

Critical Theory and Discursive Designs

DORA MEADE

Critical Theory has been dogged with criticism that it is so far removed from empirically grounded analysis it is void of relevance to social problems. In his paper John S. Dryzek attempts to counter such charges by defending the central practical thesis of Habermasian Critical Theory, positing a program of discursive designs for political institutions. This paper examines the relevant Habermasian concepts and critically assesses Dryzek's application. It argues that whilst Dryzek's cause is a noble one for Critical Theory, he does not push discourse ethics far enough to remedy the pervasive structural inequalities that would inevitably play a distorting role on communicative practices if they were to be successfully embedded in existing political institutions.

As the product of the first Marxist-oriented research institute in Germany, informally known as the “Frankfurt School”, Critical Theory has direct ancestry from the works of Marx and Engels. Emerging from the Second World War, headed by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, the Frankfurt School was severely critical of capitalist modernity. This disillusionment is perhaps most acutely expressed in Adorno and Horkheimer’s co-authored book, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, in which they assert a damaging critique of modernity and modern capitalist life; characterising the Enlightenment project as a totalitarian dictator that is intent on making ‘the dissimilar comparable by reducing it to abstract quantities. To the Enlightenment, that which does not reduce to numbers, and ultimately to the one, becomes illusion’ (Horkheimer and Adorno 7: 1997). In the wake of the holocaust the Enlightenment project was analysed and deconstructed in an attempt to try and understand where within modern thought such an atrocity could have found license. The critique of modernity put forward was so severe that it can be suggested that it theorised itself into depression. It called the role of social theory into question; any attempts to reformulate aspects of modernity were in danger of making the same mistakes again, asserting new normative grounds that could engender original forms of oppression – raising the question of whether a dialectic of Enlightenment was possible or even desirable.

The central purpose of Critical Theory is not the pursuit of specific principles but to be explanatory, practical and normative, in the belief that these characteristics arm a social theory with the power to expose injustice and reification in modern capitalist societies. The central practical thesis of Critical Theory states that applying the theory to social problems is of the utmost importance. It is the purpose of this paper to examine one such application, by John S. Dryzek. Applications of Critical Theory are important to provide much needed answers to social problems, and to justify the theory itself by putting its practical intentions to the test. Critical Theory has been dogged by the criticism that it is too theoretical and removed from empirically grounded research to offer any real solutions to social problems – that its approach is ‘abstract, obscure, arid, and politically irrelevant’ (Dryzek 1987: 657).

Dryzek's application hopes to counter such charges by showing that Critical Theory can inform the creation of political institutions and practices, 'linking social theory, epistemology, and institutions' (Ibid: 656).

The work of the most prominent member of the Frankfurt School today, Jürgen Habermas, reiterates the importance of praxis; it is multi-disciplinary to avoid positing social theory in a monological manner and to prevent the assertion of philosophy as the sole basis for normative reflection. Central to Habermas' project is the analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of democracy and a discussion of the dangers democracy faces. The enhancement and deepening of democracy is at the heart of Habermas' vision for the completion of "the project of modernity".

In his paper *Discursive Designs: Critical Theory and Political Institutions*, Dryzek puts forward an argument for the practical relevance of Critical Theory, claiming that the 'complex, non-reducible, and divisive social problems' (Dryzek, 1987: 677) of 21st-century society would benefit from institutionalising communicative rationality. Dryzek's application aims to challenge the criticism that Critical Theory is removed from concrete issues, by developing a Critical Theory programme that mounts a credible challenge to Popperian Critical Rationalism – which is, 'currently, the most fully articulated and prominent program linking epistemology to political organisation' (Ibid.: 656) – a programme that offers a theoretical justification for liberal polyarchy by adopting a scientific approach to social problems and institutional design. Dryzek's application aims to challenge directly the hegemony of positivist scientific approaches to social theory by showing the systemic applicability of discursive designs for the most pressing global problems, highlighting the utility of the Habermasian approach.

Dryzek's aim is to 'push Critical Theory further' (Dryzek 1987: 661) by drawing out the empirical conclusions embedded in Habermas' theory and challenging Critical Theorists' fear of institutional design. Dryzek effectively articulates the differences between the scientific approach of Popperian critical rationalism and the holistic and dialectical approach of Habermas' Critical Theory; his analysis of Critical Theory's conception of rationality and its suitability when considering the most pressing of today's problems makes a particularly strong case in its favour. However, it will be argued that when considering the lack of institutional design included in Habermasian social theory, Dryzek neglects certain critical ambiguities and structural distortions that would inevitably arise when attempting to synthesize political institutions and discourse ethics. His application does not address sufficiently the practical conditions and implications that need to be understood, such as the impact that inequality has on deliberation and discourse, or what the necessary and sufficient conditions of 'communicative competence' (Ibid: 665) really are. By overlooking the influential part that money, coercion and information play in communication, Dryzek's application becomes more observational than progressive.

Despite this, Dryzek successfully highlights the fundamental distinction between these two seemingly similar critical programs: their differing conceptions of rationality. It is through this comparison that Dryzek is able to present Critical Theory as an alternate basis

Roundhouse

A Journal of Critical Theory and Practice

for institutional design, noting that ‘the design of social and political practices can be itself a discursive process’ (Dryzek 1987: 665). This mixed evaluation of Dryzek’s application mirrors the myriad practical and theoretical complexities that arise when attempting to embed real principles into political institutions and uphold the practical intent of the discipline that Habermas works within. These complexities will be of central concern in this essay.

Dryzek’s use of a comparative methodology makes it important to introduce Popperian Critical Rationalism and illustrate why it is considered comparable with Critical Theory. The relevant Habermasian concepts for Dryzek’s application will then be examined, followed lastly by a critical examination of the application.

Dryzek points out that the Critical Rationalist programme echoes Critical Theory in its methodological starting points. Firstly, it posits a counterfactual ideal that introduces a critical standard for critical rationalism, depicting an exemplary scientific community evoking ‘an image of the most rational kind of social life’ (Dryzek 1987: 658). The political translation of this ideal is “the open society” in which the primary task of politics is considered to be the amelioration of social problems in the most rational way possible. This is done in practice through policy experimentation and piecemeal social engineering, underpinned by a conception of rationality as ‘effective instrumental problem solving’ (Ibid: 660). Critical Rationalists assert the importance of free communication and discussion; although hierarchy must exist, it does so with the proviso that maximal control and authority possible should be wielded by the governed. Critical Rationalism is in pursuit of specific principles that it can test, revise and explain – and translate to other contexts.

Habermas’ project has a unifying conception of rationality that is concerned with the intersubjective understanding of competent actors seeking normatively guided actions and principles. The idea is that discourse and argument produce a reflexive understanding of generalised principles that prevents against short-sighted and individualistic decision-making. Any consensus that is achieved through this kind of dialogue is deemed to have a rational quality; it exhibits communicative rationality. To elucidate communicative rationality further, Habermas posits the Ideal Speech Situation (ISS) as his counterfactual ideal. In the ISS communication occurs without the constraints of coercion, power and self-deception (Habermas 1996). All actors in the ISS must be considered equal and have the same communicative ability; in this state communicative rationality can ultimately be realised and discussion is unrestricted. As is the case with the open society, the ISS should be kept in mind whenever we communicate, despite the fact that it is an unobtainable ideal. It is primarily a critical tool that should be used as a reference point when trying to obtain normative grounds of fairness, to evaluate critically the communicative rationality of real world conversations, procedures and institutions. The ISS can be seen as a ‘moral test’ (Blaug 1997); any communication, social practice or decision that could only come about from a divergence from the ISS is considered unjustified and indefensible (Dryzek, 1987).

Habermas is addressing what he considers to be the central problem in modernised life: the colonisation of the lifeworld by instrumental rationality through the sub-systems of money and power (Habermas, 1996). This asserts an analysis of modernity shared by

Habermas' predecessors in the Frankfurt school, that it increasingly commoditises aspects of everyday life, displacing and corrupting the use of communicative rationality. The "lifeworld" is the canopy of everyday meaning, it is the arena of symbolic reproduction, and it is within this sphere that we communicate in order to be understood and to understand one another. Moreover, it has 'solidarity-generating energies' (Habermas 1992: 444) that cannot be directly carried over into the system. Asserting the importance of monitoring the relationship between bureaucratic structure and capitalist interests, Habermas states that the revival of democracy through discourse will ameliorate this process of colonisation, to 'erect a democratic dam against the colonizing encroachment of the system' through 'a radical-democratic change in the process of legitimation' that will 'successfully assert the practically orientated demands of the lifeworld' (Habermas 1999: 444).

Dryzek's application is keen to stress that communicative rationality allows for contingency and differing value judgments:

Individuals can then seek consensus on what is to be done while differing about why. Understanding of, and respect for, the motivations of those holding to a different "why" is crucial
(Dryzek, 1987: 666).

Dryzek highlights the subtlety and complexity that Critical Theory's notions of discourse and dialogue strive to promote, as distinct from Critical Rationalism. As he states at the beginning of the application, 'validation of the theory is complete when ... individuals agree it gave a correct account of their sufferings and effectively charted the course of their relief' (Dryzek 1987: 657). Communicative rationality's focus is on the process rather than the outcome, steering clear of generating 'utopian blueprints' (Ibid.), whilst at the same time trying to retain a critical standpoint. Recognising oppression is considered as important as effectively throwing it off. Dryzek stresses that Critical Theory asserts that principles are specific to the dialogue they are engaged in, 'for generalizations of the results to any larger population or any future time is irrelevant' (Dryzek 1987: 663).

The benefit of this process-over-outcome approach allows Dryzek to build an argument against the excessive use of positivism within the social sciences. This highlights the limitations of the piecemeal social engineering used by social theories like Popper's, which, when faced with the complex and irreducible issues in the world today, do not respond to the solutions or processes offered by instrumental rationality. 'Ecological systems combined with teleological and conflictual social structures exhibit complexity, nonreducibility, conflict, and dynamism to still greater degrees' (Dryzek, 1987; 674).

Issues such as terrorism, the globalised economy and nuclear disarmament – the most pressing problems in modern globalised life – do not have clear parameters of impact. Instead, many of the world's problems mirror those of an ecosystem in that everything is interconnected in some way, and actions result in a variety of unpredictable and wide-ranging impacts. It is, therefore, more and more difficult to justify thinking in a linear manner

Roundhouse

A Journal of Critical Theory and Practice

of isolated cause and effect. Instead communicative rationality promotes the importance of understanding the rhizomic nature of modern globalised society by providing a suitable legitimating process.

Aware that Critical Theory has suffered due to Habermas' tentativeness with regard to institutional design, Dryzek tries to extrapolate certain instructions or implications that can be teased out from Habermasian theory and offered as initial principles for discursive institutional design. For example, model institutions would have to omit formalised hierarchy, formal rules or constitutions, and there could be no barriers to participation (Dryzek 1987). However, there are practical obstructions to the success of discursive design. Dryzek makes a brief note that the 'communicative competence' of the individuals is important, and consequently that there may need to be a 'boost with regards to resources, time, and information' for this to be enhanced (Dryzek, 1987: 665). However, Dryzek's application does not sufficiently discuss what constitutes 'communicative competence', and fails to recognise what an ambiguous and multifaceted notion this is. For 'communicative competence' to be realised certain preconditions need to be met and structural distortions examined; there are many obstructions that make it difficult for dialogue and deliberation to take place effectively.

Dryzek successfully distinguishes between the problem-solving capacity of instrumental and communicative rationality and in doing so shows that the process of communicative rationality has positive byproducts that would strengthen both the decisions made and the group that makes them. The absence of manipulation from communicative rationality gives both the individuals and the group as a whole a heightened sense of responsibility and autonomy. Any principles collectively decided upon are for the benefit of the group; the process itself has the capacity to relieve social tensions and demand a higher level of commitment from the participants (Dryzek 1987). There must be no distinction made between the 'subjects' and the 'experimenters', no formally imposed rules can prevail and no outcome is guaranteed (Ibid.). However, these principles, whilst useful, remain vague. How exactly is the boundary between 'subject' and 'experimenter' to be blurred? There are many past examples of groups that have tried to do away with hierarchy and failed.

It is not the case that Critical Theory rests on an assumption that participants will immediately form a cohesive group that can empathise and understand one another to the point of unanimity. Communicative rationality is a process whereby public interest is scrutinised and discussed. Once public interest is lodged at the centre of the dialogue, the hope is that differences in lifestyle, normative values and background will wither away and the general conceptions of the good will emerge, producing some level of consensus. Moral claims in the public sphere should not be of the first order and should not reflect an individual's immediate wants and needs. Dryzek recognises the benefits that striving for consensus would entail; it generates something closely akin to Rousseau's "general will" as outlined in *The Social Contract*. However, his application does not sufficiently address the controversy and obscurity surrounding such a notion, as well as the structural distortions that impact upon communicative rationality, and more specifically, the vast impact that inequalities of money, power and information have on the volume and strength of a voice.

Denise Vitale argues that Habermas' conception of human rights is too narrow, prioritising political and communicative rights over social and economic rights (Vitale 2006). Principles such as the freedom of the press, assembly and opinion are unambiguously freedom-giving and ensure that free communication and participation are legally embedded in the system. However, these principles are concerned with the choice and legality of freedoms: further conditions are needed to ensure these freedoms are actually realised. In western liberal democracies political and communicative rights are entrenched to the extent that the struggle is no longer about being able to participate, 'but how, when and where citizens should participate' (Vitale, 2006; 752). The revival of democracy in the west depends not citizens on being granted the vote, but on the many other conditions that do or do not make this a sufficiently legitimating process. To make sure that communicative competence is reached many different factors need to be taken into consideration. At the very least, it must be noted that individuals communicate and express their opinions in a variety of ways, sometimes inarticulately or non-verbally, and that this would not necessarily be compatible with discourse ethics.

The impact that economic and social inequalities would have on deliberative democracy could render it unworkable. Dryzek asserts that under communicative rationality 'no individuals may possess authority on anything other than a good argument' (Dryzek, 1987; 665). However, his application does not explicitly acknowledge that arguments can be convincing and persuasive without being sound. Thus in any discourse some people could be more communicatively competent than others, making coercion a possibility whether it is intentional or accidental. It can be argued that inequalities in democratic competence would permeate the public sphere and its ability to keep the system at bay, affecting the decisions and discourse of political institutions in much the same way that it does today.

It may be suggested that Habermas did not postulate a full programme of social and economic redress because, according to his own theory, it would be illegitimate to do so: 'the reconstruction of rule systems requires an impulse that originates in the discourses themselves' (Habermas, 1971; 24). To posit such overarching preconditions would commit Habermas to violating the rules of his own theory. Discursive designs aim to generalise people's conception of the good and subordinate short-sighted and individualistic wants and needs, cultivating an intersubjective perspective rather than an individual perspective. Habermas may hope that a form of economic and social redress would be discursively decided upon but this cannot be a stipulation prior to any discussion of the issue. However, to say that Habermas' theory has not made practical stipulations is not to excuse an application for omitting at least a vigorous discussion of the structural distortions that would impact on communicative rationality. An application of Habermas' Critical Theory needs to address the necessary preconditions for communicative rationality; particularly when trying to embed Critical Theory into an environment as distorted as political institutions, it becomes a matter of urgency to look at what would distort deliberation and render communicative rationality unworkable from the outset.

A rejoinder may be offered: in his application Dryzek is not discussing Haber-

Roundhouse

A Journal of Critical Theory and Practice

mas as a radical alternative to liberalism, asserting at the beginning of his application that 'theories of knowledge rarely (if ever) determine institutional structure. More usually, such theories legitimate, justify, or (conversely) criticize and undermine particular practices' (Dryzek, 1987: 656). Dryzek wants to illustrate that Habermas' theory does not have to be seen either as a theoretical fantasy or as a threat to the political system, but that it can aid in the resolution of contemporary political problems and be a useful tool. Whilst avoiding distorting power and manipulation, discursive design facilitates a 'symbiotic kind of problem-solving intelligence in political life' (Ibid: 676) that would empower the public sphere and make political institutions more dialogical. Thus, his application is a noble one for Critical Theory's cause and particularly valuable: as he remarks himself, 'to the best of my knowledge, nobody inspired by Critical Theory has ever tried to articulate and effect political institutions of the sort sketched here' (Ibid: 666). Dryzek outlines three areas in international politics where he believes incipient forms of discursive design can be located: international conflict resolution, mediation and regulatory negotiations.

These incipient forms of discursive design are a long way away from accurately resembling Habermasian theory. They all act within a very strict framework with constituted and formalised rules, participation is often barred or limited in some way, and aims to make them truly intersubjective can be forgotten. Dryzek could have gone further by suggesting other political institutions or areas of society that would benefit from institutionalised communicative rationality – for example in training and education. Dryzek highlights the advantages of the holistic method of experimentation but does not make it clear who his addressee is; by being more specific when considering areas and groups that would be receptive to communicative rationality, Dryzek could have made a more convincing attempt at embedding Critical Theory into the framework of liberal democracy.

Thus, in his application Dryzek does not push Critical Theory as far as some would like. Instead, he illustrates ways in which discursive design can benefit liberal democracy, showing that communicative rationality has egalitarian and liberating implications in ways that instrumental rationality does not. He does this in particular by emphasising the applicability of communicative rationality to contemporary social problems, as it manages to be relative and context-sensitive whilst retaining a critical and normative stand point. Dryzek's application aims to flesh out Critical Theory in the hope that it will become assimilated into political processes and institutions. The application is limited by its reluctance to discuss the effects of the realities of economic and social inequalities and the massive distorting factor this has for any hope of achieving a form of communicative rationality. By taking a fresh look at Habermas' theory and reflecting upon how it can benefit political institutions today, Dryzek has understood the importance of getting Critical Theory to act, to whatever extent. Critical Theorists perform both a retrospective and an anticipatory function, attempting to anatomise the past and present, as well as offering practical guidance on contemporary social, political and economic problems. Dryzek understands this by engaging in and illustrating what Habermas' theory can do rather than attacking what it cannot.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Blaug, R. (1997), "Between Fear and Disappointment: Critical, Empirical and Political Uses of Habermas," *Political Studies* 45(1), pp.100-117.
- Calhoun, C. Ed. (1992), *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Dryzek, J. (1987), "Discursive Designs: Critical Theory and Political Institutions", *American Journal of Political Science* 31, pp. 656-679.
- Dryzek, J. (1996), *Democracy in Capitalist Times; Ideals, limits, and struggles*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Finlayson, G.J. (2005), "Habermas, a Very Short Introduction", Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kellner, D. (1989), *Critical Theory, Marxism and Modernity*, Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press.
- Outhwaite, W. (1996), *The Habermas Reader*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Ruane, J. and Todd, J. (1988), "The Application of Critical Theory", *Political Studies* 36(3), pp. 533-538.
- Strydom, P. (1990), "Metacritical Observations on a Reductive Approach to Critical Theory: Ruane and Todd's 'The Application of Critical Theory.'" *Political Studies* 38(3), pp. 534-542.
- Vitale, D. (2006), "Between Deliberative and Participatory Democracy: A Contribution on Habermas", *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 32(6), pp. 739-766.