Democratic Solidarity in a Secular Age? Habermas and the “Linguistification of the Sacred”

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Secularization, according to Max Weber’s classic theory, shatters social cohesion. But if this is so, what are the prospects for democratic solidarity in a secular age? In this article, I examine the response given by one of democracy’s leading intellectual architects, Jürgen Habermas. Whereas Weber thought that rational modernity enfeebles solidarity, Habermas believes that rational discourse itself inherits religion’s moral-aesthetic power, a process that he calls the “linguistification of the sacred.” Habermas’s stress on language, I argue, is partly justified. Yet as I show by tracing linguistification’s roots to Émile Durkheim’s sociology of religion and Walter Benjamin’s theory of language, Habermas’s program for solidarity falls short in one crucial respect. While shared discourse cultivates a basic interpersonal tolerance, it lacks the power to transport us beyond our narrow interests. Nonrational and prelinguistic aspects of our psychology remain decisive. Consequently, democratic solidarity in a secular age remains an unfinished project.

Social solidarity—a measure of the ties binding a group of people together in moral commitment and motivation—is crucial for democracy. Those who feel solidarity with others in their society are more willing to tolerate diverse beliefs and lifestyles, support redistributive policies that cut against their economic interests, and accept the outcome of the democratic process even when they lose. They are more likely to sacrifice for fellow citizens and less likely to exploit their vulnerabilities (Durkheim [1893] 2014; Stjernø 2005). Creating and sustaining solidarity has consequently been among the core aims of democracy’s institution builders since its modern inception. The writers of the Federalist Papers, for example, looked for ways to cultivate “national sympathy” and “connection” throughout the young United States (Hamilton et al. [1787] 2003, 58). Their French counterparts elevated fraternité alongside liberté and égalité in their own nascent republic. More recently, contemporary political theorists, after long neglecting solidarity, have begun to think seriously about the concept’s meanings, uses, and sources (Ackerly 2018; Banting and Kymlicka 2017; Bayertz 1998; Gould 2004; Kohn 2016; Kolers 2016; Lesch 2018; Scholz 2008; Shelby 2005).¹ Yet across the world democratic forms of solidarity are in retreat. Antidemocratic and illiberal solidarities are on the rise. Nationalism has seen a resurgence throughout the world, including in the United States. And the European Union, designed to prevent war by deepening transnational bonds of interest and affection, has in recent years experienced serious setbacks, of which the so-called Brexit referendum is only the most dramatic. Democratic values, it now appears, are a far more fragile and inconstant source for social cohesion than was once hoped.

In this article, I take the present crisis as a spur to rethink the foundations of democratic solidarity via an original reading of one of its leading intellectual architects: Jürgen Habermas.

¹ Although most theorists have stressed solidarity’s necessity, there is an important minority strand of political thought that downplays the need for solidarity. See Levy (2017).
Since the end of the Second World War, Habermas has been among the most powerful advocates for a social bond that eschews nationalism and reinforces liberal-democratic values. One frequently discussed dimension of Habermas’s program is civic and political, a “constitutional patriotism.” When citizens participate jointly in democratic practices like deliberating, protesting, and voting, he argues, they will come to feel ownership over the laws they help create and a sense of attachment to their co-creators (Habermas 1992, 1998, 1996, 1998, 2001, 2008, 2009). Constitutional patriotism has seen a host of critics and advocates (Abizadeh 2007; Booth 1999; Calhoun 2002; Canovan 2000; Markell 2000; Müller 2007; Stilz 2009; Yack 2012). Recent events have made plain its vulnerabilities. Yet equally important for Habermas’s theory is a second but often overlooked dimension of solidarity, one focused not on politics but on our more quotidian dialogical relations with others. Here the key point is played by discourse: as we engage in a daily renegotiation of our norms and beliefs, Habermas argues, we establish a layer of solidarity with our interlocutors. We become committed to their welfare and motivated to sacrifice for their needs (Bohman 1996; Chambers 1996; Rehg 1997). Indeed given that citizens in today’s large-scale and bureaucratized states participate in politics only infrequently, this discursive aspect of Habermas’s theory may be more significant, in practice, than any abstract constitutional loyalties.

At the same time, this second part of Habermas’s program introduces important questions and ambiguities. How, exactly, can dialogue foster moral commitment? What resources exist within discourse to push us beyond our egoistic concerns? And perhaps most importantly, does it truly provide an adequate basis for our social bond?

Habermas’s stress on dialogue, I argue below, is partly justified: shared discourse does get us some of the way to solidarity. Yet as I show by tracing Habermas’s argument to its roots in Émile Durkheim’s sociology of religion and Walter Benjamin’s theory of language, Habermas’s program for solidarity falls short in one critical respect. While shared discourse cultivates a basic level of tolerance, it fails to inspire moral commitment and motivation. It lacks the power to transport us beyond our narrow interests, be it to redistribute resources, admit refugees, or help our neighbors. For such forms of solidarity, aesthetic and otherwise nonlinguistic aspects of our psychology are decisive. To be sure, others have previously criticized Habermas on a similar score, targeting his “unremitting proceduralism,” his abstraction, and his neglect of affect and intuition (Benhabib 1986, 324; Bernstein 2005, 107; Dryzek 2001; Strong and Sposito 1995; Young 1990). But none to my knowledge have shown what I do here: that Habermas’s linguistic program fails internally. It is insufficient, by its own standards, for securing solidarity. The problem, I argue, lies in one of Habermas’s key concepts, an idea that, while central to his theoretical apparatus, remains puzzling and neglected: the “linguistification of the sacred” (die Versprachlichung des Sakralen).

The linguistification of the sacred is Habermas’s response to an enduring anxiety: Can democratic solidarity persist in a secular age? While aspects of this question can be traced back to Marx and Nietzsche, its foremost diagnostician was Max Weber. Secularization, according to Weber’s classic theory, shatters social cohesion. The uncoupling of religious from political authority and the disenchantment of the world yield a fractured modernity, one in which equally groundless sources of value—often peddled by charismatic leaders—compete for the loyalties of a rudderless populace (Weber [1917] 1958). While Weber’s empirical claims have had both supporters and detractors (Berger 1969; Bruce 2002; Casanova 1994; Katzenelson and Jones 2010; Martin 1978), his normative prognostications have inspired two consistent worries. The first of these is the loss of solidarity. Such a concern is based on what Charles Taylor (2007) has called a “subtraction story”: there is something religion provides for our social bond that is irredeemably lost as societies secularize. A second worry is that secularization will lead to bad forms of solidarity. According to this view, religion’s withdrawal will not merely hollow out societal cohesion. Its psychological and social functions will instead be reoccupied by antidemocratic forms of solidarity, including hypernationalism, fascism, and “political messianism” in various forms (Gray 1995; Talmon 1960).

One response to these anxieties has been reactionary: if secularization threatens solidarity, according to this view, the proper response is to reverse it. Thus, in the words of one well-known proponent of this position, the German jurist Ernst...

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2. Although the evidence is not decisive, empirical studies seem to cast doubt on the idea that political participation itself leads to solidarity (Mansbridge 2003; Segall 2005). For a more optimistic view, see Mansbridge and Parkinson (2013).

3. Although die Versprachlichung des Sakralen might be more precisely translated as the “speechification” or “verbalization” of the sacred, I have retained its rendering as “linguistification” in order to remain consistent with the translation used in most Anglo-American Habermas scholarship.

4. “Secularization” and “secular age” as well as their cousin “secularism” are distinct and debated concepts, and it would be beyond the scope of this article to elaborate on all of their possible meanings. Given that my focus is on Habermas, therefore, I follow his own largely Weberian understanding of secularization as (1) the separation of politics and religion as spheres of authority, legitimacy, and meaning; (2) the decline and fracture of religious participation and belief; (3) the rationalization, intellectualization, and disenchantment of worldviews. For more on the contested meaning of all three concepts, see de Vries and Sullivan (2006).
Wolfgang Böckenförde (1976), democratic states must find a “new togetherness” through a prepolitical religious “homogeneity.” A second response has been to deny that there was ever anything especially vital about religion for social cohesion. Theorists need refer to solidarity’s religious past only for the questions it raises, not the answers it gives (Blumenberg [1966] 1983). A final response, although uneasy with traditional belief and theology, nonetheless acknowledges that something in religion has social and psychological significance (Kearney and Zimmermann 2016). Legal theorist Ronald Dworkin (2013), for instance, has suggested that we practice a “religion without God,” rejecting the deity but affirming moral objectivity and the sublimity of nature; philosophers Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Kelly (2011) have proposed a new polytheism and a reenchantment of the world.

The linguification of the sacred furnishes Habermas with a fourth response, a way to acknowledge religion’s historical contributions to solidarity while eschewing both reactionary and neoreligious alternatives. Even so, it has often been overlooked in studies of Habermas’s discourse ethics. I seek to reverse this oversight, and in the process I make three principal contributions.

First, I demonstrate the centrality of linguification for Habermas’s theory of secular-democratic solidarity. Whereas Weber thought that the rationalizing forces of secular modernity created a disenchanted world and an enervated morality, Habermas believes that rational discourse itself inherits (i.e., “linguifies”) something of religion’s motivational potency. Even in the absence of religion’s emotive force, individuals will feel bound to their norms and inspired to follow them, even against their own interests, because of rational forms of argumentation alone (Habermas [1999] 2003, 7). My second contribution is to show how Habermas justifies this claim. When seeking a psychology to describe our solidarity, Habermas turns to Durkheim’s concept of the “sacred.” Yet when assembling his theory of linguification, Habermas cannot draw on Durkheim’s account, for Durkheim offers no hint that the moral force of the “sacred” can be transposed into discourse (Habermas [1981] 1987, 46). Habermas, I show, looks instead to Walter Benjamin, a thinker with his own embryonic theory of linguification but whose influence on Habermas’s thought has been almost entirely overlooked.

Finally, I reveal a potential problem with linguification. Benjamin’s theory, I argue, substantiates the first function Habermas assigns to discourse: a kind of basic interpersonal respect and exclusion of force. Yet discourse’s second proposed function for solidarity—the feeling of binding moral commitment to others and the motivation to sacrifice for them—is nowhere to be found in Benjamin’s theory. These facets of our solidarity ultimately remain, as they do in Durkheim, products of our prelinguistic and nonrational moral psychology.

The linguification of the sacred represents the most highly developed attempt to lead a secularizing humanity away from myth, tribalism, and irrationalism. And in important ways it succeeds. That it falls short in certain respects, therefore, certainly does not mean abandoning Habermas’s larger aims. Far from it: for those of us who share Habermas’s commitment to liberal democracy, who support the Enlightenment’s emancipatory project, and who reject a turn to nationalism or Böckenförde’s reactionary religious homogeneity, the lesson must be not disenchantment but renewed determination. If communicative rationality needs a prelinguistic and nonrational supplement, such a supplement would not exclude Habermas’s achievements. Democracy needs rational discourse now more than ever. No doubt, nonrational forms of attach-
ment come with dangers. As the American historian Richard Hofstadter (1965) famously showed, bad solidarities always lurk just beneath democracy's sensible surface. Yet as Hofstadter also demonstrated, neglecting these parts of the human psyche is also dangerous. For if the deep structures of our moral motivation remain stubbornly nonrational, ignoring them risks their pathologization by illiberal and antidemocratic forces. What is needed, therefore, is not a replacement for rational discourse. It is a clear-eyed awareness of its frailties. Before answering the question of how to achieve democratic solidarity in a secular age, we must uncover why it remains a question at all. If democracy is to weather both present and future crises, this seems like a good place to begin.

**WEBER AND THE DANGERS OF DISENCHANTMENT**

Among Habermas’s enduring concerns is the possibility of normativity in modernity: Why do people feel compelled to be moral? How do they experience their obligations? What brings them to act for the sake of others? His answers to these questions are grounded in his revision of Weber’s secularization narrative in Habermas’s landmark work of social theory, *The Theory of Communicative Action* ([1981] 1984). Here Habermas must balance two competing priorities: he aims to avoid Weber’s picture of modernity as a kind of amoral neo-polytheism (Lukes 1982; Rasmussen 1990), and he wants to find resources with which to motivate individuals to live peacefully in society and feel bound by their normative obligations. Habermas believes that the only way he can do this is by developing a theory of democratic solidarity grounded in reason.

Habermas stresses rationality as a basis for solidarity because of two concerns about invoking the nonrational psyche: first, while judgments about nonrational experiences can be subject to rational discussion, such experiences themselves cannot, and second, he believes that the entanglement of ethics and politics with forms of intuition, affect, and aesthetic—including especially those rooted in religion—will inevitably lead to pathological consequences. These include the loss of autonomy, the failure of intellectual emancipation, and indulgence in irrational (and frequently violent) forms of social action.

His treatment of myth offers an exemplary case. Myth, Habermas acknowledges, is a highly effective tool for social integration, offering a reservoir of shared meanings capable of uniting widely scattered groups of people. Yet it does so at a great cost. For myths place certain elements of social reality beyond criticism, disarming individuals of their ability to ponder and interrogate the structures of their society (Habermas [1981] 1987, 159). One of myth’s pathologies is personal, leading to a displacement of our critical faculties. Myths foster what Durkheim refers to as a “ritual mentality”: individuals participate in ceremonies not on any rational basis but “because the ancestors did,” because it gives them a sense of unity, community, and connection ([1912] 1995, 379–82).

Another pathology of myth extends to society as a whole. The sociologist Peter Berger has described this phenomenon as “objectification”: as human beings gradually forget that myths are their own creation, the mythic world comes to appear as unalterable, governed by fate, a kind of “second nature” (1969, 3–29; see also Habermas [1981] 1984, 71; [1981] 1987, 173). The political impact of this development is plain. Elements of society that are in fact malleable, created by human beings and in principle subject to human agency, present themselves instead as intractable, natural, or, most critically, incontestable (Habermas [1981] 1987, 51, 189). It was in this way, as Karl Polanyi has famously described, that historically contingent features of capitalism came to be conceived as immutable, the market’s equivalent of natural laws ([1944] 2001, 75). As this insight from Polanyi suggests, Habermas’s analysis here runs very close to classic Marxian worry about ideology, false consciousness, and social domination.

Yet Habermas has an additional worry about nonrational psychology, one that departs from Marx and is directed at Weber. Weber’s theory of secularization ends in a disenchanted modernity, an ethical landscape drained of unity and meaning (Habermas [1981] 1987, 324). For Habermas, the political consequences of such a development are dire: where values cannot be rationally chosen, politics becomes little more than a sphere of Schmittian decision and power, where right and wrong are, at base, separated by nothing more than arbitrary choice and personal magnetism (Habermas [1981] 1984, 246, 349; see also Lesch 2019). Here his concern is not only the failure of Enlightenment emancipation. The threat is a full retrogression of humanity, a descent into the irrational and the instinctive (390).

Looming over this apprehension is the shadow of the Holocaust and what Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer had termed, in their description of Hitler, the “mimesis of mimesis,” a kind of imitation of the primitive that leaves people in the thrall of crowds, encouraging a herd mentality and an abandonment of rational judgment ([1947] 2007, 152). Habermas is worried that the form of charismatic leadership proposed by Weber encourages precisely these kinds of aesthetic and emotive forms of solidarity, the “rapturous transcendence of the subject” in the social whole (Habermas [1985] 1998, 309). While in a traditional setting religious-like feelings of enthusiasm may serve ideological functions, they are nevertheless relatively contained, hemmed in by established social structures and regulations. But “when God is dead, the reli-
gious mode becomes monstrous” (Strong and Sposito 1995, 267). By aestheticizing a foundationless politics, such non-rationalism risks far more dangerous forms of behavior, a new barbarism uncoupled from any restraints.

**REIMAGINING SECULARIZATION AND SOLIDARITY**

Habermas responds by retelling the narrative of secularization, navigating a narrow passage between the Scylla of a disenchantered world bereft of moral motivation and the Charybdis of a relapse into the nonrational (([1981] 1984, 330). Such a theory has several difficult tasks: it must reconcile social integration with individual autonomy, provide a normative framework that reflects the interests of society in general rather than specific classes, cultivate nonviolent relations between persons, and motivate individuals to act on norms without couching them in a mythic form.

Habermas sets out to accomplish these tasks by turning to discourse. With the advent of discourse, norms governing human community moved from being implicit, unarticulated, and embedded in ceremonial contexts to being explicit, articulated, and abstracted from collective practices. According to Habermas, this development catalyzed two important changes in the normative life of human communities. First, it became possible for interlocutors to divide between actions directed toward accomplishing goals and actions undertaken to bring about mutual understanding. A space was thus opened up for a new kind of communication, one divorced from the mere attainment of ends and directed instead solely toward a nonviolent social relation.  

Habermas reproduces something like the phenomology of Hegel’s citizen—a feeling of being at home in one’s social and political world—without relying on his discredited metaphysics (Habermas [1981] 1987, 398). The rule form also helps Habermas to accomplish his second task. For if norms are, in fact, produced by individuals deliberating in conditions of open and uncoerced dialogue, then they will determine pragmatically how best to organize their moral and political lives.

This innovation allows Habermas to accomplish two of his four tasks in saving secularization from Weberian calamity. First, rules help to reconcile personal autonomy with democratic solidarity. When all features of social reality can, in principle, be expressed in a form that is general and contestable, institutional structures cease to present themselves as objectified, natural, or immutable. While society continues to exercise constraints on individual agency, those constraints are understood by society’s members to have been their own creation. In this way, Habermas reproduces something like the phenomenology of Hegel’s citizen— a feeling of being at home in one’s social and political world—without relying on his discredited metaphysics (Habermas [1981] 1987, 398). The rule form also helps Habermas to accomplish his second task. For if norms are, in fact, produced by individuals deliberating in conditions of open and uncoerced dialogue, then they will also reflect the actual interests of those individuals (Habermas [1983] 1990). No longer blinded by myth or ideology, they will determine pragmatically how best to organize their moral and political lives.

**THE EXCLUSION OF FORCE AND THE UNFORCED FORCE**

Yet two tasks remain unfinished: how to drain interpersonal relationships of violence and how to rescue moral motivation from disenchantment. To accomplish both of them, Habermas turns to features of discourse.

The first of these features is nonviolence, the “exclusion of all force.” Social violence, for Habermas, should be understood as referring not only to the use of physical force but equally to a certain mode of approaching other persons. Such a mode might include, for example, seeing another as a mere instrument for securing one’s needs, dominating that other in order to accu-
mulate power; or forcing that other into silence, suppressing her ability to express her interests. Habermas has no illusions that interpersonal domination will be eliminated entirely. What he does believe is that the preponderance of our social interactions should be conducted under conditions of nonviolence (Rehg 2011, 137).

To envision how, he reconceives of the purpose of communication itself. Discourse, for Habermas, is not merely about transmitting information. It is just as critically about creating and sustaining relationships. Speech, he suggests, has a kind of “double structure”: a person who enters into dialogue with another is simultaneously transmitting the overt meanings of her words and weaving a thread of nonviolence with her interlocutor (Habermas [1976] 1998, 63–75). Traveling along this thread is both the propositional content of speech and what Giorgio Agamben has referred to as a kind of “pure communicability” (2000, 94–95), a universal core of fellowship that disarms our fears and enables our lives together. Discourse draws on a “mysterious power of intersubjectivity,” one that can “unite disparate elements without eliminating the differences between them” (Habermas [2005] 2008, 21).

Habermas refers to this latter function of discourse as “mutual understanding” (Verständigung) and clarifies its meaning through two conceptual distinctions. On the one hand, mutual understanding means acting with, not on, another. Rather than one party seeking to exert influence over the other, mutual understanding is something created in common. On the other hand, Habermas wants to sharply distinguish the kind of solidarity brought about by mutual understanding from that produced prediscursively and instinctively, what he refers to derisively as a kind of “collective like-mindedness” (Gleichgestimmtheit). While the former admits of critical reflection, modification, and “rationally motivated assent” (Zustimmung), the latter operates in a mythic mode, velling relations of power and insulating itself from critique (Habermas [1981] 1984, 286–87, 340). The genuine “exclusion of all force,” therefore, requires that domination be expunged from even this deeper level of social interaction.

Yet even with force excluded, the task of motivating individuals to adhere to their normative commitments remains incomplete. Put another way, even if people live under norms that they themselves have made, and even if these norms reflect their interests, what guarantees that they will actually act on them? What will inspire them? For placing so much weight on individual interests creates a problem. A norm, by its very nature, comes in a form—a rule—that is generalizable and, once enacted, tends to be stable over time. Individual interests, by contrast, are particular and fickle.

Thus the puzzle: if a person assents to a norm merely because it reflects her interests, what reason will she have to continue obeying that norm when it is no longer in her interest to do so? Why not deviate? Habermas refers to this problem through the metaphor of “binding”: “From the point of view of communication theory, the problem looks as follows: how can ego bind alter by a speech act in such a way that alter’s actions can be linked, without conflict, to ego’s so as to constitute a cooperative interrelation?” ([1981] 1987, 26). At the legal and political level the answer to this question is more straightforward, for there, at least, rules will be backed by the coercive power of the state. But Habermas holds that norm construction is not only a legal but also—even primarily—a moral endeavor. And he repeatedly insists that even with regard to legal norms, in democratic societies persons should be moved to obey not only out of the fear of punishment but for reasons internal to rationality itself (Habermas [1981] 1984, 301; see also [1981] 1987, 279).

He terms this quality of rationality the “unforced force of the better argument”: without any threat of coercion, individuals will feel an inner obligation to act on the rules they have made for themselves, in the collective interest, even when such rules fail at the present moment to serve their own interests and indeed may require sacrificing those interests. To be clear, Habermas does not deny that nonrational motives often do inspire moral action. His argument is that they should not be necessary for doing so.

Taken together, the “exclusion of force” and the “unforced force” allow Habermas to accomplish the two remaining tasks raised by his revision of Weber: guaranteeing nonviolence in our everyday interactions with others and saving moral motivation from disenchantment.

**THE LINGUISTIFICATION OF THE SACRED**

But how can discourse itself cultivate nonviolence between persons? And by what means can we be inspired to follow a norm, of our own creation, when it is not in our interest, from rationality alone? Habermas answers these questions by turning to Durkheim, the sociology of religion, and the centerpiece of his revised secularization narrative: the linguistification of the sacred.

In Durkheim, Habermas finds another theorist concerned with the puzzle of moral motivation, of how norms come to be experienced as obligatory and what practically inspires us to act on them. Durkheim’s answer lies in a kind of sociological rendering of Kantian ethics: certain rules exert moral influence

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10. Takott Parsons (1937) referred to this as the “problem of order.” For a fuller discussion, see Heath (2001).

11. In his earlier work, Habermas had put this idea in almost Hegelian terms: “In reason there is an inherent drive to realize reason” ([1966] 1971, 201).
not by virtue of any end that they accomplish but on the basis of their intrinsic authority. Like Kantian "duties," such rules "forbid simply because they are forbidden" (Habermas [1981] 1987, 48). Normative rules of this kind, Habermas is careful to point out, operate on the self not primarily by inducing fear of physical or social sanction. They function instead by cutting far into our psyche, carving out a space so deep that their origins (and human fabrication) are forgotten. So situated, their transgression comes to appear as intrinsically wrong, a violation not of any particular thing or person but of rightness itself, of some fundamental, even cosmological quality. This, for Durkheim, is the force of "the sacred" (le sacré), a concept that structures humanity’s most archaic—and potent—sense of normativity (Habermas [1981] 1987, 46). Our experience of the sacred—instantiated in objects, persons, and events—is, according to Durkheim, what galvanizes us to transcend our egoism and act for the sake of the community ([1912] 1995, 417).

Habermas, consistent in his use of metaphor, refers to this facet of the sacred as its “binding power” (bindende Kraft) and seeks to appropriate it for his own theory of solidarity. But in place of Durkheim’s sociological Kantianism, Habermas offers what he calls a “linguistic Kantianism” (Bernstein 2010; Lafont 1999; McCarthy 1991; White 1988). His discourse theory of solidarity, he argues, is designed to show how speech acts themselves can produce a “socially integrating and binding force,” one that induces a “rationally motivated stance” among participants. Neither transcendental Kantian reason nor aesthetic sacred power are necessary for moral motivation (Habermas [1999] 2003, 7). “Criticizable validity claims” alone will be sufficient: “The linguistic medium of reaching understanding gains the power to bind the will of responsible actors. Ego can exercise this illocutionary power on alter when both are in a position to orient their actions to validity claims” (Habermas [1981] 1987, 27). Here Habermas again takes up his critique of Weber. Because Weber saw in modernity only warring gods, only a “pluralism of incompatible validity claims,” he failed to grasp that rationality also has a kind of “binding power.” Such a binding is made possible, Habermas continues, through a process of “argumentative redemption,” through a “release” of discourse’s “rationality potential” (46). We feel the force of obligation, in other words, through the very process of critique, in “criticizable validity claims” themselves (Habermas [1981] 1984, 249).

The roles played by the “sacred,” “binding power,” and “criticizatible validity claims” in providing moral motivation combine in the linguistifcation of the sacred. Habermas introduces this process in the second volume of the Theory of Communicative Action: “The aura of rapture and terror that emanates from the sacred, the spellbinding power of the holy, is sublimated into the binding/bonding force of criticizable validity claims and at the same time turned into an everyday occurrence” ([1981] 1987, 77). In Habermas’s description, the ineluctable moral power inspired by the sacred—an aesthetic, “auratic” quality projected onto objects—comes to be replicated within discourse itself. The pressing feeling of obligation, a nonviolent sociality, our motivation to follow norms: all of these, according to Habermas, are reproduced in the argumentative process ([1981] 1984, 301–2). Discourse thus not only conveys but actually produces its own imperatives. At the conclusion of deliberation, when all claims have been made, contested, refined, and tabulated, participants not only recognize the winning side. They will feel compelled to act on those norms (Habermas [1981] 1987, 107, 289). And theirs will be a purely “rational motivation,” elicited without recourse to violence, metaphysics, or the mystery of the sacred (Habermas [1981] 1984, 278).

If defensible, Habermas’s new secularization narrative would provide a rational basis for democratic solidarity in a secular age. By sublimating the force of the sacred into discourse, it would reproduce its motivational force without risking its mythic and ideological pathologies. Taken together, the exclusion of force and the enforced force would permit us to face Weberian disenchantment head-on, without fear of its concomitant decline of social cohesion. Through the properties of discourse, modernity could “create its normativity out of itself” (Habermas [1985] 1998, 7). Put another way, we would not need to share Böckenförde’s worry that democratic solidarity is living off of “borrowed capital,” nourishing itself on implicit metaphysical and religious resources that it cannot itself produce.

DURKHEIM’S PSYCHOLOGY OF THE SACRED

But is Habermas’s account defensible? By what mechanism, exactly, do features of discourse secularize the aesthetic moral force of the sacred? Is it even possible for a quality of religious experience to migrate into a quality of discourse? And if it could, would it maintain its psychological impact? Simply put, does linguistification succeed? I develop answers to these questions in the remainder of this article. I begin by examining the moral psychology Habermas seeks to appropriate, investigating Durkheim’s ([1912] 1995) description of the “sacred” in his Elementary Forms of Religious Life.

Durkheim writes as a sociologist, but among his stated aims is to intervene in a philosophical debate over the basic structures of human cognition. His target, above all, is the Kantian system. Where Kant understood our basic categories of experience as shared between all human beings, Durkheim stresses their origins in social—and especially religious—life ([1912] 1995, 9). Consequently, basic facets of society and
perception, including not only ethics but time, space, causation, number, and personhood, can vary from society to society (15, 238). Furthermore, if society shapes us all the way down, it also shapes every part of our lives simultaneously. Splitting the human condition into different domains, as Kant does, is inaccurate.

Such a split, Durkheim argues, is in fact responsible for a fundamental conundrum in Kant’s mature moral theory: the philosopher’s inability to answer the question “Why be moral?” In his late work on religion, Kant himself comes close to admitting failure on this score. Being moral, for Kant, means acting according to a moral maxim ([1793] 2004, 59). But the choice of which maxim to follow is not, he insists, something that we can derive from the maxim itself without risking a kind of infinite regress (47n). According to Durkheim, this admission signals a major failure on the part of Kant to grasp the essence of human morality. To the ethically indifferent, morality will seem as little more than a series of formal rules, barren of meaning and authority. It will lack force, the power to inspire a person to act, to bind her to duty, to spur her to transcend her egoism and sacrifice for others. For Durkheim, this leads to an untenable implication: That the meaning of what is moral can be divorced from the motivation to be moral.

Durkheim was hardly the only thinker to critique Kant’s ethics for its purported abstraction and detachment from concrete ethical life. Yet his thought departs from Hegel and other critics in where it searches for an answer. Rather than attempt to retain if not the primacy of the rational self then at least the cogency of an idealized “reason,” Durkheim dives into the depths of the nonrational psyche and, in particular, its role in religious experience. Habermas himself directs us toward this key facet of Durkheim’s account (again invoking his metaphor of “binding”): “[Durkheim’s] sacred arouses the same ambivalent attitude as moral authority, for it is surrounded with an aura that simultaneously frightens and attracts, terrifies and enchants. . . . In the last analysis moral rules get their binding power [bin-dinde Kraft] from the sphere of the sacred; this explains the fact that moral commands are obeyed without being linked to external sanctions” ([1981] 1987, 49). In this way, Durkheim’s solution to the conundrum in Kant is to reintegrate normative philosophy with moral psychology. To do this, as Habermas notes, Durkheim calls on the sacred’s most potent but also most enigmatic feature: the “aura.”

THE AURA AND MIMESE

The aura is the key innovation of Durkheim’s religious psychology, explaining how sacred things acquire and project their morally binding power. Thus, while Habermas refers to his secularization theory as the linguistification of the sacred, it is in fact the sacred’s aura, above all, whose characteristics he seeks to render into discourse.12

In one sense, the aura is an aspect of our aesthetic experience. Human beings, Durkheim explains, are endowed with a unique cognitive ability. Whereas other creatures merely navigate the world as it is given, our species is capable of building on that world, projecting an aesthetic onto objects, persons, institutions, or events that does not adhere in them naturally (Durkheim [1912] 1995, 424). This projection is the aura. It is the word we use to describe how objects, persons, or places acquire a uniqueness or mystery that eludes our efforts at materialist reduction and rational explication. Just as myths, as we saw with Berger, shed their human origins and come to appear to their creators in an “objectified” fashion, so too do sacred objects. Although an object’s aura was originally imprinted by us and “superimposed upon nature,” this fact is forgotten (230).

The social and moral consequences of this amnesia are dramatic and point toward a second, ethical aspect of the aura. For the aura, Durkheim emphasizes, is found not only in ritual objects but also, and critically, in social norms. When a norm is imbued with an aural quality, it has the power to motivate because it is “endowed with an authority that binds the intellect and goes beyond the intellect; in other words, the intellect is not its creator” (Durkheim [1912] 1995, 371, emphasis mine). Even though a norm, like any other sacred object, is in fact a product of the human mind, this is forgotten. So detached, it is elevated into an object of inviolable dignity and devotion, respect and responsibility, reverence and fear. It ricochets back on our perception, coming upon us from above and directing our communal lives and moral conduct. Its very separateness—the powers thereby conferred on that object . . . as if they were real” (229, emphasis mine) —gives the norm its authority and “force.”

This moral “force” permits Durkheim to resolve the conundrum in Kant’s moral philosophy (Durkheim [1912] 1995, 202, 205–6). Cloaking itself in impenetrable distance and otherness, the aura offers a social and aesthetic basis for the feelings of “duty” and indeclinable “imperative” (192) that Kant could only explain by referring to the “good will” of individuals. It nourishes us, pushing us through “restraints, privations, and sacrifices.” It motivates us, allowing us to act categorically, “irrespective of any utilitarian calculation of helpful or harmful results.” And it binds us, stifling our passions and instincts, silencing our interests,

12. Habermas uses the language of “aura” and “the sacred” interchangeably, and at times he also refers to “the aura of the sacred” ([1981] 1987, 49).
and bending our will to the moral law (209). In short, it is a norm’s aura that lends it psychological potency.

At the same time, Durkheim stresses that norms only acquire and sustain their aura via a distinctive form of collective experience: “mimesis.” While today mimesis may be most closely associated with literary studies, in Durkheim’s sociology of religion it refers instead to a certain genre of ritual. Mimetic rituals proceed through mindful human-to-human imitation. Even without speech or physical contact, participants coordinate their activities by carefully tracking one another’s gestures. Yet it is precisely its muteness that grants mimesis its psychological power. Those sharing wordless harmony feel a deep sense of solidarity with both their fellows and the norms they share in common (Seligman et al. 2008).

Most crucial for our purposes, the manner in which mimetic rituals create and sustain the aura of norms corresponds precisely to the two features of solidarity that Habermas seeks to linguistify: the exclusion of force and the unforced force. To begin with, mimesis allows for the cultivation of meaningful, nonviolent relations between persons without speech. For example, a baby and its parents cannot communicate linguistically. But by imitating one another’s movements and expressions, they can signal their mutual interest and affection. Likewise, for participants in religious ritual, mimesis exerts an “invisible influence over consciousness” in such a way as to “remake their moral being” (Durkheim [1912] 1995, 363–64). Despite lacking words, mimetic experiences allow people to develop a preconscious awareness of the “internal connections that exist between things,” including between themselves and others (239). To anticipate Habermas’s technical language, mimesis provides a means to “exclude force” through a process of “mutual understanding” (Verständigung).

It elicits a kind of “mystical sympathy,” a powerful but indefinable sense of solidarity with those in proximity (150).

At the same time, these amorphous feelings of “moral unity” are joined to a second product of mimesis, one that not only disbars violence but tightly binds participants in their normative behavior. This is the root of Habermas’s unforced force; the feeling of categorical obligation that motivates us to do what is morally right. For in the performance of mimetic ritual, people not only restore their moral ties with one another. They restore their moral standards, their “beliefs held in common,” the “collective ideal” of their society. For example, in the context of religious ceremony the simultaneous act of prostration grants worshippers a powerful but nonverbal affirmation of their creed. Witnessing the vitality of one’s cultic group simultaneously reinvigorates the “vitality of those beliefs” that animate it. Despite neither questioning its dogma nor receiving an answer, one becomes “more sure in one’s faith” (Durkheim [1912] 1995, 379).

It is through mimesis, therefore, that sacred things—and sacred norms in particular—acquire their aura. It is what disconnects moral norms from their creators, lending them the impersonality and “anonymous force” that is the real source of their power: “We cannot recognize our own voice in that voice that makes itself heard only to order us to do some things and not to do others. The very tone in which it speaks announces that it is expressing something in us that is other than us” (Durkheim [1912] 1995, 266). Put briefly: if the aura is something built by the human mind, then mimesis is simultaneously the process of its assembly and concealment. Mimesis gives moral norms their sense of unbridgeable distance, unquestioned authority, and categorical force.

In this way, Durkheim stresses, the aesthetic dimension of normativity is absolutely central to solidarity. It is only by means of its aura that a norm acquires an arresting hold on our psychology, its force to obligate and motivate, what Habermas calls its “binding power” (bindende Kraft). But a norm only earns its aura by means of shared prelinguistic and nonrational experience—that is, through mimesis.

Without modification, Durkheim’s thesis would pose a major threat to Habermas’s project. It would suggest that features of the nonrational and prelinguistic psyche are also indispensable for solidarity. And so it would jeopardize his careful attempt to lead humanity into an emancipated and democratic modernity, one neither debilitated by disenchantment nor in the thralls of an aesthetized politics. Habermas’s response, as we have seen, is a new secularization narrative: the linguistification of the sacred. But how, exactly, does linguistification proceed? In light of our investigation of Durkheim’s thought, this question can be refined further. For it is now clear that our moral psychology is grounded not merely in an indeterminate sacred but more concretely in mimesis and the aura, in our unifying experiences together and in our reverential attitude toward social norms. So now our inquiry shifts. Can rational discourse itself assume the socially beneficial qualities of mimesis and the aura? And if so, how? To answer these questions, Habermas, I will now argue, turned to the radical but enigmatic linguistic philosophy of Walter Benjamin.

**BENJAMIN ON THE AURA AND ITS DECLINE**

Habermas ([1981] 1984) only briefly acknowledges his debt to Benjamin in *The Theory of Communicative Action*. It is thus unsurprising that scholarly treatments of Habermas’s thought have contained scarce discussion of Benjamin’s impact, especially in comparison to figures like Adorno, Hiedegger, Hegel, and Weber. Even so, Habermas hints in places of a far deeper intellectual influence by Benjamin. In this section and the one to follow, I offer an original reconstruction of this influence and show how it helped to shape—
and ultimately destabilize—Habermas’s mature thinking about solidarity and discourse. Habermas’s most prominent discussion of his predecessor can be found in “Walter Benjamin: Consciousness Raising or Rescuing Critique,” an essay that appeared in 1972, about a decade before the publication of The Theory of Communicative Action. In the piece Habermas touches on a number of themes in his colleague’s thought, including myth, messianism, and his disagreements with Adorno. His foremost concern, however, is Benjamin’s aesthetic theory, in particular, his discussion of the aura and its decline.

The core of Benjamin’s argument can be found in his well-known article “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility” ([1939] 2006b). Like Durkheim, Benjamin proposes that the aura is a property that human beings superimpose on objects. He concurs that we then engage in a process of “objectification,” disremembering our part in its creation. And he agrees that, as a consequence, an object with an aura appears to us with a distinct coherence and autonomy, a sui generis quality in relation to its surroundings: “We define the aura of [nature] as the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be. To follow with the eye—while resting on a summer afternoon—a mountain range on the horizon or a branch that casts its shadow on the beholder is to breathe the aura of those mountains, of that branch” (255). While Benjamin notes that the particular texture of the aura varies across time and culture, he adds that modernity is bearing witness to something historically unique: the “decay of the aura,” its gradual expulsion from our daily experience (255).

Benjamin offers two kinds of reasons for the aura’s decline. On the one hand, human beings increasingly desire to make all aspects of their environment known to them, accounted for within a universal epistemology. They have a drive to “overcome each thing’s uniqueness,” either by mass producing it in a generic form or by subjecting it to abstract categories, as in statistics (Benjamin [1939] 2006b, 255–56). The aura thus represents an obstacle to this desire insofar as it detaches an object from its mere materiality and renders it distinct and unique, alien and uncanny.

On the other hand, Benjamin notes that whatever our desires, the tissue of human experience itself is changing in such a way as to stifle auratic encounters. Historically, he ex-


14. The essay was originally published in 1936 by the journal of the Institute for Social Research. Benjamin continued revisions for the next several years, and here I draw from his third version, completed around 1939 and published first in 1955 as part of Benjamin’s Schriften. All references are to the translation in Benjamin ([1939] 2006b, 251–83).

15. In fact, Benjamin’s political thought is more complex and nuanced than Habermas acknowledges. For one reading, see Lesch (2014).
subjective property through the metaphor of “returning our gaze”: “Experience of the aura . . . rests on the transposition of a response common in human relationships to the relationship between the inanimate or natural object and man. The person we look at, or who feels he is being looked at, looks at us in turn. To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return” (188, emphasis mine).

Something that has an aura is thus not merely an object of reverence; it is equally experienced as a apprehending being, a subject of interaction and dialogue.

According to Habermas, it was this intersubjective quality of the aura in particular that triggered Benjamin’s ambivalence about its decline. Although Benjamin saw the decay of the aura as unleashing a kind of emancipatory potential, our experience of it also manifests in a “vulnerable intersubjectivity” (Habermas [1972] 1983, 144–45). It offers a glimpse of a kind of preconceptual, nonviolent social relation, a way for a person to connect with another while retaining her integrity and coherence. It suggests, in other words, something very close to a concept that we have already seen: the exclusion of force, the difference. It suggests, in other words, something very close to a concept that we have already seen: the exclusion of force, the difference.

That the exclusion of force can be traced back to Benjamin’s thought becomes clear in Habermas’s effort to diffuse a tension in his predecessor. Benjamin’s aura, he suggests, can be split into two moments: a “cultic moment,” reflecting the auratic object’s integration into ritual life, and a “universal moment,” indicative of the aura’s mimetic qualities, its capacity to create relations of solidarity between persons. With the aura so divided, Habermas contends, Benjamin can put his ambivalence to rest: the aura can be both celebrated and mourned for its decline. Celebrated, insofar as the end of the aura coincides with the end of its primitive esotericism, its “cultic distance,” and reliance on mythical forms of thought (Habermas [1972] 1983, 144–45). Mourned, in as much as its disintegration marks the passing of a utopian moment of nonviolent inter-subjectivity. Benjamin himself, Habermas argues, was unable to resolve this tension and so could never fully escape his reliance on the nonrational and prelinguistic psyche. He feared that the aura’s “semantic energies might escape during transformation and be lost to humanity” (146). Caught in the binary between the aura’s solidaristic function and its disintegration into politics, hamstrung by his lingering mystical tendencies, he could not imagine a way to save the mimetic virtues of the aura without retrogressing into irrationalism and abandoning the Enlightenment.

**BENJAMIN’S THEORY OF LINGUISTIFICATION**

Despite this failure, Habermas argues in the final portions of his essay that Benjamin’s own writings offer a path forward, a means of redeeming the mimetic promise of the aura without relapsing into myth. What is needed, Habermas writes, is a “theory of linguistic communication” capable of “bring[ing] Benjamin’s insights back into a materialist theory of social evolution” ([1972] 1983, 159). In other words, what must be achieved is a means of channeling the nonviolent, mimetic quality of the aura into discourse itself. Writing a decade later in *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas will put this another way. Through his own theory of communicative action, he writes, “the rational core of mimetic achievements”—their integral role in achieving social solidarity—“can be laid open” (Habermas [1981] 1984, 390). Habermas, concluding his essay on Benjamin, quotes from his predecessor, and in so doing, signals where such a theory can be found. “There is a sphere of human agreement,” a young Benjamin had declared, “that is nonviolent to the extent that it is wholly inaccessible to violence: the proper sphere of ‘understanding,’ language” ([1972] 1983, 159). This, of course, is precisely Habermas’s aim with the linguification of the sacred. And so the extent of Benjamin’s influence should now be clear: among the principal tasks of *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas’s most important work of social theory, is to realize Benjamin’s own embryonic project of linguification.

Benjamin had explored the link between mimesis and language in one of his earliest works, “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man” ([1918] 2004). Departing decisively from the Saussurian model of discourse as “pure convention,” Benjamin argues that language is not entirely—or even primarily—about the production and exchange of words. The most important thing language transmits, he insists, is not meaning but being—or more specifically, “linguistic being” (63). It smuggles something of the patina that rests on an object as a mode of experience but is in no way contained within the raw material of the object itself. “Language,” Benjamin writes, “is in every case not only communication of the communicable, but also, at the same time, communication of the noncommunicable” (74). Language, in other words, is a vessel for not only our rational but our aesthetic experience. What it communicates, in short, is the *aura*.

It is language’s integration of the aura that is most compelling to Habermas. For it is precisely by communicating the noncommunicable that speech assumes its mimetic function. “Everything mimetic in language,” Benjamin writes in another essay, “is an intention which can appear only in connection with something alien as its basis: precisely the semiotic or communicative element of language” ([1931–32] 1999, 697). Benjamin, as we have seen, had previously linked the aura—this “something alien”—to mimesis through its quality of “returning the gaze”: even without the use of speech, two beings can establish a connection that signals their intention to pro-
hibit force. Here Benjamin suggests something even more radical: *language itself*—not the explicit meaning of words, but their subterranean social message—can engender prediscursive relations of understanding between persons. Indeed language is not only tangentially mimetic. It is the “highest application of the mimetic faculty,” reflecting the principal medium in which relationships between objects are established (697).

In this way, Benjamin’s theory of language holds the promise of grounding Habermas’s linguification of the sacred. Speech, for Benjamin, is able to convey something of the aesthetic potency of the aura, its intersubjective capacity and moment of nonviolence. “Words, too,” Benjamin writes, “can have an aura of their own” ([1918] 2004, 200 n. 17). What for Durkheim required actual physical movement in common can be realized, according to Benjamin, by communication in common. Thus, the act of “reading,” he insists, rests on a continuum: just as a person reads a text, she may also read “entrails, the stars, or dances” (Benjamin [1933] 2006a, 162–63). The crucial feature that these practices share is mimesis, an absorption in an object that does not seek acquisition, an investment in the other that eschews the drive for “mastery” (Benjamin [1928] 2006). Put in Habermas’s terms, language, for Benjamin, engenders processes of “mutual understanding.” Contained within it is thus one of Habermas’s central criteria for democratic solidarity, the “rational core of mimetic achievements,” the basis of nonviolent social life: the “exclusion of force.”

**HABERMAS BETWEEN TWO AURAS**

But can Benjamin’s theory of language also accomplish the second part of Habermas’s linguification of the sacred, the “binding power” (*bindende Kraft*) of rational validity claims, their categorical moral pressure? Can it project the same force as Durkheim’s sacred? What, in other words, becomes of the most critical yet paradoxical part of Habermas’s discourse theory, the so-called unforced force of the better argument?

As we have seen, Benjamin, like Durkheim, believes that the aura emerges through our nonrational and prelinguistic relationship with things; aauratic experience, in short, is the product of mimetic experience. But to this he adds a caveat: under certain conditions, language itself is capable of integrating the effects of both mimesis and the aura. This process of linguistic integration importantly includes one of Habermas’s key ingredients for social solidarity: the “exclusion of force,” the kind of nonviolent social intercourse achieved through mutual understanding. Yet as I will now show, Benjamin explicitly denies that the other half of the linguification of the sacred—the “unforced force of the better argument,” the moral-motivating power that Habermas believes is contained in rational discourse itself—can be disentangled from our aesthetic experience of the aura via mimetic ritual. Habermas, I argue, is thus caught between two auras: Durkheim’s, which serves a functional role for his theory of moral motivation and solidarity, and Benjamin’s, which serves an explanatory role for his theory of discourse and secularization.

A gap emerges where the two fail to overlap. The result is a blow to Habermas’s rational account of democratic solidarity.

The issue turns on the relationship between the versions of the aura that we have seen, Durkheim’s and Benjamin’s. Habermas, for his part, reads them together, explicitly linking Benjamin’s aura to moral obligation. In the center of a passage that is precisely about the moral-motivating power of the sacred, he directly cites Benjamin’s essay on the “Work of Art”: “In the aura itself is expressed the untouchability of what is at the same time sought after, the closeness in the distance [citation to Benjamin’s “Work of Art” essay]. . . . The sacred produces and stabilizes just the ambivalence that is characteristic of the feeling of moral obligation” (Habermas [1981] 1987, 49). If Durkheim and Benjamin truly were consistent in their understanding of the aura, it would fully validate Habermas’s linguification of the sacred. It would join understanding with commitment, peaceful intersubjectivity with binding moral obligation. It would rescue a postmetaphysical, rational theory of moral motivation. It would unravel the paradox of emancipated normativity, giving individuals the ability to fashion norms on the basis of their genuine interests, yet inspiring those individuals to stick with those norms even when their interests change. In short, it would provide a basis for democratic solidarity in a secular age.

But as is plain from his description, Benjamin’s aura is bereft of the psychological traits that would inspire us to moral action. To be sure, it is unapproachable, distant, and quasi-magical; it emerges out of a certain mental projection that human beings make onto their creations. And by becoming a property of communication itself, it helps to cultivate a layer of human social relations insulated from dependence and domination. Still, it does not have the qualities that Durkheim associates with binding moral obligation. It lacks the sense of deep otherness of the Durkheimian sacred, the kind of insurmountable distance that inspires altruism and self-sacrifice. Where Durkheim links the aural object with the characteristics of Kantian ethics—love and gratitude on the one side, respect and awe on the other—Benjamin makes none of these associations. The reverence and horror with which Durkheim’s religious subjects approach the aura of the sacred has no counterpart in Benjamin’s analysis.

Indeed Benjamin emphasizes that the kind of otherness it does project—a sheen of disconnect and uniqueness—is something that persons in modernity desire to overcome (Benjamin [1939] 2006b, 255). Far from inspiring fear,
Benjamin’s aura presents itself instead as a kind of relic of premodern perception, an obstacle to be surmounted in the pursuit of new forms of experience. He implies, moreover, that insofar as the aura has any trace of power to morally motivate, this power cannot be divorced from its connection to ritual life. As in Durkheim’s analysis, its potency remains irreversibly bound to mimesis and physical movement in common (256, 260).

To put this in historical and intellectual context: what Durkheim had in mind in theorizing the aura was premodern religious life. It was a milieu suffused with feelings of obligation, reverence, and self-transcendence—what the philosopher of religion Rudolf Otto ([1917] 1958) called “the numinous.” What Benjamin had in mind, by contrast, was something closer to nineteenth-century bourgeois aesthetics. His aura is the kind of delicate halo that our mind adds to beautiful objects, one that flits out of our perception as easily as we walk out of an art museum. It has nothing like the sacred’s psychological force or durability.

Habermas’s thesis thus suffers from a kind of theoretical legerdemain. While he claims to convey the psychological impact of Durkheim’s sacred into discourse, the theory of language Habermas employs to do so can only account for half of its effects. “The binding force of moral agreement grounded in the sacred,” Habermas had insisted, “can be replaced only by moral agreement that expresses in rational form what was always intended in the symbolism of the holy: the generality of the underlying interest” ([1981] 1987, 81). Yet without the transposition of this “binding force” into discourse, Habermas’s theory of democratic solidarity cannot be fully justified. By linguistifying Durkheim’s sacred on the back of Benjamin’s theory of language, Habermas succeeds in translating only its intersubjective qualities (the exclusion of force) not its power of moral motivation (the enforced force of the better argument). Norms, tied to interests, remain obligatory only by convention. They retain none of their categorical authority. Consequently, Habermas’s revised secularization theory is left incomplete. His linguistification thesis concludes not with rational discourse saved from disenchantment but a renewed awareness of its limits. And democratic solidarity, like modernity itself, remains an unfinished project.

**DEMOCRATIC SOLIDARITY IN A SECULAR AGE?**

Social solidarity is crucial for democracy. It engenders tolerance, inspires self-sacrifice, and helps to ensure the peaceful transfer of power. Yet since Weber, theorists have worried that secularization will lead to either solidarity’s loss or its antidemocratic appropriation. Some have called for a renewed religious traditionalism and homogeneity. Others have condemned religion’s link to social cohesion. Still others have proposed “religions without God.” In this article I examined a fourth response offered by Jürgen Habermas.

A firm believer in the Enlightenment’s pluralistic and emancipatory project, Habermas cannot accept a return to myth or metaphysics. Nor is he willing to embrace a new nationalism. Yet as a student of classical sociology, he is equally unable to dismiss religion’s historical role for solidarity. His solution, I showed, was to develop an alternative to Weber’s account of secularization as disenchantment: the linguistification of the sacred. According to this new theory, religion’s power to morally unify and motivate does not simply evaporate in secular modernity. Instead, it is sublimated into rational discourse itself. Habermas’s concept of the “sacred” is indebted to Durkheim’s sociology of religion, and so to test his claims, I examined Durkheim’s account of how the sacred operates on our psychology. The sacred, I showed, acquires its normative power by assuming an “aura,” a mental projection of otherness and reverence onto rituals, norms, and objects. As Durkheim offers no explanation for how the aura, an aesthetic property, could be transposed into discourse, Habermas, I argued, turned to his predecessor in critical theory, Walter Benjamin. Nested in Benjamin’s essays on art and experience is a suggestive linguistic philosophy, one in which language itself assumes the intersubjective quality of the aura, mimesis. This provides a theoretical grounding for half of Habermas’s linguistification of the sacred: the “exclusion of force,” a nonviolent understanding between persons. Yet linguistification’s second half—the “unforced force of the better argument,” a categorical form of moral obligation—is not integrated into rational discourse. This creates a fissure in Habermas’s secularization narrative: in the conceptual distance between Durkheim’s aura, which supports his theory of solidarity, and Benjamin’s aura, which underpins his idea of linguistification, postmetaphysical norms lose their binding power. They remain bound to the prelinguistic and nonrational parts of social experience. Consequently, his theory of democratic solidarity remains incomplete. In the aesthetic features of our social bond, rational discourse reaches its limit.

Despite its ultimate limitations, Habermas’s linguistification of the sacred is invaluable. To begin with, it goes a considerable distance toward grounding democratic solidarity in a secular age. That discourse cannot do everything that Habermas intends certainly does not mean renouncing it entirely. Democracy plainly needs more rational deliberation, not less. At the same time, in the same stroke that the linguistification of the sacred falls short as a normative theory, it succeeds (albeit unintentionally) as a diagnostic one. Its very interstices point us toward the particular features of the prelinguistic and nonrational psyche that make soli-
democracy possible. Foremost among these is the moral-motivating power of aesthetic experience. And one form of aesthetic stands out in particular: the feeling of otherness, separateness, and unfathomability—in short, something like Durkheim’s sacred and, in particular, its aura. As we have seen, for a norm to obtain its binding power it must elicit feelings of distance and reverence. It does so through a kind of social amnesia. Although the norm is our own creation, we come to forget our formative role. So situated, it burrows deep into our psyche, positioning itself in such a way that its violation seems not only wrong but logically impossible, a kind of rejection of the natural order itself. Put briefly, for something to inspire us, it must be other than us. It must exist beyond our rational and conceptual reach. At the moment its origins are recalled, its grip on our psyche slackens.

This, it seems, is the way by which norms acquire a genuine binding power. Barring a theoretical alternative to linguistification, the sense of distance and awe conjured by the aura appears to be a necessary feature of normativity. But here, too, lies a dilemma, not only for Habermas but for any theorist of democratic solidarity. For it suggests that even in a secular age, our social bond rests not only on soft manifestations of the nonrational psyche like sympathy, affect, and intuition. It relies on forms of normativity that are in principle beyond our capacity to rationally grasp and explain. This leaves two potential ways to proceed: to try to mend Habermas’s theory from within, or to find a supplement for rational discourse for realizing democratic solidarity.

One possibility would be to close the gap in Habermas’s own theory, reinserting the aura into his normative framework. The key weakness of Habermas’s moral psychology centers around the relationship between norms and interests: Even if I consent to a norm in the present, what guarantee do I have that this norm will continue to serve my interests in the future? And if it ceases to do so, why not deviate? One way of resolving this paradox would thus be to reinsert the aura into discourse. In other words, even if the sacred cannot be linguistified, perhaps its motivating power can be repurposed, with rational validity claims given their own kind of sanctity. Indeed Habermas himself hints in this direction in discussing human obligations toward the natural world: “Aesthetic reasons have here even greater force than ethical, for in the aesthetic experience of nature, things withdraw into an unapproachable autonomy and inaccessibility; they then exhibit their fragile integrity so clearly that they strike us as inviolable in their own right and not merely as desirable elements of a preferred form of life” (1990, 2001, 111). Yet such a move would resolve the motivational deficit in Habermas’s theory at the cost of one its chief virtues: its emancipatory potential. For Habermas, norms must be accessible to evaluation, critique, and modification. If not, they could easily be tasked with ideological functions, serving certain classes or individuals rather than the general welfare. But giving norms an aura would risk exacting that. In Durkheim’s words, such a solution would proceed by “putting articles of faith beyond discussion” ([1912] 1995, 240 n. 8). From that position they could reproduce the mythic mindset, veiling relations of domination behind an objectified reality. In effect, this solution would repair Habermas by undoing Habermas.

A second possibility would augment Habermas with a theory of democratic solidarity that acknowledges the ethical-aesthetic limits of language. Although rational discourse may capture some subset of our normative experience, it remains incomplete, lacking the ability to explain our deepest sources of moral motivation. Put another way, Habermas’s theory, despite its remarkable sweep, actually overlooks a crucial part of how solidarity develops. In his stylized portrayal, two (or more) individuals face one another in dialogue. But what drew them to choose words over force? How did the other become an object of moral attention? What is required, then, is a more inclusive framework for grounding democratic solidarity, one that, while avoiding nationalism and other exclusionary attachments, supplements rational discourse by attending more closely to the nonrational and prelinguistic psyche.

My aim here has been to show why such a framework is necessary. It has been to investigate why democratic solidarity in a secular age remains not a matter of fact but an unfinished project. It has been to identify, through a new reading of one of democracy’s greatest living theorists, an important fissure in our social bond and the place where we might look to fix it. If democracy is to persevere through these dark times, repairing our solidarity may be a good place to start.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to Lisa Ellis for her extremely valuable comments and assistance throughout the review process. This article benefited from the thoughtful insights, questions, and critiques of audiences at Georgetown; Harvard; the University of California, Santa Barbara; the University of Toronto; Vanderbilt; Washington University in St. Louis; and Yale, as well as participants in the Midwest Political Science Association, Northeastern Political Science Association, and the Association for Political Theory. I owe special thanks to the members of my dissertation committee, Nancy Rosenblum, Peter Gordon, Michael Rosen, and Michael Sandel, as well as Jacob Abolahia, Brook Ackerly, Elissa Alzate, Eric Beerbohm, James Booth, Randy Calvert, Ryan Davis, Avigail Ferdman, Clarissa Hayward, Waheed Hussain, Douglas Jarvis, Tae-Yeoun Keum, Peggy

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