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The Philosopher as Engaged Citizen: Habermas on the Role of the Public Intellectual in Modern Democratic Life[*]

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ABSTRACT Realists and supporters of 'democratic underlabouring' have challenged the traditional separation between theory and practice in recent years. Although both attack Jürgen Habermas for being an idealist whose philosophy is too removed from practice, I argue that this interpretation is inaccurate. While Habermas's theory is oriented to truth and understanding, he has sought realize his communicative conception of democracy by increasing the quality of public debate through his interventions as a public intellectual. In outlining this approach, I argue that giving the theorist a direct role in public policy undermines theory as an enterprise oriented towards truth and overlooks the contingency, participatory nature, and complicated internal logics of social and political practice. My basic thesis is that Habermas's understanding of theory and practice overcomes these difficulties by providing an account of theory that is independent but also gives the theorist the ability to participate in politics as a public intellectual.

KEYWORDS Jürgen Habermas, Public Intellectuals, Theory and Practice, Realism, Democratic Underlabouring

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Introduction

Social and political philosophy is usually understood as the scholarly pursuit of general questions regarding the structure of human communities, the origins of legitimacy, the nature of justice, etc. The timelessness of these problems means that past answers preserved within the disciplinary canon often serve as inspiration in the present. This conception treats theory as a map that highlights salient features of social and political life in an abstract but systematic manner that is at least partially transferable across space and time. While social and political philosophy may develop analytical tools that 'enable us to see what to do,' on this understanding of the discipline such practical applications 'are not prerequisites of a theory in any straightforward way' (Schmidtz, 2006: 27).

In recent years this traditional model has increasingly come under attack. Within mainstream social and political philosophy, there is growing support for the theorist to take on the role of a 'democratic underlabourer,' who 'is specially equipped to help her fellow citizens' by both clarifying the implications of existing proposals and 'offer[ing] arguments and justifications of her own' (Swift and White, 2008: 49, 54). Going even further, a movement of self-styled 'realists' argues that theory should be an 'effective source of orientation or a guide to action' (Geuss, 2008: 98). By calling the standard view of social and political theory into question, proponents of both of these accounts sharpen the methodological division 'between truth seeking and democratic responsiveness' (Baderin, 2016: 209).

Although these two challenges to social and political philosophy differ from each other in many ways, I focus on their shared claim that theory should be 'connected to practical interventions' (Geuss, 2008: 98). More specifically, I push back against attacks on Jürgen Habermas's philosophy, which accuse him of producing a quietist, mainstream theory that must

be drawn out 'into a "real" world from which it otherwise remains isolated' (Whyman, 2019). By drawing attention to the role separation that Habermas introduces between the theorist and the public intellectual and highlighting the advantages of his mediated model of theory and practice, I argue that social and political philosophers should not have a direct, authoritative role in public policy. I therefore agree with both Habermas and his mentor at the Institute for Social Research (*Institut für Sozialforschung*), Theodor Adorno, that 'theory is much more capable of having practical consequences owing to the strength of its own objectivity than if it had subjected itself to praxis from the start' (in Richter and Adorno, 2002: 15).

In rejecting discursive approaches to politics and society 'of the kind envisaged by Habermas' (Geuss, 2008: 31) and classifying his work as a form of 'ethics first' theorizing, I argue that realists overlook the narrow scope that Habermas attributes to academic philosophy, ignore his mediation of theory and practice, and fail to recognize the practical implications that the leading public intellectual of postwar West Germany has drawn from his philosophical research. Similarly, although the underlabourer model is more 'limited and modest,' I show that by vesting theorists with special authority as a result of their 'particular skills,' including the ability to 'assess and examine arguments about values,' this approach 'short circuit[s] the democratic process' in a way that Habermas's model does not (Swift and White, 2008: 49, 54, 55). My basic thesis is that Habermas's separation of the role that the theorist plays as a scholar and as a public intellectual overcomes these difficulties by defending the independence and objectivity of social and political philosophy as an enterprise oriented toward truth, while also allowing the theorist to participate in political debate as a critic of existing proposals and contemporary affairs more generally.

Realists are correct in claiming that Habermas associates social and political philosophy with the traditional model of truth-seeking. However, this does *not* mean that he thinks 'that one can complete the work of ethics first, attaining an ideal theory of how we should act, and then in a second step…apply that ideal theory to the action of political agents' (Guess, 2008). On the contrary, Habermas (1994: 113, 114) argues that in the modern world, which is divided into different spheres that operate with their own internal logics, philosophy can no longer claim to offer 'a theory that's supposed to be able to solve all of life's problems.' Although theory can still ensure that we do 'not to lose the connections in the move from one discourse to another,' it 'does not provide instructions for action' (in Czingon et al., 2020: 9).

While he denies philosophy the 'specific place in the political and policymaking process' (Swift and White, 2008: 49) that both the realist and the underlabouring models propose, this does *not* mean that Habermas severs theory from practice; instead, he seeks to mediate this relationship in a way that respects the inner logics of both these enterprises. He (2009: 52) therefore argues that under contemporary conditions the theorist can only intervene in political affairs as an intellectual who 'broadens the spectrum of relevant arguments in an attempt to improve the lamentable level of public debates.' Although working to raise the quality of discourse in the public sphere fulfills the theoretical *desiderata* of Habermas's conception of democratic legitimacy, his philosophical commitments are not directly action-guiding; 'instead, theory informs the scope of viable forms of practice, enabling us to address the type(s) of practice likely to succeed' (Dahms, 1997: 208) without claiming any special authority in public debate. Rather than offering concrete proposals that lead directly to practice, for Habermas theory is oriented towards critique and the broadening of public consciousness via the work of public intellectuals.

Habermas negotiates the distinction between scholarly research and broader societal relevance by dividing the person of the theorist into distinct roles governed by different norms and expectations. As a scholar, the philosopher works in a context where 'the production of research and knowledge follows accepted methodological rules' in its search for truth. However, as a citizen the theorist can also play 'the role of the public intellectual who intervenes where the apparatus has become unable to extricate itself' (Hohendahl, 1997: 218, 226) by alerting the broader public to problems in contemporary social and political debate, i.e. to rights that are being overlooked, voices that are ignored, and people who are affected but have not been considered.

Habermas serves as an example of how to play these distinct roles. As one of the most important thinkers of the twentieth century, he has not only developed the paradigm of communicative action; he has also acted as 'an engaged public intellectual in the very same "political public sphere" that he theorized' (Pensky, 2013: 31). As a result of his political stands on issues ranging from the place of the Nazi past in German political culture, the rights of asylum seekers, the dangers involved in the overly-hasty reunification of Germany, and the need for greater European integration (Verovšek, 2014), Habermas has forged a reputation as the conscience of the postwar Federal Republic of Germany.

Insodoing he has sought to performatively 'refute the objection that the theory of communicative action is blind to institutional reality' (Habermas, 2004: xl), while maintaining a strict separation between these roles in order to ensure that seeking to be practical theory 'does not sabotag[e] thinking and thereby itself' (Freyenhagen, 2014: 878). In highlighting this aspect of his work, I push back against the 'peculiar imbalance on the side of theory that has characterized Habermas's reception in English-speaking countries' (Pensky, 1995: 67-8). In this

way, I show that Habermas's public interventions – many of which have been republished in the twelve volumes of his *Kleine politische Schriften* ('short political writings') – must be read alongside his philosophical works if we are to grasp the full implications of his theoretical system.

The argument is organized as follows. I start by briefly outlining Habermas's (1994: 99-120) relatively constrained view of 'what theories can accomplish' and his understanding of the relationship between theory and practice. The second part details his vision of public intellectuals and shows how this role fits into his systematic philosophy. I then examine how Habermas engages in public debate, focusing on how this approach differs from both realist proposals and the underlabouring model, both of which end up undermining the democratic process by given the theorist a special, authoritative position in the public sphere. I conclude with some preliminary reflections on how Habermas's work as a public intellectual situates him within the engaged theoretical tradition of the Frankfurt School.

The Limits of Philosophy

Habermas has devoted much of his philosophical and sociological career to developing a normative ideal of justification based on 'the unforced force of the better argument.' In *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989b), originally published in 1962, he introduces a model of democratic legitimacy based on the bourgeois public sphere that emerged in seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe. Despite the limitations of this historical constellation in terms of both class and gender, he argues that it gave rise to a new vision of humanity and governmental authority, as individuals from different backgrounds met and engaged in rational discussion of issues of public interest. In *Between Fact and Norms* (1996) he builds on this foundation, arguing that only reasoned debate in the informal public sphere of civil

society can provide a suitable grounding for coercive democratic law. The result is a discourse theory of democracy based on the quality of deliberative opinion-formation in the public sphere, which must then be translated into law through institutional procedures of formal will-formation.

Since newspapers, television, radio and the Internet act as intermediaries between the 'weak' publics of civil society and the 'strong' decision-making publics within state institutions, Habermas (1996: 302-8) highlights the importance of the mass media as the 'filter-bed' that shapes the flow, direction and quality of public discourse. He is particularly worried about the ability of market forces and political agents to illicitly influence debates in the public sphere, which are supposed to occur between free and equal citizens exercising their power of reasoning together. Habermas's (2009: 45) recent work therefore highlights the dangerous 'media power of private corporations,' which are driven by the profit motive, not the desire to facilitate public debate. As a result, the public sphere has increasingly come to be 'characterized by at least two crosscutting processes: the communicative generation of legitimate power on the one hand and the manipulative deployment of media power to procure mass loyalty, consumer demand, and 'compliance' with systematic imperatives on the other' (Habermas, 1992b: 452). By undermining the normative ideals that exist within already existing public spheres, these developments pose a fundamental threat to the democratic legitimacy of contemporary politics.

Despite the obvious normative implications of his legal and political philosophy for contemporary public affairs, Habermas resists drawing a direct line between theory and practice. On the contrary, he warns his readers 'not to expect any more or anything different from theories than what they can achieve – and that's little enough' (1994: 99). Although he does not think that research can be completely objective and value-free, Habermas shares Max Weber's skepticism regarding the utility of '"scientifically" pleading for a practical and interested stand' given that

the ‘value spheres of the world stand in irreconcilable conflict with each other’ (Weber, 1958: 147). As a profession pursued within the differentiated, rationalized institution of the modern university, Habermas notes that theory is engaged in the search for ‘scientific truth as a form of truth which can be defined only in terms of methodological research’ (Hohendahl, 1997: 218). In contrast to unified ideas of grand theory, he (1994: 114) concludes that today ‘one has to talk about philosophical questions philosophically, sociological questions sociologically, political questions politically.’

Habermas’s interpretation of the theoretical enterprise as oriented towards truth and understanding (*Verstehen*) builds closely on Weber. Given the modern separation of value spheres, each of which operates and has to be understood according to its own internal logic, Habermas denies the possibility of ‘offering a theory that’s supposed to be able to solve all of life’s problems.’ Instead, he argues, ‘To get anything out of theoretical work, you have to follow it for its own sake.’ More specifically, Habermas notes that scientific theories can, at best, ‘make us more sensitive to the ambivalences of development: they can contribute to our ability to understand the coming uncertainties’ (1994: 113, 99, 116).

On Habermas’s view, therefore, contemporary calls for theory to provide us with direct ‘normative guidance about how we should act in the real world’ (Horton, 2017: 490) are dangerous because they elide the necessary distinction between theory and practice. More specifically, such attempts to fulfill Marx’s watchword of ‘philosophy becoming practical’ fail because they assume that theory is ‘capable of thinking not only the totality that is hypostatized as the world order, but the world-historical process as well.’ In the aftermath of ‘Weber’s austere insight into the disintegration of objective reason,’ Habermas argues that theory is no longer

'capable of identifying the subjects who will establish this unity practically and of showing them the way' (Habermas, 1984/1987: I.364).

Although Raymond Guess (2008: 8) accuses him of creating 'ideal theory of how we should act, and then in a second step…apply[ing] that ideal theory to the action of political agents,' Habermas explicitly rejects this model: 'Decisions for the political struggle cannot at the outset be justified theoretically and then be carried out organizationally' (1974: 33, 32). He instead divides the relationship between theory and practice into three separate functions: (1) the development of theories based on true statements that 'can stand up to scientific discourse'; (2) the identification of social actors and movements who can build on these insights through the 'organization of processes of enlightenment'; and (3) the 'selection of appropriate strategies…[for] the conduct of the political struggle.'

Within this process, philosophers are only in a privileged position in regard the first step, in which they are engaged in research oriented towards truth governed by disciplinary rules and norms. In this area, theory 'effects change precisely by remaining itself' (Adorno in Richter and Adorno, 2002: 19). Although theory can contribute to the second stage as well by helping to clarify the preconditions for social and political change, Habermas (1974: 34) argues that it cannot intervene directly, as the process of popular mobilization and enlightenment must be based on 'consensus, aimed at in practical discourse, among the participants.' Finally, he notes that from a strategic and tactical perspective 'the political struggle can only be legitimately conducted under the precondition that all decisions of consequence will depend on the practical discourse of the participants – here too, and especially here, there is no privileged access to truth.'

It is his objection to treating members of society as passive objects 'whose eyes are to be opened by the social theorist' (1994: 101) that leads Habermas to not only push back against the realist approach, but also the model of the democratic underlabourer. Despite the claims of the latter's proponents that philosophical arguments should be seen as 'contributions to the democratic process' (Swift and White, 2008: 54, 61), the expertise underlabouring imputes to theorists in 'working out what values we should be aiming to realize' puts philosophers in a privileged position vis-à-vis other citizens. In particular, as Alice Baderin (2016: 217) points out, this model undermines social and political theory's democratic credentials by arguing that 'the work of determining what is politically legitimate can be done partly in advance of real democratic politics.'

As to the former, Habermas vehemently rejects Leninist interpretations of the philosopher as the vanguard of the revolution (Lukács, 1972: 195-342). Instead, he argues that theorists 'must never imagine the addressees of social theory, or even society itself, as a subject writ large' whose desires and interests can be assumed from the outside. Given his conviction that '[t]here can be no theory which at the outset can assure a world-historical mission in for the potential sacrifices' (1974: 33), it is not at all surprising that Habermas has little sympathy for Raymond Geuss's (2008: 99) calls for political philosophy to return 'to something like the "realist" view, [or] to put it slightly differently, to neo-Leninism.'

Habermas's constrained understanding of the practical role of philosophy in politics is informed by his personal experience. As a student in the 1950s he was shocked to discover that leading German thinkers, including Carl Schmitt, Martin Heidegger and his *Doktorvater*, Ernst Rothacker, had not only passively accepted with the Nazi regime, but had actively collaborated with it. Habermas sees this lack of judgment as evidence of a *déformation professionnelle* that

led these theorists to believe that they could use Adolf Hitler as a vehicle to realize their theoretical ideals by 'leading the *Führer*' (*den Führer führen*) (Pöggeler, 1985). Following Adorno (1963: 32), who writes disdainfully of the 'elitist desires for authority' displayed by academics during the Third Reich, Habermas (1992a: 199) concludes that as a result social and political theorists have forfeited their right to act as 'teachers of the nation.'

More generally, Habermas also argues that modern philosophy has also lost any epistemological claim to being able to access a unified vision of politics and society due to the development of separation of value sphere diagnosed by Weber. Under these conditions theory can no longer operate in the magisterial manner associated with Kant and Hegel. Forgoing its Enlightenment-era claim to be the final arbiter and judge of knowledge in all areas of life, contemporary philosophy can now only act as a 'stand-in' or 'interpreter,' helping to translate the specialized, technical insights of the other sciences to the quotidian discourses of everyday life:

> In the discourse of modernity, it must respect the autonomous logics of the differentiated 'value spheres' (Max Weber) of science and technology, law and morality, and art and art criticism, just as it must respect the autonomy of any discipline within the science system. But because it *re*constructs the rational core of these pre-existing cultural and social structures, it becomes 'multilingual' in a way which qualifies it to play the role of an *interpreter* in the public sphere who mediates between the expert cultures and between the latter and the lifeworld (2018: 154).

In contrast to the model of the democratic underlabourer, whose supporters give philosophers an privileged role political debate due to their training and experience in analyzing arguments, Habermas (in Durand-Gasselin, 2018: 10) instead concludes that 'the postmetaphysical philosopher lacks any privileged intuitions or intellectual instruments of his or her own.' He (2018: 147) notes, 'Whereas [natural and social] science focuses exclusively on an object domain, philosophy keeps its eye at the same time on the insight provided by a

corresponding learning processes, that is, on what the knowledge we have acquired about the world (including the human being as another entity in the world) means "for us." It operates in a dimension in which changes in our understanding of the world and of ourselves interact.'

Even though it is reduced 'to elucidate[ing] the nature of situations in which people have the choice to redefine the rules and regulations by which they live,' theory can still contribute to practice by 'systematically considering the interrelations between different social value spheres.' While the 'engaged' theorist may feel the temptation to short-circuit this process by blurring the distinction between theory and practice, as realists and supporters of underlabouring advocate, such unmediated approaches cannot succeed given challenges and complexity of contemporary society: 'Before we can engage in attempts to mediate theory and practice toward any end, we must insure that each problem has been examined and pursued in terms of its inner logic' (Dahms, 1997: 207, 195, 206). Instead, on Habermas's view '[t]he question of whether a specific "practice" advances a certain goal cannot be decided beforehand, within the context of even the most complex theory.' The goal of theory is, rather, 'to make explicit a potential that already exists in contemporary society.' As an academic enterprise oriented towards truth, theoretical reflection can only assist practice insofar as it informs the scope and the conditions of possibility for social and political change.

Realist critics also often claim that Habermas is engaged in a project of 'ideal theory' that 'tries to construe discussion on the model of a highly idealized conception of what purely rational or scientific discussion is' (Geuss, 2010: 3). However, since he refers 'only to the normative contents that are *encountered* in practice, which we cannot do without,' Habermas's approach sidesteps contemporary debates about ideal versus non-ideal theory. Pushing back against accusations that his philosophy is based on 'an idealized version of a Socratic dialogue'

(Geuss, 2010: 4), Habermas notes, 'I never say that people *want* to act communicatively, but that they *have to*' because there 'are elementary social functions that can only be satisfied by means of communicative action' (1994: 101).

Rather than outlining the ideal conditions for communication as a utopian end-state based on full compliance or examining how discourse actually functions, Habermas (1994: 111) seeks instead to normatively reconstruct the internal presuppositions that underpin linguistic communication and which are therefore 'constitutive for sociocultural forms of life.' Unlike much mainstream theory, which starts by positing abstract normative ideals, Habermas's seeks to identity the normative presuppositions of communicative practice. This reconstructive approach allows him to generate prescriptive criteria by observing the underlying assumptions contained in everyday interactions.

Although he limits the scope of philosophy, denies theorists a privileged place in policy-making, and restricts their role to the analysis of the 'complex network of social value spheres characterized by different "inner logics"' (Dahms, 1997: 208), this does not mean that philosophers cannot engage in social and political debates. On the contrary, Habermas argues that they have an important role to play. However, this position is not that of underlabouring or a realist authorities 'connecting political reality and political theory' (Rossi, 2010: 510), but rather as public intellectuals who are 'limited to mobilising the relevant issues, information and arguments for public disputes' (in Czingon et al., 2020: 9). In this role the theorist is neither an idealist philosopher laying out blueprints for the future, nor a realist/democratic underlabourer 'argu[ing] about the ideas and values that politicians ought to draw on in responding to the world' (Philp, 2010: 482). Instead, the public intellectual is a critic of existing proposals who

'cannot rely on anything except the strength and precision of his or her arguments, and must renounce all other forms of authority and narcissism' (Habermas 2018: 56-7).

The Role of the Public Intellectual

In contrast to his contemporary critics, who want social and political theory to have direct, unmediated implications for 'discussions of the practicalities of political action and choice' (Philp, 2010: 467), Habermas argues that the academic search for truth must remain separate from the interventions of public intellectuals. Although this is not 'the kind of division of labour in which one thing has nothing to do with the other,' he has also sought to enforce a strict separation between these two roles. Responding to critiques of his political engagement, as well as accusations from scholars who defend a more quietist, truth-seeking model of research, Habermas observes, 'What annoys me terribly, what gets to me, is the aggressiveness of people who do not see the role-differentiation in me' (1992a: 127).

Habermas's understanding of the proper roles of the academic theorist and the public intellectual, respectively, are rooted in his readings of Immanuel Kant, Max Weber, and Michel Foucault. Drawing on Kant's famous distinction between the public and private uses of reason, as an engaged thinker Habermas sees it as his duty '*as a man of learning* addressing the entire *reading public*' to 'use his own reason and speak in his own person' (Kant, 1991: 55, 57) in the service of the enlightenment of society. Therefore, as a *private* citizen, who neither speaks for an administrative body nor in order to further his own personal economic interests, Habermas argues that he retains the right to make *public* use of his reason in order to influence the *public* process of collective will-formation.

However, as a teacher in the seminar room and as an academic researcher, Habermas sees himself as bound by the rules and norms that govern scholarship as an independent value sphere.

As individuals 'acting on a commission imposed from outside' (Kant, 1991: 57), academics are limited to the use of their *private* reason, as it is their job to both engage in research oriented towards truth (a process that is governed peer review), and to educate students in line with disciplinary norms. While researchers can still voice their political opinions as a *private* citizens acting in the *public* sphere, they have no right to do so while making use of their *private* reason in a professional capacity.

Despite his adoption of these classical Kantian categories, Habermas does not accept the Weberian claim that its status as a science means that social and political philosophy should have nothing to do with politics. On the contrary, he (1971: 63) challenges Weber's 'complete division of labor' between science and politics. Habermas argues that despite the increasing separation of value spheres, reason conceptualized in terms of the 'unforced force of the better argument' still has a role to play in social and political life. He (1974: 265) thus 'insist[s] upon the analysis and rational discussion of the relationship between available techniques and practical decisions, which [are] completely ignored in [Weber's] decisionist model.'

While he agrees that it would be inappropriate to indoctrinate students from a position of official authority, Habermas argues that students can and should be politically engaged. As a young researcher in 1958, one of his first assignments was to write the theoretical introduction for a broader study of the political attitudes in the university. Entitled 'The Concept of Political Participation' (1970), this piece lays the foundation for a 'sociological inquiry into the political awareness of Frankfurt students.' Far from encouraging students to focus on their studies, Habermas instead concludes that at its heart concept of democracy entails the idea of participation, including by students.

Habermas backed this conclusion up in practice by engaging with the student movement of the 1960s outside the classroom. As a *private* citizen exercising his *public* reason, he joined them at rallies and supported them in his political journalism, i.e. as a member of the public addressing his fellow citizens. However, he later (in)famously broke with the student movement in 1968, because he believed that they had misinterpreted the circumstances in postwar Germany revolutionary. In this sense, Habermas agrees with Adorno, who argues that within the conditions of the postwar world the theorist can no longer act as a revolutionary subject, who directly stimulates political change because 'the moment of the realization of philosophy was *missed*' (1981: 3).

In the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, the Great War, the rise of totalitarianism and the Second World War, it is clear to both of these thinkers that 'the transformation of the world failed.' In such a situation, 'the act of writing…replaces social practice' (Hohendahl, 1997: 225), as the theorist can only change the world by engaging in societal discourse as an equal, not as a catalyst or as part of the vanguard of the revolution. In light of the shameful collaboration of so many thinkers (especially in Germany) with totalitarian regimes, Habermas argues that public intellectuals can now only influence practice by helping to combat attempts by spin doctors, interest groups and political parties manipulate public opinion in a manner that leads to the 'neutralization of the citizens' (1970).

Given this potential for the manipulation of public opinion, Habermas argues that politically and financially unaffiliated intellectuals play an key role in ensuring that the strategic competition for media power (and the profits that come with it!) does not overshadow the communicative generation of legitimate power. Because their livelihood is governed by 'professional involvement in contexts of meaning that have an autonomous logic of their own'

(Habermas, 1989a: 87), intellectuals retain the ability to 'speak truth to power,' as they have the 'privilege of having to deal with public issues only as a sideline' (2009: 55). As a result of the fact that they engage in public not as part of their Weberian *Beruf* (profession), but instead only as a *Nebenberuf* (a 'secondary occupation' or 'side hustle'), Habermas (2009) argues that public intellectuals are called to speak out 'when current events are threatening to spin out of control – but then promptly, as an early warning system. […] They have to be able to get worked up about critical developments while others are still absorbed in business as usual.'

However, just as he seeks 'to separate the role of the intellectual as clearly as possible from that of the scholar and the academic teacher' (2018: 123), Habermas also differentiates the public role of the expert from that of the public intellectual. This conceptual division builds on Michel Foucault (1980: 128, 62), who distinguishes between the 'general intellectual,' who 'speaks in the name of the universal, takes the side of humanity, reason, or truth and seeks to represent all those excluded from the circuits of public debate,' and the 'specific intellectual,' who acts as a 'savant or expert' by seeking to 'provide instruments of analysis, to locate lines of weakness, strong points, positions where the instances of power have secured and implanted themselves, [by providing] a topological survey of the battlefield.' Whereas experts are called upon to provide technical details on specific problems, public intellectuals are called upon to take stands on important moral issues, acting as what Pierre Bourdieu (1991: 661) has called 'defenders of the universal.'

To a certain extent, Habermas (2009: 55) agrees with his French colleagues that the public intellectual is 'not in demand as an expert. She [is] supposed to have the courage to take normative stances and the imagination to adopt novel perspectives without losing an awareness of her own fallibility.' However, he also departs from their view in important ways. For example,

Foucault (1996: 284) argues that for the expert or specific intellectual, 'there can be no question for me of trying to tell them [i.e., the citizens] "what is to be done."' Conversely, on Foucault's model public or general intellectuals are explicitly allowed to take substantial stands on important social and political issues, as long as they are able 'to explain the moral point of view, and – as far as possible – justify the claim to universality of this explanation.'

Habermas reverses this argument. Rather than barring experts from taking specific stands on issues, he contends that this is permissible because their positions are based on their professional knowledge of the Weberian 'inner logics' of their particular area of research. As a result, they may be able to provide suggestions on how to best meet the internal demands of this sphere of life without violating the scientific objectivity involved in their search for truth. By contrast, because public intellectuals play the role of a 'dilettante who questions the demarcation lines between various realms and provokes through his or her very lack of expertise' (Biebricher, 2011: 713), they cannot base their opinions on their scientific claim to knowledge.

The result is that public intellectuals appears in social and political debate primarily as critics, not advocates for particular positions. As defenders of universalism, public intellectuals are not called to propose policies, but to defend the feedback loop 'between an informed elite discourse and a responsive civil society' (Habermas, 2006: 412), between opinion- and will-formation, in which 'the generative flow of communication is from the periphery to the center' (Chambers, 2017: 270, 271, 273). They play a key role in the agenda-setting function of the informal public sphere, by ensuring that the public opinions generated within this anarchic communicative realm 'has benefited from information, thoughtfulness, and the exchange of ideas.' While public intellectuals may take stances that are partisan – as many of Habermas's interventions undoubtedly are – this is only a problem when these positions become 'detached

from civil society inputs and can no longer claim to be responding to a flow of information from the periphery to the center.'

In this sense, the primary function of the public intellectual is to make sure that marginalized voices, opinions and arguments are heard. While public intellectuals have no claim to authority in the public sphere, they are called on to reframe issues by calling experts, administrators, lobbyists, media personalities, politicians, and other actors with access to power and money to account for ignoring or drowning out the voices of underrepresented individuals and groups affected by the issues under discussion. The public intellectual thus acts as a 'discourse agent whose activity appeals to the *moral* or context-transcendent normative dimension of public discourse; as a tradition-smashing agent of Enlightenment modernity, a supporter of principles of universal justice and right, of critical debate and democratic rule, with a deep suspicion concerning conventional identities and traditions of all kinds' (Pensky, 1999: 216).

Models of Theoretical Engagement

These considerations bring me back to contemporary critiques of Habermas for failing to recognize that 'Wissenschaft must be connected with a realm of potential action' (Geuss, 1981: 88). Although Habermas agrees that academic research in social and political theory should relate to political debate, his account of public intellectuals highlights their role as facilitators of discussion and amplifiers of underrepresented voices, rather than as political actors, who see 'real' politics as a matter of 'differential choice' and therefore provide arguments in favor of 'opting for A *rather than* B' (Geuss, 2008: 30). While Habermas defends the right of the political theorist to intervene in public debate as a citizen and public intellectual, he argues that

they betray their professional vocation if they delude themselves into believing that theory 'can facilitate better, more effective political action on its own' (McKean, 2016: 881).

Habermas's understanding of the relationship between theory and practice as mediated between the distinct roles of the social and political thinker and the public intellectual clearly differs from realist approaches. However, it is also distinct from the model of the democratic underlabourer. This approach calls on academic philosophers to utilize their professional skills of 'making of careful distinctions, an understanding of how to assess and examine arguments about values, arguments for and against political principles' in order to play a 'clarificatory role' in public debate while also 'offer[ing] arguments and justifications' with substantive content that allow their 'fellow citizens to decide whether they want to accept them' (Swift and White, 2008: 54).

Proponents of underlabouring explicitly 'limi[t] the role of the political theorist to speaking to and with her fellow citizens; she does not seek also to speak on their behalf' (Baderin, 2016: 224). In this respect, it bears some similarity to Habermas's understanding of the social and political theorist as a public intellectual. However, in contrast to the underlabourer, in Habermas's account the theorist as public intellectual does not act 'philosopher-investigator' who seeks to formulate a positive position or proposal that is can be labelled legitimate (Claassen, 2011: 504-5), nor an expert offering 'a general theoretical perspective, informed by public views, which can provide guidance when special interests collide' (Wolff and de-Shalit, 2007: 97). While defenders of underlabouring argue that their model is compatible with the democratic equality of all citizens, their description of the role that philosophers play in social and political debate as a result of their academic expertise in the analysis of arguments clearly gives them a privileged, authoritative place position in the public sphere vis-à-vis other citizens.

Given his historically informed views of philosophy's 'professional deformation' in regards to politics, as well as his radically participatory, open conceptualization of the democratic public sphere, Habermas rejects both the idea that 'the theorist's job is to defend her own views' and the notion that she has 'authority to tell us *what is actually legitimate for us here and now*' (Baderin 2016: 216, 217, 225). In drawing a hard line between the voice of the truth-oriented theorist and the critical, engaged public intellectual, Habermas objects to the idea, defended both by realists and proponents of underlabouring, that 'political theorists need to be genuine participants in public debate' *qua* theorists. Instead of ensuring that the arguments of academic research accessible all – as the democratic underlabourer model would have it – Habermas thinks that the relationship between theory and practice must be characterized by a role separation to prevent theory from becoming mere ideological pleading. In this sense he follows Adorno in opposing models where 'theory is subjected to practical pre-censorship' (Richter and Adorno, 2002: 16).

In large part, this position is due to his conviction that such mixing of different tasks increases 'the likelihood of each individual challenge [i.e. theory and practice] to be met effectively will be severely impaired' (Dahms, 1997: 207). There are at least two reasons for this. First, theory and practice will both be worse off if they are too readily mixed because they are guided by fundamentally different orientations. As Hannah Arendt – a formidable public intellectual whose work also influenced Habermas (Verovšek 2019a) – points out in a passage that appears only in the German version of her essay 'Truth and Politics,' 'The philosopher, who intervenes in public, is no longer a philosopher, but rather a politician; he no longer seeks truth, but power' (Arendt, 2000: 330, translation mine). Whereas academic work must follow the inner

logic of truth-seeking, practical political interventions are contingent and are oriented towards the successful operationalization of power.

Second, these two activities have distinct audiences. As a philosopher and sociologist, Habermas's research is directed to those 'who have a professional interest in the foundations of social theory' (Habermas, 1984/1987: I.xliii). By contrast, in his wide-ranging public interventions – which address a number of issues, including the centrality of the Holocaust in German public memory, the right of East Germany to take the time to have its own internal debate about its future rather than being rushed into an over-hasty unification with the West, and the ability of the European Union to recover democratic political control over anonymous market forces in the globalized, multi-cultural post-Cold War world – he takes up issues that are not only of interest to such specialized academic audiences, but to the public sphere more generally. While his theoretical work 'follows the dynamic of its own problems' (1994: 99), Habermas chooses the topics that are 'close to his heart' (*Herzanliegen*) (Geyer, 2008) in deciding where and when to intervene in social and political debates.

The emotional interest Habermas displays in his political writings thus contrasts with the quasi-Weberian objectivity of his scientific research. This is most visible in the different tone and style Habermas adopts depending on his audience. In contrast to the dense, jargon-laden prose he uses in laying out 'the sweeping vision of the synthetic major works' he has produced, Habermas's political writings are 'more easily digested' (Howard, 2015: 523), 'less technical and more colloquial' (Hohendahl, 1994: vi). While oratorical persuasion beyond the rational 'unforced force of the better argument' has no place in his social and political theory, as a public intellectual Habermas allows himself to engage 'using arguments sharpened by rhetoric, [to]

intervene on behalf of rights that have been violated and truths that have been suppressed, reforms that are overdue and progress that has been delayed' (1989a: 73).

Another consequence of the different audiences to which theoretical and political work is oriented is a difference in the form and medium of presentation. Like most researchers, most of Habermas's research is presented either in the form of books or academic journal articles. These forums are governed by peer review, where other members of the profession act as a jury, judging which arguments are acceptable in this value sphere oriented towards truth (see Kratochwil, 2007: 42-3). By contrast, his political writings often take the form of essays published in the *feuilleton* pages of German-language newspapers, which present a mix of cultural criticism, storytelling, and intellectual conversation. This not only allows Habermas to reach a broader audience among the reading public; the essay also allows him to ask bigger questions that transcend his work as a philosopher and sociologist. Following Adorno (1984), Habermas uses this literary form to take on the role of the 'critic who addresses ultimate questions while dealing with specific, frequently marginal issues' (Hohendahl, 1997: 224-5).

As a result of these considerations, Habermas rejects both realist calls for theorists to engage more directly with politics, and the underlabourering model, which seeks to direct 'attention towards evidence about the forms in which, and conditions under which, the arguments of political theory are comprehensible to a wider public' (Baderin, 2016: 225). Instead, he argues that 'there is no "royal path" to mediating theory and practice' (Dahms, 1997: 208). By separating the role of the theorist as truth-oriented researcher from the public intellectual as engaged citizen, Habermas creates a model whereby theorists can act as critics who seek call attention to violations of rights and to give voice to those whose views are otherwise drowned out in the cacophony of the chaotic public sphere, while also not ignoring

'the healthy implications of the differentiation of value spheres noted by Weber' (Jay, 2019). Although he 'consider[s] it impossible to map [*unmittelbar abzubilden*] theoretical positions directly onto party-political ones' (quoted in Specter, 2010: 141), this position means that the practical 'void left by Habermas the philosopher is filled by Habermas the intellectual' (Biebricher 2011: 719).

Concluding Reflections

The traditional, largely quietist approach to social and political philosophy as an academic enterprise has come under attack in recent years. While realist critics have called for social and political theory to become action-guiding in both its form and its content, practical philosophers working within the mainstream liberal tradition have instead advocated an underlabouring model, in which theorists put their specific skills in argumentation to use by clarifying existing proposals and offering solutions to social and political problems within contemporary democratic life. In contrast to both of these approaches, Habermas seeks to preserve the distinct inner logics of both theory and practice, while also allowing theorists to engage in the public sphere as public intellectuals. In the latter role, theorists seek to ensure that the 'communicative circuit between center and periphery' (Habermas, 2009: 162) do not generate views that have been strategically manipulated, but instead result in the kinds of legitimate, deliberatively-generated '*reflected public opinions*' that Habermas's theoretical model of democratic legitimacy requires.

Although he practices a strict role-separation between theoretical reflections and practical interventions, reading his scholarly research and political writings alongside each other shows how 'Habermas's work as a public philosopher and as a public intellectual merge' (Pensky, 2013: 32) as part of a broader project where theory and practice meet 'halfway' (Verovšek, 2012), while at the same time also remaining distinct in terms of audience, genre, approach, and

value sphere. The key point is that Habermas seeks to apply his theory in practice without concluding that theory must speak directly to 'real' politics or allowing the theorist to claim authority over other participants in the public sphere, as the underlabouring model requires. As a public intellectual Habermas thus seeks to combat the 'colonization of the lifeworld' by the internal, non-discursive logics of markets and state power that he diagnoses in his social and political theory by performatively demonstrating 'that communicative power is as influential on political culture as the steering power of political administration and money' (Müller-Doohm, 2005: 274).

Insodoing, Habermas does not engage in the public sphere *qua* theorist, but as a public intellectual and participant interested in improving the quality of public debate. At a theoretical level, Habermas is convinced that despite their depoliticizing tendencies, 'democracies need active participation of citizens in public life' (Freyenhagen, 2014: 879) in order to fulfill the requirements of legitimate political authority. From this perspective – and in keeping with Adorno's frequent appearances on television and radio after his return to postwar West Germany (Demirović, 1999) – Habermas's activities as a public intellectual serve as an example of what participation in a functional democratic public sphere should look like.

Habermas's interventions in social and political life as an engaged, public intellectual can also help situate him within the theoretical tradition of the Frankfurt School. Although Max Horkheimer (1972: 211, 215), the Director of the Institute, famously claimed that critical theory differed from traditional philosophy in arguing that the theorist's 'activity is the construction of the social present,' from the beginning this tradition has had a broken relationship to practice. Despite Horkheimer's claim that the theorist needs to be 'a force within [society] to stimulate change,' the project of critical theory in the 1920s started as an attempt within the Marxist

tradition to understand why emancipatory practice had not occurred within the crisis of the interwar years and why a revolutionary subject had failed to form. In this sense, the first generation's turn to Freudian psychoanalysis, ideology critique and the evaluation of the stultifying effects of mass culture are all attempts to interpret the world theoretically, not to change it.

These features of post-1940 critical theory are all signs of the Frankfurt School's conviction that 'critical reflection on what went wrong is the order of the day, and, thus, it is to theory, not to praxis, that we have to turn' (Freyenhagen, 2014: 875). Although Habermas shares this conclusion, his understanding of the contemporary situation is based on an analysis of the separation of the world into irreconcilable value spheres with their own inner logics, not on Adorno's Marxist diagnosis of 'the given historical conditions in which one has to act' (Marx, 2000). However, his engagement as a public intellectual indicates that – much like his predecessors in the first generation of the Frankfurt School – Habermas also seeks to stimulate social change while ensuring that theory's interpretive mission is not undermined by practical considerations.

Although he is committed to the idea that theory must seek understanding (*Verstehen*) guided by an orientation towards truth, this does not mean that his 'position has the *actual* effect of… diverting attention from the actual social context' (Geuss, 2019) as his realist critics would have it (see Verovšek, 2019b). It is also not a sign that his approach is quietist or 'abandons the aim of fundamental social change' (Rockmore, 1989: 165, 167). Instead, I want to conclude by proposing that Habermas's attempt to develop a form of practice that is compatible with the modern separation of value spheres can help to explain and clarify the Frankfurt School's early claim to offer 'a theory dominated at every turn by a concern for reasonable conditions of life'

(Horkheimer, 1972: 198-9).

Over the years many interpreters have argued that Habermas does not fit into the theoretical tradition of the Institute of Social Resarch and should not be classified as a critical theorist (Geuss, 1981). By contrast, my argument suggests that paying attention to Habermas's interventions in the public sphere can help us to understand why the '"Frankfurt School" of critical social theory seems an excellent fit for Habermas's reformed vision of a socially committed, interdisciplinary philosophy' (Pensky, 2013: 19). This conclusion is preliminary and would require more space to fully unpack. However, hopefully even these initial reflections show that the 'intransigence Habermas displays in his public political interventions is a crucial reason why he is still counted as a member of the circle around Horkheimer and Adorno' (Müller-Doohm, 2016: 4-5).

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