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Introduction to Apel

[Editorial introduction to an article by Apel published in *European Journal of Social Theory* 3(2), pp. 131-36]

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Karl-Otto Apel is one of Germany's best known late twentieth-century philosophers. Since his work has over a number of decades contributed to fruitful exchanges between philosophy and the social sciences, including social theory, he is by no means unknown to social scientists, social theorists or sociologists (e.g. Outhwaite 1975, 1987; Fay 1975, 1987; Keat and Urry 1975; Giddens 1976; Dallmayr and McCarthy 1977; Bleicher 1980; Joas 1985, 1992) – notwithstanding his own self-image as a 'transcendental' or even 'pedantic philosopher'. Under these circumstances, the only justification for this brief introduction is to provide a context for the following article by taking a longer view to recall some of these points of contact and to underscore the significance of Apel's various contributions.

Apel first came to the attention of social scientists during the 1960s in the field of the philosophy of the social sciences with two distinct yet related lines of argumentation. In the first instance, he presented a critique of neo-positivism in the context of his confrontation of the respective positions of Heidegger and Wittgenstein (Apel 1967a). Of interest here was also his critical evaluation of Peter Winch. Secondly, Apel put forward novel arguments regarding communication as the foundation of the social sciences (1968, 1971, 1972). These lines of argumentation were, on the one hand, only the beginning of a sustained contribution to the controversy about understanding and explanation which culminated in the publication of a major work in the late 1970s (Apel 1979b, 1984a). On the other, they became intertwined with arguments regarding the status of critical theory in the context of the Positivist Dispute (1973a: II: 128-54), which brought Apel to the fore as the other leading figure in Frankfurt besides Habermas – one, moreover, on whose leading ideas and criticism Habermas in crucial respects depended (Habermas 1983). Apel (1973b, 1977, 1979a) developed his own version of the critical reconstructive social sciences within the framework of a tripartite theory of science which has in the meantime become more generally accepted (e.g. Harvey and McDonald 1993; Sarantakos 1993; Neuman 1997). In fact, according to Kettner, 'Apel has contributed more than any other critical theorist to the ongoing project of a comprehensive critical theory of science' (1996: 260). Simultaneously, Apel also acted as internal critic of the Frankfurt tradition. On the one hand, he focused on the 'Frankfurter Krankheit' – as he called it in a seminar – of transposing epistemology directly into social theory and, on the other, argued in favour of extending democratic theory. That he was not defending some traditional notion of epistemology, however, but actually worked towards a thoroughgoing and far-reaching transformation of philosophy (1973a, 1980), pointing toward a post-metaphysical and post-empiricist position, was already suggested by his doctoral dissertation (1950). Apart from these epistemological and methodological concerns, his long-standing interest in language and communication, going back at least to his 'Habilitationsschrift' (Apel 1963), was decisive in redirecting Habermas's thinking in the late 1960s and early 70s and also fed into the subsequent development of the communication and discourse theory of society and of discourse ethics (Habermas 1997), both of which are still having a considerable impact on the social sciences today.

Besides these earlier more or less well-known commitments, however, Apel has made yet a range of other contributions that possess significance for the social sciences. Among them are two of growing contemporary interest that merit special mention here. The theme of the following essay, which is highly topical today, is one of them. But it is the other to which I want to refer first.

Unique among German philosophers, Apel played a leading role in the mediation of Continental and Anglo-American thought. Through his defence of Heidegger and Wittgenstein against objectivism, he was the first to have brought together hermeneutics and the analytical philosophy of language. And through his appropriation of Peirce, whom he introduced and made known in Germany (1967b/1970, 1981), he transformed transcendental philosophy semiotically – i.e., in terms of the threefold sign relation – to create his own 'transcendental-pragmatics' (Apel 1976, 1998; Dorschel et al. 1993). It is in these ways that he was able to spearhead what has become known as 'the pragmatic turn' (Böhler et al. 1986), embracing also the hermeneutic turn, which transformed analytical philosophy and structuralism and also proved to have had a pervasive international influence. This is perhaps the dimension of Apel's work that is of the greatest general contemporary social scientific significance. By means of his bridging transcendental-pragmatics (or cognitivist-discursivism), particularly the achievement of the pragmatic turn without giving up the idea of a critical social science, Apel prepared the ground for the key unresolved theoretical and methodological problem that starkly stares social scientists in the face today – in Germany (e.g. Beck 1992; Joas 1992; Eder 1993, 1996), Sweden (Eyerman and Jameson 1991), Britain (e.g. Giddens 1986; Delanty 1997, 1999a), Ireland (Strydom 1999a), France (e.g. Boltanski and Trévenot 1999; Bénatouïl 1999), the United States (e.g. Hoy and McCarthy 1994; Calhoun 1996; Fuller 1993; Mayhew 1997) as elsewhere: that is, the problem of how to relate critical sociology and pragmatic sociology in a considered and fruitful manner. In so far as Apel below spells out his transcendental-pragmatics, particularly what he in this context calls his 'complementaristic approach', this dimension of his work is strongly present in the following article.

The main theme of this article is of course of special interest. The topicality of globalisation does not require any comment today, and it is increasingly recognised that ethics has become an unavoidable problem in sociology (e.g. Beck 1992; Offe 1992; Schluchter 1991; Münch 1991; Bauman 1993; Tester 1993; Touraine 1995; Smart 1995; Strydom 1999b, 1999c; Delanty 1999b). In Apel's work, the dual theme of globalisation and ethics in fact goes back a considerable period. As early as the late 1960s, he started to pursue both aspects of this theme in a manner that helped to clear the way for what became known as the theory of globalisation, on the one hand, and for the characteristic late twentieth century concern with a new planetary macro-ethics of responsibility, on the other (Apel 1973a: II, 1978, 1980, 1984b, 1996: II). Indeed, along with Hans Jonas from whom he differs in important and sociologically significant respects, Apel has been instrumental in formulating the late twentieth century concept of a global ethics of responsibility (1988, 1990, 1991, 1993, 1996: II). In conjunction with this dual theme, other aspects of Apel's work are also noteworthy, not only because all of them have always been intertwined, but also in view of their contemporary social theoretic relevance. One of these is the conceptual pair of 'risk' and 'responsibility' (Apel 1973a: II: 360-61, 1980: 227-28) which he employed already in the 60s, and another is the problem of reflexivity which has figured centrally in his writings from the start and in the following article forms the relation between globalisation and ethics. During the past decade, of course, both of these have been attracting more and more attention in social theory in the

wake of Beck's thesis that the collectively organised irresponsibility of the risk society is becoming increasingly exposed in proportion as modernity becomes reflexive.

Apel's article marks another fecund contact point between philosophy and the social sciences which harbours a great potential for the development of the latter in the new millennium. It is to be hoped that the numerous fruitful exchanges that Apel's previous writings stimulated during the past decades will be reflectively continued by social scientists, social theorists and sociologists in the wake of the publication of the present article.

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