



Habermas, Dahrendorf, and the Discourse on Social Complexity in Contemporary Society

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the later works of Jürgen Habermas and Ralf Dahrendorf to answer the question: How can deliberative democratic theory and liberal sociology jointly inform solutions to rising inequality and democratic erosion in the era of hyper-globalization? By mapping points of convergence and divergence in their analyses of globalization, institutional crisis, and social solidarity, the paper offers a novel framework that integrates Habermas’s concept of the “public sphere” with Dahrendorf’s emphasis on institutional resilience. This original contribution demonstrates how combining these perspectives can guide policy proposals for revitalizing democratic participation and ensuring fairer wealth distribution in contemporary Western societies.

Keywords: *society; crisis, poverty; deliberative democracy; institutional resilience; hyper-globalization; democratic participation; economic inequality.*

1. Introduction

Ralf Dahrendorf and Jürgen Habermas are often considered two thinkers with contrasting sociological and political visions. However, their relationship has always been characterized by “friendly feelings” towards each other (Corchia, 2019). Certainly their “mutual recognition” of each other’s intellectual value played a key role in setting aside most of the divergences they might encounter because of the different thoughts on both scientific and methodological matters. But since the 1970s Dahrendorf and Habermas (1969) offered critical arguments against the attempt to reform social democracy through the formula of a “third way, beyond right and left”; often sharing some traits with the social and political scientific analysis of Western countries, particularly Europe. Globalization, growth and solidarity are the issues with which Dahrendorf and Habermas were particularly concerned about.

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The topics addressed focused on the appearance of neo-liberal governments [from the policies of reduction of state interventions, with the continuous reduction of public spending and wild privatizations] which have developed throughout the 1980s and 1990s, until they found a formulation of the so-called question of "squaring the circle" (Dahrendorf 1995) and of the "postnational constellation" (Habermas, 1999). Both were asking the same question as Giddens: how to create necessary conditions [in any society] that allow economic success in the global market without compromising solidarity, social cohesion and/or democratic institutions? (Dahrendorf, 1990; Leonardi, 2020).

2. Democratic Crisis and Citizen Participation

Nowadays, the issue of effective democracy in contemporary societies and the participation of citizens in all phases of decisions is tinged with worrying issues. Let us just think, for example, of the continuous desertion at the polls by more and more citizens which inevitably highlights the fact that, as a consequence, often less than half of those entitled to vote exercise their right. We can thus say with extreme ease (and unfortunately without the possibility of denial) that the majority of human beings do not decide but rather suffers decisions, especially in the areas of social life and work. Indeed, we should all hope that the collective dimension returns to exert pressure on public life (or "public sphere", according to Habermas' definition). As proof of the difficult historical period we are experiencing, the liberal sociologist Dahrendorf (2000a) precisely and incontrovertibly states that «it is said that we are living in an era of globalization but we do not have adequate global political institutions. Now it emerges that we no longer even have adequate national institutions... populism and federalism go hand in hand. In my opinion, our main task needs to focus on recovering, in part, the lost strengths of parliaments [...] it will be necessary to find new rules of the game that give popular opinions, organized or not, a regular expression" (Dahrendorf, 2000b).

Dahrendorf's statement suggests an impressive convergence of viewpoints with what Habermas (1981) has particularly argued on several occasions (Corchia, 2019) in various public occasions in the last two decades. In one way or another, they all place emphasis on the major themes that characterize current events; from the crisis of the national state, the overlapping of multiple cultural needs, even in the simplest things of daily life, to the social and political upheavals which are the consequence of the ever-increasing migratory flows of recent decades. But what seems to be the greatest phenomenon of the moment, which contains and determines the others, is the perception of economic ultra-liberalism as the only "prevailing ideology". The latter undermines the social state typical of the most advanced European nations and, at the same time, creates new widespread poverty throughout the world compensated by the emergence of the concentration of wealth (increasingly) in the hands of a few ultra-billionaires: a phenomenon known as "hyper-globalization" (Rodrik, 2023).

3. Globalization, Inequalities, and Systematic Risks

There are certainly many aspects to keep in mind about globalization, many of which are positive, such as «Globalization, between excesses and contradictions, limits and fragilities, has generated well-being, scientific progress, a reduction in conflicts, creating the belief – which has proven to be illusory – of being unstoppable and irreversible. Instead, it is in deep crisis. The virtuous bond between the United States and China, which

favoring it, has developed now into a strategic rivalry which could suddenly degenerate into conflict.

In the “great disconnect” which is nowadays underway, four forces can be perceived as the main playing characters within the game of the current transformation of international relations: those of an economic and technological nature which redesign global value chains; those related to internal political dynamics which favor closures in a vain attempt to protect national interests; those of external shocks (pandemics, wars, financial crises) which expose the vulnerability of the global system; and those related to geopolitical objectives which foster alliances between friendly countries. In this scenario, politics prevails over the economy, regionalization grows and the instability of international alliances increases because of the multiplication of “free-fighting” countries that aspire to achieve strategic autonomy. In addition to the economic costs, fragmentation fosters geopolitical chaos and increases the risk of conflict. However, it can also trigger globalization according to different economic and geopolitical criteria. Arctic, Underwater, Space and the Digital can all be either fronts of conflict or, with their enormous opportunities, represent the new frontiers of globalization. The world to come will depend greatly on liberal democracies and their ability to promote their values. The hope is that the relaunch in the circulation of goods, services, capital, people and knowledge can consolidate rights and spread freedoms" (Magnani, 2024).

However, certainly the most relevant and irrefutable fact is the increasingly unequal distribution of wealth (Milanovic 2012, 2017) and political power in the world. In order to provide support to these arguments, I would like to cite the authoritative interventions of some great sociologists and scholars of the phenomenon alike, such as Beck (2000a, 2000b, 2000c, 2000d, 2000e) and Bauman (1999a, 1999b, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c), who have confirmed on several occasions the negative aspects of the emergence of severe growing economic and of consequent social inequalities. The news of a few days ago regarding the fact that Elon Musk has exceeded 400 billion dollars in personal wealth. According to UBS's Billionaire Ambitions Report, the number of global billionaires has grown by 50%, and their wealth has increased at an ever-faster pace: +121%. In 2024, the total assets of the world's "scrooges" amounts to approximately 14 trillion dollars.

Globally, wealth growth has been driven largely by the technology sector, with a tripling of wealth in 10 years (from 788.9 billion to 2,400 billion dollars). Moreover, tech billionaires boast the highest percentage average of personal wealth; that is around \$70.6 billion each.

Italy as well has its very rich scrooges worth to mention. In our country the wealth of rich Italians has grown significantly. In 2024, Italian billionaires rose to 62, compared to 56 the previous year. Moreover, their assets have increased from 162.3 billion dollars in 2023 to 199.8 billion in 2024, with a growth of 23.1%, incredibly reaching the highest in Europe (against the + 10% recorded in Germany and the United Kingdom). We can thus argue that in Italy, which has a population of around 60 million inhabitants, there is one billionaire for every one million people. However, the most interest fact (and quite significant I believe) is that the assets of these 62 super rich represent as much as 8.4% of the national GDP. The gap is thus growing inexorably. Censis (2024) highlights that as the wealth of billionaires continues to grow, so does poverty. Indeed, 18.9% of the Italian population is at serious risk. As a consequence, this aspect makes it necessary to create new or reformed supranational structures, to allow fairer taxation and reduce the possibilities of the super-rich to evade taxes. These new supranational organizations should

be truly neutral, above parties and universal, which will also bring about an end to the unjust and intolerable violations of human rights that the news of contemporary politics witnesses to us on a daily basis; violations of fundamental rights that are unheard of and contrary to international law.

4. Ethical Proposals

In light of the economic upheavals of recent decades, it becomes increasingly necessary to have a greater and more equitable distribution of the planet's riches, which belong to everyone and have so far been concentrated only in the hands of too few people. It seems important to us that the return of contemporary societies to the "primacy of democratic politics" over the economy, in its ultra-liberal version prevailing today, and an effective greater respect for social rights which, as Dahrendorf and Habermas (1996) believe, determine the full respect and use of all other rights. Another important observation by the so-called "realists", such as the philosopher Danilo Zolo, who have warned of the great difficulties in implementing the proposals examined so far, also makes these interesting considerations:

"The total, uncontrolled liberalization of the movements of financial capital is not irreversible, nor is the deregulation of labor markets, nor, in the West, is the dismantling of the welfare state and its transformation into a 'penal state'. The planetary hegemony enjoyed by the great Western mass media is not irreversible, nor are the processes of "Westernization" of the world that are marketed as "global culture". The erosion of the sovereignty of small and medium-sized states and the concentration of power and wealth at the top of the world hierarchy dominated by the major industrial powers are not irreversible. The drift of the privatization of international law and the removal of markets from the regulatory and balancing instrument of law is not irreversible. The mutation of modern war into global war and the devastation of international law and institutions is not irreversible" (Zolo, 2004).

To break the constraints of the Washington consensus, as neoliberal globalization is often defined, and its "imperial seal of denial of the beauty and complexity of the world" (Zolo, 2004), we must seek truly democratic solutions, based on an idea of a State of law at a global level, with the creation of an inclusive world society (Habermas, 1998a), even if difficult to think and conceive and even more so to implement. This is the classic idea of "legal globalism" which considers individuals as free and equal, at a generally global level of citizenship, therefore beyond "strict" state citizenship. By "seriously" considering all the individual people who make up humanity as free and equal, as Dworkin (2010) would say, it will become possible to build the UN of the future without "veto rights" and without imperial superpowers on duty that can decide to "export democracy" where they deem it right and avoid sanctioning "friendly" dictators. We all cannot fail to commit ourselves to such attractive proposals: to move from an "unfinished modernity" to a modernity with an emancipated society that is fulfilled. Reason can only push us towards the best for everyone, even if on an absolutely bumpy path, which also coincides with the best for every single person, every single person.

An important consideration is the proposal of deliberative and proceduralist democracy made by Habermas (2004), who bases his entire democratic system on the participation of everyone in decision-making processes. In addition, even the Constitution must "be changed with each new generation" (Habermas, 1998b), in order to guarantee greater sharing. But Habermas (2010) himself changes his mind on delicate topics that are increasingly present in current societies; in fact, Habermasian deliberative-procedural

democracy or even the less demanding traditional representative-parliamentary democracy no longer seem adequate in the face of the new problems posed by eugenics: that is artificial insemination, the use of stem cells and euthanasia, and artificial intelligence. Dahrendorf (1985a) also supports, like Habermas (1999), the need for these topics to resort to the competence of the “Ethical Senates” composed of unelected scientists and philosophers and made up of people of clear fame, (Dahrendorf, 2009). But we think that such “Ethical Senates” could probably be an elitist way of making such relevant decisions. These decisions not only affect us all, but they will also have disastrous consequences for future generations.

In response to Dahrendorf (1985b) on this regard, I would like to recall with Salvatore Veca that «the political experiment of constitutional democracy is the best we have managed to combine». Even in cases in which «a law that we consider ... unfair does not mean that [it] is a measure that violates democratic procedures» (Veca, 2004). Therefore, we must not be influenced by “liberal genetics”, influenced by “consumeristic” models, but neither should we give up democracy; that is “the best we have managed to combine”. However, it must be remembered that even these opinions are often divided. The only possible solution for eugenics evidently always remains that of democratic procedural rules. Naturally, it seems right to us that a democratic method should always be applied to make decisions that truly concern, more than current events, the future of all humanity and, above all, of the generations to come. The Habermasian democratic-participatory method of permanent procedural rationality, in which public debate free from domination controls the representative institutions and constitutes the new sovereignty: an entirely proceduralized sovereignty, where the contents are never anticipated, seems to us one of the most rational possible solutions. Nevertheless, in order to be a truly practicable solution the latter cannot ignore the foundation of fundamental rights which undoubtedly constitute a pillar that cannot be procedurally consumed.

Here is what we can hope for: that fundamental human rights, universally recognized by the UN Declaration of 1948, are always a starting point. Therefore, rights would eventually no longer be modified except in the sense of their, whenever possible, expansion with greater guarantees and expansion of their protection. From this untouchable fixed point, it is then possible to try to apply the idea of a “permanent procedural rationality” of deliberative democracy proposed by Habermas. By placing limits on citizens’ possibilities of choice in the field of eugenics, he encounters a real aporia, which puts his entire participatory and deliberative democratic system in tension. In fact, his entire thought provides that “the contents are never anticipated” by anyone but are the result of democratic and equal debate among citizens.

In reality, in trying to set these limits, Habermas finds himself in good company; in addition to Dahrendorf (1988), we can mention the liberal par excellence Popper. Who, after having hoped, throughout his life, for a free society without controls of any kind, the famous “open society”, believes in his latest writing that «A democracy cannot exist if television is not put under control » (Popper, 1996).

11. Conclusion

The utopian realism of Habermas’ social theory has a normative scope in its theoretical contents that we do not find in Dahrendorf’s (2003) theory. This important aspect reflects not only a different epistemological approach in the sociological field, but

also a very different conception of the role of the sociologist as a public intellectual and of the relationship with political practice.

Dahrendorf (2004), as a convinced liberal, following the Popperian tradition, never elaborates, in any way, indications of a prescriptive nature based on his theoretical analyses, but always limits himself only to outlining the tendencies that social processes can assume in different institutional contexts and of power, and in the face of different forms of mobilization and action by social actors.

Its alternative envisages the adoption of policies aimed at the “social reconstruction of life”, through social processes and dynamics which see individuals, social groups and institutional actors as protagonists, which are made up of actions, practices, policies with a view to a recomposition of spheres of activity, and which are not artificially separated and opposed to the security and stability of the human condition. Therefore, according to Dahrendorf’s liberal vision, social science must in no way have an ideological character, it must never enunciate scientific categories as moral precepts or values as science.

He is very attentive to the different orientations of science and politics, which require a different way of formulating research questions and problems: science, for Dahrendorf, cannot, must never, be prescriptive, does not rest on certainties and promotes a constant criticism of 'existing. In this case, Habermas falls into the category of the “pragmatic model” of the relationship between science and politics, which contemplates both the possibility of a rational examination of the relationship between technique and practical choice, and the possibility of discussion by public opinion. In the latter context, the confrontation between science and public opinion always translates into a circular model of transmission of practical issues into scientific issues and their return, in the form of scientific information, to public opinion. But many aspects closely link the thoughts of the two great sociologists, in fact we recall the objection, made by both for over two decades now, on the risk of neglecting the dangers for democracy deriving from the so-called “Singapore Syndrome”, or of not taking seriously the act of considering the risks brought by the flexibility of work at all costs and the growth of inequalities for social cohesion as has happened since the 1980s. In particular, both feared and warned about the survival of democracy in our Western societies. Ex post, we should all learn from the two sociologists who are masters of democratic confrontation and mutual respect even if they started from theoretically very distant points of view.

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