An Encounter with:
Lasse Thomassen, editor. *The Derrida-Habermas Reader*.
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Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida had a difficult relationship. Habermas represented for Derrida a triumphant modernity, an attempt to recast modernity without focusing on the aporias of consciousness. Conversely, Habermas lumped Derrida in with the other “conservative philosophers” who, by doubting reason, failed to leave intact reason’s power to affect positive change.

Lasse Thomassen’s *The Derrida-Habermas Reader*, a collection of essays chosen from some of the most prolific writers in continental philosophy in the Anglo-American world, is an effort to draw out, in as non-partisan a way as possible, the competing positions in Derrida and Habermas’s thought. I say non-partisan because ultimately the book serves to clarify, rather than resolve, the existing tensions between the thinkers. I doubt therefore that partisans will be convinced one way or the other.

Thomassen divides the book into four sections (plus an afterword featuring Habermas’s reaction to Derrida’s death, and a short article Derrida wrote for the German magazine *Frankfurter Rundschau* for Habermas’s 75th birthday). The four sections are, respectively: Philosophy and Literature, Ethics and Politics, Identity/Difference, and Beyond the Nation-State. The first and last sections of the book show the gamut the relationship between the two thinkers

has run: from polemical disagreement—beginning with Habermas’s vitriolic treatment of Derrida in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, to their agreement on the need for a common European foreign policy following 9/11 and against the actions of an emboldened United States.

Thus, the final section brings their prospective projects as closely together as possible; it conforms to the final period of Derrida’s life, where he and Habermas reached agreement on a number of questions. These points of substantial agreement speak to the curious fact that any philosophical disagreements between them do not seem to affect their ultimate political conclusions. Derrida and Habermas are able to pen “February 15th, or What Binds us Together: A Plea for a Common Foreign Policy, Beginning in the Heart of Europe,” wherein they discuss the significance of the demonstrations of February 15, 2003 against the planned invasion of Iraq. That article, and Matustik’s intervention, “Between Hope and Terror: Habermas and Derrida Plead for the Im/possible,” show that the pressing political issue between Habermas and Derrida remained the relationship between what the Germans call *Sittlichkeit* and politics. In the final instance, it turns on the role of culture and religion in a post-secular world.

Thomassen describes the book in his introduction to the volume as an effort to bring together competing themes in the two thinkers’ works. The task is particularly difficult because Habermas does not engage substantially with many areas of Derrida’s thought: Derrida’s early work on Husserl being an obvious example, or his work on art and language. Moreover, where they treat similar topics, their approaches are often very different (which could explain the unfortunate absence of a section contrasting Habermas’s universal pragmatics with Derrida’s work on language—a range that includes Derrida’s engagement with Saussure and his writings on difference). Thus only in the first section, containing essays by Habermas and Derrida, as well

as Rorty's well-known "Habermas, Derrida, and the Function of Philosophy," do we really see the two philosophers in dispute: the other sections contain almost exclusively exegetical essays by other thinkers, wherein various writers try to tease out common themes in the two thinkers' works.

Rorty's essay could in fact serve as a guide for the book as a whole. Rorty rejects Habermas's attempt at a rational reconstruction of language use, yet holds him as the contemporary philosopher who is the most useful to social critics: "I see Jacques Derrida as the most intriguing and ingenious of contemporary philosophers, and Jürgen Habermas as the most socially useful—the one who does the most for social democratic politics" (47). In the essay, Rorty wants to examine Habermas's critique of Derrida in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, and argues that Habermas and Derrida should turn their attention to working together rather than to tearing each other down.

Beginning with the critical philosophers of the 19th century—Nietzsche in particular—Rorty claims that we see for the first time a criticism of modernity that dispenses with its emancipatory content. In other words, Nietzsche is content to criticize without realizing the nascent potential in late capitalism to liberate us from suffering. In rejecting Nietzsche's blanket criticism, Rorty sides with Habermas, arguing that the blind rejection of modernity is no better than its blind acceptance.

Philosophers like Heidegger and Derrida are examples of thinkers caught in what Habermas calls the philosophy of subjectivity. "Habermas thinks that the philosophy of subjectivity was a false start, and that the political uselessness of this sort of philosophy became increasingly obvious in our century" (47). What is wrong with what Heidegger calls metaphysics

and Derrida logocentrism is that they each hoped to do by reflection what should be done by expanding the scope and membership of the conversation.

While Rorty concedes that Habermas is correct to claim that “the ironists’ quest for ever deeper irony and ever more ineffable sublimity has little direct public utility,” this does not mean that they have no relevance at all in the quest for social justice (49). Each offers a more vivid and concrete description—like the Romantic poets—of what human life could be when its richest possibilities are realized. Habermas’s error, on Rorty’s telling, is that he treats Heidegger and Derrida as unsuccessful public philosophers. Rorty wants instead to treat them as liberal ironists who open up the possibility of realms of private existence separate from social being, where claims of universal validity are irrelevant. In that way, the rich texture of ethical life can be fully elaborated upon.

The second section of Thomassen’s book begins with an essay by Richard J. Bernstein, “An Allegory of Modernity/Postmodernity: Habermas and Derrida,” wherein Bernstein takes a similar approach to Rorty. Bernstein sees in the biography of each philosopher the roots of their respective philosophical concerns: for Habermas, it was the shock of learning what German society, in which he was well-integrated, was capable of; for Derrida, it was the experience of growing up as an outsider in Algiers—both Jewish and not, both French and not, both African and not. Modernity then, on Bernstein’s telling, has to do with concern not for a meta-narrative, but for rethinking the critique of technology. Postmodernity is instead the concern with the exception and the singularity of the ethical self.

Instead of accepting Rorty’s conclusions, Bernstein comes down instead in favour of Habermas’ position. Bernstein shows how each philosopher exposes weakness of the other’s project: Derrida’s discussion of the ethical (for example, the infinite responsibility I experience

in my relationship to another) exposes an important lacuna in Habermas' thought; Habermas's work shows that Derrida fails to provide a sufficiently concrete theory of social relations. Each thus highlights an important facet of modern existence, however, Bernstein argues, while Derrida rejects the possibility of drawing firm boundaries between philosophy and other domains of research, "he has consistently maintained that philosophy itself is not a well-defined discipline," he has failed to take his own advice to heart (92). The failure of Derrida to engage with our best social science research (unlike some incidental work on Freud) and his concern with unmasking philosophical bias, therefore means that, unlike Habermas, he is incapable of asking "what, if anything, philosophy might learn" from the social sciences (92).

Unfortunately the themes from Bernstein and Rorty are reprised several more times in the book. For example, Seyla Benhabib's essay on Derrida and Lyotard argues that Derrida is too quick to overlook actually existing bodies politic in favour of criticisms of idealized structures. Simon Critchley, in his "Frankfurt Impromptu—Remarks on Derrida and Habermas," argues that Derrida is important to political philosophy because of his discussions of openness and infinite responsibility to the other—"politics cannot be founded because such a foundation would limit the freedom of decision" (105), whereas Habermas is important because of his work on constitutionality. Derrida is a foil, then, because he stresses the importance of a non-foundational and non-arbitrary politics, where rules are created not to be fixed, but because of the necessity of getting from ethics to politics. This is the essence of his "democracy to come" (107), which Derrida brings out first in his *Politics of Friendship*. The theme that begins to emerge is that Derrida is a counter-weight to Habermas by showing the dangers of an overly universalizing politics.

This theme carries over into the third section of the collection. Bonnie Honig and Thomassen contribute essays that discuss the relationship between constitutionalism and democracy. Of more interest in the section, however, are contributions by Habermas and Derrida themselves: Habermas's lecture from 2003 on religious tolerance, "Religious Tolerance—The Pacemaker for Cultural Rights," and Derrida's well-known article on inclusion, "Hostipitality."

In a particularly incisive article, "Between Deliberation and Deconstruction: The Condition of Post-National Democracy," Martin Morris argues that Habermas has overlooked the remnants of past ideology that might occupy the public sphere. In a democratic state, the existence of certain types of political spaces is important for the reproduction of society as a whole; yet as Frankfurt critical theory has shown political space "is disfigured and limited if political questions are assimilated to those of technical administration" (232).

In contrast to many other republican thinkers, Habermas believes that substantial agreement between members of a society is unlikely at best. Instead, Habermas emphasizes the importance of reasonable decision procedures that can give rise to mutually acceptable decisions. The presumption of rationality is thus procedural and not substantive.

The theory of discourse that Habermas develops rests on an underlying realm of shared, latent agreement—the famous lifeworld that he borrows from Husserl. However, according to Morris, Derrida has shown us that language and culture (i.e. the lifeworld) are awash in relations of power if we continue to insist on agreement as a condition of political discourse. Only if we take into account Derrida's insight, which says that truly neutral encounters only occur when we put aside truth claims and instead receive the other in a situation of openness and respect, may we begin to purge ideology from our public spaces.

At the end of the day, we see two very disparate thinkers arrive in a similar place. Both accept that the fragmentation of the modern world leads to a tension between politics and culture. The unfortunate part of Thomassen's volume is that each essay does an excellent job of highlighting a central tension between the two thinkers, yet each essay turns on the same central issue. An ethical Derrida is contraposed with a political Habermas. While the various nuances of this are well set-up—in particular by Bernstein, Critchley, Rorty and others—the volume feels incomplete without an attempted synthesis or a more robust critique. While Thomassen has thus given us an excellent introductory work, I cannot say that anywhere does he break new ground.