

Power Beyond Truth:

The Implications of Post-Truth Politics for Habermas' Theory of Communicative
Action

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Introduction

What initially started with the observation that post-truth politics puts pressure on the possibility of dialogue, has amounted to a critique of Habermas' theory of communicative action (TCA). Worried as I was for the implications of the rise of a politics that seemed unconcerned with truth, I turned to deliberative democracy to understand democracy's supposed dependency on truth, and to find ways to go about in an era in which politics has become unpredictable. Dialogue, I thought, could show us something about the intersection of truth and power; the phenomenon of post-truth politics could reveal the conditions for political dialogue. This, in turn, could potentially even give rise to suggestions and solutions for how to deal with post-truth politics and populism.

However, when I started to read more about deliberative democracy and dialogue in relation to truth, it turned out that post-truth politics does not fit within the framework of deliberative democracy. I engaged with Habermas' theory of deliberative democracy, seeing him as one of the main theorists of this field, but was surprised by his disregard of the problem. It seemed that for him, (deliberative) democracy stands diagonally opposed to the phenomenon of post-truth politics – or to anything irrational, for that matter. “A post-truth democracy”, he wrote in 2006, “(...) would no longer be a democracy” (Habermas 2006, 18). Yet, at the same time, I found myself in a situation in which politicians in democracies around the world were gaining power through discourse that had little to do with truth. Are all of these politicians undemocratic? And what about their voters? What would that mean for democracy, and how to go about - is it really unproblematic to discard problems like post-truth politics as ‘undemocratic’? And if a phenomenon in reality contradicts a theory so clearly, would that not be reason to reassess the theory?

In this thesis, I assess the implications of post-truth politics for Habermas' TCA. I argue that Habermas is unable to account for post-truth politics in his TCA (chapter 2). This is due to his paradoxical understanding of power (chapter 3), and leads him ultimately to a threefold conflation of facts and norms as I argue in chapter 4. But before I continue in more depth, I will first provide some context to post-truth politics.

Context: Post-Truth Politics

If we are to solve the problems that post-truth politics poses for democracy, I think we should first understand its meaning. Otherwise we might end up reinforcing the problems by addressing them with the wrong toolkit. Through this thesis, I have developed an understanding of post-truth politics by confronting it with Habermas' TCA and his theory of deliberative democracy that is built on it. This thesis can be seen as a first step towards developing a positive account of post-truth politics; a phenomenon which I believe reveals that a proposition does not derive its force from its (perceived) truth. Words not only have power beyond their *truth*, but beyond their credibility as well. What it is that gives power to words, if not truth, however, remains to be explored in a next project. For now, a working definition of post-truth politics will suffice.

The term ‘post-truth’ has been used since the nineties, but the phrase ‘post-truth politics’ seems to be first coined by David Roberts in 2010 and has gained popularity over the course of 2016 (Oxford Dictionaries 2017). Post-truth relates not so much to a historical situation *after* truth as to a condition in which truth is just not important anymore. Initially defined as “*a political*

culture in which politics (public opinion and media narratives) have become almost entirely disconnected from policy (the substance of legislation)” (Roberts 2010), Oxford Dictionaries proclaimed it ‘word of the year 2016’ relating to “*circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion¹ than appeals to emotion and personal belief”* (Oxford Dictionaries 2017).

According to these definitions, post-truth politics appeals to people’s personal *beliefs* and emotions much like a fictitious story does – it is a political *method*, in which, as Roberts wrote, public rhetorics have little to do with actual policy, and political arguments are no longer based in facts. At the same time post-truth politics relates to a condition in which these political lies, appealing to feelings instead of facts, are no longer punished, but politically rewarded and “taken as evidence of his [i.e. Donald Trump, as “the leading exponent of ‘post-truth’ politics] willingness to stand up against elite power” (The Economist 2016a, 11). The influence of post-truth politics is not to be underestimated: indeed, the US is now governed by its ‘leading exponent’.

The previous definitions are insufficient because ‘personal belief’ and ‘public opinion’ still refer to what people perceive as *truth*. But in post-truth politics, there is power in discourse which does *not* derive from its (perceived) truth. In this thesis, I refer to post-truth politics as the phenomenon in which discourses that are *not concerned with truth*, still are *power-bestowing*. It is distinct from both *lies* and from *fiction* – while lies *pretend* to be true, and fiction *presents itself as untrue*, post-truth politics falsifies the mutual exclusion of ‘true’ and ‘untrue’ It is indifferent to truth, making claims that might be either true, untrue, or unfalsifiable: the truth of propositions in post-truth politics is of no importance to their (political) power. It could be compared to Frankfurt’s notion of ‘bullshit’, if one would add that this is bullshit *with* political power (Frankfurt 2005): “When an honest man speaks, he says only what he believes to be true; and for the liar, it is correspondingly indispensable that he considers his statements to be false. For the bullshitter, however, all these bets are off: he is neither on the side of the true nor on the side of the false.” Like bullshit, post-truth politics no longer focuses on truth – and for post-truth politics, this doesn’t influence its power. Consequently, rationality, expertise, and communicative action, as methods employed to get closer to truth, no longer maintain their importance.

Implications of Post-Truth Politics

In this thesis, post-truth politics at the same time serves as a case in point to reveal the implicit assumptions in Habermas’ theory. It displays the shortcomings of his theory: he is, I argue, unable to account for the major political phenomenon that post-truth politics is. This uncovers three implications for his theory, all of which in different ways have to do with the central distinction in his work between *facts* and *norms*.

Firstly, post-truth politics reveals the anthropological assumptions that Habermas makes about human rationality. He assumes that the human is generally a rational being; and that, following this, rationality and communicative action are better able to account for what he calls ‘social coordination’ than irrational or strategic action – but does not ground this assumption.

Secondly, this leads him to make arbitrary distinctions between what is universal, and what is particular – that is, what is fundamental to communication (e.g. rationality) and what is an

¹ Even if you argue that objective facts might overall still be *more influential* than appeals to emotions and personal beliefs, the latter become increasingly important in the public debate, which is on its own a strong enough reason to take post-truth politics seriously.

anomaly (e.g. post-truth politics). He decides on an ad-hoc basis between structural and accidental features of human communication: the yardstick that he uses to determine what is what, itself begs the question.

Thirdly, the sheer size of the problem of post-truth politics and Habermas' inability to deal with it in his theory, makes his theory either lapse into ideal theory or forces him to change his theory severely (that is, if it does not collapse in its entirety). Allowing his theory to solely have force as an *ideal* theory, however, would contradict Habermas' own criticism of ideal theory, and his understanding of the theory as a 'transcendental-pragmatic' attempt to 'post-metaphysical thinking', uncovering "a set of anthropologically basic features of human social life that 'have a transcendental function but arise from actual structures of human life'" (Habermas 1971, 194; Allen 2009, 26). Disconnected from its sociological roots in the 'actual structures of human life', the theory would be self-contradictory.

If Habermas wants to avoid this, I argue that he would have to discard the dichotomy between communicative and strategic action; and change his conception of power. This would have severe consequences for his theory. To summarise, it seems that he repeatedly mistakes an *is* for an *ought*, a *fact* for a *norm*: he does not succeed in bridging the gap between empirical and normative, but instead remains committed to both, in this way eventually contradicting himself.

Three chapters will allow me to arrive at these conclusions. In the first chapter, I will lay out Habermas' TCA and the derivative theory of deliberative democracy, and more generally how he sees communicative action as accounting for 'social coordination'. In the second chapter, I will argue that post-truth politics falsifies the dichotomy between strategic and communicative action, that is so central to Habermas' TCA. Arguing that Habermas' notion of power is the reason for the shortcomings of the distinction between communicative and strategic action, I will focus on Habermas' notion of power in chapter three. In the fourth and last chapter I will elaborate on the implications of my previous arguments for Habermas' theory as a whole.

1. Habermas' theory of communicative action

To understand the implications of the phenomenon of post-truth politics for Habermas' thought, I will here first lay out Habermas' theory of communicative action and its derivative theory of deliberative democracy. Habermas has written a wide array of work on a variety of topics. However, in these hundreds of publications, there are several leading, and connected, ideas that can be seen as the foundation of Habermas' thought. His project can roughly be understood as an attempt to what he calls 'post-metaphysical thinking'. In modern, pluriform societies, there is no longer one encompassing narrative that can account for social order – this would be 'metaphysical' thinking. A common consequence of this modern condition is lapsing into relativism (this is what Habermas criticises post-modernism for). Habermas tries to avoid both metaphysical thinking and post-modern relativism, and presents post-metaphysical thinking as a solution (Habermas 1990a; Habermas 1992). This 'detranscendentalised' *practice* of communicative reasoning can still result in a rational ordering of society, and does not foreclose the possibility of universal knowledge. Habermas posits this conception of rationality as purely procedural; it does not make any *a-priori* distinctions between the rational and the irrational, but purely specifies a *procedure*, the *conditions* for dialogue and democracy to exist. These conditions for dialogue are taken from empirical reality, then made explicit in theory. They have a weak-transcendental status. This dual basis of the TCA, however, does *not* imply that all human communication indeed meets what Habermas used to call the 'ideal speech condition'.

The TCA, following the method of 'post-metaphysical thinking', introduces the notions of *communicative* and *strategic* action. This distinction is central to Habermas' thought, and the idea of intersubjective communicative action translates directly into his theory of (deliberative) democracy. These ideas are further explicated in *Between Facts and Norms* (Habermas 1996) and subsequent works, specifying that the unrestrained practice of intersubjective communicative reasoning is constitutive of legitimate government. Ultimately, then, Habermas' project is dependent on the (empirical) assumption that the human can be explained as a rational species – it is only because of this that he base his conception of social order on communicative rationality.

In this chapter I take a close look at Habermas' thought, and trace back how, for him, social order can be effectuated through intersubjective communicative action and language. The TCA theorises everyday communicative, linguistically-mediated action. In section 1.1, I review its ambitions, scope and status; while in section 1.2 I show how this everyday communicative action reveals the inherently 'consensus-promoting' force of language. The discourse-theory of law (as theorised in BFN) then bases an understanding of social coordination on the notion of communicative action and communicative power. Communicative action stands in contrast to strategic action (section 1.3). The two are mutually exclusive and their main difference is that strategic action cannot, and communicative action can account for social order (section 1.4). This distinction is used to arrive at a theory of deliberative democracy and the 'discourse theory of law' (section 1.5). Following the project of post-metaphysical thinking, Habermas' theory has a particular 'status': it is not ideal theory, nor purely descriptive – it claims to explicate the implicit assumptions of everyday human communication. The aim of this chapter is to lay bare the content, presuppositions and conditions of Habermas' project, to better understand which parts of the theory are challenged by the existence of post-truth politics in the rest of this thesis.

1.1 *The Theory of Communicative Action*

Habermas' TCA can primarily be understood as a theory of *rationality* (Rehg 1996, xii), in that it seeks to rescue "the claims of reason that were once advanced within encompassing metaphysical systems (...) and have in the process given rise to impoverished views of reason as merely instrumental" (Rehg 1996, xii–xiii). Habermas' account of rationality is procedural, and encompasses not only *instrumental* rationality but introduces the concept of *communicative* rationality, which is based on the acceptance or rejection of three validity claims: propositional truth, normative rightness, and subjective sincerity (Habermas 1996, 5; Habermas 1984).

The TCA is a view of how social coordination is achieved through language (Rehg 1996, xiv), which is intersubjective and inherently consensus-oriented. Subjects engage in intersubjective discourse based on the inherently contestable validity claims mentioned earlier. In case a validity claim is contested and rejected by one of the partners in dialogue, a discourse where the claim will be intersubjectively rethought and revised is opened. All participants in discourse have to be oriented towards mutual understanding and consensus, driven by nothing but a collaborative search for truth. Discourse, as such, is based on nothing but rational arguments (Rehg 1996, xv). Communicative action is embedded in a social practice, stabilised through law, and takes place against the background of non-contested and unproblematic claims: the lifeworld.

Following this brief overview of the TCA, I will now trace back how Habermas arrives at it, and how he uses the central distinction between communicative action and strategic action to develop a discourse theory of law and democracy.

1.2 *Actions and Speech Acts, Illocutions and Perlocutions*

Speech acts are to be distinguished from actions in general.² 'Actions' mean action in the narrow sense of the word, referring to everyday activities such as cycling or picking something up. These activities are *purposive action*, goal-oriented, instrumental; using something (or someone, as we will later see) as a means to an end. Linguistic actions on the other hand aim to engage in dialogue with another person about something in our world and seek (intersubjective) understanding. Whereas actions also do not reveal their nature and intentions in-action– these are left for interpretation of the third person perspective of the observer -, speech acts do: if you tell me to do something, I know the nature of this action (i.e. urging me to do something).³

Moreover, an important difference between actions and speech acts is that the first causally interfere in the objective world. In other words, actions are teleological, whilst the realisation of the intentions of speech acts are dependent on the means – i.e. on the actors we address in speech. This distinction can be clarified using Austin and Searle's understanding of *illocutions* and *perlocutions*. Whilst an illocution addresses the other – e.g. by urging someone to do something- a perlocution simply treats the other as means to an end. Perlocutions are just the *aims* of one or more illocution (Green 2015), or, in other words, "in illocutionary acts, we do

² This section builds quite strongly upon *Actions, Speech Acts, Linguistically Mediated Interactions in the Lifeworld* (Habermas 1998; Habermas 1990b).

³ The idea that linguistic action reveals its nature in-action seems to invite criticisms that point out the existence of linguistic action that does not make its intentions clear in-action. Examples are lies, jokes, and other poetic forms of language. To distinguish between lies and communicative action, Habermas introduces the distinction between strategic and communicative action (section 1.3). To understand poetic language forms, Habermas introduces the categories of poetic and communicative uses of language. Poetic language is 'world-disclosing' but does not have to meet the (illocutionary) constraints of communicative language; its validity claims become ineffective (Habermas 1998).

something *in* saying something, in perlocutionary acts, we do something *by* saying something” (Johnson 1991, 187, emphasis added). Understanding and accepting a speech act is part of its illocutionary consequences, all other aims and effects are perlocutionary (Habermas 1990b).

Actions can be defined independently from the tools used to perform them. Speech acts, on the other hand, are dependent on the medium of language, with its ‘consensus-promoting force of argumentative speech (Habermas 1998, 220). Indeed, according to Habermas, the medium of natural language and the telos of mutual deliberation cannot be explained without reference to each other, they “interpret one other reciprocally” (Habermas 1998, 218). Moreover, illocutionary goals can only be achieved in cooperation, and only if the partner-in-dialogue consents. Lastly, the process of communication and its results do not become *objective conditions in the world*. Speaker and hearer are in a performative relation, sharing the intersubjective world of their language community, and when they deliberate they relate to things *outside* the world of teleological action (Habermas 1990b). Speech acts and actions connect in interactions, resulting in both communicative and strategic action.

The distinction between actions and speech-acts reveals the ‘consensus-promoting force’ of language. Speech acts are linguistically mediated, and according to Habermas, inherently oriented towards mutual understanding. Actions on the other hand are just instrumental. The next section introduces two forms of linguistically-mediated action that are distinguishable by their illocutionary (communicative action) or perlocutionary (strategic action) orientation.

1.3 Communicative and Strategic Action

Habermas’ understanding of rationality is more concerned with the *use* of knowledge than with the possession of knowledge (Habermas 1990b, 64). This rationality encompasses both instrumental and communicative rationality. Teleological actions refer to instrumental rationality and to *action* as discussed above, whilst communicative rationality refers to the conditions of validity for *speech acts*. The mechanism of “the exertion of influence”, or manipulation (strategic action) and that of reaching understanding (communicative action) are incompatible and mutually exclusive (Habermas 1998, 222).

Communicative and strategic rationality mainly differ from each other with respect to the question whether they just use natural language as a medium to transmit information, or also as a source of social integration⁴ (Habermas 1990b, 66; Habermas 1998, 221). Indeed, language in strategic rationality is only used to bring across information and does not address the other in mutual deliberation. Social coordination in strategic action is secured through manipulation rather than through mutual deliberation. Language in strategic action is thus *de-potentiated language: perlocution without illocution*, that does not seek mutual recognition or understanding but instead advances one’s self-interest. Communicative action on the other hand seeks illocutionary aims, using the rational force of mutual deliberation based on the recognition of essentially contestable validity claims.

The notion of communicative rationality implies a broad definition of rationality (instead of the narrow instrumental rationality of strategic action). Communicative propositions simultaneously serve to express the intentions or experiences of the speaker, to represent facts and to enter into relations with the listener. Each of these aims can be translated to a validity

⁴ Johnson argues that although Habermas intends to develop strategic and communicative action as “two equally fundamental elements of social interaction”, he ultimately prioritises communicative action (Johnson 1991, 181). In this thesis, with ‘social action’ I therefore relate to communicative, not strategic action.

claim: the proposition can be criticised as normatively *wrong*, *untrue*, or *insincere*. Each of these validity claims can be challenged *rationally*⁵. Communicative rationality thus does not simply imply a right representation of the facts – it means recognising or rejecting the validity claims implicit in each proposition, and entering into discourse based on arguments to intersubjectively reach agreement. Communicative interaction means collaboratively determining the situation one is in (Habermas 1996, 27) .

If one of the three validity claims causes disagreement, the actors clarify the specific problem with the questioned validity claim, and enter into a discourse – directed, of course, towards mutual understanding and reaching consensus. If the dissensus cannot be resolved, they could ‘agree to disagree’, leaving the problematic claim outside the shared basis of intersubjective knowledge. This however involves the risk of eroding the horizon of intersubjectively held convictions – in the end, only postponing the conflict. Communication could also be cut off altogether – yet, for Habermas, that seems hardly satisfactory, especially on a societal scale⁶. Lastly, the actors could shift to strategic action. The actors will start to bargain, adopting non-linguistic mediums that are not oriented towards mutual understanding, but to getting their way.

Strategic action can be divided into *latent* and *manifest* strategic action (see figure 1). The ‘real’ aims of latent strategic action cannot be revealed in-action: while addressing someone in a speech act, the actor *pretends* that his aim is different than it really is. The other can agree with the propositions of the actor, which he would not when knowing the *real* intentions of the actor (the bank robber borrowing someone’s car without telling the person what for). These actions ‘parasitize’ on communicative action: by taking the form of communicative action (Habermas

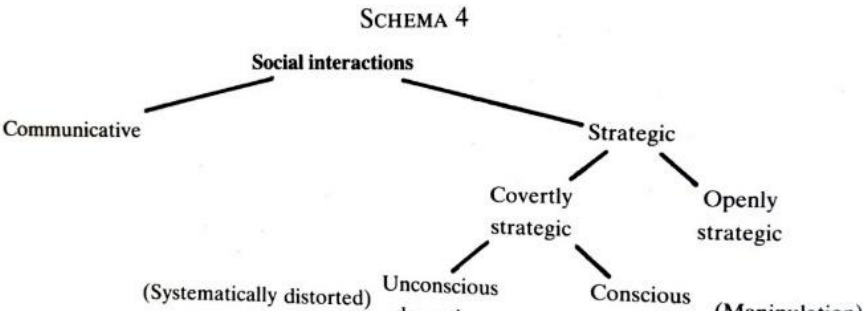


Figure 1: Types of social interactions (Habermas 1982, 264)

⁵ This does not mean that the discourses following different kinds of validity claims are completely of the same nature. Propositional truth relates to a situation in the world. Normative rightness and personal sincerity are *analogous* to truth claims. (Fultner 2011). Different types of propositions require different discourses, with different conditions. However, all validity claims are ‘cognitive in the sense that they are subject to rational scrutiny’ (Fultner 2011, 63). See also the image below (Habermas 1982, 264).

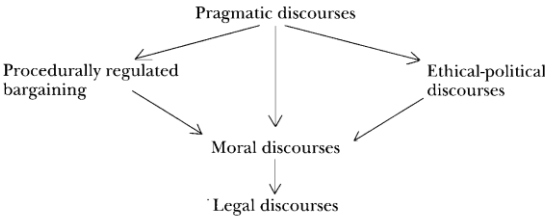


Figure 2
A process model of rational political will-formation.

⁶ This conclusion is contested - see chapter 3.3. Moreover, Johnson argues that Habermas does not sufficiently account for “the force of consent as a coordinating mechanism for social interaction” (Johnson 1991, 194).

1990b, 70; Habermas 1998), the real implications of the speech act are disguised. Manifest strategic action however does no such thing – it is, in a way, honest. This form of action is just sheer, unconcealed manipulation or coercion – an immediate and empirical threat replaces the orientation to validity claims (the bank robber threatening the employee).

1.4 Communicative Action and the Lifeworld as a Ground for Social Order

Communicative action, as we will see, forms the ground for social coordination and democracy. That is made possible because reaching understanding, according to Habermas, is the ‘inherent telos’ of human communication through natural language. In practice, however, not all communication *is* indeed oriented towards mutual understanding. And as Habermas himself acknowledges, “such examples of the use of language with an orientation to consequences seem to decrease the value of speech acts as a the model for action oriented to reaching understanding.” (Habermas 1984, 288). The fact that social coordination is effected through communicative action based on implicit reference to validity claims in everyday communication, seems to be contradicted by the fact that not all everyday communication indeed meets the criteria of communicative action.

Habermas counters this apparent contradiction by understanding all other forms of communication are ‘parasitic’ on ‘the original mode of language use’ (i.e. communicative action). Perlocutionary forces of language, Habermas argues, presuppose the existence of *illocutionary* force. Strategic action, in this way, is dependent on the existence of *communicative* action as the ‘original mode of language’ (Habermas 1984; Johnson 1991).

Communicative action, for Habermas, is ‘typical of everyday life in modern societies’⁷. (Habermas 1984, 236). Consequently he understands communicative action as ‘the original mode of language’. This means that he makes an (anthropological) assumption that the human generally acts communicatively (and thus, rationally in Habermas’ sense of the word).

Communicative action can in this way result in social coordination; language interactions oriented towards mutual understanding weave the connecting threads of our society. Where the ‘atomism’, ‘egocentrism’, and focus on personal gain cannot account for the existence of normative and coercive structures like the law (Habermas 1990b, 83), communicative action can. Intersubjectively shared language confronts actors with the ‘public criteria’ of communicative rationality, urging them to engage on a non-coercive, intersubjective project of consensus-building, instead of using the mechanism of mutual influence in strategic action (Habermas 1990b; Habermas 1996).

Habermas’ theory derives social coordination on a systematic, societal scale from the agent-centred perspective of communicative action. Or, in Habermas’ words: “The question: ‘How is social action possible?’ is only the other side of the question: ‘How is a social order possible?’”. Communicative action thus “from the perspective of the participants, (...) serves to establish interpersonal relations; from the perspective of social science, it is the medium through which the life-world shared by the participants in communication is reproduced” (Habermas 1982, 234).

⁷ This is what Habermas means with his concept of the ‘rationalised lifeworld’ (Habermas 1984, 44).

1.5 A Theory of Deliberative Democracy; the Discourse-Theory of Law

Communicative action is based on the intersubjective acceptance or rejection of validity claims that are inherently contestable. Yet, communicative rationality is also the ground for social order. But this seems in no means a stable ground: each speech act, after all, is open for contestation and discourse. Speech acts have a 'rationally motivating force', but this does not result from the truth or validity of what is being said, but just from "the guarantee (...) given by the speaker that he will if necessary attempt to make good the claim he has made" (Habermas 1985). From this perspective, communicative action seems a disruptive and hardly stable mechanism. Therefore it needs to be stabilised by the lifeworld, institutions and the law.

The lifeworld consists of the familiar and uncontested knowledge that forms a basis for all other knowledge and interactions. It is implicit, concrete, background knowledge that is intersubjectively shared and unproblematic (in its specific context). This form of knowledge, for Habermas, needs to be distinguished from the knowledge that is needed to engage in deliberation and communicative action in the first place – that 'know how' serves the production of communicative action, but does not add on to it (Habermas 1990b, 89). Instead, the knowledge that interests us in regard to the lifeworld is the concrete knowledge *about* the world that provides the basis for all other forms of knowledge.

The lifeworld is the first step in Habermas' reconstruction of how social order is possible. The second step is formed by the "regulation of behaviour through strong archaic institutions". The third step is the law. Habermas contends that the first two steps explain social order in small and undifferentiated societies. Law, then, is necessary in modern societies, that have become increasingly complex and pluralised, so that the reach of the uncontested background knowledge of the lifeworld and the 'metasocial' guarantees of 'archaic institutions' has decreased (Habermas 1996, 25). Law, legitimised (and, in a way, constituted) by the communicative power of unrestrained communicative action in the public sphere, glues different viewpoints in society together and provides procedural constraints for organising social coordination. This is the basis of Habermas' discourse theory of law (which results in the procedural account of democracy through deliberative politics).

Starting from the argument that purely 'empiricist' accounts of democracy, like Becker's 'Decision for Democracy' are insufficient, Habermas states that the "public wants to be *convinced* that the one party offers the prospect of better policies than does the other party; there must be good *reasons* for preferring one party to the other." (Habermas 1996, 294). If "rational citizens were to describe their practices in empiricist categories, they would not have sufficient reason to observe the democratic rules of the game." Therefore, a theory that bridges the perspective of the participant with the perspective of an objective observer is needed, that shows how norm and reality connect⁸ (Habermas 1996, 295–96).

Habermas' theory is a combination of his (somewhat stylised) accounts of the 'republican' and the 'liberal' view of democracy into his discourse theory. Liberals understand democracy mostly in terms of basic (negative) rights, that result in strategic compromises between different interests. The republican view on the other hand understands democracy in terms of positive rights of democratic participation – but relies, for Habermas, too much on a substantive background consensus and thus does not allow for the pluralisation of modern societies (Habermas 1996; Habermas 1994b). Habermas then introduces a 'proceduralist concept of deliberative politics' which shifts away from the state-centred perspectives of liberalism and

⁸ Although this is an admirable ambition, I argue in the next chapters Habermas ultimately does not fulfil it.

republicanism. Instead, he proposes a 'decentered society' of which the state is but one part, and that provides space for strategic action (e.g. in the market economy) as well as for the communicative action of the public sphere. The law, in this view, on the one hand provides authority and stabilises, denoting the conditions for different types of action in different spheres; and on the other hand *unleashes* communication (Habermas 1996, 37–38). In this way, deliberative democracy is less normative than the republican account, but more than the liberal account.

In Habermas' discourse theory of democracy, "members of a legal community must be able to assume that in a free process of political opinion- and will-formation they themselves would also *authorize* the rules to which they are subject as *addressees*" (Habermas 1996, 38, emphasis added). For that Habermas' is necessarily dependent on communicative *reason*, based in an account of natural language that is inherently oriented towards mutual understanding. Communicative rationality can in this way replace metaphysical thinking and provide a ground for social order. This practical reason thus becomes post-metaphysical, for it "no longer resides in universal human rights, or in the ethical substance of a specific community, but in the rules of discourse and forms of argumentation that borrow their normative content from the validity basis of action oriented to reaching understanding" (Habermas 1996, 296–97)⁹.

This connection of intersubjective communicative action with societal order, without reference to 'metaphysical' systems but by means of rationality inherent in (everyday) speech acts, brings us back to the beginning of this chapter. Over the course of this thesis, I will argue that the assumption of general human rationality on which this connection is based, is problematic. This will be revealed by putting Habermas' theory, particularly the central distinction between communicative and strategic action, to the test of post-truth politics in the next chapter.

⁹ A very similar formulation can be found in Three Normative Models of Democracy (Habermas 1994b, 6)

2. Habermas to the test of post-truth politics

After exposing Habermas' frame of thought on communicative action and democracy in the previous chapter, I will now put his TCA to the test of post-truth politics. The last chapter showed that, for Habermas, social order is established through communicative action, and stabilised by lifeworld and law. Strategic action mutually excludes communicative action and 'parasitizes' on it. The force of communicative action is based on the 'inherently consensus-oriented' nature of (everyday) language. By making validity claims that can be rationally contested or accepted, people collectively negotiate their situation. Habermas' theory in this way specifies procedures for social coordination (in the different realms of discourse, politics or administration) to take place. Strategic action, on the other hand, cannot form a ground for social order. It obstructs the mechanism of communicative rationality and validity claims, for either latent or manifest manipulation. Strategic action borrows its power from the 'rationally-motivating force' of communicative action. Were its real, strategic aims to be revealed, it would lose its force.

What, now, are the implications of the phenomenon of post-truth politics for Habermas' theory? To what extent can it accommodate post-truth politics? And what implications does it have for his theory as a whole?

In this chapter I argue that post-truth politics cannot be accounted for within the framework of Habermas' thought. Post-truth politics cannot be explained with the existing categories of communicative and strategic action, of truth and lies. It does not meet the criteria of communicative action, but it can neither be explained as strategic action. In Habermas' view, social coordination is achieved through collaboratively determining truth (the situation one is in) through rationally accepting (or rejecting) validity claims in communicative action. Strategic action then only has force if it (latently) *presents* itself as communicative action – that is, by making a reference to truth. The categories of communicative and strategic action lead Habermas into the assumption that politics (communicative or strategic) derives its force from a reference to truth. The phenomenon of post-truth politics disproves this and shows that a politics that is *not* dependent on a reference to truth, is possible.

Following the working definition of post-truth politics given in the introduction, I refer to post-truth politics as the phenomenon in which discourses that are *not concerned with truth*, still are *power-bestowing*. It is distinct from both *lies* and from *fiction* – while lies *pretend* to be true, and fiction *presents itself as untrue*, post-truth politics falsifies the mutual exclusion of 'true' and 'untrue'. It is indifferent to truth, making claims that might be either true, untrue, or unfalsifiable: the truth of propositions in post-truth politics is of no importance to their (political) power. As truth is no longer the primary focus of discourse, rationality, expertise, and open, critical discourse (methods employed to get closer to truth), no longer maintain their importance.

If Habermas' theory is correct, post-truth politics cannot exist. Yet it does: we are confronted with this phenomenon in our everyday reality of politics. Of course, the response to this could be that Habermas' theory is *ideal* theory, that does not have to account for everything that happens in empirical reality. This is a contested claim, and contradicts Habermas own criticism of ideal theory¹⁰, instead positioning his theory as 'post-metaphysical'. However, this response is unavailable for Habermas, as I argue in more depth in chapter 3.2. In short; the empirical

¹⁰ As I showed in chapter 1, he presents his theory as 'post-metaphysical', having transcendental status but arising from 'actual structures of human life' (Habermas 1971; Allen 2009).

phenomenon of post-truth politics is so vast that leaving it out of a theory that claims to arise from empirical reality would considerably weaken the theory, and would leave it almost inapplicable. The theory would be unable to provide ways to deal with either post-truth politicians (like Mr Trump) or their voters – other than dismissing them as ‘irrational’ or ‘antisocial’, thereby lapsing even further into ideal theory. Summarising, Habermas cannot provide a satisfactory reply to people who do not (want to) participate in communicative action on his terms, unless he changes his theory so that it can grasp the phenomenon of post-truth politics.

My argument in this chapter, however, aims to do more than merely showing a discrepancy between ideal and reality, or between the status of his theory and its achievements. I intend to show that Habermas’ theory is incomplete on a *theoretical* level. Post-truth politics shows that the fulfilment of Habermas’ most important condition for communicative action, the orientation towards mutual understanding¹¹, and thus to truth¹², is more problematic than he seems to think. He assumes this condition to be fulfilled. If it is not, the sole alternative is resorting to strategic action. But this is only a choice ‘in an abstract sense’ (Habermas 1990c, 101–2; Allen 2009, 13): strategic action, Habermas argues, cannot provide an alternative to the social coordination of communicative action. Post-truth politics thus shows that the *theoretical* categories of strategic and communicative action are flawed. As this distinction is – like I showed in the last chapter – central to Habermas’ TCA and his theory of democracy, it is plausible that my argument will have consequences for his entire theory and particularly for his understanding of power as *truth-sensitive*.

In the following sections I argue that post-truth politics cannot be understood within Habermas’ theory of action. Post-truth politics consists of actions. If Habermas’ theory were to accommodate it, it should belong to one of his categories of (linguistically mediated, non-poetic) action. The most important of these are strategic and communicative action; all other types of action are ‘limit cases’ of, and borrow their force from, communicative action (figure 2) (Habermas 1984, 328; Johnson 1991). I will first show why post-truth politics cannot be understood as communicative action: post-truth politics is indifferent to the most fundamental conditions for engaging in communicative action. Then I will argue that it also cannot be understood as strategic action. This is a more challenging argument, but I will show that strategic action is based on an understanding of power as truth-sensitive, which post-truth politics defies. In the last part of this chapter I will assess the consequences of this argument for Habermas’ theory.

2.1 Post-Truth Politics Cannot be Understood as Communicative Action

As we have seen in the previous chapter, communicative action presupposes rational actors oriented towards reaching mutual understanding. This is the ‘inherent telos’ of human communication (Johnson 1991, 188), and is, according to Habermas, internal to the use of

¹¹ Markell compellingly argues in his paper *Contesting Consensus* that we should take the ‘orientation towards mutual understanding’ that is so central to the notion of communicative action as a ‘weak’ claim regarding the phenomenon of consensus, but as a ‘strong’ normative claim regarding the *orientation* of participants. The orientation towards consensus is procedural, and does not necessarily have to arrive at consensus (Markell 2003). As such, Habermas’ theory cannot be disproven by relating to real-life situations that do not meet the ideal speech situation – and Habermas’ theory is less at odds with agonistic democratic theory than some authors seem to think.

¹² A collaborative understanding of the situation means collaboratively understanding a situation *to be true*. Accepting validity claims necessarily implies determining a shared *truth*.

language¹³. However, as noted before, this should not mistakenly be read as the descriptive claim that *all human communication is always oriented toward reaching mutual understanding*. Habermas theory seeks to construct a typology of ‘pure types of language-use’ (Habermas 1984, 327). Looking for the implicit archetypes of communication in the messy day-to-day communication of humans, this does not serve as a description of all human communication but rather as an ideal in a weak-transcendental way, a guideline specifying necessary conditions. All *pure* forms of communicative action are oriented to mutual understanding (see figure 1), and this is what distinguishes them from strategic action (Markell 2003)¹⁴.

Figure 16
Pure Types of Linguistically Mediated Interaction

Types of action	Formal-Pragmatic Features	Characteristic Speech Acts	Functions of Speech	Action Orientations	Basic Attitudes	Validity Claims	World Relations
Strategic Action		Perlocutions Imperatives	Influencing one's opposite number	Oriented to success	Objectivating	(Effectiveness)	Objective world
Conversation		Constatives	Representation of states of affairs	Oriented to reaching understanding	Objectivating	Truth	Objective world
Normatively Regulated Action		Regulatives	Establishment of interpersonal relations	Oriented to reaching understanding	Norm-conformative	Rightness	Social world
Dramaturgical Action		Expressives	Self-representation	Oriented to reaching understanding	Expressive	Truthfulness	Subjective world

Figure 2, Pure types of Linguistically Mediated Interaction. Conversation, normatively regulated action and dramaturgical action can be understood as limit cases of communicative action (Habermas 1984, 329).

To make potential agreement possible, participants in dialogue should make ‘idealizing assumptions’ when engaging in discourse. They must assume, among other things, *“that the participants pursue their illocutionary goals without reservations, that they tie their agreement to the intersubjective recognition of criticisable validity claims, and that they are ready to take on the obligations resulting from consensus and relevant for further interaction”* (Habermas 1996, 4). Furthermore, they must *“ascribe identical meanings to expressions, connect utterances with context-transcending validity claims, and assume that addressees are accountable, that is, autonomous and sincere with both themselves and others”* (Habermas 1996, 4). Summarising, they must suppose that they mean the same by using the same words (1), that the other is equally honest, rational and sincere/accountable¹⁵ (2), and that the arguments that their agreement is based on are stable and viable, that is, that they *“will not subsequently prove false or mistaken”* (3) (Rehg 1996, xv; Habermas 1996). I will further specify the relation between agreement and truth after discussing the possible fulfilment of these three idealizing assumptions in relation to post-truth politics. The ‘must’ here should not be taken as a moral

¹³ See for example (Habermas 1996, 4), or (Fultner 2011, 57), who points out a distinction between *speech* and *language* that might be useful here. “Language can be regarded as the system of syntactic and semantic rules constituting a language, speech refers to how that system is applied to communicate.”

¹⁴ Because of this, for Habermas, communicative action and not strategic action, is able to account for social integration (and the formation of society). I deal with this in other parts of this thesis.

¹⁵ This corresponds to the three validity claims of propositional truth, normative rightness and personal sincerity.

duty, but as a 'weak-transcendental' claim specifying the conceptually necessary conditions for dialogue deriving from, but transcending, empirical reality¹⁶.

We cannot enter discussion without making the three idealizing assumptions discussed above (see e.g. Markell 2003; Fultner 2011). If they prove to be flawed, the discourse will be reopened. Alternatively, the actors will eventually resort to strategic action, or leave the matter undiscussed. However, strategic action does not have the same potential as communicative. As I showed in the previous chapter, on a societal level, communicative action is the form that makes social interaction possible. On a personal level, likewise, "the coherence of the self is only secured (...) in the medium of action oriented toward reaching understanding" (Allen 2009, 14).

Where does post-truth politics stand in relation to the idealizing assumptions discussed above? Post-truth politics cannot meet these high requirements of communicative action. We have seen that communicative action's orientation towards mutual understanding is inherently oriented to truth. In post-truth discourse, the orientation to truth is of secondary importance. Propositions no longer have to be coherent, or indeed, true. The power of a proposition is not dependent on its truth anymore, so that in the phenomenon of post-truth politics propositions might either taken to be true, or untrue; but this does not influence their power. Because of this possibility of undisguised incoherence, it is hard to know if one actually means 'the same thing by the same world or expression'. Some say that propositions are supposed to be taken 'symbolically' instead of literally¹⁷, other propositions are supposed to be taken seriously and at face value. The point is that there is no way to distinguish between different types of claims in post-truth discourse. As such, we can no longer suppose that what one means *now*, is the same as what one means *later*, or how we should understand those propositions in general. This poses serious consequences to the third idealising assumption. Lastly, rationality can be understood as a method to get to truth. But as post-truth politics is not dependent on truth for its power anymore, we cannot rely on the consequent use of this method -other methods might be more suitable for what post-truth politics aims for. None of the idealizing assumptions, conditional for engaging in communicative action, can thus be fulfilled in post-truth politics.

More fundamentally, post-truth politics' indifference to truth is incompatible with the condition of 'being oriented towards mutual understanding' in communicative action. Mutual understanding always means collaboratively understanding something *to be true*. This contextual agreement, for Habermas, can eventually 'transcend from within' the here and now, resulting in universal validity¹⁸. Here, Habermas follows Peirce, in stating that under ideal conditions, consensus would result in 'the real': "*The real, then, is that which, sooner or later, information and reasoning would finally result in, and which is therefore independent of the vagaries of me and you.*" (Peirce via Habermas 1996, 14). Or, as Rehg puts it: when members of discourse reach agreement "*they must suppose that (...) the supporting arguments sufficiently justify a (defeasible) confidence that any claims to truth, justice, and so forth that underlie their consensus will not subsequently prove false or mistaken*" (Rehg 1996, xv).

When participants in discourse (and even in everyday communicative practice) reach agreement, they get to a shared understanding *about something in the world* (Habermas 1996, 16). This 'cooperative search for truth' is essentially the core motive of communicative action (Habermas 1983, 88–89 via Markell 2003, 399). Habermas equally believes it to be the only form able to (communicatively) bestow power. Post-truth politics puts this in question. For post-truth

¹⁶ See e.g. "Communicative rationality is expressed in a decentered complex of pervasive, transcendently enabling structural conditions, but it is not a subjective capacity that would tell actors what they *ought* to do." (Habermas 1996, 4).

¹⁷ See (McCaskill 2016; Schwab 2017).

¹⁸ Of course, this is only possible in a practice of unrestrained communicative action.

politics, the orientation to truth is not important. Although truthful propositions might occasionally occur in post-truth discourse, this does not influence the power of the proposition. Post-truth politics is *indifferent* to truth. It can therefore not be understood as communicative action.

2.2 Post-Truth Politics Cannot be Understood as Strategic Action

If post-truth politics cannot be interpreted as communicative action, it could still be understood as strategic action. This would leave us with a political, empirical problem (how is democracy still possible when a substantive part of society votes for post-truth politics?) – but it would only confirm Habermas’ theory. Post-truth politics could then be ascribed to the corruption of the public sphere, or understood as an anomaly alluding to power-play instead of open dialogue and understanding. Questions could be raised on how to improve this condition, on how to include non-ideal citizens in non-ideal circumstances in deliberative procedures and politics in general. I argue in chapter 3.2 that this ‘corruption of the public sphere’-argument is unavailable to Habermas without giving up the status of his theory as not just ideal, but empirical-pragmatic. In this chapter, however, I focus on the shortcomings of Habermas’ democratic theory that post-truth politics confronts us with. I contend that post-truth politics cannot be understood as strategic action: it cannot be referred to in the categories of ‘truth’ or ‘lie’ because it is essentially indifferent to truth.

Strategic action occurs when communicative action fails (and cannot be resolved through more discourse), but also in various domains of society where the social norms imply an orientation towards getting your way rather than reaching understanding (such as the market) (Rehg 1996, xvii). In these realms, that have their place within Habermas’ decentred understanding of society, bargaining instead of engaging in intersubjective dialogue is the appropriate behaviour (Habermas 1996, 165).

As we have seen in the previous chapter, two forms of strategic action should be distinguished: latent and manifest strategic action. For Habermas, both forms are directed not at mutual understanding but at success, and contrary to communicative action, coercion and power play a central role here. Both are perlocution without illocution: doing something *by* saying something (perlocution), instead of doing something *in* saying something (illocution) (Johnson 1991, 187).

In manifest strategic action, the condition of being oriented to validity claims, that engender the possibility of discourse, is suspended (Habermas 1990b, 72; Habermas 1998). Propositions are no longer open for contestation, instead, the direct power of *threat* comes into play. Validity claims are, in the heat of this moment, replaced by the “or-else” structure of direct coercion. Post-truth politics, by contrast, is not manifest strategic action; it is not sheer coercion. The power of the politician is constituted and recognised by the people out of free will. Neither is the politician coerced to do what she does. Manifest strategic action, furthermore, is honest: it shows in-action that coercion or manipulation is taking place. Post-truth politics on the other hand does not reveal itself so clearly. While in manifest strategic action language solely plays an *informative* role (Habermas 1990b), language in post-truth politics can still take the form of discourse (although its power no longer derives from its perceived truth). It takes the form of communicative language, yet is not submitted to the conditions of validity or truth. Post-truth politics is thus not the same as manifest strategic action. Latent strategic action is slightly more complicated. It presents itself as communicative action, disguising its real (strategic, non-communicative) aims. In this way, it makes use of the illocutionary force of communicative action – it takes its power from the same validity claims and so relates to truth. The power of post-truth politics on the other hand is independent from its relation to truth.

In latent strategic action, a perlocutionary effect takes place that could *not* have taken place, had the actor been open about her intentions from the start. As I showed in section 1.3, this language use ‘parasitizes’ on normal language use. An actor poses a proposition as if it is communicative, but does so only to convince the other to do what is instrumental to her ‘real’, but disguised, aims. It can be understood as lying. The truth is disguised for strategic reasons, and as soon as it is unveiled, the proposition loses its power. If the other actor finds out about the real intentions of the first, the action fails.

Post-truth politics is different from latent strategic action as it does not disguise its incoherence. It does not present itself as truth, and does not get its power from reference to (perceived) reality. It is not a lie, either, in that it does not disguise its divergence from the truth. Latent strategic action is dependent on the *belief* that it is *non-strategic* action, that it is *true* and *sincere*. The effectiveness of post-truth politics on the other hand is independent of truth or sincerity. It is a form of action that does not present itself as communicative or true – yet it is power-bestowing. As such, it cannot be understood by just referring to truth or lie, to communicative or strategic action.

At this point, the question why post-truth politics still takes the form of communicative action, if its power no longer derives from reference to truth through validity claims, could be raised as an objection to my thesis. Why do post-truth politicians still use the language of truth, if truth is not their goal, and if it does not affect their power? While the answer to this question remains to be explored elsewhere (a PhD project perhaps?), this is in fact no objection to my thesis. I acknowledge that my thesis stands or falls with accepting my working definition of post-truth politics. This definition, in which the power of post-truth politics is *independent* from its reference to truth, is quite strong. But this strong reading of post-truth politics is made plausible by the omnipresence of the phenomenon and its influence on the current state of our world (one only needs to be reminded of the current president of the US). Journalists, scholars and politicians throughout the world use the notion ‘post-truth politics’ to make sense of a *specific* phenomenon, that cannot be understood in terms of ‘truth’ or ‘lie’. “Political lies used to imply that there was a truth – one that had to be prevented from coming out (...) Today a growing number of politicians and pundits simply no longer care” (The Economist 2016b). If the old concepts of truth and lie can no longer explain the phenomena around us, a new concept is needed to make sense of the world. That, I think, is what motivated Frankfurt to introduce the concept of ‘bullshit’. This, too, is why I take post-truth seriously as a phenomenon on its own, and why I take a strong definition of post-truth politics in this thesis. Given the concept’s current empirical importance, not taking post-truth politics seriously or understanding it in terms of existing categories, would require further argumentation.

2.3 Implications

I have argued that post-truth politics cannot be understood as strategic or communicative action. Three options are available now: changing the notion of communicative action, of strategic action, or coming up with a third category. I will now consider each of these options, to find out which is most fruitful. In doing so, it will show that it is Habermas’ notion of power that is ultimately at stake. In the next chapter, then, I will take a closer look at Habermas’ understanding of power.

Firstly, what would have to change if we were to understand post-truth politics as communicative action? Communicative action is what makes (democratic) social coordination possible, according to Habermas. It is based on an orientation towards mutual understanding (and thus, as I showed, to truth). This orientation is incompatible with post-truth politics, being

fundamentally unconcerned with truth, rationality, or agreement. If post-truth politics would have to fit the category of communicative action, the most fundamental characteristic of this category would be lost: that of being oriented towards mutual understanding. It would then be impossible to distinguish communicative from strategic action. This does not seem to be a satisfactory solution.

Secondly, could the category of strategic action be changed as to include post-truth politics? Strategic action, as I mentioned before, is somewhat underdeveloped in Habermas' work, which makes it difficult to judge if the category could be changed to account for post-truth politics. However, most distinctive about strategic action is that it is 'atomistic', 'egocentric' thus unable to account for social coordination (Habermas 1984, 10, 85, 88, 94–95, 101, 273–2074). In Habermas' view, only communicative action can lead to social integration, while strategic action is just concerned with the advancements of one's own goals, and can do so only through force:

“to the degree that interactions cannot be coordinated through achieving understanding, the only alternative that remains is force exercised by one against others (in a more or less refined, more or less latent manner). The typological distinction between communicative and strategic action says nothing else than this.” (Habermas 1982, 269; Johnson 1991, 197).

For Habermas, strategic action can only deal with other people by using them as means to an end. To the extent that it can address others communicatively, it does so with *latent* strategic action, which is dependent on the 'rationally-motivating force of the better argument' of communicative action. In short, all *social* aspects of strategic action are said to derive from *communicative action*. Strategic action in itself is considered 'atomistic'.

Post-truth political discourse, on the other hand, is not like that. It addresses subjects, who are free to choose, to constitute and recognise the power of a specific party or politician – and does not do so through force. It is a thoroughly *social* and intersubjective phenomenon (whether it creates legitimate social cohesion is a separate issue). It is social and power-bestowing, but not communicative, nor strategic, in Habermas' sense. If it were to be included in strategic action, Habermas' conception of strategic action *and* its distinctness from communicative action would change so thoroughly that it would no longer be the same.

Imagine that Habermas' conception of strategic action would change as to encompass post-truth politics. To do so, Habermas would have to give up the idea that strategic action is 'atomistic' and that social coordination can just result from communicative action. But this idea is the key distinguishing feature between communicative and strategic action. He would therefore have to give up that distinction. However, as we have seen in chapter 1, Habermas' entire democratic theory is *dependent* on the supposition that general human communication is oriented towards understanding, and that therefore social coordination and society can be explained in terms of *communicative*, not strategic action. The distinction between communicative and strategic action, and their mutual incompatibility, is thus of key importance for the entirety of Habermas' project. Understanding post-truth politics as strategic action in this way would therefore have severe consequences for the theory as a whole: the theory as is cannot account for post-truth politics as strategic action.

Post-truth politics falsifies the opposition between communicative and strategic action by putting in question what distinguishes the one from the other. Adding a new category would not resolve the problem: it is the categories of communicative and strategic action themselves that do not hold in light of post-truth politics. They cannot explain a phenomenon that is power-bestowing, without referring to truth, while still being *socially constituted*. Post-truth politics

thus teaches us that Habermas' theory itself, with the communicative-strategic dichotomy at its centre, is flawed. More specifically, post-truth politics reveals that the theory is based on the assumption that social action derives its power from reference to truth. This does not (or no longer) seem to be the case in light of the current political situation and post-truth politics. Habermas' account of power thus seems to be the problem here. I will examine his understanding of power more closely in the next chapter.

3. Habermas' dual notion of power: communication and force

For a political theorist, Habermas has written surprisingly little on the notion of power. His understanding of power, however, seems precisely to be what is called into question by the confrontation of post-truth politics with his theory. In the previous chapter I have argued that Habermas' concept of power is vital to understanding the implications of post-truth politics for his theory. In this chapter I discuss the notion of power that underlies Habermas' TCA, mostly drawing upon the literature on the 'Foucault-Habermas debate' and his essay 'Hannah Arendt's Communications Concept of Power'.

What does Habermas himself mean when he uses the word power? It seems that his understanding has changed over time¹⁹; and I roughly categorise his use of the concept in two categories. The first can be found in his discussions on democracy and domination; Habermas' paper 'Hannah Arendt's Communications Concept of Power' can be seen as exemplary. This understanding of power as *communicative* focuses on the democratic power (constituted in the unrestrained communication of the public sphere) that gives legitimation to governments, laws and institutions. The second understanding of power can mostly be found within Habermas' work on communicative action and discourse, and in his reflections on Foucault. Here, power (understood as all non-illocutionary aims of a speech act) should be eradicated from communicative action and discourse. This stands in stark contrast to Foucault's work on subjectivation and the role of power structures in it. Although Habermas is far from consistent in this, he intends to refer to the first form of 'communicative' power as 'power', and to the second form of power as 'force' (Habermas 1982, 269).

In this chapter, I will show how these two forms of power are, paradoxically, mutually dependent within Habermas' theory. This dual perspective of power allows him to

“grasp the forms of indirectly exercising force (...) that inconspicuously enters the pores of everyday communicative practice, and can develop its latent influence there to the extent that the lifeworld is delivered over to the imperatives of independent sub-systems and reified along paths of one-sided rationalisation” (Habermas 1982, 269)

In other words, it allows him to understand certain phenomena as results of a 'corrupted' public sphere due to the 'latent influence' of strategic action. In this way, he can account for post-truth politics without changing his theory of communicative action. However, I argue in this chapter that this strategy is unavailable for Habermas. It would contradict the post-metaphysical, non-ideal status that he claims for his theory. Either his theory becomes ideal theory, or his understanding of power (and with it, the distinction between strategic and communicative action) needs to change.

In section 3.1, I elaborate on Habermas' 'communicative' understanding of power. I argue that it is based on a narrow and normative understanding of what power is, and that it is hard to distinguish from the concept of 'legitimacy'. Therefore its use could be called into question. In the intermezzo of section 3.2, dedicated to the 'corruption of the public sphere'-argument, I argue that the strategy of discarding post-truth politics as created by a corrupted public sphere is unavailable for Habermas without making his theory lapse into ideal theory. Section 3.3 then discusses Habermas' understanding of power as force, as it reveals itself in the Foucault-Habermas debate. This section shows that the paradoxical understandings of power as

¹⁹ Whereas in his earlier work Habermas sees power as an ineradicable part of social life, later he moves to a normative idea of communicative action which is *power-free* (i.e. forceless) (Allen 2009).

communicative and power as *force* are mutually dependent within Habermas' theory. Section 3.4 draws conclusions on this mutual dependency and shows how the dual perspective on power is needed to retain the 'post-metaphysical' and non-ideal status of Habermas' theory. I conclude that Habermas' theory either becomes ideal and loses its post-metaphysical status, or his understanding of power (and thus, the distinction between communicative and strategic action, with all due consequences for the TCA as a whole) needs to change.

3.1 Habermas 'Communicative' Understanding of Power - Power as Legitimacy

In 'Hannah Arendt's Communications Concept of Power' Habermas follows Arendt in her 'communicative' understanding of power. Power "corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act *in concert*" (Habermas 1977, 4, emphasis added) – it is socially constituted in the 'praxis of human communication'. It is not "the instrumentalization of *another's* will, but the formation of a *common* will in communication directed toward reaching agreement" (Habermas 1977, 4). Reaching agreement, moreover, is an end in itself. As a form of communicative action, communicative power is dependent on the 'forceless force' of the better argument: on communicative rationality, validity claims and an orientation towards nothing else than reaching mutual understanding. At the same time it is social and spontaneous: "no one really possesses power; it 'springs up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse'", as Habermas cites Arendt (Habermas 1977, 13).

In Arendt's (and Habermas') thought, the praxis of communication from which communicative power springs is a "basic feature of cultural life", it is the "medium in which the intersubjectively shared life-world is formed" (Habermas 1977, 8). Developing and sustaining it is an end in itself. However, this praxis is also in need of protection due to its highly instable nature (Habermas 1977, 8). Institutions (and the law, as discussed in chapter 1) protect the praxis, and so "give institutional permanence to the communicative generation of power" (Habermas 1977, 12). At the same time, these institutions are legitimised only by the communicative power of the people that came about within that same praxis of unrestrained communication²⁰.

The public sphere of communicative action from which communicative power springs is characterised by Arendt as determined by the facts of human natality and plurality (Arendt 1958). This leads to a form of radical equality: people "must recognize one another as equally responsible beings, that is, as beings capable of intersubjective agreement" (Habermas 1977, 8).

In the praxis of communication, citizens deliberate as equal authors and addressees of their laws and in this way form a common consensus, that becomes a communicative power which influences and legitimises the state. This communicative power results from the "collective effect of speech in which reaching agreement is an end in itself for all those involved" (Habermas 1977, 6). It comes about in unimpaired, intersubjective communicative action, which is incompatible with strategic action. Its strength, likewise, is not measured in 'success' but just in the "claim to rational validity that is immanent in speech" (Habermas 1977, 6).

Supplementing Arendt's conception of power, Habermas criticises her for holding on to a stylised image of the Greek polis that is no longer applicable to the modern world²¹. Hannah

²⁰ This is indeed a circular relation. Once again, we find ourselves at the heart of what Bonnie Honig called 'the paradox of politics' (Honig 2007), and which Rousseau famously described with the famous words "the effect would have to become the cause: the social spirit that is to be the work of the institution would have to preside over the institution itself, and men would have to be prior to the laws what they are to become through the laws." (Rousseau 2012, 193)

²¹ I will not assess Habermas' reading of Hannah Arendt here because it does not fit the scope of my thesis. However, it seems important to note that his reading of Arendt is not uncontested. Luban criticises Habermas not only for

Arendt's image of the praxis, according to Habermas, is only applicable to the *generation* of power. This part of the political is strictly communicative; it is dependent on the power of unimpaired intersubjectivity that legitimates state and institutions²². However the *acquisition*, *maintenance* and *employment* of political power can also be forms of *strategic* action, according to Habermas. This follows Habermas' 'decentralised' image of society that I discussed in chapter 1: different realms of society can be governed by different action types.

Following his supplemented version of Arendt's communications concept of power, Habermas concludes that political leadership can only exist while 'borrowing its power from the producers of power', that is, while depending on the *generation* of power in an unrestrained praxis of communicative action. But if that is true, how to explain that so many states and forms of political rule have existed *without* such legitimate generation of power? This is what I call the 'corruption of the public sphere'-argument, which I will discuss in detail in the next section.

Communicative power (or the generation of it) is thus dependent on common convictions as created in situations of unimpaired intersubjectivity. But in some situations (e.g. in countries without free press, or dictatorships) this intersubjective communicative action is blocked. This should not be understood as direct force or coercion, but rather as an unperceived blockage limiting the ideal functioning of the public sphere. It "isolates its citizens from one another through mistrusts, and cuts off the public exchange of opinions" (Habermas 1977, 10). Because it is not direct force, however, it becomes difficult to distinguish power created in situations of unimpaired intersubjectivity (based on 'non-illusionary convictions') from power created in these non-ideal circumstances (based on 'illusionary convictions'). Habermas therefore needs to specify a normative measure, a "critical standard to distinguish between illusionary and non-illusionary convictions" (Habermas 1977, 22).

This 'critical standard' is provided by the distinction between force and power (Love 1989; Habermas 1977). Whilst power is dependent on the validity claims of communicative rationality and seeks mutual agreement, force aims at success (in a more or less latent or disguised manner). This (supposedly procedural) distinction provides a criterion to differentiate between what constitutes legitimate and illegitimate government. Communicative power is created by the communicative action of citizens in *unrestrained* communication: communication where *force* plays no role. Both forms derive their power from reference to truth: based on 'non-illusionary' convictions, the one is legitimate, while discourses corrupted by force are illegitimate, based on 'illusionary' convictions. The difference between force and power thus allows Habermas to make a *normative* (and substantive) distinction between different types of power that come about in the public sphere; dismissing some as corrupted (because influenced by force and based on illusions), and accepting others as valid (coming about in unrestrained intersubjectivity).

misreading Arendt, but also seeks to show that Habermas' understanding of illocutionary and perlocutionary action is inherently paradoxical and self-refuting. Although I do not agree with this last argument (for it mistakes Habermas' theory for seeking a-priori foundations, whereas it is actually derived from modern empirical reality), Luban's reading of Arendt is I think a valuable one. Luban understands Arendt in an *agonistic* way, whereas Habermas understands her theory in relation to consensus (Luban 1979). This reading is supported by other papers that aim to show that the gap between agonistic and deliberative theory is not as large as it seems: e.g. 'Beyond the Dichotomy of Agonism and Deliberation: The Impasse of Contemporary Democratic Theory' (Yamamoto 2011) and 'Contesting Consensus: Rereading Habermas on the Public Sphere' (Markell 2003).

²² In case this collective structure of unimpaired intersubjectivity is blocked, a state "degenerates to a rule based on violence" (Habermas 1977, 10).

The introduction of this 'critical standard' is a deviation from Hannah Arendt, who bases communicative power solely on the consent, or support, of citizens. Habermas criticises Arendt there, noting that "to secure the normative core of an original equivalence between power and freedom, Hannah Arendt finally places more trust in the venerable figure of the contract than in her own concept of a praxis, which is grounded in the rationality of practical judgment." (Habermas 1977, 24). He, instead, introduces a supposedly procedural, but seemingly substantive, normative measure to distinguish between different types of communicative powers.

Habermas criticises Arendt for her distinction between truth and opinion. For her, only the latter belongs to the domain of politics. Habermas argues against this, instead introducing his concept of communicative rationality based on the three validity claims of propositional truth, normative rightness and subjective sincerity. Power can then be "anchored in the de facto recognition of validity claims that can be discursively redeemed and fundamentally criticized" (Habermas 1977, 22–23). This connection of power with validity claims (and thus, with truth) is made possible because of his introduction of the distinction between force and power. It allows him to distinguish legitimate power (as came about in situations of unrestrained communication) from non-legitimate power - which from his perspective, is not power, but force.

This distinction between power and force, however, can be questioned. Foucault regards it as primarily semantic.

"He [Foucault] maintains that 'to live in society is to live in such a way that action upon other actions is possible – and in fact on-going.' He concludes that 'a society without power-relations can only be an abstraction.' Communication, as a way of acting upon others, is always implicated in power. According to Foucault, the distinction between force and power, the idea of power without coercion, rests on a juridical or negative concept of power." (Love 1989, 287).

This negative concept of power, according to Foucault, is central to democratic theory, where the focus on 'rights', 'sovereignty' or legitimacy obscures the power relations at stake.

Moreover, if (communicative) power by definition is always legitimate, because it can only be created in situations of unconstrained intersubjective communication based on validity claims, it becomes difficult to distinguish the concept from *legitimacy*. How do the two differ? And what particular use has Habermas' notion of communicative power if it forecloses the possibilities of non-legitimate, that is, non-communicative power? This definition of power does not seem to meet conditions of specificity: why is this definition (power as communicative) necessary instead of another (legitimacy), apart from its importance for the coherence of Habermas' democratic theory?

In short, Habermas' account of communicative power is strongly normative, based on the distinction between power (legitimate) and force (illegitimate). However, this conception of power not uncontested. As an intermezzo, I will now discuss the 'corruption of the public sphere' objection to my thesis. I will then move to Habermas' second understanding of power as force, found in his work on Foucault and in his TCA before critically reviewing Habermas' understanding(s) of power at large in section 3.4.

3.2 Intermezzo: The 'Corruption of the Public Sphere'-Argument

In the previous chapter I contended that post-truth politics cannot be understood within the framework of Habermas' thought. It is neither communicative, nor strategic action – yet, it is a form of social action. We thus find ourselves confronted with a false dichotomy.

One way to counter my argument would be to say that Habermas' theory does not have to account for post-truth politics, given that his critical theory tries to explicate the implicit foundations of our every-day communicative actions, and not to account for every empirical phenomenon. Post-truth politics, in this view, would be understood as an anomaly in communicative practice. Instead of understanding post-truth politics in and for itself, it would be created by a corruption of the public sphere, which in turn came about by the influence of strategic action over communicative action. In other words, it would have been created by 'force' instead of unimpaired intersubjective communication. Therefore, it would not be communicative action. As such, Habermas' transcendental-pragmatic theory would not have to deal with it.

This counterargument, that I call the 'corruption of the public sphere'-argument, bears resemblance to the objection that Habermas deals with in *Hannah Arendt's Communications Concept of Power*. Faced with the fact that "even if the leadership in modern democracies has to periodically procure legitimation, history is replete with evidence which shows that political rule must have functioned, and functions, otherwise than as Arendt claims" (Habermas 1977, 21), Habermas counters this objection by introducing the notion of structural violence. Arendt, he says, cannot account for the existence of illegitimate states, because she "is unable to grasp structural violence" (Habermas 1977, 16). Structural violence manifests itself in an inverted way, *blocking* the structures of unimpaired intersubjectivity in which the power arises that generates legitimacy for political institutions.

The introduction of this concept makes it possible to distinguish between 'illusionary' and 'non-illusionary convictions' as a basis for (communicative) power. States without a proper basis of legitimacy, then, have been able to (and still) exist because they deployed structural violence, resulting in illusionary convictions. Illegitimate states can thus be explained by the malfunctioning of their public sphere.

In the same way as in the possible objection to my post-truth politics argument, this move discards the importance of an empirical counterexample by explaining it as an anomaly, a malfunction due to the corruption of the public sphere. It remains possible, however, to explain it *within* the framework of the TCA. The logic goes that *if* the conditions for communicative action had been fulfilled, *then* this undesirable situation (i.e. post-truth politics, or illegitimate political rule) would not have happened.

Is this countermove compelling? Firstly, it takes place solely on a theoretical level. The empirical problems of illegitimate states or post-truth politics, after all, are not solved by explaining them in terms of strategic incongruities in the realm of the communicative. The pragmatic-political problem still exists, although it would no longer disprove, but support the theory. Secondly, even if it were just an empirical glitch in a further-ideal world, the sheer *size* of the problem of post-truth politics would pose the need to reconsider the status of the theory as non-ideal and post-metaphysical. Positioned as a theory between facts and norms, between the universal and the particular, empirical-transcendental in taking what is implicit in everyday action and theorising it without losing ground, the discrepancy between reality and theory is at least rather unfortunate. At worst, it renders the theory self-contradictory. Even *if* these problems could be explained in the theory's own terms, it would lead to a theory that is no longer critical, but just *ideal*. But as ideal theory contains the possibility of applicability, which it now seems to foreclose

by disregarding major phenomena as ‘illusionary’ convictions, it would be an *inapplicable* ideal theory, and one can wonder how that could still be valuable – especially given the special status of ‘transcending, but based in, empirical reality’ that Habermas grants his theory.

It seems that even if Habermas’ response were viable on theoretical grounds (which I argue against in chapter 1), it would considerably lower the status of his theory which he claims to be based on sociological observations. The gap between ideal and reality which he seeks to bridge in his ‘post-metaphysical’ thinking would re-appear – larger than ever.

3.3 The ‘Foucault-Habermas Debate’: Power as Force

Returning from this intermezzo, I will now discuss Habermas’ understanding of power as apparent in his work on communicative action and in ‘the Foucault-Habermas debate’. Surprisingly, this second understanding of power has little to do with the communicative power he lined out in his paper on Hannah Arendt. Although he uses the word power in discussion with Foucault, too, it is likely that he actually refers to what he calls ‘force’. This is a type of power resembling (more or less disguised or latent) coercion. This power, in Habermas’ view, should be eradicated from communicative action – after all, the only thing that counts in communicative action is the ‘forceless force’ of the better argument. Indeed, this type of power falls under *strategic action*, which is, as we have seen before, incompatible with communicative action.

As we have seen in the first chapter, communicative action can take place by virtue of the ‘idealizing assumptions’ that have to be made in advance. In communicative action, “argumentation insures that all concerned in principle take part, freely and equally, in a cooperative search for truth, where nothing coerces anyone except the force of the better argument” (Habermas 1990c; Flyvbjerg 2000, 3). This condition can be achieved by adhering to the five requirements of discourse ethics, summarised by Flyvbjerg as follows:

“(1) no party affected by what is being discussed should be excluded from the discourse (the requirement of generality); (2) all participants should have equal possibility to present and criticize validity claims in the process of discourse (autonomy); (3) participants must be willing and able to empathize with each other’s validity claims (ideal role taking); (4) existing power differences between participants must be neutralized such that these differences have no effect on the creation of consensus (power neutrality); and (5) participants must openly explain their goals and intentions and in this connection desist from strategic action (transparency). Finally, given the implications of the first five requirements, we could add a sixth: unlimited time.” (Flyvbjerg 2000, 3)

Communicative discourse presupposes an ideal, transparent, non-strategic, power-free setting and like Flyvbjerg points out, to ultimately realise this condition would be to assume unlimited time. But what do ‘existing power relations’ entail, what does it mean to ‘neutralize’ them (are they always strategic?) and how does Habermas conceive of power relations in general?

Habermas discerns three types of power in democracy. I have already discussed communicative power, which arises from unrestrained communication in the public sphere. Communicative power (re)generates the *administrative* power of the state. This type of power is engendered and legitimised by deliberation of citizens, who are both authors and addressees of the law. Lastly, Habermas differentiates *social* power, a “measure for the possibilities an actor has in social relationships to assert his own will and interests, even against the opposition” (Habermas 1996; Flynn 2004). As civil society, where communicative power arises, is supposed to “absorb and

neutralize the unequal distribution of social positions and the power differentials resulting from them”, social power can only be admitted if it *facilitates* and not restricts ‘civil autonomy’ (Habermas 1996). Social power, equally, should be blocked from influencing administrative power. Unfortunately, Habermas does not further specify how social power can be made to just enable, and never constrain.

The concept of (non-communicative) power in Habermas’ theory is further developed in what came to be known as the Foucault-Habermas debate. This debate never actually took place, both due to a disagreement between Habermas and Foucault on the topic of the supposed debate, and Foucault’s untimely death (Allen 2009). Given that Habermas remained in the position to criticise Foucault and develop his own ideas, his version of events has dominated much of the secondary literature on this topic. This, and other factors, lead to ‘a peculiar impasse’, in Allen’s words: “The Habermasians seem to think that they have won, while the Foucaultians acts as if they were not even playing.” (Allen 2009, 2). Allen reconstructs this ‘deadlocked debate’ in five steps, that I will discuss now.²³

The debate deals with the (what Habermas deems) sceptic doubt over the universality validity of moral norms. ‘The (Foucaultian) sceptic’ opens the debate by arguing that moral cognitivism cannot (yet) satisfactorily show how “moral beliefs or judgments might be candidates for truth”. Habermas counters this move by giving up the strong normative claim of moral truth, arguing instead that normative claims are *analogous* to truth claims (Allen 2009; Fultner 2011). They are not based on facts (like discourses over propositional truth) but on an appeal to “legitimately ordered interpersonal relations” as reasons for normative judgments. This, however is not satisfying for the Foucaultian sceptic: normative discourses are still dependent on *reasons*, and it can thus not be explained how value pluralism is still a fact of the contemporary world; that is, why ‘rational people’ do not reach agreement on moral issues.

Here -and this is where it becomes relevant to this thesis- Habermas replies by referring to his principle of universalization (U) which is of key importance to his theory of moral argumentation. This principle is similar to the discourse principle (D)²⁴, which explains how social order derives from communicative action.

(U) *All* affected can accept the consequences and the side effects its *general* observance can be anticipated to have for the satisfaction of *everyone’s* interests (and these consequences are preferred to those of known alternative alternative possibilities for regulation).

(U) aims to specify the basic conditions for moral, reasoned, (dis)agreement to take place. The Foucaultian, however, replies by arguing that this principle, far from ‘neutrally’ specifying the conditions for moral discourse to take place, itself requires argumentation. The principle, it is said, is itself a value-laden, ethnocentric claim.

Habermas here responds by arguing that his theory is transcendental-pragmatic; because it derives from actual structures of everyday human communication, transcending them from within, his theory draws out the necessary and unavoidable presuppositions of (linguistic) communication. (U), in this way, is an “inescapable presupposition of [an] irreplaceable discourse and *in that sense* universal” (Habermas 1990c, 84; Allen 2009, 10)(Habermas via Allen 2009, 10). This is the ‘weak-transcendentalism’ that I discussed in the first chapter: Habermas’ theory draws out necessary conditions for communicative action, that are not knowable *a-priori*

²³ The next paragraphs are thus highly dependent on ‘Discourse, Power, and Subjectivation’ (Allen 2009).

²⁴ (U) is supposed to be derivative of (D) “Only those norms can claim to be valid that meet (or could meet) with the approval of all affected in their capacity *as participants in practical discourse*” (Allen 2009; Habermas 1996).

but only after empirical investigation. These necessary presuppositions for communicative action are 'universal', for communicative action with its orientation towards mutual understanding is the 'inherent telos' of language and human communication, and is accountable for social coordination. Because of this, the Foucauldian sceptic, who is currently engaging in discourse, is also dependent on the presuppositions specified by Habermas – and therefore “falls into a performative contradiction and defeats himself” (Allen 2009, 11).

The sceptic can avoid this self-defeating by refusing to engage in discourse altogether. This is reminiscent of post-truth politics, which also refuses to abide by the rules of 'normal' democratic discourse (and therefore reveals the implicit assumptions in the discourse that was thought to be normal). Habermas does not accept this move easily. As I discussed in the first chapter, for him communicative action is an inherent feature of modern societies. As argumentation is a form of communicative action, refusing to engage in argumentation would also do away with communicative action at large. If the sceptic were to accept this consequence, the only place for her would remain within *strategic action*. This, however, is not an option for Habermas:

“there is no other, equivalent medium in which these functions [cultural tradition, social integration, and socialization] can be fulfilled (...) Individuals acquire and sustain their identities by appropriating traditions, belonging to social groups, and taking part in socializing interactions. That is why they, as individuals, have a choice between communicative and strategic action only in an abstract sense, i.e. in individual cases. They do not have the option of a long-term absence from contexts of action oriented toward reaching an understanding. That would mean regressing to the monadic isolation of strategic action, or schizophrenia and suicide. In the long run such absence is self-destructive” (Habermas 1990c, 102; Allen 2009, 13)

Allen shows in this reconstruction how these moves are exemplary of Habermas' and Foucault's different perspectives on subjectivation. Whereas Habermas does not acknowledge how power constitutes a subject, Foucault fails to provide a normative model that allows for differentiating between subjugating and enabling forms of power relations. In short “neither considers how rational communication both enables and constrains” (Love 1989, 270). My focus here remains on Habermas. If he doesn't acknowledge the importance of power relations in the formation of the subject or culture, how *does* he perceive power?

In Habermas' discussions of Foucault's notion of power, he criticises Foucault for not providing a normative framework, thus 'forcing together' an 'innocent' empirical analysis with a theory of the constitution of the subject. In Habermas' view, the subject is constituted not by power relations, but through the communicatively (and as such, rationally) ordered lifeworld (Allen 2009). As, for Habermas, power-relations are *strategic* and thus egocentric, they cannot play a role in the inherently *social* constitutions of the subject, a process which Habermas refers to as individuation. Moreover, according to Habermas, Foucault's 'disciplinary' power lacks a “mechanism for social integration” and as such cannot account for the *individuating* effects of socialization. In Foucault's theory, then, “the socialization of subjects capable of speech and action cannot be simultaneously conceived as individuation, but only as the progressive subsumption of bodies and of all vital substrata under technologies of power.” (Habermas 1994a, 99).

According to Habermas, Foucault's power-relations would result in identical individuals without agency, formed entirely by the contingent histories and power structures they find themselves in. “In place of socialization as individuating (which remains unconceptualized), he puts the concept of a fragmenting empowerment (...). From his perspective, socialized individuals can

only be perceived as exemplars, as standardized products of some discourse formation – as individual copies that are mechanically punched out.” (Habermas 1994a, 104).

For Habermas, the ‘disciplining’ and ‘normalizing’ structures that play a role in the individuation and subjectivation in societies, cannot be separated from “the legal organization of the exercise of power and of the legitimation of the order of domination” (Habermas 1994a, 101). It so seems that he does not so much *deny* that (what Foucault calls) power structures exist and influence the formation of the subject. Rather, while Foucault restrains from normative judgment and could be criticised for that (Love 1989; Allen 2009), Habermas makes a normative move, rendering these ‘disciplinary powers’ just.

3.4 Conclusions: a Dual Notion of Power

Habermas’ positive account of power (as communicative power) on a societal level and his restricted understanding of power (as force) in communicative action seem to be mutually dependent. To get to an idea of legitimating power, which is based on communicative action in the public sphere, this public sphere ought to foster *unrestrained* communication. Therefore, Habermas cannot acknowledge that this public sphere is *itself* (partially) determined by power relations. So to understand power as social and communicative on a collective scale, it needs to be understood as strategic and egocentric on a discourse scale. Only then can it be excluded from communicative action so that power on a societal level can be legitimate. Habermas’ understanding power is thus highly normative.

With power as force, Habermas refers to a situation of more or less latent coercion. This form of strategic action needs to be eradicated from communicative discourse. Power in this sense is something through which an actor gets her way, using other subjects as a means to an end. For Habermas, this strategic form of power is an asset of one actor who exercises it over another, and is unable to account for social coordination.

With communicative power, Habermas refers to the institutional interactions of governments and citizens. Power in this case is intertwined with legitimacy. Although a government or law limits the freedom of citizens, this limitation is legitimate if citizens are both *authors* and *addressees* of the law. Power floats from top to bottom, from the government to the people; but is legitimised by a form of power that floats from the bottom up: a well-functioning (but internally power-free!) public sphere legitimises *and* influences the governments’ policies.

However, the question remains if these conceptions of power do justice to the actual nature of power. It could be questioned whether Habermas’ normative account of communicative power is not indeed, as Foucault argues, based on ‘a negative account of power’, its focus on sovereignty and legitimacy obscuring actual power relations in the public sphere²⁵. Habermas seems to conflate communicative power with legitimacy. Moreover, the fact that power is still understood as a property or asset that the one individual ‘has’ and ‘exerts’ upon others, can be criticised. It stands diagonally opposed to Foucault’s notion of power, which manifests itself in power *relations* (Foucault 2002), and which is not ‘owned’ but instead diffuse and omnipresent.

In his post-metaphysical theory, Habermas needs to justify the legitimacy of political power without reference to encompassing metaphysical narratives. The gap that this post-metaphysical

²⁵ Nancy Fraser developed this argument specifically in relation to gender (Fraser 1985). Furthermore, for a collection of essays on Habermas, power and gender, see (Meehan 1995).

condition leaves, is bridged by the 'weak-transcendental' practical rationality of linguistically mediated action, with its inherent telos towards mutual understanding. This practical rationality is not ideal theory, but results from empirical investigation. Communicative action in the public sphere constitutes a 'communicative power'. This, as Habermas puts it, makes "the institutionalization of relations of force comprehensible as a transformation of force into a power *outfitted with the appearance of legitimacy*" (Habermas 1982, 269, emphasis added).

To come to a normative and legitimate understanding of communicative power, Habermas separates *force* and *power*, understanding the first as eradicable from communicative action and the second as the (procedurally legitimised) result of purely communicative action. The two notions of power are strongly normative. This allows him to account for the illegitimate power of 'pathogenic' or corrupted forms of action, created by the obstruction of the unrestrained communication of the public sphere or by the increasing influence of strategic action that "inconspicuously enters the pores of everyday communicative practice" (Habermas 1982, 269) in formerly communicative domains.

This strategy, too, is the one Habermas could apply to deal with the implications of post-truth politics for his theory. However, I argued in section 3.2 that this method is unavailable for him: it would result in the self-contradiction of his theory. Given the current influence of post-truth politics, Habermas would be forced to give up the status of his theory as 'empirical-transcendental' or 'post-metaphysical'. As his theory would be cut loose from its roots in empirical investigation, he would lapse into the idealism or metaphysical thinking that he tries to avoid. Alternatively, he has to severely adapt his theory to address the issue of post-truth politics as I argued in the preceding chapter. In light of post-truth politics, therefore, Habermas can either save the status of his theory but not its content, or save its content but allow his theory to become inapplicable and ideal. Neither seems satisfactory. In the next and last chapter, I will assess the consequences for Habermas in more depth.

4. Between facts and norms: three implications for Habermas' theory

I will quickly recapitulate what I have argued in this thesis so far. Starting with the observation that post-truth politics is not understandable in terms of truth or lie, but is instead indifferent to truth, I have argued that it cannot be accounted for in Habermas' TCA. Central to this theory stands the distinction between communicative and strategic action (as I showed in chapter 1), and it is precisely this distinction that is falsified by post-truth politics (which I argued in chapter 2).

As Habermas himself acknowledges, "the concept of communicative action stands or falls with the proof that a communicative agreement (...) can fulfil functions of action coordination." (Habermas 1984, 169–70). Communicative action's ability to account for social coordination is not only what distinguishes strategic from communicative action, but it is also what connects the TCA with Habermas' theory of deliberative democracy, and more generally to his theory of power. It is the connection between the factual every-day interactions of people with the normative organisation of society, summarised in the 'discourse principle': "the only law that counts as legitimate is one that could be *rationally* accepted by all citizens in a discursive process of opinion- and will-formation" (Habermas 1996, 135, emphasis added). Habermas' concept of communicative action, in short, is dependent on the idea that *rational* communication oriented towards mutual understanding and truth, is more *powerful* than irrational or strategic action (or action that is fundamentally unconcerned with truth, like post-truth politics).

Habermas' idea of power as *truth-sensitive* thus underlies the dichotomy between communicative and strategic action. That is why in chapter 3 I explored Habermas' notion of power further. This revealed a seemingly paradoxical relation between understanding power as *communicative* and as *force*. Habermas' conception of power is based on the normative distinction between power and force. Communicative power is constituted by communicative action in an unrestrained public sphere, and transfers legitimacy to the government. In order for communicative power to be legitimate, it needs to come about in a power-free, non-strategic setting. This calls for the introduction of the concept of force, to denote the perlocutionary influences that corrupt the unrestrained communication of the public sphere.

Habermas' dual understanding of power is not uncontested. Understanding power not as relational but instead as an asset that one exerts over the other leads Habermas to misrepresent power-relations, that not only constrain but also constitute individuals. It thus leaves him unable to account for the real, non-ideal situations where power and communicative action intertwine. To let his theory remain its coherence, he then has to decide on an ad-hoc basis what counts as legitimate power and what does not. The yardstick to measure what is what, itself begs the question: he does not provide a criterion to determine what is normative and what descriptive; what is particular and what is universal. What is supposed to be a procedural standard, becomes substantive. While Habermas tries to create a theory that is both normative (in response to Foucault) and descriptive (against Arendt, who he deems too ideal), he does not in the end succeed in bridging the gap between the two.

4.1 Post-Metaphysical Thinking

To understand the implications of these arguments for Habermas' theory, and to make a final, mostly methodological, argument, I will now return to the notion of *post-metaphysical thinking* that, for Habermas, is "as much descriptive of our social and historical time as it is descriptive of

a valid philosophical methodology” (Yates 2011, 36). To further understand the theory and what post-truth politics means for it, it is necessary to take a step back and understand the status of the theory and the methodology through which it came about.

Habermas’ theory and ideas are firmly based in his acceptance of critiques of metaphysics. He distances himself from philosophy that takes an “objective, universal perspective above or outside the world” and the virtuous life of the contemplative philosopher that goes hand in hand with it. In this metaphysical view, the purest knowledge is that which does not rely on the material world; the purest life that which is disembodied, purely cognitive. Countering this, Habermas argues that (philosophical) knowledge is intimately intertwined with human interests (Habermas 1971). The philosopher produces knowledge *communicatively*, through ‘socially embedded dialogue’ and the ‘detranscendentalized use of reason’ (Yates 2011). This focus on the *practice* of reasoning acknowledges that the use of reason is embedded in particular socio-historical contexts. At the same time, Habermas does not accept that this embeddedness of (philosophical) knowledge leads to abandoning the possibility of universal human knowledge. Instead, linguistically mediated interaction through the use of reason is what makes knowledge possible, and philosophy ought to aim at explicating those universal conditions that make knowledge possible.

Habermas embarks on a project of ‘rational reconstruction’, a method that investigates empirical reality and aims to make explicit the ‘tacit knowledge’ present implicitly in everyday action and communication. Habermas’ TCA, likewise, is a project that analyses speakers’ everyday use of language, to discover “the conditions of possibility for language and speech with the aim of discovering universal presuppositions adopted by communicative subjects” (Yates 2011, 40). In this sense, it is *weak transcendentalism*: contrary to Kant, who analysed the conditions of possibility for experience and knowledge of the world *a priori*, Habermas does not distance himself from empirical reality but instead makes explicit what is already implicit in everyday communication. The conditions for communication that derive from this empirical investigation should be understood as ‘immanently transcendent’, that is, transcendent from *within* the context in which they were raised (Habermas 2007). As such, they are only discernible *a posteriori*. These conditions should continuously be tested against everyday experience.

It could be argued that throughout this thesis I have followed the method of ‘rational reconstruction’ to show the considerable weaknesses in Habermas’ theory: I took an empirical phenomenon and tried to take from it what is left implicit in its everyday use, making it explicit and assessing its implications for an influential strand of contemporary political thought (namely: Habermas’ TCA). In this way, I used the method of rational reconstruction consistently with Habermas’ own beliefs: “as a resource for moral and political criticism of dominant cultural practices” (Yates 2011). I will now assess three implications of my arguments so far and of post-truth politics for Habermas’ theory. Habermas’ post-metaphysical theory starts from empirical reality, and transcends this context from within to reveal universal conditions of human communication and action. In this way, it connects what *is* with what *ought to be*, empirical *facts* with universal *norms* in a weak-transcendental way. But this ‘post-metaphysical’ aim of his theory, I argue, is contradicted by the interaction of post-truth politics with Habermas’ theory. Post-truth politics reveals three related moments where Habermas ultimately fails to bridge the gap between facts and norms, and where he thus contradicts the post-metaphysical stance of his theory.

4.2 Habermas' Anthropological Assumption (1)

Habermas relies throughout his theory on the idea that the human is a rational being²⁶. Indeed, this anthropological assumption is a condition for his post-metaphysical thinking and 'detranscendentalized use of reason'. Reason (or rationality) is no longer supposed to be 'pure' and solely available to philosophers or thinkers: instead, it is embedded in "historically conditioned practices" (Yates 2011). In Habermas' theory, rationality is what connects individuals in their post-metaphysical world: through communicative rationality (and sustained by law and the lifeworld), social coordination is effectuated. Likewise, to engage in communicative action, one has to presuppose that one's partners-in-dialogue are equally rational beings (Habermas 1996; Yates 2011; Habermas 2007), even if it is provisionally. This is an 'unavoidable idealization' (Habermas 1996), a necessary condition for communicative action, knowledge, and social coordination. While Habermas acknowledges that irrationality can take place in everyday communication, and that situations do not necessarily meet what he calls the 'ideal speech condition', he remains committed to understanding rationality as the norm, and the irrational as the anomaly²⁷.

However, as I have showed in chapter two, post-truth politics is an empirical phenomenon that does not abide by the rules of reason. It is not oriented towards mutual understanding, it does not embark on a collaborative search for truth, it does not care about rationality. As such, it is an empirical phenomenon that questions Habermas' most basic presupposition: the universality of human rationality. Following Habermas' ideas of post-metaphysical thinking, the everyday experience of humans acting *irrationally* in post-truth politics, while still making power-bestowing propositions, is starkly at odds with Habermas' presupposition of rationality. That presupposition of rationality, indeed, is supposed to have come about *through* empirical investigation, not contradict it. Habermas is committed to an anthropological claim about human nature that he deems so fundamental that it needs no further argument. However, the empirical reality of post-truth politics contradicts Habermas' assumptions about human rationality and reveals that he needs to give reasons for why he prefers *this* anthropology over another.

4.3 The Assumption of Human Rationality: a Normative Criterion (2)

Habermas does not give reasons for the anthropological claim of human rationality, but still lets it act as a criterion to distinguish between what counts as legitimate consensus (or communicative action) and what does not. In this way, his theory maintains a circular relation between facts and norms, and he ends up determining on an ad-hoc basis what is to count as norm, and what as fact; what is universal, and what particular.

The 'transcendental presuppositions' of communicative action, including the suppositions that others interact as rational agents and that communication is not coerced (only the 'forceless force' of the better argument is at play here)²⁸, are "necessary for us to distinguish a consensus, rationally and freely attained among participants, from other forms of agreements that may be

²⁶ Indeed, following Habermas' understanding of 'communicative rationality', this means rational in a broad sense of the word, including emotional and normative judgments.

²⁷ Habermas deems irrational behaviour to enforce his idea; for "unintelligible, odd, bizarre, or enigmatic expressions prompt follow-up questions because they implicitly contradict an unavoidable presupposition of communication and therefore trigger puzzled or irritated reactions" (Habermas 2007; Yates 2011).

²⁸ In total, speakers presuppose "that others are rationally capable of justifying action", that "rational discourse involves an exchange of reasons that is improved by the incorporation of as much relevant information as possible, that "democratic deliberations are public and inclusive (...), everyone has equal rights to engage in communication and an equal opportunity to speak (...), participants exclude deception and illusion from their arguments (...) and (...) that communication is not coerced" (Yates 2011, 43).

based on power and violence, tradition and custom, ruses of egocentric self-interest as well as moral indifference” (Benhabib 2002 via Yates 2011, 43–44). This, too, is why (as I showed in chapter 3) Habermas argues for the introduction of the concept of ‘structural violence’ to Arendt’s theory. It allows him to make a normative distinction between communicative power that came about legitimately, and communicative power that came is based on ‘illusory convictions’ of power, violence, irrationality or self-interest.

However, while Habermas means to discern on a purely procedural basis (that is, not giving *substantive* requirements as to what is rationally acceptable, but just *procedural* conditions for which speech acts can be seen as legitimate and which cannot) between legitimate and illegitimate consensus, he cannot ultimately fulfil this. The procedural requirements of communicative action themselves beg the question of rationality and can thus not account for communicative action as the basis of social order. The “rationally-motivating force of a speech act” results not from the perceived truth or validity of what is being said, but just from “the guarantee (...) given by the speaker that he will if necessary attempt to make good the claim he has made” (Habermas 1985, 170). A speech act, in other words, does not have force because of its content, but because of the orientation of the speaker towards mutual understanding and his willingness to provide rational argumentation. This condition for communicative action, however, presupposes the actor to act communicatively, that is, rationally in the first place. Habermas can therefore not explain why an actor would take an orientation towards mutual understanding in the first place. In this way, he presupposes what needs to be argued.

4.4 Consequences of the Assumption of Human Rationality: Ideal Theory or Change (3)

Habermas uses the assumption of universal rationality, which he claims to be based on empirical investigation, as a yardstick to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate power and government. In this way, he can attempt to dismiss post-truth politics as a result of a corrupted public sphere. Discarding a major phenomenon like post-truth politics as an ‘anomaly’ due to the corruption of the public sphere, however, is at odds with Habermas’ critical, post-metaphysical theory. Aiming “to grasp structural properties of processes of reaching understanding, from which we can derive general pragmatic presuppositions of communicative action” (Habermas 1984, 286), it aspires to be not just an ideal theory but it seeks to bridge the gap between facts and norms, between the ideal and the empirical. Indeed, as we have seen, it is on this ambition that Habermas’ idea of social order is based: each individual needs to be able to rationally understand, contest and accept the laws and norms that govern the social realm. As such, it is not satisfactory to decide on an ad hoc basis which phenomenon is legitimate and democratic, and which is irrational and illegitimate.

Habermas wrote in 2006 that “a post-truth democracy (...) would no longer be a democracy”. A democracy, he said, is dependent on ‘the public use of reason’, and is ‘truth-sensitive’ (Habermas 2006, 18). Eleven years later, as post-truth politics has risen in democracies across the globe, this proposition raises more questions than it answers. If Habermas remains committed to his normative idea of legitimacy and democratic power as ‘truth-sensitive’, he is forced to discard post-truth politics as an anomaly, a corruption of the public sphere. But as we have seen in chapter 3, this would lead his theory to be inapplicable and ideal – while he presents it as based in empirical reality. If he did not make this move, but instead tried to make room for post-truth politics in his theory, his notion of power needs to change, and with it the distinction between communicative and strategic action (as I argued in chapter 2). This distinction is regarded of key importance to his thought; I have indicated the dependency of his theory of deliberative

democracy and legitimacy on the distinction between communicative and strategic action. This would have severe consequences for his theory as a whole.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to explore the implications of post-truth politics for Habermas' theory of communicative action (TCA) and his theory of deliberative democracy, which is dependent on the TCA. I have attempted to 'rationally reconstruct' Habermas' theory in light of a current phenomenon, with the idea that solutions for the problem of post-truth politics is only possible if our theories are able to understand the phenomenon in the first place. Below, I will first present a concise summary of my argument. I will then assess the consequences of my argument for Habermas' theory, and draw some conclusions on ways (not to) deal with post-truth politics. finding

5.1 Summary of the Argument

Chapter 1 provided an overview of Habermas' theory. It is a transcendental-empirical theory that resides on the border of facticity and validity, between system-theory and the performative actor, between liberalism and republicanism. Based in empirical social reality, it aims to make explicit the normative ideals implicit in every day communicative action, thus drawing out the ideal conditions for communicative action. The most important of these conditions is the *orientation* towards mutual understanding. This orientation towards consensus (that does not imply that actual consensus should always be achieved), for Habermas, is the 'inherent telos' of human communication and language.

The orientation towards mutual understanding is also what distinguishes communicative from strategic action. Strategic action uses another as a means to an end and is primarily oriented towards getting one's way, in a more or less latent (concealed) or manifest (undisguised) way. Language in strategic action is primarily used to transmit information; it has lost its illocutionary force. Communicative action on the other hand addresses the other by means of three validity claims implicit in human communication. By accepting or contesting these validity claims of normative rightness, propositional truth and subjective sincerity, actors develop a shared understanding of their situation through discourse.

Communicative action (contrary to strategic action) can account for social order. The practical rationality of communicative action allows people in societies to reach understanding, as authors and addressees of the laws and norms that govern them. As communicative and strategic action are mutually exclusive, the practice of communication ought to be forceless, reigned by nothing but the 'force of the better argument'. The law, the lifeworld and institutions stabilise the practice of communicative action that in turn legitimises these laws and norms.

In chapter 2 I put this theory of Habermas to the test of post-truth politics, to find out if he can account for it. I defined post-truth politics as the phenomenon in which discourses that are *not concerned with truth*, still are *power-bestowing*. It is distinct from both fiction (which presents itself as untrue) and lies (that present themselves as true). Instead, post-truth politics is *indifferent* to truth: its power does not derive from reference to truth. Understanding post-truth politics as a type of linguistically-mediated social action, it should fit within Habermas' theory of action, either as communicative, or strategic. It turned out, however, that it fits neither of these categories.

Post-truth politics cannot be understood as communicative action. The necessary conditions for communicative action, most importantly the orientation towards mutual understanding, cannot

be met in post-truth discourse. Mutual understanding, after all, means collaboratively understanding something *to be true*. This is starkly at odds with the undisguised incoherence of post-truth politics. Post-truth politics can also not be understood as strategic action. It is not manifest strategic action for it does not follow the logic of sheer coercion or threats. The power of post-truth politics is constituted and recognised in discourses – although these discourses do not follow the rules of communicative action. Nor is post-truth politics understandable as latent strategic action. Latent strategic action derives its power from *pretending* to be communicative action. As soon as this lie is revealed, it loses its force. Post-truth discourse on the other hand does not conceal its incoherence, making claims that might be either true or untrue: its power is independent of its reference to truth.

The distinction between communicative and strategic action is based on Habermas' presupposition that language derives its (socially-coordinating) power from its reference to truth. This assumption is falsified by post-truth politics, and it is therefore not sufficient to change the categories of strategic and communicative action. The notion of power that underlies these categories is what needs to be reconsidered, and this was the aim of chapter 3.

Chapter 3 revealed that Habermas maintains a dual notion of power, wherein his understanding of power as *communicative* and power as *force* are, paradoxically, mutually dependent. Communicative power springs up in situations of unrestrained, forceless communication between equal subjects. The concept of force is understood as purely strategic, and is used to denote what constrains individuals and what corrupts the otherwise forceless setting of human communication. This dual understanding of power is normative, for it is used to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate forms of government. Legitimacy of government is created in forceless spheres of unrestrained communicative action, while illegitimate government can only be supported if this public sphere is somehow corrupted by force.

Following this normative understanding of power, Habermas can only account for post-truth politics by dismissing it as 'undemocratic', created by a corruption of the public sphere due to the force of strategic action. However, I have argued that this line of argument is unavailable for Habermas without letting go of the 'empirical transcendental' status he claims for his theory. In chapter 4 I assessed the consequences of this argument. Here I showed that Habermas cannot have it all. In light of post-truth politics, his theory either becomes ideal theory, which would contradict his concept of post-metaphysical thinking, or he needs to reconsider and change several central elements. These include his assumption of universal human rationality, the distinction between strategic and communicative action, and the underlying assumption of power as truth-sensitive. Given the importance of all of these concepts for Habermas' theory at large, post-truth politics is likely to pose a major challenge to his thinking.

5.2 Concluding Remarks

Post-truth politics has called into question core elements of Habermas' theory of communicative action and the derivative theory of democracy. None of my arguments disprove Habermas in a definitive way – rather, they show how he is unable to make true all ambitions of his theory. He cannot convincingly claim that it is not just ideal theory, but 'empirical-transcendental', *and* account for post-truth politics. He cannot bridge the gap between facts and norms – either his theory describes post-truth politics sufficiently, or it retains its normative force. Either he changes core features like his notion of power and the distinction between strategic and communicative action, or he lapses into the idealism he criticises in his post-metaphysical project.

I value the high ambitions that Habermas sets for his theory. It would be extremely useful and admirable if one could create a theory that combines the perspective of the individual agent with societal organisation, a theory that has normative force but is based in empirical reality. However, post-truth politics has shown that this project, at this moment, contains major flaws. I believe we should take these seriously if we are to move forward in philosophy and politics.

Two considerations for policy and theory follow from my thesis. The first is that discarding post-truth politics as an anomaly created by a corrupted public sphere, does not solve the problems the phenomenon presents us with. Treating it as a contingent phenomenon resulting from latent strategic influence in the otherwise forceless public sphere seems to me to obscure the structural power relations in that public sphere. Understanding post-truth voters as irrational or emotional does not seem to acknowledge the discourse through which post-truth politics is recognised and constituted. This discourse might not follow the conventional rules of the - supposedly rational- game, but it nevertheless should be taken seriously.

Secondly and relatedly, still understanding post-truth politics in terms of the old categories of truth and lie does not do justice to the nature of this phenomenon. Following Frankfurt, who with his concept of bullshit tried to give words to a phenomenon which seemed distinct from truth or lies, post-truth politics can be understood as bullshit with political power. If we want to address post-truth politics, it does not help to uncover it time and again as 'lies': this strategy fails to understand the particular nature of post-truth politics because it is based on an understanding of power as truth-sensitive. In post-truth discourses, reference to truth is of no importance to its power. Exposing it as 'lies', equally, does not diminish the power those words have.

In this thesis, I do not argue against the importance of truth or rationality. I do not doubt the importance of these concepts. What I do doubt is their universality: their ability to explain all phenomena in our world. Most of all, I tried to *understand* a phenomenon that did not seem to fit these common presuppositions of democratic theory. For that, I believe, is the first step towards finding solutions.

What remains after this thesis is on the one hand finding out the consequences of my arguments for other theories. Habermas is certainly not the only thinker who assumes that political power is based on reference to truth, or who understands the human as primarily rational. Assessing the implications of these assumptions for other theories might be a worthwhile research project. On the other hand, the exact nature of the concept of post-truth politics needs to be explored further. If its power is independent of its relation to truth, what then, is the source of its power? What other phenomena are power-bestowing, if not just truth? Perhaps, these questions could form the basis of a future PhD project.

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