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CRITICAL THEORY AND PUBLIC LIFE: REPLY TO BRANTE AND CHUNG

The intent of my article was to address certain analytic problems concerning normative judgments in the broader emancipatory theory tradition and in Habermasian critical theory. I did not propose an all-encompassing ethical program with solutions for every normative dilemma. Still Thomas Brante's misunderstanding of pragmatism deserves comment. Of course the ethical complexities that surround issues such as genetic technology, nuclear power, and heart transplants cannot be resolved simply by invoking either fixed or historical ethics. Ethical principles are abstractions that help orient us to situations and that provide a language for considering acts. But ethical alternatives depend on the particular conditions of specific situations, not merely on the application of ethical
maxims (Dewey and Tufts [1932] 1985, p. 280). The contradictory conditions and moral ambiguities inherent in some situations preclude decisive ethical pronouncements no matter how clear the orienting principles. That social life is often ethically disharmonious, however, is no reason for abandoning ethics or even for giving up the effort to make our ethical principles clear and logically consistent.

Brante contends that incomplete knowledge about the "factual consequences of all alternatives" is a reason for ethical silence on complex issues. But owing to their multidimensional features, multiplicity of causal factors for each feature, and intricate networks of unintended consequences, factual differences over such issues often outnumber the ethical splits. To make matters worse, since values circumscribe the segments of the empirical world worth knowing, relevant facts shift as value orientations toward the issues change. And just as values provide "cosmetics" for facts, so are facts marshaled to prop up competing value positions. Is our inability to attain perfect and unambiguous empirical knowledge an adequate reason for giving up on science as well as ethics? It was precisely their desire to preserve rationality in the face of this uncertainty that led the pragmatists to emphasize a concern for consequences and a commitment to dialogue in ethical as well as empirical matters (see Dewey [1929] 1988a; Kloppenberg 1988, pp. 15-144). In the physical sciences, the development of relativity theory and the uncertainty principle had already required much stronger qualifications about the limits of knowledge. And ethical fundamentalism seemed bankrupt in the context of the increasingly differentiated, highly pluralistic, and rapidly changing normative orders and social spheres of nascent "organized capitalism." Uncoerced communication and systematic inquiry were, according to the pragmatists, the only "reasonable" means for dealing with the uncertain and ambiguous features of the modern world. That coercion and demagogy abound cannot be denied. But it would be wrong to ignore that the give-and-take of dialogue (in light of the best available information about factual consequences) sometimes rules, and nihilistic to cease the struggle for broader employment of discursive means of conflict resolution. On these matters pragmatists and Habermasians agree.

Brante's application of his "universalism-substantialism" continuum is also misguided. Pragmatism does not mean abstaining "from the attempt to formulate ethical principles." As I stated explicitly in my article, the pragmatists themselves embraced a "modest and defensible universalism" that "invokes principles ('good reasons') that apply in all like cases" (p. 722, n. 4; all unidentified page references are to my article). Universalistic arguments of this type are not contrary to my position. When ethical principles have a sound historical basis, they clarify the values that orient action and provide ethical languages that amplify the worthy features of
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institutions and of communities. Although such principles sometimes serve the cosmetic purposes that Brante mentions, they also contribute significantly to the development of historical configurations of value and give expression to ethical concerns.

Brante misses the thrust of my argument. I do not attempt to substitute a global substantialist ethics for its universalistic counterpart. Instead my point is simply that ethical principles, if they are to be of any help in critical theory, must be open to discussion and revision in terms of the historical context that they address, the changing pattern of needs, and the consequences of their application. And this discursive approach to value should not be equated with ethical relativism or nihilism. On the other hand, the foundational values of ahistorical ethical systems are not subject to inquiry and, thus, tend to petrify into formalist justifications that destroy ethical discourse (Dewey and Tufts 1985, pp. 275–83). However, even historically based universalistic ethics cannot by themselves constitute a critical theory. Emancipatory theories must be specific about unmet needs, injustices, and possibilities for change. Abstract ethical rhetorics are incapable of tapping the sources of sympathy and identification that motivate individuals to act on the basis of communal ends or to participate in social movements. But these limitations of universalism should not preclude critical theorists from using abstract theory to help clarify their ethical assumptions and arguments.

By ignoring my distinction between “modest” universalism (which is necessary for ethical consistency) and foundationalist universalism (which “endows norms with binding transcultural and transhistorical moral authority” [p. 722, n. 4]), Brante fails to grasp the significance of the Deweyan critique. Foundationalist claims about fixed moral “grounds” put historical values beyond inquiry, discourse, and revision. Brante’s broadside against ethical theory does not really address my points about emancipatory theory and about the traces of foundationalism that remain in Habermasian thought. Finally, as a consequence of his contention that pragmatism rejects universalism per se, Brante attributes to my position an extreme particularism that cannot possibly support the holistic and ethically oriented type of historical immanent critique that I advocated in my article.

Radical perspectivalism, not pragmatism, is the opposite of foundationalism; Dewey’s philosophy was an attempt to pave a via media between these two extremes (Kloppenberg 1988). And, as I stated in my article, Dewey did not paint a happy face on the repressive features of “corporate society” and “pecuniary culture” (e.g., Dewey [1929–30] 1988b), nor did he expect his ethical arguments or pragmatist method to work miracles. But Dewey still contended that the public was educable, that critical intellectuals should contribute to public discourse, and that
abandonment of the normative ideal of deeper democratization would advance the forces of repression. Regardless of his differences with pragmatism, Habermas continues to affirm these ideas. On the contrary, Brante's position is entirely unclear to me. Does his grim vision about "the use of stronger means of persuasion," ubiquitous "closures," and "ethical silence" leave us with any alternative except to capitulate to power and coercion or to wait vainly for social progress finally to emerge from some hidden logic of material or scientific "progress"?

Before responding to Chung's comments, it is important to emphasize that I do not dispute the ideals of uncoerced communication and discursive democracy. Moreover, I agree with Chung that Habermas's approach is not contradictory to "local politics" and that system and lifeworld are useful concepts that have stimulated promising discourse in normative social theory. Finally, although I implied that moral absolutism has an affinity for totalitarianism, Habermas's universalism is not fundamentalist or potentially repressive (see p. 742, n. 28). Lyotard's argument about the connection of Western rationality to totalitarianism is overdrawn and does not really come to terms with the strong affirmation of social differentiation and pluralism in the Habermasian defense of reason. My article does not dismiss Habermas's approach but, instead, raises questions about specific features that undercut its capacity to anchor a critical theory of society. Overall, I have no quarrel with many of the positive points that Chung makes about Habermasian theory.

On the other hand, Chung does not address the main points of my argument. Since I distinguished universalism from foundationalism (p. 722, n. 4), stated explicitly that Habermas does not rely on a priori argumentation (that he rejects classical foundationalism) (p. 723, n. 6), and nowhere implied that Habermas attempted to establish a comprehensive foundation for the sciences, Chung's attempt to criticize my argument on the basis of these matters is a wasted effort. Most important, Chung misses my central point that Habermas seeks an Archimedean point of certainty. Habermas employs his ideal speech situation and evolutionary argumentation to provide a "ground" for critical theory. As I explained, the approach is quasi-foundationalist because it substitutes "counterfactual" attributes of communication and a progressive logic of cultural rationalization for a priori argumentation. In my view, these ahistorical arguments stand in for transcendentalism. Although his universalism should not be equated with classical foundationalism, Habermas does much more than provide "good reasons" (or a logically consistent ethical argument) for a historical normative standpoint. Instead he attempts to develop a transcultural and transhistorical ethical warrant for the normative standard of communicative rationality and ideal of discursive democracy. Without critical comment, Chung implies that Haberm-
mas favors "a critique based on normative grounds" (my emphasis) over immanent critique and that he derives his normative standard "empirically in evolutionary processes." Since my central focus was on the problematic nature of these positions, Chung should have provided a counterargument. I am perplexed by his failure to address my core critique and, especially, by his claim that I did not "acknowledge" Habermas's "unique type of foundationalism."

Chung overstates my position when he suggests that I attacked Habermas for directing his critique "solely" to culture. Instead, I stated explicitly that Habermas "acknowledges the role of material interests and does not substitute idealism for materialism" and that he "acknowledges interdependence and interchange" between the organizational and normative spheres (pp. 728, n. 11; 736). Moreover, I did not ignore Habermas's discussion of the "colonization" of the "lifeworld" by "system" (power and money) (pp. 730, n. 15; 733-34, n. 20). My critical point was not that Habermas excluded political economy and organization, but that he treated them primarily as a sort of abstract backdrop contradictory to communicative rationality. Habermasian emancipatory possibilities arise from highly generalized communicative capacities and a semiautonomous logic of cultural rationalization that runs counter to organizational rationalization. My argument was that this approach hovers too far above the substantive historical conditions containing specific potentials for stronger democratization. And, in my view, such potentials arise from the economy and social organization as well as from the communicative sphere. This criticism does not imply a return to a vulgar, materialist "capital logic" but, instead, calls for a balanced, interactive, and historical concern for all three realms as a source of constraints and possibilities. I do not deny that Habermas provides valuable insights about many important issues. My argument is simply that the deficits of his theory are substantial enough to undermine his intended goal of recovering, reconstructing, and revitalizing the emancipatory tradition that began with Marx. Chung strongly disagrees with my evaluation. But his reiteration of Habermas's theory does not counter my argument.

Chung rejects my contention that critical theory ought to rely on historical immanent critique, arguing that it is both "anachronistic" and a "retreat." My point was that Habermas's effort to establish transhistorical normative grounds for critical theory results in ethical formalism; his theory is not sufficiently in touch with the determinate forms of culture and valuation that contain "living" images of stronger democracy and

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1 Chung cites Benhabib to support his argument. But, though she is a sympathetic interpreter of Habermas's theory, Benhabib (1986, pp. 274-77, 330-31) is strongly critical of its evolutionary features.
that provide the citizenry with a lens to see the meaning of oppression and exploitation. Habermas, like his pessimistic critical theory predecessors, argues that bourgeois culture lacks emancipatory values with wide appeal. For this reason, he goes outside history to find a critical normative standpoint (see Habermas [1981] 1987, p. 383). Chung admits that Habermas's alternative is formalist but at the same time agrees with him that the cultural basis for an immanent critique is missing. Chung's "solution" is to supplement Habermasian theory with "historical studies." But this makes no sense. If bourgeois culture lacks emancipatory values, Chung's historical studies will come up empty. How can they possibly shore up the theory? Here again Chung repeats the Habermasian position without really addressing my criticism. He claims that, despite his formalism, Habermas has achieved "a better theory of praxis." However, Chung does not defend this point, nor does he rebut my argument that theoretical formalism undermines praxis (i.e., weakens the possibility of contributing to discourses that are capable of capturing the imagination of historical "addressees" and motivating them to bring a stronger democracy into being).

From the start, the ultimate goal of emancipatory theorists was radical democracy. But their exuberant hopes and impatience led to revolutionary imposition of total bureaucracy as a shortcut to emancipation. This effort to exceed the limits of their historical method was a great disaster. As a consequence, emancipatory theory has swung between the extremes of millenarianism and cultural despair. If economism and vanguardism are finally dead, democratization must be treated as a process (not an end point) brought about by the activity of self-conscious publics. Although Habermas seems to concur with this idea, the formalist consequences of his break with immanent critique weaken the connection of his own theory to public discourse.

Although I disagree with much of what Brante and Chung have said, they raise an important question—Why Dewey? Their criticism implies that I did not explain well enough the reasons for reconsidering his thought. Let me try again. In contrast to Habermas's "unhistorical" grounds, Dewey's argument is that "genuine ideals . . . are possibilities of what is now moving," and, despite his grave assessment of American culture, he contended that its "spiritual factor"—equality and freedom—was not dead (Dewey 1988b, pp. 112, 49). In particular, he believed that these values could be enlivened by a reappropriation of the Jeffersonian tradition of civic republicanism (reconstructed in light of the new forms of corporate organization and the huge networks of social interdependence). Dewey based his critical ideal on specific features of the American situation, but he recognized that more general historical attributes of modern societies (e.g., the erosion of small-town parochialism, the normative
ideal of open communication in intellectual life, organizational differenti-
ation, and cultural pluralism) also favored deeper democratization. Still
Dewey stressed that effective social criticism must amplify the possi-
bilities and constraints of specific national traditions, cultures, and sub-
cultures. And, even in the American setting, reference to highly general-
ized values and potentialities is not enough. His method called for
scrutinizing particular communities, organizations, movements, and as-
pects of culture to determine the concrete possibilities for further democ-
ratization. Finally, he did not foresee the disappearance of representa-
tive political institutions or the elimination of all the blemishes of bourgois
democracy. Instead of a warrant for universal emancipation, Dewey em-
braced uncertainty and abandoned hopes for perfection. Although he was
not so somber, Dewey shared Max Weber's belief in the "integrity" of
realism in modernity.

Critical theorists should open a broader discourse with Deweyan his-
toricism because the effort to avoid the old dogmatism and the new
formalism requires that they finally face the uncertainty of their own
normative ends. They must give voice to aspirations, however muted,
that have a sociological and a cultural basis in the existing society. This
does not mean exaggerating the sunny side of bourgeois democracy. Iden-
tifying emancipatory potential does not preclude realism about capitalist
organizational and economic constraints or about postmodern cultural
fragmentation. Although theory has lagged behind the worldwide demo-
cratic movements, democracy is emerging at the center of debates on the
Left. Thinkers ranging from analytic Marxists (e.g., Adam Przeworski,
Erik Olin Wright) to post-Marxists (e.g., Ernesto Laclau and Chantal
Mouffe, Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis) now speak approvingly of
radical democracy and agree that it cannot be brought into being by
economic means alone. The uneasy marriage of politics and political
economy that existed in classical Marxian theory no longer holds, even
among the Marxists.

Most neo-Marxists agree that the goal of a more egalitarian and demo-
cratic society requires a cultural as well as an economic transformation.
But these thinkers have not developed in much detail their ideas on how
to initiate this cultural project. Despite the fact that it does not contain
the solution to our current problems, Dewey's work ought to be recon-
considered because it expressed the magnitude of the cultural as well as
economic constraints on deeper democratization and articulated the most
comprehensive theory of the forms of knowledge and communication
needed to overcome these barriers. In particular, Dewey fashioned his
antifoundationalism and historicism expressly to foster scholarly engage-
ment in the democratization process and to encourage specialized science
to address culturally significant issues connected to public needs. If criti-
cal theory is to escape being a message in a bottle futilely awaiting the arrival of a nonexistent revolutionary subject and if it is ever to have any chance of realizing its aspiration to be more than another hyperspecialized academic subdiscipline, it must confront the issue of the public and the relation of theoretical criticism to important public discourses. In this regard, reappropriation of Dewey's thought could help critical theorists determine whether their original goal of participating in and facilitating the creation of radical democracy is really possible.  

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COMMENT ON JEFFERYS'S REVIEW OF AUTO SLAVERY

Steve Jefferys (AJS 93 [January 1988]: 1016–18) objects to the theoretical framework that informs my study of the labor process in the American

1 I am not suggesting that critical theorists suddenly shift to writing strictly for popular audiences. Instead my point is that they should adjust their theoretical argumentation to address more adequately the historical constraints on and possibilities for democratization. This more modest goal would first have to be achieved before the possible scope of critical theory's public role could be assessed. Finally, the important issue of the relation of specialized knowledge to public life has recently been raised outside critical theory by Herbert Gans (1989) in his presidential address to the American Sociological Association. Russell Jacoby's (1987) polemic about American academe and the eclipse of the public intellectual also has relevance for the topics discussed in this essay.