Chapter 6
Contested Terrain: Language, Art, and Gender

Habermas’s work of four decades has resulted in an innovative and provocative analysis of contemporary society. Many parts of his social and political theory are contestable and in passing we have already noted some difficulties with specific positions. Moreover, key arguments in his work are in considerable need of further elaboration, a fact often acknowledged by Habermas himself. “I am aware that I have not put forward a mature theory…. It was my concern in writing *The Theory of Communicative Action* to provide the foundation for a project sufficiently fertile to be pursued, as it were, radially, in different directions.”¹ The present work is concerned with Habermas’s substantive portrayal of contemporary society and politics so I will focus more detailed attention on difficulties with these topics. However, before turning in that direction it is worth briefly examining a few of the more prominent areas of criticism of Habermas’s general theory that have some bearing on our main concerns. This should also help clarify some puzzling issues that have accumulated along our way.

Lyotard: Language as Contest

Habermas’s theoretical edifice is crucially founded on the idea that communicative action sustains the coherence of social life. Linguistic practices bind the whole together by maintaining a common sense of what is factually the case, what is normatively appropriate, and on shared subjective evaluations. When this sense of the common is shaken by new experiences, an attempt must be made to restore consensus through reasoned discussion.
Many recent social theorists, associated with the perspective of postmodernism, are deeply suspicious of the very idea of consensus. If consensus is to seek what is common it must necessarily exclude that which cannot be held in common, that which cannot be assimilated. To the extent that consensus is considered necessary to maintaining order, it must engage in a war on the different and thereby become oppressive. The linguistic practices that constitute social life are therefore an arena of contest, a struggle between the assimilated and the different.

Jean-François Lyotard is one of the most prominent to pursue this line of argument against Habermas’s theory, especially in Lyotard’s oft-cited work *The Postmodern Condition*. In this work the immediate concern of Lyotard is to analyze the status of scientific knowledge in the wake of “postempiricist” criticisms of scientific practices. Contemporary philosophers of science dispute the common understanding of the history of science as more or less continuous attempts to refine ever-closer approximations of reality, that is, to create through scientific practice a “mirror of nature.” Instead, these critics argue that the observations of science are always in important respects predetermined by the theories employed. All theories delimit the range of possible observation and therefore all facts are necessarily “theory-laden.” There are no “plain facts.”

Utilizing Wittgenstein’s analysis of language, Lyotard conceives scientific discourse as a kind of “language game.” As in games, scientific discussion is constituted by rules that govern what are legitimate or meaningful utterances, “moves” within the game. Lyotard argues that social life itself is properly characterized as a multiplicity of such language games. That which Weber and Habermas refer to as “cultural value spheres”—the separation of the good, the true, and the beautiful—are actually discrete language games, the utterances of which cannot be translated into each other. “[T]here is no possibility that language games can be unified or totalized in any metadiscourse.” As a consequence, “The social subject itself seems to dissolve in this dissemination of language games.” In effect, Lyotard is restating Weber’s portrayal of modern social life as a struggle among cultural “gods,” now from the standpoint of linguistic analysis.

In this new city of Babel the scientific enterprise itself can no longer be justified by claiming that science contributes to the emancipation of humanity or by other legitimizing narratives. The evaluative or normative language of “emancipation” is inapplicable to the very different language of facts with which science is solely concerned. These discourses are incommensurable with each other.