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The Colonization of Democratic Discourse: A Habermasian Critique of “Crowds on Demand”

Riassunto

Questo articolo esamina *Crowds on Demand*, un'agenzia di pubbliche relazioni statunitense che ingaggia attori pagati come folle, manifestanti e attivisti per fini politici, aziendali e di lobbying. Utilizzando la teoria dell'agire comunicativo e l'etica del discorso di Habermas, mostriamo come tali pratiche distorcano le pretese di validità – significato, verità, sincerità e rettitudine – che costituiscono il fondamento della deliberazione democratica. Ripercorrendo l'evoluzione delle pubbliche relazioni, dall'idea bernaysiana di mediazione etica alla mercificazione della partecipazione civica, sosteniamo che imprese come *Crowds on Demand* rappresentino una forma particolarmente pericolosa di quella che Habermas definisce “colonizzazione del mondo della vita”: strumentalizzando la comunicazione per obiettivi dei clienti e occultando le motivazioni economiche, esse minano i principi stessi dell'etica del discorso che Habermas pone al centro della normatività democratica. Concludiamo che, in assenza di una regolamentazione normativa che distingua l'attivismo che proviene autenticamente dal basso dall'attivismo come *performance*, la democrazia rischia una crisi epistemologica in cui i cittadini non possono più distinguere la partecipazione genuina dalla simulazione strategica.

Abstract

This article examines *Crowds on Demand*, a U.S. public relations firm that hires paid actors as crowds, protesters, and activists for political, corporate, and lobbying purposes. Using Habermas's theory of communicative action and discourse ethics, we show how such practices distort the validity

claims – meaning, truth, sincerity, and rightness – that ground democratic deliberation. Tracing public relations from Bernays’s idea of ethical mediation to the commodification of civic participation, we argue that firms like CoD exemplify a particularly dangerous form of what Habermas calls “colonization of the lifeworld”: by instrumentalizing communication for client goals while hiding monetary motives, they undermine the very basics of the discourse ethics Habermas places at the center of democratic normativity. We conclude that without legal regulation distinguishing authentic grassroots activity from purchased performance, democracy risks an epistemological crisis where citizens can no longer discern genuine participation from strategic simulation.

Parole chiave: Partecipazione fabbricata, etica delle pubbliche relazioni, agire comunicativo, colonizzazione del mondo della vita, deliberazione democratica

Keywords: Manufactured participation, Public relations ethics, Communicative action, Lifeworld colonization, Democratic deliberation

Introduction

Democratic polities are faced with an increasingly complex crisis. This crisis does not affect only those countries which recently underwent democratization¹ but also mature democracies which appear to be less and less capable of delivering on the promises of democracy². A series of terms that seek to provide conceptual clarity to the meaning of the current crisis of democracy have begun to proliferate in recent literature. There is talk of democratic “recession”³, “backsliding”⁴, “erosion”⁵, “death”⁶, “malaise”⁷, to cite just a few examples. This topic is so widely researched that Tom Gerald Daly proposed the term “democratic decay” to indicate the emerging field of studies which examine the “nature of evolving threats to a broad range of democratic systems”⁸. Aligning with the commitments of the

¹ Cfr. Huntington 1991.

² Cfr. Bobbio 1990, Moisés 2019.

³ Salih 2023.

⁴ Waldner & Lust 2018.

⁵ Laebens & Lührmann 2023.

⁶ Levitzky and Ziblatt 2018.

⁷ Nasi 2025.

⁸ Daly 2019, p. 9.

field of studies of democratic decay, this paper aims to provide a critique of the practices of the U.S. based Public Relations firm “Crowds on Demand”, arguing that their practices pose a dangerous risk to democracy.

Jürgen Habermas is a scholar who provides us with a fully developed critical apparatus which can help us navigate the current democratic crisis. Our research begins from one of his key insights: “[t]o conceive of a process as a crisis is tacitly to give it a normative meaning”⁹. Any study that seeks to parse the crisis of democracy must provide a clear analytical framework that begins from the question of normativity. To capture a comprehensive picture of the normative foundations of democracy, this study seeks to give an account of the broader Habermasian philosophical project, beginning from Habermas’s efforts to recover the positive role of reason in modern society. As Williams and Finlayson put it, this project can be understood as an attempt to not throw out “the baby” of modernity, the humanitarian ideals of the enlightenment along with “the bathwater”, the objectifying gaze of instrumental rationality¹⁰. Central to this project, as Craig Calhoun argues, is the attempt to rescue the ideal of the “public sphere” in order to secure “the element of truth and emancipatory potential that it contained despite its ideological misrepresentation and contradictions”¹¹.

While the bourgeois public sphere “was based on the fictitious identity of the two roles assumed by the privatized individuals who came together to form a public”¹² it did contain, at its full development with the advent of constitutionalism, an idealizing element of accessibility to all members of the public¹³ and was “established as a sphere of criticism of public authority”¹⁴. In his *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas denounced Public Relations as fundamentally opposed to this ideal, producing a “refeudalization of the public sphere”:

⁹ Habermas, 1975, p. 1.

¹⁰ Finlayson & Williams 2005, p. 66.

¹¹ Calhoun 1992, p. 3.

¹² Habermas 1989, p. 56.

¹³ Ivi, p. 85.

¹⁴ Ivi, p. 51.

In the measure that it is shaped by public relations, the public sphere of civil society again takes on feudal features. The “suppliers” display a showy pomp before customers ready to follow. Publicity imitates the kind of aura proper to the personal prestige and supernatural authority once bestowed by the kind of publicity involved in representation. [...] Public relations do not genuinely concern public opinion but opinion in the sense of reputation. The public sphere becomes the court before whose public prestige can be displayed – rather than in which public critical debate is carried on¹⁵.

This refeudalization affects the public sphere not only in terms of the relationship between companies and consumers, but also in terms of the relation between the state and its citizens. Since PR seeks to establish in the citizenry a link between their decisions as customers and the public interest, “the state has to ‘address’ its citizens like consumers”¹⁶. Later on, in *Between Facts and Norms* Habermas argues that the public sphere is “dominated by mass media and large agencies, observed by market and opinion research, and inundated by the public relations work, propaganda, and advertising of political parties and groups”¹⁷. Nonetheless, Habermas remains optimistic about the resilience of the public sphere, arguing that “[p]ublic opinion can be manipulated but neither publicly bought nor publicly blackmailed”¹⁸.

This paper aims to show that the practices of Public Relations in recent decades – as exemplified by our case study – have become more and more pernicious, positioning themselves directly in opposition to democratic principles, despite the calls of public relations theorists to integrate Habermasian discourse ethics as normative guidelines for the professional practices of PR¹⁹.

¹⁵ Ivi, pp. 195, 200-201.

¹⁶ Ivi, p. 195.

¹⁷ Habermas 1996, p. 367.

¹⁸ Ivi, p. 364.

¹⁹ Cfr. e.g. Grunig & Hunt 1984; Pearson 1989; Grunig & Grunig 1992; Grunig & White 1992; Meisenbach 2006; Burkart 2018.

In the first section, this paper will reconstruct Habermas's efforts to escape the *aporia* of instrumental reason which Horkheimer and Adorno argue to be the product of enlightenment rationality. The second section follows the Habermasian effort to reach a post-metaphysical foundation for morality through the theory of communicative action and discourse ethics. The third section explains Habermasian social theory in order to provide a basis for the concept of "crisis of democracy" as a social crisis. In the fourth section we trace the contemporary evolution of public relations into an industry of manufactured participation, tracing its roots from Edward Bernays's ethical vision of public relations as a mediator between private and public interests to the present-day institutional logic of firms that commercialize collective action by organizing and mobilizing crowds for clients' political and economic objectives. In the fifth section We apply Habermas's discourse ethics to critically assess the practices of "Crowds on Demand," arguing that while ethical models of organizational communication (such as Meinsbach's and Pearson's) emphasize dialogic participation and mutual understanding, CoD's activities exemplify strategic action that instrumentalizes speech and participation, thus undermining sincerity, truthfulness, and democratic legitimacy by transforming communicative acts into marketable performances serving predetermined client goals. In our conclusion we retrace our steps through Habermasian theory, assessing the social aspects of the practices of CoD and whether Habermas's optimism over the public sphere's resilience is warranted, if these practices were to remain unsanctioned.

1. *The Habermasian Project: a Post-Metaphysical Recovery of Reason*

The philosophy of Jürgen Habermas can be read as an attempt to recover the role of rationality as the bedrock of modern society. As he explains in *A Reply to my Critics*, his intention is one of developing a "theory of rationality" that builds upon the traditions of critical theory which extend "from Kant through Hegel to Marx, and from Marx through Peirce

and Dilthey to Max Weber and George Herbert Mead”²⁰. As Joel Whitebook explains, a central theme of this endeavor is determining “the proper amount of discontinuity, as it were, between capitalism and a free society”²¹. Habermas believes that reason can still constitute the means through which we can pursue emancipation. His philosophical project is in certain ways a response to, and a continuation of the Frankfurt School’s “implicit and often ignored moral dimension” – but eschewing the pessimistic conclusions of *The dialectic of Enlightenment*²², which denounced the Enlightenment as “totalitarian”²³:

For enlightenment is totalitarian as only a system can be. Its untruth does not lie in the analytical method, the reduction to elements, the decomposition through reflection, as its Romantic enemies had maintained from the first, but in its assumption that the trial is pre-judged. When in mathematics the unknown becomes the unknown quantity in an equation, it is made into something long familiar before any value has been assigned. Nature, before and after quantum theory, is what can be registered mathematically; even what cannot be assimilated, the insoluble and irrational, is fenced in by mathematical theorems²⁴.

Horkheimer and Adorno argued that the enlightenment, through its orientation toward the expansion of knowledge of the material world and its interest in molding nature through technological means, led to the affirmation of instrumental rationality as the dominant form of understanding. This form of rationality distances human beings from nature at the conceptual level: in order to capture nature through the means of abstraction, it transformed nature into “a mere undifferentiated resistance to the abstract power of the subject”²⁵. In their reading, bourgeois subjectivity sought to liberate human beings from both the Catholic and the pagan understanding of the world as possessing a given, pre-determined order²⁶: reason becomes

²⁰ Habermas 1982, p. 232.

²¹ Whitebook 1979, p. 68.

²² Finlayson & Williams 2005, p. 76.

²³ Horkheimer & Adorno 2002, p. 4.

²⁴ Ivi, p. 18.

²⁵ Ivi, p. 70.

²⁶ Ivi, p. 70.

the means through which the subject “arranges the world for the purposes of self-preservation”²⁷. What provides unity to the natural world is thought, which organizes the world as a system through the Kantian paradigm of reason – understood as the use of “one’s own understanding without direction from another”. Because reason “recognizes no function other than that of working on the object as mere sense material in order to make it the material of subjugation”²⁸, the subject imposes upon the world an objectifying gaze:

Both Odysseus and Crusoe deal in totality: the former measures it out; the latter fabricates it. They can do so only in total isolation from all other human beings, who appear to both men only in estranged forms, as enemies or allies, but always as instruments, things²⁹.

Adorno and Horkheimer describe the trajectory of this process of objectification of the natural world as one which is oriented toward emancipation from what Kant called the “self-imposed minority” but which goes farther than expected. Here, there are at least three developments that the two theorists identify which we must mention in order to give at least an impressionistic picture of their pessimist appraisal of the enlightenment. First, the “autonomy of reason” takes the form of the market economy, which “was at once the prevailing form of reason and the power which ruined reason”³⁰:

With the development of the economic system in which the control of the economic apparatus by private groups creates a division between human beings, self-preservation, although treated by reason as identical, had become the reified drive of each individual citizen and proved to be a destructive natural force no longer distinguishable from self-destruction³¹.

Second, at a more fundamental level, reason’s subjective apprehension of the world as objects denies being to what

²⁷ Ivi, p. 65. Horkheimer and Adorno point to «[t]he somber writers of the early bourgeois period, such as Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Mandeville, who spoke up for the egoism of the self» at p. 71.

²⁸ Horkheimer & Adorno 2002, p. 70.

²⁹ Ivi, p. 49.

³⁰ Horkheimer & Adorno 2002, p. 70.

³¹ Ivi, p. 71.

cannot be rationally explained, to what cannot be “penetrated by knowledge”. In this reading, Kantian philosophy leads to a nullification of both subject and object because the subject itself, as an “abstract self” can only relate to the world only as abstraction, as that which can be catalogued, leading to a fundamental impasse in which “[t]he more completely the machinery of thought subjugates existence, the more blindly it is satisfied with reproducing it”³². Third, Horkheimer and Adorno insist upon the price paid in this process of dominating the world through the means of reason, arguing that “[i]n humanity’s self-abasement to the *corpus*, nature takes its revenge for the debasement of the human being to an object of power, to raw material”³³. The totalitarian character of reason is ultimately expressed on the body, which can no longer be conceived as an entity with a soul³⁴. Through objectification, the emancipatory project of the enlightenment brings us to a condition in which “[h]uman beings are so radically estranged from themselves and from nature that they know only how to use and harm each other”³⁵.

Being conscious of Horkheimer and Adorno’s thesis that “[f]reedom in society is inseparable from enlightenment thinking”³⁶, Habermas attempts to show that the *aporia* which the two philosophers argued to be inherent to the enlightenment was actually better understood as the consequence of a fundamental inadequacy in their account of reason³⁷. In short, he argues that Horkheimer and Adorno have come to a dead end of theory where reason destroys itself because their presuppositions were “rooted in the philosophy of consciousness, fixated on the relation of subjectivity and self-preservation”³⁸. What Habermas means by “philosophy of consciousness” is a philosophical paradigm that is traced back to the mind-body dualism of Descartes³⁹

³² Ivi, p. 20.

³³ Ivi, p. 193.

³⁴ Ivi, p. 194.

³⁵ Ivi, p. 211.

³⁶ Ivi, p. xvi.

³⁷ Finlayson & Williams 2005, p. 8.

³⁸ Habermas, 1984, p. 366.

³⁹ Ivi, p. 387.

and which presumes that philosophy can grasp being “from an extramundane position and on the basis of principles discovered in the very structure of reason”⁴⁰.

Habermas offers a critique of Horkheimer and Adorno which revolves around the concept of “instrumental reason”, which was first introduced by Horkheimer by the name of “subjective reason” as opposed to “objective reason”. The latter designates a conception of reason “that conceived of the human world as part of a cosmological order”⁴¹. Habermas points out that Horkheimer agrees with Weber’s conception of the *disenchantment of the world*⁴², which Horkheimer depicts as the advent of subjective reason over objective reason. In the modern era, objective reason, underpinned by theological beliefs, is no longer sustainable: the subject becomes the only referent for knowledge, thus “sacred knowledge and worldly wisdom are dissolved into subjectivized objects of belief”⁴³. Habermas notes that Horkheimer and Adorno sought to deepen Weber’s analysis through Georg Lukács’ concept of reification, the process through which relations between human beings acquire the perceived objectivity of things⁴⁴. Habermas shows that the authors of the *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* radically alter Lukács’ concept of reification, detaching it from the historical context in which is placed by Lukács, and projecting it back in time “behind the capitalist beginnings of the modern age into the very beginnings of hominization”⁴⁵. Habermas argues that by extending reification to the origins of humanity, asserting that “reason became the instrument for domination of human and extrahuman nature by man [...] from its very beginnings”⁴⁶, Horkheimer – in his *Eclipse of Reason* – risks

⁴⁰ McCarthy, 1982, p. 59.

⁴¹ Habermas 1984, p. 130.

⁴² Ivi, p. 346.

⁴³ Habermas 1984, p. 347.

⁴⁴ Lukács 1971, p. 83. Lukács defines reification in the following terms: «a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a ‘phantom objectivity’, an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people».

⁴⁵ Habermas 1984, p. 366.

⁴⁶ Horkheimer 1974, p. 176.

collapsing the concept of reason into instrumental reason, leading to a fundamental impasse. If reason is essentially instrumental, fundamentally oriented to self-mastery and self-preservation “as an absolute end”⁴⁷, what can justify rational critique? Habermas formulates this impasse as follows:

The “dialectic of enlightenment” is an ironic affair: it shows the self-critique of reason the way to the truth, and at the same time contests the possibility “that at this stage of alienation the idea of the truth is still accessible”. [...] It is the task of critique to recognize domination as unreconciled nature, even within thought itself. [...] How could it do so if thought is always identifying thought, tied to operations that have no specifiable meaning outside the bounds of instrumental reason – all the more so today when, with the triumphal procession of instrumental reason, the reification of consciousness seems to have become universal?⁴⁸

Habermas seeks to overcome this *aporia* through a commitment to what he maintains to be the “program of early critical theory”, that being the “exhaustion of the paradigm of the philosophy of consciousness”⁴⁹. In order to achieve rational understanding of the world we must leave behind the cartesian subject and the world of objects he inhabits “in favor of the paradigm of linguistic philosophy – namely, that of intersubjective understanding or communication”⁵⁰. Instrumental rationality, Habermas argues, must be understood as “part of a more encompassing *communicative rationality*”⁵¹. Social life is sustained not only by instrumental rationality as a tool of governing the natural and the social world, but also by communicative rationality, which concerns “the intersubjective relation that speaking and acting subjects take up when they come to an understanding with one another about something”⁵².

The shift to linguistic philosophy requires us to reinterpret the role of philosophy, no longer a privileged discipline, but one that can “enter into a cooperative relation” with the social

⁴⁷ Habermas 1984, p. 380.

⁴⁸ Ivi, pp. 382-383.

⁴⁹ Ivi, p. 386.

⁵⁰ Ivi, p. 390.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*.

⁵² Ivi, p. 392.

sciences⁵³. This has to be undertaken in recognition to the fact that modernity has brought forth science, positive law and secular ethics as “three moments of reason crystallized without help from philosophy”⁵⁴. In order for such a transformation to occur, philosophy must relinquish the monopoly to truth claims, and thus become post-metaphysical, assuming the role of “interpreter, in which it mediates between expert knowledge and everyday practices in need of orientation”⁵⁵. Philosophy thus engages with the other sciences through a “division of labour”:

[T]hese sciences take up the pretheoretical knowledge of competently judging, acting, and speaking subjects, as well as the collective knowledge of traditions, in order to get at the most general features of the rationality of experience and judgment, action and mutual understanding in language. In this context, reconstructions undertaken with philosophical means also retain a hypothetical character; precisely because of their strong universalistic claims, they are open to further, indirect testing⁵⁶.

Post-metaphysical thinking is understood by Habermas as a prerequisite for a social theory which can justify reason as a category of thought and as a way of relating to the world. Through the prism of post-metaphysical thought “[t]he social sciences can enter into a cooperative relation with a philosophy that has taken up the task of working on a theory of rationality”⁵⁷. As Alexander Seran argues, “[t]he focal point in post-metaphysical thinking is that of communicative action”⁵⁸. As we shall argue in the next section, it is through the lens of communicative action that Habermas is able to confront the fragmentation of reason that characterizes modernity and thus overcome the limitations of the philosophy of consciousness in accounting for the unity of reason.

⁵³ Habermas 1987, p. 397.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁵ Habermas 1992, p. 50.

⁵⁶ Habermas 1987, p. 399.

⁵⁷ Ivi, p. 397.

⁵⁸ Seran 2011, p. 38.

2. *Universal pragmatics and discourse ethics*

According to Habermas “[r]eaching understanding is the inherent telos of human speech”⁵⁹. This seemingly simple claim about language’s purpose is what allows Habermas to move beyond the philosophy of consciousness: by grounding rationality in intersubjective communication rather than the isolated subject’s relation to objects, he can preserve reason’s emancipatory potential without falling into the Frankfurt School’s pessimistic impasse. It is this pragmatic function of speech that allows Habermas to develop his concept of communicative rationality into a theory of communicative action – building upon Weber’s theory of action – which as we will later see informs his social ontology.

Habermas identifies two types of action on the basis of the attitude of social actors, which can be either success-oriented or oriented toward mutual understanding. On the one hand, strategic-instrumental action is oriented toward an end that is predetermined by the social actor and which involves a calculation of which means are best suited to enact its success, understood as “the appearance in the world of a desired state”⁶⁰. On the other hand, communicative action is oriented toward reaching common understanding in the form of “an agreement that meets the conditions of rationally motivated assent”⁶¹. As we can attest from his claim that language has a telos, Habermas argues that communicative action is primary, that “the use of language with an orientation to reaching understanding is the original mode of language use” and thus the instrumental use of language as a means to reach predetermined, opaque ends is “parasitic” on communicative action⁶².

The pragmatic function of speech forms the basis for a speech act theory which proposes to “take up questions that have previously been dealt with in the framework of transcendental philosophy” because it aims to analyze invariable features of

⁵⁹ Habermas 1984, p. 287.

⁶⁰ Ivi, p. 285.

⁶¹ Ivi, p. 287.

⁶² Ivi, p. 288.

speech, which transcend historical contexts⁶³. This theory – which is initially termed “universal pragmatics”⁶⁴ and later “formal pragmatics” – informs Habermas’ social theory as well as his political theory and legal philosophy, along with his ethics⁶⁵. Universal pragmatics intends to reconstruct the system of rules that governs the use speech acts⁶⁶, what Habermas calls the “general presuppositions of communicative action”⁶⁷. Universal pragmatics understands communicative action in the following terms:

[I]n communicative action a speaker selects a comprehensible linguistic expression only in order to come to an understanding with a hearer about something and thereby to make himself understandable. It belongs to the communicative intent of the speaker (a) that he perform a speech act that is right in respect to the given normative context, so that between him and the hearer an intersubjective relation will come about which is recognized as legitimate; (b) that he make a true statement (or correct existential presuppositions), so that the hearer will accept and share the knowledge of the speaker; and (c) that he express truthfully his beliefs, intentions, feelings, desires, and the like, so that the hearer will give credence to what is said⁶⁸.

Habermas builds on J. L. Austin’s theory of language use. Austin argues that we can differentiate between cognitive utterances, which are statements about the world (e.g. “It’s raining”) from speech acts through which the speaker accomplishes something in the world (e.g. “Please give me the umbrella”)⁶⁹. Habermas, drawing from John Searle’s *Reply to Derrida*, argues that these two features are common to any utterance⁷⁰. When engaging in communicative action the participants necessarily relate to certain “domains of reality” which are discursively constructed, mostly in an implicit manner. Subjects, in their position of speaker or hearer, inhabit

⁶³ Habermas 1987, p. 119.

⁶⁴ Cfr. Habermas 1976, pp. 155-167.

⁶⁵ Edgar 2006, p. 163.

⁶⁶ Habermas 1976, p. 156.

⁶⁷ Habermas 1979, p. 1.

⁶⁸ Habermas 1984, pp. 307-308.

⁶⁹ Cfr. Austin 1975.

⁷⁰ Edgar 2006, p. 72. Cfr. Searle 1977.

four “domains” or “segments of reality” to which any speech act relates: “*external nature, society, internal nature and language*”⁷¹. Communication entails a series of presuppositions about these domains. As Thomas McCarthy explains:

The act of utterance situates the sentence in relation to external reality (“the” world of objects and events about which one can make true or false statements), to internal reality (the speaker’s “own” world of intentional experiences that can be expressed truthfully/sincerely or untruthfully/insincerely), and to the normative reality of society (“our” social life-world of shared values and norms, roles and rules, that an act can fit or fail to fit, and that are themselves either right-legitimate, justifiable or wrong). Regarded from this pragmatic point of view, it becomes clear that speech necessarily (even if often only implicitly) involves the raising, recognizing, and redeeming of “validity claims”⁷².

Validity claims are central to communicative action. Insofar as anyone wants to engage with an interlocutor to reach an understanding, they will inevitably raise four validity claims: meaning, truth, sincerity and rightness. Any utterance in the context of communicative action is at least implicitly asserting: (1) its meaningfulness, which entails choosing “a comprehensible {*verständlich*} expression so that speaker and hearer can understand one another”; (2) its claim of corresponding to a true state of affairs, corresponding to the intent of the speaker in “communicating a true {*wahr*} proposition”; (3) its sincerity – also translated as truthfulness – an inter-subjective orientation on the part of the speaker “to express his intentions truthfully {*wahrhaftig*} so the hearer can believe the utterance of the speaker”; (4) its rightness, the correspondence to what is assumed to be a norm of behavior, which means that “the speaker must choose an utterance that is right {*richtig*} so that the hearer can accept the utterance and speaker and hearer can agree with one another in the utterance with respect to a recognized normative background”⁷³.

One of the main purposes of this theory is to deal with the fragmentation of knowledge that is characteristic of modernity.

⁷¹ Habermas 1979, p. 66.

⁷² McCarthy 1979, xviii.

⁷³ Habermas 1979, pp. 2-3.

As discussed earlier, modernity brought forth a differentiation of knowledge through a differentiation of aspects of rationality characterized by a detachment from metaphysical claims of universality. Habermas speaks of a “magnificent «one-sidedness»” of modern rationality and of the need to confront two central questions which this differentiation puts forth: “(i) whether a reason that has objectively split up into its moments can still preserve its unity, and (ii) how expert cultures can be mediated with everyday practice”⁷⁴. This concern for the fragmentation of knowledge is not merely a theoretical or methodological issue of social theory, although these two aspects are indeed central to the Habermasian project. From this perspective, what Habermas aims to show is that “[t]he unity of rationality in the multiplicity of value spheres rationalized according to their inner logics is secured precisely at the formal level of the argumentative redemption of validity claims”⁷⁵.

What the issue of the unity of rationality also points to is a key concern of democratic theory, because “[t]he theory of communicative action aims at the moment of unconditionality that, with criticizable validity claims, is built into the conditions of processes of consensus formation”⁷⁶. This dynamic of the formation of consensus through communicative action takes center stage in Habermas’s democratic theory developed in *Between Fact and Norms*:

Democratic procedure, which establishes a network of pragmatic considerations, compromises, and discourses of self-understanding and of justice, grounds the presumption that reasonable or fair results are obtained insofar as the flow of relevant information and its proper handling have not been obstructed. According to this view, practical reason no longer resides in universal human rights, or in the ethical substance of a specific community, but in the rules of discourse and forms of argumentation that borrow their normative content from the validity basis of action oriented to reaching understanding. In the final analysis, this normative content arises from the structure of linguistic communication and the communicative mode of sociation⁷⁷.

⁷⁴ Habermas 1987, pp. 397-398.

⁷⁵ Habermas 1984, p. 249.

⁷⁶ Ivi, p. 399.

⁷⁷ Habermas 1996, pp. 296-297.

Universal pragmatics, configured as a theory of communicative action, is central to Habermas's democratic theory which aims at bridging the gap between "facticity" and "normativity". The tension between facts and norms, Habermas argues, exists not only at the level of positive law – as tension between legitimacy and coercion – but also at the more fundamental level of "language and its use":

With the concept of communicative action, which brings in mutual understanding as a mechanism of action coordination, the counterfactual presuppositions of actors who orient their action to validity claims also acquire immediate relevance for the construction and preservation of social orders; for these orders exist through the recognition of normative validity claims. This means that the tension between facticity and validity built into language and its use turns up again in the dynamics of the integration of communicatively socialized individuals⁷⁸.

The key aspect of this tension lies in the "counterfactual" nature of the presuppositions that actors must take in order to reach an understanding oriented to coordinated action. What Habermas is pointing to is that in order for actors to reach an understanding that forms the basis for coordinated social action the speaker must assume that the hearer agrees with them at the level of all the validity claims that are involved in communicative action: for example, it is assumed that the hearer understands what the speaker means through a certain utterance. But – and this is the key to understanding this argument – the speaker has no factual guarantee for this: if the speaker were to say "bring me the umbrella" he is presuming that the hearer knows what an umbrella is. But this is not guaranteed: the speaker might be saying "bring me the umbrella" to somebody who does not speak English. This idealizing aspect of communicative action becomes clearer if we take into consideration other validity claims as well. The same utterance assumes that the speaker has a right to ask the hearer to perform the action of bringing the umbrella. Communicative action exists insofar as "participants in interaction gain the freedom to say "yes" or "no" to validity

⁷⁸ Ivi, p. 17.

claims”⁷⁹: the hearer might contest the normative rightness of the utterance, for example responding “I am not your butler, go get it yourself”. Only the idealizing character of validity claims can account for the reasons that actors act the way that they do. In our example, the one who requested the umbrella might answer: “You are not my butler, but *I am* an old man and my back hurts” and insofar as the interlocutor does not contest the normative rightness of helping elders, or the sincerity of the old man, or the factual statement of the man’s old age, we would expect him to go get the umbrella. Even so, no true guarantee exists. The speaker cannot be certain these presuppositions hold, yet must act as if they do.

The theory of communicative action is developed by Habermas into what he calls Discourse Ethics. As Finlayson and Williams neatly put it, successive communicative action usually implies that the hearer does not contest validity claims: but once validity claims are put under scrutiny, such as in our example, “the agents are propelled by disagreement from an action situation into a discourse situation”⁸⁰. Discourse ethics seeks to offer a theory of morality from a post-metaphysical perspective, and thus providing those rules of argumentation which make discourse possible. He identifies two principles that can accomplish this task, the principle of Universalization (U) and the principle of Discourse ethics (D):

(U) All affected can accept the consequences and the side effects its general observance can be anticipated to have for the satisfaction of everyone’s interests (and these consequences are preferred to those of known alternative possibilities for regulation). [...]

(D) Only those norms can claim to be valid that meet (or could meet) with the approval of all affected in their capacity as participants in a practical discourse⁸¹.

These two principles establish that moral norms must be defensible publicly, in a free communicative exchange, so that no morality can be established without “argumentation among

⁷⁹ Habermas 1987, p. 73.

⁸⁰ Finlayson and Williams 2005, p. 41.

⁸¹ Habermas, 1990, pp. 65-66.

a plurality of participants”⁸². But as our example suggests, communicative action is successful insofar as the social order exists and continues to be upheld: normativity and facticity are inextricably linked. As Habermas explains, when engaging in communicative action “actors in the roles of speaker and hearer attempt to negotiate interpretations of the situation at hand and to harmonize their respective plans with one another”⁸³. But this harmonization, which Habermas argues allows for “social order in general to emerge”⁸⁴ does not occur in a void. In other words, as Habermas points out, his theory of communicative action must be able to account for “how social order is supposed to emerge from processes of consensus formation that are threatened by an explosive tension between facticity and validity”⁸⁵. This leads us to a brief explanation of what he calls “the first step in reconstructing the conditions of social integration”, that being the concept around which Habermasian social ontology revolves: the “*lifeworld*”. This engagement with the concept of the lifeworld will permit us to better understand Habermas’s democratic theory as well as explain his theory of social crises.

3. Modern society and its crises: approaching the crisis of democracy from a Habermasian perspective

At this point we can begin to sketch out the concepts that undergird Habermas’ position on the normative foundations of democracy⁸⁶, beginning from the broader question of social

⁸² Ivi, p. 66.

⁸³ Habermas 1996, p. 18.

⁸⁴ Ivi, p. 18.

⁸⁵ Ivi, p. 21.

⁸⁶ Some have argued that Habermas’s *Theory of Communicative Action* (TCA) does not envision the possibility for genuine democracy because it consists in a “normatively minimalist” account of society constructed on a functionalist perspective (Baxter, 2011). In opposition to this argument, Geoffrey Flynn proposes that “we should not ignore important precursors in TCA for a normative theory of democracy” which was then later developed in *Between Facts and Norms* (2014, p. 3). Against Baxter’s claim that within the system-lifeworld model of society “genuine democracy was literally inconceivable” (2011. p. 87), Flynn argues that

ontology. In other words, in this section we will focus on Habermas' theory of what society is and what holds it together. In this way, we can proceed to understand how Habermas understands social crises as well. Habermas proposes that societies should be understood "*simultaneously* as systems and lifeworlds"⁸⁷. But before proceeding to discuss what these two terms mean in the habermasian lexicon, we must take note of Luke Goode's keen observation that for Habermas:

The distinction between 'society' and 'nature' is not one of institutions versus trees and birds. 'Nature' refers to the domain of facticity that comes into existence whenever we take up an 'objectivating' attitude to something (institutions and even other individuals routinely become 'second nature'). 'Society' is constituted whenever we take up a first person plural orientation towards something⁸⁸.

The system-lifeworld dyad can be conceived in two ways: as concepts and as conceptual strategies. In the latter connotation, the dyad refers to two distinct perspectives on social theory: an internal perspective, which focuses on the internal perspective of actors, on their intentions, "start[ing] from communicative action and construes society as a lifeworld"⁸⁹ and an external perspective which views society from a functional perspective, focusing on the unintended consequences of social action, "present[ing] society after the model of a self-regulating system"⁹⁰.

in *Theory of Communicative Action* "Habermas used the system-lifeworld model to describe the more freedom-guaranteeing waves of juridification as, in each case, the legal embodiment of the outcome of successful social and political movements that were rooted in the lifeworld and successfully 'bridled' the system" (2014, p. 4). Furthermore, Flynn highlights the fact that Habermas gives particular attention to social movements and voluntary association in *Between Facts and Norms* and *Theory of Communicative Action* in their capacity to "channel [...] normative impulses that arise in lifeworld contexts" (Flynn 2014, p. 4. These two aspects of continuity between the two major works of Habermas thus indicate that the social ontology developed in the earlier *TCA*, and built around the dyad lifeworld-system, already constitutes "a formidable way of articulating realistic possibilities for mobilized public spheres to embody 'the radical content of democratic ideals' (*BFN*: xliii)." (Flynn, 2014: 9).

⁸⁷ Habermas 1987, p. 118.

⁸⁸ Goode 2005, p. 64.

⁸⁹ Habermas 1987, p. 150.

⁹⁰ Ivi, p. 151.

As briefly discussed earlier, the lifeworld provides the context for communicative action. Habermas describes it “as represented by a culturally transmitted and linguistically organized stock of interpretive patterns”⁹¹ that provides actors with “unproblematic, common, background convictions that are assumed to be guaranteed”⁹². The lifeworld is a fundamental social and cognitive resource upon which social actors draw upon mostly in an unconscious and uncontested manner. As the context for communicative action it provides “the transcendental site where speaker and hearer meet, where they can reciprocally raise claims that their utterances fit the world (objective, social, or subjective), and where they can criticize and confirm those validity claims, settle their disagreements, and arrive at agreements”⁹³.

Central to Habermas’s concerns is how the lifeworld is reproduced in its three main components, namely culture, society and personality⁹⁴. This reproduction ensues through communicative action in each of the three levels: because communicative action is a dynamic process through which social actors come to an understanding by either affirming or contesting validity claims, the reproduction of the lifeworld occurs “between the extremes of a mere reduplication of and a break with tradition”⁹⁵. Given that the lifeworld articulates itself across the three levels of culture, society and personality, communicative actions can be understood not only as “processes of interpretation” in which actors arrive at a common understanding over cultural knowledge but also as “processes

⁹¹ Ivi, p. 124.

⁹² Habermas 1987, p. 125.

⁹³ Ivi, p. 126.

⁹⁴ Ivi, p. 138. Note: Habermas gives precise definitions to each term: “I use the term culture for the stock of knowledge from which participants in communication supply themselves with interpretations as they come to an understanding about something in the world. I use the term society for the legitimate orders through which participants regulate their memberships in social groups and thereby secure solidarity. By personality I understand the competences that make a subject capable of speaking and acting, that put him in a position to take part in processes of reaching understanding and thereby to assert his own identity.”

⁹⁵ Habermas 1987, p. 139.

of social integration and socialization”⁹⁶. For Habermas, social crises occur at the level of disturbances of these three processes of cultural reproduction, social integration and socialization. When cultural reproduction fails, the lifeworld cannot provide social actors with sufficient cognitive resources to capture novel situations within the pre-existing schema of rational knowledge about the world, leading to “a loss of meaning and [...] to corresponding legitimation and orientation crises”⁹⁷. When social integration fails, actors do not recognize the need to coordinate their actions in respect to the social identities that are recognized as legitimate by the lifeworld, leading to a loss in solidarity between members of social groups which manifests “in *anomie* and corresponding conflicts”⁹⁸. When socialization fails, actors no longer acquire the “*generalized competences for action*” which insure that their “individual life histories are in harmony with collective forms of life”, resulting in “psychopathologies and corresponding phenomena of alienation”⁹⁹.

Up until now we have explained what social crises are, but we have not explained what causes these crises in the first place. Here, the concept of “system” comes to the fore. Whereas society-as-lifeworld can be understood as being defined by communicative action, society-as-system can be understood as being defined by “purposive activity” or, in other words, action that “takes place through the medium of goal-directed interventions into the objective world”¹⁰⁰. As Marcelo Neves clarifies, Habermas understands the concept of system, insofar as it concerns modern societies, as “the ensemble (*Zusammenhang*) of instrumental actions that are mediated by money and power”¹⁰¹. Habermas argues that the stages of social evolution identified in sociology “are marked by the appearance of new systemic mechanisms

⁹⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁹⁷ Ivi, p. 140.

⁹⁸ Ivi, pp. 140-141.

⁹⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁰ Habermas 1987, p. 232.

¹⁰¹ Neves 2017, p. 635.

and corresponding levels of complexity”¹⁰². But as complexity increases, these new social mechanisms “steer a social intercourse that has been largely disconnected from norms and values”¹⁰³ giving way to unprecedented social situations:

Actors have always been able to sheer off from an orientation to mutual understanding, adopt a strategic attitude, and objectify normative contexts into something in the objective world, but in modern societies, economic and bureaucratic spheres emerge in which social relations are regulated only via money and power. Norm-conformative attitudes and identity-forming social memberships are neither necessary nor possible in these spheres; they are made peripheral instead¹⁰⁴.

At this point we can give an account of how Habermas understands social crises. In modern society the root cause of social crisis is what he calls “colonization of the lifeworld” which he understands to be an unintended and pathological consequence of the “uncoupling of system and lifeworld”, a process in which “the lifeworld, which is at first coextensive with a scarcely differentiated social system, gets cut down more and more to one subsystem among others”¹⁰⁵.

This thesis reframes the issues of instrumental rationality identified by Horkheimer and Adorno in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* in new terms. In Habermas’s account, through the process of rationalization modernity brings forth “a heightening of systemic complexity, which becomes so hypertrophied that it unleashes system imperatives that burst the capacity of the life-world they instrumentalize”¹⁰⁶. Reification is explained as pertaining to modern capitalist societies in terms of a “colonization of the lifeworld” which

sets in when the destruction of traditional forms of life can no longer be offset by more effectively fulfilling the functions of society as a whole. The functional ties of money and power media become noticeable only to the degree that elements of a private way of life and a cultural-political form of life get split off from the symbolic structures of the lifeworld through the

¹⁰² Habermas 1987, p. 153.

¹⁰³ Ivi, p. 154.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁵ Habermas 1987, p. 154.

¹⁰⁶ Ivi, p. 155.

monetary redefinition of goals, relations and services, life-spaces and life-times, and through the bureaucratization of decisions, duties and rights, responsibilities and dependencies¹⁰⁷.

This excursus into Habermas's social theory will prove its usefulness in the following sections, as we begin to confront the task at hand, that of providing a critique of the practices of the public relation firm Crowds on Demand. As we shall argue shortly, the practices of Crowds on Demand and other firms that hire people for the purposes of changing mass perception around issues of public interest can be interpreted as particularly dangerous forms of "colonization of the lifeworld" because they directly and deliberately counter fundamental aspects of discourse ethics.

4. From Public Relations to "Crowds on Demand": The Institutional Logic of Manufactured Participation

Now that we have given an account of Habermas's crisis theory we can finally begin to confront the task we have set for ourselves, that of a critical engagement with the practices of "Crowds on Demand" from the normative perspective of deliberative democracy. In this section we will attempt to answer a series of key questions pertaining to: (1) what "Crowds on Demand" is; (2) what is the institutional context in which they operate. In the next section we will focus on the following questions: (3) how their practices affect communicative action at the level of social actors; (4) how their practices affect the democratic process from the standpoint of deliberation.

"Crowds on Demand" (CoD) is a Public Relations firm, founded by Adam Swart in 2012. As the "who we are" page on their website states, Swart's reason for founding Crowds on Demand as a UCLA college student was the realization that crowds have the power "to shape people's perception". On the one hand crowds can affect public perception positively, as "[t]he same speech by a politician has a different meaning if it

¹⁰⁷ Ivi, p. 322.

is given in front of 1000 people instead of 10". On the other hand, crowds can negatively impact the public's perception of events, as "[a] routine conference becomes 'controversial' when 50 protesters are outside"¹⁰⁸. As the name suggests, CoD offers a specific selection of services that they market in deliberately provocative language:

Just like Dunkin is no longer just donuts, Crowds on Demand is no longer just a provider of crowds. We have put together campaigns that have secured multi-billion-dollar cable carriage agreements, ended forms of anti-LGBT discrimination by insurance companies, obtained approvals for critical energy infrastructure, and shaped large public company mergers & acquisitions. We create movements from the ground up on something as simple as a local building and zoning issue or as complex as an international business dispute. We create advocacy groups and staff them with suitable leadership. We also provide phone banking and mass-emailing services with global capabilities¹⁰⁹.

It is important to point out that Crowds on Demand is not an anomaly: it exists as part of an industry where the practice of hiring people as advocates for political and commercial causes is common. As Edward T. Walker, author of *Grassroots for Hire*, one of few studies on the inner workings of public affairs companies engaged in the cultivation of "grassroots" movements¹¹⁰, points out:

Grassroots for Hire reveals an industry of consultants who work on behalf of companies, powerful interest groups, labor unions, and other organizations to shift public policies in their clients' favor by mobilizing mass participation. Their clients include many of the most powerful multinationals: 40 percent of Fortune 500 firms appear as their clients. The reach is vast: the leading campaign by an average consulting firm targets over 750,000 Americans for participation¹¹¹.

¹⁰⁸ <<https://crowdsondemand.com/who-we-are>>.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹¹⁰ Walker points to a few earlier studies that seek to understand the inner workings of "grassroots" consulting: Lyon and Maxwell 2004; Lord 2000a, 2000b, 2003; Mezner and Nigh 1995; Getz 2002; Schuler 2002; Marcus and Irion 1987; Fleisher 2002.

¹¹¹ Walker 2014, p. 7.

Public relations has a long history, and this particular industry of consultants who mobilize the participation of the public on behalf of moneyed interest has emerged quite recently compared to it, in the early 1970s¹¹². The term “public relations” appeared as early as 1804 “referring to Connecticut Congressman Jeremiah’s official duties as a politician”¹¹³. The emergence of the public relations industry can be traced as far back as 1900¹¹⁴: during the twentieth century the practices that we now call “public relations” gradually developed in the United States, between the world of mass politics and of industry so that “[b]y the 1920s, public relations practitioners, though they were not yet called that, were established in corporations”¹¹⁵. The principles – along with the name that designates “Public Relations” as a profession – were explicitly formalized through the work of Edward Bernays as early as 1923, in his famous *Crystallizing Public Opinion*¹¹⁶.

What interests us in particular is familiarizing the reader with a few important arguments that Bernays, known as “the father of public relations” presents in his mature work, titled *Public Relations*, published in 1952. Bernays defines the term “public relations” as being characterized by three meanings: “(1) information given to the public; (2) persuasion directed at the public to modify attitudes and actions and (3) efforts to integrate attitudes and actions of an institution with its publics and of publics with that institution”¹¹⁷. What is most interesting to us is the grounds upon which Bernays seeks to legitimize this activity, arguing that “there is a philosophical reason for the existence of public relations” which he ties directly to modernity, stating that public relations have a fundamental role in dealing with the “increased maladjustment and tension” brought about by a technological progress that “has advanced more rapidly than human relations”:

¹¹² Ivi, p. 52.

¹¹³ Myers 2021, p. 33.

¹¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹¹⁵ Myers 2021, p. 102.

¹¹⁶ Walker 2014, p.

¹¹⁷ Bernays 1952, p. 3.

There are many reasons for the rise of the new profession of adjustment. Among these are the growing complexity of society, the technical improvement of the media, increased education and literacy, accelerated transportation and communication, which have widened the market for ideas and things, the development and acceptance of the social sciences, the substitution of persuasion and suggestion for threat, intimidation and force, and the extension of the right to vote. Other reasons are the growing movement towards equalitarianism, general support for the concept that private and public interests must coincide, a greater dependence on central government and dependence of the government on mass support¹¹⁸.

Bernays argues that public relations as profession is concerned with “maladjustments” which are characterized by “misunderstanding of realities and communications processes”, which he distinguishes from “conflict based on differing values [which] is part of our competitive system”¹¹⁹. In this way, Bernays is able to argue that public relations can be “a potent tool in the promotion of a better understanding of democracy”¹²⁰, centering around the concept of “enlightened self interest” which is that form of self interest that coincides with the public interest¹²¹. Bernays vindicates the democratic legitimacy of his intellectual program beginning with *Crystallizing Public Opinion* (1923) by stating that:

I believed then [in 1923] and still believe now [in 1952] that public relations can be carried on effectively only on a professional, ethical, and socially responsible basis. Public relations is not a one-way street in which leadership manipulates the public and public opinion. It is a two-way street in which leadership and public find integration with each other and in which objectives and goals are predicated on a coincidence of public and private interest. At the same time, the Council on Public Relations must not forget his obligations to the public as a special pleader¹²².

Bernays insists on the ethical grounding on public relations as a profession tasked with the “high duty and function of integrating society and thus attempting to make a better world

¹¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹¹⁹ *Ivi*, p. 9.

¹²⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹²¹ *Ivi*, p. 4.

¹²² *Ivi*, p. 83.

for all of us” and on the need for government regulation of the profession through legal sanctions¹²³.

5. *A discourse ethics critique of the practices of “Crowds on Demand”*

Bernays’s arguments have had a lasting impact on the field of public relations. For example, Derina R. Holzhausen argues that public relations should be understood as a form of social activism and be put in service of “a radical democracy that ensures equality for all, respect for cultural plurality and requires confrontational intolerance of injustice”¹²⁴. More importantly for us, there have been a number of efforts to ground the ethics of public relations in Habermas’s theory of communicative action¹²⁵.

One work in particular can help us in our task of critically engaging with the practices of Crowds on Demand, because it provides a clear model of ethical behaviour for public relations. In *Habermas’s Discourse Ethics and Principle of Universalization as a Moral Framework for Organizational Communication* Rebecca J. Meinsbach’s provides an ethical framework for evaluating the communication practices of organizations, which is articulated in five steps, from the perspective of the organization as a “rhetor” that engages with civil society as “participants” in discourse. Step 1 concerns the identification and generation of an utterance “that contains claims to normative validity”, which is directly tied to Step 2, the determination of “who is potentially affected by the enactment of the utterance”¹²⁶. The third Step entails the articulation of the claim to the stakeholders, either individuals or organization in a “dialogical manner”¹²⁷. Step 4 entails the actual participation of the stakeholders in such a way as to “ensure the equal recognition of all voices during this

¹²³ Ivi, p. 6.

¹²⁴ Holtzhausen 2012, p. 239.

¹²⁵ Cfr. Burkart 2018, p. 277.

¹²⁶ Meinsbach 2006, p. 46.

¹²⁷ Ivi, p. 47.

process”¹²⁸. Step 5 concerns the formulation of a judgement on the part of the stakeholders “about whether the claim and its consequences are acceptable to all affected and are, therefore, ethical”¹²⁹. Crucially, through the engagement in discourse, the participants, if not reaching a consensus, will at least come to better understand each other’s positions: “[t]he organization can decide to proceed with its plan—that is, stand by its utterance while being aware of the challenges to its utterance so that the stakeholders can make informed decisions about their future interactions with that organization”¹³⁰. These five steps will serve as a basis for our analysis, but they must be integrated by the following considerations made by Ron Pearson on what he calls “communication symmetry”:

A communication environment that promotes dialogue will be marked by mutual understanding among communicators about the actual communication rules in place and mutual satisfaction with these rules. Most importantly, however, one would expect a dialogic communication environment to be marked by accurate understanding of and satisfaction with mechanisms for criticizing and changing rules¹³¹.

Pearson points to a principle which is only implicit in Meinsbach’s work: that dialogic communication exists only insofar as rules of communication are clearly laid out and subject to change. Mainsbach and Pearson’s work is useful to us because it provides a series of parameters through which we can assess the ethical quality of the communicative practices of organizations, but their purview is nonetheless limited because it does not engage with broader ethical concerns for the respect of democratic norms. It is here that Habermas’s democratic theory will prove its strength as a normative basis for critique. Let us consider the following snippet from the Crowds on Demand website:

If you need to hire protesters, we can get a crowd on the street, sometimes within 24 hours time. If you need speakers to present at a council meeting,

¹²⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹²⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹³⁰ *Ivi*, p. 48.

¹³¹ Pearson 1998, p. 84.

we can provide talented and well-spoken individuals to advocate for the cause. We also have a dedicated team of phone-banking staff who can call Congressional Offices and convince government officials to support your cause and help you overcome opposition. If you need lots of letters and emails written from constituents, we have a network of tens of thousands of individuals across the country who can send well-written constituent letters to their representatives¹³².

It is clear that these practices are a form of strategic action. The PR firm works on behalf of paying clients that seek to obtain a specific objective which is predetermined by the clients and presented as a “cause” for which “well-spoken individuals” and “protestors” can advocate for in exchange for money. The individuals involved are objectified in the service of “the cause”: their capacity of engaging in discourse is an asset for whoever hires them through Crowds on Demand, who stresses their competence as “*well-spoken* individuals” or people who “can send *well-written* letters to their representatives”. From the very outset, the engagement in discourse of these individuals is instrumentally oriented towards achieving a goal that is assigned to them in advance, thus undermining first and foremost the sincerity of their validity claims. The success of the strategic action deployed through the services of CoD depends on the capacity of these individuals to simulate sincerity through their capacity of generating meaningful validity claims, hence the insistence on them being “well-spoken”. But there is a certain subtlety in the activities of the “grassroots” consulting industry that is very relevant to our discussion. As Walker argues:

The subsidized public may be one in which elites have become more dominant players, but this need not entail the assumption that incentivized activists are disingenuous. Even if the outcome of their activism is to support the preferences of consultants’ elite clients, this does not necessarily mean that activists are dishonest about their own preferences. Consultants’ goals, instead, are often (although not always) to identify and make alliance with those who have an authentic interest in the cause¹³³.

¹³² <<https://crowdsondemand.com/protests-rallies-and-advocacy>>.

¹³³ Walker 2014, p. 36.

Firms that hire protesters and advocates seek to provide their clients with preferably ideologically aligned advocates so that the sincerity of their validity claims is harder to put into question. In this manner, on the individual level, the normative rightness of validity claims can better align with the requirement for sincerity. The validity claim of truth, that what is being said corresponds to a true state of affairs, also is heavily distorted through the monetary medium, as it is from the very outset directly informed by “the cause”. The clients of CoD are interested in mouthpieces for vehiculating certain bits of information to the public and not others. Let us take into consideration the following “case study” drawn from the Crowds on Demand website:

Crowds on Demand was hired by multiple large non-union firms to push back against new regulations in a deeply labor-friendly state. We successfully lobbied the legislature and the Labor Commission to push back proposed labor regulations.

We created two organizations with associated websites: one conservative site focused on the impact unions have on drastically increasing government spending and one liberal one focused on the racially discriminatory and sexist policies of many unions. We provided phone-bankers and constituent lobby visits associated with the two organizations to lobby conservative and liberal lawmakers and policymakers respectively. Within two months, the proposed regulations were off the table¹³⁴.

What CoD wants to communicate to its prospective clientele is that ideological commitments are not part of the business. They will strategically make use of both sides of the ideological spectrum to create the impression of cross-cutting support or broad opposition to policies in the desired direction. Information is vehiculated selectively on the basis of whichever social actor, thus aligning the content of validity claims in a strategic manner. In this way, CoD aims to demonstrate its capacities to create the impression of public support or opposition to policies along with the effectiveness of such practices. As we can attest from the ways in which CoD’s activities distort the purposes of communicative action in service of predetermined objectives, the framework for ethical communication advocated

¹³⁴ <<https://crowdsondemand.com/protests-rallies-and-advocacy>>.

by Meinsbach and Pearson is manifestly disregarded. There is no dialogical dimension to the way claims are articulated except for the artificially orchestrated interplay between ideological positions. While CoD might identify the stakeholders involved, they seek to ensure that the predetermined objective is reached regardless of the opinions of the stakeholders involved. Given that their aim is to give the impression of public involvement, the rules of participation in the communication environment are deliberately obfuscated, to the point that the broader public is considered insofar as the firm can garner their sympathy through the illusion of grassroots advocacy. Crucially, the activities of CoD directly target the democratic process:

We provide a cost-effective way to lobby government to pass or defeat legislation [sic], push for approval of projects, and influence government in a grassroots manner. We are the ultimate guerilla lobbying and government relations firm¹³⁵.

These practices are diametrically opposed to the normative foundations of democracy in the way Habermas grounds them in discourse ethics, corresponding to “a society in which the political public sphere has been differentiated as an arena for the perception, identification, and treatment of problems affecting the whole of society”¹³⁶. Positioning it as a halfway point between the liberal and the republican conceptions of democracy, Habermas’s model seeks to place discourse as the nexus through which political decisions ought to be achieved, aiming at the “rationalization” of democratic procedures so that “[t]he public opinion that is worked up via democratic procedures into communicative power cannot ‘rule’ of itself but can only point the use of administrative power in specific directions”¹³⁷. But, crucially, this depends on the degree to which the political public sphere remains “unsubverted”, characterized by “*unrestricted communication*”¹³⁸.

¹³⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹³⁶ Habermas 1996, p. 301.

¹³⁷ Ivi, p. 300.

¹³⁸ Ivi, p. 308.

The practices of CoD go beyond what Habermas identifies as “*unavoidable* asymmetries in the availability of information” that characterize the public sphere in terms of “unequal chances to the generation, validation, shaping and presentation of messages”¹³⁹. These practices appear to be strategically oriented to capitalize on these asymmetries precisely what Habermas calls the “*unavoidable* moments of inertia – specifically, the scarcity of those functionally necessary resources on which processes of deliberative opinion- and will-formation significantly depend”¹⁴⁰, in order to directly affect the outcomes of deliberation. These resources Habermas is referring to are the resources of the lifeworld: “a liberal political culture and an enlightened political socialization, above all on the initiatives of opinion-building associations”¹⁴¹. In short, Crowds on Demand is an organization whose business model is based on the ad-hoc creation of “opinion-building associations” with the declared objective of offering to their clients a “cost-effective way to lobby government to pass or defeat legislation”¹⁴². As such it undermines the normative foundations of democratic government, and its activities should be, to put it in the terms of Edward Bernays himself, subjected to Government sanction¹⁴³.

Conclusion

The paper has shown how Habermas’s philosophical project seeks to recover reason’s emancipatory potential by moving away from the framework of the philosophy of consciousness to the paradigm of intersubjective communication, thereby escaping the aporia of instrumental rationality that informed the pessimism of Horkheimer and Adorno. Through universal

¹³⁹ Ivi, p. 325.

¹⁴⁰ Ivi, p. 326.

¹⁴¹ Ivi, p. 302.

¹⁴² <<https://crowdsondemand.com/protests-rallies-and-advocacy>>.

¹⁴³ Bernays 1952, p. 6. Bernays’s recommendation reads: “Government should now step in and apply sanctions that will help this new profession in its high duty and function of integrating society and thus attempting to make a better world for all of us”.

pragmatics and discourse ethics, Habermas establishes that communicative action oriented toward mutual understanding is the primary mode of language use, with validity claims of meaning, truth, sincerity, and rightness forming the necessary presuppositions for reaching democratic consensus. The lifeworld provides the cultural, social, personal and normative resources that enable communicative action, while social crises emerge when system imperatives colonize the lifeworld, subordinating communicative rationality to instrumental purposes mediated by money and power.

Habermas's claim that "public opinion can be manipulated but neither publicly bought nor publicly blackmailed"¹⁴⁴ was written before the emergence of firms like CoD that have systematized the purchasing of apparent public opinion through practices that fundamentally subvert communicative actions toward the achievement of predetermined objectives in such a way as to directly impact legislative procedures and outcomes. Given the pernicious nature of the activities of Crowds on Demand, which are not uncommon in the "grassroots" consulting industry, Habermas's optimism appears to be unwarranted. In our opinion, what appears to be even less warranted is the optimism that the author of *Grassroots for Hire* himself, Edward T. Walker, shares with Habermas. Citing Habermas's aforementioned claim, he affirms that:

The hope for a revitalization of the modern public sphere, expressed by Jürgen Habermas and deliberative democratic theorists today, imagines potential futures in which the interests of capitalist markets and state administrative practices are not so powerful as to close off the independent space of a democratic public sphere rooted in civil society. Theorists expect that these powerful interests will make efforts to "colonize" those spaces for their own purposes through advertising, public relations, and other interventions in public life. However, despite these influences, there are reasons to remain optimistic that the force of organized civil society is likely to limit these colonization efforts, mainly in that the public is attentive to these strategies and often effective at discrediting them¹⁴⁵.

¹⁴⁴ Habermas 1996, p. 364.

¹⁴⁵ Walker 2014, pp. 205-206.

Walker's book, published in 2014, does not directly discuss the practices of Crowds on Demand, founded in 2012, but does recognize that paying protesters is a strategy that PR firms make use of "with some regularity", observing that these paid activists are not necessarily "dishonest about their own preferences" when engaging in paid activism¹⁴⁶. This paper has focused on the activities of CoD in order to show that, even if dishonesty were not present in the activities of protesters *per se*, the fundamental requirements for communicative actions are nonetheless directly countermanded by the way in which paid activism distorts the raising of validity claims and the principles of discourse ethics. With the activity of firms such as Crowds on Demand we are faced with a form of colonization of the lifeworld that directly affects the very foundations of discourse ethics:

Discourse ethics, then, stands or falls with two assumptions: (a) that normative claims to validity have cognitive meaning and can be treated like claims to truth and (b) that the justification of norms and commands requires that a real discourse be carried out and thus cannot occur in a strictly monological form, i.e., in the form of a hypothetical process of argumentation occurring in the individual mind¹⁴⁷.

The claims raised by paid activists cannot be reasonably treated as claims to truth and the communicative practices in which they are involved are not dialogical. As an advertisement for paid activism drawn from Walker's own book recites: "All you really have to do is show up and support our rally. We ask that you DO NOT under any circumstances talk to the press or media on our behalf or discuss anything about your attendance or compensation with them"¹⁴⁸. As this snippet suggests, firms that hire activists seek to hide their involvement in the activities of the paid activists, suggesting that Habermas is right in arguing that "[p]ublic opinions that can acquire visibility only because of an undeclared infusion of money or organizational power lose their credibility as soon as these sources of social power are

¹⁴⁶ Walker 2014, p. 36.

¹⁴⁷ Habermas 1990, p. 68.

¹⁴⁸ Walker 2014, p. 35.

made public”¹⁴⁹. But this statement, immediately followed by the claim that “[p]ublic opinion can be manipulated but neither publicly bought nor publicly blackmailed”¹⁵⁰ is overly optimistic in so far as it fails to account for the sheer prevalence of paid activism in the public sphere. If companies such as Crowds on Demand are given free rein to act as they please, democracy risks being destined to a phantasmagoric fate, where the public is uncertain of what is and what is not real, precisely because occasionally the “sources of social power” behind successful lobbying efforts will be uncovered. Unless the basic conditions for the fostering of discourse are secured, the crisis of democracy, in the “form of a disintegration of social institutions”¹⁵¹ will deepen, as the very possibility of distinguishing authentic public deliberation from purchased performance collapses.

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¹⁴⁹ Habermas 1996, p. 364.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵¹ Habermas, 1975, p. 3.

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