Locating the Linguistic Self:

Habermas, History & Inner Nature

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The works of Freud and the ideas in psychoanalysis have been influential in the formation of the theory of internal repression in Critical Theory. Júrgen Habermas has reformulated Freud's ideas of the self in order to further develop his own communicative theory of social interaction and inter-subjective framework for social critique. His has been criticised as a misreading of Freud. This essay seeks to defend Habermas' interpretation of psychoanalytic ideas by reading them alongside his reconstruction of historical materialism. With communicative interaction placed along side material reproduction at the centre of historical development, the theory of a linguistically structured inner-nature becomes more coherent. Finally the essay will deal with the charge that Habermas does not sufficiently account for the lack of happiness in communicative rationality.

From its inception, the thinkers of the Frankfurt School sought to formulate a coherent critical theory of modern social formations. Critical Theory would distinguish itself from traditional theory through its practical orientation; while traditional theory sought only to understand, Critical Theory would seek to critique and change. In an effort to disassociate themselves from Marxism-Leninism, the Soviet Union and the trajectory of contemporary western Marxism, these theorists combined Marx with other theoretical analyses of modern society. Marx, Weber and Hegel provided a firm grounding for a substantive critique of modernity, while Freud and psychoanalysis provided a fourth pillar for their interpretive framework. Critical Theory developed a concern with the effects of modern enlightenment thinking and society on the human consciousness. The incorporation of Freud's ideas allowed for a different analytical perspective of the impact of modern, advanced civilisation on the human psyche. It provided a deeper understanding of the analysis that 'just as the capitalist system continuously produces and reproduces itself economically on higher and higher levels, the structure of reification progressively sinks more and more definitively into the consciousness of man' (Lukacs 1971: 93).

In Marcuse's One Dimensional Man can be found a powerful discussion of the processes which lead to internal repression of individual consciousness and desires. The Dialectic of Enlightenment by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, meanwhile, is a pessimistic exposition of the failings and broken promises of modernity. They tell us that 'in the service of the present age, enlightenment becomes wholesale deception of the masses' (Horkheimer and Adorno 1997: 42). According to the authors, the emancipatory potential of the Enlightenment had been undermined and rendered impotent by the domination of human society by logical positivism and the reduction of value to the purely mathematical. Instead of emancipation, Enlightenment rationality provided another tool for domination and perpetuation of the status quo in a far more subtle way than tradition, feudalism or religion. These perceived contradictions and failings went so far that 'even the deductive form of science reflects hierarchy and coercion' (Ibid, p21). Meanwhile, the age of modernity, reason

and belief in human progress had alienated humans from themselves and from nature. Thus:

> *Myth turns into enlightenment, and nature into mere objectivity. Men pay for the increase of their power with alienation from that over which they exercise their power (Ibid, p8).*

Jűrgen Habermas, who inherited the work of the Frankfurt School, placed much more confidence in modernity as an emancipatory project than either Horkheimer or Adorno. His departure from their outlook is evident in his argument that their work 'conceives of Enlightenment as the unsuccessful attempt to spring from the powers of fate' (Habermas, 1987, p114). He claims that 'The Dialectic of Enlightenment does not do justice to the rational content of cultural modernity', as it ignores the Enlightenment's undiminished potential for emancipation (Ibid, p113). Habermas' project revolves around his attempt to rescue this emancipatory potential, through the development of effective, useable and empirically grounded critical processes (McCarthy 1978: 76). To be practically applicable, a critical social theory must have a fundamental interest in human emancipation. Habermas sees the potential for this in undistorted communication, which can provide legitimate grounds for normative critique and the development of rationally motivated, intersubjective social structures. Habermas did, however, retain the interest in psychoanalytic ideas which is found in earlier Critical Theory. His interpretation and use of them will be the subject of this paper.

The purpose of this paper is to critically assess Joel Whitebook's article "Reason and Happiness: Some Psychoanalytic Themes in Critical Theory". He discusses the problems Habermas is forced to confront when he attempts to incorporate Freudian psychoanalysis into his rational, communicative framework by reconstructing the ideas of the self and inner nature. I will show how the article explains the meeting point between Critical Theory and psychoanalysis and the misreading which theorists, including Habermas, have made of Freud's ideas. Whitebook's discussion adds a greater depth of understanding to Habermas' theoretical framework regarding the individual, the self and, eventually, to his discourse ethics. He makes certain criticisms of Habermas for his view of the self and inner nature as formulated through a linguistically structured social reality. This paper will demonstrate that, although they have some validity, when viewed in a wider context these criticisms miss the purpose and importance of Habermas' intellectual project and the distinction which he makes between specific value spheres, of which happiness is only one. By reading Whitebook's argument with Habermas' reconstruction of historical materialism and social-evolutionary schema in mind, I hope to show that his reinterpretation of the self and Freudian psychology is justified and well founded. The paper will first outline some of the core elements in Habermas' thought, and then consider the argument made in Whitebook's article. Finally, it will critically assess these arguments and demonstrate that Habermas' Critical Theory in its wider context can defend itself against them.

Habermas' thought revolves around social interaction. The Marxist conception of

historical materialism places the changes in productive processes and relations at the core of societal development. For Habermas, an equal position must be given to communicative processes and developments in socialisation. For Habermas, non-technical (i.e., moral and practical) learning processes drive evolutionary social change in a way which parallels material production in Marx:

> *Whereas Marx localized the learning process important for evolution in the dimension of objectivating thought – of technical and organizational knowledge, of instrumental and strategic action, in short, of productive forces – there are good reasons… for assuming that learning processes also take place in the dimension of moral insight, practical knowledge, communicative action, and the consensual regulation of action conflicts. (Outhwaite1996: 227)*

The historically centered critical framework that Habermas attempts to build is therefore structured around the view that developments in productive forces cannot be fully analysed independently of developments in forms of social integration (McCarthy 1978: 249). From here he hopes to describe the transition of primitive to modern, complex society through the development and un-coupling of "lifeworld" and "system". These two spheres of existence require fundamentally different forms of rationality. The lifeworld is the sphere of interaction which includes culture, personality and social integration; it is the area of symbolic reproduction and social 'self reflection'. (Ibid: 278). The system is the sphere of economics, power, and bureaucracy, which functions according to instrumental reason. Habermas' departure from the original Frankfurt School is evident in his theoretical development of the dialectical relationship between communicative and instrumental rationalities. In primitive, tribal societies, system and lifeworld were mutually interdependent to the degree that they constituted layers of social functioning which held relatively equal force. Power, family, society, production and culture were integrated through modes of social interaction governed by moral and legal systems grounded in family and kinship (Ibid: 252). This is to say that neither symbolic nor material reproduction was the dominant driving medium for the distribution of social goods. Over time these relatively simple moral and legal systems became more complex, and their basis in kinship became less and less adequate. What we find in the developing complexities of social interaction in modern society is a process of differentiation, or un-coupling: 'the more complex social systems become, the more provincial lifeworlds become. In a differentiated social system the lifeworld seems to shrink to a subsystem' (Outhwaite1996: 280). This is made explicit by Elliot, who tells us that:

> *Modern societies, in short, are dualistic in character. On one side there are systems domains, specialising in the material reproduction of capitalism and the bureaucratic state. On the other side, there is the modern lifeworld, specialising in symbolic reproduction, that is, the nature of the self, socialisation and cultural transmission.* (Elliot, 1999, p93).

System processes are strategic, that is, they are oriented towards success. Two social actors making a financial deal, for instance, enter into a dialogue through which each seeks the best possible outcome for themselves. They employ linguistic tactics which will result in the highest possible gain. Habermas describes such action as instrumental in nature. (Outhwaite 1996: 160). He contrasts this instrumental nature of the systems domain with the communicative nature of lifeworld processes, writing: 'I shall speak of communicative action whenever the actions of the agents involved are coordinated not through egocentric calculations of success but through acts of reaching understanding…', that is to say, 'they pursue their individual goals under the condition that they harmonize their plans of action'. (Ibid: 161). Therefore, 'social actions can be distinguished according to whether the participants adopt either a success-oriented attitude or one oriented to reaching understanding' (Ibid).

The increasing complexity and scale of system processes leads to the displacement of lifeworld rationality by instrumental reason. It is in this way, Habermas observes, that the system colonizes areas of the lifeworld. It forces social subjects to take part in instrumental interaction where it is not appropriate, and thus systems steering media (money, bureaucracy, power etc.) breach the boundaries between socio-structural domains. There are multifarious examples of lifeworld colonization of this kind, which can be found in analyses of institutions and bureaucracies from healthcare to education, from mental health to international relations and law. These also include examples of colonization on the macro-level, such as the role which the welfare-state plays as a tool of pacification, or the inadequacies of law and democratic processes.

In his article "Reason and Happiness: Some Psychoanalytic Themes in Critical Theory", Joel Whitebook critiques the 'appropriation' of Freudian ideas, both in the original Critical Theorists and in Habermas. He discusses the idea of the individual in advanced capitalist society and develops a further critique of Habermas' perception of the self and of happiness. In constructing a formalistic and overly rational framework, Whitebook claims, Habermas neglects 'the naturalistic tradition that runs from Feuerbach through the young Marx and Freud to the early Frankfurt School'. (1987: 160). He suggests that in trying to incorporate reconciliation between inner and external nature (between the unconscious and the external, material world that is) into his theory Habermas reaches a conclusion which is essentially utopian. This critique exposes certain discrepancies in Habermas' theory and contains a degree of validity. However, it does not do justice to Habermas' intellectual project as a whole. Whitebook's argument will now be outlined and the criticisms will be shown to be insufficient in terms of Habermas' wider theoretical framework, with regard to moral development and learning processes of social evolution.

Whitebook describes 'the entire complex of questions raised by the appropriation of Freud' as one of the 'perennial problems of critical theory' (Ibid: 140). His discussion begins with the implications of id psychology in the early Frankfurt School. In One Dimensional Man, Herbert Marcuse developed the theory that social repression of the id, of unconscious drives, is an extension of domination in society. Following Freud's idea of the inher-

ent discontent in civilisation, he wrote that 'there are many ways in which the unhappiness beneath the happy consciousness may be turned into a source of strength and cohesion for the social order' (1991: 80). What Whitebook recognises about this form of id psychology is that it is very much a product of the first generation of the Frankfurt School. As was the case with Dialectic of Enlightenment, 'a consequence of this way of seeing things is a low estimate of the possible role of the ego, and therefore rationality, in human affairs' (Whitebook 1985: 143). It is from this point that Habermas' ideas regarding psychoanalysis begin to become distinct, as we shall see in the way he views the relation between individual ego and wider social reality.

The Frankfurt School saw the bourgeois individual as an ideological concept which was 'articulated as a social norm, partially realised and finally undermined' by the capitalist process which created it (Ibid: 152). In the "totally administered world" described by the School, the individual subjectivity (one's thoughts, wants, preferences, and even identity) becomes subsumed by externally controlled and manipulative social structures. This generation of Critical Theorists saw the end of the bourgeois individual in a very negative light, marked by 'the pathologies of mass commodified culture' and imposed 'through the stratification of human subjects into competitive economic "roles" and "performances"'(Elliot 1999: 52). Instead of producing autonomy, the internalisation of parental authority in modern society has produced submissiveness (Whitebook 1985: 148). The cost of the subjection of the individual in modernity is borne through the domination of human inner nature. Habermas breaks with the Frankfurt School again on this point. He argues that individuals are engaged in a reflexive interaction between their own inner nature and the external nature of a linguistically structured social reality (McCarthy 1978: 261). The potential for emancipation lies, therefore, in the end of the bourgeois construction of the individual as an isolated, strategically motivated social actor. What he posits instead is a system of social interaction through undistorted communication as an intersubjective process. Such a process is free, rational and symmetrical. On this point, C.F. Alford provides a useful summary: For Habermas, Alford claims, 'the goal is to reconstruct…rational individuality on a new basis' through communicative rationality, 'grounded in the mutual recognition of self and other' (Alford 1987: 5). Alford seems to side with Whitebook, however, by describing Habermas' view of the individual as 'rather shadowy'. He continues: 'this is unfortunate, as it is clearly Habermas' view to liberate real individuals' (Ibid: 7). What Alford does not acknowledge here is that Habermas is presenting a socialised view of the individual, who interacts through free communication in an environment in which socially constructed barriers, which obstruct the articulation of needs and preferences, become porous or fade away. In the bourgeois sense, individuals are not free; they simply do not have access to the discursive framework to articulate their lack of freedom. Whitebook's argument resists Habermas' attempt at breaking down the linguistic barriers which separate inner and outer human nature.

Finally, Whitebook discusses Habermas' use of Freudian concepts and his attempt to implement happiness into his theoretical framework. In doing this he claims to outline what is utopian and contradictory in Habermas' thought. Habermas, he suggests, seeks to al-

low reconciliation between inner and outer nature, which would in turn allow for happiness. Whitebook tells us that 'whereas Habermas is willing, with Kant, to concede external nature to the Galilean sciences, he is unwilling to allow his ethics to remain arrested at the opposition of understanding and inclination, or reason and happiness'. (1985: 151).

Far from taking an anti-modernist stance, Habermas recognizes that 'with respect to moral judgment, there has in fact been progress'. We no longer fall back on religion or tradition as factors for justification, for example (Ibid: 153). Whitebook's essay addresses the idea of moral development, which Habermas borrows from Lawrence Kohlberg. In Kohlberg's theory there three levels of development, which incorporate different perceptions of social morality. In the first level, pre-conventional morality, right and wrong are conceived hedonistically – in terms of punishment and reward. The second level depends upon a sense of conformity, belonging, and loyalty to existing social orders, such as family groups or nations. This is the level of conventional morality. Finally, the post-conventional or autonomous level involves conscious decisions to define moral judgments independently of authority, individuality and group identification (McCarthy 1978: 250-1).

In order to undertake his restructuring of historical materialism, Habermas attempts to make Kohlberg's stages of moral development analogous to stages of wider social learning. In the progress of social evolution from the Neolithic era, through archaic and pre-modern civilization to modern societies, the structures of moral and legal order grow in complexity and crystalise around developing patterns of social interaction. Worldviews and appeals to such legal and moral orders detach themselves from preexisting ordering principles such as a single ruler, or the family, or religious dogma. What we find in advanced modern societies is that structures of justice, law and morality attach themselves to universally conceived principles (Ibid: 252-253)

It is the final, autonomous level in Kohlberg's theory which 'absolutizes the conflict between inclination and understanding' as the end point of moral development (Whitebook 1985: 154). This corresponds to liberal, bourgeois perceptions of law, justice and the individual. For Habermas, this is not sufficient; he maintains that a seventh stage is necessary. This is the stage of communicative rationality and of discourse ethics. Put in psychoanalytic terms this amounts to the socialisation of inner nature. For Habermas, this hypothetical seventh stage of moral development 'draws private, inner nature into the web of intersubjectivity' (Ibid). The drives and desires buried in the inner self must be retrieved from their "paleosymbolic linguisticality". They can, in fact, be rationally communicable, 'on the basis of internalizing the apparatus of unrestricted ordinary language of uncompelled and public communication, so that the transparency of recollected life history is preserved' (Habermas 2002: 232). Thus, we can understand Habermas' view of undistorted and free communication in terms of making the drives of psychoanalytic inner nature public through discourse. Social self-reflection and rationally motivated discourse go hand-in-hand. Such society-wide self-reflection is necessary to liberate social-material interaction from inadequate, contradictory and dysfunctional systemic processes.

The linguistic functionality of ego- or identity-forming socio-historical struc-

tures (such as family, education and legal norms) is fundamentally necessary in Habermas' methodology and in his formulation of an interpretive framework. This is simultaneously objective and theoretical in its approach, as well as hermeneutical and practically grounded. The theory of distorted communication which Habermas lays out allows him to develop such a framework in sharp contrast with Critical Theory in its previous incarnation, which lacked the dualistic conception of rationalities within modernity. What, for Adorno and Horkheimer, was at the root of the pathological dysfunctionality of social processes – disenchantment, secularization and the domination of instrumental rationality – is, for Habermas, a dialectically conceived social framework which incorporates communicatively dysfunctional interaction into a conception of social pathologies.

Whitebook argues that 'Habermas' linguistic interpretation of Freud has the effect of, as it were, destroying certain of Freud's central intentions' (1985: 155). This is evident in Habermas' take on inner nature, where 'he attempts not so much to solve the problem as to dissolve it' (Ibid: 156), by arguing that inner desires and needs (the id) which cannot be rationally communicated are products of domination and distorted communication: 'they are the scars of a corrupt text that confronts the author as incomprehensible' (Habermas 2002: 219). From this logic, it follows that in Habermas' thought 'all human needs and desires are potentially open to linguistic articulation' (Ibid: 101), and so, as Whitebook frames it, 'potentially everything is transparent' (1985: 157). However, the repression of inner nature by the internal reproduction of systematically distorted communication distances our linguistic access to our own inner selfhood. Needs and desires, although they are not always accessible to articulation, have the potential to be expressed in rational discourse only if they can be transformed from private inner language into rational, public, communicative language. It is at this point that Habermas refers to the possibility of happiness and Whitebook's critique begins to take more solid form.

Whitebook claims that communicative rationality ignores those needs which cannot be articulated linguistically and ignores the concept of pre-linguistic development. Elliot agrees with this point, arguing that there are aspects of human experience which are buried deep in the unconscious and resist being drawn into discourse (Elliot 1999: 106). For Whitebook, then, Habermas misreads Freudian ideas of the id as foreign inner nature, and the 'the utopianism of stage 7 of his moral scheme [the communicative stage] … results from his failure to grasp theoretically the dialectic of harmony and disharmony between human rationality and its instinctual substratum' (Whitebook 1985:157). Finally, he claims that Habermas 'is forced to entertain the possibility that a future society may be emancipated with respect to morality and justice, and, at the same time, not be happy' (Ibid). In a sense this does not matter, because the central thrust within Habermas' work is not to encourage happiness. Instead it is an attempt to reach an understanding of the normative foundations of social critique and just social formations, with goal to providing a coherent picture of what we understand as emancipation.

The criticisms which Whitebook makes in his article have some validity. Habermas reconstructs Freud's idea of ego and instinct, for instance, in a similar manner to his recon-

struction of historical materialism, or the critique of rationality in the early Frankfurt School. He has built his entire intellectual project on reevaluating and reassessing previous theoretical constructions. The charge that the logical outcome of Habermas' theory is a utopian one entirely misinterprets his wider intentions. He does not posit an eschatological, ideal endpoint of happiness for humanity. Rather, he is seeking to establish a practically-grounded critical framework. That Habermas cannot accommodate the development of happiness alongside emancipation, therefore, is a misplaced critique. His project is not concerned with happiness. It is concerned with exposing and highlighting domination through discourse and misappropriation of Enlightenment rationality. The appropriation of psychoanalytic ideas in Critical Theory is, I feel, justified when we consider them together with the development of normative social structures in history.

Whitebook's discussion of Critical Theory and psychoanalysis helps to illuminate some important elements of Habermas' intellectual project. Communicative rationality as the articulation of inner nature adds a certain weight to Habermas' argument, as well as to his view of the socialisation of the individual. We see how 'the more pathological effects of administrative logic prevent us from being able to reflect critically upon and understand the motivations and drives of our actions' (Elliot 1999: 95). The effects of lifeworld colonization by processes of instrumental reason have important psychological effects, which reference to psychoanalysis helps us to explore. Indeed, Critical Theory as a whole is concerned with the ability for societal self-reflective criticism and the restriction of this faculty in modern society. A further aspect of Habermas' project which the article helps to illuminate, however, is his departure from the thought of the early Frankfurt School. The conclusions drawn by the first generation of Critical Theorists were so pessimistic that they lost some of their power for critique. Habermas made it his goal to preserve the positive force of rationality and modernity, while retaining and strengthening the critical element of theory through his dialectical formulation of historical processes. This is borne out in his reconstruction of psychoanalysis. He takes a rationalist construct and demonstrates how it can be geared toward emancipatory ends, by explaining how needs and desires embedded in the unconscious can be 'rationalised' and made communicable in public discourse.

The intertwining of Habermas' Critical Theory and psychoanalysis allows for a conception of emancipatory politics with a sharper critical edge. Whitebook's assessment unpacks and assesses Habermas' thought and its implications in an interesting way, and some of his criticisms are valid. But they fail to grasp the wider goals of Habermas' intellectual framework, who is trying to get to the normative core of social interaction by developing an applicable critique of modern discursive practices. It is not his concern to ensure happiness or make his own normative assertions. For this reason Whitebook's is another critique which falls short of full comprehension of the practical and philosophical implications that we find in Habermas.

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