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HABERMAS VS. WEBER ON DEMOCRACY

ABSTRACT: Habermas endorses democracy as a way to rescue modern life from the economic and bureaucratic compulsion that Weber saw as an inescapable condition of modernity. This rescue mission requires that Habermas subordinate democracy to people's true interests, by liberating their political deliberations from incursions of money or power that could interfere with the formation of policy preferences that clearly reflect those interests. But Habermas overlooks the opaque nature of our interests under complex modern conditions, and the difficulty of even knowing what the modern state is doing—let alone judging whether what it is doing serves our interests well. These overlooked sources of public ignorance buttress Weber's more pessimistic understanding of democracy, and like the theatrics surrounding popular sovereignty, public ignorance both enables and masks the autonomy that allows state officials and non-state opinion leaders to shape public policy undemocratically.

The classical view of democracy as rule by the people leaves little room for state autonomy. If democratic politics involves nothing but the collection and translation of public preferences into public policy, the state is little more than a passive device that facilitates the process, a vast playing field on which extant, fully formed social actors vie for privileges and immunities. If, however, as

Theda Skocpol (1985, 9) maintains, states "formulate and pursue goals that are not simply reflective of the demands or interests of social groups, classes, or society," then if we are to gain a realistic understanding of democratic states, we must first find sound alternatives to the classical view—alternatives that take into account both the malleability of public opinion and the possibility that state personnel can operate "behind the backs" of an ignorant public, and behind the facade of public control over state actions.

Following the work of Murray Edelman and others in the tradition of "postmodern political science," I maintain that modern democracy is less a form of self-legislation, i.e., an instrument that secures voter control of public policy, than it is an elaborate series of public rituals that legitimate bureaucratic rule. My approach, designed to interrogate settled understandings of political democracy, reflects an attempt to appreciate the limits placed on self-rule by public incomprehension of political matters, and public ignorance of the theories needed to understand and effectively govern complex societies.

I begin with a consideration of Jürgen Habermas's notions of "communicative action" and "communicative power," the foundational premises of his discourse theory of democracy. Offered as a normative ideal that avoids the pitfalls of liberalism and republicanism, the discourse theory derives its appeal from its direct challenge to the "colonization of the lifeworld"—the imperialism of money and power that, Habermas believes, threaten to undermine communicative sources of social solidarity. Habermas affirms a democratic politics that harnesses communicative power in the form of law for purposes of regulatory countersteering against commercial power (without succumbing to bureaucratic power). In a sense, Habermas's theory is an attempt to redeem the democratic faith embedded in the classical view, a faith undermined by the realist critiques of Pareto, Mosca, Michels,

and most pertinently, Max Weber (Habermas 1975, 123).

I will examine each of the three normative alternatives Habermas describes—liberal, republican, and discourse-theoretic—in light of public-opinion research. The brief survey of literature concerning public ignorance and incomprehension that follows suggests that Habermas's cure may be worse than the disease, because "the colonization of the lifeworld" is unavoidable, irrepressible, and irreversible. Ignorance is not incidental to modern democratic states; rather, it is endemic, an effect of hierarchizing processes that are essential to state efficacy. Under these conditions, democratic politics can only serve a primarily symbolic function.

If we try to take up Habermas's insights but leave behind his inchoate optimism, we are left with a modified version of Weber's theory of democracy as bureaucratic rule, to which popular allegiance is achieved by hook or by crook.

Habermas and Weber

As the promise of the Enlightenment was realized in industrial capitalism and the dramatic material progress it made possible, a profound sense of alienation emerged (at least among intellectuals). Faced with the specter of Marx, a generation of social thinkers, led by Max Weber, turned a critical eye toward the foundations of modern society.

Weber sought to comprehend the underlying dynamic of modernity, "rationalization." He held that human freedom is gravely threatened by the inescapable logic of rationalization. The classical view of democracy as self-government is among the first casualties. Decades later, Habermas was faced with the comparable challenge of considering the contradictions that define life under late modernity. In many respects, he sought to contend with the same issues, including alienation in the face of ma-

terial progress, that faced Weber at the dawn of the twentieth century.

During the postwar period, however, industrial capitalism and bureaucratic governance had been irrevocably transformed by the advent of the welfare state and mass democracy. In terms of sheer detail and complexity, the governing institutions of the metropolitan West had progressed from the baroque to the rococo, as (it was thought) the management of class conflict had moved to the center of political life. Moreover, social differentiation, including the pluralization of forms of life as well as a highly articulated division of labor, had increased so much that the realm of deep cultural consensus had contracted, just when the welfare state's need for political coordination expanded. At the same time, the realm of deliberation divorced from material concerns, which Habermas (among others) considered an essential means of effecting both consensus and coordination, seemed to be under assault.

To address the origins of these phenomena, Habermas takes Weber's model of rationalization as his point of departure. At the same time, he transforms it. For Habermas, modern society is essentially Janus faced: it is an organic whole composed of system (the economy and the state) and lifeworld (personal life and the non-state public sphere). Moreover, he contends, rationalization itself is a dual phenomenon, one that affects system and lifeworld in distinct and even contradictory ways. From these premises, Habermas derives a subtle theory of social evolution that recognizes the contributions of modernity while appreciating the dangers it poses.

Despite his often profound sociological pessimism, Habermas's normative optimism ultimately offers hope for democracy, however frail, against Weber's dark premonitions. For Habermas, robust "communicative action" can redeem the classical view.

Weber vs. Habermas on Modernity

Weber (1946, 51) identified rationalization with the "disenchantment of the world"—that is, the extent to which nonrational assumptions have been displaced and traditional forms of moral consciousness eroded. In the premodern world, actions tend to be sanctioned either by tradition or as ends in themselves. But the "non-coercive, unifying power of collectively shared convictions" (Habermas 1985, 301), embodied in the certainties of religion and metaphysics, are fatally undermined when actions come to be seen as instrumental to the agent's ends; instrumental rationality is placed "at the service of a merely subjective self-assertion" (ibid.). Weber's vivid description of bureaucratic procedures suggests a systemic rationality governed by its own strategic imperatives rather than by external legitimation through—as Habermas would prefer—democratic dialogue (ibid., 307). Likewise, the capitalist deployment of science achieves boundless material advancement, yet it cannot answer the question of value.

Quoting Tolstoy, Weber writes that "science is meaningless because it gives no answer to our question, the only question that is important to us: 'What shall we do and how shall we live?'" (Weber 1946, 143). In Weber's rationalized world, there is no way to adjudicate among the contending values toward which instrumentally rational bureaucratic and economic behavior might be directed. The background consensus that does exist in the wake of rationalization is, for Weber, so thin as to be powerless against the claims of purposive strategic action.

Eventually, technical superiority establishes itself as the ultimate value—the logical conclusion of Weber's portrayal of societal rationalization. At that point, the "iron cage" of modernity is complete: individuals are captive to the prerogatives of the animate machine, a kind of norm-free sociality that calculates to no end. In the economic realm, the accumulation of wealth ("the

spirit of capitalism"), which initially had the purpose of alleviating theologically induced anxiety about one's salvation ("the Protestant ethic"), is rendered pointless by the decline of religious conviction—but we are powerless to drop out of the relentless rationalization of our lives first spawned by religious anxiety, since that would be a prescription for personal poverty. In politics, similarly, instrumentally rational bureaucratic imperatives trump "the popular will," which, under conditions of specialization, is more myth than reality.

While Weber's model suggests that cultural rationalization ineluctably leads to societal (institutional) rationalization, paradigmatically represented by the rise of capitalism, Habermas holds that cultural rationalization is a distinct phenomenon that offers a cognitive gain. This cognitive gain manifests itself in the "bourgeois public sphere," an autonomous realm in which rational debate is, as it were, the medium of exchange—and a realm that, in theory, might be mobilized against institutions of domination. Where Weber sees cultural rationalization merely as part of a broader process of disenchantment leading to more elaborate forms of social integration, Habermas sees the rationalization of worldviews as an essential step forward, toward a more reflexive and self-critical approach to values and presuppositions. While Weber believed that disenchantment would lead to a loss of meaning and (even merely instrumental) morality, Habermas maintains that meaning and morality can now be arrived at through "communicative action." Although cultural rationalization results in the differentiation of value spheres (aesthetic, erotic, intellectual, political, economic), this disunity does not represent confusion; rather, it means that people have learned to distinguish among different validity claims.

As a result, Habermas, in marked contrast to Weber, is quite sanguine about the emancipatory potential of rationalization in the lifeworld: while it does erode traditional authority, it allows communicative rationality

to recreate a freely arrived-upon moral consensus. This contention is rooted in Habermas's understanding of society as both "system" and "lifeworld." For Habermas, the failure to recognize the distinction between system and lifeworld is the source of countless flaws in the work of other social theorists, including Weber. Rationalization can, in fact, enhance human freedom, provided that the integrity of the lifeworld is respected.

The Colonization of the Lifeworld

The lifeworld is the background of shared meaning that provides the basis for ordinary symbolic interaction. All communicative actors function within the lifeworld, and as communicative actors they cannot step outside of it. It is "the transcendental site where speaker and hearer meet, where they reciprocally raise claims that their utterances fit the world (objective, social, or subjective), and where they can criticize and confirm those validity claims, settle their disagreements, and arrive at agreements" (Habermas 1985, 126).

The lifeworld is predicated on a specific form of action-rationality, communicative action. In communicative action, people seek mutual understanding through a cooperative process of interpretation aimed at arriving at an intersubjectively determined agreement. People engage in truly communicative (as opposed to strategic) action only when their intent is to achieve such an intersubjective consensus.

For Habermas, the motivation to engage in communicative action derives from the nature of language itself: internal to the use of language (by definition a symbolic phenomenon) is the need to have validity claims redeemed. For language to be intelligible, it must be predicated on an intersubjective consensus. The lifeworld serves as the realm in which communicative action produces "culture, society, person" (Habermas 1985, 138). Culture concerns itself with the transmission of meaning; society manufactures norms and

social solidarity, thus constructing "the legitimate orders through which participants regulate their memberships in social groups" (ibid., 138); and personality is the articulation of one's identity through the mastery of language and norms.

As the sphere of speech and language, the lifeworld precedes all others. The integration of society, however, needn't be predicated solely on communicative action. System, the other element of modernity, "bursts out of the horizon of the lifeworld" (Habermas 1985, 173). Exemplified by bureaucracy and by the market in capitalist societies, system may be defined as the "norm-free regulation of cooperative contexts" (ibid., 150). Its results derive not from the process or orientation of action, as does the intersubjective consensus of communicative action, but from the consequences of action. Consequently, Habermas distinguishes between social integration and system integration:

The former attaches to action orientations, while the latter reaches right around them. In one case the action system is integrated through consensus, whether normatively guaranteed or communicatively achieved; in the other case it is integrated through the nonnormative steering of individual decisions not subjectively coordinated. (Ibid.)

Habermas argues that only by understanding both system and lifeworld can the integration of a modern society be grasped. Social evolution manifests itself differently for system and lifeworld: the development of system is measured by its increasing complexity and "steering capacity," while that of lifeworld is measured by its increasing rationality. In the early stages of a society, according to Habermas, there is only lifeworld; gradually, system and lifeworld are differentiated from one another as "system mechanisms get further and further detached from the social structures through which social integration takes place" (ibid., 154).

In modern societies, this detachment and differentia-

tion are manifest in the "delinguistified media of communication" employed in systemic mechanisms: money and power. Within the system, action is oriented toward achieving maximum possible success in terms of money and power. The distinctive aspect of this type of success is that it is delinguistified. As such, it does not generate the same validity claims as does "success" in lifeworld interactions.

There are correspondingly two ways to integrate a society or, to use Habermas's terminology, two modes of sociation: strategic (or systemic) consensus, and intersubjective consensus. Intersubjective consensus is historically prior to its systemic counterpart, and Habermas fears that it may be undermined by the growth of the system. This fear parallels Weber's fear of relentless societal rationalization, and yet it is not the same. In Habermas's view, the system does not directly threaten the individual's freedom; rather, it does so through the "colonization" of the lifeworld.

Habermas's most valuable contribution to our understanding of contemporary social realities may be to focus attention on how the exercise of power shapes human perception and behavior. In looking upon the colonization of the lifeworld as a perversion of modernity's emancipatory potential, however, he fails to confront the extent to which such colonization is inextricably bound up with modernity and the management of social complexity.

As societies grow more complex, so does the pressure for an achieved consensus. As a result, the members of modern societies may choose—indeed (as Weber would argue) must choose—to avoid the risk of dissensus by hierarchizing the process of agreement: that is, either by employing specialists and privileging specialized forms of knowledge—an outcome alluded to by Weber in his reflections on bureaucracy and science—or by transferring action coordination from "consensus formation in language . . . over to [delinguistified] steering media." Both

choices undermine the process of democratic will formation and the lifeworld from which it derives.

According to Habermas, specialization and the use of money and power "do not merely simplify linguistic communication, but replace it with a symbolic generalization of rewards and punishments," such that "the lifeworld contexts in which processes of reaching understanding are always embedded are devalued in favor of media-steered interactions; the lifeworld is no longer needed for the coordination of action" (ibid.). This transfer of action coordination represents the "technicization of the lifeworld" (Habermas 1985, 183), an integral element of the colonization of the lifeworld. It results in the creation of "norm-free social structures jutting out from the lifeworld" (ibid., 185). Although these structures remain linked to communicative practice through the law,

the institutions that anchor steering mechanisms such as power and money in the lifeworld could serve as a channel . . . for the influence of the system on communicatively structured contexts of action. . . . They function as a base that subordinates the lifeworld to the systemic constraints of material reproduction and therefore 'mediatizes' it. (Ibid.)

Increases in systemic complexity lead to imperialistic pressures on the lifeworld; these pressures, in turn, create lifeworld subsystems that act destructively upon the lifeworld and its logic.

In theory, the lifeworld can impinge upon the system, but in practice this does not happen. Systemic organizations are able to disconnect themselves from the realm of culture and personality; consequently, these organizations are "neutralized against the lifeworld" (Habermas 1985, 309). Systemic organizations are not communicatively structured; to the extent that language is used within them, it is constrained through the use of steering media and hierarchy. In short, they are immune to penetration by the lifeworld, while the far

more malleable structures of communicative life are not immune to being undermined by money and power.

Habermas accepts many of Weber's assumptions regarding bureaucracy, including (at least implicitly) his characterization of bureaucracies as aimless machines. The colonization of the lifeworld can occur only when cultural rationalization has progressed to the point where traditional authorities are weak and culture, society, and personality have been differentiated; where relationships between system and lifeworld are regulated through differentiated individual roles; and where political and economic life are defined by the rewards and punishments of delinguistified steering media (Habermas 1985, 356).

The Welfare State as Functional for Capitalism

According to Habermas, one example of the colonization of the lifeworld is the welfare state. As imbalances in the capitalist system emerge, the logic of system integration—or system survival—demands the management of conflicts. Alongside mass democracy, the welfare state emerges in an effort to mollify protest against perceived economic injustices: the norms of consumerism are internalized by those who would otherwise resist the regime.

Ultimately, the welfare state derives from a strategic orientation for, in essence, it represents the intrusion of money into communicatively structured social life. Habermas believes that

this is even the model case for the colonization of the lifeworld that is behind the reification phenomena in advanced capitalist societies. . . . The functional ties of money and power media become noticeable only to the degree that elements of a private way of life and a cultural-political form of life get split off from symbolic structures of the lifeworld through the monetary redefinition of goals, relations and services, life-spaces and

life-times, and through the bureaucratization of duties and rights, responsibilities and dependencies.

The welfare state is bureaucratic as well as capitalistic because it requires a class of experts whose authority is necessarily antagonistic to the free decisions of individuals.

Weber comes to a very different conclusion regarding the welfare state. In discussing the aims of the propertyless masses in the realm of political action, he contends that they desire not "calculable" adjudication and administration; rather, the "Kadi-justice" they demand is informal-communicative, as it were. For Weber (1946, 221), the logic of the welfare state, embryonic in his own time, is antithetical to the fundamental precepts of bureaucracy, for it is based on "irrational 'sentiments.'" Habermas and Weber agree, however, that mass democracy and the bureaucratic state are allied to one another; moreover, both are disturbed by the "bureaucratic desiccation of the political public sphere" (Habermas 1985, 323). Weber worried that bureaucratic-legal domination would lead to a catastrophic collapse in legitimacy: without religious-metaphysical worldviews to legitimate it, a regime would struggle to justify its rule to no avail. Habermas recognizes this possibility but attributes it to the colonization of the lifeworld by system imperatives that drain communicative rationality from the private and political public spheres of life, replacing it with delinguistified steering media.

Unlike Weber, Habermas refuses to look upon these systemic imperatives as anything other than an imposition. Yet Habermas believes they can be overcome by communicative action rather than the machinations of power: this is the source of Habermasian optimism.

Democracy as a Solution, Not a Problem

By problematizing Weber's progression from cultural

to societal rationalization, Habermas suggests that there is an alternative to the iron cage of end-less instrumental rationality. At the same time, particularly when discussing the prospects for meaningful political discourse under late modernity, Habermas betrays a sociological pessimism not entirely dissimilar to that of Weber. Habermas's path to pessimism, however, is more indirect, for it passes through the "colonization of the lifeworld" by capitalist and bureaucratic systems, an outcome that could have been avoided and can still be resisted:

The transposition of communicative action to media-steered interactions and the deformation of the structures of a damaged inter-subjectivity are by no means predecided processes that might be distilled from a few global concepts. . . . The fact that in welfare-state mass democracies class conflict has been institutionalized and thereby pacified does not mean that protest potential has been laid to rest. (Habermas 1985, 392.)

Habermas's optimism is grounded in emerging conflicts in the metropolitan West that transcend class conflicts over material distribution; these conflicts, by contrast, take place in the lifeworld. The post-1950s protest movements that exemplify these conflicts are struggles over "the grammar of forms of life" (Habermas 1985, 392). He sees in them a promising attempt to correct the colonization of the lifeworld. Unlike Weber's moderns, prostrate before the ineluctable wave of bureaucratization, Habermas thinks that we can resist and that resistance is not futile. With the aid of communicative reason, we can turn the tide. For this to occur, however, communicative reason, and its exercise, must flow from a communicative power that can animate or, at the very least, coherently endorse systemic change.

As in the classical view of democracy, meaningful self-government is Habermas's aim. For Weber, the object of democratic politics is not democratic will-

formation, nor is that a realistic goal. In contrast to bureaucratic elites, the mass public is always susceptible to emotional and irrational influences, and is thus the enemy of sound policy making (Weber 1994, 230). Responsible leadership, not "popular sovereignty," is Weber's political goal (Ciepley 1999, 191-227). Responsible leadership derives not from the politically passive mass public, but from a politician who "recruits his following and wins over the mass by 'demagoguery'" (ibid., 228)—a perspective later found in the work of Joseph Schumpeter (1950). Constituencies, like consent, are manufactured. Rationally organized parties, which is to say bureaucratized parties, are the most effective bulwark against the "democracy of the street" (Weber 1994, 231), perhaps Weber's greatest fear. Weber asks only that bureaucratic rule be subject to a "minimal right of co-determination" (Ciepley 1999, 207), so as to secure willing sacrifices from the public.

While Weber's view lacks the romance of "popular sovereignty," it does reflect key insights concerning the mass public's political competence under modern conditions. An ever-more intricate societal division of labor, and the concomitant increase in demand for narrow expertise, suggests that the mass public is profoundly ignorant of the matters with which experts are familiar (see, e.g., Converse 1964; Page and Shapiro 1992; and Somin 1998).

With its "mechanistic" understanding of democracy, Weber's approach is, according to Habermas (1975, 97), inadequate because it is relentlessly instrumental: if legitimacy claims are conceived "as . . . empirical phenomenon[a] without an immanent relation to [normative] truth," they cannot be tested on the basis of

their morality. Rather than sacrifice the possibility of a substantive normative critique of legitimation claims, Habermas abandons Weber's empiricism and instead offers the discourse-theoretic normative ideal predicated in part on an understanding of "communicative power." For our purposes, the importance of Habermas's work lies in the idealization of democratic possibilities to which this normative approach leads. By sidestepping the question of public ignorance of means (effective policies) in favor of the question of the legitimacy of the (normative) ends toward which they should be directed, Habermas overlooks the issue of whether his ideal is realizable in a world of imperfectly informed individuals.

Three Models of Democracy

In lieu of embracing either a liberal or a republican normative ideal, Habermas builds a model situated between the two that eschews both the nostalgia of the latter and the atomistic individualism of the former. Each of the three models offers a different perspective on the role of politics, a perspective that in turn informs its assumptions concerning the appropriate scope of politics in collective life (Habermas 1998, 240).

The liberal view maintains that the democratic process allows society, "a system of market-structured interactions of persons and their labor" (Habermas 1998, 239), to exercise some control over the state, that is, over a set of institutions designed to secure collective goals. As in Weber's theory, the liberal view characterizes politics as elite contestation over the levers of administrative power; citizens, informed by public struggles between self-interested groups, express preferences through their votes, as in the marketplace (*ibid.*, 243). For liberals, politics is strategic action oriented toward victory, not communicative action oriented toward mutual understanding; to the victors go access to administrative power (at least until the

next election in which voters, like consumers, can punish an underperforming "brand" retrospectively). The liberal view is less demanding in this respect than the republican alternative. The outcomes of the democratic process are not paramount for liberals as long as transpolitical rights-liberties that exist prior to and independent of state imperatives are protected, securing a domain free of external compulsion. This makes the state a double-edged sword that protects against private violence and yet threatens to gather illegitimate public force against legitimate private purposes (*ibid.*, 241). Administrative power is, at root, seen as a source of disruption that must be controlled lest it undermine the settled rules that govern society; the democratic process is but one of several instruments designed to minimize this disruption (*ibid.*, 247)—albeit a very important one.

Under the liberal view, "society" is not lifeworld and system; rather, it is a marketplace that is entirely a creature of systemic imperatives. The state, according to the logic of this schema, is nothing more than the guardian of society (*ibid.*, 246), a role that leaves little if any room for "communicative power." In looking upon voting as a market-like process, an arena of strategic action designed to express personal distributive preferences, liberalism reflects the "imperialism of the system" Habermas rejects.

Habermas's discourse-theoretic view is far closer to the republican normative model. Rather than look upon society solely as system and the democratic process as a means of surveillance designed to keep the state from impinging on that system, the republican view embraces democracy as "an ethical discourse of [collective] self-understanding" (*ibid.*, 246) that, through communicative means, literally constitutes society. As such, the role of politics is far broader than under the liberal interpretation, and is far more crucial: participation in public life, understood as the practice of self-legislation, generates solidarity, a horizontal phenomenon dif-

ferent from hierarchizing administrative power and from the delinguistified, individualistic pursuit of economic or political self-interest (*ibid.*, 240).

Political opinion- and will-formation are at the heart of the republican view. Consequently, rights of political participation are paramount; unlike liberal rights against coercion, republican participation rights establish "the possibility of participating in a common practice, through which the citizens can first make themselves what they want to be" (*ibid.*, 241). Whereas the liberal view looks upon politics as a series of deals made among competing societal interests, the republican view "preserves the radical democratic meaning of a society that organizes itself through communicatively united citizens" (*ibid.*, 244).

For the republican, deliberation relies on a "culturally established background consensus, which is rejuvenated through the ritualistic reenactment of the founding act" (*ibid.*, 246). In a very real sense, for example, the American, Canadian, and British constitutions are a kind of "organic law," instruments of government that, over time and to varying degrees, have acquired an almost mythological aspect. Like Durkheim's totem god, constitutions and other state symbols have served as a kind of sacred center for patriotic ritual and a foundation for quasireligiously constructed identities in many post-traditional societies (see Marvin and Ingle 1999). In a sense, the constitutional order creates a space in which identities relative to the state are articulated (or, of course, left unarticulated).

With the rise of "the politics of recognition," however, the assertion of collective identities in democratic constitutional states has fatally undermined the republican vision of a comprehensive "culturally established background consensus" (see Habermas 1994). Though Habermas is sympathetic to the republican view, he concludes that it is too idealistic, since its effect is to construct society as an agent, "a social

whole centered in the state and conceived as a goal-oriented subject writ large" (Habermas 1998, 248). Moreover, republicanism is predicated on a virtuous, disinterested citizenry and a mistaken belief that politics is primarily concerned with self-understanding (ibid., 244). While Habermas acknowledges that collective self-understandings concerning nationality and tradition are important, conditions of pluralism see to it that subcultural and subsocietal interests and value-orientations cannot always be resolved in a unified way. With the advent of cultural pluralism, compromises based on relative calculations of power take precedence over achieving genuine, substantive consensus (ibid., 245). In building compromise in a diverse society, procedural fairness comes before ethical or cultural authenticity, lest the interests of cultural minorities be completely subsumed. For Habermas, therefore, the realism concerning the balancing of interests that is integral to the liberal view must leaven the republican view.

However, Habermas's discourse-theoretic model does not look upon politics as a collection of dependent variables in systemic processes, as do liberals (Habermas 1998, 248). Rather, Habermas focuses on the "higher-level intersubjectivity of communication processes that unfold in the institutionalized deliberations in parliamentary bodies . . . and in the informal networks of the public sphere" (ibid.). These processes are to be intrinsically rational as the products of popular will, but also instrumental to the diverse interests of people in pluralistic societies. Habermas deemphasizes the subject, be it the republican-national macrosubject or the liberal subject animated by private interests, in favor of communicative procedures. Habermas's model preserves the state-society distinction that is part of the liberal view, but it also looks upon "civil society" as a noneconomic or nonsystemic space that is as distinct from the market as it is from the state (ibid.). The state/society dichotomy is replaced by a "normative de-

mand for a new balance between the three resources of money, administrative power, and solidarity from which modern societies meet their need for integration" (ibid.). Collective decisions are not to be made through the democratic process so as to advance economic interests, to legitimate bureaucratic rule, or to secure social solidarity; rather, the process is meant to "guarantee a rational treatment of political questions" (Habermas 1996, 170). It is to be "rational" in that it produces answers that are acceptable to all parties (ibid., 38), but unlike in the liberal view, it requires deliberative procedures that allow all salient questions to be raised; without such procedures, a fair balance of interests may not be achieved (ibid., 170).

Habermas uses the discourse-theoretic view to affirm an antisystem politics that seeks to expand autonomous public spheres, the crucial source of social solidarity, through legislative and other means. This means repudiating the neoliberal argument that the only alternative to unbridled administrative power is economic liberalization, defined as the expansion of the market process at the expense of state control. Popular sovereignty is understood as placing legislative power in the hands of all citizens; parliamentary representation is a prudential concession to the need for face-to-face deliberation on matters of public concern, a concession that must not sacrifice broad participation—which is sacrificed by economic liberalization, i.e., depoliticization.

For Habermas's approach to be viable, however, informal opinion-formation among members of a democratic majority must be "transformed into administratively utilizable power" (Habermas 1998, 249). Law is the medium through which this transformation of communication into power is to be achieved: rights of political participation, essential to both the republican and discourse-theoretic idealizations, "refer to the legal institutionalization of a public opinion- and will-formation terminating in decisions about policies and laws" (Habermas 1996, 151). The exercise of political

participation rights allows communicatively generated normative premises, products of the lifeworld, to become comprehensible in the money-steered economy and the power-steered administration: law serves "as a hinge between system and lifeworld" (ibid., 55-56), a true language of power.

And so we are led to the question: under modern conditions, to what extent can the genesis of law derive from nonhierarchical/nonpaternalistic communicative procedures?

As Ricardo Blaug (1999) argues, Habermas fails to offer a realistic account of how a domination-free discourse is to occur, choosing instead in his more recent work to explore the normative basis of law and of the constitutional state—a lacuna that leaves difficult, and perhaps intractable, questions unresolved. It is true that while identifying the capacities that politics must have if it is to limit the independence of systemic power—in particular, the ability to "ferret out, identify, and effectively thematize latent problems of social integration (which require political solutions)" (Habermas 1996, 358)—Habermas acknowledges that the achievement of such capacities faces barriers that are nigh impossible to overcome (ibid., 358-59).

This realism is also reflected in his wariness of democratic control, as opposed to bureaucratic-regulatory countersteering, of the market. This is because Habermas 'can imagine the attempt to arrange a society democratically only as a self-controlled learning process' (quoted in Blaug 1999, 156). Such a process would call upon participants to understand and make difficult tradeoffs of fairness for efficiency and vice versa, and Habermas leaves little doubt that the conditions for a domination-free discourse about such issues are not being fulfilled at present. Thus, after characterizing the social consequences of the neoliberal turn in the metropolitan West as an unbridled disaster, Habermas (1998, 123). concludes that contemporary political realities may "undermine the legitimacy of the proce-

dures and institutions of the democratic constitutional state."

Whether this is as far as one's doubts about the practicability of Habermas's view should go, however, depends on a set of falsifiable claims (Habermas 1996, 373), perhaps the most important being that the public sphere, as a "warning system with sensors that . . . are sensitive throughout society" (ibid., 359), can meaningfully curb the exercise of administrative power; and that democratic constraints on administrative paternalism are, on both normative and empirical grounds, desirable. Which is to say, in part, that what the democratic warning system senses are violations of true social interests, and that the solutions endorsed by the demos really address those violations. Otherwise, the communicative will-formation Habermas so prizes would be much ado about nothing—or worse, as Weber hinted.

The heart of the matter is that Habermas is not a republican who values democratic will formation solely as an end in itself, and who thus equates equal participation in will formation with rationality. Other ends are served by an egalitarian process of will-formation: the resulting policies are, Habermas thinks, instrumentally as well as intrinsically rational, because the concerns brought to the communicative table by various participants are real concerns about their real interests (see Weinshall 2003).

Public Ignorance and Habermasian Politics

When power is delegated to political representatives and administrative bodies, public awareness and pressure are needed to secure a government that is responsive to the evaluative preferences of the mass public. An unresponsive state threatens to become a tyranny of experts, the machine-like regime dominated by systemic imperatives against which Habermas warns. As Ilya Somin has argued in these pages (1998, 413-58), a Habermasian model of deliberative politics would have to go beyond

the "naked preferences" of the mass public; instead, citizens would have to actively engage in a dialogue predicated on mutual recognition and the assumption of impartiality, requirements that demand a great deal of knowledge.

Somin demonstrates, however, that even the level of knowledge required for a far less robust form of democracy (the form suggested by the liberal ideal), including knowledge of "which policies will promote their preferences and how candidates stand in relation to them" (*ibid.*, 440), appears to be far beyond the grasp of most modern voters, including the most highly educated. This suggests that the prospects for any substantive realization of collective self-rule are grim. As Shanto Iyengar summarizes recent literature on voter competence, "the low level of political knowledge and the absence of ideological reasoning has lent credence to the charges that popular control of government is illusory" (quoted in Lupia and McCubbins 1998, 3). Others, including Weber, have made similar arguments concerning the ability of even elected officials to monitor and control bureaucratic authorities.

Not all analysts, however, are quite so pessimistic. In *The Democratic Dilemma*, Arthur Lupia and Matthew McCubbins (1998) argue that "limited information need not prevent people from making reasoned choices" (*ibid.*, 4). Lupia and McCubbins maintain that voters can use simple cues as substitutes for encyclopedic knowledge. However, Lupia and McCubbins offer a very limited criterion for the success of the democratic delegation of power: namely, that the voter's "personal experience allows her to distinguish beneficial from detrimental agent actions [or that the voter] can obtain this knowledge from others" (*ibid.*, 12).

This model can be no defense of deliberative politics, even if "informational shortcuts" do suffice for liberal politics, and not only because it is predicated on the scarcity of cognitive resources that can be devoted by an individual deliberator to public affairs. Even worse,

Lupia and McCubbins must appeal to individuals' reliance for their shortcuts on "others," establishing a cognitive hierarchy that is the *bête noire* of Habermas's discourse-theoretic ideal. In Lupia and McCubbins's model, action coordination and consensus are effected by informational elites who transmit cues to the general public.

To put it mildly, this approach requires a great deal of trust in the opinion leaders, be they public ideologues or ostensibly knowledgeable acquaintances; and, particularly in light of the ever-present possibility of preference falsification (see Kuran 1995), this trust may well be misplaced. If the "asymmetry of information between leaders and followers" (Somin 1998, 424), accepted by the partisans of informational shortcuts as an effective vehicle for self-rule, is as predominant as the empirical evidence suggests, then there is likely to be a divergence of interests between the opinion leaders and the led.

Since followers are often unable to monitor their leaders, this state of affairs is ripe for abuse. For example, opinion leaders may have an incentive to "exacerbate intergroup hostilities" (Somin 1998, 425), an outcome that simultaneously harms followers and reinforces the prestige and authority of leaders. Conversely, ideological heuristics, including partisan affiliation, can be undermined by collusion among political parties. As Somin argues (*ibid.*, 423), such efforts to reduce the flow of information spare ideological presuppositions challenge from inconvenient facts—something instantly recognizable to any observer of mass politics. As a real-world example, Somin cites the manner in which the first modern-style party system in the United States removed slavery from the political agenda (*ibid.*). In a similar vein, one can point to the broad consensus concerning the virtues of a mixed economy in the postwar metropolitan West. Efforts to undermine the consensus from the margins have proven to be prohibitively expensive, both in money and in time.

Even non-hierarchical voting shortcuts take advantage of whatever information seems to be at hand, however irrelevant it may be. An electorate may vote retrospectively (Fiorina 1981), basing decisions not on information about a candidate's actual policy views or performance in office, but on general perceptions of, for example, the state of the economy that may, in fact, bear little relation to the policies that were pursued by the officials being retrospectively blamed or credited. (Indeed, determining the causality of various economic phenomena proves challenging even to those who specialize in the discipline [Somin 1998, 426]).

Some scholars, including Benjamin I. Page and Robert Y. Shapiro (1992), have argued that uninformed votes, randomly distributed across candidates, "cancel each other out" (Somin 1998, 429), thus allowing the informed votes to determine the outcome. But precisely because most voters seem to use informational shortcuts, a truly random distribution is precluded (*ibid.*, 430); consequently, uninformed voters can easily carry the day. Even to achieve the Weberian goal of instrumentally rational policies, "there is no real substitute for voters who are adequately informed at the individual level" (*ibid.*, 431)—a condition that also must be fulfilled if the communicative fora are to be free of domination. Given the scope of government in contemporary modern democratic states, however, even the most sophisticated voter will face enormous obstacles in seeking to be truly well informed about the uses and abuses of administrative power so as to subordinate "system" to "lifeworld."

Assuming that the obstacles to becoming well-informed can be overcome (a questionable assumption, to be sure), Somin identifies an even more fundamental barrier to votes that reflect people's true interests (*ibid.*, 435-6): though all might benefit from an informed electorate, individual voters have little incentive to become informed because no single vote is likely to prove decisive (*ibid.*, 436). But the collective-action

explanation of public ignorance faces its own Waterloo if its reasoning is applied, beyond incentives to become well informed, to incentives to vote. Why do some citizens vote at all, despite the fact that an individual's vote is highly unlikely to alter an outcome?

Somin (1998, 433) hypothesizes that people overestimate the likelihood that their vote will make a difference. However, acquiring the political information necessary to be well informed is far costlier than voting. So people rationally remain ignorant, even though they irrationally vote.

Somin contends that there is a simple corrective for high informational burdens that preclude meaningful public participation and sound decision-making: reduce "the number of issues to be decided by government to a level voters would find more manageable" (*ibid.*); that is, minimize informational burdens by limiting the scope of democratic decision making. Suffice it to say, this solution is politically impracticable and, as Jeffrey Friedman (1998) maintains, would quite possibly be futile anyway. To make sense of the "paradox of voting," Friedman argues that the premise of voter rationality must be abandoned: a rational voter who remains ignorant because she is aware of the costliness of acquiring adequate information would, by virtue of this awareness, be deprived "of the 'attitudes' necessary to motivate her to vote" (*ibid.*, 407). Yet millions of people do vote, and many of them make efforts to inform themselves politically.

To explain mass participation in the face of the collective-action problem that would confront any individual voter, if, as Somin assumes, voters realized the insignificance of their votes, Friedman turns to Schumpeter. Instead of focusing solely on the motivation to acquire information, Schumpeter points out that the information that is the coin of the political realm usually is not "clearly interpretable feedback from public decisions" (Brainard 1967, 411-25). In the absence of the direct feedback that derives from private decisions, unmediated by second-hand reports and theoretical constructs, "informed political decisions would require

unattainable levels of theoretical and empirical knowledge" concerning the consequences of various public policy choices (Friedman 1998, 409)—even when democratic decision making is limited in scope, as per Somin's proposal. But voters need not be aware that when making political decisions, they lack the feedback necessary to be well informed. They can falsely believe that they are well informed, and this false belief could adequately motivate them to vote—if one of the things about which they are blissfully ignorant is that simple mathematics shows that in any large electorate, their vote almost certainly won't matter.

While they disagree, then, over whether voters' ignorance is motivated by their awareness of the depth of their ignorance, and their consequent recognition of how costly it would be to inform themselves adequately, both Somin and Friedman implicitly maintain that a Habermasian public sphere, a "warning system with sensors that . . . are sensitive throughout society" (Habermas 1996, 359), is utopian. Somin's hypothesis suggests that the sensors are motivated to absorb very little information, preventing them from being sufficiently sensitive. Friedman (1998), in turn, denies that the sensors could detect the relevant phenomena at all, even if motivated to do so, with the possible exception of a particularly egregious phenomenon such as an economic crisis. Indeed, he attributes what sensitivity to negative outcomes there is primarily to systemic elements, including the cognizable feedback of the private marketplace, rather than to democratic processes (Friedman 2000, 121ff.). Both he and Somin conclude, however, that in politics, hierarchies of knowledge are unavoidable, as does David Ciepley (1999, 198–99).

The Obsolescence of Discourse-Theoretic Democracy

Like Friedman, Ciepley rejects Somin's contention that a smaller government would in itself secure adequate

popular control of the state by reducing the need for knowledge hierarchies. In doing so, he introduces a premise left unexplored by Somin. Informational burdens for voters will not be reduced by limited government, he argues, because all issues affecting collective life remain, if only implicitly, "on the table"; any decision to privatize decision making can potentially be reversed, provided that willful majorities remain sovereign. Consequently, informational burdens can be reduced only if society itself is simplified. The New England town meeting, viewed as an ideal by democrats of such different political orientations as Robert Putnam and Charles Murray, is effective only when concerned with a few simple issues, primarily because it governs relatively simple communities. One might add that the homogeneity of these towns precludes class conflict and deep cultural differences, short-circuiting the need for conflict management by means of state power in the first place.

The "restoration" of this Edenic state is, as should be obvious, for all intents and purposes impossible in modern democratic societies. Without a baptism of revolutionary violence that would create a nonmarket society that could sustain only a fraction of the world's current population (Mises [1920] 1935)—or some other global catastrophe—societal complexity is essentially irreversible. As a result, modernity, with its pluralization of forms of life and elaborate division of labor, permanently forecloses the possibility of meaningful self-government. The Habermasian question of whether complex societies are still capable of democratic rule has to be answered resoundingly in the negative.

And yet increasing social complexity is not an autochthonous phenomenon to which the state simply responds. As exemplified by the legal structuring of the capitalist marketplace, social complexity is driven in large part by state imperatives. Whether by design or as an unintended consequence of countless strategic calculations, the state confounds comprehension. As a result,

democratic politics in practice bears little resemblance, even incipiently, to the normative ideals described by Habermas.

Democratic Politics as Theater

If self-rule is beyond our grasp, how should we look upon democratic politics? Benedict Anderson (1996, 2) defines the nation as "an imagined political community . . . because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, or even meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion." Beyond the New England town meeting, not just the nation but modern democratic politics in general can best be described as a product of our collective imagination. The project of the deliberative democrats might be understood as an attempt to imagine a meaningful and broad-ranging conversation among ordinary men and women much like the vigorous disagreements that characterize scholarly endeavors at their best. The democratic communion, understood in these terms, requires a social space that is effectively isolated from administrative power and selfish bargaining.

In the absence of the epistemic and other conditions necessary for such a communion, however, modern democratic politics cannot be such a conversation in anything but the theorist's imagination; instead, it is a kind of theater in which the roles, if not the outcomes, are assigned.

Like the theater, democratic politics is a pageant of animating mythologies that give the process gravity and reinforce its legitimacy. As Edelman (1964, 190) puts it, "The settings of formal political acts help 'prove' the integrity and legitimacy of the acts they frame, creating a semblance of reality from which counterevidence is excluded." Conflict in stable metropolitan societies, as intense as it often seems, is contained through ritualization. Sounding a Weberian note, Edelman (1971, 9) con-

tends that public policies in a modern democratic society "derive their salience and meaning less from their instrumental effects than from the cues they generate"—by which he means the ways in which different social groups, often created as clients of state privilege or objects of state surveillance, are notified of changes in their status. The confounding state is not, as in the liberal normative idealization Habermas describes, simply a means of translating public preferences into public policy. Instead, the successful democratic state, in its myriad manifestations, is enabled by the theatrical form taken by democratic politics to manage conflict and achieve its personnel's various goals—even when those goals are not congruent with those of the people they are supposed to represent. Behind the curtain of the voting booth, the state can largely do what its personnel want it to do. The public's ignorance of what the state is actually doing affords the state its autonomy, and the public's ignorance is facilitated by theatrical democratic pageantry.

As for the notion of domination-free politics, Edelman (1988, 10) describes it as

an optimistic view . . . of how discourse might become emancipatory in a society without capitalism or governmental or corporate or military hierarchies; but it provides little hope that political language in the world we inhabit can become something more than a sequence of strategies and rationalizations.

Edelman, in looking upon modern democratic politics as a kind of ritualized conflict structured by the state, offers a bridge between Weber's view of how democracy should be managed by crafty demagogues—and the realities of the democratic present.

As if to confirm Edelman's dark portrayal of democracy, Lawrence Jacobs and Robert Shapiro (2000), after presenting a detailed analysis of President Clinton's health-care reform efforts and the dissolution of Newt Gingrich's Republican "revolution," conclude that U.S. politicians across the political spectrum employ

techniques designed to stifle public criticism without being responsive to public opinion. In contrast to the critical publicity sought by partisans of deliberative democracy, designed to stimulate a rational and critical debate among citizens, Jacobs and Shapiro believe that manipulative publicity has instead come to the fore, although in their view this trend is relatively recent in its origins and reversible (*ibid.*, 309-10). Jacobs and Shapiro therefore call upon public officials to be more responsive to the public's preferences and demands (*ibid.*, 323-24).

However, relying on an apparent allegiance to the classical principle of popular sovereignty and a pragmatic desire to secure the stable operation of government, Jacobs and Shapiro spend relatively little time justifying their proposal. After all, if manipulation is avoidable in contemporary political contexts, surely it is to be avoided; indeed, if members of the public are capable of exercising their critical faculties in the absence of government manipulation, perhaps the discourse-theoretic ideal can be achieved. The authors aim to "challenge the long-standing bias among elites against government responsiveness to public opinion" (*ibid.*, 295) (a bias that is hard to find outside the pages of long-dead theorists such as Weber and Schumpeter). Jacobs and Shapiro therefore dismiss the disquieting evidence that while citizens may have coherent preferences (Zaller 1992, 310-32), they very rarely have preferences that are well informed. In doing so, the authors reinforce what is in fact the widely held and uncontroversial belief that democracy, as conventionally understood, can work, if only we "threw the bums out." This is, to say the very least, a comforting suggestion—but it largely ignores the state as an autonomous actor.

Whether or not one believes that "the public reacts sensibly to events and available information" (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000, 307), Jacobs and Shapiro fail to adequately address the possibility of a state that can ignore public opinion because the public, distracted by democ-

ratic theater, is unaware of the divergence between its preferences and actual state policies. Nor do Jacobs and Shapiro adequately consider the even more radically statist possibility that public preferences themselves are not "rational reflections of their interests and their moral upbringing and therefore . . . stable and continuing" (ibid., 3), but rather that

individuals' positions on public issues are mobilizable rather than fixed. . . . Governmental activities are themselves potent influences upon change and mobilization of public attitudes; and . . . the significant "outputs" of political activities are not particular public policies labeled as political goals, but rather the creation of political followings and supports: i.e., the evocation of arousal or quiescence in mass publics. (Edelman 1988, 4)

In a classic recent study, John Zaller (1992) buttresses Edelman's claim by demonstrating that political elites play a crucial role in the process of opinion- and will-formation by providing cues in ambiguous circumstances. But Zaller expands the scope of Edelman's entirely state-centric theory of opinion manipulation by including among those who send decisive cues to the electorate non-state political figures, such as candidates who have not yet won public office but who convey signals about the opinions their party's followers should hold. In this way (despite his own protestations—see the Epilogue to Zaller 1992), Zaller brings us back to Weber's demagogue-centric theory of opinion shaping.

Weber's Theory of Democracy Revisited

Habermas's objection to Weber's theory of democracy is based in large part on its failure to transcend contemporary realities. Weber's is a theory utterly bereft of a democratic ideal beyond that of "a pluralism of elites, replacing the self-determination of the people"

(Habermas 1975, 124) with the elites' own determination of public policy.

Characterizing this "theory of domination" as reflective of "cynicism and self-pity" (ibid., 123), Habermas fails to give Weber his due. Habermas might have learned from Weber to appreciate the possibility of an inherent tension between social complexity and the democratic rule that complexity ensures will not be adequately informed. His own appreciation of this tension undergirds Weber's support for universal suffrage along lines that would be familiar to Edelman: instead of securing voter control of public policy, universal suffrage, along with the ritual of voting itself, cements the allegiance of the mass public to the program of the political leadership (Weber 1994, 125-26).

For Weber, political systems are called upon to provide responsible leadership for the long-term stewardship of modern societies (Ciepley 1999, 208). To achieve this end, bureaucracy is essential, but bureaucrats cannot face the political consequences of their actions, in large part because this would paralyze them and keep them from performing their crucial tasks. Instead, responsible political leaders, demagogic stewards of the bureaucracy, accept responsibility, minimizing administrative recklessness (at least in theory) (ibid., 212). Weber does not embrace elite-led democracy simply because the alternatives are presumptively unjustifiable; instead, he believes that it is the best method of securing political leadership that is "responsible" to the people's objective interests (ibid.)—which Habermas himself believes can be achieved merely by means of a democratic conversation free of systemic barriers to the equal expression of individuals' (apparently self-evident) interests. Habermas simply takes no account of the prospect, already underscored by Weber, of a gap between people's subjective political preferences and their objective interests—a void created by public ignorance and filled by demagogues who, ideally (in Weber's view), will let the bureaucratic experts

come up with the best means for achieving the public interest.

Though Weber's interpretation of democracy is far narrower than Habermas's, and far less ambitious, it remains salient in an imperfect world in which citizens are necessarily incapable of making sound judgments concerning policy questions because of the lack of interpretable feedback from public policy. Using Edelman's conception of democratic politics as the creation of political followings, as modified by Zaller, we return to Weber's far less starry-eyed view of the nature of democracy, given modern conditions that require a grasp of such complex phenomena as capitalist economies.

In such a world, the prospects for authentic self-government are grim. In his attempt to redeem the classical democratic faith in the rule of the people, Habermas identifies social conditions for a domination-free discourse characterized by substantive cognition and cognitive equality that cannot, under the informational burdens introduced by modernity, be fulfilled. Weber's view, in contrast, accepts that modern political democracy bears little resemblance to the classical democratic faith. Instead, he recognizes that at its best, it is nothing more than the most palatable and sound version of elite rule.

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