A Pragmatist Critique of Derridian Politics

Tina Sikka

I draw on Security Council Resolution 1674 to demonstrate that the political assumptions Jacques Derrida holds in his politically-oriented texts are inconsistent with the assumptions of his linguistic texts, and that Jürgen Habermas’s political theory is consistent with the political implications of his approach to language. Habermasian pragmatism offers a critical theory of society and discourse of modernity that touches on the same themes of politics and meaning as Derrida and other deconstructionists, but is more coherent, consistent, and explanatorily persuasive.

In recent years there has been a rise in the amount of critical scholarship dedicated to unpacking the relationship between the late French philosopher Jacques Derrida and the German social theorist Jürgen Habermas. Although these two thinkers were born only a few years apart, their experiences of the world and the specific historical forces that shaped their intellectual upbringing could not be more different.

Habermas was born and grew up in Germany and was 15 years old when WW II ended. Much of his work, it has been said, is a response to the devastation wrought by Nazism and the attendant need for Germany to found a new constitutional order. Derrida was a Sephardic Jew born in Algeria and educated in France. It has been argued that the trajectory of his work is shaped by the sense of being doubly displaced and, consequently, feeling estranged from both Algerian and French society. This lack of grounding is reflected in his philosophy which is shaped by an ongoing suspicion of “discourses of identity,” (Thomassen, 2006, 1). Perhaps as a partial result of these differences, the theoretical assumptions that underpin Habermas and Derrida’s manifold books and articles on the nature of language, meaning, subjectivity, and truth are equally contradictory.

Despite these seemingly insurmountable differences I, as well as other contributors to this area of research such as Lasse Thomassen, Richard Rorty, Richard J. Bernstein, Simon Critchley, and Martin Morris, have come to believe that there are points of convergence and divergence between Habermas and Derrida worth unpacking – particularly in relation to their strikingly analogous
approaches to international politics.⁴ As Lasse Thomassen argues, what merits further study of their approaches in relation to one another is

[their simultaneous differences and shared concerns. They are often taken as representatives of, respectively, modernity, postmodernism, universalism and particularism, and reason and the critique of reason. There are indeed important differences between them over the role of philosophy and reason. Nonetheless, they share in a critique of nationalism and xenophobia, and a concern for further European integration and the rule of law in international relations (Thomassen, 2006, 2).

While I concur that the similarities between Derrida and Habermas’ political philosophies are striking, over the past few years I have turned my attention away from examining their similar political philosophies to unpacking the aporetic relationship that exists between Derrida’s early attempts to destabilize the conceptual grounds of metaphysical philosophy, and his later political texts which tend to embrace these very normative principles. My objective in this article is to concretely demonstrate this inconsistency.

I first discerned the lack of entailment between Derrida’s linguistic and political work through my contemporaneous readings of Derrida and Habermas and the consequent development of a growing belief, on my part, that pragmatist philosophy in general, and Habermasian pragmatism in particular, offers a critical theory of society and discourse of modernity. This theory touches on the same themes as Derrida and other deconstructionists (i.e. politics and meaning), but does so in a manner that is coherent, consistent, and explanatorily persuasive.

My objective here is not to belabor the theoretical intricacies of this argument but rather to demonstrate concretely that this is in fact the case. This article reveals the inconsistencies that exist between Derrida’s early and later work and shows that the opposite is the case with respect to Habermas’ early and later work. I employ a Habermasian pragmatist critique of Derrida’s deconstructionist philosophy from the perspective of entailment.

The case study chosen for making this argument is a political text, Security Council Resolution 1674 on the Responsibility to Protect (R2P). I subject this text to a double reading: first, through the precepts of Habermas’ linguistic work in order to unearth the political norms that result, which I then compare to the politico-moral framework he actually articulates in his later work; and second, through the assumptions of Derrida’s linguistic texts in order to show that the politics that result are not consistent with the political themes he expresses in his political texts.² I chose this particular political text as the central case study because it makes claims to universality, justice, and human rights which fit well into Habermas and Derrida’s political theory but, when analyzed using Derrida’s linguistic philosophy, reveals itself as untenable.