

Habermas in the public sphere

About: Stefan Müller-Doohm, *Jürgen Habermas. Une biographie*, Gallimard

by Clotilde Nouët

In this intellectual portrait of the enfant terrible of the Frankfurt School, S. Müller-Doohm presents us with an indefatigable polemicist whose various stands have marked the last fifty years. This first ever biography of Habermas also takes us through post-war German history.

‘I have never again in my life met a person who, in trying to find the truth, attaches as much weight to the exchange of arguments as Habermas’ (p. 350)¹: this personal observation by Oskar Negt, quoted by Stefan Müller-Doohm in the first ever biography devoted to Jürgen Habermas—published by Gallimard in a French translation by Frédéric Joly—could easily serve as the epigraph to the book as a whole. This would, however, require taking the measure of what ‘the exchange of arguments’ meant for Habermas. Running counter to any conciliatory reading of his theory of communication, Habermas’s taste for discussion in fact seems closer to the art of *dispute* than that of consensus. Stefan Müller-Doohm paints the portrait of a colourful character whose active engagement in ‘battles over the politics of ideas’ (p. 459) in his time has been constant, from his famous indictment of Heidegger in 1953 to his more recent contributions to public debate.

¹ In-text page references are to the French translation reviewed by the author. English translations of quotations have, however, been taken from the English translation of the biography: *Habermas: a Biography*, translated by Daniel Seuer, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2016.

The Frankfurt Years

Habermas had only just turned 24 when, at the end of July 1953, he discovered Heidegger's *Introduction to Metaphysics*, the famous 1935 lecture course which referred to the 'internal truth and [...] greatness' of the National Socialist movement. In an article published by the FAZ, he expressed his indignation that 'one of our greatest philosophers'² should have proceeded to republish this almost unedited lecture course without the slightest comment on his political positions of the time. The text sparked lively controversy and acquired symbolic significance. Habermas achieved relative fame for having condemned, through Heidegger, the moral bankruptcy of a whole generation that, after the war, failed to express the slightest remorse about its moral compromises with Nazism: this generation included his professors at the University of Bonn, among whom his PhD supervisor Erich Rothacker, but also his father, Ernst Habermas, who joined the NSDAP as early as Spring 1933.

This text sparked the curiosity of Adorno, whom Habermas met in 1955. In his first major article, 'The dialectics of rationalization' published in August 1954, Habermas engaged in a critique of technical rationality and pauperism that was very close to Adorno's critique of culture both in topic and style. In February 1956, he arrived in the 'elite'³ circles of the Institute—also referred to as the 'café Marx'—like a 'clumsy uneducated boy from the province'⁴ in a Balzac novel. Here began his '*éducation intellectuelle*' (p. 86) with Adorno, for whom he acted as personal assistant and with whom he had an intense professional relationship and friendship. Learning the methods of empirical social research, he discovered sociology but also psychoanalysis. Marcuse's writings from the 1930s were a 'revelation' to him (p. 96).

His relationship with Max Horkheimer, however, was unequivocally bad. Horkheimer had not appreciated Habermas's bibliographical review of Marxism published in December 1956 in Gadamer's journal, the *Philosophische Rundschau*, which, according to him, testified to a political activism incompatible with the Frankfurt School's conception of critique.⁵ He wished to see him leave Frankfurt. However, Habermas remained at the Institute until 1959 thanks to Adorno's support, at which point he decided to finish his Habilitation on the public sphere in Marburg with the Marxist political scientist Wolfgang Abendroth before being appointed to the University of Heidelberg in 1961.

That was also the year of the German Sociology Society conference that brought together Karl Popper and Adorno: the lack of forcefulness in their exchanges left Habermas

² J. Habermas, *Kleine Politische Schriften*, I-IV, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1981, p. 515.

³ J. Habermas, 'Die Zeit hatte einen doppelten Boden', in S. Müller-Doohm (ed.), *Adorno-Portraits*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2007), p. 19. For an English translation: 'Dual-Layered Time. Reflections on T.W. Adorno in the Late 1950s' in *The Logos Reader: Rational Radicalism and the Future of Politics*, ed. Stephen Eric Bronner and Michael Thompson, Lexington, University Press of Kentucky, 2006, p. 75-80.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ See his letter to Adorno from September 1958, in Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 14, *Nachgelassene Schriften 1949-1972*, Frankfurt am Main, Fischer Verlag, 1988, p. 82 sq.

unsatisfied and the far more vigorous tone with which he lambasted Popperian critical rationalism contributed to radicalising what we have come to know as the ‘positivism dispute’. In the meantime, his sociological study focusing on students’ relationships to politics, *Student und Politik*, published by Luchterhand,⁶ received positive feedback, and his relationship with Horkheimer improved to the extent that, when the latter left his sociology and philosophy chair at the Goethe University in Frankfurt, Habermas took his place in 1965.

These stages in Habermas’s academic career are consonant with his theoretical development until the end of the 1960s. In his review on Marxism, Habermas looked to update historical materialism in the framework of an ‘empirically based philosophy of history’⁷ that would make it possible to determine the historical and practical conditions of possibility for a revolutionary transformation of society. The article showed particular concern with the analyses of early Critical Theory. In 1960, his article ‘Between science and philosophy: Marxism as critique’ examined the absence of class consciousness in industrial societies where the Welfare State, through its compensatory social measures, made latent the antagonism between capital and labour; democracy appeared to be the only way to tame capitalism.

The publication of Habermas’s Habilitation thesis⁸ in 1962 met with great success. Focusing on the modern formation of a bourgeois public sphere, he denounced the pernicious effects of the capitalist organisation of the mass media on the quality of public opinion. From his inaugural lecture in Marburg on the relationship between classical and modern philosophy to his collection of essays *Technology and Science as Ideology* (1968), dedicated to Marcuse, Habermas’s work in the 1960s focused on the stakes of the political rehabilitation of practical reason over technocracy. Since the positivism dispute, Habermas also sought to base critical theory on an anthropological theory of knowledge before then abandoning this perspective definitively in the 1970s. The end of the 1960s thus marked a shift in the evolution of his thought. When Adorno died in August 1969, Habermas had already begun the vast project of a theory of communication.

The 1960s and 1970s: Fighting on Two Fronts

Stefan Müller-Doohm sheds light on this intellectual trajectory by recalling Habermas’s critical stances towards the anti-authoritarian student left wing of the 1960s. Habermas was initially very close to the socialist students and supported their political project of democratising universities in his preface to *Hochschule und Demokratie* (1961). He was the main guest speaker

⁶ Horkheimer had refused its publication in the Institute’s collections.

⁷ J. Habermas, “Zur philosophischen Diskussion über Marx und den Marxismus”, *Philosophische Rundschau*, vol. 5, No.3-4, 1957, p. 165-235.

⁸ Entitled *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* or *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. This work was only translated in 1989, which helps explain the late reception of Habermas’s theory of the public sphere in the Anglo-American world.

at a meeting of delegates from the SDS (Socialist German student union) organised in Frankfurt in October 1962 and went on to participate actively in the protests against the Vietnam War.⁹ The death of the student Benno Ohnesorg, killed by a police officer during a Berlin demonstration against the Shah of Iran in June 1967, led to the radicalisation of the protest movement.

In his 'Speech on the political role played by the student body in the Federal Republic', given at a conference held in Hanover in the victim's honour, Habermas enjoined the movement to 'compensate for the lack of [...] radicalness in the interpretation and implementation of our [...] constitution'¹⁰ while avoiding violent activism. Habermas denounced Rudi Dutschke's voluntarism, which he saw as the mark of 'left-wing fascism': these unfortunate words, spoken late at night during the debate that followed Dutschke's speech at the Hanover conference, sparked a general outcry.¹¹ In the collective volume *Die Linke antwortet Habermas*, authors close to the SDS spoke out against him (including Oskar Negt, his assistant in Frankfurt, who wrote the introduction) and accused him of being a liberal. At several points during 1968, Habermas clashed with the radical wing of the protest movement. In August 1968, speaking at the Praxis group's summer school in Korčula, he underscored the limitations of the Marxist theory of crises and challenged its concept of revolution.

The end of 1968 was marked by heightened tensions: while, from the United States, Marcuse reproached Adorno for having called in the police when the students occupied the Institute, Habermas expressed his support and explained his reticence to seeing his seminar transformed into a 'headquarters imagined as the avant-garde of the battles to be waged inside and outside the University'.¹²

Finding himself in a difficult position within his own camp, Habermas simply 'decided to leave' (p. 189) in 1971, moving from Frankfurt to the Max Planck Institute in Starnberg in Bavaria; however, he then found himself facing liberal conservatives on a new front. In the context of the Years of Lead, he took a public stand against the *Radikalenerlass*, a 1972 decree aimed at excluding any member of an 'extremist' organisation from state employment, and in 1977 denounced professors Kurt Sontheimer and Golo Mann who questioned the proximity of Critical Theory intellectuals to Red Army Faction terrorism. From Ernst Topitsch to Robert Spaemann or Hermann Lübbe and Joachim Ritter, Habermas regularly targeted the conservative philosophers who were hostile to the Kantian conception of emancipation through *Aufklärung*. And he did not mince his words when it came to lambasting the reactionary

⁹ In 1965, he signed a declaration addressed to Chancellor Erhard demanding the end to air strikes and the peaceful resolution of the conflict and spoke in 1966 at a conference organised by Rudi Dutschke and the SDS in Frankfurt.

¹⁰ J. Habermas, *Protestbewegung und Hochschulreform*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1969, p. 141. The English translation is taken from Müller-Doohm's book.

¹¹ J. Habermas returned to this episode in 1977, reproaching himself for having used such an expression ('A Test for Popular Justice: The Accusations against the Intellectuals', *Der Spiegel*, 10 October 1977; English translation, *New German Critique*, n°XII [1977]). See also, on this topic, the homage he paid to Dutschke on January 9th, 1980 after his death from the after-effects of the assassination attempt against him in 1968.

¹² Letter from Habermas to Marcuse, 5 May 1969, collection Na 3, Nachlass Herbert Marcuse, archives of the J. C. Senckenberg university library, Frankfurt am Main.

teaching practices advocated by the ‘cartel of right-wing professors’¹³ united in the ‘Association for the Freedom of Science’.

In the course of this decade, Habermas also engaged in a long-term investigation. From his Christian Gauss Lectures (in 1971 at Princeton) to his recasting of historical materialism, he combined social science research conducted at Starnberg with his reflections on language. The publication of his major work, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, in 1981, was the culmination of an interdisciplinary approach to rationality. Against the backdrop of a normative conception of modernity, the book proposed a theory of social action based on a communicative—rather than instrumental or strictly technical—concept of reason.

The Public Intellectual

While Habermas’s first years in Frankfurt were the ‘most intense’¹⁴ of his life, the 1980s and 1990 saw his most significant works: from his considerations on the ethics of discussion to *Between Facts and Norms* (1992), he brought his theory of communication to bear on a reflection on institutions and legal structures, which allowed him to develop a theory of deliberative democracy and the constitutional state.

During that period, Habermas was present on the public stage more than ever before. In 1986, he launched the ‘historians’ quarrel’, publicly attacking right-wing historians such as Michael Stürmer, Andreas Hillgruber, and Ernst Nolte and rejecting their historical revisionism and conservative conception of German identity. He also contributed to all the major national and international debates that followed—the reunification of Germany, the controversies about the right to asylum in the early 1990s, the lively debate sparked by the construction of the Shoah Memorial in Berlin, Kosovo at the end of the 1990s—as well to the issue of bioethics. His defence of transnational forms of democracy against the retreat into nationalism characteristic of the 1990s, which was exacerbated by the financial crises of the 2000s, led him to promote a political conception of the European Union and of its integration beyond Nation-states.

There is no doubt that this first ever biography is a precious scholarly resource for those interested in Habermas’s thought. It also addresses the broader circle of people with an interest in German post-war history, the key moments of which had a profound impact on Habermas’s work. Stefan Müller-Doohm highlights the connections between Habermas’s theoretical texts and those in which a sometimes openly partisan stance are at play, and this is one of the book’s most interesting aspects.

¹³ J. Habermas, *Die Zeit*, 21 July 1978.

¹⁴ J. Habermas, manuscript of his speech of September 5, 2012.

For example, from the end of 1986 onwards, we see Habermas holding regular ‘Dionysos meetings’. Dionysos was a discussion group bringing together academics, intellectuals, media representatives, and political figures—for example Joschka Fischer and Daniel Cohn-Bendit—which influenced the broad policy goals of the red-green coalition (SPD/Greens). Despite not being a member of the SPD, Habermas publicly supported the party—whose cultural conferences he had attended regularly since 1983—in the September 1998 elections.

Despite not playing the role of “courtly advisor”, Habermas has never hesitated to take political figures to task, from Gerhard Schröder to Angela Merkel. However, his contributions do not always meet with approval: for example, after he met Gerhard Schröder in June 1998, some close observers—Claus Offe for example—formed the impression he had been manipulated by the politician. Are these the limits of a public sphere in which modes of communication are not always advantageous for intellectuals? Although Habermas has lamented the decline of the public sphere on several occasions, he has never—unlike Bourdieu, for example—addressed as a specific theme the particular constraints that the mass media format imposes on ‘enlightened’ public speech. However, it is also true that his television appearances have been rare and that he has always given priority to written communication. One way or another, this portrait of the writer as a combative public figure reveals an indefatigable polemicist whose various stands have marked the last fifty years.

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