# FOUCAULT WITH HABERMAS: TOWARD A COMPLEMENTARY CRITICAL READING OF MODERNITY

## *Foucault con Habermas: hacia una lectura crítica complementaria de la modernidad*

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ABSTRACT: This essay examines Foucault's and Habermas's critical project in order to show their complementary character. In the examination of the main aspects of their oeuvres, it is argued, contrary to what some authors state, such as Habermas, that Foucault's position on modernity is not that of total rejection, but rather ambivalent. It is therefore possible to consider Foucault's theory as a critical counterweight to Habermas's. The point is made that Foucault's theory awards flexibility to some theoretical distinctions upon which Habermas builds his own project.

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This enables making profound criticisms of modernity without relinquishing the project of modernity. It is thus possible to see the critical project of Habermas and Foucault as two complementary readings of modernity. Some aspects of the Habermas/Foucault debate are addressed in order to support this argument.

*Keywords:* Foucault, criticism, modernity, Habermas

RESUMEN: El presente ensayo examina los proyectos críticos de Foucault y Habermas con el fin de mostrar su carácter complementario. Por medio de un examen de los principales aspectos de sus obras, se sostiene que la posición que mantiene Foucault respecto a la modernidad no es, como plantean algunos autores como el propio Habermas, de total rechazo, sino más bien que es ambivalente. Sobre esta base es posible ver el proyecto crítico de Foucault como un contrapunto crítico de la obra de Habermas. Específicamente, se plantea que la teoría de Foucault flexibiliza algunas distinciones teóricas sobre las cuales Habermas funda su proyecto. Esto permite profundizar la crítica de la modernidad sin renunciar a ésta. Siguiendo esto, es posible ver los proyectos críticos de Habermas y Foucault como dos lecturas complementarias de la modernidad. Algunos aspectos del debate Habermas/Foucault son tratados con el fin de sostener este argumento.

*Palabras clave:* Foucault, crítica, modernidad, Habermas

## Introduction

Foucault's thinking represents one of the most original and radical challenges to modernity. In contrast to a long tradition of thinkers who sought to keep 'faith' in modern principles, such as reason, progress, and the rational subject, Foucault's philosophical approach shakes the very foundations of modernity, by showing the extent to which these principles are based on relations of power and social domination (White, 1991). The coherence of this radical perspective, however, has been widely questioned, since it requires the rational base that it attempts to negate, in order to sustain its criticism.

This essay seeks to evaluate the coherence of Foucault's postmodernist critique of the Enlightenment and modernity by drawing on some of the issues central to the Foucault/Habermas debate. The paper argues against the position held by some authors (such as Rabinow, 1984), who deem the critical projects of Foucault and Habermas to be mutually exclusive, such that 1) Foucault's position

regarding modernity is ambivalent (and not of total rejection) –and assuming this–
2) a line of argument by which both projects can be viewed as complementary can
be drawn. While Habermas's theory provides the normative foundations of mo-
dernity, which would sustain the positive 'hopes of the Enlightenment project',
Foucault's thought serves to prevent a reading complacent with the effects of what
Habermas considers to be its pathologies.

   In order to perform this task, the paper first describes Foucault's critique
of Enlightenment, humanism and modernity, focusing on the link between so-
cial domination, power and knowledge, emphasizing his ambivalent position with
modernity. The paper then goes on to describe Habermas's defense of modernity,
by focusing on the way in which Habermas sought to save the project of moder-
nity by means of a wider conception of reason and rationality built upon a rigid
theoretical framework (a bipolar distinction between communicative rationality
and instrumental rationality). Finally, it is argued that Foucault's theory allows to
reconsider some aspect of Habermas's in the light of a more flexible theoretical
framework without relinquish the entire modern project.

## Foucault's critique of enlightenment: two sides of modernity

In his widely acclaimed speech entitled '*Modernity: un unfinished project*' given dur-
ing his acceptance of the Adorno Prize, Jurgen Habermas posed a crucial ques-
tion for modern social and political theorists: 'Should we continue to hold fast
to the intentions Enlightenment had, however fractured they may be, or should
we rather relinquish the entire project of modernity?' (Habermas, 1997: 45-46).
According to Habermas, a clear line of division can be drawn between those who
answer affirmatively to this question and those who answer in a negative way. Even
though Foucault is situated by Habermas in the latter group,[2] before an evaluation
of the coherence of his critique to modernity, it is necessary to clarify the extent
to which, and the way in which, Foucault's work can be considered a renunciation
of what Habermas calls 'the entire project of modernity'.

   Foucault's reluctance to see his own work as a systematic theory (Foucault,
1980) makes it difficult to describe it in a schematic way. However, taking into
account some key points within his work, it is possible to outline several main
theoretical elements. As Asheden and Owen (1999) point out, Foucault's critical
project involves two main issues. On one hand, the theoretical issue of modern
reason is considered as a specific mode of thinking on which modernity was found-
ed. Whilst on the other hand, Foucault's thought is concerned with the political

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[2]    According to Habermas, the climete of opinion that promotes tendencies highly critical
of modernism led to new conservative positions. There are the Young Conservatives, who promote
a criticism of modernism by an appropriation of the experience of aesthetic modernity, and the
old Conservatives, who search for a return to a pre-modern position. And finally, The New Con-
servatives, who recognise the achievements of modernity but neglecting the explosive elements of
cultural modernity. Foucault would be, according to Habermas a representative figure of the first
group (Habermas, 1997).

and practical problems of modern society and the historical process in which this specific mode of thinking arose during the eighteenth century, thus creating social practices, institutions and modern subjectivity.

In *Discipline and Punishment* Foucault illustrates the way in which both issues are closely related. According to Foucault (Foucault, 1995), the building of prisons, the humanization of the penal system and the consequent metamorphosis of punitive methods during the eighteen century, lead to the development of a certain 'political economy of the body' by means of which a new form of power was developed:

> [E]ven if they do not make use of violent or bloody punishment, even if they use 'lenient' methods involving confinement or correction, it is always the body that is at issue –the body and its forces, their utility and their docility, their distribution and their submission. (Foucault, 1995: 26)

But for Foucault, this new way of exerting power on the body did not only involve power in a controlling and manipulative way for use as a productive force, but power was also a corpus of knowledge, through which the body could be organized, analyzed, excluded and thus, normalized. The emergence of these methods through which the body can be carefully controlled –which Foucault calls disciplines– entailed the emergence of a field of knowledge which supported them and hence the simultaneous creation of a subject of power and an object of knowledge (Foucault, 1995: 28).

It is necessary to stress that far from being restricted to the prison system, Foucault (1995) finds a general form of domination present in the corpus of social institutions that emerged during the modern era, including schools, hospitals and psychiatric wards. Indeed, all these institutions operate on the same principle of utility, use the same techniques of power and are related to a specific field of knowledge. These institutions also act as a surveillance system, constituting an 'infrapenality' system, which is exercised through observation and examination of society members. It is for this reason that Foucault conceives the birth of the rationality of modern science as being intrinsically linked to power relations.

For Foucault the aim of his historical research has not been to analyze the phenomenon of power but rather to shed light onto the way in which human beings have been made into subjects (Ravinow, 1999: 7). There is no doubt that the analytical grid of knowledege-power has crucial importance in his critique of modernity. For it is precisely through power-knowledge relationships that human beings have been made subject. Moreover, if it is possible to criticize the project of modernity, it is precisely because the use of the analytical grid power-knowledge, the modern promise of civilization, enlightenment and human emancipation (such as a life guided by the principle of reason) is revealed as a new form of domination and subjection. Consequently, it is worth pointing out some of the elements that compose Foucault's theory of power.

As some authors have pointed out (Walzer, 1987; Couzens, 1987), Foucault's theory of power represents a challenge to the concept of power that had traditionally been used in social and political theory, especially to the Marxist concept of power. Three reasons can be given in order to support this claim. First, in Foucault's view, power is not a property but a strategy, which means that it is not possessed by any person or group and 'it is not the 'privilege' acquired or preserved, of the dominant class, but the overall effect of its strategic positions (Foucault, 1995: 26). Second, due to its strategic character, power is not localized in the State or in the States apparatus; rather, power traverses every institution, going down right into 'the depths society' (Foucault, 1995: 27). This means that power is always circulating, through a net-like organization, where individuals are not outcomes of its application but rather vehicles of its techniques and procedures (Foucault, 1980: 171). Finally, from Foucault's point of view, power always creates knowledge and knowledge is produced by the effects of power, but this cannot be taken as being mere ideology. Marxist theory of ideology, in contrast, is based on a distinction between ideology and reality and hence the possibility of being able to access 'true' knowledge that is beyond power, so this approach fails in grasping the inseparable articulation existing between knowledge and power.

Taking into account these elements of Foucault's theory it is possible to understand the way in which his critique of modernity is articulated. Modern society and Enlightenment is for Foucault not the 'epoch of the lights' and progress, as many philosophers of the eighteenth century have argued, but an epoch in which a new form of power and subjugation arose. Disciplinary society, in which Foucault observes the very traces of 'our present', led to a society that denies the principle of liberty that it claims to perform. Thus, the utopian content of modernity and its promise of a perfect society based on reason and science is, in Foucault's view, actually the utopia of a disciplinary society based on diffuse control over functional institutions and the production of a subjectivity that remains tied to power relations.

## The critical 'spirit' of the Enlightenment: the modern attitude

Having seen the negative verdict of Foucault on modernity, it is difficult not to agree with Habermas's statement, according to which Foucault's thinking implies the renunciation of the entire project of modernity. However, there is a line of argument in Foucault's later work that allows suggesting that Foucault' position in respect to the project of modernity is not that of total rejection. This position is related to a certain 'critical attitude' that Foucault argues is characteristic of the modern era.

As the paper has mentioned, the process of rationalization that arose during the eighteenth century led to a new form of power that extended the 'art of government' and its power mechanism to a variety of areas of social life. According to Foucault, together with this 'governmentalization' movement, another parallel movement arose, a 'movement by which the subject gives himself the right to question truth on its effects on power and question power on its discourses on

truth' (1997: 28). This movement is what Foucault calls *critique,* the crucial point being that what the French author defines as critique is, according to him, the same phenomenon that Kant names as *Enlightenment*.

In Foucault's view, Enlightenment refers not only to the historical period giving rise to capitalism, the emergence of a bourgeois culture, the foundation of modern science and its correlative power mechanism, but it is also an opportunity to place in doubt the link between reason, truth and power (Foucault, 1997: 43). The whole critical project that Foucault carries out through his historical research is an attempt to apply this idea that Enlightenment exists in different moments of history, including the present.[3]

Indeed, what Foucault finds in Kant's text *What is Enlightenment?* is a specific way of questioning the present. This specificity lies in the way that Kant addresses the issue of Enlightenment, more specifically of what makes 'today' an event totally different from 'yesterday'. In the eighteenth century, this difference is related to the human capacity to gain knowledge, given the process of Enlightenment that releases us from a status of 'immaturity'. According to Foucault's reading of Kant's text, the escape from immaturity entails a critical use of reason, by means of which it is not only possible to defend the right of not to be governed, but also to define the condition under which the use of reason is legitimate to determinate 'what can be known, what can be done and what may be hoped' (Foucault, 1997: 111). It is in this context that Foucault outlines his concept of modernity:

> *I wonder whether we may not envisage modernity more as an attitude than as a period of history. And by 'attitude' I mean a mode of relating to contemporary reality; a voluntary choice made by certain people; in the end, a way of thinking and feeling; a way, too, of acting and behaving that at one and the same time marks a relation of belonging and presents itself as a task. (Foucault, 1997: 113)*

Foucault finds in the modern aesthetics, especially in the figure of Baudelaire, the main characteristics of this modern attitude. On the one hand, modernity involves a critical relationship to the present that implies his 'heorization'. By 'heorization' of the present time Foucault understands the capacity of recapturing something eternal within this moment, a certain apology of the contingence that always entails a mode of relation to it. The important thing is that this valuation of the present is 'cannot be dissociated from a desperate eagerness to imagine it, to imagine it otherwise than what it is, and to transform it not by destroying but grasping it in as to what it is' (Foucault, 1997: 177).

On the other hand, modern attitude also involves a relationship of the self. To be modern, Foucault argues, 'is not to accept oneself as one is in the flux of

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[3]     It is worth noting that Foucault make a clear distinction between Enlightenment and humanism. Humanism, Foucault argues, is a set of themes always tied to value judgments that serve to justify the conceptions of man to which it is, after all, obliged to resort to. If it is seen as a critical aspect of Enlightenment, the relation between this and humanism appears as being tensional rather than one of identity (Foucault, 1997: 123).

the passing moment; it is to take oneself as an object of complex and difficult elaboration' (1997: 117). This 'ascetic' aspect, illustrated mainly in the figure of the dandy, consists of a modern man who does not accept being guided purely by the law, religion or by science and from this to discover deep-seated truth about the self, but rather having to deal with the difficult task of reinventing oneself in a constant process of revolt against the self.

Taking into account these characteristics which Foucault defines as the modern attitude, it is possible to state that the relation of Foucault's thought and modernity is ambiguous (Schmidt, 1996). In fact, Foucault gives in to modernity in an episte-mological level what he denies to do it in a theoretical or analytical level; that is, the possibility of Enlightenment being a liberating force. This ambiguity can be explained by the fact that Foucault's philosophical investigation focuses on the present time, as a dandy, within a logic of respect and transgression. However, as Simons argues (1995: 3), the emergence of the modern attitude has led to the formulation of a philosophical critique of the present, which involves the question of the relationship between truth, government and authority, such as the link between rationalization and power, thus maintaining this ambiguity as a central part of Foucault's critique of modernity.

Furthermore, this tension between what Simons has called 'constraining limitations and limitless freedom' has been explicitly defended by Foucault, in an attempt to overcome the rejection of one aspect of modernity which entails the abandonment of 'the entire project of modernity' (Habermas, 1997: 47):

> [O]ne has to refuse that what might present itself in the form of a simplistic and authoritarian alternative: you either use Enlightenment and remain within the tradition of its rationalism; or else you criticize Enlightenment and then try to escape from its principles of rationality. And we do not break free of this blackmail by introducing 'dialectical' nuances while seeking to determine what good and bad elements there may have been in the Enlightenment. (Foucault, 1997: 120)

Hence, following this line of argument, it is possible to maintain that Foucault's thought does not represent a complete abandonment of modernity. Moreover, the critique of modernity carried out by him involves a movement of self criticism that is characteristic of the modern project. In this sense, Foucault's critique of modernity is coherent with the critical legacy of the Enlightenment. However, as Habermas (1998) has pointed out, there is a point in which Foucault's arguments lack the coherence that has been stated here.

## Habermas's defence of modernity

The Foucault/Habermas debate has been addressed by many authors from several points of view (for a detailed revision of this debate see Ashenden and Owen, 1999). Rather than focusing on the multiple facets of this debate, what follows will illustrate that Habermas's defence of modernity exposes internal inconsistencies in the critical project as proposed by Foucault. The process of rationalization –which

includes both societal modernization and cultural modernity– is in Habermas's view a necessary condition for any rational critique bestowed upon it, which implies that Foucault's critical project is caught in a 'performative contradiction'. Before further discussing this problematic aspect of Foucault's thought, a brief look at the way in which Habermas articulates the relationship between modern reason and the process of rationalization and critique is presented.

One of the most important contributions of the *Theory of Communicative Action* lies in having succeeded in expanding the concept of instrumental rationality that had hitherto prevailed in critical theories of modernity. Given this classic concept, Habermas proposes a more comprehensive concept of rationality that is not oriented towards reaching goals in an effective and efficient manner, but to the attainment of a consensus reached at communicatively. Indeed, communicative rationality, unlike instrumental rationality:

> *[C]arries with it connotations based ultimately on the central experience of the unconstrained, unifying, consensus bringing force of argumentative speech, in which different participants overcome their merely subjective views and, owing to the mutually of rationality motivated conviction, assure themselves of both the unity of the objective world and the intersubjectivity of their life world. (Habermas, 1997: 10)*

By further developing this concept of communicative rationality, Habermas is able to critically assess the project of modernity, but without abandoning it. Through this concept, conditions of possibility can now be set for a lifeworld capable of sheltering rational action orientations. One of those conditions is the development of worldviews capable of sustaining fully rational structures of understanding that cannot rely on mythical understandings of the world. Thus, cultural traditions must respond to the formal logical conditions imposed by the modern worldview in order that a lifeworld interpreted according to them may become rational.

The concept of lifeworld developed by Habermas responds to the conceptual necessity of a clarification of the conditions under which communicative rationality might be realized. In this sense, it is a concept necessarily complementary to that of communicative action, since it serves to explain the background against which communicative interactions are carried out. The important aspect to understand here is that in spite of having a problematic background in communicative action, in the course of evolution the power to prejudge everyday communicative practice is lost. As a result of this, participants must therefore reach an understanding by means of their own interpretation efforts (Habermas, 1998: 346).

Following Durkheim, Habermas conceives the process of the rationalization of the lifeworld as the differentiation between culture, society and personality. The symbolical reproduction of these elements is carried out through the communicative action in a process of cultural reproduction, social integration and socialization, which reproduce each one of them. Each process can concurrently

be evaluated in three facets: cultural reproduction in terms of the rationality of knowledge, social integration in terms of the solidarity of members, and socialization in terms of greater autonomy and responsibility. However, due to the very process of rationalization, Habermas argues, these functions are interfered.

Is this context Habermas introduces the thesis of decoupling the system from the lifeworld and the former colonization of lifeworld by system. The system is a concept which Habermas uses to refer to the complex teleological actions that led to the material reproduction of the lifeworld through money and power, becoming a separate realm when due to the process of rationalization 'contexts of interaction that have gained autonomy as subsystems and which go beyond the horizon of the lifeworld' (Habermas, 1998: 352). Once this has reached a certain degree of autonomy, the process of social rationalization will be carried out by capitalist modernization systems, through the media of money and power, colonizing the structures of lifeworld, producing what Habermas calls 'Pathologies of modernity':

> [T]he two functional systems of the market economy and the administrative state, which grew beyond the horizon of the political orders of stratified societies, destroyed the traditional life form of old European society to begin with. The internal dynamics of these two functionally intermeshed subsystems, however, also reacts back upon the rationalized life forms of modern society that made them possible, to the extent that processes of monetarization and burocratization penetrate the core domains of cultural reproduction, social integration, and socialization. Forms of interaction shaped by these media cannot encroach realm of life (…) without the appearance of pathological side effects. (Habermas, 1998: 355)

Thus, the pathologies of modernity, which are expressed as a cultural impoverishment, as a weakening of the public sphere and consequent elitism in politics, and as the emergence of a fragmented consciousness, are seen by Habermas as the perverse result of the route followed by the process of social modernization. At this point, the main difference of the critique of modernity developed by Habermas and Foucault, is that for the former the process of social modernization can also be turned into a non-capitalist direction 'if the lifeworld can develop institutions of its own in a way currently inhibited by the autonomous systemic dynamics of the economic and administrative system' (Habermas, 1997: 53).

## Towards two complementary critiques of modernity

Finding a standpoint from which to assess critically both projects is not an easy task. As White (1991) has suggested, one may force Foucault to speak the traditional language to which Habermas belongs. From this perspective, there would be no alternative but to accept the strength of Habermas's theoretical system and the weaknesses and inconsistencies of Foucault's thought. However, one may also use Foucault´s viewpoint and highlight the lightness with which Habermas treats the issue of power in his theory. However, it can be said that from the point of view

of a critical theory of society, Foucault's and Habermas's insight on the process of modernity can be seen as a complementary attempt to bring the consequences of rationalizing power and social domination to light.

This does not mean overlooking the various differences that have been pointed out by many authors regarding epistemological (identity and reconciliation vs. difference), ethical (universalism vs. acknowledgement of others), and political (deliberative democracy vs. multiple forms of subversion). Both authors attempt to grasp what Honneth has called, 'the social organization of societies '(1993:97) and that in both cases these attempts have led both authors addressing the problem of how contemporary society can reproduce itself by means of mechanism of power and domination. As Foucault cannot be said to be the only author who shares with Habermas his concern on power and domination, a specific reference to be found in his theory should be noted.

On the one and, if we consider the way in which Habermas conceptualizes the link between the process of social modernization, rationalization and communicative action, then the reasons why Foucault's critique of modernity is internally incoherent can be understood, as seen from his (Habermas's) angle. Basically, what Habermas states is that Foucault observes modernity from two different levels, one being the metatheorical and epistemological level, where modern reason is seen as an inherent critical aspect of modernity and the other at an analytical level where there is a identification between reason and power, which cannot be sustained since the only possibility for claiming a critical function for modern reasons would be recognizing the achievement of the process of rationalization that Foucault's criticizes.

There is a point however, where Foucault's reading of modernity is seen as being particularly useful in gaining a better understanding of Habermas's theoretical implications; such as whenever the German author deals with so-called "Pathologies of reasons", which is precisely the diagnosis on which Habermas bases his critique to modernity. As we have seen, Habermas's critical project is based upon a bipolar and rigid distinction between system and lifeworld (or communicative rationality and instrumental rationality). This means that the elements conforming lifeworld cannot be considered as being at the same time part of the systems; that is, that the lifeworld has just an *enabling* sense as a source from which individuals can take the pretentions of validity, but not as a realm that might *determine* actions. The "pathologies" of reasons can only be conceived therefore as a colonization of the lifeworld and not as interpenetration of elements of the two realms. The problem with this strict distinction lies in the fact that it makes difficult to comprehend some of the pathologies that Habermas seeks to examine. Let us take, for example, the case of the weakening of the public sphere that Habermas indentifies as one of the pathologies of modernity. According to Habermas, the process of cultural rationalization led to the segmentation of knowledge of cultural tradition in a group of experts, meaning that much of the population is unable to use the fruits of cultural learning. The point here is that as Habermas conceives this problem as an effect of the colonization of lifeworld by the system, he cannot

give an account of how cultural knowledge is distributed from the world life to become concentrated in a secluded realm of the public community. Even when Habermas explains that scientists follow a performative attitude when acting in the life world and a reflexive attitude when they act as scientists, he cannot explain the fact that just *some* people (and not *other* people) are able to change their performative attitude for the reflexive one.

These aspects can be better understood if Foucault's reading of modernity is considered. As we have seen, Foucault tries to keep the tensions between 'constraining limitations and limitless freedom' while Habermas seems to merely emphasize the latter. This perspective has at least one important implication regarding the problem that may be found in Habermas's theory: it allows making more flexible the bipolar distinction between lifeworld and system, and thereby it allows gaining a deeper insight into the pathologies of modernity as stated by Habermas. Indeed, from a Foucaultian perspective, it is possible to see how the elements of the lifeworld can be used for systems operations. If social relations are relations of power, so phenomena like the weakening of the public sphere can explain not just how some people are able to gain a reflexive perspective (the expert group), but what is even more important, how people legitimize this situation (by drawing not just validity claims but by also holding unquestioned beliefs and values from the lifeworld). From the reflexive perspective would emanate a process of struggle which *also* occurs in the realms of culture (one of the components of the lifeworld).

Finally, Foucault's reading of modernity is, as Owen (1999) has underlined, a way of developing the discursive ethic as proposed by Habermas. Indeed, given this perspective, Foucault can be considered as a critical 'counterweight' of Habermas's theory; meaning both authors can be seen as participants of a communicative action based on mutual recognition, coherent with the 'agonic use of reason' that Foucault finds in the Enlightenment.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this essay has not been to be a definitive version of the dialogues held between Habermas and Foucault. The notion has been put forward that a complementary reading of modernity can be achieved if the strengths of both theories are fully considered. Focusing on the main aspects of Foucault's philosophical project and in some of the elements of the theory of Habermas, the author has tried to suggest that the critique of modernity made by Foucault can be regarded as an ambiguous critique.

Indeed, if the relationship that the critique sets out with the legacy of Enlightenment is taken as criterion, then we can say that the criticism of Foucault is consistent, since this updates the critical component of this tradition itself. However if the relationship that Foucault establish between critical pretensions inherent to modern attitudes and a critical reading of western rationalization is

taken as criterion, then the French author's critical project can be considered as incoherent. The critique of Habermas to Foucault's thought illustrates these inconsistencies. In going beyond these inconsistencies, the author suggests that it is useful supporting Foucault's criticism, as it eliminates some of the rigidities of Habermas's theoretical framework, useful when analising the pathologies of modernity that the very Habermas mentioned.

In this regards, Foucault's theory can be considered as a critical counterweight to Habermas's critical project and as a way to obtain a balance between 'constraining limitations and limitless freedom'. Since the project of modernity is marked by this tension, it seems reasonable to argue for a complementary reading of modernity that does not try to eliminate neither one nor the other. This is precisely what can be achieved when instead of thinking of either Habermas or Foucault, one thinks of Habermas *with* Foucault.

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