he had to back up this suggestion with a story which would differentiate and "place" the three great spheres into which culture must be divided. From the point of view common to Hume and Reid (who disagreed on so much else) no such metanarrative is needed. What is needed is a sort of intellectual analogue of civic virtue — tolerance, irony, and a willingness to let spheres of culture flourish without worrying too much about their "common ground," their unification, the "intrinsic ideals" they suggest, or what picture of man they "presuppose."

In short, by telling a story about Kant as the beginning of modern philosophy (and by emphasizing the difference between modern and pre-modern philosophy) one might make the kind of fervent end-of-philosophy writing Habermas deplors look both more plausible and less interesting. What links Habermas to the French thinkers he criticizes is the conviction that the story of modern philosophy (as successive reactions to Kant's diremptions) is an important part of the story of the democratic societies' attempts at self-reassurance. But it may be that most of the latter story could be told as the history of reformist politics, without much reference to the kinds of theoretical backup which philosophers have provided for such politics. It is, after all, things like the formation of trade unions, the meritocratization of education, the expansion of the franchise, and cheap newspapers, which have figured most largely in the willingness of the citizens of the democracies to see themselves as part of a "communicative community" — their continued willingness to say "us" rather than "them" when they speak of their respective countries. This sort of willingness has made religion progressively less important in the self-image of that citizenry. One's sense of relation to a power beyond the community becomes less important as one becomes able to think of oneself as part of a body of public opinion, capable of making a difference to the public fate. That ability has been substantially increased by the various "progressive" changes I have listed.

Weber was of course right in saying that some of these changes have also worked the other way (to increase our sense of being controlled by "them"). But Habermas is so preoccupied with the "alienating" effects of such changes that he allows himself to be distracted from the concomitant increase in people's sense of themselves as free citizens of free countries. The typical German story of the self-consciousness of the modern age (the one which runs from Hegel through Marx, Weber, and Nietzsche) focuses on figures who were preoccupied with the world we lost when we lost the religion of our ancestors. But this story may be both too pessimistic and too exclusively German. If so, then a story about the history of modern thought which took Kant and Hegel less seriously and, for example, the relatively untheoretical socialists more seriously, might lead us to a kind of "end-of-philosophy" thinking which

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would escape Habermas' strictures on Deleuze and Foucault. For these French writers buy in on the usual German story, and thus tend to share Habermas' assumption that the story of the realignment, assimilation, and expansion of the three "value-spheres" is essential to the story of the *Selbstvergewisserung* of modern society, and not just to that of the modern intellectuals.

In order to interpret this problem of the three spheres as a problem only for an increasingly "isolated order of priests," one has to see the "principle of the modern" as something other than that famous "subjectivity" which post-Kantian historians of philosophy, anxious to link Kant with Descartes, took as their guiding thread. One can instead attribute Descartes' role as "founder of modern philosophy" to his development of what I earlier called "an overzealous philosophy of science" — the sort of philosophy of science which saw Galilean mechanics, analytic geometry, mathematical optics, and the like, as having more spiritual significance than they in fact have. By taking the ability to do such science as a mark of something deep and essential to human nature, as the place where we got closest to our true selves, Descartes preserved just those themes in ancient thought which Bacon had tried to obliterate. The preservation of the Platonic idea that our most distinctively human faculty was our ability to manipulate "clear and distinct ideas," rather than to accomplish feats of social engineering, was Descartes' most important and most unfortunate contribution to what we now think of as "modern philosophy." Had Bacon — the prophet of self-assertion, as opposed to self-grounding — been taken more seriously, we might not have been struck with a canon of "great modern philosophers" who took "subjectivity" as their theme. We might, as J.B. Schneewind puts it, have been less inclined to assume that epistemology (i.e., reflection on the nature and status of natural science) was the "independent variable" in philosophical thought and moral and social philosophy the "dependent variable." We might thereby see what Blumenberg calls "self-assertion" — the willingness to center our hopes on the future of the race, on the unpredictable successes of our descendants — as the "principle of the modern." Such a principle would let us think of the modern age as defined by successive attempts to shake off the sort of ahistorical structure exemplified by Kant's division of culture into three "value-spheres."

On this sort of account, the point I claimed Lyotard shared with Feyerabend and Hesse — the point that there are no interesting epistemological differences between the aims and procedures of scientists and those of politicians — is absolutely fundamental. The recovery of a Baconian, non-Cartesian attitude towards science would permit us to dispense with the idea of "an internal theoretical dynamic" in science, a dynamic which is something more than the "anything goes that works" spirit which unites Bacon and Feyerabend. It would break down the opposition between what Habermas calls "merely technologically exploitable knowledge" and "emancipation," by seeing both as manifestations of what Blumenberg calls "theoretical curiosity." It would free us from preoccupation with the purported tensions between the three "value-spheres" distinguished by Kant and Weber, and between the three sorts of "interests" distinguished by Habermas.

In the present space, I cannot do more than gesture towards the various rosy prospects which appear once one suggests that working through "the principle of subjectivity" (and out the other side) was just a side-show, something which an isolated order of priests devoted themselves to for a few hundred years, something which did not make much difference to the successes and failures of the European countries in realizing the hopes formulated by the Enlightenment. So I shall conclude by turning from the one issue on which I think Lyotard has a point against Habermas to the many issues about which Habermas seems to me in the right.

The thrust of Habermas' claim that thinkers like Foucault, Deleuze, and Lyotard are "neoconservative" is that they offer us no "theoretical" reason to move in one social direction rather than another. They take away the dynamic which liberal social thought (of the sort represented by Rawls in America and Habermas himself in Germany) has traditionally relied upon, viz., the need to be in touch with a reality obscured by "ideology" and disclosed by "theory". Habermas says of Foucault's later work that it

replaced the model of repression and emancipation developed by Marx and Freud with a pluralism of power/discourse formations. These formations intersect and succeed one another and can be differentiated according to their style and intensity. They cannot, however, be judged in terms of validity, which was possible in the case of the repression and emancipation of conscious as opposed to unconscious conflict resolutions. (EME, p. 29)

This description is, I think, quite accurate, as is his remark that "the shock" which Foucault's books produce "is not caused by the flash of *insight* into a confusion which threatens identity" but instead by "the affirmed de-differentiation and by the affirmed collapse of those categories which alone can account for category mistakes of existential relevance." Foucault affects to write from a point of view light-years away from the problems of contemporary society. His own efforts at social reform (e.g., of prisons) seem to have no connection with his exhibition of the way in which the "humane" approach to penal reform tied in with the needs of the modern state. It takes no more than a squint of the inner eye to read Foucault as a stoic, a dispassionate observer of the present social order, rather than its concerned critic. Because the rhetoric of emancipation — the notion of a kind of truth which is *not* one more production of power — is absent from his work, he can easily be thought of reinventing American "functionalist" sociology. The extraordinary *dryness* of Foucault's work is a counterpart of the dryness which Iris Murdoch once objected to in the writing of British analytic philosophers.⁹ It is a dryness produced by a lack of identification with any social context, any communication. Foucault once said that he would like to write "so as to have no face." He forbids himself the tone of the liberal sort of thinker who says to his fellow-citizens: "We know that there must be a better way to do things than this; let us look for it together." There is no "we" to be found in Foucault's writings, nor in those of many of his French contemporaries.

It is this remoteness which reminds one of the conservative who pours cold water on hopes for reform, who affects to look at the problems of his fellow-citizens with the eye of the future historian. Writing "the history of the present," rather than suggestions about how our children might inhabit a better world in the future, gives up not just on the notion of a common human nature, and on that of "the subject," but on our untheoretical sense of social solidarity. It is as if thinkers like Foucault and Lyotard were so afraid of being caught up in one more metanarrative about the fortunes of "the subject" that they cannot bring themselves to say "we" long enough to identify with the culture of the generation to which they belong. Lyotard's contempt for "the philosophy of subjectivity" is such as to make him abstain from anything that smacks of the "metanarrative of emancipation" which Habermas shares with Blumenberg and Bacon. Habermas' socialization of subjectivity, his philosophy of consensus, seems to Lyotard just one more pointless variation on a theme which has been heard too often.

But although disconnecting "philosophy" from social reform — a disconnection previously performed by analytic philosophers who were "emotivist" in meta-ethics while being fiercely partisan in politics — is one way of expressing exasperation with the philosophical tradition, it is not the only way. Another would be to minimize the importance of that tradition, rather than seeing it as something which urgently needs to be overcome, unmasked, or genealogized. Suppose, as I suggested above, one sees the wrong turn as having been taken with Kant (or better yet, with Descartes) rather than (like Habermas) with the young Hegel or the young Marx. Then one might see the canonical sequence of philosophers from Descartes to Nietzsche as a distraction from the history of concrete social engineering which made the contemporary North Atlantic culture what it is now, with all its glories and all its dangers. One could try to create a new canon — one in which the mark of a "great philosopher" was awareness of new social and religious and institutional possibilities, as opposed to developing a new dialectical twist in metaphysics or epistemology. That would be a way splitting the difference between Habermas and Lyotard, of having things both ways. We could agree with Lyotard that we need no more metanarratives, but with Habermas that we need less dryness. We could agree with Lyotard that studies of the communicative competence of a transhistorical subject are of little use in reinforcing our sense of identification with our community, while still insisting on the importance of that sense.

If one had such a de-theoreticized sense of community, one could accept the claim that valuing "undistorting communication" was of the essence of liberal politics without needing a theory of communicative competence as backup. Attention would be turned instead to some concrete examples of what was presently distorting our communication — e.g., to the sort of "shock" we get when, reading Foucault, we realize that the jargon we liberal intellectuals developed has played into the hands of the bureaucrats. Detailed historical narratives of the sort Foucault offers us would take the place of philosophical metanarratives. Such narratives would not unmask something created by power called "ideology" in the name of something not created by power called

“validity” or “emancipation.” They would just explain who was currently getting and using power for what purposes, and then (unlike Foucault) suggest how some other people might get it and use it for other purposes. The resulting attitude would be neither incredulous and horrified realization that truth and power are inseparable nor Nietzschean *Schadenfreude*, but rather a recognition that is was only the false lead which Descartes gave us (and the resulting over-valuation of scientific theory which, in Kant, produce “the philosophy of subjectivity”) that made us think truth and power were separable. We could thus take the Baconian maxim that “knowledge is power” with redoubled seriousness. We might also be made to take seriously Dewey’s suggestion that the way to re-enchant the world, to bring back what religion gave our forefathers, is to stick to the concrete. Much of what I have been saying is an attempt to follow up on the following passage from Dewey:

We are weak today in ideal matters because intelligence is divorced from aspiration . . . When philosophy shall have cooperated with the force of events and made clear and coherent the meaning of the daily detail, science and emotion will interpenetrate, practice and imagination will embrace. Poetry and religious feeling will be the unforced flowers of life.¹⁰

I can summarize my attempt to split the difference between Lyotard and Habermas by saying that this Deweyan attempt to make concrete concerns with the daily problems of one’s community — social engineering — the substitute for traditional religion seems to me to embody Lyotard’s postmodernist “incredulity towards metanarratives” while dispensing with the assumption that the intellectual has a mission to be avant-garde, to escape the rules and practices and institutions which have been transmitted to him in favor of something which will make possible “authentic criticism.” Lyotard unfortunately retains one of the left’s silliest ideas — that escaping from such institutions is automatically a good thing, because it insures that one will not be “used” by the evil forces which have “co-opted” these institutions. Leftism of this sort necessarily devalues consensus and communication, for insofar as the intellectual remains able to talk to people outside the avant-garde he “compromises” himself. Lyotard exalts the “sublime,” and argues that Habermas’ hope that the arts might serve to “explore a living historical situation” and to “bridge the gap between cognitive, ethical and political discourses,” (PC, p. 72) shows that Habermas has only an “aesthetic of the beautiful” (PC, p. 79). On the view I am suggesting, one should see the quest for the sublime, the attempt (in Lyotard’s words) to “present the fact that the unrepresentable exists” (PC, p. 82), as one of the prettier unforced blue flowers of bourgeois culture. But this quest is wildly irrelevant to the attempt at communicative consensus which is the vital force which drives that culture.

More generally, one should see the intellectual *qua* intellectual as having a special, idiosyncratic, need — a need for the ineffable, the sublime, a need to go beyond the limits, a need to use words which are not part of anybody’s language-game, any social institution. But one should not see the intellectual as serving a *social* purpose when he fulfills this need. Social purposes are served, just as Habermas says, by finding beautiful ways of harmonizing

interests, rather than sublime ways of detaching oneself from others’ interests. The attempt of leftist intellectuals to pretend that the avant-garde is serving the wretched of the earth by fighting free of the merely beautiful is a hopeless attempt to make the special needs of the intellectual and the social needs of his community coincide. Such an attempt goes back to the Romantic period, when the urge to think the unthinkable, to grasp the unconditioned, to sail strange seas of thought alone, was mingled with enthusiasm for the French Revolution. These two, equally laudable, motives should be distinguished.

If we do distinguish them, then we can see each as a distinct motive for the kind of “end of philosophy” thinking Habermas deplures. The desire for the sublime makes one want to bring the philosophical tradition to an end because it makes one want to cut free from the words of the tribe. Giving these words a purer sense is not enough; they must be abjured altogether, for they are contaminated with the needs of a repudiated community. Such a Nietzschean line of thought leads to the kind of avant-garde philosophy which Lyotard admires in Deleuze. The desire for communication, harmony, interchange, conversation, social solidarity, and the “merely” beautiful, wants to bring the philosophical tradition to an end because it sees the attempt to provide metanarratives, even metanarratives of emancipation, as an unhelpful distraction from what Dewey calls “the meaning of the daily detail.” Whereas the first sort of end-of-philosophy thinking sees the philosophical tradition as an extremely important failure, the second sort sees it as rather unimportant excursus.¹¹ Those who want sublimity are aiming at a postmodernist form of intellectual life. Those who want beautiful social harmonies want a postmodernist form of social life, in which society as a whole asserts itself without bothering to ground itself.¹²

NOTES

- 1 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, 1984), p. xxiii. Further references to this book will be included in the text of the essay as “PC.”
- 2 Jürgen Habermas, “The Entwinment of Myth and Enlightenment: Re-reading *Dialectic of Enlightenment*,” *New German Critique*, 26 (1982), p. 28. Further references to this essay will be included in the text as “EME.”
- 3 Mary Hesse, *Revolutions and Reconstructions in the Philosophy of Science* (Bloomington, 1980), p. 173.
- 4 See, for example, Thomas McCarthy, “Rationality and Relativism: Habermas’ ‘Overcoming’ of Hermeneutics,” in *Habermas: Critical Debates*, John B. Thompson and David Held, eds. (Cambridge, Mass., 1982).
- 5 Raymond Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory: Habermas and the Frankfurt School* (Cambridge, 1982), p. 94.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 83.
- 7 Jürgen Habermas, *Paris Lectures*, III, p. 3. In the Spring of 1983, Habermas gave four lectures in Paris on the theme of modernity. These lectures will form part of a book on modernity to be published in 1985. References are to a typescript translation of the lectures by Thomas McCarthy and will be referred to in the text as lectures I, II, III and IV.

- 8 Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, Mass., 1983), p. 184.
- 9 See Murdoch, "Against Dryness," reprinted (from *Encounter*, 1961) in Stanley Hauerwas and Alasdair MacIntyre, eds., *Revisions* (Notre Dame, Indiana, 1983).
- 10 John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (Boston, 1957), p. 164.
- 11 I pursue this contrast in a discussion of Derrida called "Deconstruction and Circumvention," forthcoming in *Critical Inquiry*.
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