

Forget Habermas?

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After Habermas:

New Perspectives on the Public Sphere

Edited by Nick Crossley & John Michael Roberts, Blackwell Publishing, 2004.

In 'After Habermas: New Perspectives on the Public Sphere', Nick Crossley and John Michael Roberts have edited a collection of essays which both directly and indirectly respond to Habermas's thinking on the public sphere. This intervention adds to a literature that has grown significantly in the English-speaking world since the early 1990s following the translation of Habermas's hugely influential 'The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere'.¹ Crossley and Roberts suggest that the aim of the collection is one "of deepening and extending the Habermasian project by way of both an engagement with Habermas and, more particularly, a consideration of other theories and frameworks which afford us different ways of problematizing and exploring the public sphere."² So the 'After Habermas' of the title is meant in two senses: it "follows him to a point but then also seeks to break new ground *beyond* his work."³ Of course, it is important to acknowledge and understand that this hermeneutic gesture or strategy of both following Habermas and supposedly breaking new ground in interrogating the concept of the public sphere is rather compromised and limited in its scope precisely because the discussion tends to be policed and circumscribed in accordance with broadly Habermasian intuitions. That is to say, although Habermas's work and Habermasian intuitions are problematized here and there, the broad intuitive feel of this collection is one of sympathetic critique, of entering into a 'dialogue' with Habermas, of praising rather than burying him. Let us turn, then, more specifically to the chapters of the volume to see what form this 'dialogue' with Habermas takes.

In the first three chapters, Michael Gardiner, Ken Hirschkop and John Michael Roberts each use the work of figures from the Bakhtin Circle in developing their conception of the public sphere. Gardiner draws explicitly on Bakhtin in order to question Habermas's formalism or abstract rationalism. What we have here is the familiar criticism that Habermas anchors his concept of the public sphere in a form of language-use or discursive argumentation that is idealized or formally abstracted from the embodied everyday contexts in which real dialogue takes place, and where the reproduction of social life and social-political power is operationalized. From Gardiner's Bakhtinian perspective, the point to underline is that creative dialogical reflection is located not in the norms or validity-claims presupposed in Habermas's idealized notion of 'communicative action', but in 'mundane' or 'ordinary' speech.

Now, rather than seeing Bakhtin as a fleshy and material corrective to the abstract and formalistic

excesses of Habermasian rationalism, Hirschkop wants to create the impression that they can complement and reciprocally inform one another. Hirschkop argues that analysis of how Habermas's concept of the public sphere has evolved clearly shows that it now embodies the kind of 'non-institutionalized' and 'expressive spontaneity' that is characteristic of Bakhtinian dialogue; that Bakhtin's concept of dialogical reflexivity can flesh out further developing tendencies in Habermas's own thinking on the nature of the dialogical exchanges needed to create a vital, imaginative and critical public sphere.

In chapter three, Roberts utilises the dialogical theory of the Bakhtin Circle to engage in a critique not of Habermas, but of John Stuart Mill, in particular, his theory of free speech, and the liberal bourgeois public sphere it implicitly rationalizes. That is to say, by drawing on the dialogical theory of Bakhtin, Medvedev and Voloshinov, Roberts argues that Mill's defence of free speech is, in truth, highly restrictive and skewed towards reproducing and legitimating a liberal bourgeois state concerned to silence and marginalise the majority of citizens who are supposedly less practiced in cultivating what Mill called the 'higher pleasures'. In chapter four, Nick Crossley montages or cross-cuts Habermas's work with that of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, suggesting that the latter pursues or realises more effectively the form of critical theory that Habermas himself promised in 'Knowledge and Human Interests', where the function of 'critical theory' is to robustly engage in a demystification of the various ideologies that sustain and reproduce public institutions.

The final three chapters of the book focus less on critically negotiating, supplementing or challenging Habermasian theory and more on actually trying to use Habermas in different contexts or social formations. These chapters, I would suggest, are more interesting and 'critical' precisely because they tend to use and abuse Habermas for specific purposes, rather than getting hung-up on critiquing him, exposing blind-spots, or problematising his assumptions in light of alternative frameworks. I particularly liked Gemma Edwards's chapter in this respect. She uses and critically problematizes Habermas's distinction between 'system and lifeworld' – and what he calls the 'colonization of the lifeworld' – in analysing the emergence of specific 'social movements' in actual social formations. Emphasising Habermas's connection with a tradition of Frankfurt School critical theory (both Marcuse and Axel Honneth figure in the chapter), Edwards quite deliberately and convincingly frames her analysis of specific 'social movements' against the historical backdrop of 'capitalist modernization' or 'capital-labour' antagonism (for example, I found her discussion of the British Firefighters dispute of 2002-3 particularly instructive).⁴

In the penultimate chapter, James Bohman raises the idea of the internet as a 'public sphere' or 'transnational democracy'. Building on the classically Habermasian and normative intuition that any workable political public sphere must connect to an ideal of 'democratic deliberation', he is concerned to interrogate what form this model of democratic deliberation would need to take in an internet age. What we seem to have on offer here is a kind of Kantian cosmopolitanism for the broadband generation, a global public sphere or type of 'publicity' or 'dialogue' (a 'public of publics' as Bohman calls it) that tends toward the universal or global; a 'transnational public



sphere' which he claims is the basis "for a realistic utopia of citizenship in a complexly interconnected world."⁵ In the final chapter of the volume, Lisa McLaughlin provides an implicit critique of the kind of Kantian cosmopolitanism offered up by Bohman. Building on the insights of leftist-feminist critiques of the liberal-bourgeois public sphere, she shows how the normative ideal of a free and equal citizenry engaged in dialogical exchanges about matters of public importance is itself shot through with an exclusionary logic that is both 'gendered' and 'neo-liberal' in its orthodoxy and operations. Against this, she argues for the possibility of a feminist theory

of the public sphere critically sensitive to the 'political-economic' conditions in and through which it is shaped.

All in all, Crossley and Roberts have pulled together a collection which, in a sense, does exactly what it says on the tin. That is to say, the collection is 'After Habermas' in the sense that it "extends the Habermasian project by way of an engagement with Habermas" and by the way it engages "other theories and frameworks which afford us different ways of problematizing and exploring the public sphere." However, as I indicated earlier, the collection never departs radically from Habermas, instead tending to supplement his work through a broadly sympathetic critique. In a way, we should not be surprised by this, and this collection only further reinforces the extent of Habermas's influence in the English-speaking academic world of public sphere theory. If we assume that trying to think and critically interrogate the concept of the public sphere means we have to stand in Habermas's shadow, then Crossley and Roberts' 'dialogue' with Habermas can be judged an interesting and useful addition to the literature, and it is on those terms that the book should be judged. After all, the collection is not called 'Forget Habermas: Perspectives on the Public Sphere that have absolutely nothing to do with Habermasian theory'. I have to say, though, I'd be more excited at the prospect of reviewing such a collection...

Notes

1. See, for example, C. Calhoun (ed.), 'Habermas and the Public Sphere' (London, 1992).
2. N. Crossley & J.M. Roberts (eds), 'After Habermas: New Perspectives on the Public Sphere' (Oxford, 2006), p.1.
3. *Ibid.*
4. The importance of emphasising the 'Frankfurt School' lineage in analysing the usefulness of Habermas's thinking is something that is often lost in contemporary debates and critical commentary on his work. This is particularly the case within the political studies (or in English-speaking 'political theory') where Habermas tends to be mobilized as a 'liberal', a thinker (comparable to John Rawls or Ronald Dworkin, for example) who seeks to answer the question of what justice demands in a modern, pluralistic, liberal society. While this kind of critical commentary is undoubtedly important, and while Habermas's recent work in political and legal theory clearly merits such commentary and exposition, it is also crucial that we do not lose sight of the fact that Habermas's particular brand of critical theory is still intuitively guided by a clear notion of ideology critique, and by a clear conception of the ideological that can be tracked back to the Frankfurt School. I develop this point further in Robert Porter, 'Ideology: Contemporary Social, Political and Cultural Theory' (Cardiff, 2006).
5. N. Crossley & J.M. Roberts (eds), 'After Habermas: New Perspectives on the Public Sphere' (Oxford, 2006), p. 154.

