THE METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS OF DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY IN TIMES OF UNCERTAINTY

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Abstract: The foundations of deliberative democracy rest on ideals of communicative rationality, as articulated by Jürgen Habermas, a key representative of the Frankfurt School's second generation. Emerging from critical theory's broader critique of instrumental rationality, deliberative democracy emphasizes public discourse and consensus as essential mechanisms for legitimate governance. This model assumes that through discourse ethics, diverse societal interests can converge toward norms, transcending partial biases. However, in times of uncertainty — particularly during war or social upheaval — these assumptions face significant challenges. The historical context of the Frankfurt School's development underscores this point. Established amidst the European crises of the early 20th century, critical theorists like Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer grappled with the failures of rationality that led to totalitarianism. The critique of deliberative democracy in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war highlights the need to reassess the theory's practical and ethical foundations. While deliberative democracy aspires to foster inclusivity and legitimacy through rational discourse, its application during periods of profound uncertainty exposes critical vulnerabilities. These include the challenges of relativism, asymmetrical power dynamics, and the ethical risks of procedural neutrality. The aim of this study is to probe the practical applicability and evaluate the core epistemological and ethical assumptions of deliberative democracy, particularly its Habermasian formulations, when

confronted with conditions of uncertainty. It critically examines the theoretical underpinnings of deliberative democracy, its limitations, and the ethical dilemmas posed by its procedural inclusivity. Methodological approach taken in this article builds upon case study to illustrate the limitations of deliberative democracy, and draws on critical theory — especially those of Theodor Adorno and Jürgen Habermas — to evaluate its epistemological and ethical assumptions.

Keywords: democratic regime, democracy, transformations, Ukraine, ethics.

Introduction

The post-World War II reflections of critical theorists extended into practical philosophy, addressing issues of guilt, memory, and the ethical responsibilities of societies. Theodor Adorno's critique of the "dominant reason" underscores the limitations of instrumental rationality when applied without ethical substance, leading to what he termed the "unreason of the dominant reason". This critique is pertinent when evaluating modern deliberative frameworks, especially in their handling of complex geopolitical challenges.

The horrors of the twentieth century prompted reflection on how they were allowed to happen and what could prevent similar catastrophes in the future. Amid above-mentioned background, the existentialism of Albert Camus, the humanistic psychoanalysis of Viktor Frankl, and the critical theory of Frankfurt School — particularly that of Theodor Adorno — all addressed questions of practical philosophy and sought to clarify the function of morality in society. Theory and praxis create a continuum for theorising the problem and translating it into practice. Consequently, the totalizing theories that contributed to the Second World War and the Holocaust have been questioned, as they shaped history through *pathos* — learning through suffering. In Immanuel Kant's terms, the abyss of experience (*bathos*) expands our knowledge and situates us in space and time. *Diastatic* time, unlike linear time, implies stumbling or interruption. Responses to the war are both separated and linked across time and space through what Emmanuel Levinas calls *diastasis*. This diastasis is, for example, Jacob's limp after the pathos of the struggle with the angel, or in our context, the blindness of some representatives of deliberative democracy theory to the pathos of the Russo-Ukrainian war. The experience of trauma often manifests as a disjunction between the moment of impact and the capacity for response thus creating a delayed interplay of *pathos* — the immediate emotional and psychological disruption and the

subsequent response, which frequently arrives too late to mitigate the initial impact. War, as evidenced by contemporary experiences, is not a linear or comprehensible sequence but an eruption that arrives either prematurely or belatedly, defying the measured constructs of theoretical analysis. The scale and brutality of Russia's aggression against Ukraine have reignited reflections reminiscent of Theodor Adorno's critique. Adorno posited that the rise of European fascism marked not only a societal collapse but also a profound failure of theoretical constructs to anticipate, explain, or prevent such atrocities. Similarly, the Russo-Ukrainian war challenges the capacity of modern theory to grapple with the magnitude of evil, illustrating the limits of intellectual paradigms in the face of systemic violence and moral breakdown.

This article employs a qualitative methodological approach grounded in critical theory, using the Russo-Ukrainian war as a case study. The analysis draws significantly on Habermas's concepts of communicative rationality, the ideal speech situation, discourse ethics (Principles U and D). It also delves into Habermas's own critical theory roots (emancipation, critique of domination) to examine potential internal tensions or inconsistencies when his framework is applied to the times of uncertainty. Moreover, the paper situates the Russo-Ukrainian war as the particular case study of the times of uncertainty and identifies specific elements within this context that serve as focal points for analysis — primarily Habermas's *Süddeutsche Zeitung* op-ed, that illustrate the dilemmas of applying deliberative ideals, thus limitations in applicability. This methodological design aimed at revealing a tension between the procedural demands of deliberative democracy and the substantive ethical demands in the times of uncertainty.

Given the above, the research aims to define and explicate the core tenets of Habermasian deliberative democracy — focusing on communicative rationality, the ideal speech situation, and discourse ethics (Principles U and D) — and to articulate the specific tensions that arise when juxtaposing these ideals with the realities of the case study (e.g., procedural inclusivity vs. substantive justice; idealized rationality vs. strategic action or violence).

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Deliberative democracy is rooted in two distinct traditions that reflect opposing normative commitments and emphases on freedom — the theories of John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas. As Christian Rostbøll sketches, Rawls conception of freedom is rooted in the liberal tradition of tolerance and accommodation, tracing back to John Locke. In contrast, Jürgen Habermas draws from a critical tradition inspired by

Karl Marx, which interprets freedom as a process of liberation from repressive apparatus (Rostbøll 2008: 708). These two approaches give rise to different ideas about the purpose of debate: for John Rawls, it is a mechanism of accommodation and reconciliation between conflicting positions, while for Jürgen Habermas, debate is a tool of learning and emancipation. Critical theory, in contrast to traditional theory, is defined as being "committed to bringing social conditions free from domination" (Kompridis 2006: 20). In order to free oneself from preformed needs and domination, one must emancipate oneself by acquiring a subjectivity that facilitates the encounter of the heterogeneous. The idea of overcoming all forms of oppression lies in the attempt to preserve agency in the structures of domination. For Jürgen Habermas, the method of preserving this agency is the communicative action for the "discursive exercise of political autonomy" (Habermas 1996: 121). In this tradition, proponents of deliberative democracy view its potential in the emancipation of political actors from repressive forms of domination, drawing its heuristic power from critical theory. The methodological core of deliberative democracy is the conditions of communication and the relief from positivist outlook on the social structure as immutable. At the same time, Jürgen Habermas's ideal speech situation has already been criticised in academic circles. For example, Margaret Kohn approaches this issue from the perspective of Ludwig Wittgenstein's understanding of language, doubting that the ideal speech situation serves the basis for rational decision-making. Ludwig Wittgenstein shrewdly points out the importance of political and social context for the analysis of communication (Kohn 2000: 411). Contrary, when Jürgen Habermas presents a "validity claim", which means asserting a truth or normative rightness, the idea of shared cultural knowledge and values is involved. Therefore, the question on differences of "lifeworlds" occurs. The solution to this enigma is introduced in Rawlsian idea of public reason that secures the concept of reasonable pluralism, rather than mere pluralism.

In the theoretical frameworks of John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas, reasonableness occupies a central yet distinct role, reflecting their differing philosophical commitments. John Rawls emphasizes a substantive logic of reasonableness, rooted in shared principles and normative content that guide cooperative deliberation in a pluralistic society. This approach prioritizes the articulation of mutually acceptable terms of social cooperation, grounded in the substantive values of fairness and justice. In contrast, Jürgen Habermas situates reasonableness within a framework of formal criticality, emphasizing the procedural dimensions of rational discourse. For Jürgen Habermas, reasonableness is less about pre-defined normative content and more

about the critical processes that enable participants in dialogue to test and refine validity claims. This approach highlights the emancipatory potential of reasonableness as a tool for uncovering and addressing power imbalances and ideological distortions.

The divergence between these approaches underscores a fundamental distinction between content reasonableness and form reasonableness. John Rawls' content-oriented perspective seeks to establish consensus through shared substantive values, while Jürgen Habermas' form-oriented perspective emphasizes the procedural integrity of deliberation itself, ensuring that the "force of the better argument" prevails. This conceptual difference shapes not only their respective understanding of reasonableness but also their broader theories of justice, democracy, and social interaction. Content reasonableness is the idea that Jürgen Habermas's deliberative democracy lacks and makes it heuristically weak and struggles "with a conundrum, not wanting to resuscitate liberal humanism and its associated fixed notions of justice, but at the same time wanting to make political commitments to specific struggles" (Hyndman 2010), as it sets reasonableness as a pre-deliberative boundary.

This theoretical ambiguity becomes particularly evident in times of uncertainty, such as the Russo-Ukrainian war. Jürgen Habermas illustrates this dilemma in his widely discussed essay in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, channeling the idea of "saving the face of both sides of the conflict" (Habermas, n.d.). Additionally, his argument contains a logical fallacy: although he initially presents two actors — Ukraine and Russia — he ultimately concludes that the West should propose its own initiatives for negotiations, disregarding the position of the Ukrainian government. In his opinion, allowing Ukraine, its military and political leadership to decide when negotiations with the aggressor will be possible is "sleepwalking on the edge of the abyss" (Habermas, n.d.). Moreover, Noam Chomsky has hinted that the war in Ukraine can be blamed on both sides, but only in a sarcastic way: "Putin is as concerned about democracy as we are" (Chomsky 2022). For some reason, when putting the climate crisis and Russia's war against Ukraine in the same row, calling on Ukrainians to surrender to Russia in the same way they would have surrendered to a "hurricane" (Robinson 2022), the trap of appeasing the nature appears. At the same time, it is regarded as an attempt to free the Kremlin from the historical context of the Bolshevik crimes and to present the Russian aggression against Ukraine as a reified, naturalised catastrophe. To present Russian aggression as natural catastrophe means to naturalise the artificial famine of 1921–1923, which was directly planned by Lenin to "re-educate" the Ukrainian peasantry, which resisted the establishment of state farms

and communes, Holodomor of 1932–1933, organised by Moscow, the executions in Babyn Yar, Bykivnia, and others. The deliberate neglect of the millions of victims reflects a sacrifice of human lives to uphold ideological purity, further solidifying the power of totalitarian systems. This sacrifice is part of a broader historical shift that emerged after World War II, where the collapse of faith in humanity's capacity for reason became central. The very idea of man as the ultimate bearer of reason was undermined by the disturbing reality that individuals, despite their rational potential, could succumb to irrational and oppressive orders. These totalitarian systems did not solely rely on brute force but operated through the subtle domination and manipulation of consciousness, rendering individuals passive and unfree. In this context, the critique of ideology becomes crucial, as it exposes how distorted interpretations of reason transform ideals like "democracy" into mechanisms of authoritarianism and "freedom" into mere justifications for economic exploitation, while perpetuating deep-seated structural injustices.

Jürgen Habermas proposed to eliminate the pervasive delusion of rational reason by creating a normative foundation of discourse ethics to commence a "communicative turn", reformulating social criticism in terms of criticism of the conditions of communication. Jürgen Habermas insists on the need to situate reason within social reality, deducing two principles of discourse ethics: the universality principle U and the discourse principle D. Principle U is adhered if: "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 possibilities for regulation)" (Habermas 1995: 65).

Jürgen Habermas suggests that in ideal discourses, participants necessarily make ideal assumptions, which can then be used to identify and critique the shortcomings of practical discourse distorted by interests, power relations, and ideologies. The universality principle U is intended to achieve interest generalisation. In trying to formulate a universality of interests, Jürgen Habermas encourages the discourse participants to take a step back and experience the view of the Other, to engage in a universal exchange of roles. He believes that in each and every practical discourse a unifying norm can be crafted that can be agreed upon regardless of worldviews or even existences (the participants in the discourse should not only be preoccupied with on-time problem solving, but also take the generations into account). Principle U assumes that everyone is capable of accepting norms on the same basis and in the same interest. To assume that everyone has the same interest in the norm and accepts it in the same way and addresses it

on the same basis would be an inadmissible generalisation. For example, not to cause unnecessary pain to others is a norm that should be validated by the U procedure. At the same time, the world community witnesses the torture of Ukrainian prisoners of war by the Russian occupiers is widespread. According to Jürgen Habermas's logic, this means something is wrong with the procedure. The fact is that an interest is distributively universalised if and only if everyone can agree that they have their own such interest. In *Justification and Application*, Habermas draws a connection between justice and universal solidarity. By equating justice with universal solidarity, we should get "solidarity with everything that bears the mark of humanity". But why hasn't this happened in the eight years of negotiations with Russia? Does it turn out that the rational mind allowed Auschwitz, but the mind of discourse ethics allowed Bucha? If the tyranny of the rational mind, mathematically measured, tried to bend nature to its purposes, is the tyranny of the unlimited consensus of discourse ethics trying to bend culture? The latter is fundamentally human-centred, and therefore designed both for and about humanity. However, both twentieth-century Nazism and the Russism stand in stark opposition to this foundation. These ideologies cannot be classified as cultures, as their core ethos is directed against the very essence of humanity. This opposition underscores a critical tension within the deliberative democracy paradigm: the absolutized drive to negotiate with all parties, even those fundamentally opposed to humanistic values, risks becoming a form of tyranny. It represents the imposition of culture upon non-culture, where the commitment to dialogue inadvertently legitimizes forces that seek to undermine its core principles. This failure highlights the need to critically reassess the boundaries and conditions under which the deliberative ideal can be applied without compromising its ethical and humanistic essence.

Another principle that Jürgen Habermas puts forward is the discourse principle 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 a practical discourse" (Habermas 1995: 66). Advocates of deliberative democracy, who uphold the principle that all participants in discourse must reach consensus on norms, reveal a fundamental inconsistency when they disregard the perspectives of critical stakeholders. For instance, proclaiming that peace in the Russo-Ukrainian war should be achieved while sidelining the Ukrainian government's position — characterizing it as "sleepwalking on the edge of a cliff" — betrays the very principles of inclusive deliberation. This approach undermines the concept itself, as it denies the validity of one party's voice in the pursuit of consensus. Such a contradiction not only exposes the

limits of applying deliberative democracy in contexts of aggression and asymmetrical power but also demonstrates how idealized frameworks falter when faced during the times of uncertainty. To remain coherent, the theory must critically account for power dynamics and the ethical imperatives of justice, particularly in cases where one party's exclusion would fundamentally violate the principles of fairness and mutual respect central to deliberative engagement.

For Jürgen Habermas, discourse ethics presents a universal theory of morality, positioning itself beyond the confines of cultural and historical particularities. However, his rejection of an a priori moral foundation for intersubjective discussions and his departure from the egalitarian underpinnings of Kantian ethics reveal a critical oversight. By doing so, Jürgen Habermas disregards the foundational conditions necessary for the validity of a norm. In Jürgen Habermas's framework, reality is contingent upon the collective approval of all participants engaged in a communicative action. Yet, his focus remains on the formal correctness of the process rather than on the ethical substance of the outcomes. The question of whether an action is ethically good is replaced by an emphasis on procedural justice, where the act of participation itself is equated with fairness.

This shift leads Habermas to prioritize the norm of unconditional involvement as morally right, sidelining the ethical evaluation of value choices. In this view, the legitimacy of norms emerges from consensus-driven processes, but it risks ignoring the deeper ethical dimensions that should underpin those norms, potentially reducing morality to a function of procedural inclusion rather than substantive justice. That is, there is a distinction between moral questions about norms and ethical questions about values: "The first part of the domain of the practical, which consists of norms, is susceptible to the requirement of moral justification in terms of its deontological validity; the second part, which consists of particular value configurations belonging to collective and individual modes of life, is not" (Habermas 1995: 177). However, values should influence norms. And this has no place in Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative rationality, who uses "rational" as a dispositional predicate: "Thus assertions and goal-directed actions are the more rational the better the claim (to propositional truth or to efficiency) that is connected with them can be defended against criticism" (Habermas 1984: 9). But does the claim to propositional truth of a goal-directed action make it rational? For example, imagine that during the Minsk process, Participant Y receives an unknown call saying "Destroy the Minsk agreements". Suppose that Participant Y starts eating all the papers because they believe that this is an effective method of destroying them. This behavior would

be considered irrational, since the rationality of an action includes not least the rationality of the motives that drive it; however, according to Jürgen Habermas's definition above, this action is merely "rational": "In all cases, the teleological structure of action is presupposed, insofar as the capacity for goal-setting and goal-directed action is ascribed to actors, as well as an interest in carrying out their plans of action" (Habermas, 1984, p. 101). This limited rationality does not describe the actual rationality of an action, but only the procedural rationality. An action that is rational only in an instrumental sense is as much a kind of rational action as Russian "peace" actions are a kind of peace.

Conclusion

Deliberative democracy seeks to include diverse perspectives to achieve legitimate outcomes. However, in the context of war, not all voices contribute equally to the pursuit of justice. Inviting aggressor states or their sympathizers into deliberative processes risks legitimizing violence and perpetuating injustice. This dilemma underscores the ethical challenge of maintaining deliberative inclusivity without compromising moral clarity. In the case of Ukraine, calls for negotiations that overlook the nation's right to self-determination illustrate how procedural neutrality can obscure fundamental ethical distinctions between aggression and defence. Such limitations highlight a core dilemma within deliberative democracy: the assumption of symmetric participation. Habermas's principles of discourse ethics — universality (U) and discourse (D) — presume that all stakeholders share equal capacity and interest in rational consensus. Yet, as evidenced by the asymmetric nature of contemporary times of uncertainty, this presumption often fails in practice. The atrocities committed during the Russian invasion of Ukraine, for example, cannot be reconciled within a framework that demands equal consideration for aggressors and victims alike. This "tyranny of culture" over non-culture, to borrow from critical theory, illustrates the ethical blind spots inherent in communicative rationality.

Drawing on the lessons of 20th century totalitarianism and the reflections of critical theorists like Theodor Adorno and Jürgen Habermas, this article underscores the tension between communicative frameworks of rationality and the complex realities of systemic violence and moral collapse. The universality and discourse principles central to Habermas's ethics highlight the potential for rational discourse to achieve justice, yet their practical application often falters when faced with actors who fundamentally reject humanistic values.

This failure is not merely theoretical; it bears practical consequences, as seen in attempts to legitimize aggressors in the name of neutrality or compromise. To address these shortcomings, deliberative democracy must evolve beyond procedural inclusivity to incorporate substantive ethical considerations. It should distinguish between actors committed to dialogue as a means of achieving justice and those who exploit it to entrench domination. In the face of systemic violence, the commitment to dialogue must not come at the expense of moral clarity or the principles of justice. The Russo-Ukrainian war starkly illustrates that in contexts where aggression undermines the basic premises of humanity and autonomy, deliberative democracy must be applied critically and cautiously, ensuring that its ideals are not co-opted to perpetuate oppression. The path forward for deliberative democracy lies in balancing its normative aspirations with the ethical imperatives of justice and humanity. Only through such a recalibration can the theory remain relevant and effective in addressing the challenges of contemporary conflict and moral disruption.

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