



On the Brink of a New ‘Great Transformation’?

The Liberating Power of Symbols: Philosophical Essays (trans. Peter Dews)

J. Habermas

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The Postnational Constellation: Political Essays (trans. & ed. Max Pensky)

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Between Facts and Norms (1996) signified an important turn in Habermas’s thought towards a full-blown theory of the integrative medium of law and the ideal of cosmopolitan solidarity, aspects seriously undertheorised before then. His most recent offerings represent augmentations to, rather than advances on, that turn.

With *The Liberating Power of Symbols* Habermas expands upon the philosophical heritage impelling his ardent modernism through eight *laudatios* and essays from the years 1990 to 1996 on figures as diverse as Alexander Kluge, a renowned writer–film maker, and the Finnish analytic philosopher Georg Henrik von Wright. Admittedly a mosaic, the text nonetheless suffers from a disappointing superficiality of analysis and engagement, especially obvious in the essays on Jaspers, Johann Baptist Metz, and Apel. An exception is the title essay on Ernst Cassirer, where Habermas records his debt to a body of work that in switching from the paradigm of transcendental consciousness to the symbolism inherent in language made possible the ‘linguistic turn’ basic to his own discourse-theoretical position. One could say the same, perhaps, of his examination of Michael Theunissen’s negative theology.¹ Indeed, the interface of Habermas’s ‘methodological atheism’ (p. 78) with Theunissen’s movement from Kierkegaardian despair to a divine Absolute, the anamnestic reason of the Catholic Metz, and the negative messianism of Gershom Scholem’s study of the false prophet Sabbatai Sevi, is what saves the text from irrelevance, situating it within the larger debate between discourse theory and theological responses to modernity.

The Postnational Constellation sees Habermas assume the familiar mantle of a public intellectual, the arguments and much of the material being also familiar, apart from one interesting foray into the morality of human cloning



and a revealing essay on the legacy of Marcuse.² The guiding metaphor is of globalized ‘flow and boundary’ (p. XVIII), exposing the vulnerabilities of traditional nation states and the argued need to move to a post-national political framework of European federalisation and a ‘world domestic policy’. Habermas begins by exploring the budding national consciousness of the 1846 Germanist Assembly, simultaneously expressive of a dangerous linguistically understood *Volksnation* (extolled by the *Brüder Grimm*) and a progressive wish for a universalistic egalitarian polity (as attested to by the ‘clear-eyed reflections’ of Fröbel and Gervinus). This Janus-Face origin of the nation state informs a subsequent defence of Daniel Goldhagen’s *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*. Largely ignoring the factual and argumentative shortcomings of Goldhagen’s controversial work, Habermas maintains that its importance lies in re-sensitising German ethical–political self-understanding to the moral tragedy of ‘a barbaric nationalism’, thus strengthening the universalist, over the particularist, inheritance from 1846.

History and its meaning therefore impel the volume’s core chapters. The ‘turning-point’ of 1945 hailed the triumph of the ‘universalist spirit of political enlightenment’ embodied in the co-original, symbiotic interrelation of private and public autonomy (pp. 45, 46). Yet, the necessary welfare state compromise secured after the war has collapsed in the post-1989 era, scorned by the proponents of neoliberalism and post-modernism (p. 88), and structurally undermined by the global economy. With this collapse ‘democratic self-steering within a national society’ becomes impossible, given the ‘new kinds of risk that do not respect national borders’ (pp. 67, 68). Without resources because of the mobility of capital and therefore unable to legitimate themselves by securing social rights, nation states must seek a new form of political ‘closure’ to deal with a radicalised ‘openness’.

Yet for Habermas globalisation is not a threat but an opportunity for learning, for taking a further ‘abstractive step’ towards higher civility and a more rational closure. This means the link between ‘nation’ and the constitutional state must be broken in favour of an abstract solidarity as envisioned in an integrated European Union, ‘the initial form of a postnational democracy’ (p. 89). Normatively *and* functionally, Europe’s future lies in the emergence of a common political framework held together by a constitution or ‘Charter’ allowing for common social and economic policies. Although not desiring a ‘Nation of Europe’ (p. 99), and accepting that the second chamber of national ministers should retain primacy, Habermas holds out for the possibility of a distinctly European ethical–political cultural identity emerging to buttress this new political reality.³

The prospects for global politics are somewhat different. Ambivalent about the possibility of securing cosmopolitan democracy on the basis of



a world parliament, he argues that a 'world domestic policy' has to develop without 'world governance'. A host of arguments commingle here, to the effect that cosmopolitan solidarity can only be secured through a *legal-moral* self-understanding centring on human rights, which both Western and Eastern states have to accept, since only this arrangement can cope with the systemic imperatives of modernisation. Unlike a federal EU, Habermas sees little chance of a common global *ethical-political* culture arising. Thus, the only hope for a rational closure is the emergence of a multilevel politics not within a world organisation, but *between* 'political processes that persist at national, international, and global levels' (p. 110). To be successful, such processes would have to draw their energies from informal public spheres, citizens impelling political elites to act towards instituting a global domestic policy. Paradoxically, then, the impetus towards a post-national 'great transformation' has to come from citizens within existing nation states.

No doubt this represents a consistent and timely, if predictable, argument deserving the attention received from political heavyweights such as Joschka Fischer, Gerhard Schröder and Jean-Pierre Chevènement. One has to question, however, Habermas's use of the term '*postnational*'. If national identities should still endure on a European level, if the second chamber ought to retain primacy, and if, globally, a minimal social justice is to be achieved through long established transnational organisations, then his contention that we stand at the brink of an epoch where the nation state has lost its relevance appears hyperbolic, to say the least. In such a vision the nation state is as central as it was to pre-1989 politics. Moreover, there is little sign of Habermas engaging with the literature of nationalism. His tendency is to read nationalism solely in the light of German experience, where not nationalism *per se*, but *pan-nationalism* was decisive. Thus, he automatically devalues any normative arguments for national self-determination, which he considers a 'nonsense' (p. 72). But if, as he says, political communities require complementary ethical-political identities, and if such identities revolve around the idea of self-realisation as much as rights and a patriotic constitutionalism, then the nation state ought to remain a locus of real communal and transcommunal aspiration. In having excluded these realities and perspectives, *The Postnational Constellation* fails to advance Habermas's thought beyond the trite claims of a dominant liberal universalism.

Notes

- 1 Chapter 7, Communicative freedom and negative theology: questions for Michael Theunissen, has already appeared in M. Matuōtik, M. Westphal, (eds.) (1995). *Kierkegaard in Post-Modernity*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, pp. 182–198.



- 2 Chapter 5, Remarks on legitimation and human rights, pp. 113–129 has appeared in (1998) *Modern Schoolman*, 75:2 and (1998) *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 24:5.
- 3 Chapter 4, The post-national constellation and the future of democracy, draws from a talk given on 5th July 1998 in Berlin at the Willy–Brandt–Haus before an audience including Gerhard Schröder. It repeats to a considerable extent Chapters 4, 5, and 6 of *The Inclusion of the Other*, as well as the arguments presented by Habermas in (1999). The European nation state and the pressure of globalisation. *New Left Review* 235: 46–59.

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