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Habermas, Dialogue, and Change in the International System

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Can Dialogue be a Source of Change in the International System? Discuss with Reference to Jürgen Habermas's Work.

The question 'Can dialogue be a source of change in the international system?' entails several key terms that need to be analysed in order to draft an answer. The nature of dialogue can differ depending on the conditions and circumstances in which it occurs. It can also lead to different outcomes depending on these conditions and on the nature of dialogue. If we argue that dialogue is indeed a source of change, the nature of this change will depend on the nature of the dialogue creating it. I will argue in this essay that dialogue, regardless of its nature, is a source of change. But I will also argue that the nature of this change depends on the nature and conditions of the dialogue.

I will refer to Habermas's theory of communicative action and discourse ethics to outline the set of conditions Habermas gives for a dialogue to create 'good' change. Habermas views change as social change aiming for human emancipation through the creation of a cosmopolitan society (Habermas 2003). There is at the present moment no 'democratically constituted world society' (Habermas 2008: 445), but Habermas believes that this could be achieved by dialogue as a process of 'legitimation' (Habermas 2008). We will therefore consider change in Habermasian terms, i.e. consider change as social change towards an emancipated world society.

I will start by explaining how dialogue and communication impact every human in our daily social lives, in order to assess what it can mean at the national and supranational levels. I will then give an insight of Habermas's theory of communicative action and discourse ethics, and analyse what it entails for dialogue and change in the international system. I will end by outlining some critiques of Habermas's theory and explain that if dialogue seems to trigger change, this change may not be as optimistic as Habermas says it could be.

Before getting into abstract theories of discourse and communication, dialogue can be put in relation with change in a more pragmatic way. In our day-to-day life, what drives our day in a certain way? We may have planned to do a certain thing, and then a conversation with someone else will change this. We may change our minds about things, or have a certain opinion about something in the morning and another one at night. We make life choices as a result of dialogues. When we disagree with someone, we do not take out our gun and shoot this person. We will enter in dialogue and express a series of arguments and counter-arguments. We create relationships through dialogue and communication, which may in turn change our behaviour and influence our choices. We, as participants in a dialogue, are presupposed to be rational individuals (Habermas 1984).

This could be transposed to the level of states. States, by communicating with one another and by establishing diplomatic relations, make decisions and build policies that lead them to act and behave in a certain way. If we believe in the importance of states as agents in the international system, dialogue between these states could have an important potential for change. Dialogue makes it so that states do not attack one another continuously at every single disagreement and they may find a better solution through dialogue.

Communication is omnipresent in personal life as well as in public life, in domestic politics as well as in international

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politics. Communication occurs bilaterally, between two states through their diplomatic relations, as well as multilaterally, for example in the United Nations or other regional organisations. Dialogue also takes place between state actors and non-state actors. Communication and dialogue impact greatly the international system. But does it impact it and change it in the way Habermas would like it to? Habermas asks the following question: 'Can this form of democratic self-direction of modern societies [within the framework of the nation-state] extend beyond national border' (Habermas 2003: 87)? It seems that the change that Habermas is advocating for is the emancipation of the world society, to make it a 'self-effectuating or self-directing society' (2003, 87). 'The long-term goal must be the steady overcoming of social division and stratification within a global society, but without damaging cultural distinctiveness' (2003: 99).

However, participants in dialogue have to respect a certain set of conditions for the change to be consistent with Habermas's ideas. 'Habermas's work is concerned with validity claims and the desire for a better, or emancipated, society [...] to be found [...] in the structure of language and discourse' (Rustin 1999: 169).

Actors engaging in communication are pre-supposed to be rational. Habermas drafts a definition of the process of communicative rationality. For him, this is communication that is

oriented to achieving, sustaining and reviewing consensus – and indeed a consensus that rests on the intersubjective recognition of criticisable validity claims. The rationality inherent in this practice is seen in the fact that a communicatively achieved agreement must be based *in the end* on reasons (Habermas 1984: 17).

Habermas assumes that a discussion is an exchange of reasons and counter-reasons, arguments and counter-arguments, between two or more participants that are pre-supposed to be equal in the dialogue and open to the others' reasons. In dialogue, participants have reciprocal behavioural expectations that are 'raised to normative status' (Habermas 1975: 108). In other words, if two actors agree to engage in dialogue, we can suppose that they are open to both talk and listen, listen and be listened to, and to adopt certain norms and behaviours. Both expose their arguments (what Habermas calls 'reasons') (Habermas 1984: 17) about a topic, trying to convince the other of the 'better argument' (Gimmler 2010). They are also supposedly open to the possibility of being convinced if the counter-argument happens to be better (Mitzen 2005: 401). In sum, Habermas, in defining the process of communicative rationality, assumes that participants engaging in an argumentative dialogue adopt 'universal pragmatics' of language and social behaviour. We assume that the participants in a dialogue share the same meanings about words and have a 'mutually recognized normative background' (Habermas 1979: 3).

But for this *communicative rationality* to occur and for the participants to expose freely their reasons towards the search of the 'better argument' in order to create change in the form of human emancipation, dialogue must be occurring under '*suitable circumstances*' (Habermas 1984: 17). As Jabri puts it, 'language is medium of understanding as well as domination' (Jabri 1996: 163). Therefore, in order to counter this possibility of using discourse as a form of domination, Habermas refers to the conditions necessary for a communication to aim for the better argument through the establishment of an 'Ideal Speech Situation' (Habermas 1990: 86). Participants in a dialogue must respect certain rules and pre-agree to recognize an equal relationship between them in the dialogue:

Under the pragmatic presuppositions of an inclusive and non-coercive rational discourse between free and equal participants, everyone is required to take the perspective of everyone else and thus to project herself into the understandings of self and world of all others; from this interlocking of perspectives there emerges an ideally extended 'we-perspective' from which all can test in common whether they wish to make a controversial norm the basis of their shared practice (Habermas 1999: 58).

Therefore, according to Habermas, for this ideal situation and 'suitable circumstances' to be met, there must be same capacities of discourse and social equality, absence of coercive force, mutual search for understanding and compelling power of the better argument.

As Jabri said in her *Discourses on Violence*, 'the ability to "make a difference" or to overcome institutional constraints in order to generate unhindered, open communication constitutes what Habermas calls "emancipatory

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interest”(Habermas 1972)’ (Jabri 1996: 161). The whole point is to overcome the pressures of the asymmetric social system in order to achieve emancipation through dialogue (1996: 162). As Giddens said, ‘the more social circumstances approximate to an ideal speech situation, the more a social order based on the autonomous action of free and equal individuals will emerge’ (Giddens 1991: 213).

Habermas assumes that participants in dialogue have an ‘emancipatory interest’ and that they will accept the rules of the ‘ideal speech situation’ in order to find the best outcome for society. As Linklater puts it, ‘advocates of the dialogic approach to world citizenship argue that the ability of the modern state to protect the rights of citizens has been eroded by the modern phase of globalization. They maintain that the achievements of national citizenship can only be secured by investing in the development of a new European international society’ (Linklater 1998: 30). Mitzen further argues that ‘confronting the limitations of nation-state democracy in condition of globalisation, Habermas and other theorists argue that it is necessary today to think in terms of state-transcending rather than just national public spheres’ (Mitzen 2005: 402).

In other words, in the context of the increasingly globalised world, citizens would find more possibilities of emancipation from domination and power relations of the international system by establishing dialogic relations at the supranational level, as it has already been initiated regionally particularly with the creation of the European Union and dialogue at the European level. However, Habermas acknowledges that dialogue between European states has not yet led to a European citizenship. His article “Toward A Cosmopolitan Europe” is aimed at exploring ways to reach such a cosmopolitan society. He argues that there is still a lot to do, and that ‘discussions have to be synchronized within national public spheres that are networked across Europe – that is, conducted at the same time and on the same topics – so that a European civil society with interest groups, non-governmental organisations and citizens’ initiatives can emerge’ (Habermas 2003: 98). He believes that European citizens will discover an ‘emancipatory interest’ through supranational dialogic relations, and that ‘a European party system will take shape only to the extent that existing parties initially fight it out within their own national arenas and, in the course of such fights, come to discover interests that cross national borders’ (ibid).

Thus, cosmopolitan theorists such as Habermas believe that the only way to counter the negative effects of capitalism and globalization, e.g. increasing inequalities and erosion of state sovereignty in the protection of its citizens, is to aim for a ‘cosmopolitan citizenship’ (Linklater 1998: 24) where every citizen of the world would be equal. Even if today we are far from this idea of world citizenship, Linklater points out the emergence of a ‘solidarist’ form of international society, for example with international organisations such as the United Nations, where efforts are made to create international norms that do not only reflect the interests of the great powers (1998: 35). The UN General Assembly is a good example of a forum for equal dialogue: each state, regardless of its power or capabilities, has one equal voice in discussion and one equal vote for decisions. If we follow Habermas’s ideas, we should call for an even more equal dialogue at the UN, as the Security Council shows the remaining of power relations, with unequal voices. Five states have a more powerful voice, since they have a permanent seat and a veto power. He calls for a ‘multilaterally coordinated world domestic policy’ (Habermas 1994: 23-24) by creating the conditions of ‘ideal speech situation’ in all the UN bodies in particular.

In addition, Habermas argues that in order to create a ‘self-effectuating or self-directing society’, there needs to be ‘self-legislation’, i.e. ‘the addressees of law should understand themselves as the authors of the law as well’ (Habermas 2003: 87). Therefore, for dialogue to lead to the emancipation of world society and to the creation of a ‘global cosmopolitan society’, of a ‘participatory democracy beyond the nation-state’ (2003: 94), there needs to be an ‘ideal speech situation’ in which the agreement coming out of a dialogue must be the product of the people affected by it. Habermas says that ‘the European Union offers itself as an initial example for a form of democracy beyond the nation-state’ (2003). Indeed, citizens of EU member states vote for their representatives at the EU Parliament (the MEPs). However, Habermas’s view of emancipation and ‘global cosmopolitan society’ goes further than a mere representative democracy. He advocates for a ‘participatory democracy’, in which the participants in dialogue are the ones affected by the outcome of this dialogue. But is there really an equal and open dialogue in Europe where the persons affected by the outcome of the social dialogue are also the participants in it?

The term ‘social dialogue’ is used to refer to the dialogue between the representative of management and labour (the

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'social partners') in the European Union, who are trying to negotiate on different issues in order to reach binding agreements (Dukes and Christodoulidis 2012: 3). Social dialogue in the EU is said to be 'at the centre of the European social model' and 'the driving force behind economic and social reforms'. While '[b]etter governance of an enlarged Union relies on the involvement of all actors in decision-making', '[s]ocial partners have a unique position within civil society' as 'best-placed to address issues related to work' (European Commission Communication on the European Social Dialogue, COM 2002: 341). In principle then, social dialogue in the European Union would address well Habermas's claims for an open and equal dialogue, where the participants in the dialogue are affected by the outcomes, with 'the involvement of all actors in decision-making', including social partners and civil society (2002: 341). However, Dukes and Christodoulidis point at an issue of 'representativity' in the European social dialogue that would jeopardise Habermas's hope for change towards a cosmopolitan Europe:

Given the consequent disenfranchisement of members of other umbrella organisations, the seriously low membership of trade unions and employers' associations in many member states, and the lack of proximity between the individual worker and 'her' representative at European level, doubts arise regarding both the effectiveness of the representation of labour and management at the European level, and the lack of any mechanism whereby the question of representativity can itself be subject to and thus determined reflexively in processes of dialogue (Dukes and Christodoulidis: 6).

Therefore, the efforts towards establishing a participatory democracy and open dialogue in the EU have faced some limits, and even within the institutional framework of the EU, Habermas's hopes for a cosmopolitan society are not yet achieved. It will take even more efforts to establish an ideal speech situation at the international level, where there is no institutional framework such as the EU's. Habermas and other cosmopolitan theorists assume that common interests may be found, and that the ideal speech situation made possible by the framework of the EU would allow the participants to reach a 'well-grounded consensus'. But Dukes and Christodoulidis claim that 'the assumption that the antagonistic interests of sectors or classes are a priori bridgeable, as condition of perspective-taking and entering into discourse, is unwarranted' (Dukes and Christodoulidis: 7). Habermas's assumptions may therefore, at times, seem to be a bit too optimistic.

In this essay, I have argued that dialogue can indeed be a source of change. But for this change to be for what Habermas advocates, i.e. human emancipation within a cosmopolitan society, we should aim for the establishment of an 'ideal speech situation', the conditions for which I have outlined throughout this essay. As Samhat and Payne acknowledge, theorists following Habermas's ideas 'do not suggest that this ideal of new political communities and their accompanying global democratic practices have been attained, only that the international regime, which provides the best institutional form now available in world politics, can realise these goals (Samhat and Payne 2003: 274). This may all, of course, be bit utopian. Even if we efforts in the international system work towards establishing common norms through international law and human rights law and towards creating regional and international organisations, it may seem still a long way to the realisation of the conditions for the equal dialogue that Habermas proposes. But the dialogue already taking place in our current international system already is a source of change, or at least of preservation of a certain world order, preventing total chaos of continuous wars in this currently anarchical system.

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