

**Discourse, Desire,
and Fantasy in Jürgen
Habermas' Critical Theory**

Kenneth G. MacKendrick

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*This book is dedicated to Andrea Brown,
for saying the things that no one else was thinking.*

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Introduction

To adopt a quote from the Preface of Seyla Benhabib's first book, *Critique, Norm, and Utopian: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory*, my doctoral studies began "with a question and a suspicion." My question, like that of Benhabib's, concerns the plausibility of Jürgen Habermas's effort to base the normative foundations of critical theory upon a moral theory of discourse. And again, like Benhabib, my suspicion concerns the possibility of developing an alternative normative foundation for critical theory. Unlike her careful analysis, which concludes "this suspicion has proved untenable," I think my research suggests a viable alternative.¹ In the following study I argue that a psychoanalytically informed rethinking of Habermas's earlier work may assist in overcoming some of the stumbling stones and deadlocks of his later work. As a corollary, my re-visioning of Habermas's early work may also be productive as a means of keeping alive the creative and provocative critical intuitions of the early Frankfurt School theorists.

My argument begins by tracing some key concepts in the writings of the Frankfurt School alongside Habermas's earlier writings as a means of suggesting missed opportunities. If there is a guiding phrase for my research it is Adorno's aphorism "the preponderance of the object," a phrase I take to include moments of neglect and forgetting. As is well known, the principal architects of critical theory, particularly Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse, each in their own way argue that the recollection of the past includes the pathos and recognition of missed opportunities, moments in history where the achievement of a more genuinely humane world, the reasonable conditions of life, could have emerged but did not. The sentiment is appropriate because this is precisely what my argument aims to show. I am recuperating and reflecting upon a missed opportunity located in the contradictions and crevices of Habermas's earlier writings. I am convinced that Habermas's writings in the 70s, which begin the trend away from the critical spirit of the

Frankfurt School, and his later writings through the 80s and 90s, paradigmatically represented by *Between Facts and Norms*, have veered into the realm of what could be called conformist critical theory.² In many instances Habermas's mature writings read more like an apology for existing forms of liberal democratic regimes than a critical account of their pathologies, a tendency in critical theory detected by Nancy Fraser when she entitled one of her articles, "What's Critical about Critical Theory?"³ Certainly Habermas remains one of the most articulate critics of modernity, but in my view his critique of modern thought is not tenacious enough, exerting tendencies that are unwittingly accommodating to existing forms of social and political pathology coupled with a theoretical apparatus too easily absorbed into philosophical and political apologetics. Interestingly enough, it is often through his political interventions that Habermas expresses the deepest sympathy with the Frankfurt School theorists.⁴

When I began my research on Habermas during my M.A. at the University of Toronto, I had naïvely hoped to provide a sustained critique of his work relying primarily on Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*.⁵ This rapidly showed itself to be implausible, or at least this kind of critique could only proceed in a limited way. I remain influenced by Adorno and have tried to develop and build upon many of his key concepts without abandoning Habermas's progressive and theoretically innovative insights. What initially concerned me about Habermas's thought was an apparent conceptual insensitivity to the ambiguities and contradictions of reason, a concern emerging from lessons I have learned from psychoanalysis. In the most general way I think social interaction is more complicated than Habermas's theory of communicative action permits. Language is inundated with more than stock definitions, irreducible validity claims, and ubiquitous idealizing assumptions. There are forces operating on and through language that entwine its use with dreams, desires, and fantasies. These affective elements operating on language are not necessarily regressive, they are constitutive elements of thought and speech. These affective elements must be accounted for when trying to articulate a theory of communicative rationality that is not hopelessly hypostatized. To phrase it bluntly: an analysis of reason in language that gives priority to the pragmatic dimensions of language, focusing on universalizing notions about how language works, will minimize or neglect the equally important questions of how language, as a product of the imaginary, comes to be constituted and constitutive of the subject and of intersubjective relations in idiosyncratic and particular ways. To explain these entwinements a psychoanalytically informed understanding of communication in relation to desire and the imagination is required. My findings

here serve simply as a prolegomenon to what I hope to be a more sustained rethinking of Habermas's critical theory. Overall, it is my view that more attention needs to be given to subject-object or subject-image relations in the midst of intersubjective relations, both between subjects and internal to the subject; thus my keen interest in Jessica Benjamin's dialectical emphasis on the intersubjective and the intrasubjective.

When I began my research, setting out to investigate problems in Habermas's communicative theory through the work of Adorno, I increasingly gravitated to the often audacious writings of Marcuse. I thought that Marcuse's understanding of Eros was promising, but I eventually found it too clumsy and under-theorized to express the complexities of the relation between desire and fantasy that I sought to understand more carefully; likewise, the nebulous concept of "emphatic rationality" often associated with the Frankfurt School was too amorphous to be of much use. It was not until I encountered the writings of Cornelius Castoriadis, largely through Habermas's critique of *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, that a new path of inquiry was opened for me.⁶ Around the same time I became intrigued by Axel Honneth's critique of Habermas in *The Critique of Power: Reflective Stages in a Critical Social Theory*, influenced in part by Foucault, and his attempt to articulate and initiate a post-linguistic turn in critical theorizing in *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*.⁷ My interest in Castoriadis, which seemed to harmonize with my sympathy to anarchist thought, led to the publication of my first article: "The Moral Imaginary of Discourse Ethics."⁸ Using Castoriadis's conception of the imaginary, which is still very important for me, I began to sense the plausibility of developing a more psychoanalytically informed critique of Habermas's works. My main problem was simple: I found Habermas's critique of Castoriadis to be persuasive and I found Honneth's work to remain too close to the original position he set out to criticize.

While researching the concept of the imaginary I was directed to the work of Slavoj Žižek by my colleague Darlene Juschka, and for about two years I studied the writings of the Slovene Lacanian School and the writings of Jacques Lacan, with some attention given to the writings of Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, and Judith Butler. While at first I thought this material would be helpful I gradually became increasingly suspicious and mistrustful of the entire modality of Lacanian inquiry. I include this point because I am aware that this research did influence the tenor of my theoretical trajectory.⁹

I suspect that anyone familiar with Habermas's work will recognize that his book *Knowledge and Human Interests* is theoretically more innovative than the works that come after it. And, at least in my opinion, his debate

with Hans-Georg Gadamer, which has sweeping implications for research in the humanities and social sciences, is among the most fascinating philosophical debates of the 20th century. Reflecting on this I discerned that it was the presence of Habermas's appropriation of Freud, which was in part still under the influence of the writings of Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse, that interested me, and where I again detected an opening for a version of critical theorizing that seems to have disappeared shortly after the exchange. With this in mind I then, finally, turned back to those scholars identifying with the aims of the critical theory of the Frankfurt School who were also struggling with the less-than-critical tendencies of Habermas's thought.¹⁰ It took a rather long detour to figure out that these were the most valuable thinkers through which to articulate my critique. In most respects each of these thinkers is trying to reconnect Habermasian critical theory with a more differentiated understanding of the entwinement of reason, domination, and autonomy. It is through these influences, some of them productive and others leading into dead ends, that this manuscript took shape. Throughout I have tried to retain many of the precepts of the Frankfurt School as a means of articulating this alternative path.

In terms of my theoretical assumptions vis-à-vis Habermas, I am using a concept of the imaginary similar to the one provided by Cornelius Castoriadis: the imaginary "is the unceasing and essentially *undetermined* (social-historical and psychical) creation of figures/forms/images, on the basis of which alone there can ever be a question of 'something.' What we call 'reality' and 'rationality' are its works."¹¹ The imaginary is a vital aspect of all human activities, linguistic and performative. It is meaning-constituting and, as creative, generative of the signs and symbols that constitute language. There can be no communication without the intersecting imagining of communication. The imaginary, with its stream of identifications and projections, is the means through which the subject can begin to speak and comprehend at all. The imaginary is not, however, an autonomous partner in a public dialogue; on the contrary, it is the underlying schema of discourse and the agency of the positing, creation, and reception of forms. Dealings with the imaginary, as an irrevocable facet of subjectivity, are best conceptualized along the lines of a volatile subject-object or subject-image dialectic. The imaginary works as a petrifying or fossilizing operation on the one hand and as a fragmenting and dissolving force on the other; learning is accomplished through the dissolution of certain ideas and the fusion of others. The imaginary is also subject to revision, modification, and potential transformation, through brutish instrumental calculation or self-conscious and dialogical reflection.

To further clarify this point: when I am talking about the imaginary as a substratum of subjectivity I have in mind a two-fold notion. First, there is what could be called a natural or prelinguistic imaginary, the interaction of the organic form of the human being with itself in a primary or primordial way. An equally appropriate term would be the instincts. Such an imaginary is primordial and without concept, although not necessarily without shape or form. Second, there is a social and perceptual influence and interaction with this natural imaginary that imprints itself on it: the partial and fragmented—and largely unconscious—acquisition of language and the vicissitudes of the symbolic realm (gestures, posture, and so on). This includes the experience and intensification of perception increasingly mediated by the gradual acquisition of language and eventual emergence of differentiated forms of communication, what I think can be called the non-conceptual or pre-conceptual imaginary. Social interactions give increasing form to the prelinguistic substratum. In both instances, the natural or prelinguistic imaginary and the pre- or non-conceptual imaginary should be viewed as constituting the non-linguistic substratum of consciousness. As I view it, this substratum can be described as an amorphous hunger that is fed with things and with words, gradually merging perceptions and sensations with something more picturesque or phantasmatic than wholly linguistic. The imaginary basis of conscious life operates on and from within our linguistic cognition, with the effect of congealing and fragmenting simultaneously. The easiest, although perhaps misleading, way to describe the relation of the nonlinguistic imaginary to conscious life is through an analogy to the creation of confectionaries. A confectionary is a food product based on sugar. Basically, a candy is made up of raw materials which may include sugar, syrup, or honey and some form of animal or vegetable fat, fruit, etc. In the creation of a candy, the sugar is dissolved in water then boiled and goes through different stages from soft to hard in the crystallization process, resulting in a range of sweets from fudge to toffee and caramel to brittle.¹² What I am calling the prelinguistic imaginary is akin to the raw ingredients, the process of boiling is the acquisition of experience wherein the prelinguistic imaginary is dissolved and reconstituted in an increasingly crystallized and conceptual-cultural form. Whatever forms the candy takes, its transformed ingredients retain their plasticity, the elements of heat and water can at any time continue to dissolve or crystallize the confection.¹³ The unavoidable forward and backward motion in the relation between the imaginary and linguistic cognition is crucial to my understanding of the relation between discourse, desire, and fantasy. Perhaps there is no better phrase to encapsulate this dialectic than Adorno's aphorism "If thought really yielded to the object . . . the very objects would start talking

under the lingering eye.” Or, perhaps one could mention Horkheimer and Adorno’s speculative comments in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* concerning the possibilities of mindfulness or consciousness of nature in the subject.¹⁴

The other kind of imaginary that I refer to is the social imaginary: the world of shared meaning, interpretation and so on, perhaps akin to what Habermas calls the lifeworld.¹⁵ Imagination, as opposed to the different valences of the imaginary, simply refers to creativity, the novelty of imagining of something. It is my contention that the natural imaginary cannot be wholly transformed nor rendered transparent, there is a remainder that can best be described as the ineluctable natural basis of human beings, the natural imaginary can be imprinted upon, is malleable, and to some degree is transformed through interaction with others and with the environment, but it is not transcended, otherwise human beings would cease to be natural beings. Jonathan Lear has nicely captured a similar idea with the phrase “the remainder of life.”¹⁶

Coupled with the significance of my differentiated understanding of the imaginary is the notion of desire, which I do not view as completely distinct from Habermas’s theory of human interests. My understanding of the concept of desire is Freudian, influenced primarily by Jessica Benjamin. Desire must be equated with lack and with the potential for agency; desire can be conscious, as an interpretation of interests expressed in fantasy or the social imaginary, or, unconscious, in relation to phantasy. Where concepts of interest and desire depart is in relation to the structure of fantasy and the imaginary, and the supposed rationality inherent to the different stratifications of anthropologically deep-seated human interests. Desire “in-itself” cannot be theorized as rational; desire is simply an energizing aspect of practice. Empirically, when desire is situated, it may be appropriate to speak of “ideologies of desire,” ways in which desire is implicated within social interactions, institutional structures, and patterns of individual or collective behavior as well as emancipatory, as in a desire for self-reflection.¹⁷

By way of introduction, in the most general terms the critical theory of Jürgen Habermas is a sustained analysis of rationality and enlightenment from a social theoretical perspective, a perspective setting out to chart the distortions and malformations of the human use of reason in society and history. Habermas’s writings comprise a body of literature virtually unparalleled throughout the social sciences and humanities, constituting a sustained and systematic defense of the cognitive and normative ideals of the Enlightenment. In brief, Habermas’s thought provides a philosophical justification of the separation of value-spheres and world orientations, the progress of scientific knowledge,

the material possibility of justice and the propensity for moral autonomy, and even extends to reflections on the relevance of art and the future of religion within modernity.

Although much of my argument deals with Habermas's earlier work, from *Knowledge and Human Interests* to *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, my aims are not those of a historiographer. Habermas's earlier work suggests a direction for social theorizing that I argue he opted not to pursue. While Habermas has often found it necessary to amend the justifications given for particular aspects of his theory, I view his work to be thematically consistent throughout. I have chosen to focus on his earlier work because it is the most suggestive for developing an alternative path to the one he has chosen. It is my assumption that the difference in tone and trajectory between his early and later writings is in no short measure due to the proximity of his early work to the writings and personages of the "inner circle" (Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse) and his gradual counter-balancing use of the "outer circle" (especially Walter Benjamin) to justify the growing gap in philosophical affinity.¹⁸ While the creativity and innovative depth of Habermas's early Marxian analyses are self-admittedly plagued with contradictions and tensions, the attempt to resolve these apparent ambiguities has steered his thoughts in the direction of his later inquiries. It should be stressed that I am not providing a sustained or systematic critique of Habermas's later works. In my view drawing on the unresolved tensions in his earlier work is productive, and in doing so I am seeking to revisit those concepts and ideas that may yet again be taken up within critical theory. My choice is perhaps not unlike Habermas's decision in his writings on labor and interaction to emphasize Hegel's writings from his Jena years rather than the later works written in Berlin.

My critique and analysis of Habermas's research has two sides. One is philosophical, presented in my various attempts to clarify Habermas's basic concepts. The other side is feminist and psychoanalytic, concerned with productive contributions that feminist thought and psychoanalysis have to offer Habermas's theory of communicative rationality and discourse ethics. The motive for my inquiry is relatively straightforward. I wish to re-infuse Habermas's work with the critical spirit that first animated his thoughts, a spirit that a politically sensitive Horkheimer once warned Adorno about.¹⁹ I pursue this intention by raising questions about his writings in relation to the concerns of the earlier generation of critical theorists, controversies resulting from his debate with Hans-Georg Gadamer, and issues raised by feminist theory and psychoanalysis pertaining to recognition. As I see it, the single most salient problem with Habermas's theory of communicative rationality is his overdetermination of the role of language as constitutive of

subjectivity. It is argued here that the limits and internal contradictions of Habermas's theory can be detected in his appropriation of psychoanalysis, his debate with Gadamer and the hermeneutic tradition, and his conceptualization of reason and reciprocity. My final judgment on Habermas's work is that it suffers unnecessarily from an inadequate theorization of the relation between desire and fantasy in intersubjective relations. The result of this inadequacy is that Habermas's model of interaction produces a hypostatized understanding of the relation between rationality and communication due to an underestimation of the significance of the natural and imaginary elements of human experience. My questions and concerns do not dissolve an interest in the "reasonable conditions of life."²⁰ The critique of reason is the lynchpin of critical theorizing and for me the critique of communicative rationality, in lights of its apologetic tendencies, is a pressing issue.

My manuscript begins by providing a brief introduction to the critical theorizing of the principal members of the Frankfurt School. The first chapter focuses on the trajectory of critical theory highlighting concepts that I think have continued relevance within Habermas's writings. In particular, I discuss concepts of reason and history, myth and enlightenment, ideology and ideology critique, and subject and object in relation to the utopian tropes of their work.

The second chapter discusses Habermas's appropriation of Freud and his discontinuous writings on nature. Starting with Habermas's theory of human interests, I demonstrate that the conceptualization of the acquisition of language as instituting a radical break with nature is problematic. Following Joel Whitebook, it is argued that psychoanalysis provides a bridge to analyze the complexities of internal and external nature that does not dissolve the tension between the subjects' relation to self as object within the context of the intersubjective formation of subjectivity and identity.

The third chapter deals with Habermas's debate with Hans-Georg Gadamer, the critical theory and hermeneutics encounter. In this debate Habermas deploys psychoanalysis as an example of a form of inquiry that undermines the universality of hermeneutics. Situating Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics as theoretically naïve, Habermas advocates a more scientific and procedural form of analysis and stresses the way in which hermeneutics encounters its limitations from within. Habermas's solution to this dilemma advances what he calls the reconstructive sciences, a mode of theoretical inquiry that escapes the snares of a historically dependent and interpretively bound approach. My critique in this chapter argues that Habermas does not succeed in his task, at least not completely. As Habermas has formulated his objections he cannot escape the centrality of interpretation in discursive

relations. Furthermore, his understanding of psychoanalytic inquiry and his supposition of language as primarily public and only derivatively private prevents him from moving beyond a model of critical hermeneutics. As a rejoinder, drawing on the work of J. M. Bernstein and Albrecht Wellmer, I argue for a more aesthetic and narrative understanding of intersubjectivity, self-reflection, and self-understanding. Here I show that subjects articulate their identities in a socio-narrative form, a form misperceived when approached in a formal-pragmatic manner, accomplishing both more and less than Habermas's concept of emancipatory self-reflection intends. Understood this way subjective identity is better grasped as structured by a phantasmic and narrative horizon rather than solely by publicly constituted language games. Close attention to this narrative form constitutes part of the aim and object of psychoanalytic inquiry: the elucidation of the imaginary as it serves as the basis of identity and identity-formation.

The fourth chapter follows up on the findings of the third. Using the work of Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and Slavoj Žižek as exemplars, I develop a theory of secular revelation as an alternative to Habermas's project of reconstructive science, thus keeping with the desire and intention of developing a post-hermeneutic understanding of critical theory. My interests here coincide with Seyla Benhabib's and J. M. Bernstein's emphasis on the "transfiguring character of human activity." It is argued in this chapter that a theory of revelation, which finds a three-fold justification via the philosophy of history, aesthetic theory, and the philosophy of language, is a better means for overcoming hermeneutic objections to critical theory. At this point it is also argued that Habermas's theory cannot accommodate such insights as long as it remains doggedly attached to an overdetermined and idealized understanding of communication.

The fifth chapter examines the different ways in which recognition and the struggle for recognition are developed in the work of Habermas, Axel Honneth, and Jessica Benjamin. Against Habermas and Honneth I argue that Benjamin's approach is the most promising since it does not reduce subjectivity to its linguistic elements nor does it equate breakdowns in communication as pathological. It is my view that the pathologies diagnosed within Habermas's communicative theory rest on an unrealistic expectation and a misunderstanding of the constitutive elements of subjectivity, again stemming from his idealized understanding of communicative relations. It is argued that Benjamin's paradoxical conception of the intersubjective view offers a significant and promising alternative to Habermas's procedural approach to argumentation and rational adjudication that does justice to the imaginary and narrative elements of subjectivity. Unlike Habermas's analysis, Benjamin's