

Chapter 3

Habermas and the New Populisms

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ABSTRACT

Habermas is widely criticized for adumbrating an essentialist, deliberative, and consensual approach to democracy that neglects the significance and importance of contingency, conflict, and emotions in the struggle for hegemony and collective identification. However, his conception of system and lifeworld raise the claim that no society could exist without providing for a minimal degree of political cooperation between professional actors in the political system and spontaneously acting laypeople in the social lifeworld. Contingency, conflict, and emotions are obviously at play in this political conception of how to ground system and lifeworld in mutual relations of power, knowledge, trust, and respect. The goal is not to reach a stable consensus or succumb to conflict and chaos but to avoid that system becomes uncoupled from lifeworld, thus undermining the reciprocal connection between political authorities and laypeople required to make and implement authoritative decisions which are ‘for’, ‘of’, ‘with’, and ‘by’ ‘the people’.

INTRODUCTION

The theory of modernity that I have here sketched in broad strokes permits us to recognize the following: In modern societies there is such an expansion of the scope of contingency for interaction loosed from normative contexts that the inner logic of communicative action “becomes practically true” in the deinstitutionalized forms of

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intercourse of the familial private sphere as well as in a public sphere stamped by the mass media. At the same time, the systemic imperatives of autonomous subsystems penetrate the lifeworld and, through monetarization and bureaucratization, force an assimilation of communicative action to formally organized domains of action—even in areas where the action-coordinating mechanism of reaching understanding is functionally necessary. It may be that this provocative threat, this challenge that places the symbolic structures of the lifeworld as a whole in question, can account for why they have become accessible to us. (Habermas 1979, 403).

A fundamental political claim raised by Jurgen Habermas is that no society, or other grouping of human beings, could exist without providing for a minimal degree of cooperation between ‘professional’ actors inside the political system and spontaneously acting laypeople inside the social lifeworld. Thus, a viable political-democratic connection between authorities and laypeople presumes reciprocal relations of power, knowledge, trust and respect. Otherwise the system risks becoming uncoupled from the lifeworld to an extent that threatens not only democracy but political and social existence as such. Habermas is usually discussed in relation to the debates on liberals v communitarians (Mulhall and Swift 1992), individualism v collectivism (O’Neill 1973) and liberalists v socialists (Giddens and Turner 1987) . However, these ‘old’ disciplinary discussions of liberty v common good, preferences v norms and private interests v class interests have been made somewhat redundant with the recent takeover of liberal democracy by globalist neoliberalism (Dardot and Laval 2013) and nativist populism (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). Global v national has today taken over from the old antinomies above and have created a series of new ones such as self-governance v hegemony, truth v power, and personal identity v collective identity. The intensifying struggle between globalist neoliberalists and nativist populists has simply replaced right v left as the dominant cleavage and conflict in high modern society (Bang 2015). The result is that Habermas’s lifelong discussion of how to connect rationality with common sense, leadership with citizenship and ‘professionals’ with ‘amateurs’ has been converted into an ‘either/or’ opposition between ‘the networking elite’ in the global knowledge economy and the ‘pure people’ inside the nation-state. Thus, ‘the system’ has become disconnected from ‘the lifeworld’ and a deep schism is occurring concerning how democracy is to steer between concerns for transnational expert governance and national government ‘for’ and ‘of’ the people. The global health crisis created by the spread of the covid-19 virus is a good example in point. This crisis clearly demonstrates the need for combining national leadership, global expertise and local engagement. However, it also illuminates the lack of political will to admit and recognize this profound interdependence between system and lifeworld. The world-population rely profoundly on global expertise to find a cure

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