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BOOK CHAPTER

Habermas, Jürgen

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Jürgen Habermas (born 1929) is one of the most influential German social philosophers of the twentieth century. Besides his academic work, he regularly contributes to political debates, often playing the part of the liberal 'conscience' of Germany. A staunch defender of enlightenment principles, he sees modernity as an 'unfinished project' that needs to be protected from neo-conservative and postmodern critics who attack and undermine Western liberal democracies. Habermas's most important works include *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962), *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1968), *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1981), *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1985), and *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (1992). In addition, he regularly publishes his political opinions in newspapers and magazines.

The scion of a West German middle-class family, Habermas grew up in Gummersbach. He was drafted into the Germany army in the later stages of WWII. The chaos of postwar Germany and the revelations about Nazi atrocities left a lasting impression on Habermas and determined his future political stance. From 1949 to 1954 he studied philosophy, history, psychology and German literature at the universities of Göttingen, Zurich and Bonn. In 1954, he graduated with a Ph.D. in philosophy on Schelling, supervised by the philosopher Erich Rothacker, and worked as a freelance journalist before joining the Institute of Social Research in Frankfurt in 1956 where he became assistant of Theodor W. Adorno. Having lost the confidence of the institute's director Max Horkheimer, however, he moved to the University of Marburg where he defended his *Habilitation* on the structural transformation of the public sphere, supported by the political scientists Wolfgang Abendroth. In this historical-philosophical study, Habermas developed a notion of free public discourse as the backbone of liberal society. In 1961, he became professor of philosophy at the University of Heidelberg, and in 1964 he returned to Frankfurt when he succeeded Horkheimer in the chair of sociology and philosophy. From 1971 until 1983 he was co-director, together with the physicist Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker, of the Max-Planck-Institute for the Study of the Conditions of Life in the Scientific-Technical World at Starnberg, Bavaria. During this time, Habermas underwent his own "linguistic turn", absorbed the philosophy of language and linguistics and produced his opus magnum, the two-volume *Theory of Communicative Action*, in which he formulated a consensual theory of "discourse" and the "ideal speech situation" as the foundation of society. In 1983 he returned to the University of Frankfurt as Professor of Sociology where he taught until in 1994. After his retirement, he continued to contribute regularly to political debates, most recently in a dialogue with Pope Benedict XVI on the role of religion in a secularized world.

While working at the Institute of Social Research, Habermas had contributed to an empirical study on university students' attitudes to politics which criticized the apathetic nature of the "skeptical generation" of the 1950s. In the 1960s, Habermas's unorthodox Marxism made him a popular figure with the West German student movement which he in turn supported in their critique of the existing liberal order of the Federal Republic of Germany. While Habermas grew increasingly concerned about the radicalism of the left-wing students and accused them of 'leftist fascism', he kept defending "1968" for its positive effects on the political culture of West Germany. In 1973, Habermas edited an important study on the "crisis of legitimation" in capitalist societies. In the 1980s, he started a much publicized debate about the singularity of the Holocaust when he

rejected attempts by “neoconservative” historians to “normalize” the official view of German history. Instead, Habermas urged his fellow countrymen to adopt a “post-national identity”. Borrowing a concept from the political scientist Dolf Sternberger, Habermas presented “constitutional patriotism” as the only option open for postwar Germans. Consequently, Habermas was an enthusiastic adherent of a unified Europe, but remained critical of the unification of the two German states in 1990.

Habermas’s influences are as varied as his large oeuvre: well-versed in the traditions of philosophical idealism, he was much influenced, but also highly critical of Martin Heidegger’s existentialism. In line with the tradition of the Frankfurt School and mediated by Herbert Marcuse, he combined theories of the early Marx with Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalysis. His focus on language and discourse are the product of his reception of the philosophy of the late Wittgenstein, of American pragmatism (Charles S. Peirce, George Herbert Mead, John Dewey) and the philosophy of language (J. L. Austin, John Searle, Noam Chomsky). From the 1970s, Habermas critically reviewed the systems theory of the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann, while in the 1980s he was influenced, by way of critical reception, by French post-structuralism, notably Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard and Michel Foucault. Translations and regular invitations as guest professor to American universities have made Habermas one of the best known and most widely discussed German social philosophers of the second half of the twentieth century.

The Cambridge Companion to Habermas, ed. Stephen K. White (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995).

William Outhwaite, *Habermas: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity, 1993).

Matthew G. Specter, *Habermas: An Intellectual Biography* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010).