
Review

The limits of scientific reason: Habermas, Foucault, and science as a social institution

John McIntyre,

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The animating issue of the Foucault–Habermas debate of the 1980s—which never actually took place because of Foucault’s untimely death—is well summarized by a question posed by Michael Kelly: ‘Which paradigm of critique—Foucault’s or Habermas’s—is most defensible philosophically and most effective practically, especially in relation to the role of power in the contemporary landscape?’ (1994, p. 2). The dispute between followers and critics of each philosopher revolved primarily around the question of how power affects the presuppositions and consequences of critique, but it also extended to broader comparisons between Foucault and Habermas on concepts such as reason, power, modernity, ethics, and normativity.

John McIntyre’s new book *The Limits of Scientific Reason: Habermas, Foucault and Science as a Social Institution* wants to resist the either/or framing of that debate and offers instead the conciliatory view that these thinkers should be understood as doing different but complementary things. Contra recent work that has emphasized shared postmodern strains in these thinkers (Verovšek, 2022), McIntyre interprets them both as working within the Enlightenment tradition: aiming to change society by understanding it and thereby liberating humans from systems of dependence and domination. Although Foucault radicalized this tradition, McIntyre claims that he did so with resources implicit within the tradition itself. He thus presents these thinkers as two distinct moments within modernity’s reflexive rationality, ‘somewhat in tension but not in conflict’ (p. 254).

The contrast between the two thinkers will likely be more obvious to readers than their commonalities. Habermas seeks to discover what is stable, universal, and necessary, whereas Foucault problematizes all that is presented as stable, universal, and necessary. But McIntyre finds common ground between them through two main moves. First, he downplays Habermas’s transcendentalism and emphasizes how the universal can be linked to the contingent through ongoing contextualization. Once we realize that the universal norms Habermas urges us to accept must always be interpreted and applied by particular communities facing specific



problems, we will see that he is not as far from Foucault as commonly believed. Secondly, he maintains that although Foucault adopts a stance that requires him to step back from normative commitments, he is ultimately not 'less normative' (p. 9) than Habermas. The normativity is to be found in the self-transformation made possible by opening up unforeseen possibilities. Self-questioning is the ethical result of Foucault's critique.

McIntyre develops these ideas through the unifying framework of Habermas and Foucault's critique of scientific reason and its interaction with social institutions, power, discourses, and practices. The book dedicates three chapters to each thinker, followed by a final chapter comparing their views on key themes. McIntyre writes clearly and lucidly on issues which are difficult to render without jargon. Not coincidentally, the book is enjoyable to read. Although the book offers many perceptive observations that advance the literature, the reader must do some work to identify what they are. McIntyre does not clearly tie his points to an overarching argument that might change the common wisdom on these thinkers. Instead, he dips in and out of the vast literature, referencing other works, but often without positioning the book's argument with respect to them and only occasionally engaging with others' views.

McIntyre is a sympathetic reader. He reconstructs the texts he studies in the best possible light and does not try to catch these thinkers out or claim easy victories. He meticulously goes through their *oeuvre*, selecting their most defining contributions and judiciously discussing their significance and their limitations. He aims to show how their critiques of science remain relevant and illuminating even as he offers what he calls a meta-critique of their critiques.

So what are the titular limits of scientific reason? For Habermas, science is just one form of reason characterized by its technical orientation toward prediction and control. It is reliable for its intended purposes and governed by the imperative of efficiency. While the interest in controlling nature is a value orientation, science itself is neutral and merely follows the technical rules around which it is organized. Habermas's concern is that scientific reason has become equated with reason *per se*. It has spilled beyond the proper limits of instrumental action and infiltrated others spheres more appropriately ruled by other forms of knowledge, such as the historical/hermeneutical and the critical, as well as a different form of reason, namely communicative rationality. The remedy, according to Habermas, is to restore the balance between different spheres and different forms of reason.

McIntyre criticizes Habermas by pointing out that his claim about the neutrality of scientific reason misses how the concept of efficiency is determined by social norms and contexts (p. 63). Similarly, what Habermas posits as the species-wide interest in survival that is presupposed by a technical orientation toward nature rests on distinctions such as harmless/harmful, useless/useful, which are value-laden constructions of social and cultural life. Technology in the abstract may be universal, but it is actualized only in specific contexts that are imbued with different



meanings, norms, and values. Here McIntyre draws fruitful insights from the literature in the sociology of science to argue that far from being non-normative, science and technology have normativity built in. He gives the example of Latour's theory of delegation, which maintains that humans have delegated social norms to technologies, which enforce, dictate, or prompt them (p. 64). Such theories involve an intermingling of communicative and instrumental rationalities, which Habermas's theory cannot accommodate, even though McIntyre rightly argues that this is a defining feature of socio-technical systems.

While Habermas aims to insulate his formal-transcendental account from any grounding in power relations, Foucault's critique is that scientific reason can never exist outside of power. Foucault aim is to step outside the 'truth regime' of the sciences as we currently find them and expose their contingent origins. He links the sciences to circuits of power that have constructed new social realities by presenting them as merely natural. McIntyre points out that while Habermas follows Kant in seeking the necessary and universal limits of scientific reason, Foucault tries to show that any particular conception of its limits will be contingent and local. He historicizes rationality and its purported limits and shows that a plurality of scientific rationalities has emerged under different conditions. Each has constructed new binaries of normal/abnormal, which have been used as instruments of social control.

Interestingly, McIntyre points out that while both Habermas and Foucault criticize various forms of scientism, neither challenges the truth of scientific claims within science's own particular form of rationality. While Habermas criticizes the extension of scientific reason beyond its proper limits, Foucault argues that particular frameworks of rules may be arbitrary but the truths within them are not. In fact, Foucault was hesitant about extending his analysis from the human sciences to the natural sciences, focusing on disciplines like psychiatry, whose standing as a science is often contested. McIntyre quotes an interview where Foucault commented on the issue as follows: 'If concerning a science like theoretical, physical or organic chemistry, one poses the problem of its relations with the political and economic structures of society, isn't one posing an excessively complicated question?' (p. 185).

McIntyre does not press on this cagey remark, and while he criticizes each thinker from the perspective of the other, he does not focus on what Habermas and Foucault may both have missed. His passing references to the disciplines of the history, philosophy, and sociology of science, which were influenced by but diverged from these thinkers, suggests a missed opportunity for closer engagement with these literatures.

One of the most interesting observations in the book involves a discussion of an alternative critique of science, which I think serves as an important foil for both Habermas and Foucault. This is the critique that the science we have today represents the values, interests, needs, and priorities of elites and those involved



with the development and design of new technologies. McIntyre traces this view to Marcuse's class-based analysis, although it also has clear affinities with the critiques of feminist philosophers of science who have exposed various forms of male bias within science. The utopian upshot of this alternative line of critique is to open up the possibility for a new and emancipatory kind of science—not just one steered from the outside by democratic deliberation but transformed from within by actors with a new set of values, needs, interests and priorities. Certain strains of the environmental and feminist movements have called for just such a transformation. Could this offer an alternative way of moving beyond the limits of scientific reason?

References

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