DISSENT IN COMMUNICATIVE ETHICS AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

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Introduction

Habermas’s communicative ethics and political philosophy is normally understood as a positive consensus-oriented theory. As an alternative, I want to use the notions of negation, disagreement, critique and dissent to establish a hermeneutical perspective on Habermas’s theory. This interpretation is inspired by Adorno’s moral intuition that all we have left is negation to speak of what is wrong in modern society. In that sense my reading could be called a critical, Adorno-inspired interpretation of Habermas’s communicative ethics and political philosophy.

In the first part, I present Habermas’s communicative ethics as a critical conflict theory where Habermas finally focuses on the possibility of criticizing the validity of a statement through a determined negation, the so-called Nein-sagen-Können, the ‘ability-to-say-no’, which could also be called dissent. Such a critique should be followed up with an appeal to good reasons.

In the second part, I discuss this interpretation of Habermas’s theory of communicative action in a sociological perspective where four sociological problems are examined. First, there is Habermas’s claim that the authority of the sacred is transformed into deliberation, the so-called Versprachlichung des Sakralen. I argue, to the contrary, that secularization dissolves the authority of the sacred. Second, there is Habermas’s claim concerning the ethical neutrality of the systemic reproduction of society. Here, I argue that the systemic reproduction of society cannot be value-neutral because every person’s lifeworld is mediated through systems in a modern society. Third, there is the paradox in Habermas’s theory of the differentiation of practical reason in pragmatic, ethical and moral discourses that this theory on the one hand makes it possible to differentiate between different forms of normative problems but on the other hand dissolves the reference to a common tran-
scendental reason as a standard for the normative statement. Fourth, there is
in Habermas’s theory the problem how practical reason can be institutional­
ized. The essential issue from a sociological perspective seems here to be
whether free speech as a critical normative questioning can be expressed in
the institutions, which demands that this form of questioning is secured in
practice as an institutional arrangement. This is, in the end, a political ques­
tion and therefore requires that the relation between ethics and politics be
discussed.

In the third part, I argue that there should be a close relation between
ethics and politics in modern society but that this connection can only be
secured indirectly through the formalization of the civil right to take part in
political deliberation and through the cultivation of the right to dissent in the
public spheres of society. This requires that the institutions provide practical
support for testing deliberation about the normative maxims for an action.

I conclude that a communicative ethics can only be secured indirectly
through the right to dissent in the institutions of society.

I. The principles of Habermas’s communicative ethics

Communicative ethics is based on the simple idea that language, funda­
mentally, aims at mutual understanding and that we cannot get around this
fundamental aspect of language – not even when we misuse it for strategic
purposes (Habermas 1981, I: 387). The next idea is that it is possible to test
the validity of a linguistic statement through making an objection – the so­
called Nein-sagen-Können, because this objection requires good reasons to
be provided for the validity of the statement (Habermas 1981, II: 113 ff.).
This general understanding of the essence of language indicates that lan­
guage encourages universal argument (Habermas 1983a: 97 ff; Habermas
1981, I: 367 ff.). In this context, Habermas speaks of the universal principle
of argumentation ‘U’ (Habermas 1983a: 75 f.; 102 ff.; Abizadeh 2005: 193
ff.; Finlayson 2005: 79 ff.). This requirement of universality in the argumen­
tation also applies to more specific moral areas that must also relate to the
requirement for universal justification (Lumer 1997: 45 ff.). Here, Habermas
speaks of the universalization principle in discourse ethics ‘D’ (Habermas

This is a simple idea, deriving its strength from the fact that, first, it is an-