1987

Habermas, Peukert, Höehn: Towards a Political Ecclesiology of Communicative Praxis

Paul F. Lakeland

Fairfield University, pflakeland@fairfield.edu

Peer Reviewed

HABERMAS, PEUKERT, HOEHN:
TOWARDS A POLITICAL ECCLESIOLOGY
OF COMMUNICATIVE PRAXIS

The first real task of the presentation was to place the subject of the paper in the context of the conference theme of "The Linguistic Turn." An investigation of Habermas' idea of communicative action, in particular through an examination of its appropriation in a theological context by Helmut Peukert and Hans-Joachim Hoehn, would show how something as apparently abstract and theoretical as a linguistic turn could have significant practical consequences for the life of the church. Further, although Juergen Habermas is himself not noticeably favorable towards religion, it is possible through the mediation of Peukert and Hoehn to establish a relationship between church and communicative action distinguished by three "moments," a moment of need, a moment of critique, and a moment of solidarity.

Habermas' interest in critical philosophy and social science as ways of emancipating human beings from positivism and so-called "value-free" science led directly to his personal "linguistic turn." Habermas found that in all language that is not deliberately distorted there is an implied intention to achieve consensus. Language operates with implicit validity claims to comprehensibility, truth, truthfulness and rightness. Differences between speakers can be arbitrated through the attempt to "discursively redeem" these validity claims in argumentation, pursued in a genuinely open atmosphere oriented to achieving understanding "purely by the force of the better argument."

In his more recent work Habermas has developed his theory of communicative action into a kind of comprehensive moral vision, in which the exercise of undistorted communication is the best protection of the human community from the unchecked instrumentalism of technology on the one hand, and the "strategic" manipulation of individuals and communities on the other. The appropriate form of action in the "lifeworld" (the moral community) is communicative reason, that of the "system" is instrumental reason. The system is important, but subordinate in the last analysis to the lifeworld.

The second stage of the presentation turned to the specifically religious reality. Utilising Peukert and Hoehn, can the moral vision of Habermas' communicative action illumine the religious life of the ecclesial community? Peukert's proposal[1] is to demonstrate that if critical theory, as understood by Habermas, involves a commitment to true solidarity, then that solidarity must take account not only of the present community, but of those already dead. In other words, critical

---

[1]See *Science, Action and Fundamental Theology: Towards a Theology of Communicative Praxis* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985).

theory needs the kind of openness to transcendence that can alone make sense of an idea of solidarity with the dead. Thus Peukert is drawing contemporary fundamental theology and Habermas' notion of communicative action into a close relationship with one another. He defines fundamental theology as ''a theory of communicative action in universal solidarity.'' Obviously this approach has bearing on ecclesiology, since the church is the historical point in which the dead are remembered, precisely in the context of the community's hopeful anticipation of the open future.

Hans-Joachim Hoehn's work[2] takes a somewhat different approach, attempting to show how the ecclesial reality in all its complexity can be seen on a systems theory model owing much to the thought of Niklas Luhmann, but powered, so to speak, by an action theory on the lines of Habermas' communicative action. Further, since Hoehn like Peukert sees communicative action as the fundamental expression of human freedom and communal responsibility, he is able to make fruitful suggestions for the role of the church within the context of a pluralistic society. It will collaborate with the reality of communicative praxis in the world, while attempting to unmask the illegitimate instrumentalisation of the lifeworld or the exercise of a distorting and therefore oppressive communication. Hoehn's problem is that he does not seem to see the reflexive character of this outlook, that is, that the church may have to subject its own reality to the same critique.

In the final constructive section of the presentation some further interrelations of communicative action and ecclesial reality were made explicit. One could add to Peukert's concern for the preservation of solidarity with the dead an eschatological orientation, a hope in the face of the knowledge that we who struggle in the church and world in the present are destined to be the dead. Further, the church needs communicative action theory both in order to enter into a free and open dialogue with the secular or non-Christian world, and to unchain theology from an exclusive attention to the recollection of a tradition. Communicative action theory would also encourage the church to cleanse itself from all distorted communication, from all that is not emancipatory. This would lead it to rethink its own understanding purely by the force of the better argument. Authority would have to be seen as directed towards preserving the ecclesial conditions within which such communicative action could continue to take place.

Finally, the church as ''the eschatological community of salvation'' is an example of a ''community of communicative competence.'' The church is not eschatological if it is too this-wordly or too otherwordly, not community if it is too individualistic or too exclusive, and not salvific if it does not live out and communicate to the world a commitment to human freedom and responsibility. To do this it must express universal solidarity, be and be seen to be a place of open dialogue in a spirit of equality, and practice a purifying self-critique of its own false consciousness and ideological captivity.

The discussion was led off by the moderator, who while recognising the suggestiveness for ecclesiology of much of Habermas' theory of communicative

---

[2]*Kirche und kommunikatives Handeln: Studien zur Theologie und Praxis der Kirche in der Auseinandersetzung mit den Sozialtheorien Niklas Luhmanns und Juergen Habermas*, Frankfurter Theologische Studien 32 (Frankfurt: Josef Knecht, 1985).

action, yet had two significant problems. He felt that the whole idea of communication directed towards achieving understanding created difficulties for an ecclesial understanding in which tradition is accorded so much respect; and for a community, one of whose charisms is asserted to be the responsibility to speak with authority about just how that tradition is to be interpreted. Perhaps Habermas' difficulties with the idea of tradition and the apparent incompatibility of a theory of communicative competence with the idea of magisterium restricted his real usefulness in the Catholic tradition. Perhaps, indeed, Gadamer would be a more fruitful resource.

The focus of the ensuing discussion was upon the points raised by the moderator. In the first place it was suggested that tradition in the Catholic sense was not a rock upon which communicative action had to founder. Tradition is a record of the ongoing conversation, and of those understandings which the community has found to be of central importance. But tradition is not itself closed, and indeed proceeds precisely through a conversation. The sticking point for Habermas here might be the question of who is competent to engage in the conversation. In principle in Habermas all have an equal right and responsibility. But do all have an equal capacity? In practice in Habermas, however, the idea of the community of inquirers is open to the charge of de facto elitism.

In the second place the issue of magisterial authority does raise some difficulties. However, these may not be insurmountable, since no one believes that magisterial authority is exercised through the proclamation of an interpretation of doctrine in defiance of previous tradition. Magisterium is intended to be exercised through explication of the tradition. Authority exists, then, to insure that ongoing interpretation remains faithful to the tradition. This is all compatible with a theory of communicative action. What may not sit so comfortably, in practice if not in theory, is Habermas' belief that communication must seek understanding, not compel consent, and his insistence that all members of the community are equal partners in the conversation. At the same time such notions are not self-evidently ridiculous, even in the context of Catholic ecclesial practice.

PAUL F. LAKELAND
Fairfield University