

**Habermas, pupil voice, rationalism, and their meeting with Lacan's objet petit a**

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### **Introduction**

“Pupil voice” is a movement within state education within England that is associated with democracy, change, participation and the raising of educational standards. This conception and practice of “pupil voice” is interrogated from two different perspectives: the first, via Habermas and rationalism: the second via Lacan, particularly the Lacanian concept of the objet petit a.

### **Habermas and the philosophy of between**

There is something incredibly heroic, grand, and romantic about the work of Habermas which follows from its commitment to a certain form of rationalism. This rationalism also incorporates a kind of historicism, through which the work is located. It is a historicism that, explicitly within his early work (Habermas, 1962), writes the possibility of rationalism as the emergence of a critical social space within the eighteenth century; a possible social space within which he locates his own work, as immanent critique, pressing outwards, disruptively, upon the politically and socially defining dogmas of industrial and post-industrial Western society. The historicism is irreducible because the movement of Habermas's critique occurs at the brink of epochs; the conception of epoch or some other similarly grand defining movement is absolutely necessary because it is between the spaces of their succession that

Habermas is able to position his disruptive analysis. Essentially this analysis is a critique of ideology that can occur because a public space opens within society as a result of economic, cultural and intellectual pertinences; and it is within these interstices of subsuming, self-interested material and linguistic dominance, that a form of communication and reflection can be nurtured that is authentic to itself. It is this authenticity that is able to reflect upon and critique the surrounding material and cultural forms of dominance as products, as forms of collaboration that maintain existing sets of knowledge, channels of exchange, hierarchies of validation; and so is able to draw a distinction between this space, inhabited by authenticity, and that space, identified as being, ontologically and epistemologically, inauthentic. It is not coincidental that the historicism of Habermas's critique also locates itself, historically, between other adjacent epochs: between the West at the end of the Second World War, and the West's post-war reconstruction; between the economic triumph of twentieth century industrialization, and fears engendered by Western consumerism; between the consciousness of liberal democracy, and Marxist criticisms of false consciousness and reification. Indeed, if nothing else, Habermas is a philosopher of the between; a between based upon the construal, but perhaps, given the historicism and historical nature of his work, generation would be a more telling term; a between then, based upon the generation of successive teleological moments that arrange themselves, so this generation tells us, with a between; a between within which the rational consciousness of immanent critique both realizes the onto-epistemic truth of each moment and each moment's succession, and simultaneously articulates the proper, alternative, authentic trajectory, as process and goal.

If this seems a rather grand description of Habermas's work, then it is a grandeur that is nothing less than such a work rationally demands. How else, in what other landscape, can rationality, as Habermas describes it, figure? Doesn't this conception of teleological movement, a conception that the rational figure conceives and invests with a reciprocal and mutually reinforcing onto-epistemic identity, require such a perspective? And isn't there, thus, an inevitability about this; an inevitability that supports the rational figure and the march of epochs; an inevitability that the consciousness of immanent critique will be configured within the seriousness of this romantic landscape, and will be configured somewhat heroically, standing out, pointing towards truth, clothed in nothing other than a kind of naked authenticity that proclaims the truth of its own project? And a necessity that the Habermasian rational figure encounters of this landscape is its absolute functionality.

Absolute functionality in this context refers to the way that everything that the rational figure encounters, and everything about the rational figure is purposeful because it engages in some way with the teleological progress of social construction and epochal movement, even by way of critique and disruption. We see this in Habermas's description of communication and instrumentality. In *The Theory of Communicative Action* (Habermas, 1984) two domains are brought together: both are teleologically motivated; and between them we observe the figure of rational consciousness. The two domains are famously the domain of lifeworld and the domain of systems. Lifeworld is in a Heideggerian sense the lived experience of social being; and it is embodied in various integrated and self-organizing systems, such as the family, culture and art, and the politics involved in the daily negotiation of these and other naturally occurring systems within this domain. It is characterized, again in a way that is

reminiscent of some of Heidegger's work, by a ready-to-handedness, which is a form of ontological condition within which Being and the context within which this exists, are the same; for example the understanding of one's self as a member of a family engaged in a particular form of work: in this way, identity is embedded within lifeworld. By contrast, the domain of systems, principally money and power, engineer the societal infrastructures that sustain an industrial and post-industrial capitalist society. An important difference that distinguishes the domain of lifeworld from the domain of systems is the difference signalled by communication. Within the domain of lifeworld communication is organized around collective agency, is purposeful and is in a Heideggerian sense an affirmation of Being, of humankind embedded within the context of their existence. Communication within the domain of systems does occur, but it is, within this Habermasian framework, a form of reproduction that is driven by the exigencies of infrastructure demands. Examples of these demands include: the recruitment, organization and payment of employees; the management of economic systems; and the administration of state and market institutions. Whilst the domain of lifeworld clearly requires the domain of systems, within a Habermasian framework, ideally the two domains ought to be distinct; and this is where Habermas's work also embraces an ethical imperative attached to his conceptualization of ontology: the very nature of large capitalist societies, the importance, the proliferation and the ubiquity of the domain of systems that they require to operate inevitable leads to the colonization of the domain of the lifeworld by the domain of systems. That is, modes of being, in Heideggerian terms distinguished from Being, that are a function of, to repeat the examples above, the recruitment, organization and payment of employees; the management of economic systems; and the administration of state and market institutions, the types of interactions that they require, the language that they inhabit, come to exist parasitically within the lifeworld.

Again, it is the between that Habermas marks out, the between the domain of the lifeworld and the domain of systems that is occupied by the rational figure; a rational figure that is able, through the perception afforded by rationalism, to identify both domains, the improper occupation of the one by the other, and through this power of identification, to articulate an immanent critique that will serve as a corrective to this scenario of colonized habitation. Before proceeding any further, it is important to emphasize the role of teleology and absolute functionality within this sketch of Habermas's work. The domain of lifeworld is teleologically predisposed to articulate itself on ontological grounds; this is how lifeworld exists, it is the encounter of humanity with itself in its natural societal context, as that which is ready-to-hand. The domain of systems within modern capitalist societies is also teleologically predisposed to reproduce itself because it serves to facilitate, indeed it is necessary for the existence of, lifeworld within a modern capitalist context. It is the teleological predisposition of these domains that drives their absolute functionality within the Habermasian schema. There are, however, a number of interesting problems with this project that Lacan's concept of the objet petit a exposes and analyzes. The next section introduces a Lacanian analysis of Habermas's work via the objet petit a; but instead of limiting this discussion to the theoretical arena, it explores the play between Habermas and Lacan within an aspect of current English state educational policy, practice and critical discourse, namely "pupil voice"

**"Pupil voice"**

The opening sections of Flutter and Rudduck (2004) situates what has become the critical discourse known as “pupil voice” within the contemporary English state education system *in between*, in a very Habermasian way, as described above. The lengthy quotation is worth inclusion here because it demonstrates the in between of the rational figure articulating the domains of lifeworld and system so powerfully:

“Teachers and pupils today... Surrounded by an eager crowd of politicians, parents and employers... are keenly aware that what happens inside the classroom is being watched, scrutinised, evaluated and publicly debated. ‘Targets’ and ‘goals’, ‘performance’ and ‘league tables’ are the banners waved enthusiastically by education policy makers and the media... It is easy to see how this model has infiltrated education: through government schemes that aim to recognise and reward the successful, through systems of inspection and measurement designed to pressure relentlessly for ‘higher scores’ and through the establishment of a competitive structure where some schools find themselves singled out as ‘failing’... it must be recognised that learning is far more important, complex and demanding than any game and, as a society, we cannot afford to relegate any young person to failure” (Flutter and Rudduck, 2004: 1).

From the domain of systems we have techno-bureaucratic procedures, formulated as “‘Targets’ and ‘goals’, ‘performance’ and ‘league tables’” which are instituted across education within the state sector by official regimens of scrutiny and evaluation. A highly valued outcome of this system’s process, by the system, is a ranking schema, which perceives education largely as a form of performance; and inevitably those institutions and individuals that find themselves towards the bottom of the schema are identified as ‘failing’. The teleology of the system here is such that not only does it clearly reproduce itself, driving

itself forward through governmental inspection and evaluation bodies that determine curriculum content, curriculum delivery, modes of pedagogy and engagement with learning for teachers and pupils; it also comes to colonize the other domain, the domain of lifeworld. Lifeworld here is that which the techno-bureaucratic procedures – their evaluation of education as a form of performance, their determination of ranking schemas and identification of failure, in short the domain of systems – is parasitic upon. Obviously, so this logic goes, the techno-bureaucracy of systems could not exist on its own; it could not even precede that which it is designed to regulate; and that precedent, that fundamental condition, is the experience of education itself, namely the educational lifeworld. Now, very much in keeping with the Habermasian vision and again also reminiscent of the Heideggerian notion of ontology as that which is ready-to-hand, the lifeworld of education must be experience of education itself because it is fundamentally an engagement with self through natural context, which is most typically situated within the classroom in the English state education system. Indeed, the system's performative, competitive, ranking schema that results in the label 'failing' is contrasted with a lifeworld understanding of education as a learning, demanding, complex process, so emphasizing the lifeworld ontology as an interactive, collaborative, democratic experience of lived educational being. It is this ontology that the proponents of 'pupil voice' take to be primary, formative and authentic; and it is by recognizing, giving space to, and listening to 'pupil voice', so the proponents of this critique argue, that the system's "...model [that] has infiltrated education..." can be resisted. Before moving on, it needs to be noted that the parallels here with Habermas's work are extraordinary, as is an implicit acceptance of Heideggerian ontology and to some extent Habermas's understanding of language and hermeneutics in his later work. Where the two part company, of course, is over the role that rationalism plays in the Habermasian appreciation and experience of

lifeworld. And it is at the point where rationalism intrudes that it is appropriate to turn to Lacan and the *objet petit a*.

### **Lacan, trajectories and the *objet petit a***

“For Lacan, the *objet petit a* represents an unconscious clinging to an impossible desire that cannot be shared or satisfied...” (Kirshner, 2005: 88); it is realized, however, as an object, but an object whose meaning is never properly understood. To appreciate this, the mechanics of the *objet petit a*, the role it plays in the discourse of the self and the motivation of identity, it is important to think about the trajectory of desire. In Lacanian theory desire is not desire for *something* as focussed on a particular object, nor in this same way is it a particular desire *for* as in some emotion corresponding to a particular wish; instead, desire is a function, a result, of a fundamental misapprehension: this misapprehension is one of the defining properties that contributes to our being human subjects. Let us consider a simple example: A feels thirsty and wants a drink. We could say that A desires a drink, but this would be to miss what A is articulated by. In no particular order, the following overlapping *contingencies* all play a part in constituting A’s desire: the physiological feeling that A is thirsty; the situation that A finds A being in; and A’s representation that A is thirsty, and this last point does not matter if A represents this to A’s self, or both to A and others. Let us begin with the last of these: A finds A in a street opposite a bar and says to B, A’s companion, “I’m thirsty; I could do with a drink.” Several *contingencies* are now immediately obvious, which produce something else; this something else is the displacement, though perhaps dispersion would be more descriptively telling, of what we have taken to be the original motivation of satisfying A’s thirst. A’s wish for a drink is not equivalent to A’s utterance to B, “I’m thirsty; I could do

with a drink,” nor is it equivalent to A’s representation of this utterance to A. The wish for a drink, the impulse to satisfy a need, is, however, caught up in its representation, indeed, in its realization; but this is not the same as the impulse to satisfy the need itself, though this in itself cannot be separated from its representation. The in itself is caught sight of, dispersed, displaced, lost by its articulation. It is this loss that functions as the site of Lacanian desire. The articulation of loss and the in itself occurs on the plane of representation, which is not perfectly reflexive: A’s utterance is not purely representational; it does not simply stand in for the thing itself until the thing itself is gained, in this example, A’s drink; nor does it return to A without remainder, leaving the various pieces of the ensemble intact and discrete. There is always, for example, in the form of representation, a remainder; a remainder that is not entirely consumed by the functionality of the represented form (we will come back to this point). The plane of representation is a cultural and linguistic plane, that is to say, it is bound up with a system of articulation located within a specific historical frame; it is also outside what we have taken to be the original motivation of A to satisfy A’s thirst, but is simultaneously stitched into A, since it is only through this plane of representation, the Symbolic Order, that this motivation can be known. What we therefore witness when A utters, “I’m thirsty; I could do with a drink,” is A being split, and also, mythically, being whole, being both continuous and discontinuous with that which is both outside and inside A. The Symbolic Order – the linguistic system and the historical-cultural context, the moment that A finds A in the street, opposite a bar – precede A; but it is only by being part of them, by being sutured to them, that A and the fulfilment of what A wants can be identified and acted upon, which is also different to the in itself of A’s thirst and concomitant need to satisfy that thirst. And how is A cognizant of this scene of misrecognition, within which A functions and can be known and identified: how does A know? We are on the threshold, now, of the

objet petit a, or at least an understanding of the scene through which the objet petit a functions.

Lacan refers again and again to the scene within which the subject apprehends the subject, in our example, A apprehending A, as occurring within the domain of the scopic, and more particularly apprehension of the object around which this apprehension is focussed, as occurring within the circuit of the gaze (Lacan, 1986). What does this mean, what is the gaze? If we return to the scene within which A conceives and misconceives A, we cannot help but note that it depends upon A perceiving A: and so A perceives A perceiving A. This circuit is the gaze. A perceives A as part of the Symbolic Order, which has already involved the displacement or dispersal of A as well as A's articulation by that which is external to and precedes A's identity. And around what does this perception cohere? Well, around the form of representation that is pertinent to this moment, which in our example is the utterance, "I'm thirsty; I could do with a drink." It is only because, as we have already noted, the representation is not absolutely adequate to its proposed functionality, that a residue of some sort is left; and it is this residue, this little object that is other to that which it represents, that is not entirely used up in the representing process, that is both more and less than symbolic, be it somatic, acoustic, visual or whatever, and is also discontinuous with but representative of the subject, in this case A, that A can perceive it as such, and can therefore also perceive A perceiving A. As Lacan, perhaps somewhat elliptically notes: "The gaze sees itself... The gaze I encounter – you can find this in Sartre's own writing – is, not a seen gaze, but a gaze imagined by me in the field of the Other [the Symbolic Order]... Is it not clear that the gaze intervenes here only in as much as it is... the subject sustaining himself in a function of

desire?" (Lacan, 1986: 84-85). The locus of the gaze within the scene which is profoundly one of misrecognition is the objet petit a: the "I'm thirsty; I could do with a drink," is the subject looking at looking at; and unsurprisingly it is also the point of the realization of rationalism, in an obviously Cartesian sense.

Whilst Lacan does not quite develop this notion as specifically as saying, the realization of the subject looking at looking at is the unfolding of Cartesian rationalism, he does allude to "... the Cartesian subject, which is itself a sort of geometrical point, a point of perspective..." (Lacan, 1986: 86); but it is not very difficult to see how this is so. The famous, "Je pense donc je suis" of (Descartes, 1637), translated into Latin as "Cogito, ergo sum" in (Descartes, 1644), is conditional upon the apprehension of the subject apprehending the subject, apprehending "I think, therefore I am," and signals the quintessential (mis)recognition of the objet petit a, as subject, against the screen of the Symbolic Order, which is profoundly what the subject is not, but nevertheless must also involve misrecognizing the subject as so being. The implications here for Habermasian rationality, for the project of rationality in general, are most interesting. In the final section of this paper, we will explore these implications in relation to "pupil voice."

### **(Mis)apprehending apprehending education apprehending "pupil voice" and rationalism**

Given the apprehension of the Cartesian subject, though the apprehension of apprehension, it is easy to see the parallel between this example of the gaze and the gaze of education which

perceives “pupil voice.” Reporting on Ruddock (2003), Whitehead and Clough (2004) comment:

“If schools in Education Action Zones (EAZs) are going to make real strides in raising behaviour and academic standards then they need to start consulting pupils, according to the authors of this research report. The Government established the first (EAZs) in 1997 to raise standards of behaviour and academic attainment in areas of significant disadvantage. Education Action Forums (EAFs), the local decision making bodies within EAZs, were asked to empower people and communities to find radical, innovative solutions to problems of underachievement. But few zones have explicitly involved students in this process” (Whitehead and Clough, 2004: 1).

The subject of education, its apprehension of itself as itself by noticing its apprehension of education, is clearly visible here. But as we have also seen, this involves misrecognition, in a number of ways. As before, there is the misrecognition of the subject as being continuous with the Symbolic Order. But what is the subject here? The Symbolic Order is much easier to point to than the subject. The Symbolic Order is composed, amongst other things, by EAZs, EAFs, the criteria that are used to define “standards of behaviour and academic attainment,” “areas of significant disadvantage” and “underachievement”; it includes the mechanisms through which performance against these various criteria are calculated and structures through which the ensuing results are circulated, debated and acted on in various ways, such as the drawing up of plans, and instantiating pedagogic and resource strategies. And if the Symbolic Order includes all of these and other forms of representation and systematic organization, doesn't it also then include that within itself which it designates as a certain kind of lack, namely “underachievement” and the vast majority of zones which “...

have [not] explicitly involved students in this process [of consultation and engagement]”? Isn’t the Symbolic Order precisely this lack? Isn’t the Symbolic Order of education demonstrably composed of students not making “... real strides in raising behaviour and academic standards...”? In Lacanian terms, what appears to be occurring is the exile of that which is, namely the lack that has just been described, as the Other of the subject, in favour of a misapprehension of the subject, namely the inclusion of “pupil voice”; and it is through the apprehension of this little other, “pupil voice,” the objet petit a, that the subject of education (mis)apprehends what it means for it to be.

In response, then, to the question that we opened with – what is the subject – an answer might be, the subject is the claim that it is that which it is not, namely a lack, which, as we have already seen, is for Lacan the locus of desire. A Habermasian response to this Lacanian understanding of “pupil voice,” which is an understanding of misrecognition and exclusion, might be, pragmatically: let us put this business of the gaze to one side, what we are still able to derive from “pupil voice” is a hollowing out, a space between, that is more democratic, more essential, closer to a sense of the authentic life world of the classroom, than the techno-bureaucratic dimension of education might allow. And we have to ask at this point, politically, would this be so? Would this involve a shift in the constitution of the Symbolic Order? It is tempting to think, yes:

“As Anna aged ten, points out ‘our pupil voice project is going to help our education, our environment and help other schools’. The children who contributed to this article were inspired by the belief that their views matter and will make a difference. Clare notes how important it is ‘to have your voice heard... because it ‘makes you feel

free'. However, she reminds us that 'it is a big responsibility for teachers to make children have good futures'" (Peacock, 2001: 53)

Would it be churlish to suggest that the Symbolic Order has not changed? Would it be churlish to suggest that Anna and the other children who have contributed to this article were already part of the identity of the school, and that all that has happened is that this identity has been confirmed by a misapprehension, and that this is what "makes you feel free," the very fact that you are not free? Would it be churlish to note that this rationalism of observing the self observing the self is about reproduction rather than transformation, as education misconceives? Or is it more propitious to throw in our lot with a Habermasian rationalism that sees "pupil voice" as a kind of romantic quest for the authentic life world, as a space that is critically, historically, eked out between the drive towards techno-bureaucratic improvements? Who knows?

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