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In Memoriam Jürgen Habermas (1929 – 2026)

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The 14th of March 2026 marked the loss of one of the most influential thinkers of modernity, one whose lifelong commitment to the defense and development of democracy and its ideals and principles was rooted in direct experiences of the Nazi regime. The German philosopher, public intellectual and sociologist Jürgen Habermas, has died.

Jürgen Habermas was born on the 18th of June 1929 in Düsseldorf of the Rhine Province, on the cusp of the worldwide economic depression. Born as the second child of a middle-class, Protestant, and conservative couple, he was the son of Anna Amalie Margerete Habermas (born Köttgen) and Ernst Habermas. Both were very attentive to their son, who suffered from a cleft palate since birth, a condition that necessitated two corrective surgeries. While his mother devoted herself to taking care of their children and the household, his father, who had nationalist leanings, joined the NSDAP in 1933 and in 1939 became its economic advisor. Due to the combination of the influence of the social situation in Germany on his own upbringing and the lack of a stronger attitude from his parents towards the rise of authoritarianism, Jürgen himself joined the *Deutsches Jungvolk* in 1939, and later became part of the Hitler youth. Not keen on military fighting, he enrolled in medical corps and narrowly avoided being drafted into the Wehrmacht army. Once the Allies successfully landed in Normandy in 1944, his detachment, however, was deployed to the Siegfried line to defend the anti-aircraft guns. Luckily, his medical training ultimately saved him from the fighting on the increasingly chaotic frontlines, for he was assigned to the military district office. Soon after, Hitler was dead, the war was over, and a time of reckoning with the legacy of the Reich has come. As we learn from his biographer, Stefan Müller-Doohm, in November 1945, Habermas heard about the Nuremberg Trials on the radio, "and thus first

learned of the true extent of the Nazi regime's atrocities" (Müller-Doohm 2016, 25). The shock of the Holocaust's revelation marked a decisive turning point in Habermas' life, and he ardently committed himself to help ensure that this history would never repeat itself.

After the war, Habermas studied at the universities of Göttingen, Zurich and Bonn. There he finished his dissertation on Schelling, titled "The Absolute and History: On the Schism in Schelling's Thought" (1954), which took a Heideggerian approach to analyze Schelling's attempt to reconcile the finite historical subject with the concept of the infinite absolute. Habermas wrote his thesis with very little oversight from his supervisor, Erich Rothacker, who nevertheless praised the work as the mark of a rare talent that renders the history of philosophy relevant for contemporary readers and their issues.

While Habermas worked on his dissertation, he was not only concerned with his solitary academic work but already participated actively in the public discourse of postwar Germany. He briefly worked as a freelance journalist, and two of his articles merit attention. The first article was a response to the publication of Heidegger's "What is Metaphysics" in 1953. Written by Habermas for the journal *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, it attacked a part of the lecture that referenced the "inner truth and greatness" of the NSDAP. Habermas indignantly prodded Heidegger for a genuine answer as to what this truth is supposed to be but was met with silence. In doing so, Habermas gave voice to one of the ideals that guided his lifelong work, namely, that there is a burden of responsibility on the part of the thinker because philosophy is inseparable from politics. The second article in question, a critical essay "The Dialectic of Rationalization" (1954), concerned Habermas' growing interest in and familiarity with Western Marxism. The text addressed the topic of the alienation of the human subject both from bureaucratic structures and from being a producer "in order to explore the role that consumption plays in compensating for the impoverishment of this industrial experience" (Edgar 2005, 4). Habermas' critique helped him become Adorno's assistant at the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research in 1956.

Habermas remained in that position for the next three years, while he worked on his habilitation thesis, and during the time immersed himself in social theory and critique. However, he did not share the overwhelming critique of the Enlightenment in Adorno's and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947). The split represented a major part of his habilitation *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962), where he charted the historical

development of the public sphere. Habermas' thesis was that despite the Auschwitz genocide, it is still possible to see in the Enlightenment project of rationalization a value. Its emphasis on reason can be defended to the point that we can salvage reason itself and develop a new form of rationality. As he explains:

> If we are successful in gaining a historical understanding of the structures of this complex that today, confusedly enough, we subsume under the heading "public sphere," we can hope to attain thereby not only a sociological clarification of the concept but a systematic comprehension of our own society from the perspective of one of its central categories (Habermas 1989a, 4 – 5).

Due to obvious reasons, Horkheimer vehemently opposed Habermas and accused him of being a Marxist and a revolutionary, and insisted on changes to the thesis. Habermas declined to make any such concessions. Horkheimer also wrote a defamatory letter to Adorno, demanding that Habermas be fired, but Adorno supported his assistant.[1] Nevertheless, Habermas left Frankfurt for the University of Marburg, where he finished his habilitation under the political scientist Wolfgang Abendroth and was able to publish it in 1962, along with a dedication to Abendroth. This work laid the groundwork for his eventual theory of communicative action.

In 1962 Habermas was offered a position as "extraordinary professor" at the University of Heidelberg, which he accepted. He held the post until 1964, when, in spite of the past circumstances, Adorno convinced him to return to Frankfurt. In an ironic twist of fate, Habermas succeeded Horkheimer as a professor of philosophy and sociology, and the two men were happily reconciled. While he was back in Frankfurt, Habermas also took part in a major debate surrounding positivism that pitted the members of the Frankfurt School against the critical rationalists, namely, Karl Popper as well as Hans Albert. The debate between Adorno and Popper began with a conference in Tübingen in 1961 concerning the methodology of the social sciences. It was stoked again by Habermas in 1963 and 1964, when he criticized positivism for its decoupling of the knowledge of the natural sciences from the totality of the social world that the hermeneutical approach of critical theory takes into account.

During the late 1960s, Habermas participated in another discourse. He became sympathetic to the protest movement of the Socialist German Students (SDS) and initially supported their demands. His research earned him their respect, and he

[1] See the detailed account in Müller-Doohm (2016, 80 – 88).

> hoped to provide a constructive critique of some of the tactics of the student movement, which he saw as misplaced and intended to provide a reorientation away from what he regarded as obsolete Marxist elements of its political philosophy (Driver 2010, 150).

The students, however, felt that his philosophy was not radical enough, and Habermas then took a stance against the movement. In 1967, he participated in a debate with the movement's leader, Rudi Dutschke, and criticized their unrealistic demands that are not reconcilable with the democratic structures in which they operated. Habermas went so far as to accuse the movement of "left fascism," for it ran the risk of excluding others from its body since "all moral value systems other than the students' own are seen as part of the matrix of the dominant ideology" (Driver 2010, 154). The movement failed, leaving Habermas bitter over the whole ordeal, and he insisted that true change can only be brought about through dialogue that *a priori* rejects violence.

The student situation weighed heavily on him in the book *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1968), which follows a reconstruction of the history of positivism and of scientism, and offers a vivid critique of the capitalist institutionalization of economic growth. The argument is that this process erodes democracy and self-determination, because technology and the sciences are decoupled from human values as they are tailored to purely economic goals. Politics and administration are taken over by technocratic experts, and citizens slowly become depoliticized as the divide between them and their institutions widens. Ultimately, this leads to the hollowing out of democracy as such. According to Habermas, the students' revolt was also directed against this process. Seen from our contemporary situation, his warnings appear particularly prophetic.

When Habermas was offered the position of the co-director at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Living Conditions in the Scientific and Technical World in Starnberg in 1971, he agreed and occupied the position until 1983. During this period, he published his famous two-volume book, his magnum opus, *Theory of Communicative Action* (1981). Habermas' central aim was to counter the instrumental reason of the Enlightenment, by taking a major swing at the key problem of modernity and of post-modernism: if we can no longer rely on universal truths or narratives, what can we still rely on, and how might we act? The solution, according to Habermas, should be sought in language and its structures since they are universal to humans. As a counter to the instrumental reason of the Enlightenment, and in opposition to the

pessimism of the Frankfurt School (mainly Adorno), Habermas proposes the concept of communicative reason. This refers to

> a symbolically structured lifeworld that is constituted in the interpretive accomplishments of its members and only reproduced through communication. Thus, communicative reason does not simply encounter ready-made subjects and systems; rather, it takes part in structuring what is to be preserved. The utopian perspective of reconciliation and freedom is ingrained in the conditions for the communicative sociation of individuals; it is built into the linguistic mechanism of the reproduction of the species (Habermas 1984, 398).

Communicative action is an action that sees language as a means of coordinating and leading its participants towards mutual understanding. Rational communication is the basis of democracy and social order, and citizens require the free public space to discuss their problems and ideas.

Habermas therefore offered the model of an "ideal speech situation." This is a consensus model of truth, which can be mutually agreed upon and reached through speech. In this model situation, each agent discusses various issues and defends their positions by rational arguments. It presupposes inclusivity, equality of the participants, their willingness to have their claim questioned by others, and the sincerity of those participating. It must be remembered that it is an ideal, and Habermas understands well that this kind of situation never truly occurs. What it offers instead is an "epistemological tool used to test the validity of what is actually the case or essentially what is true" (Rasmussen 2019, 182). Habermas therefore offers an optimistic counter to the pessimism of both modernity and the post-modernists. Not only can we reach the truth, but also we are actually in the possession of the means necessary to do so.[2] Shortly thereafter, Habermas wrote *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (1983), where he moved away from this model.

It was during the same year that Habermas once again returned to Frankfurt as a teacher. He remained stayed there until 1993, the year of his retirement. Given that he enjoyed public discourses, it is worth mentioning briefly his involvement in the debate called the "Historikerstreit" that started in 1986 and lasted four years. Habermas took advantage of his academic and

[2] Habermas notably criticized Carl Schmitt's caricature of liberal parliamentarism. Schmitt derided the idea of public discussions and wanted to separate them from democratic will-formation, and introduced the ethnically homogenous concept of *Führerdemokratie*, where democratic processes are used to establish a dictatorship. See Habermas (1989b, 128 – 139).

public role to intervene against several German historians.[3] Ernst Nolte, Michael Stürmer, Klaus Hildebrand, and Andreas Hillgruber had in their works sparked a discourse about the role of history in the development of a new German national identity. Unfortunately, they did so in a fashion that relativized the crimes of National Socialism, by treating Auschwitz not as a uniquely tragic event, but as an "unoriginal copy" of the Gulags, effectively arguing that the contemporary Germans ought not feel guilt over their past.

Habermas launched the debate, by attacking Nolte and others in an article for the journal *Die Zeit*, "A Kind of Settlement of Damages: The Apologetic Tendencies in German History Writing" (1986) and rejected any attempts at historical revisionism. At the end of the text, Habermas concluded by stating:

> a connection to universalist constitutional principles that was anchored in convictions could be formed only after—and through—Auschwitz. Anyone who wants to dispel our shame about this fact with an empty phrase like "obsession with guilt" (Stürmer and Oppenheimer), anyone who wants to recall the Germans to a conventional form of their national identity, is destroying the only reliable basis for our tie to the West (Habermas 1989b, 227).[4]

Against the conventional form of national identity Habermas advocated the model of civil identity. During the unification period after the Berlin Wall fell, he proposed the article 146 of the existing constitution, arguing that the people from both parts of the divided country would draft a new constitution, thus creating a new political nation that would be based neither on an ethnic-cultural community nor on a territorial basis. It would instead, "be understood as a voluntary association of free and equal citizens" (Barša 2003, 249). Germany had the opportunity to root its identity on the principles of equality and freedom, informed by its uniquely tragic past.[5] For this reason, the "Historikerstreit" debate remains one of Habermas' most influential, and it recalls his earlier attack on Heidegger in 1953.

His retirement from Frankfurt did not prevent Habermas from maintaining an active public and intellectual life, and he continued to publish extensively until his death. Some of his notable works include *Postmetaphysical*

[3] Habermas also debated Gadamer, Foucault, Apel, Rawls, Derrida, and even the Pope Benedict XVI.

[4] For an account of the dispute, see Müller-Doohm (2016, 263 – 268), and Emslie (2015, 171 – 187), and for all of Habermas' articles in the "Historikerstreit," see Habermas (1989b, 207 – 248).

[5] In the end, his proposal fell through, and East Germany acceded to the Western Republic via article 23 of the existing constitution.

Thinking (1988) that deals with the decline of metaphysics in modernity; *Between Facts and Norms* (1992), which was his major mature work that tied together work that began with his habilitation on the public sphere; a collection of essays titled *The Inclusion of the Other* (1996); another collection of essays centered around a linguistically-based pragmatic theory, *Truth and Justification* (1998); *Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays* (2008) that tackles the relation between religion and science in post-metaphysical thinking; the daunting three-part *Also a History of Philosophy* (2023 – 2025), where Habermas again deals with post-metaphysical thinking in a new interpretation of the history of Western philosophy. These works are bound to challenge and inspire readers for years to come.

Throughout his long and illustrious career, Habermas received over twenty prestigious awards, and we will mention at least some of them: the Hegel Prize (1973), the Theodor W. Adorno Award (1980), the Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Prize (1986) during his final Frankfurt tenure, as well as the Prince of Asturias Award (2003), the Kyoto Prize (2004), the Holberg Prize (2005), and many others, like the Erasmus Prize (2013), and the Sheikh Zayed Book Award (2021). Habermas, however, declined this last award due to the non-democratic and repressive nature of the United Arab Emirates.

For our part, the journal *Filozofia* is no stranger to Habermas' philosophy. Over many years, multiple authors continually contributed to his legacy, and we would like to bring these reflections to the attention of the reader. The first is a translation of Habermas' own text "Three Normative Models of Democracy," by Ľubica Habová (2000). This was followed by "Habermas, or which Ethics for Bioethics?" (2007) by Daniela Kovaľová; "Remarks on the Basis of J. Habermas' Communication Theory of Action" (2012) by Tatiana Sedová; "A Pluralistic World of States and a Vision of Global Unity: Toward Kant's and Habermas' Versions of Cosmopolitanism" (2015) by Michala Lysoňková; the article "Jürgen Habermas' Communicative Democracy: Between Peirce and Dewey" (2025) by Štěpán Raška; and finally "The Right Use of Reason in the Moral Theories of Aristotle and Habermas" (2025) by the Icelandic philosopher Vilhjálmur Árnason.

As active as he was in his public and intellectual activities, Habermas was well known for his mostly reserved private life. Once he had finished his doctoral thesis, he married Ute Wesselhoeft in 1955. Their marriage lasted until 2025, when Ute passed away at the age of 95. The couple is survived by their three children, Tilmann, Judith, and Rebekka Habermas.

Although Jürgen Habermas is no more, his legacy lives on, and it remains our task to reckon with it. He represents an admirable image of a public intellectual, one that is committed to truthfulness in politics and philosophy, and who does not shy away from an engagement in discourses that threaten to undermine that very truthfulness, without which democracy, institutions, and principles cannot survive. It was this attitude that guided him in his continued support for the European Union project but that also increasingly confronted him with the democratic decline, which we now all face. Some of his thoughts on this problem can be found in his book *Europe, The Faltering Project* (2008). He also reflected on the place and role of religion in modernity and even expressed vocal support for Muslims in Europe. Taken together, his approach to truthfullness in the public sphere remains a model for all of us.

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