

COMMUNITY, POLITICS AND LANGUAGE: RECONSIDERING HABERMAS AND RECOGNITION

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The objectives of this paper are twofold. The first aim is to work out an institutional approach to language within the communicative theory put forth by Habermas that resolves difficulties related to his thesis that the meaning of linguistic expressions is constituted by the shared practices of a lifeworld. This thesis leads Habermas in an undesirable hermeneutics of language, which some commentators have approved, while others have pointed to the contradictions of this position. The institutional approach remedies those contradictions by distinguishing between the structural features of a lifeworld and its cultural traits. In addition, this approach enables a concept of group that has political significance. The second aim of this paper is thus to argue for a recognition of communities that stays within the demanding deliberative democracy that Habermas has developed. The result is to set grounds for a constructive critique of politics of recognition in the light of a radical theory of democracy.

Introduction

I would like to share some thoughts on two phenomena that have influenced many thinkers during the past century. The first concerns the implications for political theory of philosophy's "linguistic turn". According to Jürgen Habermas, language being both a medium of communication and an enabling condition of social practices and norms, a theory of language should stand at the foundation of a critical theory of society.

The second phenomenon is nationalism. On the one hand, most would agree that nationalism has spurred many processes of escalation toward war. For a response to this, one could point to European policy-makers fighting the narrowness of nationalistic egoism with a politics based on the appeal to interests shared in common. Some thinkers, not least Habermas, have called attention to the benefits of this "postnational constellation"—and indeed have argued for further disengagement from nationalistic policies. Still, questions remain about the feasibility of alternatives to nationalism. What scope is there for reforms to take us beyond the logic of a nation-centric politics?

On the other hand, appeals to "identity politics", hitherto used in many cases as a smokescreen for chauvinistic nationalism, have served a new role, which Samuel

Scheffler describes as calling attention “to the interests of those whom the movement toward global integration has left behind” (Scheffler 1999, 105-106). Some group-based claims have coalesced around problems of social justice. One example is the aboriginal rights movement in Canada. The recognition of their claims in court judgments has led the Québécois state to negotiate with aboriginal populations what has been called *la paix des braves*. The Québec state government, led by a French nationalist party, publicly expressed its solidarity with the aboriginal communities and granted them autonomy rights over a fair portion of land. Some have said that *la paix des braves* stands at the vanguard of movements towards aboriginal rights. One reason for this may well be the openness of Québécois nationalism toward minority nations. In any case, the recent shifts in global integration makes it compelling to rethink the bases of solidarity between groups. One might see John Rawls’s last opus, *The Law of Peoples* (Rawls 1999) as an important step (however embarrassed) in the right direction.

But my focus here is on Habermas’s work. At stake in what follows is a central question: is a qualified recognition of groups possible within the scope of Habermas’s framework, or is this avenue irremediably blocked? It is plausible, I think, to insert a coherent account of groups in this corpus without jettisoning any of its central ideas. But in order to verify this hypothesis, I will have to lean on the internal link he develops between communicational structures and political legitimation. Here we find an institutional approach to language that rejects semantic holism and removes the spectre of hermeneutics. This strategy will unearth the foundations for a concept of collective identity poised between excessive formalism and cultural relativism. My constructive criticism should therefore bequeath a fresh perspective on politics of recognition in general.

The Brandomian revision

The starting point of my critique is the concept of lifeworld (*lebenswelt*). This concept refers to the shared language, norms, culture, practices, and history of a given community. Habermas contends not only that the lifeworld is linguistically constituted, but especially that it constitutes the meaning of any linguistic expression. To know the meaning of a word, one has *inter alia* to share with others a considerable amount of cultural background. Cristina Lafont has made the case that this approach surreptitiously leads to a *hermeneutics of language*, where linguistic meaning is constituted by overarching interpretations deeply anchored in the cultural substrate of a group, a conclusion which conflicts with Habermas’s reservations about the scope of hermeneutics (Lafont 1997, ch. 5). To overcome this contradiction, it is necessary to isolate the processes of understanding and communication from the encompassing cultural substrate of the lifeworld. In this section, I will make a few comments about a putative solution prevalent among Habermasians.

Several commentators on Habermas, among them Joseph Heath and Barbara Fultner, reinterpret his theory of meaning by way of the inferential semantics of Robert Brandom (Heath 2001; Fultner 2002; Brandom 1994). As a consequence, the

role of the lifeworld is downplayed, while a robust form of semantic holism (the thesis that a sizeable segment of language is the fundamental unit of meaning) is reaffirmed. I will limit my comments to Heath's version of this case. Heath starts with a theory of action that conceives language as merely a normative practice *among* other normative practices. The reason why language holds an important place among our normative practices would be that it constitutes *the most effective* means for members of a social group to coordinate an important share of their behaviour.

But where does the normativity of such practices come from? Heath disputes the claim that we comply with norms in an "always already" manner, as Habermas thinks (on which terms the mere fact of speaking would commit one to a set of implicit norms). Rather than grounding the normativity of social order in linguistic behaviour, Heath makes way for Brandom's inferential semantics, for whom the normativity of linguistic behaviour is itself constituted by a social practice, i.e. the mutual ascription of permissible actions by agents. According to Heath, normativity emerges from actions approved in a public exchange of reasons because generally approved actions possess a better pragmatic effect. That is to say, we seek out consensual norms, and act on those norms, because they stand for the *most effective* way of obtaining cooperation among members of a social group. Without this kind of socialization, things would go from bad to worse. In other words, convergence in reasons to act is "simply functionally recommended" by the demands of living together; nothing is gained, apart from effectiveness, by introducing language to this picture (Heath 2001, 310).

Instead of being constrained by a lifeworld, meaning would just be the result of mutually approved linguistic behaviours; for instance, my uttering "it is raining" would imply that I am a reliable rain-verifier and have the consequence that, should I go outside, I will bring my umbrella. In the same way as any norm-governed action, speakers would understand each other because they have "the capacity to respond differentially to features of their environment, and to sanction each other's performances" (Heath 2001, 161). While a shared lifeworld is part of the environment of speakers, they are not "always already" constrained by it. They merely use it efficiently to understand each other.

On this reinterpretation, language is not representational but expressive: language makes explicit an inferentially constituted network of norms already legitimated by a social group. Semantics is inferential, not truth-conditional: assertions do not stand for truth-values relating to the world but denote a practice of norm-giving. Finally, the shared common practices of a community are the mutually sanctioned normative practices, not a full-blooded worldview. This latter clause may serve to block a hermeneutics of language, but since the basic unit of meaning is a sum of valid inferences that can grow indefinitely, a semantic holism is nevertheless implied in this account. I find this outcome problematic. One criticism that can be made is that holism does not fare very well if we need to explain the acquisition of language.¹ It is highly implausible that one must ascertain a holistically structured unit of meaning before learning to speak. For example, when a child utters "table", we surely agree that she *means* table; but no one would claim that she masters all the inferences

¹ What Dummett considers part of a "full-blooded" theory of meaning (Dummett 1993, 5).

implied in the use of the word “table”. One way to get around this troublesome problem is to postulate an ideal level of understanding. For instance, it could be argued that the utterances of the child are to be related to propositions, which do have a determinate meaning. But this solution departs from how language is used by real-world speakers, i.e. it says nothing about “speaker-meaning” or *how the child intends what she means*.

Heath would reply that the meaning of a speaker’s utterances depends on *her own* authorized entry and exit moves in the language game. Granted this point, a new problem appears when we query the normativity of an expression. One may indeed be hesitant about the *right* meaning a speaker ascribes to an expression. For instance, I might be unclear as to whether the object referred to by a child really *is* a “table” (it could just as well be an eccentric footrest on which the child may put his feet). According to Heath, this troubling matter is settled with something akin to Davidson’s principle of charity: “the meaning of the utterance is the meaning that is conferred upon it by the best interpretation” (Heath 2001, 299; see Davidson 1973). Once we admit that there is no fact of the matter stipulating the *right* meaning of an expression, it seems that the only way to tease out a valid interpretation would be to insert the expression in a huge network of inferences that maximizes understanding. Interpreting the meaning of expressions would imply relating utterances with *the* network of valid inferences bringing about the largest amount of convergence in meaning between speakers.

But this reply presupposes what is precisely in question: the problem here being indeterminate meaning, it does not help to look out for meaning convergence. Linguistic convergence does not produce rules; convergence is the *result* of a rule. You can call a footrest a “table” as long as you wish, nobody will quite understand what you mean until the linguistic rule defining the meaning of table is accommodated, say to include eccentric pieces of furniture on which one may rest his feet or use as a table. Moreover, to understand each other’s idiosyncrasies, we need to share already a good amount of linguistic understanding, which idiosyncrasies cannot bring about. Appealing to the way that factual and social information is interconnected in language just shows that language can specify these connections; it could be that despite the huge mass of information out there, language is not itself holistically structured.

Let me recapitulate. A fashionable revision of Habermas’s linguistic theory leans on the inferential semantics of Robert Brandom, according to which meaning just is the intersection of moves a speaker is authorized to in a language game (see Brandom 1994, xix). This amounts to a downsizing of the lifeworld, which acts now as a reservoir that speakers can freely use, provided they respect some kind of cooperation scheme. This major revision is hard to justify, in the light of Habermas’s own critique of hermeneutics, for the robust holism that an inferential semantics of this kind presupposes depends upon a dubious hermeneutic principle of charity governing the *right* meaning of expressions. One could reply that the whole idea of that charity principle is to “de-dramatize” meaning and merely explain what speakers do when they communicate. This kind of hermeneutics would thus be innocuous, while providing a nice explanation of the relation between language and social interactions. But in fact, the answer is neither elegant nor innocuous, since it begs the

question (a natural language is presupposed) and it leads to some counterintuitive explanations concerning the normativity of language, let alone its acquisition.

The institutional approach with regard to language

To be sure, there will be strong affinities between a particular language and a particular culture. A great deal of information we possess about the world comes through a closely-knitted matrix of language and culture, and thus hermeneutic claims to explain how a mass of information bundles up with a particular way of life. But as we have seen, the idea that uncovering the meaning of expressions ultimately implies some kind of hermeneutical interpretation process is hard to swallow. There are good arguments showing that *knowledge* theories must accommodate a holistic structure—something that many theorists have granted.² But this does not mean that a *semantic* theory must satisfy the same holistic precepts. The reason some are pushed this way seems to be a too strong focus on information. Hermeneutics creeps in when an analysis of language is expected to yield all the information available “out there”. Brandom himself wants to deny that meaning is only information. That is why he rejects semantic representationalism and embraces inferentialism. But he ends up expecting that knowledge about meaning will reproduce all the inferential patterns available to all speakers.

One way to avoid semantic holism is to search for collective acts that constrain meaning in a non-holistic fashion, as does a social institution. Language in this *institutional* sense is governed by a set of finite rules and agreements. If this institutional level has any semantic potential, speakers have to share not a huge *inferential* structure, but rather a common *institutional* structure specifying linguistic rules, like grammars and dictionaries do. Linguistic abilities would thus include the capacity to bind oneself with collectively revisable decisions having normative force.

On this view, current semantic definitions approved in a speech community are conceived as *stereotypes* accommodating the indeterminacy of meaning. But there is a distinction to be made between different stereotypes, for instance those defined by a theory (“proton” or “justice”) and those that can be defined merely by explicit ostension (“water” defined by pointing at a sample of an odourless, tasteless and colourless liquid that descends from the clouds and forms streams, lakes and oceans). The complex theoretical stereotypes all contain in their *definiens* other complex stereotypes, which themselves can be reduced eventually to ostensive stereotypes. This suggests that while a speaker may not share with other speakers the complete set of all theoretical terms, she has to master the set of basic stereotypes in order to be deemed a competent speaker. This structure could in principle accommodate infinity of utterances while containing at its core a finite set of ostensive definitions. What must be shown (and this would probably be a tedious process) is that every expression of a language can be reduced to an ostensive definition, whether directly or indirectly, and whether through basic or complex stereotypes.

² According to Martin Montminy, epistemological holism is a rather plausible thesis, rarely contested since Quine (Montminy 1998, 95).

So on this model, instead of an individually backed validity claim interpreting a lifeworld, meaning is parsed by a collective process stipulating acceptable stereotypes through ostension and definition. Language requires, indeed, that speakers act upon a common linguistic authority and commit their will to future actions through joint commitments. A speaker may not stipulate definitions by herself, be it through an interpretation process or any other kind of cognitive feat, and expect to be understood; linguistic behaviour is constrained, at a first semantic level, by boundaries set forth in a linguistic community. But what is implied by this kind of community? For one thing, in the face of disagreements or misunderstandings, complex expressions can be reduced to simpler stereotypes. This explains why a speaker learning a language will be deemed competent when she masters *at least some partial* segment of a culture (its basic conceptual structure consisting of definitions containing only ostensions), not when she will qualify as a cultural erudite. If speakers have a collective ability to correct and approve linguistic behaviours on the basis of a basic conceptual structure conceived along these lines, there is a sense in which the institutional *structure* of language is isolated from the encompassing cultural *character* of a lifeworld, while not being reducible to the cognitive operations of a single individual.³ This does not deprive speakers of their capacity to make complex inferences, but merely elucidate on which linguistic basis they can count to do so.

This approach relies on speech acts that are neither reduced to the informative content of an expression, nor diluted in a holistic inferential pattern; they are declarative speech acts, producing claims to be redeemed at the level of a collective authority. *One knows the meaning of an expression when one uses it in concordance with the stereotype put forth in one's speech community*; one might know a lot more than a stereotyped definition, but surely not less if credited with the right meaning. Language would thus be constituted by a non-holistic conceptual basic structure, allowing individuals to collectively take part in a cooperative search for truth.

Yet, each and every expression would still contain in principle an unfathomable amount of information and an unlimited inferential power. How do linguistic expressions then relate to this mass of information and inferences? I would answer: with the help of the concept of validity claims put forth by Habermas (1976), where the normativity of a claim is to be backed with reasons others cannot reasonably reject in real discourses (in fact, even declarative acts establishing meaning have a normative force related to validity claims). I will not inquire further into this matter; suffice it to say that linguistic meaning (or what some call propositional content) is not illegitimately presupposed by the concept of validity claims *if* the semantic theory is dealt with by the institutional approach. To be sure, a lot of cultural background enters into everyday communication. But it is always possible to distinguish neatly between propositional content, validity claims and cultural content. Linguistic meaning boils down to stereotypes that can always be reduced to ostensive definitions. Validity claims are modelled through the weighting of reasons

³ The distinction between a *structure* of culture and its *character* has been made famous by Will Kymlicka (1989). I am however largely indebted here to the appropriation of this distinction by Michel Seymour in his recent work; see for instance Seymour (1999; 2003).

interwoven with other claims. Cultural content is part of a lifeworld that speakers find themselves in, but about which they can take a step back through validity claims expressed with the help of their linguistic abilities.

A first interpretation of “constitutional patriotism”

As hinted at in the Introduction, one of my goals is to explore a modest version of the linguistic turn, which asserts an internal link between language and political legitimation. Habermas interprets this link by arguing that speakers could not understand their linguistic behaviour if they did not commit themselves to strong ideals carried by the very act of discussing; meaning is certainly presupposed in some sort of cultural knowledge shared by speakers (a position I problematized in the foregoing sections), but most importantly, a set of validity conditions must obtain for linguistic utterances to be fully rational (Habermas 1976). These conditions take part in the mutual recognition of speakers and include speaking honestly, treating all others as reasonable speakers, not barring discordant voices from the debate, and so forth. However, if what I have said in the preceding section is right, meaning is not directly dependent on these strong idealizations, but is rather given in definitions stipulated by the collective authority of a linguistic community.

I have been relying on the concept of validity claims and surely do not wish to isolate linguistic behaviour from the conditions of mutual recognition. In this sense, even if Habermas would grant that the institutional approach is the most promising avenue through which to build a social theory of meaning, he could nevertheless try to keep the stakes high. It could still be possible to envision political legitimation through the lens of validity claims and the strong idealizations they convey. In what follows, I will investigate some of Habermas’s political theses, in particular those concerning a politics of recognition. One outcome of the institutional approach is that well-institutionalized debates must recognize the authority of linguistic communities. Habermas has resisted this kind of recognition, at least at a primary echelon. But why?

There has been a good deal of discussion surrounding what Habermas has termed a “constitutional patriotism”: meaning, roughly, common sympathies that a given group of citizens cherish, involving only a basic set of constitutional principles. I will go directly at the heart of the matter and follow a distinction that Patchen Markell has made in a recent article, considering in this section only the first part. According to Markell, patriotism can first be interpreted as a *strategy of redirection*:

This strategy claims to render affect safe for liberal democracies by redirecting our attachments and sentiment from one subset of objects (the “ethnic”) to another subset of objects (the “civic”). Since the ethnic conveniently turns out to be the source of all affect’s pathologies, the civic can offer all the benefits while “eschewing exclusion” at the same time (Markell 2000, 39).

Others have described this strategy as a “civic nationalism”. It ultimately fails: embodying political affects in a *particular* framework, however remotely it might stand from “ethnic” attachments, does not deliver its universalistic promise. This is

because civic attachments are still grounded in a particular community, possessing its own institutions and culture, which, in Markell's words, "are never quite equivalent to the universal principles they purport to embody" (Markell 2000, 45). Margaret Canovan mounts a similar critique when she says that, inasmuch as a polity needs strong inclusive ties, "a state is unlikely to be powerful enough to demonstrate the liberal democratic virtues that can attract constitutional patriotism unless it is very widely regarded by its population as our state rather than someone else's" (Canovan 2000, 423).

Yet Habermas rejects *both* civic and ethnic nationalism on the grounds that they succumb to particularistic closure, and instead proposes a constitutional patriotism, which claims to combine the complementary benefits of individual autonomy and collective self-determination. A political community is described as balancing, on the one hand, which rights "citizens must accord each other if they want to legitimately regulate their common life by means of positive law" (Habermas 1996, 82). On the other hand, Habermas admits that a legal community presupposes some sort of togetherness: any expression of political principles, at any level, will have to find accommodation with a political culture defined as a "democratic *Sittlichkeit*" (Habermas 1996, 461).

Habermas puts forward the important claim that a political community is "impregnated" with many discourses, diffusing, into the discursive space, its ethical substance:

Valid legal norms indeed harmonize with moral norms, but they are "legitimate" in the sense that they additionally express an authentic self-understanding of the legal community, the fair consideration of the values and interests distributed in it, and the purposive-rational choice of strategies and means in the pursuit of policies (Habermas 1996, 151).

Thus, to get from a *conception* of rights to a *valid set* of rights determining a community, one must take into account the richness of its particular forms of life. Yet, how can a united "self-understanding" of these lifeforms, as Habermas wishes, be specified? At many places, he argues that a self-understanding aims at "an authentic conduct of life, a goal that is absolute *for us*" (Habermas 1996, 161). This goal introduces hermeneutical considerations arising from the interpretation of the history, culture and works of art of a given tradition, combining facts and intuitions in worldviews. These discussions are not motivated by truth; they aim for a consensus where each voice has its own say.

This is all very well—but what kind of community is defined by discourses over such disparate matters as the factual, the moral, the ethical and the aesthetical? Should we not admit that this community is pre-given in a certain sense, that it exists within a given territory and shares a number of institutions and cultures, *and* that it has learned to solve problems with the help of pacified discourses? Habermas admits this point, but constrains the pre-political community to a descriptive dimension, while interpreting the normative dimension within a discursive community (Habermas 2001, 17). This is achieved by disengaging the most important political principles from the national cultures coexisting within that community. The price for national majorities and minorities to live together peacefully would be to devise an

institutional attachment distinct from either cultural forms of life; i.e. a constitutional patriotism.

Yet, a hermeneutical paradigm making explicit the self-understanding of a community will not grant this point, since the pre-given “impregnates” the discursive part as well. Habermas cannot at the same time make way for ethical impregnation at all levels, and disengage the constitutional principles alone from any impregnation of a given form of life. If he abandons the impregnation model, his deliberative stance reverts to the neoliberal delusion of neutrality he otherwise condemns; if he admits some impregnation only at sub-levels, he becomes vulnerable to critics arguing that a constitutional patriotism relies implicitly on a strong sense of a “we”.

Habermas could retort that a constitutional patriotism does not miraculously hover above the thick air of a particular lifeform, but that a modern political community should aim to satisfy everyone’s interests, *including* nationalistic aspirations—but not exclusively. In actual societies, where national aspirations seem to count less than before, a political community needs to make room for its national components *and* for greater aspirations. An objector could reply that national interests still play an important role in contemporary politics, and that a theory isolating political principles from local interests cannot capture what is going on in the real world; moreover, to push aside these interests is to give *some* majorities all the space they need to keep their own interests high on the agenda, since they compose a good part of the workforce and do not have to struggle for any kind of recognition. In response to *this*, Habermas might highlight certain assumptions made by his objector. He could try to show as he has done many times that these objections presuppose a strong community taking precedence over the individual. This last reply is however hardly convincing: it assumes that any organized community will inevitably take precedence over the individual—with the exception of a discursive community. In the light of my discussion on the intermingling of language and culture in a lifeworld, it is easy to see that communities pose a danger to the individual if linguistic meaning is constituted by the vast semantic unit of all valid inferences related to utterances. In other words, Habermas is protecting his theory from itself, from its own understanding of how meaning is construed, how discourses impregnate the medium of law, how the identity of individuals is build.

Once we take on board the institutional conception, there are no more reasons to resist at least a qualified recognition of group authority. To the very least, we must recognize a common group authority over the institution of language and make way for the multiplicity of national languages in multinational democracies.⁴ Since what is referred to is a structure of culture, this does not imply a surrender to a culturalist understanding of politics. But we can take a step further and tease out of the institutional approach a conception of *political* structures that could, as Habermas wishes, navigate between excessive formalism and cultural relativism, without paying lip service to the hermeneutical overtones of “ethical impregnation” and the like. This will be the subject of my last and concluding section.

⁴ On the problem of linguistic justice, one can consult the work of Philippe Van Parijs (see for instance those on the website of the *Chaire Hoover d'éthique économique et sociale* at <http://www.etes.ucl.ac.be/DOCH/themeH.htm>).

A second interpretation of “constitutional patriotism”

Let me start by returning to Patchen Markell’s twofold interpretation of “constitutional patriotism”. The first interpretation, as we have seen, appeals to a strategy of redirection that Habermas himself rejects (though with mitigated success). A second avenue interprets constitutional patriotism as a *practice of resistance* countering false identifications. Implied here is the idea that identifications are (at least partly) enforced. In other words, *misrecognition* is the key concept: even if a set of institutions comes close to embody democratic principles, there will always remain a gap which frustrate citizens from recognizing themselves in those principles, leading *all* identification to a dialectic of dependence and conflict:

On this reading, constitutional patriotism is not a kind of affectively charged *identification* with a set of universal principles; instead, in keeping with the risks and dangers that come to inhabit the reproduction of all sorts of identity (even in the postconventional situation), constitutional patriotism is a habit or practice that *refuses* or *resists* the very identifications on which citizens also depend (Markell 2000, 54).

Such a practice thus rejects false identifications. It fits nicely with an institutional approach that distinguish structural components of a lifeworld from encompassing cultural traits. But Markell’s interpretation runs into a deep problem, since, on his account, we would eventually turn suspicious about this practice itself. To get a better grip on this fundamental yet thorny structure, one has to understand its predominance in the work of Habermas.

In an interview published in 1986, Habermas admitted that insisting on consensus, as he does, conceals distortions ever present in communication. But he added immediately that as far back as 1964, he “stressed the broken nature of all intersubjective relationships” and never denied that “tensions” always remain.⁵ Indeed, in that 1964 article he develops the idea that individuals must maintain their identity through an extremely frail equilibrium between full identification (for instance, with a given lifeworld) and the refusal of any identifications (as displayed in radical protests). Each individual and every community thus experience the dialectical process of aiming at this equilibrium, and the threat of failure is always around the corner.

This quasi-Hegelian proposal has since been reinterpreted within Habermas’s subsequently developed paradigm of communicative action. The fundamental idea is still the same: communication serves as a medium with which individuals can balance total identification with radical disconnection. Consequently, the capacity to criticize, i.e. to reject or accept any identification, *does not entirely overlap with communicative power*: individuals need not always justify their denials or approvals—though they will eventually have to, for communication also constitutes

⁵ Habermas (1986, 202). Habermas refers to a brilliant review he did in 1964 of Klaus Heinrich’s *Versuch über die Schwierigkeit, Nein zu sagen*.

their identity.⁶ It is not enough to stress that a constitutional patriotism serves as a practice of resistance; most importantly, it aspires at *equilibrium* between rejection and approval of political identifications. Constitutional patriotism not only uncovers failures of its environment, it also contains presuppositions one must make in order to craft any critique. A most important set of presuppositions refers to the moral identity of individuals, which a theory of communication can make good by way of the necessary conditions of uncoerced argumentation.

Is there such a set that would refer to a community? The answer I would give preserves the moral identity of individual, while developing a collective identity that individuals recognize in order to exercise their political autonomy. To be sure, individuals rely on a language in order to elevate and redeem validity claims. To check his own hermeneutical bias, Habermas idealizes language as an abstract entity presupposing nothing other than an unlimited communication community: an “ideal speech situation” (see Habermas 1976). For instance, individuals would criticize the cultural content of their own lifeworld from the viewpoint of an abstract, idealized community (Habermas 1988). However, the preceding section has shown that this abstraction is self-deluding. Even if an abstract, idealized community proves to be useful, we still have to posit a *shared* language, containing shared definitions—and this is just what we need to evade the hermeneutical closure. This structure works similarly in natural languages: individuals can criticize their environment without intermingling their claims with thick cultural interpretations. This just means that at the political level, *at least* a shared language constitutes the identity of speakers, this identity being neither reducible to an individual’s preferences nor should it be inflated to include a thick cultural network.

Any critic’s viewpoint thus presupposes the institutional structure of a natural language. I would like to dwell on what is implied here and give some outlines for future research. The idea I have in mind is to start from the structural framework of the institutional approach to language in order to specify a concept of community presupposed by a critical theory of society. In doing so, I borrow from the work of Will Kymlicka, which furnishes us with a distinction between the *structure* and the *character* of culture.

The cultural structure of a political community is treated by Kymlicka as an essential *grammar* that all individuals need to empower their autonomy. The particular components contained in a given structure of culture (for instance, linguistic, social, political and economic institutions) thus constitute part of a *societal culture* enabling an alleged *context of choice*, offering to citizens an intricate range of options from which they can exercise their autonomy (Kymlicka 1989, 164ff). It is important to understand that the structures of a societal culture are isolated from its character: the focus is on structures that *any* group maintains in order to empower the political autonomy of *any* citizen. The next step argues for the compensation of individuals whose autonomy is attenuated just because they belong

⁶ A long detour would be needed here to elucidate this intricate position, reminded to me by Miguel Vatter during a preparative talk for this paper. The curious reader can start by consulting a short text of Habermas concerning the tension between a subjective and an intersubjective paradigm (Habermas 2003, 16-25).

to a societal culture having a minority status. There is no justification, argues Kymlicka, for a *liberal* society providing its cultural majority with a rich context of choice while denying the same to members of minority cultures.

While it may sound appealing to rely only on individualistic premises to convince liberals of the importance of recognizing different cultures, this standpoint is way too narrow. According to Kymlicka, what should get recognized is any structure of culture offering a context of choice. However, the difficulty is to picture a valid context of choice from the individual's point of view, since a number of spheres and cultures compete to offer this. For what it's worth, survey data provided by the *European and World Values Survey* show that most individuals on this planet probably identify themselves *first* with their city, *then* with their country *or* with their region and, in a much smaller proportion, with their continent or the world (Anheier *et al.* 2001, 304-305). The point is that it would be literally impossible to scrutinize individual's preferences and answer the question: why should we protect *this* societal culture and not *that* one?

A more promising avenue considers a concept of the "group" invoked in democracy theory. Minimally, individuals will need to understand each other in order to evaluate each other's critical stances and correct their institutions. Not only a natural language is presupposed, but in the light of Kymlicka's argument, a context of choice offering a structure of culture will also be essential. At the very least, language is governed by a collective authority. But recognizing such an authority does not involve a chauvinistic identity politics that encourages groups to build a culture of exclusion. What needs to be recognized are structures shared by all groups; recognition of a given societal culture should not be hazardous for another. A common public language shared by a political community does not block linguistic minorities from enjoying a minimal set of linguistic institutions. The same can be said in relation with a common public set of institutions, for instance economic, and a common public history. What is aimed at is the recognition of structures that serve the self-organization of individuals in political communities. But must we stop at this individualistic level? Can a societal culture constitute an intrinsic good?

Let us consider a standard answer to this question: we must be able to conceive a societal culture as "something, which, at least strategically and instrumentally, is central in the lives of peoples in modern societies" (Nielsen 1999, 455). If we interpret this answer in an individualistic sense, we will not recognize many groups, since only one group could be needed to satisfy individuals' purposes. But if we consider the world as it is, we have to admit that there is a diversity of cultures and that such diversity is a good for human species as such.⁷ The *sole fact* that individuals can organize themselves in groups diversely adapted to their environment is a good thing for mankind. While this is a *prima facie* statement (other concerns hold, like the protection of individuals), it has its importance.

Once we understand self-determination as a good that serves the autonomy of the individual, and the diversity of groups as a good for mankind, we can make out what is normatively just about recognition claims opposing assimilation in a hegemonic

⁷ Michel Seymour makes a similar argument in the texts cited above.

global world order. We will then have to conceive a plurality of self-determining groups. Nations pretend to self-determination, but so do states; so do also territorialized groups that, in conjunction with INGOs and IGOs, reaffirm their lost self-determination (as is the case with the Polisario rebels, and the peoples of Somalia, East Timor, Kosovo, etc.); so do finally supranational organizations, as Europe. However, we must limit the concept of recognition to those structures that self-organizing groups need without invoking a given character of culture. Political recognition needs to be compatible with disagreement over the content of a societal culture; a thick cultural character must not be recognized. To be sure, not every self-determination struggle is a success story. They encompass all sorts of extra-normative factors, ranging from power politics to egoistic interests. But whatever political conception one clings to, it is impossible to deny that a good polity presupposes some kind of community shaped by a particular context of choice in time and space. This context influences and penetrates the way politics is made and thought; it does more damage than good to consign it outside our theories and practices.

Conclusion

To conclude, let me resume the objectives of this paper. The first aim was to unearth some deficiencies in the thought of Habermas, in particular concerning the presupposition that linguistic meaning is constituted by a lifeworld to which speakers belong. This presupposition has been attacked from various angles, notably by commentators wishing away the primacy of language and explaining the normativity of social order with a more conventional view on social interaction. Norms that have been acknowledged, explicitly or implicitly, would be legitimate not because they correspond to the validity conditions of linguistic interaction, but simply because agents find them legitimate. This popular move is as far as one can go from Habermas's original stance. Moreover, it assumes a semantic holism that presupposes a natural language without explaining its effective workings. A more promising avenue is to keep the notion of a lifeworld and to show how an institutional approach to language can differentiate its structure and its character. While lifeworlds are plural in their character, they each exhibit a general structure that is in many points identical. Individuals recognize in each other not only a moral identity, but also a sociopolitical identity that is constituted, at least partly, by a collective authority. This authority is not reducible to a voluntary association of individuals; it is constituted by the collective will of the members of a lifeworld. The result is an argument for the recognition of groups in the political sphere.

Another objective was to fare better than other political conceptions that commentators of Habermas have put forward. Most of the time, Habermasians interpret "constitutional patriotism" as a strategy of redirection, which on a closer view gets entangled in an insuperable paradox. If political institutions are to be described, as Habermas wishes, in the light of the self-understanding of a collective, then it makes nonsense to isolate a formal community from its reach. If, on the other hand, one insists at isolating such a community from prepolitical communities, then

there is nothing differentiating Habermas from other forms of patriotism, such as civic nationalism, that have been rightfully accused of relying on an implicit sense of togetherness. The solution is to insist on the structural features of a political *collective* authority. The main outcome of my approach is thus to yield a concept of the “group” compatible with both the institutional approach to language *and* to a long-standing feature in the thought of Habermas, according to which a critic’s viewpoint aims for “the salvaging balance between speechless identification with all and speechless alienation from all”.⁸

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⁸ “die rettende Balance zwischen sprachlosem Einssein und sprachloser Entfremdung” (Habermas 1964, 446).

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