

Cultural Practice and Communicative Action: Of Differences and Solidarity

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The purpose of this paper is to examine how cultural practice and communicative action in their diverse forms can make meaningful intervention in the problems that beset a country like India today. Sandwiched between the residues of the colonial project of modernisation, which monologically aim at casting all cultural specificities in an Enlightenment European mould, and the easy reaction to the same in an unproblematised regression to some 'authentic' and essential cultural past, the social theorist today wonders if there can be a third alternative, one that would be critical and yet not reactionary. It is this that leads this paper into the rationality of communicative practice as theorised upon by Habermas and the post-Marxist notion of solidarity of the 'new left', where differences can be retained and yet be sutured into a subversive and interventionistic use of culture.

The way modernisation appropriated culture for its hegemonic ends has been theorised upon by the Frankfurt School, whose position is roughly this that mass culture is the means through which the populace get indoctrinated into unquestioningly accepting normative hierarchy. It is in this context that Habermas' idea of 'communicative action' occupies an important position, and one can recall how he says in *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1981), 'the inner logic of everyday communicative practice sets up defenses against the direct manipulative intervention of the mass media'.¹ Communicative practice can further remedy the manipulations through mass culture so characteristic of modernisation, because through its rationality, the splintered rationalities of the Enlightenment can be sutured. In a 1981 lecture, Habermas explains cultural modernity by borrowing a theorisation of Weber, whereby reason is seen to separate into the three autonomous domains of science, morality and art. Cultural modernity is all about this splintering of rationality into the three

domains of science, jurisprudence and art, and there emerging specialists in these three fields, resulting in, as Habermas points out, a distancing of culture from the general public and everyday practice. He says,

Let me start [...] by recalling an idea from Max Weber. He characterized cultural modernity as the separation of the substantive reason expressed in religion and metaphysics into three autonomous spheres. They are: science, morality and art. These came to be differentiated because the unified world-views of religion and metaphysics fell apart. Since the 18th century, [...] Scientific discourse, theories of morality, jurisprudence, and the production and criticism of art could in turn be institutionalised. Each domain of culture could be made to correspond to cultural professions in which problems could be dealt with as the concern of special experts. This professionalized treatment of the cultural tradition brings to the fore the intrinsic structures of each of the three dimensions of culture. There appear the structures of cognitive-instrumental, or moral-practical and of aesthetic-expressive rationality, each of these under the control of specialists who seem more adept at being logical in these particular ways than other people are. As a result, the distance grows between the culture of the experts and that of the larger public. What accrues to culture through specialized treatment and reflection does not immediately and necessarily become the property of everyday praxis.²

For Habermas, the Enlightenment could not live out its promises to the full because of this splitting of rationality into three areas of expertise, and this splintering can be *post facto* remedied only through a communicative practice that brings them together again, by setting up 'counter-movements' that can take the reins away from 'expert cultures'. Habermas explains this as follows:

The mediation of the moments of reason is no less a problem than the separation of the aspects of rationality under which questions of truth, justice, and taste were differentiated from one another. The only protection against an empiricist abridgement of the rationality problematic is a steadfast pursuit of the tortuous routes along which science, morality, and art communicate with one another. In each of these spheres, differentiation processes are accompanied by countermovements that, under the primacy of one dominant aspect of validity, bring back in again the two aspects that were at first excluded. [...] It seems as if the radically differentiated moments of reason want in such countermovements to point toward a unity—not a unity that can be had at the level of the world-views, but one that might be established *this side* of expert cultures, in a non-reified communicative everyday practice.³

Habermas further shows that this suturing enterprise can go beyond

the scope of the critique of instrumental reason undertaken by the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School and in fact bridge the two branches of Hegelian-Marxist theory—action theory and systems theory—into a communicative action that can critique functionalist reason. He says in a 1981 interview,

For this purpose I have developed [...] a concept of society that brings together systems and action theory. Because Hegelian-Marxist social theory, developed in categories of totality, has decomposed into its parts, namely, action theory and systems theory, the present task now consists of combining these two paradigms in a non-virtual fashion—that is, not merely eclectically and additively. Thus, one can give new form to the critique of instrumental reason which could not be pursued further using the methods of the old Critical Theory. The appropriate form is a critique of functionalist reason.⁴

Thus, the view of the Frankfurt School, as further supplemented by Habermas beseeches the postmodern to relive the uncompleted dream of Enlightenment by radicalising it.

Thus, Habermas' point is that the splitting of rationalities in the domain of culture and their over-professionalisation and resultant dissociation from everyday life need not necessarily translate to an impossibility of pro-active action in the socio-political domain too. The purpose of Habermas' communicative action is precisely this that, in spite of its splintering and distantiation in the domain of culture, the politically emancipatory project of modernity can ensure a possibility of reuniting these three separated spheres of action. This emphasis on communicative action has to be understood in relation to Habermas' concept of postmetaphysical thinking, and one has to see how Habermas redefines earlier Western philosophy. In a 1990 interview, Habermas marks out his project of 'critical social theory', as 'postmetaphysical' to the extent that it succumbs to neither idealism nor empiricism, the two epistemic poles around which dominant Western metaphysics formed itself. He says,

Hence, I advocate an ascetic construal of moral theory and even of ethics—indeed, of philosophy in general—so as to make room for a critical social theory. Critical theory can contribute to the scientific mediation and objectivation of the process of self-interpretation in quite a different way; the latter should neither succumb to a hermeneutic idealism nor fall between the twin stools of philosophical normativism and sociological empiricism.⁵

Furthermore, Habermas' postmetaphysical communicative practice can also take one beyond metaphysical subjectivist isolation, because,

as he shows in a 1971 lecture, communicative action can lead knowledge to the domain of the intersubjective. He says,

Communicative theories enjoy the advantage of being able to take as their starting point the intersubjective relation that constitutive theories attempt in vain to derive from the activity of monadic consciousness. Their task, then, is to give a communication-theoretic account of the subjective experiences, to which each ego has privileged access. The constitution of the objects of possible experience *about* which we communicate with one another must also be accounted for in terms of a theory of ordinary language communication.⁶

The functioning of this postmetaphysical intersubjective communicative action and the resultant bonding of splintered rationality can take place in what Habermas calls the 'public sphere'.

Habermas' influential book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962) shows how a public sphere got formed under the bourgeoisie, which could function as a communicative matrix between the state and the civil society. Habermas shows how the bourgeoisie made possible an unprecedented coming together of private people into a communicative public sphere, which could then, through the use of communicative rationality, influence matters of state and society. He says,

The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor. The medium of this political confrontation was peculiar and without historical precedent: people's public use of their reason (*öffentliches Raisonement*).⁷

However, Habermas notices that with the development of organised capital, the bourgeois public sphere eroded and got assimilated into the private, which precisely led to the problems of the Enlightenment splintering of rationality into isolated private specialisations. The only solution, for Habermas, seems to be the regeneration of a public sphere, where participating communicatively, one can again reinvent forms of social liberation. He, however, does not think that this can be done by communication through mass media, because not only are the mass media, as the Frankfurt School has already been reported to think, controlled from the above, but for Habermas, these means of communication actually generate a disorganised sphere, where

there is communication between individuals without actual contact. As opposed to this, Habermas proposes an 'organised public sphere' as the remedy to the ills of cultural modernity. For Habermas, this organised public sphere has to work around the category of consensus, so that competing interests can come together to develop resistance and not get blown away in the unstable individuality of their diversities. It should be noted that this principle of solidarity can only be achieved through a foregrounding of difference and Habermas shows that the ultimate test of whether an opinion is really 'public' is whether it emerges from the most minuscule of intra-organisation public spaces of discussion and slowly gains a pan-social consensus through interaction between different such organisations. He says,

The degree to which an opinion is a public opinion is measured by the following standard: the degree to which it emerges from the intraorganizational public sphere constituted by the public of the organizations' members and how much the intraorganizational public sphere communicates with an external one formed in the publicist interchange, via the mass media, between societal organizations and state institutions.⁸

Thus, for Habermas, the ultimate test of the efficacy of a public sphere is its solidarity achieved through differences, where an idea generated, not from above, but from the below, can be consensually accepted through communicative practice as the basis of political action.

For Habermas, thus, the current legitimisation crisis in political action arises from the splintering effect of the Enlightenment, whereby first, political rationality gets split from cultural rationality, and second, within culture, the ethical gets divorced from the scientific and the aesthetic. As has already been explained, the remedy lies, for Habermas, in a revitalisation of communicative action in the public sphere, whereby a solidarity of differences through consensus can realign the splintered rationality into meaningful political intervention and thus a revitalisation of the delegitimised political project. This is where cultural practice starts occupying a major role in conceiving political action in today's world. Not only is the solution of communicative action itself reminiscent of culture, it being discursive and dialogical, but also because first, it involves a realignment of the political with the cultural, and the ethical with the aesthetic. In his *Postmetaphysical Thinking* (1988), Habermas recalls the task accorded to philosophy by Marx,⁹ that it is to adopt a critical rather

than a mere interpretive role, and claims that his own postmetaphysical thought has the potential to do so by grounding philosophy in the communicative action of everyday practices. He says,

In its role as interpreter, in which it mediates between expert knowledge and everyday practices in need of orientation, philosophy can make use of that knowledge and contribute to making us conscious of the deformations of the lifeworld. But it can do so only as a critical agency, for it is no longer in possession of an affirmative theory of the good life. [...] Marx's saying about the realization of philosophy can also be understood in this way: what has, following the disintegration of metaphysical and religious world views, been divided up on the level of cultural systems under various aspects of validity, can now be put together—and also put right—only in the experiential context of lifeworld practices.¹⁰

This recalling of Marx does not only bring one back to the terrain of political practice from that of cultural and communicative practice, but also prepares one to read the extrapolation of the principles of difference and solidarity, already hinted at by Habermas, in the activist articulations of the same within the post-Marxist 'radical democracy' of the New Left.

While this going back to Marxism may be received with a certain amount of incredulity by those used to receiving Marx through myopic interpretations of his theories by totalising apparatuses, one can show that there is also a multiple, 'open', and continuously being re-interpreted Marxism which makes creative resistance possible in the ever-changing world scenario. It is this kind of Marxism that Derrida has in mind when he equates his own work with 'an open marxism', and says,

I would reaffirm that there is some possible articulation between an open marxism and what I am interested in [...] Marxism presents itself, has presented itself from the beginning with Marx, as an open theory which was continually to transform itself.¹¹

It is with this possibility of appropriating Marx towards a critical postmetaphysical postmodern politics that I now turn to the post-Marxist 'radical democracy' of Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, a resistant politics that operates on envisaging the creative solidarity of differences.

Chantal Mouffe shows that in postmodern times, if one does not believe in the affirmation of bourgeois liberal democracy, and wishes

instead to belong to a critical left, the only option is of a 'radical democracy', or an immanent radicalisation, rather than a revolutionary overthrow, of liberal democracy. In her 1992 book on 'radical democracy', she says,

On the eve of the twenty-first century, amid the upheavals the world is witnessing, the task of rethinking democratic politics is more urgent than ever. For those who refuse to see 'really existing' liberal democratic capitalism at the 'end of history', radical democracy is the only alternative. If the left is to learn from the tragic experiences of totalitarianism it has to adopt a different attitude towards liberal democracy, and recognize its strengths as well as revere its shortcomings. In other words, the objective of the left should be the extension and deepening of the democratic revolution initiated two hundred years ago.

Such a perspective does not imply the rejection of liberal democracy and its replacement by a completely new political form of society, as the traditional idea of revolution entailed, but a radicalization of the modern democratic tradition. This can be achieved through an immanent critique, by employing the symbolic resources of that very tradition.¹²

For Mouffe, the only way the left can thwart forces of neo-liberalism and exert a radical democracy that is pluralistic, is through the idea of 'democratic citizenship', which conceives the individual as implicated within a community and not as an independent subject. In her exegesis of this concept, Mouffe recalls Michael Oakeshott's suggestion that what links and coheres the participants in a *societas* or *civitas* is neither a common enterprise nor a view to facilitate each other's individual prosperity, but rather the recognition of the authority of the conditions specifying their common or 'public' concern, which Oakeshott calls the *respublica*.¹³ Mouffe uses this concept of *respublica* to understand citizenship as an ethico-political rather than a simply legal status. This understanding of citizenship creates a solidarity among different movements, creating a collective 'we', through which radical democratic practice can exercise itself in all quarters of exploitation. Mouffe says,

The creation of political identities as radical democratic citizens depends therefore on a collective form of identification among the democratic demands found in a variety of movements: women, workers, black, gay, ecological, as well as in several other 'new social movements'. This is a conception of citizenship which, through a common identification with a radical democratic interpretation of the principles of liberty and equality, aims at constructing a 'we', a chain of equivalence among their demands so as to articulate them through the principle of democratic equivalence.¹⁴

It is this notion of solidarity, where the plurality of movements is foregrounded without compromising on their common goal of liberation, that marks out the creative intervention into social action that Radical Democracy has to offer. Mouffe explains in a 1988 article, how Radical Democracy takes into consideration the political dreams of modernity and gives it the postmodern turn of plurality. Thus, in it, neither does a critique of universalism amount to a dismissal of the liberatory goals of modernity, nor does a dream of liberty for all banish the postmodern emphasis on plurality. Mouffe says,

[T]he fundamental characteristic of modernity is undoubtedly the advent of the democratic revolution. [...] Therefore, the challenge to rationalism and humanism does not imply the rejection of modernity [...] Nor does it imply that we have to abandon its political project, which is its achievement of equality and freedom for all. In order to pursue and deepen this aspect of the democratic revolution, we must ensure that the democratic project takes account of the full breadth and specificity of the democratic struggles in our times. It is here that the contribution of the so-called postmodern critique comes into its own.¹⁵

Radical politics today, therefore, has to take into consideration the multiplicity of subjectivity and through a creative communicative act of bringing together the movements of diverse decentred multiple identity positions create a solidarity of liberatory political practice. For Mouffe, Radical Democracy is thus not a rejection of universalism but a particularised re-articulation of the same. It is therefore that she says that in her brand of politics, 'Universalism is not rejected but particularized; what is needed is a new kind of articulation between the universal and the particular.'¹⁶

Like Chantal Mouffe, Ernesto Laclau also shows how postmodernity becomes helpful for a new radical politics, when he says, 'The theme of postmodernity, which first appeared within aesthetics, has been displaced to ever wider areas until it has become the new horizon of our cultural, philosophical, and political experience.'¹⁷ This adds on to the current concern of connecting the aesthetic and the creative to the political, because the reorientation of the political under Radical Democracy is an extension of the postmodern aesthetic thesis of denouncing universal metanarratives and setting up of plurality and heterogeneity in their places. This weakening of foundations leads postmodern thought to the 'horizon' or limits of human practice, and the solidarity of all such cases of

liminality thus brought into the foreground, provides a common ground to emancipatory practice within contemporary activism. This provides movements for rights and liberty a contingent practical validity in the face of a loss of foundations. For Laclau, it is this that comprises postmodern freedom, and he says,

It is the contraposition between foundation and horizon that I think enables us to understand the change in the ontological status of emancipatory discourses and, in general, of metanarratives, in the transition from modernity to postmodernity. [...] The discourses of equality and rights, for example, need not rely on a common human essence as their foundation; it suffices to posit an egalitarian logic whose limits of operation are given by the concrete argumentative practices existing in a society. A horizon, then, is an empty locus, a point in which society symbolises its very groundlessness, in which concrete argumentative practices operate over a backdrop of radical freedom, of radical contingency. The dissolution of the myth of foundations does not dissolve the phantom of its own absence. [...] This double insertion constitutes the horizon of postmodern freedom, as well as the specific metanarrative of our age.¹⁸

This is how Laclau shows the possibility of appropriating the postmodern problematisation of metanarratives and foundations towards new modes of resistant political practice, where the diversity of different modes of emancipatory activism is retained and is yet creatively sutured into the solidarity of movements oriented towards freedom.

To come back, in conclusion, to where one began from, the current legitimisation crisis in resistant political activism, which perforce makes one uncritically accept either the assimilation of the liminal into the globalising and modernising colonial and neo-colonial apparatus, or equally uncritically regress into a nativistic pre-modern past, is very much a result of the splintering of rationality brought in by the Enlightenment. The solution lies in undoing this split, which involves the practice of communicative rationality, whereby, without specificities being gobbled up by universals, the process of consensus generation through the public sphere can produce a postmetaphysical solidarity between the political and the cultural, among the ethical, the aesthetic and the scientific. This solidarity itself, articulated as it can be through the creative intervention of diverse means of communication—culture, modes of public debates and dialogues, the intelligentsia, the media—can lead to the solidarity of diverse modes of struggles for liberation within the broad public umbrella

of Radical Democracy. The World Social Forum, convened not all that long ago in Mumbai, where Marxists, feminists, anti-racists, gay-lesbian activists, environmentalists and representatives of all such movements could come together, may well be an indication of the creative synergy aimed at relegitimising political activism, but commenting any further on it, may be beyond the scope of this theoretical paper.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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