Habermas and the Meaning of the Post-Secular Society: Complementary Learning Processes

Michael R. Welton, Department of Educational Studies, Athabasca University, Athabasca, Canada

ABSTRACT

This essay argues that if social justice is to prevail in our world, we must understand the post-secular nature of our globalized society as a prerequisite for moving beyond “might is right” to national and international relations that heed all voices towards evidence-based interaction. The authors post-secular world and post-metaphysical world-orientation requires of us complementary learning processes. This exploration engages Habermas’ thinking post-secularity as the framework for the pedagogical project that replaces the speechlessness of violence with the building of the conversable world.

Keywords: Complementary Learning Process, Fundamentalism, Modernization, Neo-Liberal, Post-Secularism, Postmetaphysical, Public Sphere

1. INTRODUCTION: THE SHREDDING OF THE CONVERSABLE WORLD

In his impassioned essay, “Faith and knowledge,” Jurgen Habermas (2005) contrasts the speechlessness of violence with communicative action. “Faced with a globalization imposing itself via deregulated markets, many of us hoped for a return of the political in a different form—not in the original Hobbesian form of the globalized security state, that is, in its dimensions of political activity, secret police, and the military, but as a world-wide civilizing force. What we are left with, for the moment, is little more than the bleak hope for a cunning of reason—and for some self-reflection. The rift of speechlessness strikes home, too. Only if we realize what secularization means in our post-secular societies can we be far-sighted in our response to the risks involved in a secularization miscarrying in other parts of the world” (p. 328). The “fatally speechless clash of worlds” is already present malevolently in the world. The negation of speech or communicative action shreds the world into little tattered pieces. But mumbled speech or unwillingness to try very hard to be conversable is also part of the problem we face in our world.

Our times are excessively and extraordinarily uneasy. Thoughtful pundits smell World War III in the acrid air: their mood is dark.

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sarcastic and tinged with nihilism. The Obama regime appears to be willing to face off with Russia, risk war in the European theater through precipitating the Ukrainian crisis (Mearsheimer, 2014), pressing NATO troops to the Russian border and engineering insane forms of sanction on selling goods to Russia. Yet again in the dark summer of 2014, Israel has massacred approximately 2,500 citizens, including many women and children, and smashed up the infrastructure of schools, businesses and hospitals. The Gaza is an open-air prison of no escape. We have watched planes, tanks and warships bomb and mutilate territory occupied by the Israeli state itself, leading us to imagine that this would be similar to the Canadian state bombing First Nations reserves. And in September, 2014, the US appears willing to violate international law, national sovereignty and borders to make war against ISIS in Syria. The US is in quite the predicament: they want to overthrow both the Assad regime in Syria and crush ISIS fighters there and in Iraq. Enormous international suspicion clouds US intentions in the Middle East. During his visit to Korea in August, 2014, Pope Francis said: “Today we are in a world at war everywhere. A man said to me, ‘Father, we are in World War III, but spread out in small pockets everywhere. He was right,’ Francis said at the time (Russia Today, September 13, 2014). The rift of speechlessness courses through these situations. Who can sleep well at night?

Indeed, the entire Habermasian project of shared citizenship and communicative action as legitimate ground for evolving learning processes appear to be in jeopardy. The ideology of “war on terror” renders us mute before power and money. Terrorism is a communicative pathology that leads us to “become alienated from each other through systematically distorted communication” and “not recognize each other as participating members of a community” (Habermas, as cited, Borradori [2003], p. 35). In this essay I want to argue that this recognition of each other—the precondition for parties to learn something new—requires that we grasp the post-secular nature of our globalized society. This focus on naming our world as post-secular may help clear the pathway for breaking the rift of speechlessness and beginning the hazardous pedagogical journey of “mutual perspective-taking” (ibid., p. 37). Hazardous, because it takes place in a geo-political world of degrading discrimination, violence, social inequality, pauperization and marginalization. For readers of IJAVET, I must point out that I am not delving into the details and pedagogical procedures of complementary learning processes. I want to establish only that these processes are required of our global civilization once we understand we live in a post-secular world in the first place.

2. WHAT IS MEANT BY THE POST-SECULAR WORLD?

Our attention turns to Habermas’ seminal essay, “What is meant by a ‘post-secular society’? A discussion on Islam in Europe in Europe: the faltering project (2009). This text is based on a lecture delivered on March 15, 2007 at the Nexus Institute of the University of Tilburg in the Netherlands. Habermas acknowledges that the term “post-secular” is a controversial one. “A ‘post-secular’ society must at some point have been a ‘secular’ condition” (p. 59). Strictly speaking, the term is “only applicable to the affluent societies of Europe or to countries such as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, where people’s religious ties have steadily loosened, and quite dramatically so since the end of the Second World War. In these regions, the awareness of belonging to a secularized society had become more or less universal” (ibid). Steve Bruce (2006) points out that: “Even in the U.S., routinely held up as the great exception, churchgoing is now about 20 percent, down from about 50 percent in 1950….Most churches have abandoned their supernatural focus, and the therapeutic benefits of faith (once firmly second place to placating God and ensuring salvation) are now advertised as the main point” (p. 36). For me, the claim of American religious exceptionality is shadowed by a deepening and troubled sense that American religion is unable to temper the increasingly militarized
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