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ARTICLE

Critical Theory, Truth, and Protest

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In the 1960s, theoretical quarrels over truth in the tradition of postwar political theory found themselves at the center of political conflict about the validity and value of student protest. This article traces those quarrels to argue that Herbert Marcuse was not merely a "guru" polemicist of the New Left, and that Jürgen Habermas's emerging deliberative theory was not just the result of austere philosophical debates. Each self-consciously pursued justificatory links between their interpretations of Hegel, their debates on truth and justification, and their conflicting views on student protest. Both thinkers, I show, cited these theoretical debates in both public writing and private correspondence on the student movement. In the process, I suggest that prevailing histories of critical theory have underappreciated the ways these two divergent critical epistemologies were marshaled to justify different responses to student protest. More broadly, I argue that critical theory's protest decade reanimates long-standing questions about the normative and political commitments latent in the twentieth century's recurring debates about truth, language, and the objectivity of future possibilities.

Introduction

In 1971, as a fiery protest movement dimmed, Jürgen Habermas reflected, "How are radical thinking and a doctrine with political consequences possible, but so that the philosopher will neither moralizingly overstretch his responsibility (and congeal at the undefined things he anticipates) nor succumb to objective irresponsibility (and proceed frivolously, whether in the sense of activism or in that of a retreat to practical abstinence)?"[1] Habermas was frustrated: on one hand, he scorned Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer for retreating to "practical abstinence"; on the other, he claimed that some leftist intellectuals, perhaps Herbert Marcuse, "congeal[ed] at the undefined things [they] anticipate[d]." He was concerned about critical theory, fearing that the tradition would constitute little more than "an empty exercise of self-reflection."[2] Between these possibilities, between quietism and activism, anesthetic asceticism and futile radicalism, Habermas endeavored a practical role for his discipline.

[1]Jürgen Habermas, "Why More Philosophy?", trans. E. B. Ashton, *Social Research* 38/4 (1971), 633–54, at 637.

[2]Ibid., 650.

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Habermas's provocation punctuated an especially critical period in critical theory's relationship to protest politics. Canonic anglophone histories of this moment often follow Martin Jay's lead, focusing on the quietism (Lukács's "grand hotel abyss") of Adorno, Horkheimer, and others in Germany.[3] Interpreters have often focused on either Marcuse *or* Habermas. Despite an abundance of work on each, few have systematically placed these two thinkers alongside one another.[4] Marcuse is often taken as a "guru" of the protest movement. His writings through the 1960s are properly contextualized in the New Left protests, but are not, I suggest, read alongside sufficiently careful exegesis of his earlier work on the epistemological and metaphysical grounds of critical theory. More interesting to Habermas interpreters and historians are the influences on his work of debates with linguistic pragmatists and democratic theorists, his years away from the institute during which time he received support from Wolfgang Abendroth, or his break with Adorno over student protest.[5] These focuses have led historians to overlook a moment in critical theory when Marcuse's politics, partially born of theoretical commitments he'd first formulated in Frankfurt, collided with Habermas's politics, which themselves were linked to theoretical commitments foundational for critical theory's second generation.[6] Axel Honneth has suggested that Habermas, Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse were all united by the thought that "that the turn to a liberating practice of cooperation should not result from affective bonds or feelings of membership or agreement but from rational insight."[7] Honneth's neat unity comes to look slightly messier if one explicates exactly what was at stake *politically* in critical theory's transitional debates about rational justification and truth.

[3]György Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature,* trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, MA, 1971), 21–2. Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research*, 1923–1950 (Berkeley, 1996), xv; John Bokina, "Marcuse Revisited: An Introduction," in John Bokina and Timothy J. Lukes, eds., *Marcuse: From the New Left to the Next Left* (Laurence, 1994), 1–24. See also Helmut Dubiel and Martin Jay, *Theory and Politics: Studies in the Development of Critical Theory* (Cambridge, MA, 1985).

[4]Thomas Wheatland, *The Frankfurt School in Exile* (Minneapolis, 2009), 290; Douglas Kellner, "Introduction," in Herbert Marcuse, *Collected Works of Herbert Marcuse: The New Left and the 1960s* (London, 2005); Andrew Feenberg, *The Philosophy of Praxis: Marx, Lukács, and the Frankfurt School*, new edn (Brooklyn, 2014). Peter Verovšek moves in the right direction in his argument that Habermas's engagements with students were "in line" with his theoretical commitments. See Peter Verovšek, *Jürgen Habermas: Public Intellectual and Engaged Critical Theorist* (New York, 2026), 129.

[5]Wheatland, *The Frankfurt School in Exile*; Verovšek, *Jürgen Habermas*. Linda Zerilli has asked similar questions about Habermas and Arendt. I depart from her work in two ways. First, I aim to locate Habermas more precisely in his intellectual context among Frankfurt school thinkers like Marcuse and Adorno. Second, I do not take a distinctly "Arendtian" lens on the question of political action and protest politics. Whereas Zerilli reads Arendt against Habermas, I aim merely to historicize and conceptually map the relationship between Habermas's early work and his politics. Linda Zerilli, *A Democratic Theory of Judgment* (Chicago, 2016), 202–7.

[6]Axel Honneth, *Pathologies of Reason: On the Legacy of Critical Theory*, trans. James Ingram (New York, 2023), 11–14. Honneth exemplifies an approach to critical theory wherein all the "first-generation" Frankfurt theorists were committed to some notion of constructing a "rational society" as a society free from needless suffering. What I aim to show is show how different forms and accounts of rationality related to different political programs—to examine the *political stakes* of debates about truth and the *philosophical stakes* of debates about protest.

[7]Ibid., 28.

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This article aims to supplement *contextual* readings of this now well-documented episode with a theoretical investigation of the conceptual and justificatory links between two critical theorists' accounts of true potentialities, valid justification, and protest politics. I aim to surface *conceptual and historical* links and continuities between their theoretical projects and their practical purposes that surface only once we systematically place these thinkers alongside one another in the context both of the New Left and of their concomitant debates about truth and justification. Specifically, I attend to these two thinkers' divergent interpretations and assessments of Hegelian and Marxian accounts of the validity and truth content of historical "potentialities."[8] Both Marcuse and Habermas drew on these debates as they weighed how to speak to and about the student protest movement.[9] This episode in critical theory, then, serves as a dual study: first of the ways they understood the relationship between epistemology and political action, and second of the kinds of normative resources their respective pictures of validity offered them to justify ranges of apt political attitudes towards protest. Neither Marcuse's nor Habermas's politics were strictly entailed or caused by their prior philosophical commitments. Their political commitments seemed to fit—not just as a contingent historical matter, but conceptually—with their philosophical accounts of truth. Thus I conclude with a conceptual provocation on the ways intellectual historians might employ terms like "aptness" or "fittingness" to pursue the normative and conceptual bridges between epistemological debates and particular political attitudes in urgencies like protest.

* * *

While much of Marcuse's and Habermas's engagements with students is well known, it is important not to either overstate their influence or strawman their views. To be sure, protests did energize Marcuse; *some* protesters looked to him for leadership.[10] His books circulated in French, German, and Spanish (the languages of European and American 1960s student protesters).[11] He joined demonstrations, his monographs addressed activists, and he adapted his views upon engagement with protesters.[12] One 1968 Parisian barricade banner read, "Marx the prophet, Marcuse the interpreter, Mao the sword."[13]

[8]This side-by-side reading of Habermas and Marcuse complicates Matthew Specter's, Thomas Wheatland's, and other recent readers' understanding of the ways these two thinkers mobilized their theoretical categories towards distinctive responses to 1960s protest. As will become clear, I have profited greatly from Wheatland's, Specter's, Doohm's, and others' contributions to the history of critical theory and student protest. Nevertheless, I diverge from these accounts in two ways: first, in my focus on Hegel and the idea of "potentialities," and second, in my attention to the ways epistemological debates figured into these thinkers' appraisals of the protests and in their specific choices about how to engage with student audiences through long 1960s.

[9]To my knowledge, this is the first extended anglophone treatment specifically of the relationship between debates in critical theory about Hegelian and Marxian commitments to the truth content of "potentialities" and their relation to the New Left.

[10]Kellner, "Introduction"; unknown author, *The Justice*, 1965, UBA Ffm, Na 3, 1002, Nachlass Herbert Marcuse.

[11]Kellner, "Introduction"; unknown author, *The Justice*.

[12]Wheatland, "Marcuse's Mentors," in Wheatland, *The Frankfurt School in Exile*, 296–334.

[13]Harold Keen, "Interview with Dr. Herbert Marcuse," 25 Feb. 1969, UBA Ffm, Na 3, 1022, Nachlass Herbert Marcuse.

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But this is half of the story. Thomas Wheatland has convincingly shown that Marcuse may have had less of an *actual* influence on movement politics than 1960s newspapers presented.[14] Marcuse was not always open to the association with student protesters. When Soviet, French, American, and German papers called him a "father" of the New Left, he rejected the title.[15] He warned students about the "anti-intellectual" impulses of their protests, and claimed that while their movement was "catalytic" of radical action, it was immature, "pre-revolutionary."[16] Privately, Marcuse criticized the students, all the while convinced that his role as a philosopher was to publicly support their disruptive action.

Conversely, while Habermas's protest politics are well-trodden ground, his nascent deliberative theory (in the late 1950s and early 1960s) is sometimes portrayed as incidentally linked to his critique of the New Left.[17] Matthew Specter has rightly resisted the temptation to summarize his view of student protest by citing his 1967 public condemnation of Rudi Dutschke, whom he called a "leftist fascist" at a student activist conference in Hanover debating potential responses to the recent shooting of Benno Ohnesorg.[18] This flare-up was just one episode in Habermas's decade-long relationship with student protest. As early as 1958, Habermas had sided with members of the student left, supporting protests of nuclear armament.[19] Later, he gingerly aided the

[14]Wheatland, *The Frankfurt School in Exile*, 303. Wheatland's story is broadly convincing, but it is worth noting that references to Marcuse appear in organizational strategy documents and letters between Dutschke, Krahl, and others through the 1960s. See, for example, Rudi Dutschke and Hans-Jürgen Krahl, "Organisationsreferat [auf der XXII. Delegiertenkonferenz des Sozialistischen Deutschen Studentenbundes, 2 September 1967]," in Wolfgang Kraushaar, ed., *Frankfurter Schule und Studentenbewegung: von der Flashenpost zum Molotowcocktail, 1946 bis 1995*, vol. 2 (Frankfurt am Main, 1998), Nr. 152.

[15]Kenneth A Briggs, "Marcuse, Radical Philosopher, Dies," *New York Times*, 31 July 1979, sec. "Archives"; Yuri Zhukov, "Another Opinion: Attack on the Left," *Pravda* (trans. *New York Times*), 2 June 1968, UBA Ffm, Na 3, 1002, Nachlass Herbert Marcuse; *The Economist*, "The Sayings of Herbert Marcuse," 25 May 1968, UBA Ffm, Na 3, 1002, Nachlass Herbert Marcuse.

[16]When Mike Davis asked Marcuse to sponsor his "Radical Education Project" (REP) in 1966, Marcuse called it "blind indoctrination" instead of "genuine" opposition backed by critical insight, but ultimately agreed to sponsor the project. Marcuse's tentative support for the REP was characteristic of his attitude from 1966 through the end of the decade. Herbert Marcuse, To Mike Davis, UBA Ffm, Na 3, 875 Nachlass Herbert Marcuse. Similarly, in 1968, Marcuse said that he did not condemn this "action for action's sake," and that it might be unpredictably productive. For a transcript of that lecture see "Herbert Marcuse and the Student Revolts of 1968," *Jacobin*, at https://jacobin.com/2021/03/herbert-marcuse-student-revolts-of-1968-ucsd-lecture.

[17]Specter, for example, locates Habermas's thought through the 1960s in his longer-term interests in legality and legitimacy; Doohm spends relatively little time on Habermas's protest politics, a lacuna in his work that Specter himself has drawn attention to. See Matthew Specter, "From Eclipse of Reason to the Age of Reasons? Historicizing Habermas and the Frankfurt School," *Modern Intellectual History* 16/1 (2019), 321–37.

[18]Matthew Specter, *Habermas: An Intellectual Biography* (Cambridge, 2010), 96–103. This is a famous flare-up in the conflict with the students. Oskar Negt read it as Habermas's effort to warn against provocation in excess of what was merited or necessary, as a warning against "pure" provocation. Oskar Negt, "Studentischer Protest—Liberalismus—'Linksfaschusmus'," in Kraushaar, *Frankfurter Schule und Studentenbewegung*, Nr. 219.

[19]Jürgen Habermas, "Unruhe erste Bürgerpflicht," in Kraushaar, *Frankfurter Schule und Studentenbewegung*, Nr. 50. Habermas supported university disarmament efforts, and identified universities as a formally neutral space for free discussion of matters like armament.

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"extra-parliamentary opposition," finding, as Peter Verovšek has shown, both a professional and a political ally in Wolfgang Abendroth.[20] His uneasy support of student protest never fully vanished. Indeed, Habermas quickly recanted his condemnation of Dutschke, settling later in 1967 upon a less extreme diagnosis of the students' pathology: "actionism."[21]

In Berlin, the following spring, a conservative gunman shot Dutschke off his bicycle.[22] As Dutschke convalesced, students raided a Springer plant. For Habermas, this vindicated the charge of actionism.[23] Marcuse, too, was implicated; Habermas's archives reveal that he read coverage calling Marcuse a "guru" of the New Left and linking Marcuse specifically to Dutschke.[24] And yet Habermas remained interested in guiding the student movement, in repairing famously broken relationships between Marcuse and Adorno, and in speaking as a friendly critic to actionists on the left.[25] In the weeks after the shooting, Habermas increased his correspondence

[20]In America, Ronald Dworkin criticized Habermas, claiming he was irresponsibly encouraging radical protest. Ronald Dworkin, *A Matter of Principle* (Cambridge, MA, 1985), 113. James Driver, "Habermas on Sixties Student Protests: Reflections on Collective Action and Communicative Potential," in Bryn Jones and Mike O'Donnell, eds., *Sixties Radicalism and Social Movement Activism: Retreat or Resurgence?* (London and New York, 2010), 149–66, at 151. For the connection to Abendroth, see Verovšek, *Jürgen Habermas: Public Intellectual and Engaged Critical Theorist*, 131–2.

[21]Specter, *Habermas: An Intellectual Biography*, 96–100.

[22]David E. Barclay, "Benno Ohnesorg, Rudi Dutschke, and the Student Movement in West Berlin: Critical Reflections after Forty Years," in Philip Broadbent and Sabine Hake, eds., *Berlin Divided City, 1945–1989* (New York and Oxford, 2010), 125–35, at 125.

[23]"Springer Sues Leader of Berlin Student Raid," *New York Times*, 25 April 1968, sec. "Archives"; Driver, "Habermas on Sixties Student Protests," 153.

[24]Driver, "Habermas on Sixties Student Protests," 153; Lloyd Garrison, "French Students Debate Their Revolution's Goals," *New York Times*, 17 May 1968, UBA Ffm, Na 3, 1003, Nachlass Herbert Marcuse; "Young Revolutionaries Stand against Authority," Associated Press, 7 June 1968, UBA Ffm, Na 3, 1003, Nachlass Herbert Marcuse; Robert Greenstein, "Revolution and Reaction: The Student Revolt in West Germany," *New Republic*, June 1968, BA Ffm, Na 3, 1002, Nachlass Herbert Marcuse. This coverage may have slightly exaggerated Marcuse's enthusiasm for the movement. At London's "Dialectics of Liberation" conference, speaking after R. D. Laing and Stokely Carmichael, he endorsed their cause and spoke of the necessity of negative action, but cautioned against some excesses of action for its own sake. Herbert Marcuse, "Liberation from the Affluent Society," in *To Free a Generation: The Dialectics of Liberation* (1967 addresses) (New York: Collier Books, 1969), 175. Kenneth A. Briggs, "Marcuse, Radical Philosopher, Dies," *New York Times*, 31 July 1979, sec. "Archives"; Zhukov, "Another Opinion"; "The Sayings of Herbert Marcuse," *The Economist*, 25 May 1968, UBA Ffm, Na 3, 1002, Nachlass Herbert Marcuse.

[25]Habermas transmitted messages between Marcuse and Adorno during their arguments about the protests. See Habermas's letter to Adorno from November 1968, at Na 60, 9; Jürgen Habermas and Peter Dews, *Autonomy and Solidarity: Interviews with Jürgen Habermas*, rev. edn (London and New York, 1992), 190; Heinz Lubasz, Herbert Marcuse, Rudi Dutschke, Karl Popper, Alfred Schmidt, and Ralf Dahrendorf, *Radical Philosophers: The Frankfurt School*, prod. Adrian Johnson, Radio 3, 18–27 Jan. 1974, UBA Ffm, Na 3, 1022, Nachlass Herbert Marcuse, Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität Frankfurt a. M. Archivzentrum, Frankfurt am Main, Hesse. See also Norman Birnbaum, letter to Habermas, 12 April 1968, UBA FfM, Na 60, 9. Habermas commiserated with Birnbaum (in New York) about the difficulties of balancing sympathy with the students' legitimate anger and skepticism of their tactics. This and similar letters corroborate the common view that the 1960s saw international collaboration among left intellectuals. See Martin Klimke, *The Other Alliance: Student Protest in West Germany and the United States in the Global Sixties* (Princeton, 2010); Jeremi Suri, "The Rise and Fall of an International Counterculture, 1960–1975," *American Historical Review* 114/1 (2009), 45–68.

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with the left-wing publisher Rudolph Augstein and wrote frequently in *Der Spiegel*, evidently seeking a semipublic role advising and moderating the students' cause.[26] In *Protestbewegung und Hochschulreform*, an essay collection released on New Year's Day, 1969, Habermas presented himself as a friendly critic of protesters. Here, repeating the actionist accusation, Habermas notably refrained from calling students "left fascists." Instead, he praised their capacity to hypothesize future alternatives and provoke reflection on them, even still remaining hesitant to endorse their tactics.[27] He praised some of the students' critiques of society, which, he said, diagnosed the "legitimation crisis" of the late 1960s.[28] More active than Adorno's famous quietist disdain of protests—"resignation"—Habermas retained hope of guiding their activism.[29] Days after Marcuse died in 1979, Habermas stood alongside Dutschke, despite their ongoing disagreements, among a handful of mourners at an intimate memorial.[30]

This article chronicles the personal and intellectual relationship these two thinkers nurtured even through the tumult of the late 1960s and the 1970s. Specifically, I explore Habermas's remarks that his relationship with Marcuse had developed from admiration for the latter's writings—Marcuse's early essays, *Reason and Revolution*, and *Eros and Civilization*. Marcuse and Habermas explained these political differences several times over by reference to what Habermas, in one letter, called their deep "theoretical differences."[31] In interviews, letters, and reflections on the period, both Marcuse and Habermas traced the relevant theoretical differences to their understandings of validity and negation, and to their divergent appraisals of Hegelian and Marxian conceptions of the truth of historical "potentialities."[32] In what follows, I stage that foundational debate between Marcuse and Habermas and track its footprints through their disagreements over New Left protest politics.[33]

[26]Jürgen Habermas, letter to Rudolph Augstein, 20 July 1968, UBA FfM, Na 60, 9. Attention to Habermas's public writing generally focuses on his recent work on the EU. See Robert C. Holub, *Jürgen Habermas: Critic in the Public Sphere* (London, 1991).

[27]Specter, *Habermas: An Intellectual Biography*, 102.

[28]Ibid.

[29]T. W. Adorno, "Resignation," *Telos* 35 (1978), 165–8. As early as 1962, Habermas postured publicly as an internal critic of the movement. Some sources identified him as an ally, while he carefully voiced his caution about untampered ambitions for student protest. See "SDS Der Affe Sultan," in Kraushaar, *Frankfurter Schule und Studentenbewegung*, Nr. 75; Jürgen Habermas, "Leserbrief an de Studentenzeitschrift 'Civis'," in ibid., Nr. 76.

[30]"Death, Burial and Grave of Herbert Marcuse," *Marcuse.org*, at www.marcuse.org/herbert/newsevents/2003berlinburial/gravestone.htm. See also Driver, "Habermas on Sixties Student Protests," 152.

[31]Habermas and Dews, *Autonomy and Solidarity*, 190; Lubasz, Marcuse, Dutschke, Popper, Schmidt, and Dahrendorf, "Radical Philosophers"; Jürgen Habermas, letter to Marcuse on student protest in Frankfurt, 5 May 1969, UBA Ffm, Fond Na 3, Folder 261.

[32]Marcuse and Habermas were not the only ones to stage the debate over the New Left in terms of the philosophy of history and its service in political justification. Horkheimer found disagreement as early as 1958 with Habermas's philosophy of history and his empirical approach. See Max Horkheimer, "Brief an Theodor W. Adorno," in Kraushaar, *Frankfurter Schule und Studentenbewegung*, Nr. 53.

[33]For accounts of Marcuse's relation to Habermas see Specter, *Habermas: An Intellectual Biography*; Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York, 1986); Wheatland, *The Frankfurt School in Exile*, 290; Kellner, "Introduction"; Feenberg, *The Philosophy of Praxis*. This list is hardly exhaustive.

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To start, I undertake exegetical reconstruction of their academic disagreement on the nature of truth and its relation to negation. So doing reveals submerged continuities between their pre-New Left theoretical projects and their protest politics. While I am not the first to look for these continuities, I aim to show the specific relevance of these two thinkers' engagements with Hegel on the concept of truth for their responses to the New Left. Some leaders of the student protest movement—among them Hans-Jürgen Krahl—identified epistemological questions related to the interpretation of Hegel and Kant as central nodes in the account of revolutionary protest.[34] These debates were about the nature of true claims about future "potentialities." Their persistence and their reappearance in Habermas's and Marcuse's commentaries on the student movement complicate still-present narratives that Marcuse was "unable to integrate" his "negativistic" theoretical pose with his views on student protest.[35] Moreover, they complement portraits of Habermas's earlier-career preoccupations with a more intimate theoretical "bridge" between his academic and his political work, portraits which some have suggested had faded by the 1980s, when he may have become more committed to separation between his theoretical and his political enterprises.[36]

Marcuse remained committed to a materialist–Hegelian concept of the truth of historical potentialities, a concept he had first formulated in the 1930s and then revised over the next three decades. On this account, Marcuse sought to historicize Hegel's picture of determinate negation as a source for positive political programs. Habermas, by contrast, asserted that these historical potentialities were "fictive," rejecting Marcuse's reading of Hegel and turning to a pragmatic consensus theory of truth. The former suggested that true alternatives be revealed to the practices of radical protesters, while the latter sought to rescue a deliberative realm of norm-setting prior to radical protest. These two thinkers' disagreements about New Left protest were partly contextual responses to their political climates and partly *apt*, or *fitting*, in virtue of the philosophical approaches to truth and negation that they refined in response to each other. Ferocious debates on the nature of truth and debates about student protest ran on intersecting, mutually adjusting tracks. Collisions were frequent.

[34]See, for example, Hans-Jürgen Krahl, "Kritische Theorie und Praxis: Diskussionsbeiträge in einer Sendung des Hessischen Rundfunks," in Kraushaar, *Frankfurter Schule und Studentenbewegung*, Nr. 361.

[35]I am quoting from Peter Verovšek, "Rebuilding the Frankfurt School's Bridge from Theory to Practice: Jürgen Habermas's Rehabilitation of Critical Theory," *Constellations* 33/1 (2025), 3–13, at 8.

[36]Three ancillary consequences of this study are worth mentioning. First is psychoanalysis. I offer a story parallel to accounts which foreground psychoanalysis in the history of postwar critical theory's relation to politics without writing it out entirely. For Marcuse, especially, psychoanalysis remained relevant to his appraisal of protest; I merely hope to show the relevance of an abiding account of truth for his critical project and its politics. Second is transatlantic communication. I point towards previously submerged continuities and discontinuities their conception of the "tradition" of critical theory during its transitional moments and center the ways in which transatlantic communication between activists and critical theorists played a central role in this transitional moment. Third is the idea of a "tradition" of critical theory. Habermas had, by the early 1960s, spent time rereading much of the earlier work of the *Institut*. Marcuse spent the decade revisiting some of his prewar work. It is plausible that his debates with Marcuse and Adorno about student protest contributed to the narrativization of critical theory as a coherent "tradition" originating in Frankfurt. None of these are the central claims of the article; they remain, however, fruitful avenues for elaboration of this work.

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True potentialities and valid justification

Theoretical debates between Marcuse and Habermas were tied to their divergent pictures of truth, negation, and potentiality, differences I trace to these two thinkers' reappropriations of Hegel's *Begriff*. Marcuse remained, through the 1960s, committed to a "thick" Hegelian concept of truth, wherein truth contained not just the totality of given historical facts but also possibilities, or potentialities. These unrealized historical potentialities were true—even before their realization. Marcuse inhabited three positions on the proper relationship between critical theory and true historical possibilities: first, in the 1930s and 1940s he advanced a practice of what I call "critical, rational negation" to unearth latent emancipatory historical possibilities; second, in the 1950s, he became more pessimistic about the promise of rational critique; finally, in the late 1960s and the 1970s, Marcuse turned away from rational critique as a means of unlocking true historical possibilities and turned towards a concept I call "practical negation," or the embodied practice of living on the margins of society, refusing to perform according to established norms. Habermas, on the other hand, may have found Hegel's historical method instructive but claimed to have found extravagant contradictions in Hegel's picture of the unfolding of *Begriff* and the unity of *Geist*. Indeed, Habermas instead held, through the 1960s, a strikingly pragmatic consensus theory of truth, where hypotheses could only be validated after they were agreed in rational discourse and willfully applied to real-world action. Thus the emancipatory historical possibilities Marcuse identifies as true, as the "actual," were, for Habermas, fictive until subjected to rational discourse and objectified through worldly instantiation.

Marcuse's early concept of truth proceeded from a potted history of philosophy aimed at deriving his materialist redux of Hegelian essentialism.[37] The category of "essence," or the idea of "one true Being [apart] from the constantly changing multiplicity of appearances," he argued, shaped the historical impact of Western philosophy's understanding of concepts such as freedom, autonomy, and equality.[38] From its beginnings in Platonic philosophy, essence presented dialectical tension between metaphysical unity and imperfect, particular contingency. In ancient philosophy, this tension held as much for concepts like freedom as for objects like chairs, enabling philosophers to compare something's essence against its appearance, revealing its flaws and latent possibilities. Unfortunately, Marcuse argued, recent positivists had abandoned this critical, inherently tense (and therefore, somehow, productive) concept of essence.[39]

To relocate what he saw as its "dialectical" and therefore progressive potential, Marcuse fused essentialism with Marx's historical materialism, conceiving of the essence of freedom, for example, as the unifying conceptual elements of historical

[37]These essays originally appeared in the *Zeitschrift*; for translations see Herbert Marcuse, "Philosophy and Critical Theory," in Marcuse, *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, ed. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston, 1968), 99–118; and Marcuse, "The Concept of Essence," in ibid., 31–64.

[38]Marcuse, "The Concept of Essence," 31.

[39]Marcuse likely received a rather crude critique of positivism from the young Horkheimer. For an analysis of the Frankfurt group's dismissive appraisal of the "left Vienna Circle" see John O'Neill and Thomas Uebel, "Horkheimer and Neurath: Restarting a Disrupted Debate" *European Journal of Philosophy* 12 (2004), 75–105.

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instantiations of freedom, all historical applications of freedom, and latent possibilities of and desires for freedom in each historical moment.[40] The *true* and *actual*, the *essential*, were for Marcuse these historically unrealized pictures of free society.[41] The vindication of these unrealized desires negating the given was, for Marcuse, a political project. In *Reason and Revolution* (1941), a title which was reprinted and retranslated to meet rising student demand through the 1960s protests, Marcuse elaborated this concept of truth.[42] Although *Reason and Revolution* contained some lines of argument from Marcuse's earlier study of Hegel, it departed from this work by connecting his critique of Hegel to emancipatory, revolutionary theory.[43] According to Marcuse, Hegel understood that reality, or the "true," is composed of all possible things as historical interpretation tells us they *could be*: "Truth is not only attached to propositions and judgements, it is, in short, not only an attribute of thought, but of reality in process. Something is true if it is all it can be, fulfilling all its objective possibilities."[44] Those objective possibilities were given by history and the negation of historical fact. What Hegel got wrong, in Marcuse's view, was the abstraction and absolutism of his picture of truth. Thus, while Marcuse retained from Hegel the insight that negative historical potentialities were true and contained in the actual, he rooted these historical potentialities and the conditions for their realization in historically developing social capacities, rather than in a speculative logic of reconciliation.[45]

Marcuse elaborated this argument into the 1960s. In 1967, he glossed truth in Hegelian terms as "the actual," a category which included "possibilities" revealed through "negations of the [historically] given."[46] For Marcuse, studying and mining history illuminated the actual but did not generate *predictions* of the future. Instead, study of possibilities negated by historical developments of capitalism and liberal democracy could illuminate the general contours of *future possibilities* which were

[40]Marcusean potentialities are "real." Marcuse believes through social labor, what he views as the fundamental process of historical development, human beings come to both know nature as it exists and to externalize their image of it. In this way, nature and man form and are formed by the iterative and historical process of labor-interactions. Here, Marcuse borrows from Marx while rejecting *deterministic* teleology. This is Marcuse's break from Hegel and Marx and the reason he asserts philosophical critical theory as a necessary productive activity to negate the real in service of "phantasy" about the actual.

[41]Ibid., 44.

[42]Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory*, 2nd edn, with supplementary chapter (New York, 1968), 151. Wheatland, for example, identifies some distance between *Reason and Revolution* and Marcuse's texts through the 1960s. For him, *Reason and Revolution* appears to be an important theoretical work in Marcuse's development, but a rather minor work for historical analysis of his influence on the New Left. The book is dense, and few would have read it, Wheatland shows. I want to suggest this text bears similarities in its account of truth to both Marcuse's earlier critical work and his later work at the beginning of the long decade. Wheatland, *The Frankfurt School in Exile*, 286.

[43]Marcuse's critique of Hegel was part of what brought him into the fold of the Frankfurt Institute as their resident philosopher. I focus on *Reason and Revolution* due to space constraints and because Habermas mentioned this book as one of his favored early critical works of Marcuse. See also, for Marcuse's earlier study of Hegel, Herbert Marcuse, *Hegel's Ontology and the Theory of Historicity* (Cambridge, MA, 1987).

[44]Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, 151; Marcuse, notes for inaugural address at UC San Diego, Feb. 1966, UBA Ffm, Na 3, 201, Nachlass Herbert Marcuse.

[45]I am grateful to Linda Zerilli for sharpening this important interpretive point.

[46]Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, 151.

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already latent and true. I shall show that Habermas did not assign truth value to such future possibilities, or "potentialities."

Whereas, originally, Marcuse claimed that potentialities could be revealed through negation and critique, by the late 1950s he had begun turning away from his initial formulation of critical theory.[47] In a new political preface to *Reason and Revolution*, Marcuse reasserted that truth contains all that is or could be.[48] Gloomily, he bemoaned that ideology legitimizing the established status quo had evacuated from social theory much of its capacity for negation and critique to gesture towards *true* potentialities. Whereas *Reason and Revolution* had promised to identify a Hegelian link between its two titular concepts, the solemn preface of 1960 cast doubt on the possibility that they might ever become causally related. The problem here, however, was not with the underlying historical concept of true potentialities, but with the extent to which theory and negation *alone* could grope towards those latent truths. In *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse expressed brief optimism about the possibility that memory and psychoanalysis might serve the project of excavating the capacities for self-reflection necessary to stand at a sufficiently critical distance from one's given conceptual and justificatory context. Marcuse soon rejected reliance *only* upon such reflective psychoanalytic practice, turning instead to practices of rejection and negation.

Similar pessimism oozed from *One-Dimensional Man*. Student protesters—among them Angela Davis—described it as "deeply resonant," and "canonical."[49] Narrating the ideological foreclosure of an individual's capacity to engage in rational critique, Marcuse sought in vain domains wherein individuals might retain their two-dimensionality—their capacity to remove themselves from "operationalist" thinking, negate the rationality of given conditions, and critically view the multiplicity of possible (i.e. true) social alternatives. Importantly, Marcuse no longer saw individual experience and memory, key *loci* of potentially liberatory consciousness and rational negation in *Eros and Civilization*, as the source of historical consciousness. Instead, redemptive memories were impossible, rewritten as one-dimensional memories of suffering rationalized by hegemonic ideologies.[50] The outlook was bleak. As Marcuse wrote in *One-Dimensional Man*'s final chapter, "on theoretical as well as empirical grounds, the dialectical concept pronounces its own hopelessness."[51]

Marcuse's readers have highlighted this hopelessness, even calling this moment a "repudiation of dialectics."[52] But, despite his frustration with ideological barriers to

[47]This turn was marked by Marcuse's publication of a "political preface" for *Reason and Revolution.* See Herbert Marcuse, "The Task of a Critical Theory of Society," in Stephen Eric Bronner and Douglas Kellner, eds., *Critical Theory and Society: A Reader* (New York, 1989), 450.

[48]Ibid.

[49]Davis, Preface in *The New Left and the 1960s*, viii. Marcuse supported Davis through the 1960s. See Herbert Marcuse, "Redebeitrag auf einer Kundgebung für Angela Davis in Berkeley" in Kraushaar, *Frankfurter Schule und Studentenbewegung*, Nr. 359.

[50]Ibid. Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia*, 279–82.

[51]The possibility of rational negation that he once championed seemed unviable. Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (London, 1964), 253.

[52]Marcial González, "Herbert Marcuse's Repudiation of Dialectics: From 'Reason and Revolution' to One-Dimensional Thinking." *Science and Society* 82/3 (2018), 413–39, at 424. In 1962, Marcuse thought of *One-Dimensional Man* and his other work as a study of dialectics in a "new situation." See Marcuse,

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theoretical negation, Marcuse's basic view of truth did not change: "Dialectical theory is not refuted, but it cannot offer the remedy. It cannot be positive. To be sure, the dialectical concept, by comprehending the given facts, transcends the given facts. This is the very token of its truth. It defines the historical possibilities, even necessities; but their realization can only be in the practice which responds to the theory."[53]

The problem Marcuse diagnoses is not with his epistemological foundations or the relationship between negation and potentialities, but with the relationship between theory and its concretization. Totalizing ideology precluded sufficiently negative theoretical critique of society. Still, it *was* possible for political actors to *practice negation*. By refusing to participate in and perform the standards of the current system's status quo, individuals undertook an imminently material, practical negation that still gestured towards true potentialities. He wrote that a "substratum of outcasts and outsiders … exist[s] outside the democratic process … their opposition is revolutionary even if their consciousness is not … The fact that they start refusing to play the game may be the fact which marks the end of a period."[54]

Marcuse concluded, "critical theory of society possesses no concepts which could bridge the gap between the present and its future. Thus[,] it wants to remain loyal to those who … give their life to the Great Refusal."[55] Note three points. First, Marcuse implies here that contingent historical moments contain true *future potentialities* that belong to their presents.[56] Second, Marcuse says that pure negative dialectical theory can no longer serve as a mediating bridge between the present and the future; ongoing practices of refusal projecting desired, negative potentialities must do so as well. Third, Marcuse said that critical theory ought to "remain loyal" to negation by studying how hippies, outcasts, and social rejects *practice* negation of the status quo. Thus, without sacrificing the validity of theoretical negation, Marcuse relocated the *political* possibility of negation from theory to negative practice.[57]

Practical negation, or action and forms of life refusing to perform to standards set by the formal and informal institutions of Western civil society, became central in Marcuse's work through the 1960s.[58] The concept was slippery even for Marcuse; his

"Emanzipation der Frau in der repressiven Gesellschaft—Ein Gesprach mit Peter Furth n der Zetschrift," in Kraushaar, *Frankfurter Schule und Studentenbewegung*, Nr. 71.

[53]Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 257.

[54]Ibid., 260.

[55]Ibid., 261.

[56]I should avoid overstatement—the present does not "point" to the future as it might in vulgar Marxism. Still, Marcuse remains committed to *some* dialectical bridge between present and anticipated future. Ironically, by suggesting the future belongs to the present, Marcuse undermines his earlier claim that critical theory "possesses no concepts." Perhaps what he means is that critical theory can offer no *guidance* other than the assurance that there is true content to enter into valid arguments about the alternatives to be discovered through negation of the present.

[57]In 1965, Marcuse voiced similar views about the continued relevance of a dialectics propelled by negative practice on the occasion of Max Horkheimer's birthday. Herbert Marcuse, "Aufhebung der Gewalt: Max Horkheimer zum 70. Geburtstag" in Kraushaar, *Frankfurter Schule und Studentenbewegung*, Nr. 92.

[58]The media's obsession with this German American "father of the New Left" and the reappropriation of Marcuse's books and aphorisms for protest pamphlets and placards may have pushed the aging philosopher to begin to write polemics for popular audiences. This is why Wheatland refers to the students as "Marcuse's mentors." See Wheatland, "Marcuse's Mentors."

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writings through the 1960s and 1970s experimented with limits to practical negation. It proved hard to specify exactly where unproductive disruption ended and practical negation—to which critical theory owed "loyalty"—began. In "Ethics and Revolution" (1965), for example, Marcuse justified violent revolutionary tactics as occasionally necessary to counteract the "violence" imposed by the status quo. In his most famous work from the period, *Repressive Tolerance* (1965), Marcuse experimented with the possibility of negating the liberal principle of "official tolerance" of dissent, arguing that toleration in democratic societies absorbed dissent. These arguments quite clearly emerged from his commitment to the truth of potentialities and his radical interpretation of practical negation as a prerevolutionary necessary condition for emancipation. Moreover, a 1968 postscript to *Repressive Tolerance* made this connection apparent: "For this struggle, I proposed the practice of discriminating tolerance. To be sure, this practice already presupposes the radical goal which it seeks to achieve."[59]

In *Essay on Liberation* (1969) (which Irving Howe called "even for Marcuse's standards, coarse in quality and argument") Marcuse reduced his earlier work on practical negation into a paean to the utopian leftism of the late 1960s.[60] Here, he retreated somewhat from the confrontational negation of *Repressive Tolerance*. Even this transition, however, was *not necessarily* a transition in his underlying commitments about the nature of truth. Here, although potentialities were not true as *predictions*, they were true as potential *utopias*. Whereas the younger Marcuse thought historical potentialities were merely true *theoretical* fantasies, in *One-Dimensional Man* and (to some extent) in *Essay on Liberation* Marcuse understood historical potentialities as *true*, nearly practicable alternatives towards which we should orient speech, belief, and action.[61] For Marcuse, then, critical theory's psychoanalytic and cultural turn had not extinguished his basic commitment to a quasi-Hegelian logic of historical potentiality.

* * *

Habermas rejected Marcuse's potentialities. Marcuse was too ontological about truth for his younger peer's taste. Instead of an account of truth attached to a notion of the actual, Habermas sought to spell out a more *epistemological* account of truth focused on the demands of justifiability and warranted assertability. His early epistemological writings introduced one premise: knowledge contains its own interest and demands validation.[62] When one learns something either empirically or theoretically, one becomes tasked with validating it and, in some cases, acting accordingly. Individuals can act according to knowledge in two ways. Either knowledge becomes technically applicable—a strategic tool for accomplishing a prior goal—or knowledge becomes what Habermas calls "practically" applicable—used to envision a new goal, norm, or practice. Whereas a biochemical discovery, for example, might

[59]Herbert Marcuse, "Repressive Tolerance," in Robert Paul Wolff, Barrington Moore, and Herbert Marcuse, *A Critique of Pure Tolerance* (Boston, 1969), 81–123, at 137; Kevin Anderson, "On Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory: A Critical Appreciation of Herbert Marcuse's Reason and Revolution, Fifty Years Later," *Sociological Theory* 11/3 (1993), 243–67.

[60]Irving Howe, "Herbert Marcuse or Milovan Djilas," *Harper's Magazine*, 239/1430 (1969), 84–92, at 84.

[61]Herbert Marcuse, "The New Sensibility," in Marcuse, *Essay on Liberation* (Boston, 1969), 23–48.

[62]Ibid., 23.

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become technically applicable for making a drug, a discovery of "hermeneutic sciences," like sociology, might lead us to desire to shape new goals or norms.[63] We can only identify a fact as a natural object, or a theoretical statement as *true*, when we project our knowledge into the world by acting accordingly ("objectification" through social and physical labor).[64] In this way, knowledge and the external world enter a mutually constituting relationship of self-formation.[65] Habermas writes, "The underlying 'interest' [of knowledge] establishes the unity between the constitutive context [of experience and action] in which knowledge is rooted and the structure of the possible application which this knowledge can have."[66] Because knowledge and experience form each other (instead of one serving *merely* as ground for the other), Habermas asserts a third interest of knowledge: *emancipation*. Knowledge is interested in emancipation because only free individuals can apply what they know through unfettered, self-moving, free action. Finally, if knowledge is interested in emancipation, then hermeneutic sciences question the conditions of emancipation and autonomy.

Habermas complicates this picture: "authenticity" in discovery is a necessary condition for applicable knowledge. If you present information relevant to my goals and norms, I must be certain you are doing so in good faith, engaging in open-ended inquiry without hidden designs or ulterior motives.[67] But how can one discover facts, especially facts relating to meaning and interpretation, authentically? Habermas's answer is "discourse." Not simple communication, discourse is a process by which individuals make their positions understandable to others and attempt to collectively pursue consensus without prior commitments or goals.[68] When I submit a hypothesis for discursive validation, I intend for my listeners to understand and engage with my idea. As my idea becomes refracted through the demands of legibility, clarity, coherence, and agreeability, it becomes a "proposition" which my listener can evaluate under demands of mutual comprehensibility.[69] Rinse and repeat, Habermas said. In short, Habermas turned away from Marcuse, justifying a consensus theory of truth wherein the valid and actual contain only that which experience and discourse have validated.[70] Tellingly, this official statement of Habermas's nascent discourse theory emerged in

[63]Ibid., 8. Importantly, Habermas insists knowledge does not operate with immediate applicability. In this passage, Habermas teases what interpreters later identify as his early quasi-pragmatism.

[64]Ibid.

[65]Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests* (Cambridge, 1987), 24, 62.

[66]Jürgen Habermas, *Theory and Practice*, trans. John Viertel (Boston 1973), 9.

[67]Ibid., 16.

[68]Ibid., 17. This is why Habermas asserts communication has a "quasi-transcendental element." Each utterance, whether it comes in an ideal or nonideal discourse situation—that is, under distorted or undistorted contexts—contains words in grammatical structures designed for intersubjective legibility.

[69]I do not have sufficient room to examine Habermas's exchanges with Apel and Gadamer. It seems settled he engaged pragmatic theories of language largely because of their relationship to discursive production and validation of knowledge; he sought to find a domain for grounding normative claims discursively. What is less explored are the roots of this interest in his engagements with protest.

[70]Habermas also wrote that labor and social labor ought to be interpreted as the media of change, not change itself; hypotheses on the nature of future labor, then, were just that—hypotheses. See Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, 29.

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the introduction to his similarly anti-Marcusean engagement of Hegel in *Theory and Practice*.

The body of *Theory and Practice* opened with reflection on natural-law philosophy and its relation to the American and French revolutions. Habermas highlights Hegel's astonishment, observing the relationship between Enlightenment philosophy and political revolution, at the fact that philosophy stood between science and action, that political philosophy was *positivized* into legal documents. Two distinct contexts—America and France—appropriated similar philosophical texts for *different* constitutional regimes.[71] Political theoretical claims entailed the *possibility* of their concretization but did not anticipate the particular institutional form that concretization would take.[72] Theory, in other words, could merely provoke reflection upon institutions, governmental form, and political practices.

It was this historical relationship between philosophy and action which, Habermas argued, supplied evidence for Hegel's theory of the dialectical self-movement of history. When philosophical consciousness outpaced the given conditions of history, and the emancipatory content of philosophy pointed beyond the present, Habermas says, Hegel proposed that philosophy could propel history through reflection on the logic of history. Therefore, Habermas says, Hegel "elevates the revolution to the primary principle of philosophy for the sake of a philosophy which is to overcome the revolution."[73] By this, Habermas means that Hegel's dialectic made the relationship between thought and historical change the subject of a self-understanding philosophy. Habermas, like Marcuse, saw this as a potentially progressive role for philosophy. Also like Marcuse, Habermas rejected Hegel's idealist conception of the relationship between thought and practice.

But, unlike Marcuse, Habermas saw unserviceable contradictions in both Hegelian and Marxist interpretations of *Geist*:

> The contradiction contained in the construction of the world spirit … consists in the following: on the one hand, in order to guarantee the realization of the revolutionary demand in history, a subject must be substituted for this history, which invents the ultimate aim of history as an abstract universal, in order to then actualize it. On the other hand, this universal must not have the character of a theoretically predesigned plan; it is therefore degraded to a self-subsistent being of natural origin, which only "comes to itself"—is realized—after it has objectified itself in the course of history.[74]

[71] Ibid., 82.

[72] Further, Habermas says, bourgeois natural-law theory, as it entered revolutionary constitutions, indexed concepts like political equality or freedom which pointed beyond their applications in postrevolutionary contexts. To justify this, Habermas cites Marxist critiques of the civil state, wherein Marx stretches the very concepts outlined in civil constitutions beyond their immediate historical application to develop a theory of "human emancipation" as beyond "civil emancipation." Natural law, Habermas says, pointed beyond its immediate application to advance previously submerged emancipatory interests.

[73] Habermas, *Theory and Practice*, 121.

[74] Ibid., 138.

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Philosophy, Habermas says, cannot both propel history through revolutionary stages and remain a reflective project of self-revision through self-critique. Either history is teleological and contains an end state of absolute freedom and knowledge, or history is a process of change and self-reflection where the conditions of freedom and knowledge become objectified and true as they are realized. Habermas prefers the latter formulation.[75] Habermas elaborates: "the world spirit is a fiction invented in order to give the cunning of reason a name; but only after this cunning has been carried out can there be a world spirit which could have such cunning thoughts." In other words, Hegel's *Geist* cannot anticipate its own actualization. Hegel, to Habermas, is right to associate philosophy with historical change and knowledge with emancipation, but wrong to presuppose that either one can have rational knowledge of the objective forms of emancipation or that rational knowledge can propel history without willful, "volitional" action.

This critique of Hegel, as well as Habermas's increasing interests in pragmatics, most clearly articulated through his engagements and correspondences with Karl-Otto Apel, differentiated Habermas from a Marcusean view of potentialities.[76] Habermas, in accordance with his consensus theory of truth, understood reason as a process of coming to understand and validate facts. These facts, for Habermas, were not objectified characteristics of the world unless they become relevant to experience and action. Thus reason could directly anticipate action-possibilities. This was radically different from Marcuse's adaptation of thick, Hegelian truth, where historical reason or practical negation might illuminate latent, true possibilities for action and experience.

Habermas departed from Marcuse, again, in his critique of Marx. To be sure, the two agreed about the risks of scientizing Marxism (a view common to their Western Marxist milieu), and agreed that Marxist theories of history do right to identify social labor, and not pure thinking, as a historical motor.[77] Habermas, however, contrary to Marcuse, found a contradiction in Marxist history. Specifically, he decried three contradictory pairs in Marx and Hegel: crisis and unity, totality and particularity, and contingency and historical necessity. Marx (and Marcuse) view history as a totality constructed through a process of labor and social development. Habermas says that this view presupposes both development through crises *and* real unity in history, two positions which were not compatible with each other. Further, Habermas says, one cannot conceive of history as a process of movement through totalities while at the same time positing that totality itself is particularly constructed.[78] Finally, Habermas claims, Hegel and Marx presupposed *historical* subjects as objective inheritors of the

[75]Here, Habermas's Hegel is somewhat stylized to his ends; his problem with Hegel seems more with Hegelian metaphysics than with internal contradiction in Hegel's project. Habermas's critique of Hegel as internally contradictory only makes sense if one already is dubious of Hegelian metaphysics which posits teleological unity in history.

[76]For detail on Habermas, Apel, and pragmatists see Stefan Müller-Doohm, *Habermas: A Biography*, trans. Daniel Steuer (Malden, 2016), 244–58. See also Apel's work on C. S. Peirce. His more recent work on Peirce bears some traces from his earlier book on the matter. Karl-Otto Apel, "Pragmatism as Sense-Critical Realism Based on a Regulative Idea of Truth: In Defense of a Peircean Theory of Reality and Truth," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 37/4 (2001), 443–74.

[77]Habermas, *Theory and Practice*, 250.

[78]Ibid., 251.

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ends of historical development, while at the same time arguing that the development of that self-conscious historical subject is and was historically contingent. For this reason, Habermas rejected a definite or *true* anticipatory end to history which can be arrived at through historical development. Therefore, any left–Hegelian teleologies remain "fictional" until they enter the "will and consciousness" of actual individuals.[79] In the same way as natural-law philosophy required mediation through the public sphere to become positivized, the "fictional" potentialities revealed through Marxist critique of historical development need to be first validated through discourse and then mediated through public will to become actualized.

Thus negative critique of historical conditions, for Habermas, did not gesture towards its positivization. Knowledge of or reflection upon historical conditions produces what Habermas calls "hermeneutic knowledge," not "scientific knowledge." Whereas the latter can be developed independent of action and then made available as tools for preestablished ends, the former requires discursive validation and willful action. Interpretations of history were hermeneutic hypotheses, potentialities just further hypotheses. Indeed, Habermas argued, any "potentiality," whether it emerged through historical critique or through negative thinking, was "fictive." They could only become objectified once individuals *chose* to act upon discursively validated knowledge. The trouble, Habermas concluded, was that ideal discursive contexts for such consensual volitional action were absent. Ideologies legitimate capitalism and civil democracy, and "distorted" speech contexts rule.[80] This view of ideology and distorted speech, for Habermas, was related to his early forays into psychoanalysis. Perhaps there is an argument to be made that Habermas's observations of failures in students' communicative practices were influential for his psychoanalytic thought in *Knowledge and Human Interests*.[81] Still, the essays most explicitly applicable to questions of protest (and therefore those to which I pay most attention—namely the essays in *Toward a Rational Society* and *Theory and Practice*) are far thinner on psychoanalytic content than on the truth content and validity of action.[82]

Habermas and Marcuse disagreed about the application of critical theory for revolutionary practice. They formulated differently the relationship between knowledge,

[79]Ibid.

[80]Habermas, *Theory and Practice*, 12–19. See also Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: an Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Bürger, and Lawrence Kert, (Cambridge, MA, 1989). Although nonideal speech conditions contain the same grammatical and syntactical constituents of ideal speech, ideologies dominant in the twentieth century, Habermas says, preclude authentic discourse. By reflecting on these ideologies and on the history of philosophy and social theory, in a way not unlike the process of psychoanalytic therapeutic reflection, Habermas says, we can begin to understand the pathologies in our justifications. Thus Habermas proposes we ought to engage in *reflection* on the history of philosophy.

[81]Steven Klein, *The Work of Politics: Making a Democratic Welfare State* (Cambridge, 2020), 135. See especially Klein's treatment of *Knowledge and Human Interests*. Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, 228.

[82]Habermas and Dews, *Autonomy and Solidarity*, 190. Habermas seems to have been friends with Marcuse. Instead of asking Adorno and Horkheimer for help finding American translators for his work, Habermas turned to Marcuse, claiming in one letter that he felt closer to Marcuse than some of those in Germany. See Jürgen Habermas, letter to Marcuse, 18 Nov. 1968, Fond Na 60, Box 10.

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decision, and action, differences which are, at the very least, foundationally epistemological and practical, but which are arguably also metaphysical differences. Marcuse believed that truth contained both the given and emancipatory potentialities denied by historical development. Habermas believed that truth contained all that is and was agreed in discourse, meaning that potentialities were mere suggestions or hypotheses until they could be ratified and acted upon following consensus.[83] Habermas, then, proposed a pragmatic reframing of potentialities, and attempted to synthesize knowledge's latent interest in historical development into alternative sociopolitical forms with a democratic interest in willful action and self-assertion.[84] Where Marcuse's "practical negation" was based on his belief in the truth of potentialities, Habermas's focus on will and public discourse was based in a belief that potentialities were fictive. This was one prominent theoretical difference, I will argue, underlying each of these thinkers' responses to student protest.

Apt attitudes?

Neither of these thinkers architectonically derived their responses to student protest from these deeper theoretical disagreements. Nor did they formulate those responses to protest in isolation—political, personal, and professional factors played a role. Even still, there is compelling contextual evidence suggesting that both thinkers wanted their prior philosophical work to motivate their responses to 1960s protest. Marcuse, for example, elaborating on what I take to be the primary differences between him and the Frankfurt crowd, wrote to Adorno, "our (old) theory has an internal political content … that today … compels us to concrete political positions."[85] Later in the year, returning to those "concrete political positions," he argued that being a left theoretician occasionally required writing more "polemical" and "crude" essays to guide the movement in a productive direction.[86] Habermas, similarly, seemed to understand his public writing not as an entirely separate endeavor from his philosophical work, but as one constituent part of politically committed critical thought.[87] Despite these intentions,

[83]That prerequisite ratification of a hypothetical potentiality through public discussion and rational choice to Habermas calls the realization of emancipatory interests through "volition." See Habermas, *Theory and Practice*, 252.

[84]Specter, *Habermas: An Intellectual Biography*, 94. Matthew Specter comments on the pragmatic influences in Habermas's thought, and directs attention to his relationship with Karl Otto Apel, who advised Habermas to read American and English Pragmatists. See also, as cited in Specter, "Interview with the *New Left Review*" (May 1985), in *Die Neue Unübersichtlichkeit* (Frankfurt am Main, 1985), 215.

[85]Herbert Marcuse, letter to Adorno, 5 April 1969, in "Correspondence on the Student Movement," *New Left Review* I/233 (1999), at https://newleftreview.org/issues/i233/articles/theodor-adorno-herbert-marcuse-correspondence-on-the-german-student-movement.

[86]Ibid., 134.

[87]Habermas, letter to Rudolph Augstein, 20 July 1968. In this letter, Habermas expresses his interest in guiding the student movement to the publisher of *Der Spiegel*, one of Germany's leading left-leaning magazines at the time. To this day, Habermas publishes op-eds and essays frequently in *Der Spiegel* and other German papers. Much attention has been given to his recent writing and work as a public intellectual, or as a "critic in the public sphere, but this literature generally focuses on his writing about the EU through the 1990s and 2000s. See Holub, *Jürgen Habermas: Critic in the Public Sphere*.

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however, it is worth surveying the material and political contexts scholars tend to think are candidates for explaining these two thinkers' protest politics.

Some trace Habermas's sensitivity to political violence to his earlier engagements with denazification and denuclearization, or to the West German constitutional debates.[88] Others link Marcuse's revolutionary fervor to 1918, when he was an activist student himself.[89] Still more say that Marcuse, flattered by student and media attention, performed his support for students, although this particular explanation suffers some historical infelicities.[90] Others still suggest that Marcuse and Habermas differed only or primarily because of their geographic distance. I will take the most convincing of these in turn. While these explanations are powerful, they fail to account for the *theoretical* links between Marcuse's philosophical work and his protest polemics.

It is tempting to suggest that Habermas's childhood in Nazi Germany explains his outburst at Dutschke in 1967, his sensitivity to police violence, and his criticism of militant tactics.[91] Such contextualization, however, as Matthew Specter has reminded us, fails to account for moments in Habermas's career when he claimed he did not unequivocally condemn violence.[92] Moreover, the place of violence even in Habermas's mature philosophy of language is hardly settled.[93] But Habermas took his analysis of the protests far beyond a knee-jerk response to shootings and violence. His deeper theoretical commitments explain the nuances in his response to the students perhaps better than a simple emotional revulsion based upon his childhood in Nazi Germany.

It is also tempting to explain differences between Habermas and Marcuse as a symptom of their geography. This is a compelling argument. Habermas, in Germany, witnessed protests born from university angst, sat in departments directly targeted by students, and was a younger, professionalizing faculty member eager to make a name

[88]Specter, *Habermas: An Intellectual Biography*, 25, 113; Holub, *Jürgen Habermas: Critic in the Public Sphere*, 82–9. Specter says Habermas's "his encounter with "actionism" helped to solidify his understanding of a nonviolent, but still radical, reform project." Specter, *Habermas: An Intellectual Biography*, 113.

[89]Caroline Ashcroft, "From the German Revolution to the New Left: Revolution and Dissent in Arendt and Marcuse," *Modern Intellectual History* 19/3 (2021), 835–58. Ashcroft links Marcuse's participation in the Weimar student movement to his participation in 1960s protest. Terrance Renaud similarly suggests that the New Left was just *one* "new left" inheriting traditions and practices from prior left-wing student protests. See Terence Renaud, "German New Lefts," *New German Critique* 46/2 (2019), 117–49.

[90]This explanation might overlook some of the personal and professional costs Marcuse incurred through his support for the students. In many of the articles I have cited, Marcuse was repeatedly criticized and threatened for his support of the students. He earned himself a long FBI file, and his protest politics made him the enemy of administrators at Brandeis and UC, San Diego, where he was frequently threatened with disciplinary action and firing.

[91]There is some work linking the recent Nazi past to German intellectuals' aversion to violent protest. Verovšek occasionally implies this for Habermas, citing his view that the German New Left had a less sharp image of the improvements of the liberal state over fascism than he did, given his experience and memory of the recent Nazi past. Verovšek, *Jürgen Habermas: Public Intellectual and Engaged Critical Theorist*, 148. See also, for an extended treatment of this subject: A. Dirk Moses, *German Intellectuals and the Nazi Past* (Cambridge and New York, 2007).

[92]Specter, *Habermas: An Intellectual Biography*, 116. Specter cites, for example, Habermas's identification of a "progressive role for violence" in Jürgen Habermas, "Reaktion auf das referat Rudi Dutschkes" (9 June 1967), in Krausharr, *Frankfurter Schule und Studentenbewegung*, Nr. 130, 254.

[93]S. Ashenden, "On violence in Habermas's philosophy of language," *European Journal of Political Theory* 13/4 (2014), 428.

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for himself in an austere German academic context. Marcuse, in the United States, saw protests born from antiwar and antiracist calls for freedom. Perhaps Marcuse and Habermas were speaking to and about fundamentally different protesters from fundamentally different social roles. There is good evidence to support this reading. Indeed, in one letter, Marcuse linked part of his disagreement with Habermas to their differing analyses of the origins of protests.[94] In this letter, disagreeing with Habermas, Marcuse wrote that protests in America and across the Atlantic had originated from *similar* discontents with capitalist democracy.

This was a frequent claim in Marcuse's public and private writings through the decades.[95] He often called '68 protests transatlantic—in his view, students in Germany and the US were engaged in parallel struggles for freedom.[96] But, while Marcuse may have thought Habermas's analysis of protest was overly German, the archive reveals that Habermas was not ignorant of the protests in America, which he *also* named "actionism." Habermas spent time in the United States through the 1960s. In one speech, he cautioned *both* American and German students against actionism.[97] Moreover, Habermas's "Student Protest in the Federal Republic of Germany" distinguishes between America and Germany, but *still* claims to theoretically and practically disagree with Marcuse.[98] Theoretical *and* political disagreement persisted outside the influence of place.

Recognizing these insufficiencies of personal and political history to properly contextualize these thinkers' response to the students, some have turned to theoretical explanations. Wheatland, for example, links Marcuse's occasional uneasiness with the students to his theoretical claim that the critical reason was an emancipatory practice.[99] But a closer reading of Marcuse's published work and letters reveals that any uneasiness with the students' actions was of a piece with his changing relationship to the challenge of demarcating the limits of practical negation. He was unsure, following his historicized Hegelian concept of truth and a critique of the totalizing power of ideology that pushed him towards an embrace of "practical negation," where the distinction lay between practical negation and some of the students' "action for action's sake."[100] His critique was not that the students lacked critical reason, but that he was unsure if they properly *practiced* negation.

In 1966, Marcuse was at his peak of support for the protests, ending one April lecture in Frankfurt with the words "today is the day for theory to become practice,"

[94]Letter to Adorno, 21 July 1969, Na 3 261.

[95]In October 1968, Marcuse said, "I have been accused of concentrating my critique on American Society, and this is quite true." "Marcuse Defines His New Left Line," *New York Times*, 27 Oct. 1968, 107.

[96]Gianuido Piani, "An interview with Herbert Marcuse," *Lo Continua*, April 1978, UBA Ffm, Na 3, 1022, Nachlass Herbert Marcuse. See also, for example, Marcuse's global view of Vietnam earlier in the decade in his notes for a lecture in Frankfurt: Herbert Marcuse, "Notes for Anti-war Lecture in Frankfurt," May 1966, UBA Ffm, Na 3, 202.

[97]Jürgen Habermas, *Toward a Rational Society* (Boston, 1970), 13, 16.

[98]Elsewhere, Habermas indicates his analysis is not *purely* of the German case. See his reference to Berkeley in his picture of student protest actions in Jürgen Habermas, "Brief an Erich Fried," in Kraushaar, *Frankfurter Schule und Studentenbewegung*, Nr. 146.

[99]Wheatland, *The Frankfurt School in Exile*, 299

[100]"Herbert Marcuse and the Student Revolts of 1968."

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and claiming in an antiwar speech in May that American students were forming a "remarkably" and "spontaneously" unified "radical negation" (read, practical negation) of the status quo.[101] As Marcuse urged the students to lead with their practice, he was also preparing a 1967 inaugural address at UC San Diego, where he was poised to join the philosophy faculty. In drafts of his lecture notes, Marcuse scrawled that "authentic theory involves practice," and that theory *necessarily requires* "negation of the actuality" to "reveal true potentialities."[102] Rich marginal annotations emphasized the *truth* of possibilities, and their accessibility through *practice*.[103] This necessarily justifies practical negation: "truth is potential rather than actual and is not only an order of thought, a quality of propositions, but is also an order of action, a quality of *practice*."[104] Marcuse underlined "practice." He did not underline the truth content of critical reason, or of critical rationality, but claims that radical philosophy must encourage and be intimately connected to a practical negation of given conditions. Commitment to his peculiar interpretation of Hegel's *Begriff* and the embrace of practical negation also surfaced in the half-polemic "Ethics and Revolution" (1966), where Marcuse asked "whether ends can justify [violent] means" of revolutionary movements. He answered with a resounding yes.[105] Violence, he claimed, was not objectively ethically justifiable, but was "historically justifiable."[106] Such a calculus, Marcuse said, gave revolutionary movements and protest movements which negate the given state of affairs "the presumption of historical justification."[107] In this 1966 essay, Marcuse's "critical reason" could *justify* revolutionary action, but ought not *direct* it. What ought to direct revolutionary action was the practices of negation and refusal. Thus, although Marcuse had not entirely abdicated a role for philosophy—evidenced by his trouble with the REP's "undertheorized" pedagogy—he still granted practical negation priority over abstract negation.

After the 1967–8 shootings, Marcuse tempered his support, experimenting with theoretical models to place limits on legitimate practical negation.[108] After the shootings, Dutschke requested a German reprint of Marcuse's essay titled "The End of Utopia." Marcuse responded curtly, clearly worried that his prior embrace of radical practical negation would lead to more violent protest. In the spring of 1968, he wrote to Dutschke, "I have no objection to the foreign-language editions of the 'End of Utopia,' provided that the essay on the problem of violence in the opposition appears in

[101] Herbert Marcuse, Frankfurt antiwar lecture notes, May 1966, UBA Ffm, Na 3, 202, Nachlass Herbert Marcuse. See also similar material in Marcuse's 1966 lecture at UCSD: Marcuse, notes for inaugural address at UC San Diego, Feb. 1966.

[102] Marcuse, notes for inaugural address at UC San Diego, Feb. 1966.

[103] Ibid.

[104] Ibid., original emphasis.

[105] Herbert Marcuse, "Ethics and Revolution," in R. T. de George, ed., *Ethics and Society: Original Essays on Contemporary Moral Problems* (Garden City, 1966), 133–48, at 146.

[106] Ibid., 147. Here, ethical justification relies on derivation from abstract principles of the right or good; historical justification relies on Marcuse's materialist transfiguration of Hegel.

[107] Ibid., 145.

[108] Ibid.

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full."[109] In "The End of Utopia," Marcuse had identified fringe groups refusing to participate in the status quo—groups practicing negation—as latent evidence of these utopian potentialities.[110] Now, just a year after that lecture, Marcuse vacillated on the limits of violent practical negation; he wanted to ensure that the students reexamined the writings on violence relevant to their cause.[111] He wanted the students to be aware of the strategic challenges involved in violent confrontation with a well-funded and armed state apparatus; he also wanted Dutschke to know that he was worried about the "Trotskyist" factions among the student left.[112]

In this letter to Dutschke, Marcuse reiterated his favor for an ethics of practical negation as a rejection of the present, while backing away from his prior, more radical embrace of *violent* opposition. Is it the case that the goal of a society which negates the current conditions of suffering can *always* justify violent means? Not entirely, Marcuse suggested: protesters, he thought, should learn more about both the promise of "utopia" and the problem of violence. This complicates Wheatland's argument that students "mentored" Marcuse.[113] Here, Marcuse wanted the students to learn from him. In 1966, Marcuse had generally praised the students (save a few comments about undertheorized projects like the REP). Indeed, there had been some escalation before 1966. (In one 1964 protest, Dutschke joined students as they launched overripe tomatoes at the Congolese prime minister).[114] Clearly, for Marcuse, some confrontation was acceptable. But, by 1968, after two major shootings, Marcuse was uneasy with mounting violence. At first glance, it appears that Marcuse significantly changed his views, but this, I argue, is not the case.[115] Indeed, the fact that Marcuse permitted Dutschke to publish "The End of Utopia" at all and the implication that he still believed that students might properly orient their protests by reading his work imply that Marcuse retained *some* faith in the student movement. He was willing to caution against violence without allowing this criticism to override his general support for their protests' direction towards *true* "historical potentialities."[116]

This nuance in Marcuse's view is further supported by a lecture to students in San Diego, highlighting links between the student movements in America and Germany. In May 1968, during the Parisian protests where Marcuse's name appeared on posters alongside Mao and Marx, Marcuse said, "The [students'] conclusion now is that the more radical, the more nonconformist the expression of the opposition, the better it

[109]This is further evidence that Marcuse shared his worries with the students privately, hesitant to be overly critical in public. Herbert Marcuse, Briefwechsel mit Rudi Dutschke, 12 January 1968, UBA Ffm, Na 3, 565, Nachlass Herbert Marcuse.

[110]Ibid.

[111]Ibid.

[112]Ibid.

[113]Wheatland, *The Frankfurt School in Exile*, 296.

[114]Quin Slobodian, *Foreign Front: Third World Politics in Sixties West Germany* (Durham, NC, 2012), 52; Norbert Frei, 1968: *Jugendrevolte und globaler Protest* (Munich, 2008), 62.

[115]Part of Marcuse's apparent shift seems to come from the realization that student provocation and violence was not one-sided—while students might have had "preemptive" justifications for violent protest, the retaliatory violence police used to suppress protests, perhaps, made violence a strategically inferior strategy.

[116]Marcuse, "Ethics and Revolution," 143–4.

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is."[117] He identified in students the most radical form of "practical negation"; they try anything to reject the hegemony of an ideologically rationalized status quo. Reflecting on this approach, Marcuse said that he felt "highly reluctant to indict even the disagreeable and even the all-too prematurely radical features of the movement," because he hoped "that through trial and error the movement will gain strength."[118] Thus Marcuse continued to back off slightly from the assertion that radical practical negation by any means was ultimately a productive revolutionary strategy. He instead insisted that it was at the very least *tolerable*—that although the students' approaches may not perfectly balance unified, theorized action and total practical rejection of the status quo, their experimentation with that balance was worth entertaining. This was a point highlighted in his letters to Adorno, and it does an excellent job explaining both his uneasiness with some of the most radical student factions and his general support for their movement. Moreover, Marcuse himself identified these views as they diverged from Habermas. In a 1969 letter to Adorno, he wrote that, "in contrast to Habermas," he believed that the protests in America, France, and elsewhere were reflections of the "same underlying problem": the students were merely giving catalytic voice to a *true* feature of late capitalist Western democracy.[119]

Marcuse ended the decade with the publication of *Essay on Liberation*. Here, Marcuse reflected on the student movement to test the mechanics and limits of "practical negation." He experimented here with the concept of imagination, which first appeared as a necessary element of realizing true historical potentialities in "Philosophy and Critical Theory." He reads the more peaceful rejections of the status quo in the form of isolated communal living as a kind of present negation of capitalist life, an already latent potentiality not yet universally realized.

Understanding the ways Marcuse justified his attitude towards the 1960s *in virtue of* his epistemological foundations enables a richer account of his response to the students. First, Marcuse's support for students through 1966, including his support for violent means of refusal, is not neatly separable from his more abstract work on true potentialities and practical negation. Second, Marcuse's uneasiness with the student's extreme factions can be read neatly alongside his *own* theoretical experimentation with the extent to which the practice of rejecting the status quo could legitimately precede non-ideological internal rational critique. Finally, his assertion that, despite some trouble with violence, students should be allowed to experiment with those limits—his overriding interest in supporting even somewhat disagreeable action—accords with his belief that the historical potentialities towards which students claimed to organize were not just hypothetical but were true. In other words, philosophical exegesis of Marcuse's account of truth and justification, negation, and potentialities and of his reading of Hegel offers supplementary and significant exposition to understand how he and others sharing his theoretical apparatus may have seen his responses to protest as particularly apt.[120]

[117]"Herbert Marcuse and the Student Revolts of 1968."

[118]Ibid.

[119]Herbert Marcuse, letter to Adorno, July 13 1969, Na 3, 261.

[120]Here, I do not mean that Marcuse's responses to protest were apt, *simpliciter*—just that they appear *warranted, merited*, or otherwise fitting *given* his epistemological views.

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Habermas followed a different course. Initially, he supported students' opposition to the 1966 Grand Coalition between the German conservative party, the Christian Democrats, and the more progressive Social Democrats. He also backed their university reform proposals, but as clashes with police intensified, he consistently called students "actionists."[121] All the while, Habermas retained an abiding interest in advising the students, publicly offering his constructive thoughts on their tactical choices. Secondary literature has focused on this "actionist" critique, seeking contextual explanations for the term, linking his politics to his proximity to Wolfgang Abendroth and his tenuous relationship with Horkheimer—or, at most, looking to Habermas's thought on legality and legitimacy. I do not dispute these accounts; instead, I offer a picture of the explanatory role of Habermas's epistemology for his delicate political position.

One such approach explains Habermas's problem with the students in terms of his broader theory of dependency on exploitation in the developing world.[122] Habermas was, in his lectures in 1967, critical of the students for their ignorance of their dependency on postcolonial Third World extractive economies.[123] The conditions of prosperity which students argued supported a more emancipated society were, Habermas said, only possible in virtue of extractive economies and unjust wars elsewhere.[124] Habermas was unlikely to have been engaging much with the Marxist dependency and postcolonial theorists writing in French, English, and Spanish during the 1960s. While some of his critique of the students resonates with them, the charge of "actionism" had little to do with postcolonial politics.

[121]Specter, *Habermas: An Intellectual Biography*, 96.

[122]Slobodian, *Foreign Front*, 9. Third Worldist Marxism and the importance of a proper appraisal of the relationship between German society and an emerging international capitalist order are also briefly thematized in Habermas's exchanges with Oskar Negt and Hans Jürgen-Krahl on the student movement, which Verovšek (among others) has made central to the story of his engagements with the New Left. Oskar Negt, "Studentischer Protest—Liberealismus—'Linkfaschismus'", in Kraushaar, *Frankfurter Schule und Studentenbewegung*, Nr. 219; Habermas, "Die Scheinrevolution und ihre Kinder: Sechs Thesen über Taktik, Ziele und Situationsanalysen der oppostionellen Studenten," in Kraushaar, *Frankfurter Schule und Studentenbewegung*, Nr. 220. Slobodian occasionally draws on these texts, which certainly support his broader claims. Nevertheless, Habermas is clear that the reason students might "provoke" effectively but cannot assert true claims is surely tied to his broader concomitant studies of the conditions of public validity which I have identified as central to his debate with Marcuse. Indeed, in this speech Habermas warns explicitly against purely negative action. Krahl and Reimut Reiche were critical of Habermas's view here. See Hans-Jürgen Krahl, "Antwort auf Jürgen Habermas," in Kraushaar, *Frankfurter Schule und Studentenbewegung*, Nr. 221; Reimut Reiche, "Verteidigung der 'neuen Sensibilität'," in Kraushaar, *Frankfurter Schule und Studentenbewegung*, Nr. 225. Reiche found especially odious Habermas's insistence on rationality over emotion and sentiment.

[123]Dutschke himself occasionally pursued solidaristic action and contact with international student and left movements, referencing "one-dimensionality" in the same breath. See Rudi Dutschke, "Diskussionsbeitrag," in Kraushaar, *Frankfurter Schule und Studentenbewegung*, Nr. 93. Marcuse, in response, offered cautious optimism about the global focus, but was clear that solidarity across borders was more complex than some students recognized. Herbert Marcuse, "Die Analyse des Exempels," in Kraushaar, *Frankfurter Schule und Studentenbewegung*, Nr. 102.

[124]See Hans-Jürgen Krahl, "Antwort auf Jürgen Habermas," in Kraushaar, *Frankfurter Schule und Studentenbewegung*, Nr. 221. For Habermas on antiwar protests see Habermas, "Scheinrevolution unter Handlungszwang," 9 June 1968, *Der Spiegel*, sec. "Politik."

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One possible *theoretical* explanation for the meaning of Habermas's "actionism" reaches back to *Structural Transformation*.[125] On this account, Habermas saw the students seeking a shortcut through public debate, attempting to bypass the long process of constructing and developing reform through debate in the public sphere. This account is quite convincing and captures some of what Habermas saw as problematic in the student protests. Indeed, Habermas criticized the students for rejecting institutional reform processes. Still, in several essays from the late 1960s, Habermas actually praised the students for raising their cause to the level of public debate in media and popular culture. Indeed, the term "actionism" comes up most frequently as a critique not when Habermas is discussing the public sphere, but when he is discussing the fundamentally *hypothetical* and *experimental* nature of the alternatives students raise as objective alternatives to the status quo. Thus there is more connection here to his theory of validation for theoretical hypotheses relating to practice.

Specter offers another possibility which does aid in explicating the term "actionism," but does not identify what is specifically *wrong* about actionism to Habermas. Specter contextualizes Habermas as an interlocutor on debates over positivism and technocracy in political decision making. Habermas exchanged essay-length letters with Apel and Gadamer about problems with the positivist approach to language.[126] Although these letters sparsely touched the issue of protest, Habermas's writings on technocracy show a clearer link to actionism. Habermas disagreed with Marcuse about the role of technological and scientific rationality in developed societies. He read Marcuse as levying a classically Marxist critique of the role technology played in rationalizing irrational ends but ultimately believed that Marcuse saw technological development as a potentially radical disruptive force. This interpretation emerges in Habermas's "Science and Technology as Ideology," an essay he published for Marcuse's birthday in July 1968, two months after the Dutschke shooting.[127] Here, Habermas departs from Marcuse, offering his own theory of technology. He traces the development of two kinds of action: "purposive rational action" and "communicative action" (sometimes called "interaction"). The former, Habermas says, refers to means–end rational thought. The latter refers to goal-setting or "practical" action.[128] As more domains of society are subjected to technological thought and to thought in line with the Enlightenment scientific method, Habermas says, the means–end approach that technology embodies becomes "ideological." By this, Habermas means that "purposive rational action" comes to crowd out space for "communicative action," and our processes for setting goals and norms are slowly divested of its essential, hermeneutic content.[129]

[125]While Holub may not *exactly* argue this point as I have worded it, his account is perhaps the most suggestive of an argument in this direction. See Holub, *Jürgen Habermas: Critic in the Public Sphere*, 83–6. Verovšek also references *Structural Transformation* and Habermas's early work on university reform to contextualize his later clash with the students and his earlier praise for some activism as efforts to bring new issues into the realm of the political. Verovšek, *Jürgen Habermas: Public Intellectual and Engaged Critical Theorist*, 138–40.

[126]Doohm, *Habermas: A Biography*, 307, 317; Holub, *Jürgen Habermas: Critic in the Public Sphere*, 63.

[127]Habermas, *Toward a Rational Society*, 81–5.

[128]Ibid.

[129]Habermas, *Theory and Practice*, 216; Habermas, *Toward a Rational Society*, 33.

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Specter claims that the charge of "actionism" is a charge in line with the argument of this essay. Habermas, according to Specter, is disagreeing with Marcuse, identifying the students' tactical failure as a failure to properly relate communicative action to purposive rational action, a failure to understand that means–end rationality (or technology and the *techne* of protest) alone is not sufficient to legitimate action.[130] Specter is, I believe, correct to probe Habermas's nascent discourse ethics for an understanding of actionism. But there is a question left unanswered in this analysis. Specter argues that Habermas thought that actionism was a kind of naive, perhaps technological, ideology, but does not ask *why* actionism was a deeply problematic approach to advocating social alternatives. In other words, this account rightly identifies what actionism is, for Habermas, but does not extensively probe his epistemology for the explanation of why actionism is wrong. Returning to Habermas's writing, it becomes clear that one of the fundamental commitments grounding both his critique of technocracy *and* his critique of actionism was Habermas's consensus theory of truth and justification and his related critique of Hegel.

Indeed, in "The Scientization of Politics and Public Opinion," Habermas offered clues that the problem with translating technocratic knowledge into practices of government and social organization is rooted in his deeper epistemology. He writes that experts and technologists cannot impose a technocratic politics or political order until "the articulation of needs in accordance with technical knowledge can be ratified in the consciousness of the political actors themselves."[131] Thus, Habermas suggests, there is a deeper problem with unmediated translation of technical knowledge into political practice, the problem Specter identified as fundamental to the concept of "actionism." That deeper problem is the relationship between knowledge and practice; experts may have domain knowledge, but, for Habermas, the hypothetical objectifications of knowledge cannot become *real* or *true* unless they are ratified by discourse. Habermas's epistemology appears to ground his political-theoretic critique of student actionism. Specter does not explicitly identify this link between Habermas's actionist critique and his epistemological foundations.

Returning to the students, Habermas's lecture on university democratization in January 1967 (before the shooting of Ohnesorg, and before he used the term "actionism") advanced support for a core student cause—reforming the university. He justified that support with a brief outline of the structure of "democratic decision making." Indeed, Habermas emphasized that the university could produce powerful and progressive knowledge, but that this was "a principle … binding but not real" since "the discussion of proposals and justifications" is distinct from "the demonstration of a decision with appeal to the preceding arguments."[132] Here, Habermas claimed that the university ought to be thought of as having political potential, but that the social and

[130]Specter, *Habermas: An Intellectual Biography*, 112–13. Specter glosses actionism: "An 'actionist' is one who engages in '… [protest] action for action's sake.' The actionist's goals are nonspecific; the overriding objective is mobilization for its own sake. The indiscriminateness of the protest is encapsulated in the slogan, the 'Great Refusal' [*grössen Weigerung*]." Specter here cites Habermas' introduction to *Protestbewegung und Hochschulreform*.

[131]Habermas, *Toward a Rational Society*, 75.

[132]Ibid., 10.

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political knowledge produced by universities does not immediately demand objectification in new social and political proposals. Habermas's support for a "politicized" and democratized university flowed from this concept. Indeed, he said that it is because knowledge develops "potentials" for practical objectification, but should be developed without any particular objectifications as the ultimate *telos* of knowledge, that the university must politically "guard itself" from encroachment on free thought.[133] It seems, then, that Habermas's support through early 1967 of student-driven university reform may have been grounded in an attempt to defend the free development of knowledge with political *potential* but not *immediate* practical force.

In 1967, once he used the term "actionism," Habermas looked for many ways to define it. Ultimately, in an essay from November 1967, Habermas settled on a definition which articulates with his deeper commitments to the fictive nature of potentialities. First, Habermas associated the student ethos with a version of radical Marcusean practical negation. He claimed the students sought to "create counter-worlds, which are supposed to protect against the danger of integration and to convert protest into a way of life that absolves those who lead it of having to ascertain the effectiveness of protest."[134] The students, according to Habermas, believed that by developing alternate life forms which negate the status quo, they could protest effectively against it. Habermas calls that strategy "the Great Refusal," directly referencing the term Marcuse frequently used and defended as a mode of practical negation grounded on the truth content of negations of the given. Critiquing that model, Habermas uses the term "actionism," or a "devaluation of theory and the over-hasty subordination of theoretical work to the *ad hoc* requisites of practice."[135] Actionism was parallel, perhaps converse, to the definition of "decisionism," which was a similarly problematic approach not to action but to politicians' decision-making processes. Decisionists made choices technocratically, without discursive validation. Actionists take action for its own sake, improperly seeking to objectify hypotheses without communicative norm setting.

After 1968, amid mounting tension after Dutschke's shooting, Habermas outlined an ethics of protest. Protest movements must understand and appreciate what he called "the dialectic of potential and will."[136] The student demands, Habermas claimed, had potential for truth; their critique was salient. He thought it productive that the protest movement issued "practical questions … [and] experiments with new forms of life."[137] Unfortunately, Habermas said, the students took their answers to these questions as "*ideés fixes*," unwilling to subject them to dialogical scrutiny.[138] This assessment of the students' discursive deficits and his concomitant interest in guiding the movement—an interest evidenced by his frequent public writings and his private correspondence

[133]Ibid., 11.
[134]Ibid., 32.
[135]Ibid., 33.
[136]Ibid., 61.
[137]Ibid., 42.
[138]Ibid., 40.

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with the publisher Rudolph Augstein about the aims of his public-facing writing—was *apt* in virtue of his nascent consensus theory of truth and justification.[139]

I began with a dilemma—how to explain Habermas's tripartite response to the students: his support for university democratization, criticism of confrontation, and continued public comment on protesters despite his criticisms. A closer reading of his commentary on student protests reveals that Habermas's initial support for university democratization was partly an expression of his belief that knowledge was best developed freely, secluded from unmediated translation into practice but not immune to democratic deliberation. He worried over the confrontational tactics *in virtue of* his belief that such knowledge could not be immediately objectified but first had to be subjected to discourse. Actionists skipped reflective, dialogical steps between knowledge and action. Finally, Habermas's interest in guiding the students can be partly explained by his belief that it is productive to *experiment* with hypothetical alternatives, if these are understood as experiments and not understood in a Marcusean sense—that is, as practical negations grounded in true potentialities.

Conclusion

In the 1960s, theoretical quarrels over truth in the history of postwar political theory found themselves at the center of political conflict about the validity and value of student protest. Tracing those quarrels reveals, first, that Marcuse was not merely a "guru" polemicist of the New Left, and that Habermas's emerging deliberative theory was not just the result of austere philosophical debates. Each self-consciously sought justificatory links between their debates on truth and justification and their conflicting views on student protest through the 1960s. Critical theory in the postwar period saw sustained transatlantic communication; both Habermas and Marcuse invoked the tradition of prewar critique as a foil for new theories of negation, truth, and justification. More broadly, critical theory's protest decade was an especially salient moment when theorists puzzled over the relationship between political commitments and the twentieth century's recurring debates about truth, language, and the objectivity of future possibilities.

The nature of the relationships between debates about truth, justification, and political actions remains relatively unserviced by the methodological tools of intellectual history. I haven't argued that either Marcuse's or Habermas's accounts of rational justification *caused* their responses to protests; I've argued instead that their writings indicate that they believed that their respective commitments to distinct critical epistemologies bore a *conceptual*—that is, not just historical—link to their attitudes towards protest. What exactly does it mean for abstract premises to be "expressed in," linked to, loosely suggestive of, or perhaps partially explanatory of practical, political conclusions?

It is these kinds of question that, for example, Richard Wolin asked when he identified an "inextricable" link between Heidegger's philosophy and his Nazism, that Ray Monk asked about Wittgenstein's practice of life and about his philosophical reflections on practice, and that Katrina Forrester asked about the relationship between Rawls's

[139]Habermas, letter to Rudolph Augstein, 20 July 1968. Attention to Habermas's public writing often focuses on his recent writing on the EU. See, for example, Holub, *Jürgen Habermas: Critic in the Public Sphere*.

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mid-century influences and the rather tepid protest politics of American liberalism. And they are questions that past historians and political theorists have asked, whether in studies of the link between Enlightenment reason, secularization, and the rise of nationalism, or in Weber's study of the elective affinities between Protestantism and capitalism. It seems that there has often been a loose link between the theoretical commitments authors formulate in intellectual contexts and the practical commitments they make in temporally distinct political contexts.

There are several ways to characterize the relation between deep philosophical commitments like an account of truth and practical attitudes, including strict entailment, necessity, obligation, possibility, permissibility, goodness, and badness. These do not quite capture the relationship between Habermas's and Marcuse's theory and their political attitudes. Indeed, I argued that Marcuse's and Habermas's theories of truth and negation neither *caused* nor *obligated* them to hold particular political attitudes—their theories rendered certain attitudes more *defensible*, loosely suggesting some political stances over others. They could have held any number of political attitudes through the decade (as many of their colleagues did), and few would reasonably question their logical or moral propriety. So necessity, entailment, and obligation do not describe a normative relation between their philosophical thinking and their political attitudes. Do possibility or permissibility describe it? No. Any number of political attitudes were *possible* or *permissible* for Marcuse and Habermas, but some among these *possible* attitudes were apt in virtue their philosophical priors. In short, I could not derive, using strict entailment, exactly what political attitudes Marcuse and Habermas ought to have held given the facts of the protests. It seems vague to say that certain attitudes might have been "good" and others "bad" in virtue of their philosophical beliefs. Necessity does not quite describe this relation; neither do causality, pure contingency, or mere possibility. Still, their pictures of truth seem to have fixed a *range* (or, if you like, a field) of plausibly defensible practical commitments; moreover, a range of their actual responses to protest led them to hone and sharpen those pictures.

To gain purchase on this slippery yet intuitive relationship between philosophy and politics one need not restrict oneself only to developed methodological approaches. Recall that historians of various methodological creeds—including Pocock, Skinner, Jay, Gordon, LaCapra, and others—have been searching for an account of the proper relationship between a thinker's interventions in abstract debates and their contextually limited political intentions.[140] They've searched for a waystation between, on one hand, a deflationary contextualism in which ideas merely reflect contingent intentions, and, on the other, an ahistorical view in which ideas are unmoored from authorial intent. I am inclined to cut a trail through this methodological debate which looks to the rich metaethical literature on the normative bridges between philosophical commitments

[140]Dominick LaCapra, "Rethinking Intellectual History and Reading Texts," *History and Theory* 19/3 (1980), 245–76; Quentin Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," *History and Theory* 8/1 (1969), 3–53, at 16; Adrian Blau, "Extended Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," *History and Theory* 58/3 (2019), 342–59; Martin Jay, "Historical Explanation and the Event: Reflections on the Limits of Contextualization," *New Literary History* 42/4 (2011), 557–71; Peter E. Gordon, "Contextualism and Criticism in the History of Ideas," in Darrin M. McMahon and Samuel Moyn, eds., *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History* (Oxford, 2014), 32–53, at 43.

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and practical attitudes. The link I identified between Habermasian or Marcusean pictures of truth and each of their political attitudes and intentions strikes me as one instance of this broader issue. To make sense of those normative bridges like these perhaps we ought to look, then, to recent work on practical reason, on the "fittingness" of practical attitudes, or on kinds of normativity that sit uneasily in traditional deontic and evaluative categories. In any case, there's more work yet to do.

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