

Habermas, democracy and civil society: Unearthing the social in transformation theory¹

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Abstract: The debate as to whether transformative learning theory takes adequate account of the social has contributed to the clarification and development of the theory. But this debate has been, to a great extent, framed within transformation theory. This paper outlines some key ideas from Jürgen Habermas - civil society, public sphere, democracy and discourse - that are crucial to unearthing the social in transformation theory.

Key words: Civil society, public sphere, democracy

Transformation theory has been critiqued on the basis that it does not have an adequate understanding of the social (Collard & Law, 1989; Hart, 1990; Clarke & Wilson, 1991; Cunningham, 1992a; Newman, 1994; Inglis, 1997) prompting clarifications and further development of the theory (Mezirow, 1989; 1991; 1995; 1996; 1997). The critics assert that Mezirow's emphasis on transformation, as a primarily individual act, is not representative of the sociological emphasis of Habermas's critical theory. The critics, according to Mezirow, misunderstand transformation theory. This paper will briefly look at these critiques, the responses, and look to the critical theory of Jürgen Habermas as a useful starting point for unearthing the social in transformation theory.

The missing social in transformation theory?

Collard and Law (1989) say transformation theory is overly concerned with individual change, while Clarke and Wilson (1991) say it locates "perspective transformation in the individual...and fails to explore the constitutive relationship between individuals and the sociocultural, political and historical contexts in which they are situated" (p. 90). Newman (1994) asserts that transformation theory does not show how learning might contribute to the political struggle. Inglis (1997) states that there is an "over-reliance on the individual rather than social movements as the agency of social change and, consequently, an inadequate and false sense of emancipation" (p. 6).

The response from Mezirow (1997, p. 61) is to spell out the connection between transformation and social action by helping learners analyse their common problems through participatory research; helping learners discover options for social action; building solidarities with others and developing the ability to work with others in order to take social action. His response is to also identify the role of educator as a teacher of the skills and other knowledge required for social action. Mezirow is concerned to place action at the centre of the transformative process and if the oppression is by a landlord, employer or anyone else the action necessary may indeed be collective social action (Mezirow 1997, p. 60). If the distortions are of a sociocultural nature then the action may be social or political (1989, p. 173). Mezirow always draws the distinction between fostering critically reflective learning and fostering social action (1997, p. 61). Action is seen as individual or social but not exclusively one or the other. Epistemic or psychic distortions may not require social action and adult education can have goals other than collective social action (Mezirow, 1989). It may be appropriate for adult educators to join in solidarity, when appropriate, with others taking social action and Mezirow is also determined to emphasise how distortions in our meaning schemes and perspectives are placed there by the society and culture (1997, p. 62).

It is the persistence of these misunderstandings that prompts this paper. The debate is usually framed in the context of transformation theory and less often in the context of the theories of Jürgen Habermas that provide the intellectual genesis of transformation theory. We turn first then to some key ideas from Habermas on civil society, public sphere, lifeworld and discursive democracy in order to identify the social as a key part of transformation theory.

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Civil society and the public sphere

There has been a renewed interest in civil society, particularly since the fall of Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the Soviet Block. The radical political Left in Europe has seen civil society as a location for radical political action. Civil society has recently become the central focus of the debates regarding the perceived decline of American society and it is argued that civil society must be strong for democracy to prevail, the economy to grow and social problems to be resolved in a post-industrial global society (Hall et al., 1999). Adult educators are also interested in civil society as a way of critiquing how the state and the economy operate in their relationship with civil society (Durish, et al., 1999). More recent concerns about state and economic globalization see adult education playing an important role in developing a global civil society (Fleming, 1998).

While acknowledging the various meanings given to civil society by Adam Smith, David Hume, Hegel, Marx and Gramsci, it was the latter who initiated the process of adding three crucial components to the understanding of civil society. The first was an emphasis on the cultural and symbolic dimension of civil society - its role in the formation of values, action-orienting norms, meanings, and identifications. From this perspective, civil society does not only transmit or inculcate established practices or beliefs; it is also a site of social contestation, in which collective identities, ethical values, and alliances are forged.

The second major contribution of twentieth-century analysts was an emphasis on the most dynamic, creative side of civil society - informal networks, initiatives and social movements, as distinct from more formal voluntary associations and institutions. Social movements articulate new social concerns and projects and generate new values and collective identities. In struggles over democratization, they seek to reform not only the polity, but also the institutions of civil society itself.

The final key contribution in this century has been the communicative, deliberative conception of the "public sphere," developed primarily by Jürgen Habermas and his followers. For Habermas the coffee houses, salons and table society of Europe were examples of inclusive literary public spaces because of their equality, critique, problematizing the unquestioned, accessibility and reflexivity. The ideal of a public sphere asserts itself as a bulwark against the systematizing effects of the state and the economy. The public sphere is located in civil society and is where people can discuss matters of mutual concern as peers, and learn about facts, events, and the opinions, interests, and perspectives of others in an atmosphere free of coercion or inequalities that would incline individuals to acquiesce or be silent. This involvement develops the autonomy of individuals and is a learning process. This discussion or discourse on values, norms, laws, and policies generates politically relevant public opinion. These discussions can occur within various units of civil society. But there is also a larger public sphere that mediates among the various mini-publics that emerge within and across associations, movements, religious organizations, clubs, local organizations of concerned citizens, and informal social networks in the creation of public opinion.

It will be sufficient for our purposes to see civil society as "a sphere of interaction between economy and state, composed above all of the intimate sphere (especially the family), the sphere of associations (especially voluntary organisations), social movements, and forms of public communication" (Cohen and Arato, 1992, p. ix). The current interest in civil society is partly because of its connections with ideas of democratisation and Cohen and Arato in reconstructing the concept of civil society on the base provided by Habermas connect civil society and a particular kind of discourse. This will be of importance in our discussion of democracy. The core of civil society comprises a "network of associations that institutionalises problem-solving discourses on questions of general interest inside the framework of organized public spheres" (Habermas, 1996, p. 367). In this debate civil society is frequently seen as a locus for limiting the power of the state.

Radical adult educators have long been involved in identifying spaces where critical learning can take place - Freire's culture circles, Mezirow's women returners of the 1970s - and now civil society is regarded as a prime location for learning that is free from domination by either the state or the economy. Civil society is also seen as the space, which promotes full participation, by citizens ensuring that we strive towards a participatory democracy (Cunningham, 1992b, p. 12). On the other hand, it is also important not to romanticise civil society, as frequently the state and dominant classes achieve their hegemony through the organisations of civil society. For example, it is clear that in Northern Ireland much of the violence is located in civil society – beatings, punishment shootings, teen gangs and family violence.

The tradition of radical democracy includes, in different ways, figures such as Jefferson and Emerson, Marx and Gramsci, John Stuart Mill and John Dewey. What makes them radical, according to Warren, (1995) is the view that

democratic participation is an important means of self-development and self-realization. They also hold that more participation will produce individuals with more democratic dispositions – individuals who are more tolerant of difference, more sensitive to reciprocity, better able to engage in moral discourse and judgment, and more prone to examine their own preferences – all qualities conducive to the success of democracy as a way of making decisions. (p. 167)

Cohen and Arato follow Habermas in assuming that democratic transformations of the self are most likely to take place within social movements located in civil society because the external imperatives of markets do not interfere with self-reflective processes (Cohen and Arato, 1992, pp. 416-17, 560-562). These groups in civil society range from political parties, to citizens' initiatives, new social movements, to voluntary associations, to consciousness raising groups. It is through the locking together of these such groups that a public conversation takes place. It is central to the concept of deliberative democracy that it privileges such public sphere. The public sphere is the primary locus of the struggle to protect the lifeworld. This concept of the public sphere is the normative core of the idea of civil society and the heart of any conception of democracy. The political legitimacy of modern constitutional democracies rests on the principle that action-orienting norms, practices, policies, and claims to authority can be contested by citizens and must be affirmed or redeemed in public discourse.

Lifeworld colonization

Habermas (1987) defines the lifeworld as “the intuitively present, in this sense familiar and transparent, and at the same time vast and incalculable web of presuppositions that have to be satisfied if an actual utterance is to be at all meaningful, i.e. valid *or* invalid” (p. 131). The life-world is “the reservoir of implicitly known traditions, the background assumptions that are embedded in language and culture and drawn upon by individuals in everyday life” (Cohen & Arato, 1992, p. 427). In other words, “the lifeworld is a stock of knowledge composed of basic assumptions which function as an implicit or tacit horizon in everyday processes of communication” (Wildemeersch & Leirman, 1988, p. 19).

In Habermas (1984, p. 12) the lifeworld is colonized by the functional imperatives of the state and the economy, characterised by the cult of efficiency and the inappropriate deployment of technology. Problems arise when the system, constructed to serve our technical interests invades the practical domain of the lifeworld and intervenes in the processes of meaning-making among individuals and communities in everyday life. One effect of the colonization of the lifeworld is that individuals and groups increasingly identify themselves and their aspirations in system terms. The theory of communicative action aims to offer a vision, which allows the effects of uncoupling and colonization to come into perspective. It allows us to

become conscious of the *difference between steering problems and problems of mutual understanding*. We can see the difference between systemic disequilibrium and lifeworld pathologies, between disturbances of material reproduction and deficiencies in symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld....Money and power can neither buy nor compel solidarity and meaning. In brief, the result of the process of disillusionment is a new state of consciousness in which the social-welfare project becomes reflexive to a certain extent and aims at taming not just the capitalist economy, but also the state itself. (Habermas, 1987, p. 363)

In transformation theory it is the lifeworld that gets transformed. The lifeworld concept indicates that the person is dialectically related to the cultural-social context. This allows us begin the process of unearthing the social in transformation theory. The task of the left and of a democratic civil society and of adult education is one of de-colonizing the lifeworld (Habermas, 1987; Cohen and Arato, 1992, p. 455).

For each person, according to Habermas (1996), the lifeworld

remains largely unthematized, but the theorist can differentiate its resources into three broad components: the stock of taken-for-granted certitudes and ideas ('culture'); the norms, loyalties, institutions, and so forth, that secure group cohesion or solidarity ('society'); and the

competencies and skills that members have internalised ('personality'). A viable lifeworld is reproduced, then, through the cultural transmission of ideas through forms of social integration, and through the socialization of its members. (p. 518)

Any transformation of the lifeworld involves changes in the cultural, social or personality dimensions of the lifeworld and for Habermas all these are interconnected. Again there are grounds for seeing that personal transformations are linked to the social and political. The three components may give an interesting way of describing frames of reference, as used by Mezirow, as having cultural, social and personality dimensions, as the lifeworld does.

Civil society and the lifeworld are under threat from the system and one example may illustrate the point. At present the objective evidence indicates that there is a problem with contamination from the British nuclear industry. Moreover, the state, as regulator, has a vested interest in the military applications of the nuclear reprocessing plants. This coalition of state and economy is anti-life-world. Adult education needs to be seen as creating spaces for critical discourse, collective actions, strategies for resistance and as developing alternative approaches to development.

Welton (1995, p. 28) writes about the defence of the lifeworld as reappropriating the learning processes in "the family, the public sphere, community life, and cultural expressions" from the grasp and control of technical reason and putting them back in the hands of citizens engaged in democratic consensual dialogue. Again the social is central.

Adult education and democracy

Habermas's (1996) discursive theory of democracy places discourse at the centre of democratic theory, conceived both as a means of resolving disputes and enabling collective actions and also as a measure and justification of democratic institutions. 'Why should I obey?' is answered by Habermas in this way: not because of the police or state or strategic interest but by the force exercised by validity claims within discursive processes. The force of the better argument is the reason. In other words, political force generated by discourse where all motives except that of the cooperative search for truth are excluded, is what compels and legitimises that action.

The core of Habermas's critique of capitalism is that the public sphere or public discussion have been reduced by the activities of politicians, advertisers, public relations and the media in general. He links the concept of a public sphere with that of civil society to provide an account of how control can be exercised over markets and bureaucracies (Habermas, 1996). Civil society operates on the basis that the government is not fully representative of the people. There is a democratic deficit - a gap between actual democratic practices and the ideal. The feminist movement, for example, has always identified a democratic deficit and bias in the system world. The agenda of civil society is influenced strongly by this analysis of undemocratic or partial democratic achievements and by a certain conception of what democracy might mean. Civil society has the dual function of ensuring that those who exercise power do not abuse it and of transforming the system to regenerate more democratic practices. In a complex modern society the quality of democracy ultimately depends on the existence of the public sphere, on people's intelligent involvement in politics and on organisations and associations which help form opinion through discourse. A vibrant civil society is essential for democracy. The conviction that free, open, public discussion has a transformative function is central to Habermas's thinking. The way to reach a true understanding of people's needs and interests is to engage in a democratic debate in which these needs are shared and in the discourse, clarified and transformed.

Habermas proceeds to examine the possibilities for revitalising a public political sphere which has side-lined mutual understanding in favour of system self-regulation through the steering medium of money and power, and which is now paying a high price in terms of the withdrawal of motivation and legitimacy from those systems. The economic and political-legal systems have become insensitive to the imperatives of mutual understanding on which solidarity and legitimacy of social orders depends. The solution suggested by Habermas is the construction of autonomous self-organised public spheres, e.g. grassroots movements and self organised groups conducting participatory research and collaborative action research in system settings (education, community development) are examples of such autonomous public spheres at the local level (Kemmis, 1996, pp. 280-282).

But what kind of debate is Habermas talking about? He means a debate that is aimed at resolving practical disagreements and involves the implicit commitment to a set of rules. These rules of discussion

involve the equal rights of all concerned; having appropriate evidence in support of arguments; an obligation to provide reasons for challenging what others assert; and the examining of alternative and other people's perspectives.

Habermas outlines a concept of discourse as a debate where proposals are critically tested; information shared in an inclusive and public way; where no one is excluded and all have equal opportunities to enter the debate and take part. The debates are free of external coercion in so far as they are bound only by criteria of what is reasonable, and free of internal coercion in that each has equal opportunity to be heard, introduce topics, make contributions, to suggest and criticize proposals and the arrival at decisions motivated solely by the unforced force of the better argument. All decisions are for now, provisional and can be returned to at any time. These deliberations also include the interpretation of needs and wants (Habermas, 1996, p. 305). There are three principles of this discourse:

1. universalization - it constrains all to adopt the perspectives of all others in the balancing of interests - in a scaled down version of Kant's categorical imperative;
2. only those norms can be valid that meet with the approval of all affected in their capacity as participants in the discourse;
3. consensus can be achieved only if all participants participate freely.

These must be further complemented by a sense of solidarity between participants - concern for the well-being of others and the community at large. Habermas is aware of issues of power but assumes that this one area at least is, ideally, immune from power. Power is a key concept in Habermas's conception of communicative rationality and it is here that Habermas gives grounds for arguing with Inglis (1997) who asserts that Mezirow has no theory of power. These are the necessary conditions for a democratic society and transformative learning (Mezirow, 1995, p. 67).

It is on this basis that transformation theory asserts that the dichotomy between individual and social development is a spurious one for educators. Effective learners in an emancipatory, participative, democratic society - a learning society - become a community of cultural critics and social activists (Mezirow, 1995, pp. 68-70).

Will adult education serve the system or the life-world? The increased role of the system in education, family life, community activities, etc. leads Collins (1991, p. 94) to identify a new "problem zone that has arisen on the borders separating the system and life-world." A deskilling of the life-world has been facilitated, at least partially, by adult education and its persistent involvement with the system.

In this context adult educators find themselves with options. As with Freire, who said education was never neutral, one can be for system or lifeworld. Adult educators find themselves working very often in the state sector (in schools, second chance provision), in the economy (job skills training, organisational change) or civil society (community education). The challenge is how to be for decolonisation of the lifeworld? Part of the problem is that some systematically distort public communication (education debate) by narrowing discussions to issues of technical problem-solving and denying the very conditions for communicatively rational collective will-formation.

Critical adult education has as its normative mandate the preservation of the critically reflective lifeworld (Welton, 1995, p. 5). Critical theory holds out the promise of enabling us to think of all society as a vast school. Habermas addressed a multiple audience of potential transformative agents working in the social movements and in various other institutional sectors of society (Welton, 1995, p. 25). Habermas in identifying actors who emerge from the public such as journalists with a critical mandate he summarises the tasks they *ought* to fulfil (Habermas, 1966, p. 378) as that of a central and systemic player in the construction and support of a critical public sphere. Journalists and the media ought to "understand themselves as the mandatary of an enlightened public whose willingness to learn and capacity of criticism they at once presuppose, demand, and reinforce" (Habermas, 1996, p. 378). It might be a useful starting point for defining the role of an adult educator as located in the same public space, helping adults decolonize the lifeworld through democratic, critical discourses and participating in the opinion- and will-formation of adult learners.

In this view, having briefly borrowed again the ideas of Habermas, it is clear that transformation theory is grounded in and infused with a sense of the social not only in its understanding of learning but also in its understanding of action and of adult education.

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