

## **Between Uniqueness and Otherness: Living in a Telematic Society**

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### **Abstract**

The paper discusses the ambiguous nature of the experience of authentic self and its relation with the other in contemporary philosophical discourses. The source of the ambiguity rests on two approaches to the concept of being 'authentic': the deconstructive and the dialogical. The discussion carried out in the paper aligns itself with Juergen Habermas's concepts of intersubjectivity, lifeworld, public sphere and critique to contrast them with the idea of authenticity.

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**Keywords:** Authenticity, Otherness, Intersubjectivity, Lifeworld, Public Sphere, Critique.

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### **I**

#### **Introduction - Authenticity and Otherness**

It was existentialist thinking which in a major way projected the image that life in the technologically constituted society is made up of fragmented sources of self-understanding which throws the individuals into amorphous absurdities. Following existentialism the major philosophical approaches hooked their solutions to the disintegrated nature of Individual-society relations on the idea of self which was to be grounded on a notion of authenticity. Authenticity existentially means self-critiquing, intimate relationship with oneself which places the self in a radically negotiable distance from society, Nature and the cosmic beyond. Existential thinkers from Soren Kierkegaard to Jaspers, Buber, Heidegger, and Sartre discuss authenticity as the deciding factor of the existential and moral particulars of experiences. The concept of authenticity according to these thinkers envisions a constant journey of oneself towards the bottomless bottom of subjectivity. Though authenticity figures in these thinkers with different conceptual connotations, they always showed a close inner proximity by way of their attachment to what we can call the common existentialist concept of self.

The later discourses which transcend the modernist/high modernist notions of self as they make the other/otherness lesser and insignificant, however, tried to map the fields of social fragmentation from the divided orientations of self and more divided, contradicting multiple identities. Therefore, the contemporary debates in social theory and democratic theory centre on identity/difference which is portrayed as a 'fractal', which allows only relational definitions. It thus becomes one of the major affirmative

claims of what we broadly understand as postmodern/post structural thoughts that as they unsettle the defined meaning attributed to many a conceptual pairs in philosophy. Therein the concept of 'authentic-inauthentic' becomes one of the major casualties. They fragmentize the conceptual integrity of authenticity along with others such as, 'Self-Other', 'Gender-Sex' etc. The possible implosion of the above mentioned concepts and the meaning which they had acquired, however, does not undo them to the 'ground zero' level. In fact, they are being shifted to locales where their import is deconstructed. For instance, the content of the concepts of responsibility and authenticity is being dissipated into the ambiguities related with the formative discourses that determine the self-other relationship. The idea of authenticity is again forced to be leveled on the basis of the ambiguities emerging out of the deconstructive or genealogical ambivalence that shape gender-sex nexus. Metaphorically, the authentic is responsible when it peels off the definitional notion of its self from itself to be reconstituted from the contextual otherness.

Parallel to the above scenario, there are theoretical efforts which follow a different orientation of constructive engagement (hermeneutics) which adds new dimensions of meaning to self-authenticity through a reconstructive endeavour, informed and inspired by the same sources which problematize the self-other relationship. Charles Taylor in one of his works which appeared in the nineties of the last century called the late-capitalist, contemporary society as reflecting a culture of narcissism as it is, in his language, comprised of three malaises namely, an irresponsible individualism, dehumanizing instrumental reason and undemocratic despotism. The creative alternative that he proposes to it is a culture of authenticity as the culture of dialogue which makes us define ourselves /our identity against the significant others<sup>1</sup>. Such approaches need to be differentiated as they align with efforts for planetary ethics with environmental sensitivity and cross cultural and intercultural conceptualizations which reclaim the conceptual credibility of authenticity as global responsibility.

In what follows an attempt is made to discuss how the question of authenticity in contemporary living has been housed by a critical conception of dialogical intersubjectivity. Specifically, the paper puts together the idea that Habermasian ideal of intersubjectivity and dialogical democratic identity enrich the idea of authenticity in a constructive manner. It goes along with Juergen Habermas's<sup>2</sup> notions of critical theory which instead of leaving authenticity as irretrievable otherness redeems it as responsibility and critique.

1 Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1991, pp. 30-33.

2 Juergen Habermas is the well known representative of the Frankfurt school and critical theory. As an engaging interlocutor, he makes the claim to renew and refresh the socio political life more 'democratizingly emancipatory through a reconstruction of the intersubjective and dialogical basis of human engagements. Habermas's creative interference in the issues like German Reunification, Gulf war, European Union, the debate over the need and demand for a constitution for the EU, the September 11th attack and the discourse on terrorism, keeps him untiring an intellectual, motivated with a never ending concern for justice, democracy and human rights. In other words, Habermas's theoretical presence is situated around the dictates of a rationally critiqued and reclaimed humane society. Thus, Habermas fixes the axis of his critical philosophy quite emphatically on the need to overcome anti-dialogical, regressive-fundamentalist orientations and anti-rational.

## II

### **The Problematique - Intercultural Ambiguity and Dialogue**

The problematique, then, is as follows: Primarily, contemporary life's uniqueness and wholeness is caught in an ambiguous midway image which oscillates between authenticity and otherness. According to many contemporary schools of thinking authentic self vanishes to be a deconstructive, critical possibility as it rests on concrete otherness. Simultaneously there emerges another line of thinking which attempts to build up such a critique more as a (re) constructive engagement. The insight that guides our discussion then is that the ambiguity generated out of living in contemporary post-traditional societies as it remains stuck between authenticity and otherness has been intercultural in nature. It is so because the intercultural imagination sketches out the ambiguities from the point of view of local/ contextual cultures as they struggle to restore their identity against the global techno-media supra-cultures. Moreover, intercultural dialogue as close encounters unravel the moments of failure in self's effort to gather itself as authentic from the encounter with the concrete otherness.

The gist of the discussion here asserts that the idea of communication and dialogue becomes the inner dynamics of responsibility and authenticity to determine how authenticity figures out the self-other. In line with Habermas we can argue that dialogical communication as the intersubjective affirmation of an ethical and normative commitment is the path to authenticity. Habermas does not stop here as he attaches dialogical communication as the intersubjective affirmation with the inherent 'reflexivity' of modernity/modern belief system, institutionalized in the discourses of science, law and aesthetics. By surfacing de-centration, reflexivity and the differentiation of value spheres as the factors that determine communicative rationality and cultural modernity, Habermas reasons out that the ethico-normative foundation is not foundational as it is not relative, but fundamentally dialogical. Just as dialogue determines the normative foundation, dialogue is being determined by the reflexive de-centration of differentiated value spheres. Similarly critique as 'dialogical-communication' posits the possibility of an alternative framework of reflective engagement to resurface authenticity as responsibility and critique.

Habermas's critical theory along with the contemporary social wisdom presents before us the insight that the media and technology/ techno-culture as supra-cultures reduce the different sources that enrich life into the single (dis)value of centralization. On the contrary, the culture of dialogue and communication decentralizes. He raises the concept of intersubjectivity in this context which reconstructs the idea of authenticity and the notion of democratic identity as dialogical identity. The concept of intersubjectivity in Habermas is constituted to represent dialogical and decentred concepts of reason, knowledge, truth, meaning and language expression which affirm the communicative – dialogical base structure of the human race.

### III

#### **Critique of Contemporary Sources of Social Life:**

##### **Technology and Intersubjective Lifeworld**

The notable intervention of Habermas in modifying Horkheimer and Adorno's and Herbert Marcuse's critique of technology as the criticism of the vulnerable epistemic pretensions of enlightenment was in proposing a more dialogical notion of intersubjectivity. In 'Dialectic of Enlightenment'<sup>3</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno argue that instrumentality is in itself a form of domination and if this is so, then technology is not neutral, and simply using it involves taking a value-based stance. Though, the early Frankfurt theorists emphasized the subjective/holistic conditions of societal transformation against the 'technologized', mechanical and evolutionary concept of social change, the subjectivist lacunae into which they were unknowingly slipping in the name of an half worked out anti-Enlightenment theorization, was objectionable, according to Habermas. He points out how the critique of 'the positivist understanding of science which limits science and scientific enterprises into instrumental reason remained and modified into the totalized reproach' when the early Frankfurt School representatives failed to inculcate dialogical authenticity in the form of intersubjectivity.

Secondly Habermas asks us to go beyond the general theoretical outcome of Dialectic of Enlightenment, which falls into an ethical skepticism, since Horkheimer and Adorno tend to explain away law and morality as baseless in the absence of pre-scientific institutions and in a scientific civilization. Such a bleak, defeatist and emptying of enlightenment misses mortally the emancipatory values of modernity which keep alive agency and responsibility, for Habermas<sup>4</sup>. Herbert Marcuse's critique of technology and the solution that he proposes in the original unity of man and nature, which, Marcuse believes, is manifested in art, too is not competent enough to hold the dialogical kernel of social bond. Habermas in his critique denounces Marcuse's aesthetic-centered critique of instrumental reason along with the similar ideas of Benjamin, Adorno and Bloch, since, their implicit ideal was the restoration of the harmony of man and nature. He rejects the very idea of a new science and technology as it as a romantic mythical ideal reduces the model of human communication to a domain where only instrumental relations are possible and the intersubjective plane is undermined. For Habermas, technical development supplements the human body and mind with one device after another. Thus technology is a generic project, "a 'project' of the human species as a whole", not of some particular historical epoch like class society or of a particular class like the bourgeoisie<sup>5</sup>.

3 Max Horkheimer & Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, New York, Herder & Herder, 1972.

4 J. Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Trans, Frederick Lawrence, London, Polity, 1999, pp. 110-113.

5 Habermas, Jürgen, "Technology and Science as 'Ideology'," in *Toward a Rational Society*, Trans. J. Shapiro, Boston, Beacon Press, 1970, p. 87.

Habermas's critique of technology in a very interesting way strikes a lineage of thought which introduces the concept of lifeworld as distinct from system and as the receptacle of communicative action. I used the word lineage to mean how Habermas preserves the ideal of dialogue/intersubjectivity in the concept of lifeworld. It is as Habermas says, "the horizon within which the communicative actions are always already moving... (and which) is limited and changed by the structural transformation of society as a whole"<sup>6</sup>, Habermas understands it as sustaining the individual and social identity by organizing action around shared values to reach agreement over criticizable validity claims<sup>7</sup>. System is defined, in contrast, as that 'integrates diverse activities in accordance with the adaptive goals of economic and political survival by regulating the unintended consequences of strategic action through market or bureaucratic mechanisms that constrain the scope of voluntary decision'<sup>8</sup>. The distinction between the system and lifeworld, as Ingram says, 'is formally introduced in order to specify spheres of societal reproduction (material and symbolic), which in turn designate functions of societal integration (system and social) embedded in different context of action (strategic and communicative)<sup>9</sup>.

Since, dialogical action as communicative action in the lifeworld is oriented towards mutual understanding, the coordination of action it contributes towards socialization aiming at transmitting and renewing cultural knowledge, to achieve and maintain social integration and to form and sustain personal identities, it is to be regarded as the only means by which authentic meaning structures are reproduced. Habermas substantiates the above position and explains the structural components of lifeworld, i.e., culture, society, person etc. as follows, 'I use the term culture for the stock of knowledge from which participants in communication supply themselves with interpretations as they come to an understanding about something in the world.

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6 Juergen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action Vol 2*, Trans. Thomas McCarthy, Cambridge, Polity, 1987, p. 2:119

7 The Habermasian notion of lifeworld is derived from other major theoretical sources prior to that of Habermas's critical theory. They are, the phenomenological tradition of Husserl and Schutz, the pragmatic tradition of Mead and the linguistic philosophy of Wittgenstein and Austin. Mead's theory of symbolic interaction that Habermas accepts as the most important and decisive of his theory of communication was later elaborated by the Wittgensteinian and Austin's theory/ philosophy of language.. The early phenomenology inspired definition of lifeworld, that is, 'as the unthematized horizon of meanings that compromise the background against which particular items are thrown into relief' is not understood by Habermas as Husserl might have defined it, as in which the above horizon of lifeworld constituted and unified by the intentional activity of a transcendental ego, but as consists of 'a preexisting stock of knowledge that has been handed down in culture and language' (in the words of Ingram). Habermas's borrowing of the Phenomenological notion of lifeworld is in fact a critical acceptance/rejection. He says, "If we now relinquish the basic concepts of the philosophy of consciousness in which Husserl dealt with the problem of lifeworld, we can think of the lifeworld as represented by a culturally transmitted and linguistically organized stock of interpretive patterns. Then the idea of a context of relevance that connects the elements of the situation with one another, and the situation with the lifeworld, need no longer be explained in the framework of a phenomenology and psychology of perception. Relevant structures can be conceived instead as interconnections of meaning holding between a given communicative utterance, the immediate context, and its connotative horizon of meanings. Contexts of relevance are based on grammatically regulated relations among the elements of a linguistically organized stock of knowledge". (TCA- 2:124).

8 David Ingram, *Habermas and the Dialectic of Reason*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1987, p.115.

9 *Ibid.*, p.115.

I use the term society for the legitimate orders through which participants regulate their memberships in social groups and thereby secure solidarity. By personality I understand the competences that make a subject capable of speaking and acting that put him in a position to take part in processes of reaching understanding and thereby to assert his own identity. The dimensions in which communicative action extends comprise the semantic field of symbolic contents, social space, and historical time'<sup>10</sup>.

The tripartite structure of the lifeworld recognized by Habermas, such as, culture (knowledge), society (legitimate order) and person (Individual identity), adding one more dimension to the intersubjective notion of de-centering understanding, elaborates it with rationalization of the lifeworld, which is identified as the liberative process that could 'potentiate the possibility of a dialogical negotiation of our own ways of life' different from the un-free and undifferentiated centralization of life in the traditions or societies dominated by instrumental reason.

#### IV

#### **Critique of the Media - The concept of the public sphere**

The concept of public sphere introduced by Habermas was definitely to highlight the media's dialogical function and to associate it with an ideal project of democracy. The idea that props up the discussion of the public sphere is Habermas's deep interest in the project of democracy and critical modernity which demands '...a remodernization of modernity so as to develop systems of free discourse necessary for the maintenance of civil society and democracy'<sup>11</sup>. As Kellner writes, 'Habermas's account of the structural transformation of the public sphere, despite its limitations, also points to the increasingly important functions of the media in politics and everyday life and the ways that corporate interests have colonized this sphere, using the media and culture to promote their own interests'<sup>12</sup>.

The concept of public sphere has brought in a lot of discussion since it has been proposed by Habermas in the sixties of the twentieth century, as a prerequisite to his reconstructive-critical theory of communication. That is why, from the point of view of mass media and communication, the Habermasian proposal of the concept of the public sphere has been recognized a very viable and dynamic critical theoretical framework. In establishing the inner link between communication, media and democratic rationality, the primary motive behind the concept of the public sphere has been recognized as spotting an evolving democratic space and ideal of communication.

Habermas defines the bourgeois public sphere, which presents the basis to the

10 Juergen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action-2*, Thomas McCarthy (Trans.), Cambridge, Polity, 1987, p.138.

11 Jim Walsh, *In the Net*, London, Zed Books, 1999, p. 6.

12 Douglas Kellner, 'Habermas, the Public Sphere, and Democracy: A Critical Intervention', [url:www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/kellner.html](http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/kellner.html)

democratic and communicative public space of free discourses as follows, “The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as public, they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically but publicity relevant sphere of community exchange and social labour. The medium of this political confrontation was peculiar and without historical precedent: people’s public use of their reason”<sup>13</sup>. The public sphere, can be called, “a realm in which individuals gather to participate in open discussions... (but this is) subject to particularization based on the historical context and on the topics that are admitted for discussion”<sup>14</sup>. So, the public sphere is conceived as evolved from representative publicity in the feudal society, later in the court nobility running parallel to the renaissance period, and in the bourgeois civil society. But, later, in the welfare, organized capitalism, the public sphere declined, making the citizens consumers, ‘dedicating themselves more to passive consumption and private concerns than to issues of the common good and democratic participation’. Habermas observes, ‘Public opinion is administered by political, economic, and media elites which manage public opinion as part of systems management and social control’. ‘Inasmuch as the mass media today strip away the literary husks from the kind of bourgeois self-interpretation and utilize them as marketable forms for the public services provided in a culture of consumers, the original meaning is reversed’<sup>15</sup>. Thinking in the same way Craig Calhoun writes, ‘The importance of the public sphere lies in its potential as a mode of social integration. Public discourse (and what Habermas later and more generally calls communicative action) is a possible mode of coordination of human life, as are state power and market economics’<sup>16</sup>.

The notion of public sphere, now as it is obvious, makes the notion of dialogue which is the prototype of deliberative democracy more concrete. The public sphere presupposed freedoms of speech and assembly, a free press, and the right to freely participate in political debate and decision-making. The democratic revolutions

13 Juergen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Thomas Burger (Trans.), London, Polity, 1989, p. 27.

‘The two major themes of the book include analysis of the historical genesis of the bourgeois public sphere, followed by an account of the structural change of the public sphere in the contemporary era with the rise of state capitalism, the culture industries, and the increasingly powerful positions of economic corporations and big business in public life. On this account, big economic and governmental organizations took over the public sphere, while citizens became content to become primarily consumers of goods, services, political administration, and spectacle.

Habermas’s concept of the public sphere thus described a space of institutions and practices between the private interests of everyday life in civil society and the realm of state power. The public sphere thus mediates between the domains of the family and the workplace — where private interests prevail — and the state which often exerts arbitrary forms of power and domination. What Habermas called the “bourgeois public sphere” consisted of social spaces where individuals gathered to discuss their common public affairs and to organize against arbitrary and oppressive forms of social and public power’. Douglas Kellner, *op cit.*

14 Robert C. Holub, J.H.: *Critique in the Public Sphere*, London, and Routledge, 1991, p. 3.

15 *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, *op cit.*, p. 171.

16 Craig Calhoun, “Introduction: Habermas and the Public Sphere”, In Craig Calhoun,

institutionalized the bourgeois public sphere. Constitutional orders, then, started guaranteeing political rights. The judicial system established as a consequence, was to mediate between claims between various individuals or groups, or between individuals and groups and the state.

The conceptual power of public sphere is to link the media with the authentic source of discursive modes of coordination of democratic will formation supported by an ethics of deliberative discourses empowered by reason. This radical effort to couple the critique of the media/public opinion which constructs 'less-public' and 'more privatizing' spheres in the late capitalism with the consequent critique of the liberal democracy makes Habermas's idea of the public sphere to attain more complex and situated notions of authenticity, social responsibility and deliberative democracy.

### **Conclusion: Critique as Authenticity**

The paper was a moderate attempt to highlight the connectives available in a primary reading of Habermas's critical theory which dialogically link authenticity and otherness in a unique way. In other words, I was trying to show how the ideas of intersubjectivity and the conceptual variants which spring up from it in Habermas's thought stand in constructive dialogue with self-authenticity and its significant other to add a different dimension to the necessity of communicative responsibility from a constructive hermeneutics point of view.

A major question here would be that whether our reading of Habermasian stance in this connection situates the intercultural ambiguity related with the concept of authentic life in contemporary societies or not. Such a critical query acquires its momentum primarily from the post-structural critique against the western notion of dialogue. Secondly, it reminds us that the recent problematization of Habermasian notions of social dialogue and communication based on the concept of linguistic intersubjectivity has been justifiably legitimate too from a non-western perspective. I do not justify fully Habermas's critical theory and its conceptual constructs in this context. However, within the limited scope of the present discussion I presume to state that the critical tools that Habermas's critical theory offer operate as self-critical tools too. Therefore, hoping that I sensitize one of the most significant angle to read Habermas as many readers have done before and also hint at an important vantage point to look at our discussion, I think the ideal of critique in Habermas's thought still remains unexhausted as it hints at the unexplored combinations of intercultural notions of 'lifeworlds' and dialogical identity.

The above understanding can be further explained as follows:

Habermas, in his context of theorization of the late and reflexive modernity remodels the nature of the meaning of critique into the intersubjective reconstruction of the ambivalent presuppositions of modernity. He systematizes the tradition of



critique, through self-reflective and reconstructive notion of rationality which is fallible, procedural and postmetaphysical. Presumably, such an intersubjective reconstruction of dialogue/communicative self-critique as responsibility which is the route to authenticity, reschedules the self to define itself along with the significant other. The dynamics of such an auto-critical paradigm is contoured by the intersubjective theory of de-centering dialogical universality, deliberative/discursive democracy and an intersubjective unity of reason that sets an 'ideal critique situation' beyond the scattered local commitments of the various universes of discourse. It tells us that authenticity as responsibility can not but intent a global ethics, which as Gerard Delanty puts it,

'must be understood in terms of ongoing debates, the emergence of a global public sphere (as distinct from a global legal order) and socio-cognitive evolution. Whether on a national, local or global level, a discourse ethics is the ongoing raising of truth claims which is realized in the communicative cultural logics of modernity, such as self-confrontational, reflexivity and the permanent critique of cultural values. For Habermas, all that is left of moral universalism today is precisely this capacity for critique'<sup>17</sup>.

17 Gerard Delanty, 'The Significance of Global Ethics for Critical Social Theory', in Seamus O Tuama, *Critical Turns in Critical Theory*, London, I.B.Tauris Publishers, 2009, pp. 89-90.