

# Márkus and Habermas

What does their debate tell us about them?

János Kis

*Department of Philosophy & Department of Political Science  
Central European University*



## About the author

**János Kis** is university professor of the CEU Departments of Philosophy and Political Science. He was a disciple of György Markus and belonged to the latest generation of the philosophical school of György Lukács. His fields of research are ethics and political philosophy. His works include: *L'égale dignité: Essai sur les fondements des droits de l'homme*. Paris: Seuil, 1989, *Az állam semlegessége*, Budapest: Atlantisz, 1997, *Constitutional democracy*. Budapest: CEU Press, 2003., *Politics as a Moral Problem*. Budapest: CEU Press, 2008., *Az összetorlódott idő*. Pozsony: Kalligram 2013., *Mi a liberalizmus?* Pozsony: Kalligram, 2014.

## Abstract

*Márkus and Habermas: What does their debate tell us about them?*

In the early 1980s, György Márkus and Jürgen Habermas were engaged in a philosophical debate. On the surface, the debate seems to focus on the question whether production or language should be treated as a paradigm for social praxis. With hindsight this issue seems to be of parochial interest. But there was a deeper question at stake in the debate between Márkus and Habermas. Habermas' main objection to the "production paradigm" is that it presents the instrumental action (characteristic of the relationship between humans and nature) as inextricably interwoven with communicative action (appropriate for the relationship between humans and humans). The alternative paradigm he proposes strictly separates the communicative from instrumental action. Márkus claims the separation is not feasible. This paper tries to show why not, and draws cursory conclusions on the character of the two philosophers' late theories.

**János Kis: *Márkus and Habermas: What does their debate tell us about them?*<sup>1</sup>**

In 1982, György Márkus has published his first book in exile: *Language and Production* (in French). The book registers a shift in post-Marxist literature from production to language as a paradigm for interpreting social praxis. It passionately argues against that shift. And the most prominent post-Marxist philosopher singled out as a target of its critique is Jürgen Habermas.

In 1988, Habermas has published *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, a lecture series dedicated to a critical defense of modernity and of the Enlightenment project of human emancipation. In this book, the author subjected Márkus' account of the production paradigm to an extensive discussion. He failed to take notice, however, what *Language and Production* says on his "linguistic turn". Neither has Márkus ever reacted to Habermas' critique of his views.

So their debate remained lopsided.

And, yet, it is of an extreme theoretical importance. In making this claim, I do not have the production/language issue in mind. With hindsight, that issue seems to have no other than parochial interest. Underlying the production/language controversy there is a deeper one lurking, though. In my view, the question of paradigm shift is not a properly formulated question.

But the underlying question is. It is about a very serious philosophical problem.

Given the time constraints, I will not explain in what sense I believe the production/language question to be misdirected. I will try to uncover and discuss the underlying question. Reversing the historical order of the exchange, I start out from Habermas' critical comments.

Here is Habermas' main worry about the production paradigm. Production focuses on the relationship between human beings and nature. It takes the goals of productive action for granted. Its question is: Given the available means, what is the most effective way to reach the fixed goals. Its norms are of an instrumental character. They are determined by the laws and empirical facts of nature. And it is doubtful whether the instrumental norms of the relationship between humans and nature, revealed by the production process, can properly account for the character of the norms regulating social practice. For the relationship between humans and humans should not be governed by instrumental norms.

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented at the *György Márkus Memorial Colloquium* organized by the Institute of Philosophy, Research Centre for the Humanities of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, on December 3, 2016.

On the face of it, there seems to be a plain answer to this criticism. Habermas' description of the production paradigm does not correctly render the views of Márkus. In *Language and Production*, Márkus argues that "production" should not be used as a synonym for "labor". He insists that the terminological distinction is made by the mature Marx himself, at least since *Grundrisse*. Habermas' description of production applies, more or less, to "labor" but not to "production". Labor is, however, an abstraction according to Márkus (and the mature Marx). In the real world, it is embedded in a wider process. Production is that wider process.

Production, as Márkus understands it, is not a one-off act. It is a process regularly repeating itself: a process of *re*production. Once we focus on reproduction, the instrumental view is revealed to be grossly inadequate. First, the goals of production (the human needs and desires that it is supposed to satisfy), do not appear as fixed. True, they are fixed at the beginning of each period. But they change between that period's beginning and end. They change, in part, due to the changes of production itself. For the productive process entails technical development, technical development results in new product types, and the availability of new product types gives rise to new needs and desires. So at the beginning of the next period, the goals of production are partly different from what they were at the beginning of the previous one. Production, Márkus argues, is not just production of commodities and services, it is also production of a demand for those commodities and services.

Second, technical development does not determine alone the direction of the change in needs and desires. Social institutions coordinate the technical development on the one hand, and the changes of the needs and desires on the other. Think of the role of the market in shaping the nature of the demand – and that of the supply. So the technical and social aspects of the process of reproduction are inextricably intermingled when it comes to determining the dynamics of the means-ends relationship.

Third, production itself is socially organized, and its social organization is being reproduced in the same process in which the material conditions of the production are reproduced. This is another aspect of the inextricable intermingling of the social and the technical. Here again, the influence does not point in one direction only, from technical change to social change. What is called the social division of labor is underdetermined by the technical division of labor, by the technical necessities of human cooperation. It entails rights, powers, obligations, and privileges whose structure is to some extent independent of the technical

features of production. It involves role inequalities and asymmetries. Those inequalities and asymmetries are defined by conventions, rules, and norms. And the conventions, rules, and norms, by their very nature, are open to criticism in terms of higher moral standards and principles. So the processes of reproduction are of a complex character, and their logic goes ways beyond instrumental rationality. It is production taken in this sense that Márkus wants to preserve as a paradigm for social praxis.

Habermas does not miss the complexities of Márkus' view. He provides an accurate description of it. But he believes to have an independent argument capable of showing that the complex view, too, is vulnerable to his general critique of the production paradigm. It is this argument that directs our gaze towards the deeper layer of the debate.

For Habermas, the complexity of Márkus' view – an account of production where the technical and social aspects are inextricably intertwined with each other – is not a theoretical virtue. It is rather a theoretical weakness, because it forces the relations between human beings into the straightjacket of instrumental normativity Habermas does not say much on why this is so but he intimates that the unity of the technical and social aspects of production allows the instrumental logic of the relationship between humans and nature to dominate the relationship between humans and humans. It makes, for each agent, everybody else appear as part of the means they can use to reach their separate goals.

So the production paradigm, even in its complex form, is incapable of accommodating the non-instrumental norms of social relations. It leads to a view in which the proper attitude of a human to another human is strategic. But, when it comes to working out the principles under which they ought to conduct their shared lives, humans should not treat each other strategically. Rather, they should be motivated by the aim of reaching rational consensus. As Habermas explains it in great detail somewhat later, in Volume One of his *Theory of Communicative Action*, one has clearly to distinguish two types of action, strategic and communicative, from each other. It comes to strategic action when individuals pursue separate aims, and give incentives and disincentives to others in order to bring their action in harmony with their aims. On the other hand, as participants of communicative action, individuals recognize that they owe justification for their acts to each other. They recognize that the justification must be given in terms of principles and standards they can agree upon. Each participant is motivated solely by the desire to obtain a rational consensus. They are in a position to evaluate each other's

assertions solely on the basis of reason and evidence in an atmosphere completely free of any non-rational coercive influences.

To have communicative action in this sense, Habermas argues, presupposes a clear separation of the sphere of strategic action from that of communicative action. Unless this comes true, the communicative process will be tainted by the effects of strategically fabricated motivation. Call this Habermas' separation claim.

It is the separation claim that raises the deeper issue between Habermas and Márkus. Interestingly, Habermas is not clear about this. He believes that Márkus himself accepts the separation claim. He attributes a thesis to Márkus according to which, in socialism, technical relations between the "freely associated producers" and nature will be institutionally separated from social relations within the association of the producers.

This is a gross misreading. The view Habermas attributes to Márkus is a view Márkus attributes to Marx – and disavows. Moreover, he critiques the separation claim not only in the form in which it can be found in Marx – he explicitly critiques Habermas for his proposal to separate the domains of strategic and of communicative action. He has many points against Habermas' theory but this is, in my view, his philosophically most important objection.

To be fair to Habermas, he does not propose the separation claim as a blueprint for a future society beyond reification, alienation, and domination (as Marx has done). He proposes it as an ideal and as a methodological tool for identifying principles by which people should be guided in their treatment of each other. His theory takes communicative action to be based on counterfactual assumptions that cannot be fully realized in the real world. This is why he calls the situation when those assumptions obtain an "ideal speech situation".

Is there anything wrong with such an idealization? Márkus thinks there is. He proposes intricate arguments in *Language and Production* and in an article, *Beyond the Dichotomy: Praxis and Poiesis*, an article contemporaneous with the book, for why Habermas' "ideal speech situation" goes astray. I have no room for reconstructing his arguments in this talk. But I can provide a trivial story to illuminate the basic structure of the objection. I am not sure whether he would like the style of my argument. But I believe he would agree that it is made in the spirit of his objection and, that, it works.

Here is the story. A schoolboy tells his pugnacious classmate: "It is not nice to beat the weaker." Clearly, he formulates a moral judgment. This judgment has practical implications. For

the pugnacious child, it implies: “Refrain from beating the weaker.” For any bystander strong enough to interfere without unreasonable costs for themselves, it implies: “Defend the weaker if they are attacked.” This injunction applies to the very speaker, for he is not only the one who utters the moral judgment – he also finds himself in the position of a bystander. If he makes the statement sincerely, if he believes to be under the duty to defend the weaker, then his statement has a further implication: “If you do this again, I will interfere.” This last message is of a strategic nature. It warns the pugnacious child that the balance of costs and benefits of this beating the weaker are dramatically changed.

So the schoolboy, by uttering the sentence “It is not nice to beat the weaker”, does the followings:

1. He expresses a moral judgment.
2. He addresses a moral injunction to his classmate.
3. He addresses a strategic warning to his classmate.

These are three different things. But there are no three different acts. It is not the case that the schoolboy *first* expresses a moral judgment, *then* addresses a moral injunction to his classmate, and then, *finally*, addresses a strategic warning to his classmate. He performs only one act. What we have done was not more than rendering the same act under three different descriptions.

Sometimes, different descriptions are related contingently. E.g., if I knock the door from the outside, what I am doing can be described as asking for being let in. If I knock the door from the inside, what I am doing cannot be described as asking for being let in. It should be described as my asking to be let out. But our case is different. Here, the strategic message is a necessary implication of the moral message. All moral messages have strategic implications. Communicative action is, therefore, inseparable from strategic action. To put it better: the communicative aspects of action are inseparable from its strategic aspects. The “ideal speech situation” is not intelligible, even as a mental experiment.

This is not a matter of some little technical detail. As Márkus explains, our entire view on how to understand modernity and how to relate to the emancipatory project of the Enlightenment hinges on it.

This brings us to the concluding question of my talk: What does the debate between Márkus and Habermas tell us about them?

As Márkus points out in *Praxis and Poiesis*, the separation claim is not a specific feature of Marx' thinking. It is at the heart of the entire Enlightenment project of human emancipation. What is specific to Marx is the way he wants to see the separation to be accomplished. By reformulating the separation claim, Habermas tries to rescue the intelligibility of the emancipatory project of the Enlightenment. With all its problems, his venture is a great philosophical achievement. But it remains vulnerable to some of the internal contradictions that project was revealed to be suffering from.

What about Márkus? He has freed his thinking from this and other sources of the incoherence of the original project. But for reasons of deep moral convictions, he insisted that the idea of human emancipation cannot and should not be abandoned. His later philosophy can be understood, I think, as a continuous intellectual struggle with the tensions between a sincere commitment to the ideal of human emancipation at the core of the Enlightenment tradition and the failure of the philosophers working in that tradition to give a fully defensible form of that ideal.

\*

Aki olvasott Márkus György műveiből, tudja, hogy Márkus igen jelentős filozófus volt. De csak akik a közelében lehettek, azok tudják, hogy nagy szellem is volt egyben. A nagy szellemek közelsége felemelő, de nyomasztó is tud lenni. Gyuri jelenléte soha nem volt nyomasztó. Mert bár szellemi fölénye nyilvánvaló volt, ezt soha nem érezte a környezetével. Tanítványaihoz – hozzánk – kedvességgel és szeretettel közeledett. Úgyhogy nemcsak mesterünknek éreztük – mert nem egyszerűen tanár volt, hanem Mester –, de idősebb fivérünknek is. Nagyon nehéz a rendelkezésre álló szűk időkeretben beszélni erről, ezért inkább elmondanám egy erős emlékemet.

1963/64 telén egy este együtt jöttünk el a bölcsészkar Pesti Barnabás utcai épületéből, Márkus és néhány tanítványa, köztük Bertalan Laci és Bence Gyuri, akik már régóta nincsenek velünk, róluk is meg kell most emlékezni. Úgy emlékszem, Altrichter Feri is ott volt. Talán Tímár Árpai is. Hatalmas hóesés volt, leállt a forgalom. Gyalog vonultunk át az egyetemtől a Margit-híd pesti hídfőjéhez. Gyuri végig magyarázott, mi is mondtuk a magunkét. A Margit-hídnál megálltunk. Gyuri, akár a katedrán: kezében az elmaradhatatlan cigaretta, fejét kissé oldalt és előre hajtja, úgy beszél. Észrevételeinket kedvesen helyére teszi. Fedetlen feje behavazva, de észre sem veszi. Nem tudom felidézni, meddig tartott ez a beszélgetés, nem emlékszem a végére. Számomra azt jeleníti meg, hogy a mester és tanítványai, az idősebb testvér és a fiatalabb testvérek közti beszélgetés soha nem érhet véget. Ő már nincs. De amíg lesz egy is azok közül, akik a tanítványai lehettünk, a beszélgetés folytatódni fog.

