
Modernism, Postmodernism and Organizational Analysis 4: The Contribution of Jürgen Habermas

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Abstract

This article is the fourth in a series published by this journal on the relevance to organization studies of the postmodernism–modernism debate. It begins with a brief preface in which some recent developments in the field are placed in context and then goes on to analyze the work of Jürgen Habermas. As a ‘critical modernist’ his ideas have a saliency for all those interested in defending organization theory from the charge that our discipline offers no means of preventing our involvement in the next Holocaust. If Habermas is the ‘last modernist’ then it may be that he represents one last chance for the discipline . . . as we currently understand it.

Preamble

Without undue apology, let me try and establish three filaments of context for this piece. When Bob Cooper and I first mooted an article on Habermas as a part of this series, a member of the Editorial Board of *Organization Studies* ventured a rather searching question of us. ‘What else remains to be said about Habermas?’ he asked. True enough, the Continental literature on Habermas is colossal. In 1982, René Görtzen produced a complete bibliography of primary literature by Habermas and identified more than 900 publications on his work (Görtzen 1982). At the end of 1990, a revised, updated version was due to be published with a list of more than 3000 publications dealing with his oeuvre! Given this more than modest level of interest in Habermas’s writings, our editorial colleague certainly appears to be making a sound point. Second and more recently, a past editor of *Organization Studies* dug into his lexicon of metaphors and accused us (Cooper and Burrell 1988; Burrell 1988; Cooper 1989) of dabbling in intellectual entrepreneurship by trafficking in Continental icons and landing them in outlying entrepôts of social science (Clegg 1990: 15). On arrival at the academic equivalents of some delapidated port, presumably one would find that the volume of material already produced on Jürgen Habermas, and easily available at the dockside, was such that the market for this particular icon was totally saturated. Most recently, and also in this journal, Martin Parker (1992: 13) has said that by looking at issues of modernism and postmodernism ‘there is certainly a sense in which organization theory is jumping on a band-

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wagon'. The metaphor shifts in the next line of the article where we are told that users of new conceptualizations are given a sense of 'pushing forward' the boundaries of their discipline. Given that jumping and pushing are aphoristically antithetical it is unclear what precise meaning to attach to the argument, but this is a serious issue worth considering in the light of the other criticisms mentioned above.

On the question of the volume of work by Habermas, both social-scientific and philosophical, our feeling is that this should heighten the interest within organization studies in his writings, rather than diminish it. Key thinkers should be studied not ignored. The importance of his books has been recognized in our field but his utility and insight have, by no means, been exhausted. Indeed, one of my arguments will be that even a cursory investigation of his work shows the possibility of a defence for organization theory in the face of the gathering attack now being assembled by those in the sway of postmodernism. The study of organizations as we currently understand it is being increasingly linked to the possibility of the Holocaust and its re-enactment. Habermas's defence of modernism happily provides an intellectual barricade behind which organization theorists can seek to hide if they so wish. Meanwhile, Clegg's metaphor of European trade has a topicality and flexibility which can be playfully manipulated. However, let this not mask the deep underlying differences which exist within organization studies. Clegg argues for an analysis of postmodern phenomena, not of existing postmodern ideas and intellectuals; for an analysis of distinctive, emergent and possible postmodern practices not a self-contained, self-grounded and self-referential discourse; for an analysis of postmodernity not a postmodern analysis. He votes, in other words, for a reliance on empiricism and its place in good old Anglo-American positivism (Clegg and Couleau 1992: 23). Thus Clegg 'proposes not so much to shock sensibilities reared in the good taste of modernist conventions as to augment them' (Clegg 1990: 21). However, in turning his back upon these other, Continentally based approaches, Clegg runs the risk of not understanding what is being debated within their discourses. His neglect of 'real' postmodern approaches shows just how self-referential, self-grounded and self-contained the Anglo-Saxon empirical tradition itself is. *Modern Organizations* never gets to grips with 'organisation studies in the postmodern world' precisely because Clegg ignores postmodern intellectuals and existing ideas. His metaphor of trade can be deconstructed to reveal something very surprising. Whilst basic data from overseas are acceptable, *Continental* imports in the form of theoretical ideas and theoreticians should be regulated and cleaned up before allowing them entry into this sceptred isle. However, if one does not know what these ideas are in their original form, if one has not taken the time to read them, sympathetically and with conviction, if one has not entered the discourse as a novice to learn and be edified then, of course, it is very easy to dismiss them. Steal their label, but reject the content. Act not so much as the importer, but more as the counterfeitor.

Parker (1992), on the other hand, uses the bandwagon metaphor. Electoral victory is almost assured to those who ride upon these high and brightly coloured vehicles, for such is the impact of their musical appeals to a watching crowd. The term, of course, is pejorative. Bandwagons are never for oneself — only for one's enemies. One is independent and a free thinker; they are party hacks. They merely 'give it an image and sense of excitement' (Parker 1992: 13); they are denizens of 'an intellectual ghetto which has little relation to the problems and politics of the real world' (Parker 1992: 15); they are 'scoundrels' (Clegg 1992: 21). Safe in this knowledge, we can be sure the bandwagon will move on out of town. 'They will just disappear, given the present rules of the intellectual game in this neck of the woods' (Clegg and Couleau 1992: 23). Thus one can continue to do as one always has done. Praise be to Sisyphus and pass the truss. God forbid we should ever get excited.

Well, some of us *have* got excited. The sense of movement, bright paint and music in our neighbourhood has meant we have tried to find out where it's coming from. What is so worrying about the current state of affairs is that some colleagues seem upset, not so much by the material upon which they have happened, but more by the fact that it excites others. What has become of their sense of intellectual curiosity? In their insulated search for interiority, life's joys seems to have passed them by (Clegg and Couleau 1992: 23).

The very existence and content of this article then, means that the author and certain members of the Editorial Board part company on issues of substance. This is as it should be within discipline-based discourse and it acts, conveniently, as a way of conceptualizing the real conflict between those sympathetic to postmodernist notions and those who are not. Jürgen Habermas is decidedly of the latter persuasion and for this reason I must declare my prejudices. White (1988: 6) begins his book on Habermas by saying 'the reader will no doubt quickly sense that my treatment of Habermas is fairly sympathetic. This partly a result of the fact that I do agree with a number of Habermas's positions'. I should declare that I am much *less* sympathetic than White and face the temptation of being overtly hostile. Having sought to advocate the utilization of Foucauldian insights into organization studies earlier in this series, and given Habermas's hostility to Foucault, this confession should not come as a surprise. Nevertheless, this piece is written in a way which is intended to be 'critical' in the full and true sense of that word. Miller (1987: 92) makes the point that 'Habermas's method remains that of an elaborate definitional web which excludes as external or irrelevant that which does not fit'. Habermas will not be the first nor the last to produce such elaborations for this, as many philosophers of social science have noted, is often the way important thinkers create programmatic approaches to their self-defined problems. One must seek, however, to enter this self-contained world of assertions in an open-minded way in order to understand his relevance. This is what the next few pages attempt to do.

Introduction

According to Richard Bernstein, 'Habermas is a thinker who at once stands against many of the intellectual currents and self images of our time and speaks to our deepest aspirations and hopes' (Bernstein 1985: 25). He wishes to responsibly reconstruct an informed, comprehensive perspective on modernity in the face of those authors who question the very legitimacy of modernism itself. Postmodernists suspect 'reason' and validity claims arising from argumentation; they question humanism and the legacy of the Enlightenment; they talk of the end of philosophy and the decline of the individual; they see the modernists as producing metanarratives to explain away existing social disorganization. They seek to deconstruct not reconstruct; they are suspicious even of suspicion. Being of a modernist persuasion, Habermas has sought to defend modernism from the depredations of many of these critics throughout the 1980s. Indeed, he has been described by Crook (1991) as the *last* modern social theorist. For this reason alone he is central to our series of articles.

Born in 1929, Jürgen Habermas was 15 as the Second World War came to an end. As he read and studied within the divided Germany of the late 1940s, the impact of the Holocaust on his thinking intensified. Thereafter, Habermas has sought to defend the search for a moral universalism in which these basic abiding values are made clear for all to see by measures arising from democratic government. Any rejection of morality, particularly if it comes from recognizably postmodern thinkers, is seen as profoundly dangerous because such a rejection opens one up to the seduction of anything attractive that just happens to come along. For Habermas, the philosopher is guardian of reason, not in any deformed realization of it which is pathological, but where rationality has been questioned and rethought. He is clear that Weber's notion of *Zweckrationalität* or purposive-instrumental rationality has not led to the realization of a universal freedom. On the contrary, the iron cage of bureaucracy offers little if any chance of escape. Here is a concrete example of a deformed and pathological realization of rationality (Bernstein 1985: 5), though reason need not create such deformations. Primarily in the 20th century, reason has been imprisoned within the individual subject and is only expressed in terms of self-serving instrumentality. Weber and Nietzsche are allocated the blame in describing this scenario (Rasmussen 1990: 5). For Habermas, one must be careful to distinguish between reason itself and a subject-centred reason. If one does this successfully, then the project of modernity *can* be saved and a long list of Western thinkers can be despatched to the reserve shelves of social philosophy, alongside Weber and Nietzsche — namely, Horkheimer, Adorno, Heidegger, Foucault and Derrida. As Rasmussen implies, 'one begins to see that the Habermasian enterprise rests upon a rather massive claim which, if successful, can undermine much of contemporary philosophy' (Rasmussen 1990: 5).

What, one might ask, is this enterprise? It is that the project of modernity can be redeemed from the hands of those who, knowingly or not, have played a part in strangling it. Pusey (1987) argues that behind Habermas's huge theoretical apparatus lie quite simple questions. How can we make decisions on how to act in a world where traditional myths, both moral and political, have lost their force and where commonsense approaches to conflict resolution have been undermined by market and administrative structures? How can we save democracy when it seems an unobtainable ideal? How can we create the conditions for democratic participation in everyday life? These are the questions of a humanist and a modernist (Floud 1992a, 1992b). In 1981, Habermas said he had had these concerns for three decades.

'Already at that time, my problem was a theory of modernity, a theory of the pathology of modernity from the viewpoint of the realisation — the deformed realisation of reason in history.' (Habermas 1981: 7)

Throughout these 30 years, he has fought in a variety of ways against 'the present mood' and all attempts to bring about the downfall of Western rationality. Postmodernism is but the *latest* in a line of approaches to philosophical argumentation against which Habermas has pitched himself. He has intervened in the famous Positivist dispute in the early 1960s between Adorno and Popper; he critiqued Gadamer in the then prevalent debate about hermeneutics in the late 60s; he debated systems theory with Niklas Luhmann in the 1970s and the 1980s and saw the conflict with Foucault, and then Lyotard, develop into acerbic ripeness (Bernstein 1985: 30). It is fair to say that in all these debates Habermas stands against all varieties of totalizing critique which lead to despair. For him, the philosopher as 'guardian of reason' is also the sentinel of, and for, human hope.

Philosophy, Social Theory and the Study of Organizations

If one looks at the development of this large corpus of works, four landmark texts are visible which will be briefly discussed at this point in order to understand Habermas' influence on organization theory and to place him within the modernist–postmodernist debate. These are (in English) *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1971), 'Modernity versus Postmodernity' (1981), *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1984) and *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1987b).

Given the amount of work Habermas has produced, it may be thought inappropriate to select only four textual pieces, when there is so much to consider and learn from. A brief description of the development of his work may help explain the selection made, and put the texts in some context. In the 1970s, Habermas produced work which showed a continuity with the Frankfurt School in that it attempted to link economic, political and cultural issues within a framework provided by Marxist debate.

The organization of capitalism is seen to be threatened by a series of crises in which the legitimation for the system to steer the lives of individuals has not been secured. These severe steering problems are, of course, seen to be linked to the crises of production which capitalism engenders. In the 1980s, these crises were viewed as having been resolved by an uncoupling of the economy and polity, on the one hand, from the domestic and societal spheres on the other. The former two are seen as steering systems because they manage and direct the society; the latter two are characterized by communicative action in which participants normally seek to agree. However, the possibilities for debate decline as the world of communicative action — the lifeworld — becomes dominated by the steering systems which colonize it, both through bureaucratization and monetarization. What is likely to confront us in the future is an enduring, hypercentralized and mediated system of economic and political power (Crook et al. 1992). It is here where Habermas's concerns for postmodernism surface, for he sees that particular constellation of views to be profoundly antagonistic to emancipation, and therefore deeply conservative.

This, in the crudest terms represents the overall development of Habermas's work. Turning then to the arguments in a little more detail, in the first of his systematic syntheses, Habermas in *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1971) recognized three irreducible cognitive interests upon which tremendous importance is placed; the technical, the practical and the emancipatory. He says 'the approach to the empirical-analytic science incorporates a *technical* cognitive interest; that of the historical-hermeneutic sciences incorporates a *practical* one; and the approach of critically oriented science incorporates the *emancipatory* cognitive interest. (Habermas 1971: 308). The first of these refers to what others have called positivism, and whilst it is rooted in human 'work' it is much broader than the notion of 'technical' might first appear to suggest. As such, this widely defined approach covers much of Western scientific thought, and because of this is hugely significant. It is not, however, the only cognitive interest possible. The second of these knowledge-constitutive interests identified by Habermas refers to the subject matter of hermeneutics and focuses upon the interpretation of text and of language. In the face of the *Naturwissenschaften*, Habermas recognizes the relevance of the *Geisteswissenschaften* and the importance of intersubjective communication, but this too is not enough. Both cognitive interests are in need of dialectical synthesis by an approach based on emancipatory interests — a critical social science in which non-coercive communication is possible *at the same time* as the discovery of nomological knowledge.

We shall turn to the problems engendered by this trichotomous schema in a moment, but it may be worth considering at this point in the article the impact of *Knowledge and Human Interests* upon organization studies. In 'critical systems theory', for example, the recent debates between Jackson and Mingers revolve largely, though not exclusively, around

Habermasian notions from this period. The influence of the book upon 'critical systems theory' has been profound. Fuenmayor and Lopez-Garay (1991: 404), for example, say:

'An advantage of using the Habermasian framework in this paper is that it has already been used in the systems community several times. See, for example, Mingers (1990), Ulrich (1983), Jackson (1985, 1988), Flood (1990) and Oliga (1988, 1990).'

This framework, as they see it, comes exclusively from *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1972) and *Theory and Practice* (1974) (ibid: 418).

Without going into these debates in any detail, it has become clear that Habermas's theory of knowledge-constitutive interests provides operational research with a strong framework through which it might come to know political choices through which differing clienteles might be served. It is possible, as Mingers (1992) has done, to show operational research in three lights — technical, practical and critical, with a view to developing a critical management science. Similarly, in organization theory, Alvesson and Willmott (1992) and Alvesson (1991) have utilized this scheme in 'understanding the discipline of management' and have been 'inspired by this conceptual scheme' to 'discuss the field of organisational symbolism in relation to the ideological nature of cognitive interests governing various studies within it' (Alvesson 1991: 216). They do not see the approach as entirely unproblematic, however, and recognize that certain disadvantages flow from its utilization (Alvesson and Willmott 1992). It is well worth bearing in mind at this point that whilst Habermas's defence of critical, emancipatory theory in the face of both positivistic and conservative approaches did win him many friends, as is usual, the attention attracted by *Knowledge and Human Interests* also brought down upon his head a whole barrage of critical salvos. Bernstein (1985), a supporter, chronicles these attacks most clearly. The first problem for Habermas is what is meant by 'self-reflection'. Two possible interpretations present themselves, the former of which is an intellectual self-reflection using reason, which is necessary for knowledge to develop; the latter contains a clear emancipatory message implying freedom through escape from dependence on ideology. Habermas moves between these two interpretations of self-reflection and fails to distinguish between them (Bernstein 1985: 13; Pusey 1987: 26).

Related to this problem is where do knowledge-constitutive interests originate? This question, like the previous paragraph, rests upon the difficulties created by Habermas in attempting to be both philosopher and social scientist. Are there philosophical bases for his assumptions and conclusions or are they really resting upon empirically based claims derived from possible scientific research? Rasmussen (1990: 95) puts this point very clearly.

'The two poles between which Habermas's work has been suspended since the mid-sixties are the transcendental and the empirical. In becoming a philosopher, Habermas never stopped being a social scientist.'

In setting this objective of speaking to two audiences, Habermas sought to occupy that territory where organization studies at some point, sooner or later, must go. Third, and on the transcendental side, the problem arises of how and to what extent the intersubjective agreement advocated by the book matches up to the philosophy of the subject and to the philosophy of consciousness which rely fundamentally upon *individualistic* conceptualizations of the 'knower' and which permeate the text. Fourth, and on the empirical side, Habermas promised much in terms of a research programme for critical social science. Critics asked for the details of this plan, but all they received were a few suggestions. Into that horrifying space between philosophy and social science, then, fell Habermas' first book in English (Pusey 1987: 26). It failed the tests set by both communities of scholars to whom it seemed to be addressed.

The Theory of Communicative Action (Volume 1) is seen by some as an abandonment of themes outlined in *Knowledge and Human Interests*. To the extent that the twin philosophies of consciousness and subject are no longer there, this is the case, but some of the key conceptualizations of knowledge interests and the centrality of emancipation not only remain, but grow in importance. They are part and parcel of Habermas's 'linguistic turn' in which the twin individualizing philosophies are replaced by a philosophy of language in which *dialogue* is paramount. Whereas purposive rational action has the achievement of efficiency and successful outcomes as its goal, 'communicative action' has as its goal, mutual understanding. Agreement is a key part of communicative action and is built upon notions of reciprocity, mutual trust and shared knowledge. Of course, communication can break down, but differences should be solved through 'non-manipulative and non-coercive argumentation' (Bernstein 1985: 19). *No* dispute lies beneath or beyond rational argument according to Habermas. Wherever and whenever consensual action takes place there must be a claim to reason (Habermas 1979: 97). The development of claims to reason is a process he calls 'rationalization'. In communicative action, this involves overcoming that 'systematically distorted communication' which comes from the use of coercion and force. Habermas then ties these forms of communication to competing orientations based on the social system and/or the 'life-world'. The former is the world of structure, complexity and macro-social forces; the latter allows a place for individual social actors who are creative and proactive. In a memorable phrase, what is deemed to be happening today is 'the colonization of the life-world' by processes of systemic rationalization. This is not necessarily the case, but, nevertheless, it *is* occurring as a pathology of modernity. In the face of this, we must re-integrate our lives and harmonize the balance between the life-world and systemic requirements — not in any utopian way, he says, but based on rational, practically based grounds (Rasmussen 1990: Chapt. 3; White 1988: 107–115).

In this conceptualization, we see again, somewhat dimly, Habermas' repeated confrontation with the Holocaust and his attempt to support

liberal political viewpoints. Without mentioning Habermas by name, Bauman in a beautifully written but somewhat narrowly focused text, (Bauman 1989), looks at the colonization of the life-world for Nazis and Jews alike in the early 1940s. The invasion of the life-worlds of both, by purposive rationality and bureaucratization and the decline in the potency of individuals, morality and emotion is chillingly documented. What is missing, however, is any *full* sense of language and its utilization in this process. Structures are described fully; less time is spent on the systematic distortion of speech which accompanied such developments. The Milgram experiments, for example, are analyzed (Bauman 1989: Chapt. 6) without reference to the language used by the controllers of the experiments. They are seen in an 'over-socialised' sense by Bauman to be the product of power and obedience in social relationships but *without* language as the medium of expression of these relations.

Other social scientists, however, have fully embraced Habermas' work on colonization of the life-world and communicative distortion. In our own area, as we shall see, the notion of the 'ideal speech situation' and of 'communicative competence' have had some impact (Pusey 1980: 72–73) as has Habermas's reliance on certain elements in the work of Weber and Durkheim through which post-traditional forms of social integration might be developed (Rasmussen 1990: 44). He has been keen to keep apart 'labour' and 'interaction' because there is a necessary difference between them. Mingers (1992) has used this later set of writings to augment his work already based upon Habermas's approach in *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1972) but Laughlin's (1987) attempts in this direction are perhaps more relevant to the present discussion. In addition to the three 'stages' of knowledge development, Laughlin utilizes the concepts of system/life-world and the ideal speech situation in looking at accounting (see also, Power and Laughlin 1992). The 'system' level is that of accounting technology and its links to regulatory bodies. The 'life-world' level is the social context of the accounting system in which culture and communication are located within the organization, both past and present. The relationship between researchers and researched, and between researchers themselves, should approximate, as much as possible, the ideal speech situation. Only this will provide unfettered opportunity for both analysis and research to develop in looking at accounting systems as they are presently constituted.

Fairtlough (1992) also uses the concept of 'life-world' in looking at critical systems thinking. He claims that as a concept it is 'an extraordinarily fruitful one' and argues that its origins lie in the work of Schutz, Durkheim, Parsons, Luhmann, and G. H. Mead, and that it parallels Foucault's concept of the 'carceral society'. He then attempts to show the links between Vickers and Habermas, but he pushes the concept of paralleling way beyond the bounds of credulity. Nevertheless, this period in Habermas's thinking has been influential upon the study of organizational practices, not at a processes level but more at the level of theory.

There are theoretical problems, however, with Habermas's work on the theory of communication. For example, communicative action can be seen as taking over the function of social co-ordination and integration. Given that the influence of Luhmann on Habermas is acknowledged to be great, and Luhmann was a student of Parsons, some may wish to suggest that the Parsonian influence on *The Theory of Communicative Action* is very marked. In this sense, it can be argued that there is little which is 'critical' in Habermas's sociology at this point. Moreover, despite his concerns to be non-utopian (Forster 1992), Habermas's communicative thesis is grounded in an utopian assumption about the way the social world ought to be (Rasmussen 1990: 54). The 'project of modernity' becomes one of increasing emancipation, yet the evidence for this is not at all persuasive. Finally, the distinction between the life-world and the system is not really defensible. To suggest that the former can be conceived independently of domination and power whilst the latter is constructed independently of consensus is to engage a naive dichotomization which falls at the first empirical hurdle. In straddling the distinction between the transcendental and the empirical here, it is the empirical which all too easily escapes Habermas.

Some years prior to the publication of the *Theory of Communicative Action, Volume 1*, Habermas (1981) had written a very influential article in which he chose to place modernism and postmodernism as antagonists. This piece is given a title in English which is often translated as modernism being very hostile to postmodernism. In actual fact, the original title chosen by the author refers to the unfinished project of modernity and not specifically to any hostility with postmodernism. Nevertheless, within the article, the attack upon postmodernism is severe and those who are identified as its protagonists are seen as representative of counter-Enlightenment and irrationalist forms of thought. In the face of this, Habermas argues for the 'project of modernity' which he interprets as:

'the efforts to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art, according to their inner logic. At the same time, this project intended to release the cognitive potentials of each of these domains to set them free from their esoteric forms. The Enlightenment philosophers wanted to utilize this accumulation of specialized culture for the enrichment of everyday life, that is to say, for the rational organization of everyday social life.' (Habermas 1981: 9)

Here then in very explicit forms we see again the links between philosophy and social theory being explicated by Habermas.

Some six years later, in *The Philosophical Discourse on Modernity: Twelve Lectures* Habermas continues to carry on this 'balancing act'. It parallels the themes developed that year in the *Theory of Communicative Action, Volume 2* (1987a), but whether it is less of a philosophical tome and more a sociology of knowledge is open to question. In any event, it is an attempt to undermine postmodern approaches to 'reason' and the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment is given crucial significance in the development of modernity for it produced (particularly in its high period

of the 18th century) a philosophical outlook which was new and liberating. It freed intellectual endeavour from myth, tradition and authority creating the 'rational subject' as the primary vehicle for progress and liberalism. In this, says Habermas, it is central to civilization.

With Nietzsche, however, modernism ran into its first real critique. Whilst Hegel had been concerned with the effect upon the personality of two warring spirits, namely the expressive and rational, in Nietzsche, modernism was subject to *fierce* attack. He was concerned on two fronts. First, reason replaced the deeper, intuitive forces represented by him as 'Dionysian' and second, the 'will to power' within modernism simply replaced religion's authority with a science-based authority. This split in Nietzsche's argument is paralleled today with the Dionysian line represented by Heidegger and Derrida (see Cooper 1989 in this series) who see purposive rational thinking as mere Western metaphysics which needs replacing by 'deconstruction', whilst the other fork most recently sees Foucault produce genealogy which undermines the claims of the human sciences to be anything but senseless power games (see Burrell 1988 in this series). Postmodernism then has two lines of attack on modernism, (Best and Kellner 1991: Chapt. 7) neither of which, according to Habermas, is sustainable. For one thing Nietzsche was an irrationalist, a champion of myth over reason, a celebrant of erotic abandonment rather than thoughtful enlightenment whose ideas led to the concept of the Superman and ultimately to National Socialism. The postmodernists therefore are seen as a 'group' who stand against the achievements of the Enlightenment. Moreover, they have come close to succeeding in undermining philosophy and propounding both a baseless ethics and baseless politics. According to Habermas, they remain trapped in the philosophy of the subject with Foucault's concept of 'power' being highly individualistic and voluntaristic in tone. He no longer calls the postmodernists 'conservative' in this book. Now, they are described as irrationalists and anarchists. Most importantly, he takes postmodernists to task because of the paradoxes in their work. For example, he says, 'one cannot employ reason to reject reason' implying, that the construction of arguments by Lyotard, Foucault and others is often of an impressively rational kind. Overall, as Rasmussen puts it, one can conclude that:

'democratic theory can be read into modern philosophy in such a way as it can be linked with the unfinished project of modernity The path of Nietzsche, Heidegger and postmodernity is relatively easy to chart. By opting out of this tradition they can be understood to have given up on the normative question. Hence, postmodernism can be appropriately dismissed.' (Rasmussen 1990: 112).

In other words, the project of modernity is a noble ideal; it stands for emancipation and liberation from oppression. Postmodernists threaten this ideal.

At the end of *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Volume 1, Habermas suggests that critical theory has two sorts of tasks; philosophical and social scientific (White 1988: 128). This distinction corresponds to

that between a quasi-Kantian face to critical theory and a very different Hegelian–Marxian face. The Kantian approach is progressive and develops a theory of rationality, thence a theory of modernity, thence a universalistic approach to human understanding. The social-science approach, arising in Marx and Hegel, looks at the societal pathologies arising from cultural impoverishment and the colonization of the life-world during a specific historical system — namely, that of advanced capitalism. White argues that ‘Habermas’s recent work should be taken as a sketch for an alternative research programme in the social sciences with the communicative model of reason and action as its core’ (White 1988: 153). Thus, for White, Habermas is optimistically moving in the direction of progress — a philosophically informed social science. Of course this is precisely the orientation of the old Frankfurt School to which he once belonged (Crook et al. 1992; Jay 1974). It is this link between the transcendental and the empirical, between philosophy and social science, between theory and practice which will be the subject of discussion at the concluding stages of this paper. What of the impact of Habermas’s work though in this most recent period on organization studies?

In our first article in this series (Cooper and Burrell 1988) we distinguished between ‘systemic modernism’ (or instrumental rationality) and ‘critical modernism’ which stands opposed to the monolithism of systemic modernism by (re) claiming the emancipatory spirit of the Enlightenment. In these terms, Habermas is clearly a critical modernist. He places the concept of critical, human agency against the rationalization of systemic, formal systems. Yet Clegg (1990) makes no reference to his work in *Modern Organisations* and prefers instead to remain grounded in Weber. Given the full title of the text it seems to be an omission of significant proportions.

Others, however, have been more understanding of Habermas’ defence of modernism and corresponding critique of postmodernism. Power (1990: 110), for example, uses Habermas in his discussion of the concept of organization to express his ‘views concerning the limitations of the postmodernist motif of deconstruction’. In a perceptive and well-argued piece he outlines the Habermasian defence of modernity and is keen to rescue the notion of communicative competence from some of the less sophisticated attacks launched upon it. In a comparison of Lyotard and Habermas, Power concludes that the latter ‘is richer in ‘critical’ content than Lyotard’s hopes for paralogy’ (Power 1990: 123), but he claims that in the debate between these thinkers one finds the means ‘to redescribe and reclassify current and past research’ in organization theory. It is by no means clear, however, how this classification or description (let alone re-analysis) would be developed.

Habermas’s attack on postmodernism could be music to the ears of modernist organization theorists, but one must note that, of course, the critique of postmodernism is itself open to critique. The idea of ‘two’ Nietzsches is seen by some to be untenable. The Dionysian only appears

(Cooper 1989) in his very early work and the bulk of his writings advocate hard, rational thinking. Indeed, here Habermas may have taken *too much* from postmodern thought. Also, it is said that he is too ready to reject postmodern writings as paradoxical when in their *own* terms they are not, and even when subjected to Habermasian rationalistic terms, they are not. What he fails to provide is a reasoned critique for his rejection of their arguments. Guilt by presumed association with Heidegger's incipient Fascism is not enough either in philosophical or in social-scientific terms.

Organization Theory as Not Guilty

In addressing Fascism, Habermas nevertheless begins to construct a position for organization theory into which it may well be forced to retire as the decade progresses. As I suggested at the beginning of this article, there is a view gathering support which claims that the modernist project created Auschwitz. However, was this a necessary and natural development within the trajectory of modernism or was it merely a horrible, highly peripheralized possibility (Bauman 1989)? Feingold (1983: 398) argues that:

'The final solution marked the juncture where the European industrial system went awry; instead of enhancing life, which was the original hope of the Enlightenment, it began to consume itself.'

Similarly Stillman and Pfaff (1964: 31) claim that 'we cannot deny Buchenwald as a casual aberration of a Western world essentially sane'. If we were to accept the view that locked into modernism were a set of features culminating in the gas chambers, then an organization theory, which is purely technicist, purely a-moral, will produce these chilling conditions time after time. If modernism relies upon organizations for its system of organization then, equally, organization theory relies upon modernism for its justification. The logic resembles this; modernism → organizations → organization theory → technicist solutions → the final solution. It is not a logic which leaves one untouched. It is certainly a logic which Habermas has rejected. Implicit in Habermas then is a defence of organization theory in its modernist form. We are able to say 'Not Guilty'. For organization theory on the defensive, the appeal of Habermas's approach to knowledge-constitutive interests largely rests upon its critical approach to technicist knowledge and its portrayal of the superiority of interests based in emancipation. Modernism can allow one to be critical and not supportive of the state or corporate capital in this view. Let us ask ourselves how much of organization theory today is technicist? Lex Donaldson's work is typical of its type, but one could envisage a situation in which a follower of Donaldson (1985) asked no questions about *why* they did a managerial task more effectively. Similarly, a student reading Morley and Hoskin (1991) would find little to utilize in

standing up against managerial technicism. The vast majority of writers in the traditional areas of organization theory would be horrified, and rightly, by the suggestion that they would or could embrace a bureaucratic design for processing people, with death as the end-product. In Germany under the Nazis, managers, bureaucrats and academics were involved in such processes. In Britain, the military amassed similar technical expertise behind the task of the mass bombing of civilian targets (see, however, comments in Bauman 1989: 224). Provide a patina of ideological justification and you can get an organizational member to do anything (Bauman 1989; Jackall 1989; Thompson and McHugh 1990). As organization theorists, can we really claim not to be 'servants of power' in one form or another?

Here is another question. If the debate about modernism hangs on such huge issues, is Habermas correct in implying that postmodernism is not supportive of such an important discussion? Again his oscillation between philosophy and social science creates problems, but *more important* perhaps is the tension between German and French intellectual currents in the post-war period. One comes across 'a remarkable case of intellectual insularity' (Thompson 1992: 26). Habermas finds a counter-Enlightenment thread running through French postmodern theory against which he warns (Best and Kellner 1991: 244). Foucault meanwhile confessed to being ignorant of the Frankfurt School's work which is explained, he argues unconvincingly, by their very similarity, creating a 'strange case of non-penetration'. Unfortunately, however, he does not say what they have in common (Honneth 1991). Clearly, one engages in geographically based argumentation at one's peril, but the modernism/postmodernism debate has got national (and even nationalistic) dimensions in which the Rhine acts as a contemporary division and barrier. This begins to solidify when one recognizes the fact that no actual debate between Lyotard and Habermas has taken place. The former complains, with some justification, that certain French thinkers such as himself 'do not have the honour to be read by Professor Habermas — which at least saves them from getting a poor grade for their neo-conservatism' (Lyotard 1984: 73).

This is very worrying. Franco-German schisms begin to appear the closer one looks into the modernism/postmodernism debate. Whilst one cannot claim, of course, that the argument merely reflects upon which side of the Rhine one stands, it is not without significance. Add to this a certain hostility anyway in the United Kingdom to Continental European ideas (*viz* the controversy over Derrida's candidature for an honorary degree at Cambridge in which several eminent Professors said '*non placet*') and Clegg's revealing remarks about trade with the French (Clegg 1990: 15) then one also gets a picture of Anglo-American resistance to ideas and conceptualizations derived from Gallic cultures. At a time when 'globalization' is seen as a key issue, we may be seeing the rise of nationalistic approaches (rather than international ones) to discourse. Add to this the growth in interest in Fascist and Neo-fascist art, decor and imagery in

some branches of postmodern thought, and the picture looks less than bright.

For a journal such as *Organization Studies* with a clear European remit, remarks of this kind may seem to have little force. However, the rise of 'culturalism' and the attack upon the clear domination of our field by American conceptualizations and authors suggest that as American pre-eminence declines we may have to deal *not* with a genuinely European approach to organization studies, but with increasingly nationally based contributions.

Conclusion: Crossing the Border

I maintained earlier that sooner or later organization studies must enter an area where only the foolhardy dare to tread — the place where philosophy and social science meet. Clearly there are several models of the linkages between the two and there are professional philosophers who teach social theory and social theorists who are abreast with developments in social philosophy. Nevertheless, as the case of Habermas shows, to seek to do both, to attempt to speak the twin discourses, to be a student of these twin disciplines is open to very few of us, and to none without criticism. To confront a professional philosopher is to confront one's own ignorance. Nevertheless, the embarrassment must be endured. If one believes that the 'action' is to be found in philosophy, and if one believes that the Derrida affair in Cambridge will encourage a growth in student numbers in academic philosophy, then here is one (but not the only one) meeting place where it may be worthwhile for organization theorists to intermingle with non-social scientists. Such intermingling may well be dialectical, of course, producing an Hegelian synthesis and synergy. However, one suspects the experience might also be painful.

Organization studies must also enter that intellectual territory where the well-established French and German traditions of social theory meet, but here too the experience may be chastening. Many readers of *Organization Studies* should be in a position to transcend these narrow nationalisms which are, we have alleged, visible in the modernism/postmodernism debate — but how? Could they not tell the Anglophones amongst us how this is to be achieved? The political situation within Europe is changing and the role of Germany is a key piece in this jigsaw. For 30 years, Habermas's work has continued to reflect the problems of the German polity and the German economy and to confront, *through philosophy*, issues of the day. His sophisticated defence of modernity (White 1988: 2) not only allows the critics of postmodernism to go about their daily lives relatively unperturbed, but it also speaks unto the technocrats. Of course, there are distortions within Western liberal capitalism. 'Colonisation of the life-world' and 'cultural impoverishment' have obscured the limitations of the current socio-economic order, and we must recover the rational potential of modern culture. In recent years, though, the enemy

for Habermas seems not to be the distortions within the economic and political systems, but rather post-structuralists such as Derrida and Foucault. Against them, he argues for a critical theory which must try 'to formulate an idea of progress that is subtle and resilient enough not to let itself be blinded by the mere appearance of emancipation. One thing, of course, it must oppose; the thesis that emancipation itself mystifies' (White 1988: 4).

In their discussion of Habermas's work, Crook et al. (1992: 233) have claimed that 'the figures of "system" and "system crisis" have been fundamental to diagnostic and critical claims of modern sociology'. Certainly it is obvious that these terms are central to Habermas's modernism with its radical bent and reliance on some Marxian conceptualizations, but Crook et al. (1992), in their excellent discussion of postmodernization, accuse Habermas of possessing a nostalgia for modernism and that, by allowing an anachronistic belief in the modern to possess him, he 'erodes his ability to consider the possibility that they point *beyond* modernity' (Crook et al. 1992: 235).

If they are correct, there is a danger here that Habermas's concentration on emancipation within a certain type of social formation has blinded him to the fact that this social formation itself has changed. In seeking escape, Habermas has not noticed that the society has transmogrified itself around him and represents something fundamentally different from modernist presuppositions. Given his optimism that emancipation is possible, it remains to be seen how Habermas will handle the unification of Germany and the forces this has unleashed. Will he approach this as a philosopher, or a social scientist? How can the communicative model he has developed handle such an ingestion? Will his relevance to contemporary debate decline as more managerialist solutions are sought? Is Nicklas Luhmann's work to become the central focus of debate?

Let us return at this point to the issue of Habermas's contributions to organization theory, where one can see clear dangers and clear opportunities. It is dangerous to try and be both social scientist and a philosopher; it is perilous to seek both the empirical and the transcendental; it is of concern to one's audience to eschew utopianism yet for so much of one's work to rest upon its pursuit. It is questionable to seek to defend the 'modernist project' in ways which do not directly confront those critics of it and their detailed arguments. Yet organization theory would be the stronger for facing up to these issues. As social scientists, we need to be more like philosophers; as people locked into empiricism we should be more excited by the transcendental; as pursuers of practice we should be more utopian in what we advocate. In organization studies, we rest fundamentally upon the modernist project conceived of in one of two ways. Either we are 'systemic modernists' always seeking performativity, or we are 'critical modernists' seeking emancipation for ourselves and for others. Either way, we can hardly escape modernism — despite all our best efforts to move through 'jumping' or 'pushing' or whatever. It is built into the discipline itself. Indeed it is discipline! And as the debate

about the role of organization theorists in all twentieth century holocausts develops, the defence of our discipline, offered to us by Jürgen Habermas, will become invaluable.

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