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Habermas, Jürgen (1929–)

Jürgen Habermas has been the most prolific and influential representative of the second generation of the Frankfurt School. He has not only continued the theoretical tradition of his teachers Adorno and Horkheimer and his friend Marcuse, but also significantly departed from classical critical theory and made many important contributions to contemporary philosophy and social theory. In particular, he has opened critical theory to a dialogue with other philosophies and social theories such as the hermeneutics of Gadamer, systems theory and structural functionalism, empirical social sciences, analytic and linguistic philosophy, and theories of cognitive and moral development. He has been synthesizing these influences into a theory of communicative action, which presents the foundation and framework of a social theory that builds on the tradition of Marx, Weber and classical critical theory, but also criticizes his predecessors and breaks new theoretical ground.

Habermas was born on 18 June 1929 in Düsseldorf, and grew up in Gummersbach, Germany. His father was head of the Bureau of Industry and Trade, and his grandfather was a minister and director of the local seminary. The Young Habermas experienced the rise and defeat of fascism, and was politicized by the Nuremberg trials and documentary films of the concentration camps shown after the war. Habermas began his university studies in Göttingen in 1949 and finished a dissertation of *Das Absolute und die Geschichte* in 1954. In the 1950s, Habermas absorbed – and was strongly influenced by – Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* and Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that he first read in 1955. He studied the young Marx and the young Hegelians with Karl Löwith, one of Germany's great scholars and teachers.

Habermas resolved to work with Adorno and Horkheimer because he believed that they were establishing a dialectical and critical theory of society from within a creative and innovative Marxist tradition. He thus went to Frankfurt and continued his studies in the Institute for Social Research. In this context, he wrote his first major book *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (1962). Combining historical and empirical research with the theoretical framework of critical theory, Habermas traced the historical rise and decline of what he called the 'bourgeois public sphere' and its replacement by the mass media, technocratic administration and societal depoliticization. This influential work continues to animate discussion concerning problems of representative democracy in contemporary capitalist societies and the need for more participatory, democratic and egalitarian spheres of sociopolitical discussion and debate.

In the 1960s, Habermas taught at the universities of Heidelberg (1961–4) and Frankfurt (1964–71). At this time he also became more interested in politics and with others in 1961 published *Student und Politik*, which called for university reforms, and *Protestbewegung und Hochschulreform* (1969), which continued his concern with university reform and also criticized what he saw as the excesses of the German student movement in the 1960s. Habermas was also engaged in

intense theoretical work during this period. His *Theorie und Praxis* appeared in 1963 (*Theory and Practice*, 1973), which contained theoretical papers on major classical and contemporary social and political theorists, as well as anticipations of his own theoretical position; *Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften* in 1967 contained a detailed and critical summary of contemporary debates in the logic of the social sciences; *Erkenntnis und Interesse* in 1968 (*Knowledge and Human Interests*, 1971) traced the development of epistemology and critical social theory from Kant to the present; and several collections of essays: *Technik und Wissenschaft als Ideologie* (1968); *Arbeit-Erkenntnis-Fort-schritt* (1970); and *Philosophische-politische Profile* (1971).

During the 1970s Habermas intensified his studies of the social sciences and began restructuring critical theory as communication theory. Key stages of this enterprise are contained in a collection of studies written with Niklas Luhmann, *Theorie der Gesellschaft oder Sozialtechnologie* (1971); *Legitimationsprobleme im Spät-kapitalismus* (1973); *Zur Rekonstruktion des Historischen Materialismus* (1976); and essays collected in several other books. In these works, Habermas sharpened his critique of classical Marxism and his critical theory predecessors. He attempted to develop his own reconstruction of historical materialism, a critical theory of society, and a philosophical theory rooted in analyses of communicative action. During much of this period, since 1971, Habermas was director of the Max Planck Institute in Starnberg where he involved himself in various research projects and was in close touch with developments in the social sciences. After a series of disputes with students and colleagues, he resigned in 1982 and returned to Frankfurt where he served as Professor of Philosophy and Sociology until his retirement in 2002.

In 1981, Habermas published his two-volume magnum opus, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*. This impressive work of historical scholarship and theoretical construction appraised the legacies of Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Lukács and western Marxism, including critical theory, and criticized their tendencies towards theoretical reductionism and failure to develop an adequate theory of communicative action and rationality. Habermas also generated his own analysis of the importance of communicative action and rationality for contemporary social theory. The book points both to his continuity with the first generation of the Frankfurt School and his significant departures. *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* also manifests Habermas's continued interest in the relationship between theory and practice with his discussion of new social movements. The concluding section is a testament to his interest in systematic social theory with a practical intent in his summation of the current status of critical theory. The work as a whole thus sums up Habermas's theoretical work in the 1970s and points to some issues and topics that constitute future projects.

Since 1981 Habermas has indeed continued to pursue development of a systematic articulation of his theory of communicative action in the fields of moral discourse and legal and political discourse. *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (1990) contains contributions towards developing a discourse ethics, while *Faktizität und Geltung* (1992) articulates a discourse theory of law, democracy and rights. *Postmetaphysical Thinking* (1992) contains

articles that articulate Habermas's attempts to reformulate modern theory in terms of a theory of communicative action that overcomes the metaphysical presuppositions of the philosophical tradition. *Between Facts and Norms* (1992) draws on the legal and political theories of Rawls, Dworkin, and others to provide theories of democratic legitimation of formal law and distributive justice in the governance of contemporary societies. *The Future of Human Nature* (2003) questions whether there are postmetaphysical answer to the quest for the "good life" and takes on the vexed issue of human cloning.

In addition, Habermas has published collections of essays commenting on contemporary political, cultural and historical events such as *The New Conservatism* (1989) and he edited a collection of *Observations on 'the spiritual situation of our time'* (1984). *The Past as Future* (1994) collects lectures, interviews, and reviews on issues of German unification, the Gulf War, and German history, while *The Postnational Consellation* (2001) deals with European Union, globalization, the future of democracy and other socio-political challenges of the day. Habermas has consistently criticized relativizing attitudes toward the Holocaust and dealt critically with the complex problems of German history, including residues and debates over German fascism.

Perhaps *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1987) has been most controversial book. In this systematic reflection on philosophy and discourses of modernity from the Enlightenment to the present, Habermas launched an attack on French postmodern theory (especially Derrida and Foucault) and its predecessors (Nietzsche, Heidegger and Bataille). In this text and other essays of the period, Habermas defended the heritage of modernity, Enlightenment, and reason against the postmodern critiques.

A vast number of books and articles have appeared which defend or criticize Habermas, and he often responds to collections of books containing essays on his work, such as *Habermas and Modernity* (Berstein 1985). A collection of interviews *Autonomy and Solidarity* (Dews 1992) also provides answers to his critics and insights into his life and intellectual development. *The Past as Future* (1994) provides interviews in which Habermas answers critics and expresses his views on contemporary political and intellectual developments. Habermas thus continues to be highly productive and controversial as he enters his seventh decade and he has emerged as one of the great intellectual figures of our time.

References

- Berstein, R. (ed.) (1985) *Habermas and Modernity*, Cambridge, UK.
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Further reading

- Holub, R. (1991) *Jürgen Habermas: Critic in the Public Sphere*, London.
Matusztkik, M. B. (2001) Jurgen Habermas. A Philosophical-Political Profile. Lanham, Md.

McCarthy, T. (1978) *The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas*, London.