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Democracy versus the Domination of Instrumental Rationality: Defending Dewey's Argument for Democracy as an Ethical Way of Life

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Abstract: For some, the problem with the domination of instrumental rationality is the tendency towards anomie. However, this fails to recognise the instrumental use of norms by elite groups to manipulate public opinion. Such manipulation can then allow elite groups to treat the citizenry as a means for the pursuit of their self-interest. Horkheimer was one of the first to recognise the problem in this form, but was unable to offer any solution because he conceptualised the citizenry as passive. By contrast, Dewey argued for an active citizenry to value participation in public life as good in, and of, itself. This is associated with his conception of democracy as an ethical way of life offering the possibility for the domination of instrumental rationality to be transcended. In this article Dewey's resolution of the problem is addressed in the light of the weaknesses attributed here to Horkheimer and to later developments by Bellah, Bernstein, Gellner, Habermas and Honneth.

Keywords: Bellah; Bernstein; Dewey; Gellner; Honneth; Horkheimer; instrumental rationality

1. Introduction

Instrumental rationality is a mode of rationality that is exclusively concerned with the search for efficient means and which, consequently, is not concerned with assessing the goals—or ends—pursued. This form of rationality has existed throughout history, but has become dominant in post-Enlightenment liberal democratic capitalist societies. We may speak of instrumental rationality being dominant in the sense that it shapes the practices of people and institutions. So, in a capitalist economy the economic elite, that is, the capitalist class, will produce and/or sell whatever commodities

are the most effective means to realize a profit. Moreover, they will seek ever more efficient means to increase profit by buying products to sell from cheaper suppliers or buying new technology and seeking ways to lower wages to produce more for less cost. As regards the development of a liberal political order that developed alongside capitalism, we may make the following observations.

For classical liberals, individuals were defined as rational pursuers of self-interest and not as beings defined by any form of substantive communal bonds. Given this, individuals needed freedom from interference by the state to pursue their self-interest and the provision of rules for competition to reduce the risk of losing private property through theft, force or fraud. In other words, freedom and the provision of “rules of the game” to regulate competition were the most efficient means for individuals to pursue rational self-interest. Obviously the provision of such rules and the raising of taxes to pay for their enforcement entailed restrictions of individuals’ freedom, but such restrictions were a “necessary evil” to ensure the security of individuals and their private property. Beyond that the state had no legitimate right to impose norms or control behaviours. Whereas a “thick” conception of politics would regard individuals as being defined by their ties, responsibilities and power relations with others in a community, the classical liberal conception of politics is a “thin” conception, because the activity of politics is reduced down to providing rules to regulate competition. The state would just enforce a set of formal, procedural rules-as-means to regulate competition. There would be no concern about trying to create the good society by imposing a set of norms on individuals which were deemed, by a political elite, as being good in themselves as ends that needed to be realised. Or with the citizens creating the good society by acting on norms as ends by, for example, seeking to impose religious norms or norms concerning the value of individuals engaging in public life for its own sake, and shaping the actions of the state to fit their conception of what norms needed to be realised. In other words, the “thin” liberal approach to politics is an expression of instrumental rationality because the focus is only on the provision of efficient means for individuals to realise self-interest. Furthermore, as will be argued, with the development of representative democracy within a “thin” liberal framework, it is possible for the political elite, that is, competing political parties, to act in an instrumentally rational way, using emotive norms-as-means to sway public opinion and get electoral support and support for policies.

2. Is Anomie the Problem?

There is a large literature in social and political thought and philosophy concerning the domination of instrumental rationality. One problem often identified is the condition of anomie, that is, a sense of normlessness, with the domination of instrumental rationality evacuating meaning from the world and replacing it with formal, bureaucratic processes. Gellner [1] and Bellah [2] both hold that anomie is the problem and argue, in different ways, that the solution is to use religious norms which are, respectively, imposed by the state or re-interpreted by the state. The problem with this focus on anomie is threefold.

First, one may challenge the notion that a condition of anomie exists. Whilst it is the case that traditions have been undermined this is not the same as saying a condition of anomie obtains, because instead of meaning being evacuated from the world it is the case that norms with emotive power do exist but that they are transient. Second, the focus on overcoming anomie offered by Gellner and Bellah failed to recognise that the political elite may mobilise and use norms as an emotional and thus efficient means to influence the citizens. This, in turn, reduces the citizens to means, in the sense that

the citizens are used by the political elite in their pursuit of self-interest and are not held to full account. Third, both Gellner and Bellah share a passive conception of the citizenry as consumers of norms, which make it impossible from their perspectives to conceptualise radical change based on the citizenry being motivated by commitments to norms deemed good in and of themselves as ends. As we will presently see, these are issues pursued in different ways by Horkheimer [3] and Dewey [4,5].

Gellner [1] noted how the cognitive ethic of the Enlightenment shifted the focus from the authority of the clerics to the inner abilities of individuals to know the world. Both the natural world and cultures arrive to us as a “pre-packaged deal, but following the Enlightenment it was realised that these pre-packaged deals can be “dismembered by thought” ([1], p. 80) with empirical combinations being re-examined by individuals to see how they could be different. The “re-examination of all associations destabilizes all cognitive anciens regimes. [...This] desacralizes, disestablishes, disenchant everything substantive: no privileged facts, occasions, individuals, institutions or associations” ([1], p. 81. Emphasis in original). This helped the scientific revolution but evacuated intrinsic meaning from the world. Gellner argued that:

whereas error can define a society, truth cannot. Truth does indeed corrode the old coherent ends, but fails to replace them with anything permanent, concrete, rounded off, and morally sustaining. The valid style of inquiry generates neither stability nor normative authority. The Enlightenment ethic of cognition does exclude certain kinds of authority, certain ways of validating a social order, but it simply does not contain any solid, so to speak meaty, premises, capable of engendering a concrete social alternative ([1], p. 88).

With this Enlightenment ethic of cognition “[o]nly a procedure, but no substantive ideas, is absolutized” ([1], p. 84. Emphasis in original). This, together with emphasis on formal procedural means replacing traditional bonds in the public sphere, and the industrial revolution, created a condition of anomie. The “post-Enlightenment industrial-scientific societies” best able to deal with anomie were liberal societies that “muddled through with an incoherent compromise” ([1], p. 88). This refers to societies that mixed an acceptance of scientific method and liberal procedural means with some pre-Enlightenment modes of legitimation, such as religion and use of monarchical heads of state.

Gellner’s proffered solution to transcend anomie is seen by him as operating in this tradition of prudent compromises. He argued for a constitutional religion which would be analogous to a constitutional monarchy. This solution prudently accepted an incoherent worldview. On the one hand domains such as science are based on rational questioning with there being no sacred sources of knowledge, such as clerical authority. On the other, the need for meaning and cohesion would be based on a “pre-industrial mode of legitimation” which treated religion with a “limited seriousness” and which did not let religion “interfere with serious cognitive and productive business” ([1], p. 94). Any notion of norms being treated seriously as ends that are good in and of themselves was avoided for fear of this leading to Fundamentalism. Instead, norms were just means to transcend anomie and were to be held with “limited seriousness” and clearly demarcated from the domains of science and commerce, over which they could not legitimately be used to pass judgment.

Gellner’s position can be quickly contrasted with that of Durkheim [6]. Durkheim held that the transition from traditional to industrial societies destroyed traditional bonds based on similarity between people and created the condition of anomie. He argued that this condition could be overcome by the establishment of new norms based on functional interdependence. What this meant was that

people in different trades and professions should, eventually, all realise that they relied on each other to do their tasks. That is, people filling different roles should come to realise that for society to function they not only had to fulfill their role but also rely on others to fulfill their roles too. Such realisation would then lead to a new set of norms developing based on people seeing themselves as members of an inter-dependent community where everyone's work benefitted others. The failure of such new norms to develop was to be explained, Durkheim argued, in terms of people gaining senior management positions through favouritism rather than ability and the lack of expert technical knowledge to facilitate the smooth running of the economy and large organisations. For Durkheim, a managerial class recruited purely on ability and the possession of expert technical knowledge could see class conflict and recessions replaced by a regulated capitalist economy. For Gellner such an approach would be bound to fail because commerce was based on the pursuit of self-interest and norms that could overcome anomie had to be clearly demarcated from commerce. Moreover, for Gellner, this is not to be regretted because the "serious business" of business was, unlike the new norms that were to be held with "limited seriousness", more important for progress. Capitalist societies innovate because the economy is not restricted by strong ethical norms.

For Bellah there was no problem with anomie in the USA because there was a clearly identifiable civil religion. This civil religion was both general enough to avoid sectarianism and specific enough to be saved from "empty formalism" and to function as "a genuine vehicle of national religious self-understanding" ([2], p. 8). Bellah argued that:

In American political theory, sovereignty rests, of course, with the people, but implicitly, and often explicitly, the ultimate sovereignty has been attributed to God. [...] The will of the people is not itself the criterion of right and wrong. There is a higher criterion in terms of which this will can be judged; it is possible that the people may be wrong. The president's obligation extends to the higher criterion ([2], p. 4).

The civil religion meant that anomie was avoided because politics was based on something "higher" than the self-interest of voters or politicians. It also motivated reforms, with an example of this being its influence on tackling racism ([2], p. 15). Unlike Gellner then, Bellah held that religious norms could be held seriously as good in and of themselves, as ends, which legitimately influenced public affairs. There was thus a consensus amongst the citizens over accepting the civil religion independently of its usefulness in particular situations. However, Bellah also argued that the civil religion "has often been used and is being used today as a cloak for petty interests and ugly passions" ([2], pp. 18–19). The risk is particularly great he argues, in the context of the Cold War, when it comes to "America's role in the world [where] the dangers of distortion are greater and the built-in safeguards of the tradition weaker" ([2], p. 14).

If the norms of the constitutional religion did have real traction with the citizenry and were applicable to key domains of public life, such as commerce, politics and issues concerning the uses of science in, say, medical and military technology, then the citizens may be motivated to learn about the activities of the elites and then challenge the behaviour of the elites. This would not be a desired outcome for those elites, because it would make the pursuit of self-interest potentially more difficult/less efficient. So, for it to be rational, that is, instrumentally rational, for the political elite to use their time and resources to construct such a religion, it would have to be the case that the religion would not motivate the citizenry to become active in public life. Having a religion that was only held

with “limited seriousness” and which was demarcated from the key domains of the public sphere which play a major role in everyone’s lives over which it could not be used to pass normative judgment is likely to produce a religion with little emotive traction. Thus the constitutional religion may well fail from Gellner’s point of view because it may well lack the traction in people’s lives required to become a new tradition. Ironically its very construction as just a means to overcome anomie, rather than a set of ends held with a serious—but not Fundamentalist—commitment, would undermine the ability of the constitutional religion to function in the way that Gellner envisaged. However, this outcome may well be of use to the political elite. This is not only because it would preclude the development of an active community of citizens, motivated by values and norms concerning justice that were deemed good in and of themselves, holding elites to account. Rather, it would also be because if the norms lack real traction with the citizenry it is easier for the political elite to exploit them by packaging them in an emotive way and using those norms as means to win support. So, whilst the norms themselves may lack traction, they could be packaged in certain ways to give them rhetorical appeal when the political elite deem this to be an efficient means to gain support. Just as metaphors lose their arresting quality if repeated constantly so too will emotive rhetorical appeals lose their ability to influence citizens if the political elite keep using the same packaging of the same norms. To avoid this and seek optimum efficiency from the norms of the constitutional religion, the political elite could draw on different norms and give them new rhetorical packaging. The outcome of this would be that the norms as constantly rhetorically re-packed means would be transient norms. If this did indeed succeed as a means to sway public opinion then it could well be the case that the changing repackaged norms were perceived by at least some citizens in a potentially edifying way, as something exciting and dynamic. The din of emotively charged claim and counter claim could well be preferred to the solidity of any sober tradition that cut across the party political divide and which could be used to hold all parties to account.

As regards Bellah’s [2] position, we can note that if a civil religion did indeed exist and underpin an ethically meaningful community where religious ends were taken seriously then the citizenry would be active. Such a citizenry would discuss amongst themselves the way to interpret and apply the moderate ends taken to be good in themselves and would seek to hold the political and economic elites to account on ethical grounds. In such a scenario citizens would have to hold their preferred party to account too, prioritising the civil religion over allegiance to one party. If that were the case the political elite would deem it an inefficient use of their time and resources to use the civil religion. However, as Bellah admitted, the political elite were able to exploit the norms of the civil religion as means to win support with the religious norms being used as a “cloak” for “petty interests” and “ugly passions”. All of which suggests that if the civil religion did indeed exist, its traction with the citizenry was radically diminished, with the political elite being able to exploit it as a set of rhetorically repackaged means to pursue self-interest, influencing a citizenry that was generally passive. As with the criticism of Gellner’s [1] position, the existence of norms-as-means which can efficiently mobilise political support suggests that the use of transient emotive transient “cloaks” may be enjoyed by a passive citizenry, in the spectacle of competition between the different sections of the political elite.

Bernstein’s [7] argument about the “abuse of evil” illustrates how norms can be used as emotive and thus efficient means for the political elite, or at least one section of it, to pursue self-interest. For Bernstein it was the case that in post 9/11 US politics a strain of Fundamentalism, in the form of

Christian Fundamentalism, developed within a liberal democracy. Bernstein argued that “[w]hat is so disturbing about post 9/11 talk is its rigidity and popular appeal” ([7], p. 10). This post 9/11 discourse used by some sections of the political elite posited an emotive binary opposition between good and evil, with the “War on Terror” being presented as the necessary action of the righteous against those who are fundamentally evil. For Bernstein this is an abuse of evil because “instead of inviting us to question and to think, this talk of evil is being used to stifle thinking” ([7], p. 11. *Emphasis in original*). To this we may add that the problem was not, *pace* Bernstein, the influence of Christian Fundamentalism, but the use of Fundamentalist rhetoric as a means to create popular support for President Bush and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. To be sure there were critical voices, but the Fundamentalist rhetoric was quite efficient in marginalising these [7]. That this was Fundamentalist rhetoric rather than Fundamentalism is clear from the fact if the wars were really motivated by Fundamentalism then they would still have to be justified. One could not turn away from implementing God’s will because the opinion polls indicated that war was no longer popular with voters. Turning to the motivation to engage in the wars in the first place, Chatterjee [8] argued that there were three causes. These were: a desire to re-assert US American power on the world stage; a desire to generate domestic support by offering decisive action to a shocked citizenry; and the economic benefits that accrued to corporations like Halliburton who were linked to the Republican Party and who made profits by supplying the military and engaging in reconstruction. The wars therefore were means to securing political and economic advantage.

3. The Enchanted Iron Cage

Weber [9,10] recognised that the dominance of instrumental rationality was a key defining feature of modernity. For Weber, the rise of instrumental rationality led to a condition of “disenchantment”, meaning that intrinsic meaning was stripped out of the world, as the world came to be conceptualised in terms of resources to be valued for their usefulness as means. Further, the rise of formal, procedural, bureaucratic means that were meant to be efficient, led to the rise of an “iron cage”, whereby life was subject to rigid impersonal rules in place of norms with traction. There is some debate about how pessimistic Weber was about our ability to break free from the disenchanting iron cage and what possible alternatives he envisaged. Kloppenborg [11] held that Weber saw the only possible escape as being the election of a ruler who was unaccountable during their term in office but then subject to electoral competition at the end of that term. The benefit of that system, for Weber, was that the leader would be free, during their term in office, to pursue an end without having to be concerned about pressure and criticism from those whose vested interests were threatened. By contrast, Scaff [12] held that, as regards the USA at least, Weber thought that there may be enough autonomous groups in civil society to resist the full development of the iron cage and the subsequent need for any quasi-authoritarian attempt to break free from it. On Weber, Horkheimer argued that:

Although Weber’s own and his followers’ descriptions of the bureaucratization and monopolization of knowledge have illuminated much of the social aspect of the transition from objective to subjective [*i.e.*, instrumental] reason [...] Max Weber’s pessimism with regard to the possibility of rational insight and action [...] is itself a stepping stone in the renunciation of philosophy and science as regards their aspiration of defining man’s [*sic*] goal ([3], p. 5).

In other words, Weber has surrendered the possibility of thought recovering any intrinsic meaning in the world. Weber's work, for Horkheimer, was a pessimistic expression of the problem with no solution.

Horkheimer contrasted instrumental rationality, which he refers to as subjective or formal reason, with objective reason, defined in terms of reason being in the objective world ([3], p. 4). Examples of objective reason are Platonism, Aristotelianism and German Idealism. Such works "[a]imed at evolving a comprehensive system, or hierarchy, of all beings, including man and his aims. The degree of reasonableness of a man's [*sic*] life could be determined according to its harmony with this totality" ([3], p. 4). In other words, objective reason is concerned with finding intrinsic meaning in reality, with such intrinsic meaning being good in and of itself, in contrast to instrumental reason, which is concerned with seeking efficient means. To talk of history moving to a point where people see themselves as members of a community which is intrinsically good and just is an example of objective reason, whereas the search for more efficient means, such as machines that can produce more for less, is an example of instrumental—or subjective—reason. Instrumental reason is referred to by Horkheimer as subjective reason because it concerns the individual subject seeking ways to maximise their self-interest with no conception of any values and norms being good as ends, that is, good in and off themselves. Both forms were present throughout history with instrumental rationality becoming predominant with the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment and the liberal individualist tradition created a subjectivization that is meant to "exult" the autonomous subject. However, this was intrinsically connected to the domination of nature and individuals, as both came to be perceived purely as a means to be exploited. Subsequently, cognition came to be defined solely in terms of efficiency. Thus:

Concepts have become 'streamlined', rationalized, labor-saving devices. It is as if thinking itself had been reduced to the level of industrial processes. [...] The more ideas have become automatic, instrumentalized, the less does anybody see in them thoughts with a meaning of their own. They are considered things, machines ([3], p. 15).

So, "every realm of being [is turned into] a field of means" ([3], p. 64). All relationships and cognition become "reified" (thing like) and people become "fungible" (interchangeable standardised units). The autonomous subject is liquidated as everything, everyone and cognition only exist as means. In other words, people become enslaved by being wholly defined by the search for means to increase self-interest. Here self-interest can be defined in terms of the economic elite seeking ever more efficient ways to increase their profits or citizens-as-consumers seeking means to conform to socially sanctioned roles that are constructed and advertised by the mass media.

Ironically the notion of the free individual becomes a standard feature of culture. Adorno and Horkheimer argue that "[p]seudo individuality is rife: from the standardized jazz improvisation to the exceptional film star whose hair curls over her eye to demonstrate her originality" ([13], p. 154). As high culture cannot be recognised as having intrinsic value by citizens who only value means, and as capitalism needs to commodify all domains to increase profit, the culture industry commodifies culture, manufacturing film and popular literature. It is not just the case though that citizens are used as customers to realise a profit. Rather, they are used in a more profound way, with the products sold conveying standardised images of conformity, to ensure that the social hierarchy is efficiently reproduced by those saturated with messages about the value and usefulness of conformity. Central to this is the presentation of socially sanctioned types (that is, stereotypes that citizens are meant to copy),

such as the masculine breadwinner, the daring entrepreneur or war hero succeeding against the odds, *etc.* [14]. Thus, “[t]he deceived masses are today captivated by the myth of success even more than the successful are. Immovably, they insist on the very ideology which enslaves them” ([13], pp. 133–34). With this form of “tyranny”, any failure to conform is deemed incompetent, and any expert knowledge of high culture is despised as a pretentious elitism ([13], pp. 133–34). The passive citizenry crave conformity and seek means to conform, with such means being furnished by the culture industry that sells transient norms-as-means in the form of ideal images for the citizens to consume and copy.

For Horkheimer, earlier arguments for representative democracy made appeals to objective reason, in the form of religious principles, with the US constitution being an example of this, but now the increasing dominance of instrumental rationality has stripped away such appeals ([3], pp. 18–20). Consequently, the only argument left for democracy is the irrational (tautological) argument that the will of the majority is justified as the will of the majority. The consequence of this is that democracy may be replaced if fascist parties succeeded in arguing that democracy is an inefficient means for implementing policies. Moreover, fascism may have an emotional appeal. Horkheimer argued that the dominance of instrumental rationality represses our nature to the point where a violent reaction may be brought about, on which fascists can capitalise. The appeal of the Nazis, he argued, stemmed from people enjoying the mimetic mocking of despised scapegoat groups that occurred at Nazi meetings. Those that enjoyed this and the accompanying violence felt it to be a release. However, the outcome was a “satanic synthesis of reason and nature” ([3], p. 83) because such sadism only re-enforced the dominance of instrumental rationality. Here a person would be reduced to a type, namely a worker—warrior or mother, and these types would only have value as a means, conforming to the demands of the fascist party who claimed to rule in the name of the folk [3,14]. Whereas for Weber the problem was the rise of the disenchanting iron cage, the problem for Horkheimer, we may say, was the rise of the enchanted iron cage, with the culture industry making subjugation enjoyable for the citizenry, whilst also paradoxically being incapable of overcoming the repression felt.

Adorno and Horkheimer [13] regarded positivist philosophy as the embodiment of instrumental rationality, and Horkheimer [3] argued that pragmatism was the genuine expression of positivism. For Adorno and Horkheimer, positivism is a philosophy of science that is only concerned with seeing nature as a means to be exploited by the most efficient method to garner information. Dewey, as far as Horkheimer ([3], p. 31) was concerned, was the arch positivist. Logical positivism indulged in some speculative thought, bordering on metaphysics, when it addressed the issue of whether ideas in the mind could be “copies” of objects outside the mind, because such reasoning went beyond the domain of empirical observation, which was central to logical positivism’s methodology. By contrast, Dewey’s pragmatism striped that away to create a pure positivism which was only concerned with what we could observe and the use to which nature could be put. In other words, there was no scope for any form of speculation about truth and reality and, instead, the focus was entirely on using nature as a means to be exploited. As regards Dewey’s position on democracy, Horkheimer noted that people should be able to see the future as a projection of the desirable in the present. Horkheimer held that this either meant that Gallup polls can replace philosophy, because opinion is arbitrarily synonymous with the good. Or it meant that Dewey, despite himself, recognised some role for objective reason because the good is not reducible down to subjective desire ([3], p. 37). The only possible escape from the domination of instrumental rationality for Horkheimer was for philosophers to recover objective reason.

Although Gellner's analysis of the problem was incorrect, his position on the solution offered by Horkheimer and Adorno is worth noting. Gellner argued that:

there is a countless number of possible deep explanations of the surface [...] and, similarly, there is a countless possible number of contrasts to or negations of the present situation, all of which some of us might prefer to the current reality. How is one to choose the right one? Answer came there none. In practice, [Horkheimer and Adorno, together with the rest of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory], freed by their *elevated depth* (Karl Popper's apt phrase) from any tedious superficial positivist fact-grubbing, gave themselves license to disclose their own private revelations or intuitions concerning both the deep and the ideal. [...] No 'critical method' really existed, but the pretence that it did exist was a compliment that subjectivism paid to objectivity ([1], p. 34. Emphasis added).

So, for Horkheimer and Adorno the citizenry are reduced to standardised consuming units who despise high culture. In order to escape the domination of instrumental rationality, a philosophical elite, such as the Frankfurt School, need to recover objective reason. That is, the elite need to go beneath the empirical 'surface' to an underlying domain of ultimate reality which will yield knowledge of a natural order of intrinsic value. The empirical domain and the manipulation of consequences we can observe to exploit nature are thus to be replaced by metaphysical speculation about reality and values. However, as there is no method for ascertaining how one may judge competing speculative metaphysical endeavours it is the case that the Frankfurt School confuse their own educated—but subjective—norms for depth reality (or true "objectivity"). Thus Gellner held that their 'elevated depth' was groundless speculation masquerading as a method for recovering intrinsic meaning in the world. As the majority are defined as uncultured passive consumers of stereotypes craving conformity, their only hope for redemption would be to follow the subjective prescriptions about norms and values posited by the philosophical elite. If the elite were in a position of power then the majority, who had no grasp of high culture, could not understand their prescriptions. In which case, adherence to them would be a matter of being instrumentally rational and acting on norms as a means to avoid any form of censure. The outcome of this being that the ethically meaningful community would not be realised and, without the titillations of the culture industry, it may be that the enchanted iron cage became a disenchanted iron cage for the unintellectual and anti-intellectual passive citizenry. Whilst the elite may explore what they took to be objective reason, the majority would still live in a world dominated by instrumental rationality.

To sum up we can note the following. The strength of Horkheimer's position is that he recognised the problem as being the domination of instrumental rationality and that in place of a condition of anomie obtaining there was instead what has been termed here an enchanted iron cage. The citizenry become reduced to standardised consumers who find enjoyment through the culture industry that reduces norms and meanings to images of conformity that the citizens use to validate themselves. Although the citizenry enjoy the consumption of transient norms and meanings they are also in the paradoxical position of feeling repressed by the reduction of all human life to means. The weakness of Horkheimer's position is that it still relies on a passive conception of the citizenry which undermined the possibility for escaping the iron cage. Horkheimer was also wrong to regard Dewey's pragmatism as an endorsement of instrumental rationality. For Horkheimer, both Weber's work and Dewey's work are expressions of the problem, with Weber's work being a despairing pessimism and Dewey's work

being an optimistic celebration of instrumental rationality. Whilst Dewey argued that science was an exemplar for politics, this did not mean that he endorsed the sort of elitism as argued for by thinkers such as Lippmann [15,16]. For Lippmann the citizenry were too fickle and capricious to be entrusted with influencing political, social and economic decision making and so it would be more efficient to have an expert elite make such decisions without democratic accountability. Whilst Lippmann was concerned about the development of bureaucratic self-interest, he was more concerned about policy making being inefficient because it was accountable to an incapable citizenry. Against this, as we will now see, Dewey held that a scientific approach to politics was also a democratic approach and not an appeal for a technical-elite to govern.

4. Democracy as an Ethical Way of Life

Dewey's theory of democracy stemmed from his fallibilist approach to knowledge and science [17]. Dewey [18–20] rejected what he termed the “spectator theory of knowledge”, which held that the mind of the individual was able *passively* to have ideas that mirrored discrete objects outside the mind through ideas derived from experience. As Hook put it, Dewey's epistemology recognised that “[p]erceptions, images, and sensations are immediate; knowledge never is. [...] Sensations are the stimuli not the gateways to knowledge” ([21], pp. 56–57). What this meant was that we *actively* interpret the world, applying ideational filters to discount some sensations and interpret others in a particular way. These ideational filters come from a community, making them social, and are created to solve problems.

Dewey considered science to be an epistemic and ethical exemplar. This did not mean that Dewey adopted the positivist view that science could achieve certainty based on a method that prioritised empirical observation. As Bernstein argued, by “science”, Dewey “did not mean a set of formal decision procedures or rules for advancing and justifying scientific hypotheses and theories” ([22], p. 265). Nor did Dewey think that science was a dispassionate endeavour and he “insisted that knowing cannot be separated from valuing” ([23], p. 119). For Dewey scientists were members of a community of inquiry who were motivated by shared norms pertaining to a commitment to value the pursuit of truth as an end in itself as well as being motivated to tackle specific substantive problems deemed interesting and valuable. In seeking to solve problems, scientists drew on the shared conceptual resources of the community of inquiry and subjected these to the “experimental method”. This meant knowledge developing in an analogous way to the development of species, through trial and error adaptation [18–20,22]. Contestation rather than consensus would characterise trial and error adaptation because it would be based upon a critical dialogue where those interested in protecting a particular theory would try to defend it from criticism. This would be democratic in the sense that it was open to all members of the community of inquiry with there being no privileged sources of knowledge. With Dewey's approach, truth is a matter of consequences and not correspondence—or mirroring—between an idea in the mind and an external object. This is also a social account of knowledge, because ideas need to be judged by the conventions of the community of inquirers to have practical warrant and to not be a fortuitous moment. Dewey sometimes referred to this approach as instrumentalist because ideas were instruments to overcome problems [18,21]. Nonetheless, this instrumentalism is not synonymous with an endorsement of instrumental rationality and positivism. This is because it is not premised upon using a method to produce results that are deemed “uncontaminated” by the values of

individual scientists. Nor is science “uncontaminated” by social values because the prevailing conventions within the scientific community are used to decide on whether a theory has practical warrant or not. A community of inquirers are motivated by the belief that the end of truth is good in itself and this leads to contestation over the application of communal conventions to decide issues of warrant.

There are two ways Dewey’s approach to epistemology and science influenced his conception of democracy. Negatively, Dewey rejected attempts to justify a particular set of institutional arrangements that sought certainty by appealing to an *a priori* notion of human nature or the state [4,5]. Positively, democracy was conceived of in “thick” terms of an “ethical way of life”. What this meant was that personal commitments concerning the intrinsic value of engaging in public affairs would motivate a commitment to problem-solving with others. This problem-solving required “intelligence” which meant applying the experimental method of “trial and error” adaptation [21,24]. It would be a mistake to think of intelligence solely in terms of individuals’ innate abilities though. Whilst these obviously exist, Dewey [4] argued that the intelligence of a dialogue depends on pre-existing knowledge and the number of informed interlocutors. Consequently, the intelligence of dialogues can increase despite individuals’ innate intelligence remaining the same if the dialogue draws on previous knowledge concerning solutions to previous problems and has a range of critically informed positions assessing it.

Dialogue would address means and ends. In terms of means, Dewey argued that whilst the shoe maker will best know how to make or repair a shoe it is the wearer who knows where it pinches ([4], p. 207). In other words, politicians can only assess their policies in a truly experimental way by studying all the pertinent consequences and that entails entering a dialogue with citizens. Before the truly democratic society can be realised, people need to make a commitment to value freedom as an end in itself. This did not mean conceptualising freedom as freedom from interference by the state. Nor did it mean freedom to try to amass vast wealth. Rather, it meant valuing the freedom to take control of one’s life by working with other citizens in a community of publically engaged citizens. Freedom here is the freedom to participate as an equal interlocutor with other informed citizens in dialogues addressing economic, political and social problems, which subject politicians to substantive, far reaching accountability. Once such a conception of freedom was valued as good in and of itself other ends could be pursued. Politicians would then be held to account as regards the consequences of the means deployed to realise a particular end, and have to pursue ends regarded as valuable by the active citizenry. With this conception of freedom as communal engagement in public affairs, the plutocratic power possessed by some sections of the economic elite would have to be removed. This is because citizenship is undermined by the existence of a minority with vast power stemming from vast wealth [5]. This will require radical change:

The end of democracy is a radical end. For it is an end that has not been adequately realised in any country at any time. It is radical because it requires great change in existing social institutions, economic, legal and cultural. A democratic liberalism that does not recognize these things in thought and action is not awake to its own meaning and to what that meaning demands ([5], pp. 338–39. Emphasis in original).

One consequence of this would be the socialisation of production which would undermine the power of the economic elite. The economic elite, and especially the plutocratic section within this, hold power over the political elite; “have reaped out of all proportion to what they sowed” ([5], p. 330); and have “created

imperialism” in a “frantic effort to control raw materials and markets” ([5], p. 331). A socialised economy would create a situation where “the liberty of individuals will be supported by the very structure of economic organization” ([5], p. 324), because “a socialized economy is the means of free individual development as the end” ([5], p. 235). The removal of vast differences in wealth will allow individuals to participate as equals in the community of citizens. In seeking to bring about socialised production the citizens should try to use non-violent means, Dewey [5,25] argued, because violent means run the risk of producing a violent and repressive outcome. Diggins ([26], p. 272) rejected this, arguing that violent protests have promoted democracy, with European anti-fascist actions being an instance of this. However, Diggins’ critique failed to grasp that Dewey did admit that in some situations violence may be unavoidable. Thus Dewey argued that force may be “intelligently deployed to disarm and subdue the recalcitrant [plutocratic] minority” ([5], p. 334) if they try to block the majority realising democratic reforms.

Dewey sought to diagnose what *habits* of thought and action were blocking the development of an *experimental* approach to democracy where a community of citizens would act in an analogous way to the community of scientific inquirers by engaging problem-solving critical dialogue, based on trial and error adaptation, rather than being used as means by the economic and political elites pursuing self-interest. His answer was that the dominant mode of political thought was anachronistic, although Dewey did not use this term. As an instrument, liberal individualism had a very specific and time limited application, with the retention of that instrument being unhelpful as it not only failed to solve later problems but became part of the problem itself. Liberal individualism initially had beneficial consequences because it helped undermine clerical authority and thus it helped the development of the Enlightenment and the scientific revolution [4,5]. However, the individual “was in the process of complete submergence in fact at the very time in which he [*sic*] was being elevated on high in theory” ([4], pp. 95–96). Just as liberal political theory and the spectator theory of knowledge were focusing on the lone individual, the “mechanical forces” of industrial development combined with “vast impersonal organizations” ([4], pp. 96–97) to place the individual in what Weber recognised as the iron cage. In the face of industrial development and bureaucratisation, the individual came to feel powerless. As Dewey put it, people “feel that they are caught in the sweep of forces too vast to understand or master. Thought is brought to a standstill and action paralyzed” ([4], p. 135). On this, some aspects of Dewey’s work are similar to Horkheimer’s. As Dewey put it:

Instead of the independent, self-motivated individuals contemplated by the theory, we have *standardized interchangeable units*. Persons are joined together not because they have voluntarily chosen to be united in these forms, but because vast currents are running which bring them together ([4], p. 107. Emphasis added).

Similarly, Dewey argued that science:

has played its part in generating enslavement of men, women and children in factories in which they are animated machines to tend unanimated machines. [...] Man, a child in understanding himself, has placed in his hands physical tools of incalculable power. [...] The instrumentality becomes a master and works fatally as if possessed by a will of its own—not because it has a will but because man [*sic*] has not ([4], p. 175).

As Horkheimer criticised Dewey for fetishising science he would have been surprised to find Dewey making such criticism. However, rather than want positivist science applied *to* human affairs

(like Lippmann), it was actually the case that Dewey wanted a democratic science applied *in* human affairs ([4], p. 174). Having science in human affairs would mean that the active community of publically engaged citizens had an understanding of the technical means used by the economic elite, plus the rhetorical/normative and bureaucratic means used by the political elite. It would also mean having the ability to bring these under democratic control, through critical trial and error dialogic adaptation. So, there is a conflict “between institutions and *habits* originating in the pre-scientific and pre-technological age and the new forces generated by science and technology” ([5], p. 330. Emphasis added), because the anachronistic instrument of liberal individualism fails to grasp the forces at work in modernity.

As the retention of an anachronistic instrument has negative consequences the question is raised as to why it is still dominant. The answer, for Dewey, was that knowing and valuing are connected and people’s perceptions of the consequences of liberal individualism are tainted by a strong emotional commitment to individualism. Thus key institutions that are premised on liberal individualism, such as private property and a legal procedural means based on its protection, are subject to feelings of “reverence” and a “truly religious idealization” ([4], p. 169; see also [5], p. 330). Furthermore, one consequence of the “machine age” was the mass production of cheap forms of entertainment which diverted people from talk of politics to talk about the “best motor car” or “best actress” ([4], p. 139). The cause of this materialistic outlook which values consumption and entertainment over the more demanding matter of current affairs was a matter of both nature and nurture. Dewey argued that this is not a result of some conspiracy but due to humans being consuming as well as political animals ([4], p. 139). He also argued that this natural tendency was “sedulously cultivated by the class in power” ([5], p. 335). The outcome of this is that people live in an iron cage that is neither disenchanting nor subject to anomie but rather subject to anachronistic enchantment. The way to move beyond this, Dewey [4] argued, was for the education system to change by teaching children to value participation in public life as good in itself and to encourage children to learn by questioning rather than through rote learning. Furthermore, Dewey also held that there was a natural tendency to sociability which could help people establish more communal bonds, especially with a sea-change in the education system.

5. Is Deweyian Democracy “Thin”?

So far the notion of a “thin” concept of democracy has been used to refer to the liberal democratic emphasis on democracy as a set of formal rules-as-means to select representatives, in contrast to “thick” conceptions of democracy, such as Dewey’s notion of democracy as an ethical way of life. A “thin” concept of democracy may also refer to an approach that fails to grasp the political nature of dialogue in the sense that it evacuates any notion of dialogue being intrinsically tied up with ongoing conflicts over power and values.

This charge is levelled at Dewey—and Habermas—by Wilkinson [27]. As we will see though, the charge is only applicable against Habermas. Wilkinson argued that:

By insisting on such a sharp antithesis between “the method of intelligence” and the “method of violence”, Dewey overlooks a third “method” or, rather, form of power that, as a phenomenon, is neither purely “scientific” nor purely “violent”. Introducing the concept of the political into the mix is intended to highlight the “non-scientific” or “non-experimental” methods of investigating social change—such as direct or indirect

political action—and to provide a perspective from which to query whether scientific development (like its market analogue) is as pure and undistorted as Dewey suggests ([27], p.132).

Dewey juxtaposed the use of force to achieve political ends with what Wilkinson referred to as a “free market of ideas” whereby undistorted communication amongst the majority allowed them to base democracy on intelligent argument. The outcome of intelligent argument, or dialogue, is, for Dewey, a consensus amongst the interlocutors, because intelligent argument freed from the distorting effect of power struggles could arrive at a shared conception of the correct course of action. For Wilkinson “[t]his conveys the sense—continued in the Habermasian tradition of ‘rational consensus’ or agreement in conditions of ideal discourse—that if only we had the right methods and full information we would necessarily agree with one another” ([27], p. 134). The problem with this, for Wilkinson, is that it fails to appreciate how change does occur through contestations, including violent contestations, and more problematically, how society cannot have anything approximating to a “free market of ideas”. Dewey thus offers a “thin” concept of democracy or, what Wilkinson ([27], p.133) called “democracy without politics”, because he failed to recognise, Wilkinson argued, that problem-solving is embedded in power relations. Social and political continuity is arrived at by elite groups controlling how problems and their solutions are to be determined and, where change occurs, it is embedded in contestation over power with elite groups. So, whilst Dewey imagined problem-solving to arrive at a rational consensus freed from the distorting effects of power it is actually the case that economic and political elites determine how problems are defined, who controls the communication of results and who evaluates the consequences ([27], p. 135), with this only ever being challenged by conflict. Dewey’s approach to politics, which Habermas continued, is thus a “thin” or apolitical approach that was blind to how powerful groups could either act as a cartel for opinion making or act as privileged players in a struggle over power, values, opinions, knowledge and resources.

In order to show how this criticism applies to Habermas but not Dewey, we can turn to Kadlec’s [28,29] discussion of Habermas’ critique of Dewey. Habermas drew a distinction between the “system” and the “lifeworld”, with the former being defined in terms of the domination of instrumental rationality and the latter defined in terms of rules facilitating rational discourse that would permit people to arrive at an informed consensus. This approach was transcendental in the sense that the rules in the “lifeworld” would act as the condition of possibility for rational agreement over what courses of action to take in public-political matters. In contrast to the dualism between “system” and “lifeworld” and in contrast to the emphasis on transcendental rules, Dewey advocated an “experimentalism” that, according to Habermas, kept action ensnared by instrumental rationality. This was because action was based on observing consequences with consequences being manipulated as means [28]. Kadlec [28,29] responded to this by arguing that whilst Dewey’s terminology changed what remained central to all of his work was an emphasis on experience, with experience being regarded as social, emotional and open to critical revision. That is, experience for Dewey, including the experience of scientists (as argued above), draws on concepts that are shared within a community, with these concepts having emotional traction and being open to change through contestation. Given this approach to experience the goal of dialogue is not necessarily, contra Wilkinson, consensus. Indeed, as argued above, dialogue is also about contestation. As regards the questions of who defined problems, who controlled the communication of results and the evaluation of the consequences, the answer had to be the citizenry,

and their engagement with these issues would be one of contestation, in the sense that there may well be differences of opinion. Moreover, there would be contestation, which may involve “the intelligent use of force”, when it came to bringing the political elite—and especially—the economic—elite under full democratic control. Given this, we may say that Dewey does manage to retain a “thick” conception of democracy that transcended the domination of instrumental rationality.

For Kadlec [28], the reason why Habermas misread Dewey is that Habermas’s thought remains trapped within dualisms. As Kadlec argued:

There is a richness to [Dewey’s] view of the relationship between experience and critical reflection that is largely obscured by Habermas’s insistence on a strict differentiation between instrumental and communicative reason, between transcendental forms of justification and those that are generated in and through experience. Dewey’s resolute faith in the transformative potential of lived experience and experimental communication involves a set of commitments that cannot be squared with Habermas’s insistence upon a strict differentiation between strategic and communicative action, between ultimate justification of our principles and lived experience ([28], p. 22).

The problem with seeking transcendental justification for the rules governing discourse is that, as Kadlec ([28], p. 20) notes, the argument seeks the condition of possibility of dialogue as lying beyond experience. That is, the rules to govern the production of undistorted communication are separated from people’s experiences of the world as molded by emotions, norms and power, with those experiences being defined as expressions of instrumental rationality and other distorting effects on discourse. Not only does this mean that any reference to experience, including references that stress the need for a critical approach to experience, are designated as expressions of instrumental rationality. It also means that Habermas cannot locate dialogue in anything other than a domain that is cut off from the way citizens perceive and criticize the world in a way that is motivated by values and emotions. In contrast to the recognition that social beings will engage in social discourse, motivated by emotions, values and contestation over power, Habermas offers what Pappas ([30], p. 67) refers to as a “solipsistic” conception of dialogue “where your reasons, concepts and beliefs just ‘bump’ or are tested against mine”. In other words, it is Habermas who offered a “thin” approach to democracy, which would not be able to transcend the domination of instrumental rationality, because the domain of undistorted communication is abstracted from the processes that shape who people are and how people engage in discourse.

6. Bernstein on the Dialectical Critique of Modernity and Habermas

Here we can consider an alternative reading of Habermas, put forward by Bernstein [22,31]. Bernstein sought to develop a dialogical approach to philosophy and action which linked experience, normative commitments and rationality. He developed his approach through a dialogic critique of other dialogic philosophers. For Bernstein, many of these dialogic approaches were flawed and it was not possible or desirable to synthesise them into one “closed” grand theory. Rather, the task of the dialogic philosopher was to keep the dialogue going, by developing sympathetic critiques of other dialogic philosophies. Bernstein [31] sought to contribute to a tradition of thought that developed a “moral-political vision” which engaged in a “dialectical critique of modernity”. Bernstein discussed

Arendt, Gadamer, Habermas and Rorty. Although there were significant differences between these thinkers each, he argued, recognised the limitations of the Enlightenment project. That is, each recognised how a tendency to technocracy and an idolatry of the expert undermined the development of an intellectually and politically dynamic community. In contrast to this, they all sought to advocate a Socratic approach to political life, based on open dialogue, with this eschewing any form of foundationalism or transcendentalism. For Bernstein, all these philosophers “are concerned to show us what is vital to the human project and to give a sense of what dialogue, conversation, questioning, solidarity, and community mean. [They all] stress the multiple ways in which these are threatened in the contemporary world” ([31], p. 206).

Habermas has been criticized for developing a transcendental philosophy (as mentioned above), which would be contrary to Bernstein’s description of those philosophies that developed a dialectical critique of modernity. Here we can see how Bernstein tried to rescue Habermas’ project by turning from its transcendentalism (and later claims to be a reconstructive science) to its moral and political *intention*. It will be argued that Bernstein’s interpretation of Habermas can be read either as returning us to a form of transcendental argument, or as a position very similar to Dewey’s which abandon’s Bernstein’s conception of a *telos* informing Habermas’ “moral and political intention”.

Bernstein’s [31] discussion of Habermas’ theory of communicative action can be set out as follows. Habermas, he noted, developed a theory to explain how we can elucidate universal conditions of communicative action and discourse based on claims to validity, whilst also eschewing any notion of an “infinite intellect” for a recognition of fallibilism ([31], p. 183). This theory of communicative action was meant to deal with theoretical discourse which sought to validate claims to theoretical truth and practical discourse which sought, through argument, to redeem claims to normative validity, that is, to what is to be deemed ethically right ([31], p. 184). Habermas spoke:

with two voices, which might be called the “transcendental” and the “pragmatic”. [...] At times Habermas slips into the language of [...] strict transcendental argument. [...] But in the years since the publication of *Knowledge and Human Interests*, Habermas has qualified his project to disassociate himself from this strong transcendental strain ([31], pp. 184–85).

Whereas a “transcendental” theory would stipulate *a priori* conditions for arriving at validity independently of socio-historical context, a “pragmatic” version of the theory of communicative action would focus on the empirical situation in which validity claims could be successful. This led Habermas to describe his work as an empirical science rather than a form of transcendental philosophy. On this Bernstein noted that Habermas referred to two approaches to science: the “empirical-analytic” approach concerning the construction of specific explanatory theories based on the hypothetico-deductive method, and “reconstructive analysis” concerning the “universal conditions and rules that are implicit in cognitive or moral development” ([31], p. 185). Rather than deal with Habermas’ treatment of theoretical discourse, Bernstein focused on his treatment of practical discourse. Bernstein noted that unlike an emotivist understanding of norms, Habermas asserted that there is a type of argumentation and rationality that is presupposed by the redemption of universal normative validity claims and which existed within the structure of intersubjectivity. What this meant was that practical discourse had to presume the existence of an ideal speech situation whereby consensus can be reached on the basis of generalizable interests ([31], p. 187).

Whereas Gadamer would see tradition as containing the rules that allowed individuals to reach agreement over normative matters, Habermas recognised the power of instrumental rationality and social structural barriers systematically to distort communication. Nonetheless, pre-theoretical, 'ordinary', practical discourse still contains within it the possibility of achieving undistorted communication. There is "a gentle but obstinate, although seldom redeemed, claim to reason, a claim to reason that points to the possibility of the argumentative redemption of validity claims through mutual dialogue and discourse" ([31], p. 192).

Now, given this reading of Habermas, one may say that the critiques of Habermas discussed in the previous section could be judged to be erroneous. This was because they were targeted at a transcendental position furnishing rules for the condition of possibility of communication arriving at a consensus that were abstracted from everyday life. However, Bernstein noted that the non-transcendental arguments of Habermas, as discussed above, present us with a dualism between emotivism and relativism on the one hand and a position which is "dangerously close" to being transcendental because it still seeks "a solid ground for communicative ethics" ([31], p. 194). This might be stifled and suppressed and distorted in practice, but its existence was still the condition of possibility of dialogue resisting distortion. Quite why Bernstein refers to this as being "dangerously close" to a transcendental position when it is actually a transcendental position is unclear, especially as he goes on to acknowledge that the transcendental voice and the pragmatic voice, to use Bernstein's terms, get "superimposed" on one another ([31], p. 194). After mentioning how the two voices get superimposed on one another, Bernstein went on to focus on developing the pragmatic voice. He argued that we need to reject both any aspect of transcendentalism in Habermas' work and the claim that his work is a reconstructive scientific theory, because the latter has no criteria for success or failure. Instead, Bernstein argued that Habermas should be read partly against himself as offering a "vision of humankind, its history and prospects" that is animated by a "moral and political intention". This is to be understood in terms of a *telos* to overcome systematically distorted communication. Elaborating on this Bernstein argued that this *telos*:

can orient our collective *praxis* in which we seek to approximate the ideal of reciprocal dialogue and discourse, and in which the respect, autonomy, solidarity, and opportunity required for the discursive redemption of universal normative validity claims are not mere abstract "oughts" but are to be embodied in our social practices and institutions ([31], p.195).

Having started with a critique of Gadamer, Bernstein then went on to liken this pragmatic reading of Habermas to Gadamer's argument that we can make comparative normative judgments in concrete situations without the existence of universal and fixed criteria ([31], p. 196).

So, we may say that Habermas, for Bernstein, is saved from the criticisms presented in the last section by being read as more of a pragmatist, with the transcendental aspect left behind. However, Bernstein's argument can be read in one of two ways. First, having a vision of humankind, its history and prospects based on there being a *telos* to overcome systematically distorted communication does return us to a form of transcendental argument. This is because it sets itself apart from the actual practices of agents and functions as the condition of possibility of successful communication and change. That is, it functions as an ideal that exists separate from lived practices and normative commitments which can pull solidarity, dialogue and normative commitments in the direction of

undistorted communication. To be sure, Bernstein does try to reject the notion of “abstract oughts” existing outside social practices and institutions. However, saying that there is a *telos* which can orient praxis by allowing us to “approximate the ideal of reciprocal dialogue and discourse” does set the ideal apart from the actual in order for it to act as the condition of possibility of actual discourse moving to the ideal. This notion of an ideal speech situation being approximated to takes us back to the criticisms levelled at Habermas’ position discussed above. For it abstracts the criteria to assess the validity of dialogue from its always-already situated character in particular norms, conventions and emotional concerns, which will generate contestation as much or more than consensus. This is because there is no necessary ideal answer that can be arrived at if only people had all the “right knowledge” and sufficient reason. Further, such notions beg the question as to how knowledge and reason are to be defined. As Papas [30] argued, the notion of an ideal speech situation creates a form of socially detached “solipsism”. Second, if the Gadamer inspired reading is followed, with the emphasis being solely on the situated nature of judgments and actions, then we are returned to a position akin to that of Dewey’s, with there being no *telos*. In this situation, there would be no transcendental factor acting as the condition of possibility for dialogue slowly to increase its approximation to an ideal speech situation and it is possible that people in the “machine age” remained trapped in an iron cage that is subject to anachronistic re-enchantment.

7. Honneth on Reification

Honneth [32] developed a critique of Lukács’ [33] treatment of reification. In the process of doing this, Honneth drew on and complemented the work of Dewey, by developing a more nuanced account of how other people, nature and thinking became treated as things, that is, as means for manipulation, with no other value. We may describe Lukács’ approach to reification as a totalized conception of reification for two reasons. First, he argued that all human cognition and relationships were reified, that is, all human cognition and relationships strip out any notion of intrinsic value, with people seeing themselves, others and the world around them in a “thing-like” way. Reification defined what it was to be human, and penetrated people to the core. Second, he argued that there was one source for the development of an all pervasive state of reification, which was the development of a capitalist commodity economy. Against Lukács, Honneth argued that the reification of others, oneself and nature are not all part of a homogenous form of reification. Further, Honneth argued that there is a tension in Lukács work between the claim that reification totally defined human beings, and appeals to some non-reified aspect of human being which can be developed when capitalism is transcended. Honneth also challenged the argument that reification can be explained as a necessary outcome of capitalist economic relations. Honneth’s position can be set out as follows.

Honneth drew on Heidegger’s notion of “care” and Dewey’s critique of the spectator theory of knowledge to argue that “recognition” precedes cognition. He argued that the concept of recognition:

shares a fundamental notion not only with Dewey’s concept of practical involvement, but also with Heidegger’s care and Lukács’ engaged praxis, namely, the notion that the stance of empathetic engagement in the world, arising from the experience of the world’s significance and value [...], is prior to our acts of detached cognition. A recognitional stance therefore embodies our active and constant assessment of the value of that persons or things have in themselves ([32], p. 38).

So, in contrast to the spectator theory of knowledge, which held that individuals passively gain knowledge of discrete object-things of no intrinsic value, knowing the world is a process that entailed empathetic engagement. The raised the question as to the nature of cognition. On this Honneth continued to draw on Dewey and he argued that we can only rationally analyse a situation by distancing ourselves from the “qualitative unity of the situation” and breaking it down into separate units of analysis. At this point an “object of cognition” can be encountered by an “affectively neutral subject” ([32], p. 38). This does not mean that cognition became divorced from recognition. Recognition precedes cognition, rather than being replaced by it, because, as Dewey emphasized:

the primordial, qualitative character of experience cannot be allowed simply to vanish in this cognitive process of abstraction; otherwise the harmful fiction of a merely existing object—of a “mere given”—may emerge ([32], p. 38).

This did not mean that recognition is always present and Honneth argued that reification occurs when recognition is forgotten.

Honneth held that there are three types of reification which are the reification of other people, the reification of nature and self-reification. Reification of others occurred when recognition is replaced by the perception of others as things. Honneth cited two “exemplary cases” of “reduced attentiveness” resulting in recognition giving way to the reification of others ([32], pp. 59–60). The first is when someone becomes fixated on a goal or end with the consequence that the context in which it arose is forgotten. Honneth gave the example of a tennis player forgetting that her opponent is her best friend and focusing solely on the task of winning. The second is when an ideological conviction led to others being negatively stereotyped and scapegoated. With this second case it is more a matter of “denial” or “defensiveness” rather than forgetting. The reification of the natural world occurred when it was forgotten that this is bestowed with meaning by others and it came to be seen purely in terms of things to use. The reification of nature thus depended on a reified relationship to others. Self-reification can occur though without the reification of others. Honneth described two positions on self-reification which he termed “detectivism” and “constructivism” ([32], pp. 67–74). The former held that thoughts are self-contained static things waiting to be found and the latter obtained when someone had thoughts and feelings which were instrumentally produced for others and imagined these may be genuine. So, self-reification occurs when we regard “our psychic sensations as mere objects either to be observed or produced” ([32], p. 82). Honneth suggested that self-reification may increase as people become increasingly enmeshed in institutional practices which are “functionally tailored to the presentations of our own selves” ([32], p. 82). The examples cited by Honneth are: job interviews, service sector jobs which require emotional labour, such as being an airline steward / stewardess, and internet dating. As regards relations of commodity exchange Honneth drew on Simmel to distinguish a process of “objectification” from reification. Honneth argued that whilst relations of market exchange are impersonal, other people have to be “present to us as bearers of general personal characteristics for us to accept them as accountable exchange partners at all, whereas to reify other humans means simply to deny their existence as humans” ([32], p. 76). However, Honneth does go on to argue that institutional changes are underway which may increase reification with, for example, the “increasing hollowing out of the legal substance of labor contracts” and the increasing emphasis in schools on measuring and manipulating children’s talent leading to increased self-reification ([32], p. 80).

So, Honneth drew upon Dewey to explain how recognition precedes cognition. The discussion of reification as the forgetting of recognition offers a more nuanced account of how people experience others and their own thoughts than Dewey's argument that people have become "standardised interchangeable units" ([4], p. 107). That is, when discussing the conditions of life under the domination of instrumental rationality, Dewey sounded similar to Horkheimer and his argument about people becoming "fungible". In place of such a totalising, "blanket" approach to people's experience, Honneth distinguishes qualitatively different types of reified experience. Honneth's argument that reification of others may emerge from over-identification with a goal or end is also important because it meant that reification can occur in Fundamentalist societies where there may be no dominance of instrumental rationality. As regards the causes of reification, Honneth's observations about institutional changes can be linked to Dewey's arguments that a lack of democracy as an ethical way of life and a commitment to liberal individualism led to people failing to understand the forces shaping the world, which include the increasing bureaucratization of life in the search for increased economic efficiency [34].

8. Conclusions

Many authors writing about the domination of instrumental rationality, including Bellah, Durkheim and Gellner, focus on anomie. Their position is that we have entered, or are entering, a condition of normlessness, because any concern with normative ends being good in themselves, has been replaced by the constant search for more efficient economic, technical and bureaucratic means. Against this, it was argued that we do not live in a condition of normlessness. Rather, we live in a condition where emotive and transient norms-as-means can be used by elites to manipulate public opinion. Bernstein's discussion of President Bush's "war on terror" was used to illustrate this.

Although Horkheimer and Dewey are radically different thinkers, they both addressed the issue of elites using norms-as-means to pursue self-interest. For Horkheimer this meant that the economic elite used the "culture industry" to manufacture images of socially sanctioned types, such as the masculine bread winner, for a passive and "fungible" citizenry who craved conformity and who despised intellectual matters. Dewey is regarded as being optimistic but there were, it was asserted, places where his work was similar to Horkheimer's. One instance of this was where Dewey held that people were becoming "standardized interchangeable units" in the "machine age". Such "standardized interchangeable units" were capable of grasping neither the bureaucratic, economic and technical forces shaping the world, nor the ability of elites to "sedulously cultivate" a desire in the citizenry for consumerism and popular cultural distractions such as "talk of the best actress".

Horkheimer's solution to the problem was for an intellectual elite to recover "objective reason", meaning the recovery of intrinsic meaning in the world. The difficulty with such a position, it was maintained, was that the citizens were considered so passive and incapable of engaging in intellectual matters that they would only conform to norms based on "objective reason" as a means to avoid censure. This would lead to the ironic situation that the majority of people would conform to ideas based on "objective reason" in an instrumentally rational way. The superiority of Dewey's position, it was argued, was that it envisaged the creation of democracy as an ethical way of life, where an active citizenry valued participation in public life as an end in itself and held elites to account. Central to this vision of democracy was an on-going critical dialogue where reasons were entwined with emotions

and norms, in a process that was marked by contestation more than consensus. Democracy as an ethical way of life could be constructed by changing the education system to base learning on questioning and valuing public affairs, with this being complemented by what Dewey took to be a natural tendency in people to sociability and the building of communal ties.

There is extensive debate about whether Dewey's dialogic approach to democracy is similar to Habermas' work and whether such dialogic approaches would be useful for revitalizing democracy. On this, the work of Bernstein, Kadlec, Pappas and Wilkinson was discussed. Three conclusions were drawn from this. First, Habermas' approach was not useful for revitalizing democracy. This was because even with Bernstein's attempt to re-interpret Habermas, it was still the case that it failed fully to conceptualize how dialogue was situated in a process that was as normative as it was cognitive and which was characterized by contestation more than consensus. There is no *telos* or ideal speech situation meaningfully to approximate to. Second, Dewey's work was significantly different from Habermas' because Dewey rejected any notion of an ideal speech situation. Third, Dewey's work could be useful for revitalizing democracy, because democracy as an ethical way of life was based on an active citizenry valuing participation in public life as an activity that was good in itself.

Honneth drew on Dewey to hold that reification occurred when people forgot the qualitative and empathetic nature of experience. Honneth then went on to develop a more nuanced account of reified experience and reason than Dewey. It was maintained that this did not contradict Dewey's position and could be used to complement it. This more nuanced account held that reification could occur without the domination of instrumental rationality and, further, it asserted that reification from one's own thoughts was different from, and not an extension of, reification from other people.

When it came to the issue of transcending the domination of instrumental rationality, or tackling any form of reification, the education process would be vital to stop people treating others and their own thoughts as just thing-like entities. So, for example, one way to begin dealing with the problems of instrumental rationality and reification could be to challenge the current neo-liberal changes occurring in some higher education sectors. In the UK the Campaign for the Public University drew explicitly on Dewey's work to argue for higher education as a "public good" rather than a "positional good" [34]. What this meant was that university education should not be treated simply as a means to secure labour market and financial advantage, but as something that is both good in itself and good for promoting democracy as an ethical way of life. As regards the latter, such an education can produce educated citizens who value critical dialogue and the responsibility of engaging in public affairs as activities that define meaningful and rewarding citizenship. Such engagement would, of course, not be restricted to voting, but to joining or forming campaigning groups to alter public opinion and pressurize the political and economic elites to, for example, ensure that corporations pay tax. It would also mean creating alternative forms of information outlets to bypass the mainstream media, using the internet or even the print press. Other examples could be the formation of co-operative food shops amongst local people, the show of solidarity between people in difficult unions, including those who may not be directly affected by an issue, and student protests, such as the 2012 Quebec protests.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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