Reappraisals

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In September 1980, when he accepted the Adorno Prize from the city of Frankfurt, Jürgen Habermas provoked his audience by insisting that the discourse of modernity, which supposedly had collapsed, was by no means obsolete; moreover, he stressed that it was still waiting for its ultimate fulfillment. Habermas openly attacked the notion that we have reached the age of postmodernism, because this assumption would necessarily result in a flawed assessment of our future. Instead, Habermas insisted on the continuation of the Enlightenment project, even if this project, as he readily conceded, should not be pursued through the use of instrumental reason or in the mode of traditional subject philosophy. The reason for Habermas's polemic was his fear that the contemporary critique of rationalism would play into the hands of conservative forces—not only in West Germany but also in the United States. Habermas's provocation was answered in similar fashion: both in France and in the United States poststructuralist theorists angrily rejected the positing of a logical link between postmodernist theory and political neoconservatism. Jean-François Lyotard, for instance, responded by arguing that it was Habermas's logocentric theory that should be called conservative and hopelessly outdated.¹

¹ Jean-François Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge (Minneapolis, 1984).
Reappraisals

It seems as if Habermas had entered a debate for which he was ill-prepared. Before 1980 he had not had many serious encounters with French theory. He had acknowledged neither Foucault nor Derrida and his deconstructionist disciples in this country. His own interest in the Anglo-American and French tradition had clearly favored theories that came out of the European Enlightenment, among them analytic philosophy and the pragmatism of John Dewey, Charles Peirce, and George Herbert Mead. In *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1980), French structuralism and poststructuralism are simply absent. There are biographical and historical reasons for this gap. For a German intellectual who grew up during the Third Reich, the most influential forerunners of contemporary French theory—Nietzsche and Heidegger—are politically dubious because of their impact on or their involvement with German fascism. This distrust of the Nietzsche-Heidegger connection continues in Habermas's latest book. His doubts concerning the validity and the political implications of poststructuralist theory are grounded in his hostility toward the German mastertexts on which French theory is based. Between 1980 and 1985, however, Habermas clearly moved away from the relatively simple opposition of Enlightenment versus postmodernism, or of progressive versus conservative traditions. The distance between Frankfurt and Paris decreased, although it would be misleading to call Habermas's position poststructuralist. It can be said, however, that Habermas's intensive readings of George Bataille, Foucault, and Derrida have resulted in a more precise and also more fruitful statement of the theoretical differences between Paris and Frankfurt. Whether his French colleagues would agree with his interpretations of their texts is another matter. The recent attempt to bring "German" and "French" theory together in Paris was, as Rainer Rochlitz has suggested in his instructive account of the meeting, unsuccessful. 2 Both

Habermas's *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* sides were ultimately unwilling to make a leap and familiarize themselves with the opposing arguments. It seems doubtful that Habermas, who participated in the meeting only as an observer, could have prevented the disaster. Even his *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* would in all likelihood have been rejected by Derrida and his disciples as a defense of a position that still relies on the unquestioned premises of European rationalism.³ After all, Habermas did not change his position in the process of reading French theory. Still, there is one major agreement. It concerns the critique of the philosophy of consciousness, which Habermas fully shares with Foucault and Derrida. Thus, Habermas welcomes their attempts to move beyond the problematic concept of modern subjectivity, although his own critique of the subject differs significantly from the poststructuralist approach. Habermas shares with contemporary French theory the preference for a linguistic paradigm, yet he clearly does not support an understanding of language in which words function as a chain of signifiers for which a signified can never be established with certainty. This rhetorical interpretation of the function of language is unacceptable to Habermas because it makes intersubjective understanding and consensus impossible.

Some critics have argued that one cannot equate poststructuralism and postmodernism because poststructuralist discourse remains closer to modernism than to postmodernism. Poststructuralist theory is concerned with the texts of classical modernism. When Habermas refers to modernism (*Moderne*) he has a broader historical period in mind. He means the phase from roughly 1500 to the present, for which German historians have coined the term *Neuzeit* (as opposed to *Mittelalter*). More specifically, he refers to the philosophical discourse that began with the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century and reached

³ Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass., 1987); cited henceforth in the text as *PD*, followed by page number.
Reappraisals

its maturity in the philosophy of Hegel. This is the moment when the theoretical awareness of historical modernity is fully developed. Hence, for Habermas the question of whether the present age is still part of modernity or whether it is already a phase of postmodernity can be answered only by addressing the accumulated philosophical problems of the last 150 years. This approach differs rather drastically from that of either Heidegger or Derrida, who argue that the problem of modern thought, that is, its logocentricity, goes back to ancient philosophy (Plato). Here, Habermas seems to be closer to Foucault, who assumes a fundamental epistemological break in the late eighteenth century. Even in this case, however, the differences are undeniable: while Foucault insists on the rupture between the classical episteme and modernism, Habermas views the German idealism of the early nineteenth century as a continuation of the Enlightenment, which began with Descartes.

Habermas defines modernity in the narrow sense (Moderne as opposed to Neuzeit) as the second stage of a philosophical discourse stretching from German idealism to the present. Modernity is understood as that historical moment when philosophy, by fully appropriating its own history, calls for its own cancellation (Marx) or at least radically questions the unproblematic continuation of its project (Left-Hegelians). Therefore, Habermas claims that the philosophical discourse following Hegel's system—both its more conservative and its more radical branches—is still relevant today. Although they hardly offered lasting solutions, the positions developed in Germany during the 1840s still have a (mostly unacknowledged) impact on present philosophical discussion.

For this reason, Habermas's debate with French theory begins with its German forerunners in the nineteenth century. At the center of this discussion we find Nietzsche, who clearly influenced Heidegger and also directly and indirectly had a major impact on contemporary French thought. It is not accidental that Habermas calls Nietzsche's work a Drehscheibe (turntable) of European philosophy. In the fourth chapter, which deals
Habermas's *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*

with Nietzsche's critique of the Enlightenment, Habermas underscores the radical nature of this polemic, which not only questions the content of previous philosophical discourse but attacks the episteme of rationalism itself—its method and its function. While Hegel saw reason as "reconciling self-knowledge" and the Left-Hegelians defined reason as "emancipatory appropriation" by and for human beings, Nietzsche decides to cancel the project of rational critique. "Nietzsche... renounces a renewed revision of the concept of reason and *bids farewell* to the dialectic of enlightenment" *(PD, 86)*. When Nietzsche undertakes a critique of the Enlightenment he does this with the "goal of exploding modernity's husk of reason as such" *(PD, 86)*.

This formulation may remind us of Lukács, for whom Nietzsche was one of the most important precursors of German fascism. Still—and this makes a major difference—Habermas does recognize the importance and validity of the historically accumulated epistemological problems, and he also differentiates much more clearly between Nietzsche's utopian project and its reactionary appropriation by the German fascists. In order to demonstrate the problematic nature of Nietzsche's program, Habermas links Nietzsche's thought with German romanticism (with Richard Wagner as the connecting link). He tries to explain the difference between Nietzsche's position and the romantic approach to the problem of truth. As specifically romantic, Habermas defines the concept of a new mythology, a program to which Nietzsche remains indebted. "The idea of a new mythology is of Romantic provenance, and so also is the recourse to Dionysius as the god who is coming. Nietzsche likewise distances himself from the romantic use of these ideas and proclaims a manifestly more radical version pointing far beyond Wagner" *(PD, 88)*. It is not the interest in Dionysius that is original in Nietzsche's writings but, as Habermas underscores, the displacement and revision of the Dionysius figure. In Nietzsche the god Dionysius is clearly separated from the Christ figure—a separation that does not occur in roman-
Reappraisals

tic thought. By cutting the link with Christian mythology—the presence of which he criticizes in Wagner's writings—Nietzsche redefines the utopian program in purely aesthetic terms. Thereby he undermines the liberal claim for an understanding of history that should culminate in the emancipation of humanity. "And as a counterauthority to reason, Nietzsche appeals to experiences that are displaced back into the archaic realm—experiences of the self-disclosure of a decentered subjectivity, liberated from all the constraints of cognition and purposeful activity, all imperatives of utility and morality" (PD, 94). To put it differently, Habermas views Nietzsche—and, of course, he is not the first critic to see Nietzsche in this light—as the proponent of a radical aestheticism that rejects all cognitive and moral norms.

Expectedly, Habermas is highly critical of this position. He is especially critical of Nietzsche's theory of power, which later resurfaces in Bataille and Foucault. This theory, Habermas maintains, is ultimately unable to legitimate itself because its major thesis (everything is grounded in power relations) makes it impossible to ground theory rationally. As Habermas points out, this type of radical critique of rationality necessarily ends in an aporetic situation: the critique undercuts the ground on which the proof of its validity must be based. This fundamental contradiction reappears in various forms in Nietzsche's disciples. It can be traced in Bataille, Lacan, and Foucault, who continue the critique of subject-centered reason through anthropological, psychological, and historical arguments. It can also be found in Heidegger and Derrida, who follow Nietzsche's attack on metaphysics and therefore want to return to pre-Socratic philosophy. The most radical questioning of philosophy, however, may well turn into a defense of the status quo. He uses the case of Heidegger to demonstrate the link between a radical critique of rationality and German fascism, and later he uses the case of Foucault to show the contradictions involved in a theory of power that borrows from Nietzsche. Within the context of this theory no critique of existing power
structures can escape the argument that it is itself involved in claims for power. At the end of his chapter on Nietzsche, Habermas suggests that Heidegger at the same time continues and surpasses Nietzsche’s critique of rationality. Heidegger takes over Nietzsche’s aestheticism, the attempt to rescue philosophy by transforming it into art, but at the same time he wants to limit this program and moves toward a restitution of philosophy proper. Unlike Nietzsche, Heidegger does not appreciate the provocation of modernist art, its subversive function vis-à-vis a professionalized discourse of philosophy.

Here it is useful to provide a more detailed analysis of Habermas’s criticism of Heidegger, because this polemic serves as the background for his reading of Derrida and the American deconstructionists. Heidegger and Bataille, as far as they follow Nietzsche’s lead, face the same problem: they want to carry out a radical critique of reason which “attacks the roots of the critique itself” (*PD*, 101). In his presentation of Heidegger’s philosophy, Habermas follows the traditional division between Heidegger’s early thought, which was still under the impact of Edmund Husserl’s philosophy of consciousness, and the late philosophy of the 1940s and 1950s. But he does not follow Heidegger’s own interpretation of this development, which reads the later writings as a *Kehre* (turn) that reinterprets the problems and questions presented in *Being and Time* (1928). Habermas’s resistance to the late Heidegger’s humanism is clearly motivated by political considerations. More than once Habermas points to the dangerous political implication of Heidegger’s position, that is, its closeness to fascism. This connection is not simply a matter of Heidegger’s dubious personal decision; rather, it is Heidegger’s very discourse that is involved in thought patterns and arguments that affirm the power of the National Socialists.

Still, Habermas’s critique cannot be reduced to a narrow political polemic. His aim is to demonstrate the inherent connection between Heidegger’s specific philosophical criticism of traditional metaphysics and the historical circumstances in
Reappraisals

which this discourse was developed. In other words, Habermas
offers a radical historical reading of Heidegger, while Heidegger
himself thought of his philosophy as being above historical
events. This interpretation throws a different light on Heideg­
ger's position. His critique of Seinsverlassenheit (abandonment
of being) appears as a mystification—an empty shell that can
be filled in different ways according to changing historical cir­
cumstances. Thus, while Heidegger's position in Being and
Time does not yet actively support the doctrine of National
Socialism, neither does it preclude it. This political problem
is grounded in a philosophical argument. Habermas stresses
again and again that Heidegger remained much closer to a phi­
losophy of consciousness (Subjektphilosophie) than he was
willing to admit. While the genesis of Being and Time has to
be seen in the context of the neo-ontological movement of the
1920s, it is apparent that Heidegger could not return to pre-
Kantian ontology. His own project grew out of neo-Kantian
philosophy and the problems of Lebensphilosophie (philosophy
of life). Thus, Habermas notes: "He [Heidegger] makes use of
the vocabulary of the neo-ontological turn in order to further
the dissolution of the concept of the transcendental subject;
but even in this radicalization he holds on to the transcendental
attitude of a reflective illumination of the conditions of the
possibility of the being of the person as a being-in-the-world”
(PD, 142). Not only are Heidegger's pro-fascist statements be­
tween 1933 and 1935 (when he still believed in the revolu­
tionary power of the movement) compatible with the language
of Being and Time, but so is his later critique of fascism, where
he stresses the critique of technology.

Habermas presents Heidegger as a German intellectual
whose biography and philosophy participated in the fascist
movement. Such an involvement cannot be found in Heideg­
ger's French disciples. Derrida's interest in Heidegger's critique
of metaphysical thought, for instance, is clearly unrelated to
Heidegger's 1933 political decision. What Derrida appreciates
in Heidegger's position is the emphasis on the end of European
Habermas's *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*

history and the decline of traditional European philosophy. Thus, Derrida continues Heidegger's later writings, but at the same time he returns to Husserl's phenomenology, which he interprets as the final expression of European logocentricity. Habermas describes Derrida's project as an anarchist and subversive struggle that aims at undermining the foundations of Western metaphysics (*PD*, 161–62)—a strategy Habermas acknowledges as an important contribution, although he does not believe in its efficacy. According to Habermas, Derrida's critique of European metaphysics remains dependent on the very structures he wants to criticize. The attempt to explode the foundations of logocentric thinking only leads to the search for ever deeper foundations (*écriture*). This fundamentalism in reverse cannot, therefore, escape the structure of a philosophy of origin (*Ursprungsphilosophie*). Hence, Derrida is closer to Heidegger than he himself would admit.

What are Habermas's arguments, and what are their implications? In his chapter on Derrida, Habermas focuses his analysis on Derrida's critique of Husserl. From a critique of Husserl's theory of language and his thesis that an ultimate grounding of pure philosophy should be possible through intuitive *Anschauung* (perception), Derrida reaches a position that favors *écriture* rather than phonemes. As Derrida notes: "The rationality which governs a writing thus enlarged and radicalized, no longer issues from a logos. Further, it inaugurates the destruction, not the demolition but the desedimentation, the de-construction, of all significations that have their source in that [signification] of the logos. Particularly for the signification of truth" (*PD*, 164). Habermas traces the argument Derrida presents in *Speech and Phenomena* in detail; his strategy, in other words, aims at an immanent critique. The point of his reconstruction is to show that in Derrida *écriture* rather than Logos becomes the starting point. Habermas appears to be willing to follow Derrida's critique of presence and his insistence on difference. At the end of his argument he notes: "Thus, Derrida
Reappraisals

achieves an inversion of Husserlian foundationalism inasmuch as the originative transcendental power of creative subjectivity passes over into the anonymous history-making productivity of writing" (PD, 178).

This is where Habermas finally inserts his criticism. He understands Derrida’s movement as a reversal rather than an overcoming of Ursprungsphilosophie. The history of Being is replaced by a complicated mirror image: the mirroring of a text in another one, which again is mirrored in a third one. Each text can only directly or indirectly point to the original text without ever reaching the Urschrift (original text). This search for the original text, however, which for Derrida takes the place of the search for the transcendental subject, is for Habermas both a continuation and a radicalization of Heidegger’s program. “Against his will, he [Derrida] lays bare the inverted foundationalism of this thought by once again going beyond the ontological difference and Being to the differance proper to writing, which puts an origin already set in motion yet one level deeper” (PD, 181).

The weakness of Derrida’s approach, Habermas argues, lies in its dependence on the very kind of Ursprungsphilosophie that Derrida means to criticize. Thus, Derrida ends up with a “formulalike avowal of some indeterminate authority” (PD, 181). It is obvious that Habermas does not expect Derrida’s project to result in a viable political praxis. Strangely enough, however, he does not make this criticism explicit. Rather, when dealing with the sociopolitical consequences of Derrida’s philosophy, Habermas emphasizes the positive value of deconstruction in comparison with Heidegger’s endorsement of archaic Greek culture. Following Susan Handelman, Habermas argues that Derrida’s approach has to be seen against the background of Jewish mysticism and its heretical hermeneutic theory. 4 Hence, Derrida’s deconstruction belongs to a tradition

Habermas’s *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* that opposes the hegemony of Christian logos and its hermeneutics in Paul’s teaching. The attempt to rescue writing from the hegemony of the spirit suggests Derrida’s proximity to Benjamin’s anarchist philosophy of history. For Habermas this comparison clearly implies both respect and distance. Habermas has never concealed his admiration for Benjamin; at the same time he has made it clear that he does not believe in the feasibility of Benjamin’s project.5

In an extended footnote to a passage concerning the relation between philosophy and literature (*PD*, 408–409) Habermas makes a very important general point: he argues—not only against Derrida but also against Adorno and Benjamin—that they read and write philosophy as if they were only one generation removed from Hegel. These critics, insofar as they see themselves as disciples of Nietzsche, remain caught in those universal problems they received from the philosophical tradition extending from Plato to Hegel. Habermas, on the other hand, wants to remove philosophy from this need for an ultimate grounding (*Letztbegründungen*) and to limit its project. According to him, the business of philosophy does not differ fundamentally from other disciplines—all results are fallible in principle, they are grounded in praxis and history, and therefore they have to be reconsidered under different circumstances. In this claim for a pragmatic position, Habermas is not far from someone like Rorty, whom he explicitly mentions in this context. This position, however, does not imply a repudiation of normative claims, as one might read the move against *Letztbegründungen*. This is precisely the point where Habermas disagrees with Foucault, with whom he shares more common ground than with Derrida.

Reappraisals

Apparently Habermas was seeking a dialogue with Foucault before the latter unexpectedly died in 1984. In his obituary, Habermas openly expressed a feeling of appreciation, without, however, suggesting at any point that he was in agreement with Foucault’s theory. Habermas’s proximity to Foucault’s work, which also clearly comes through in the two chapters devoted to him in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, is grounded in the nature of the questions that Foucault would ask, especially in Habermas’s interest in Foucault’s critique of the philosophy of consciousness. Reading *The Order of Things* and *The Archeology of Knowledge*, Habermas could not fail to notice the similarity with (but, of course, also the difference from) his own attempts to overcome the transcendental approach (which was still dominant in *Knowledge and Human Interest*) by moving closer to the epistemology of systems theory. This comparison would also, however, reveal the similarities of Foucault’s and Luhmann’s positions with respect to fundamental methodological assumptions—for instance, their basic common antagonism to hermeneutics. Thus, Habermas’s analysis of Foucault’s work concentrates on two related aspects: the antihermeneutic attitude of archaeological and genealogical history and the move toward a general theory of power in Foucault’s late writings. For Habermas this theory of power is the bold but ultimately unsuccessful attempt to establish a new kind of subject-decentered historiography without metaphysical foundations.

While the ninth chapter primarily introduces Foucault’s theory, the tenth chapter, entitled “Aporias of a Theory of Power,” presents Habermas’s critique of Foucault’s theory. Here, the focus will be on three questions: (1) what does Habermas mean by his claim that Foucault is undercutting the hermeneutic approach, (2) how does Foucault’s general theory of power grow out of this antihermeneutic strategy, which replaces the con-

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cept of interpretation (*Verstehen*) with the concept of discourse, and (3) why does Habermas so emphatically object to the theory of power?

Foucault, so Habermas argues, wants to move away from the historical paradigm that favors the present (as the point of departure) and understands the writing of history as a form of self-understanding. This strategy also necessarily undercuts the hermeneutic approach. "Hermeneutical effort is aimed at the appropriation of meaning; in each document, it hunts out a voice reduced to silence that should be roused into life again. This idea of a *document* pregnant with meaning has to be called into question just as radically as the business of interpretation itself" ([PD, 250]). This implies that the perspective of the observer replaces the perspective of the participant. Closely connected with this stance are the attack on any totalizing form of history, which attempts to understand the process from a central concept, and the renunciation of expressive causality, which argues that the divergent phenomena of a given period can be related to a center containing the essential meaning of the period. Foucault replaces historical interpretation with the analysis of discourse—a method that deliberately keeps its distance from the material under consideration.

Readers familiar with Foucault will find little new in the ninth chapter. Yet, the reconstruction of the argument (as usual in Habermas) is no more than a preparation for the systematic discussion that follows in chapter 10. Again, Habermas begins his critique of Foucault's theory of power with a close reading of the text. Then Habermas suggests that discourse analysis is faced with a fundamental problem. "What then counts as fundamental are the rules (accessible to archeology) that make possible the ongoing discursive practice. However, these rules can make a discourse comprehensible only as regards its conditions of possibility; they do not suffice to explain the discursive practice in its actual functioning—for there are no rules that would govern their own application" ([PD, 268]).

Foucault is faced with the problem that a discursive practice
controlled by its rules cannot determine the context in which it functions. Foucault responds to this problem with a general theory of power. The archaeology of knowledge is therefore subsumed by a genealogy of knowledge “that explains the emergence of knowledge from practices of power” (PD, 268). Still following Foucault’s strategy Habermas acknowledges two advantages of this move in Foucault’s theory. First, this strategy allows Foucault to distance himself from the philosophy of consciousness, and second, it provides the various discourses of knowledge with a common ground. The general theory of power is supposed to explain the operation of theoretical discourses. Habermas, however, argues that this strategy is doomed to failure; he holds that Foucault’s theory of power does not escape the quandaries of subject-centered philosophy. According to Habermas, the theory of power itself is ambiguous because it is supposed to operate on two different levels. On the one hand, it is expected to analyze empirical power constellations; on the other hand, it has to function as a transcendental theory explaining the very possibility of theoretical discourses. As Habermas notes: “In his basic concept of power, Foucault has forced together the idealist notion of transcendental synthesis with the presuppositions of an empiricist ontology” (PD, 274). Consequently, Foucault faces the following aporia: If we assume with Foucault that the concept of truth is based on the concept of power (rather than the other way around, as idealism presupposes), then we cannot explain successful action, since successful action can be measured only in cognitive terms, that is, according to its adequacy vis-à-vis specific circumstances. Of course, in using this argument against Foucault, Habermas presupposes the priority of the acting subject—a subject that relates to the world either in terms of cognition or in terms of practice. Foucault, on the other hand, reverses this relationship: Subjectivity is the result of discourses grounded in power relations.

Although Foucault and Habermas strive toward a similar goal, a critique of the philosophy of consciousness, their
solutions to this problem differ significantly. While Foucault (following Nietzsche) treats normative considerations (Geltungsansprüche) as purely functional aspects and reduces them to power relations, Habermas insists that this strategy does serious harm to the definition of social praxis. Moreover, he claims that Foucault’s theory rests on basic contradictions. The most fundamental one is this: genealogical historians must make a truth claim for their research and presentation. As soon as they apply the genealogical method to their own project, it leads to an unresolvable contradiction. Habermas distinguishes three aspects of this aporia (PD, 276): genealogical historians are part of a temporal context; an analysis of history grounded in a specific moment of history itself can make only relative truth claims; and genealogical historians, no matter how much they try to distance themselves from the material (documents, facts, and so on), remain partisans. Foucault’s method suppresses the hermeneutic aspect of historical analysis. In his early work Foucault simply does not reflect on the position of the cognitive subject, the perspective of the historian. In his later work, under the influence of Nietzsche, this objective stance results in general skepticism—an attitude Habermas somewhat viciously calls “professing irrationalism” (PD, 278). He observes: “The unmasking of the objectivist illusions of any will to knowledge leads to an agreement with a historiography that is narcissistically oriented toward the standpoint of the historian” (PD, 278). If we limit the concept of truth to the specific discourse in which it is used, if, in other words, we limit the category of truth to the impact it has within a specific discourse, then Foucault’s theory cannot be universalized and would have no more than local relevance. This conclusion, however, frustrates Habermas because it takes Foucault’s project seriously and supports his attempt to undermine any form of power (also those forms that dress up as scientific truth). Hence, Habermas insists (against Foucault) on a universal concept of truth that cannot be derived from power relations. (This claim, of course, does not exclude the possibility that concrete
**Reappraisals**

scientific projects may be motivated by considerations other than the search for truth). Clearly, for Habermas power and truth operate on different levels. Specifically, truth cannot be grounded in power. In the end, Habermas disagrees with Foucault's claim that all norms and standards are ultimately relative; he disagrees with the thesis that the historian must therefore refrain from value statements in order not to be affected by the influence and power of existing discourses. With good reasons, Habermas argues that this position cannot be carried out consistently. Foucault's discourse—as a radical critique of the humanities and social sciences (Geisteswissenschaften)—contains implicit value judgments. Habermas wants to show that Foucault, as much as he steers clear of an explicit statement, occasionally admits that normative criteria are unavoidable (PD, 284).

At this point Foucault and his disciples might ask Habermas, How do you explain these norms and values (in the social as well as in the scientific sphere)? Do you not fall back on a position that emphasizes the need for these values and covers up their origin in power relations? These questions would force Habermas to account for his own position and to examine the basis from which he launches his critique of poststructuralist theory. In the concluding chapters he tries to answer these questions by restating his own theory. Most of all, he wants to demonstrate that there is a third way—besides philosophy of consciousness and poststructuralism (chapter 11). Furthermore, he wants to illuminate why the project of modernity cannot simply be canceled (chapter 12).

As one would expect, in these final chapters Habermas basically refers back to his theory of communicative action. He considers this theory a realistic and pragmatic approach—equally distant from the dangers of logocentric philosophy of consciousness with its problems of Letztbegründungen and from the pure rejection of metaphysics in the work of Foucault, Derrida, and their disciples—a rejection that easily results in irrationalism. This claim also throws more light on Habermas's
Habermas's *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*

understanding of the project of modernity (*Aufklärung*). What he has in mind is not, contrary to what some of his critics have claimed, simply the continuation of the idealist tradition. Habermas thinks in terms of a third alternative that would avoid the dangers of logocentrism and deconstruction. In this search, he feels close to a philosopher like Rorty who tries to rewrite the history of philosophy in terms of a radical critique of modern philosophy and its development from Descartes to Heidegger. Habermas could hardly share this program fully because he would have to cut himself off from the tradition in which he was trained, but it is apparent that today he has more affinities with thinkers like Dewey or Mead than with German idealism or even with the philosophy of the early Marx. Like Foucault and Derrida, Habermas insists on a paradigm change because he concurs with them that the metaphysical tradition of European philosophy is exhausted. In his opinion, the old paradigm is to be replaced with the model of communicative action in which neither the subject nor factual relations are the basis. Instead, the point of departure is communicative interactions. In particular, Habermas wants to undercut the opposition of an empirical and a transcendental subject, an opposition that even the critics of logocentrism have retained in their attacks.

How can this program be grounded? How can it be defended against the criticism that it remains part of the old paradigm of subject philosophy (Lyotard's criticism)? Habermas decided to ground his theory in language theory, especially speech-act theory. In the eleventh chapter he restates his arguments for this approach. Habermas believes that language itself contains the premises for a theory of communicative action. In other words, the explication of speech acts is not only supposed to explain how actual human communication works, but it is also supposed to demonstrate why consensus and thereby human solidarity is possible at all. It is impossible here to discuss this theory in detail. The following will, rather, focus primarily on its implications for the understanding of modernity. Habermas
Reappraisals

argues that the linguistic approach allows a rereading of the project of the Enlightenment in a different light and thereby reappropriates its semantic content. This revisionist tendency in Habermas's interpretation of modernity has to be emphasized more strongly than usual. As Habermas notes, "By contrast, as soon as we conceive of knowledge as communicatively mediated, rationality is assessed in terms of the capacity of responsible participants in interaction to orient themselves in relation to validity claims [Geltungsansprüche] geared to intersubjective recognition. Communicative reason finds its criteria in the argumentative procedures for directly or indirectly redeeming claims to propositional truth, normative rightness, subjective truthfulness, and aesthetic harmony [Stimmigkeit]" (PD, 314). To put it differently: the use of reason is not conceived anymore in terms of an absolute origin; rather, it unfolds within the context of an intersubjective exchange of arguments, an exchange that will necessarily raise normative claims. But these claims are not absolute: they can be questioned at any given time.

Habermas's use of speech-act theory contains a descriptive and a normative aspect. On the one hand, the analysis of speech acts explains how human communication actually works. On the other hand, it is also used by Habermas to ground his social theory, which emphasizes human emancipation. Habermas has been accused by his critics of idealizing the actual use of language in human communication. This reproach, however, misses the real problem. The weak spot in Habermas's argument is the dual function of language. By pointing to the actual operation of linguistic and social communication, Habermas conceals that these empirical conditions are ultimately turned into a normative understanding of language. This dualism results in an aporetic situation, which, incidentally, is not very different from the contradictions in Foucault's theory of power—although with a different turn. By insisting that linguistic communication, as it functions in the real life-world,
Habermas's *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* provides the basis for the new paradigm, Habermas distances himself from a transcendental argument. But this move has a price: the rigid equation of facts and norms. As Habermas notes: "Inasmuch as communicative agents reciprocally raise validity claims with their speech acts, they are relying on the potential of assailable grounds. Hence, a moment of *unconditionality* is built into factual processes of mutual understanding" (*PD*, 322). Those norms to which we have recourse in our everyday interaction are, as Habermas suggests, context-bound, but there is another important aspect, which "serves as the foundation of an existing consensus" (*PD*, 323). This thesis seems to be close to a transcendental argument. To put it differently: if we want to avoid the quasi-transcendental structure of the argument, it might be safer to drop the use of universal norms and favor a purely local, context-bound use of rationality. Obviously, Habermas is not inclined to draw this conclusion, since universal normative claims (*Geltungsansprüche*) are of great importance for the structure of his emancipatory social theory.

The last chapter, then, tries to make two points: it shows why Habermas in the final analysis refuses to subscribe to the presuppositions of poststructuralist theory, and it sketches the outline of an alternative theory. It becomes quite clear, incidentally, that Habermas does not speak out in favor of a continuation of classical Critical Theory. In fact, he sees the later work of Adorno, for instance *Negative Dialectics* and *Aesthetic Theory*, as part of a tendency from which he wants to distance himself. Why, then, does Habermas, after a full-scale analysis of its major texts, decide to draw a line between himself and French theory? He argues that the poststructuralist critique of reason reduces the concept of rationality to such an extent that significant distinctions become irrelevant. In particular, Habermas turns against the undialectical critique of subjectivity—the general attack on logocentricity. This polemic has reduced the ambiguity of modernity by stressing the negative elements
Reappraisals

without considering the positive side of the account. The frontal attack has thereby repressed the progressive potential of modernity. As Habermas observes:

Not only the devastating consequences of an objectifying relation-to-self are condemned with this principle of modernity, but also the other connotations once associated with subjectivity as an unredeemed promise: the prospect of a self-conscious practice, in which the solidary self-determination of all was to be joined with the self-realization of each individual. What is thrown out is precisely what a modernity reassuring itself once meant by concepts of self-consciousness, self-determination, and self-realization. (PD, 337–38)

This statement clearly defines the direction of Habermas’s program. It differs significantly from the project of his teachers (Horkheimer and Adorno) and also from those traditions within Marxist theory that want to reemphasize the category of human praxis. Unlike Horkheimer and Adorno, Habermas can positively relate to Max Weber’s work. While Dialectic of Enlightenment reads modernity—through the eyes of the early Lukács—primarily as a process of increasing reification, Habermas sees Weber’s description of modern history (a process of disenchantment) also as a positive and encouraging tendency. Since Legitimation Crisis, Habermas has maintained that modern society has developed through a process of Ausdifferenzierungen (differentiations), which results in a system consisting of relatively autonomous subsystems and spheres. Thus he writes about the cultural system: “These knowledge systems of art and criticism, science and philosophy, law and morality, have become the more split off from ordinary communication the more strictly and one-sidedly they each have to do with one linguistic function and one aspect of validity. But they should not be considered on account of this abstraction per se as the phenomena of decline symptomatic of subject-centered reason” (PD, 339). It is fairly obvious that this sentence also contains a critical indictment of Adorno’s philoso-
Habermas's *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*

For Habermas, the fundamental development on which his reflections on modern society are based is the difference between the life-world and system, as it begins to surface during the eighteenth century. In this context he encourages the rehabilitation of reason (Vernunft)—a project beset with problems, as Habermas knows so well. Hence, his defense of reason must chart its course most carefully in order not to succumb to the dangers of instrumental, or to the lure of "inclusive," reason—both of which have a totalitarian character.

It is precisely poststructuralist objections to the specter of a totalizing rationalist norm that, as one might have expected, have made *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* a highly controversial book in America, once it was available in English (1987). The battle lines were predictable: they pretty much followed the division between the Critical Theory camp and the poststructuralist camp. Also predictably, the reception revealed a considerable amount of misunderstanding about Habermas's position, especially his conception of rationalism and his defense of modernity. To some extent, Habermas's earlier essay ("Modernity—an Incomplete Project")—with its strong indictment of implicit conservative tendencies within postmodernism/poststructuralism—blocked an adequate appropriation of Habermas's *Philosophical Discourse*, in which the epistemological problems figure much more prominently than the political ones. Among poststructuralists—John Rajchman for instance—it was simply assumed that Habermas extended his argument in order to reinforce his earlier position.

There is no need to trace the details of this rather acrimonious debate, in which received opinions and stereotypes have overshadowed the discussion of the substantive issues. Instead, I hope to bring these issues more to the foreground by turning the tables on the prominent poststructuralist discourse in this

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8. Ibid.
Reappraisals

country; rather than challenging Habermas on the basis of poststructuralist models of analysis, I would like to raise the question What can Habermas's theory contribute to the discourse on power and truth? Can the Habermasian version of Critical Theory throw light on poststructuralist positions? Further, considering the debate between Habermas and Foucault, another crucial issue is the distinction commonly made between normative and descriptive levels. If we accept this distinction as useful, how do we justify it and ground it theoretically? While Habermasian theory has tended to privilege the normative use of reason, Foucault's writings have strongly emphasized the descriptive level of particular historical analysis. This tension leads us to the core of the debate over Habermas's rationalism and his defense of modernity.

Once one has stripped away the polemical rhetoric, the question about norms is, I believe, at the bottom of the debate between John Rajchman and Richard Wolin. Although I will not trace this discussion in detail, in general, the argument in favor of Foucault's (and against Habermas's) position can be presented in the following way: philosophical discourses, like all cultural discourses, are culture-bound and historical. Consequently, one can no longer theorize about modernity in the same manner as in the eighteenth century, when people were seeking for universal structures of knowledge. Habermas, since he continues to use the theoretical apparatus of the Enlightenment, fails to understand the historical end of the project of modernity, with its stress on teleological history (evolution). Once we grant that history is a construct rather than an actual (linear) process, we no longer have an Archimedean point from which to judge progress and reaction, good and bad. This situation necessitates a new approach (and a new definition of "critical"): instead of confronting "bad" reality with "good"

Habermas's *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*

norms in order to improve society, one "tries to explore what we take for granted as necessary and fixed in our existence as something that has been happening to us, and which we may refuse to accept."¹⁰ Foucault's theory wants to eliminate the normative aspect of rationality because it tends to interfere with our access to historical events (in their specific function). Norms and standards are there to be questioned. Concepts like justice must not be trusted; rather, a critical approach analyzes actual discourses of justice to demonstrate how the use of this concept depends on particular social practices. According to Rajchman's account, Habermas fails to recognize Foucault's project and therefore superimposes his own categories on Foucault's writings.

In the final analysis, for Foucault, reason and rational behavior are always defined in local terms: "there is no such thing as Objectivity or Rationality in general."¹¹ Consequently, the distinction between true and false statements relates only to rules grounded in a specific discourse. Still—and this is where I would locate the weakness in the Foucauldian argument—the description and analysis of particular discursive practices, which lead to a recognition of the plurality of discourses, always require a comparative rationality that in itself can never be merely local. How do we make rational decisions when we have to address competing and conflicting discourses, let us say, of social justice? Habermas offers a solution by arguing that there are formal universal norms available that can serve as a guide for a rational discussion. The formal character of these norms has to be underscored: they are not supposed to deal with specific contents; rather, they are expected to map the parameters and define the character of public communication. Hence it is possible to argue that the concerns and problems of marginalized groups can be dealt with most successfully when rationality is restricted to principles of formal

Reappraisals

procedure. In other words, the distinction between universal and local aspects of reason, between generalizable norms and culture-bound questions of the good life, is necessary. For this reason, Habermas criticizes Foucault’s attempt to reduce rationality to the level of a cultural context.

In his desire to overcome a relativistic position and to secure the possibility of rational discussion (but not through deductions from a priori knowledge, as some of his critics have maintained), Habermas tends, I feel, to underestimate the epistemological strength of local reason and, conversely, to overrate the need for overarching norms of rationality. Although Habermas agrees that most of the practical questions with which we are confronted in our life-worlds cannot be solved through demonstrative arguments, he tries to transcend an unstable pluralism, where individual needs and interests cancel each other, and wants to hold out the possibility of a normative and rational consensus that is stronger than a rationally negotiated, pluralist compromise. According to Habermas, this outcome can be achieved by separating formal procedure from substantive content. When we are faced with fundamental divergences in value orientation, however, this distinction tends to break down. The boundaries between procedural rationality and cultural rationality (concerning the “good life”) are less stable than Habermasian theory assumes. To put it differently, demonstrative norms—even norms of formal procedure—that transcend specific cultural contexts are not available in the public sphere where political and social issues are debated. Yet this does not mean that there is no room for rational debate. Particular and local rationality does not claim to provide a conclusive mechanism for creating a consensus, but it offers a comparative analysis of needs and values so that a compromise can be reached. This means that rational debate does not have to be based on demonstrative universal norms. At the same time, we have to note that this argument does not eliminate the difference between the normative and the descriptive aspects of rationality, as Rajchman appears to assume; the move
Habermas's *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*

from a problematization of Habermas's claim for demonstrative norms to a rejection of norms and procedures is not persuasive. It is flawed because it makes the problematic assumption that these norms cannot be questioned, overlooking the fact that Habermas's formal notion of communicative norms stresses precisely the process of questioning and debate.