

POPPER AND HABERMAS: A REAPPRAISAL

Geoffrey Stokes
Politics and Policy Studies
Faculty of Arts
Deakin University
BURWOOD VIC 3125 Australia
e-mail: gmstokes@deakin.edu.au

As a result of their robust engagement in the ‘positivist dispute’ or ‘Positivismusstreit’ of the 1960s, the philosophies of Karl Popper and Jürgen Habermas are often considered to be in irreconcilable conflict. Divided over issues in social science methodology and on political ideology, Popper and Habermas seemed to have little in common between them. Nonetheless, there is a strand of interpretation that points to not only problems of mutual concern, but also a number of shared values and assumptions. The value of freedom of speech and communication, for example, is central to both philosophers. For Popper, a key requirement of the open society is the freedom to criticise political and intellectual authority, while Habermas demonstrates the importance of open, undistorted communication. In Popper’s sketch of the ‘open society’ and Habermas’s concept of an ‘ideal speech situation’ can be seen the normative convergence of their thought. Both philosophers advocate a public sphere characterised by free dialogue and criticism set within a democratic context. Although both Popper and Habermas put a premium upon the practice of criticism and critique, they use significantly different strategies of argument to establish them. At issue here is the meta-ethical problem of the rational choice or defence of values. This paper reviews the respective contributions of Popper and Habermas to the Enlightenment tradition emanating from Kant. The first aim is to delineate the differences and similarities between the work of Popper and Habermas and indicate the nature and significance of any ‘rapprochement’. A second objective is to point out the implications for the theory and practice of democracy. It will be argued that both Popper and Habermas, in different ways, lead us to consider more deliberative forms of democracy within nation states and beyond them.