

The Political Theory of Jürgen Habermas

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Introduction

Jürgen Habermas, who died on March 14, 2026, is recognised as one of the most significant social philosophers and political theorists of the second half of the twentieth century and beyond. From the early 1960s and onwards he was engaged in a series of public debates in philosophy, where he advocated the importance of communication, reason, and pragmatics. Holding professorships at Heidelberg University and Goethe University Frankfurt, and as a director the Max Planck Institute in Starnberg, he was a public intellectual known throughout his native Germany as well as in intellectual circles globally. Indeed, in Germany, he was somewhat of a court philosopher primarily among the Social Democrats but also very influential in the Christian Democratic circles as well, the two main political parties in that country. In philosophy was known for his engagement with positivist philosophy, phenomenologists, pragmatists, and post-structuralists. In political theory, he was known for his debates and incorporation of ideas with system theorists and technocrats, with Marxists and neoliberals, European federalists and nationalists, postmodernists, and religious thinkers.

This presentation to the Isocracy Network on the political theory of Jürgen Habermas complements an earlier presentation given on May 2nd to the Existentialist Society, for which a transcript is readily available. That presentation included many biographical details that I will not repeat here, and was explicitly dedicated to Habermas' contributions to philosophy, specifically the linguistic turn, knowledge and communicative rationality, universal pragmatics, the ideal speech situation and discourse ethics, and the discussion concerning modernity and the enlightenment. These philosophical positions are foundational to his political theory, however, the concentration in the presentation is on the latter. In particular, this presentation will be reviewing Habermas' thought on the public sphere, the division and role of social systems and cultural lifeworlds, his wide-ranging comments on Europe, democracy, and justice. All of these concerns will be addressed in turn, and match the trajectory of his political thought. Finally, there will be a critical assessment of Habermas' political work and opportunities for future development.

The Public Sphere

Habermas' first major work was "The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society" (*Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit. Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft*, 1962), as his habilitation for professorship requirements in Germany. A combination of history and politics, it describes the rise and development of "the bourgeois public sphere" in Europe in the 18th century and its decline, whose origins are traced back to merchants during the Renaissance, alongside a growth of in nascent notions of social democracy, individual liberty, and popular sovereignty. The public sphere serves as a place between government and people, where individuals can meet and discuss matters of *res publica*, the public concern. This would be manifested especially on salon society of the French Enlightenment, the "penny university" of British coffee-houses, the Republic of Letters throughout Europe and the Americas, and Invisible College.

This public sphere provided two progressive and complementary tendencies. Firstly, it provided an outlet by which members of the public could express their ideas and air their grievances. Secondly, if they listened, it provided a resource for which governing authorities could formulate policy that

understood the general will of the participants. Of course, as Habermas points out, some of the governing authorities were often monarchies and feudal in their organisation and despotic by temperament; they had little concern for what the public thought, much less a critical public. As far as they were concerned, there was no separation between the individual and state; "*L'État, c'est moi*" ("The state, it is I") as the French King Louis XIV claimed and likewise, "*Dieu et mon droit*" ("God and my right"), the motto of the monarchs of the United Kingdom, encapsulating the argument of King Charles I that a king had sovereign immunity. Of course, as was observed by Marx, the development of technological progress allowed for the potential of new social relations. Where this was resisted by existing forces, conflict would arise either as revolution or reform, as the bourgeois revolutions made clear.

The bourgeois public sphere, born from the mercantile class, adopted by wealthy intellectuals and artists, supported by the rising industrial class, was successful in establishing new individual and property rights and new democratic institutions. It also opened up opportunities for increasing the scope of the public sphere and inclusion. Over time, and often with great and violent struggles, liberal-democratic political systems would expand their formal and legal rights to include women, working-people without property (i.e., land ownership), and different "races", and, through both the socialist pressure for economic reform, the distributive limitations of liberal-capitalism, and a further understanding of positive liberty, the historic class compromise that allowed for the welfare state, all occurring through the troubling and often violent era of the twentieth century.

In Habermas' perspective all of these are positive developments in the public sphere; however there is a negative distortion as well, one which correlates with Adrent's distinction between "citoyen", the inclusive rights of all, and "bourgeois", the exclusive economic interest, that comes with liberal-capitalism and, indeed, part of the double-barrelled name. As part of the intellectual tradition of German critical theory and the Frankfurt School, Habermas was also attentive to how industrialisation, information technologies, and mass commercialisation and consumerism have distorted the critical elements of the public sphere, leading to the social pathologies of trivialisation, temporary fads, politically ineffectual subcultures, counter-cultures that withdrew from society, and mass democratic processes truncated to occasional elections and political commentary from specialists. These are, in Habermas' opinion, not just a negative structural transformation of the public sphere, but one which illustrates a tension between the egalitarian side of democracy and the hierarchy of capitalism.

There are a number of criticisms of Habermas' exploration of the public sphere, mainly from the perspective of viewpoints that were excluded. Whilst Habermas' original text was quite explicit on how the bourgeois public sphere was socially limited, his essay "Further Reflections on the Public Sphere" (1992), discussed the role private associations of social criticism, especially prominent in the German enlightenment, such as secret societies (e.g., the Illuminati, Freemason lodges), the rise of working class public engagement and a "plebian public sphere" (e.g., French Jacobins, British Chartists, utopian socialists, and other radicals), and, of course, (especially with input from Pateman and Fraser) the development of a women's participation in the public sphere, noting that the bourgeois-capitalist public sphere undoubtedly requires the adjective 'patriarchal' assigned to it.

A further publication "A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and Deliberative Politics" appeared in 2022 which discussed the spread of the Internet and social media, the transformation of journalism, and the effects on the public sphere, and the requirement of deliberative reasoning in politics, grounded on rational reasoning and justifications. Habermas notes that the liberal and bourgeois revolutions and the socialist challenges have created an environment where in democratic states there is an public expectation, as well as typically legal and constitutional expectations, that public debate will effect the political decision-making process, including the expression of public will in elections. This is a basic normative transformation that

would not have been present in societies with traditional monarchical systems, and provides a unifying element where divergent interests are present, both in providing protection of diversity but also the opportunity to expand the scope of diversity through deliberation on what constitutes universal rights and norms.

However, neoliberal economic policies undermine these egalitarian and integrative functions, setting people in opposition to each other, and groups against groups in a divisive manner, fragmenting the democratic potential of the Internet. Further, decades of professional management of statecraft has weakened people's beliefs of the efficacy of public input, reflected in falling voter turnout and participation in political organisations. In these circumstances the emancipatory and democratic potential of the Internet and social media has become truncated, fragmented into self-sustaining closed echo chambers, and especially prone to emotive with deliberately declining quality of content and fake news from demagogic vested interests, and the narcissistic "singularization" of trivial content found in "social media influencers". This all creates a "post-truth" environment which will become more pathological if unregulated social media platforms continue without accountability

System and Lifeworld

Habermas' work on the public sphere leads his distinction between societies as functional systems of institutions, rules, and procedures and the everyday interactions and experiences as cultural lifeworlds. This difference is first thoroughly developed in "Legitimation Crisis" (Legitimationsprobleme im Spätkapitalismus, 1973), correctly described by the Times Literary Supplement described as "a landmark in critical social analysis", and followed up in the second volume of "The Theory of Communicative Action" (Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns, 1981) which has the subtitle "Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason" (Zur Kritik der funktionalistischen Vernunft). Legitimation Crisis represents Habermas' engagement and critique of functionalist systems theory represented by Niklas Luhmann who, in a Weberian-like manner, sought to incorporate all of society in systems and sub-systems of increasing complexity. With a commitment to modernism, rationality, human rights, and social welfare - all encapsulated under the notion of "dignity" - Habermas argued for a "free space" for meaning to develop; and Jean-Francois Lyotard published "The Postmodern Condition" a decade later in response to "Legitimation Crisis", leading to another fifteen plus years of debate on the nature of the Enlightenment and modernity within social theory.

"Legitimation Crisis" starts with a definition of crisis that cuts across medicine, literature, and society; the capacity of self-healing. Social formations are described; primitive, traditional, modern, with different principles of organisation, modes of integration, and crisis tendencies. Advanced capitalism has particular crisis possibilities; those arising from modern production itself (e.g., the environment), the international balance, system crises, whether by a failure in institutional rationality or an economic crash, and, a novel contribution, a legitimation crises, affecting social integration and cultural motivation. Habermas argues, contra the systems-functionalist approach: "There is no administrative production of meaning... Cultural traditions have their own, vulnerable conditions of reproduction. They remain 'living' as long as they take shape in an unplanned, nature-like manner" (p70 LC).

This distinction is very important for in the realm of law; Habermas' criticises those who argue that law acquires justification for just following its own rules consistently (which, of course, contributes to system rationality and is viewed positively), but rather argues that there must be a normative foundation for legitimacy. In order for a society to develop and advance, that normative foundation needs to be independent from the imperatives of the social system and it needs to increasingly adopt more universalisable grounding. Where the former is not the case, democratic politics increasingly

becomes a series of political compromises between elites disempowering the mass of culture, and where the latter is not the case, society fragments into conflict-laden anti-communities, where the classic crises of modernity (alienation from Marx, disenchantment from Weber, anomie from Durkheim) are increasingly evident because of a systemic colonisation of the lifeworld. Which, as a word of warning, can also lead to a destruction of individual rights and diversity that applies a pre-modern mode of monocultural norms with modern technology. This sort of argument of absolute, totalitarian rule, has been invoked in fascism: "The Fascist conception of the State is all-embracing; outside of it no human or spiritual values can exist, much less have value. Thus understood, Fascism is totalitarian, and the Fascist State - a synthesis and a unit inclusive of all values - interprets, develops, and potentiates the whole life of a people." (Mussolini, Gentile, "The Doctrine of Fascism", 1927)

The interest in law is two-fold. On one hand, legal systems and code represent the the most advanced and complex representation of procedural rules in a given polity, a *system* whose scope covers property, behaviour, and enforcement and from which all other agreements are subsets; a contract cannot contradict the law and remain legal. On the other hand, viewed from the perspective of the philosophy of universal pragmatics employed by Habermas, rational law is at the intersection of morality and truth or, to use the title of his comprehensive study on legal theory, "Between Facts and Norms" (Faktizität und Geltung, 1992). As can be expected from the title, Habermas notes that whilst truth is essential for law, so too is are the principles of justice, and it is here that the possibility of a sociological disenchantment with the law can arise. Habermas instead suggests that the conflict between "natural law" and "positive law" can be resolved by a complementary relationship between moral norms and legal norms, however this requires the ability of a legal system to accept input from the normative lifeworld in a manner that engages in a deliberative procedure that draws upon democratic republicanism and liberal individualism. For Habermas, whilst a legal system derives obedience partially from the coercive power of its commands, but its legitimacy and validity rests on the consent of the governed formed through the rational discourse in the lifeworld.

Europe, Democracy, and Justice

With this emphasis on the European public sphere, with European social development and European legal norms, it is fair to note that Habermas' analysis is primarily Eurocentric with a fair dose of advanced capitalism as it is also common in North America and Australia. He certainly does take into account anthropological evidence of modes of consciousness for different societies, but he is very much influenced by Weber who attempts to orientated traditional worldviews according to their potential for modernity. Weber came to the conclusion that, influenced by the Judeo-Christian tradition of ethical mastery and egalitarian tendencies, along with Hellenic rational contemplation, that Europe held the greatest potential for modernism. Habermas largely agrees with this position in contrast to the Marxist interpretation of the relative development of productive forces or, in a more contemporary argument, Jared Diamond's argument of geography. Whilst certainly Eurocentric for these reasons, Habermas is no Europhile by any stretch of the imagination, taking a very strong position during the "historians debate" (Historikerstreit) of the 1980s where some conservative historians attempted to revise responsibility and the exceptional nature of the Holocaust.

Regardless, the concentration on European issues and setting has led, unsurprisingly, for Habermas to engage in significant public commentary about the state and development of Europe especially in the context of the European Union after the cold war. Two related positions are evident here. Firstly, Habermas argues for a post-national state, recognising that globalisation and transnational capitalism is overwhelming the traditional nation-state, that supranational governance is required to preserve and incorporate those normative rights (such as democracy, human rights, social welfare) that were achieved during the 19th and 20th century on a state-level, to a new and more

cosmopolitan environment. The second position is a development of a different sort of patriotism; whereas historical modernist notions of patriotism was strongly tied to the nation-state, Habermas argues that there is a need in the new environment for a constitutional patriotism (Verfassungspatriotismus), where civic loyalty and collective identity and is motivated by the rights of the "citoyen" (c.f., Arendt) in a liberal and social democracy embodied in law rather than loyalty to ethnicity or national identity. Habermas wrote an influential essay with Jacques Derrida on this shared statement of "European values" entitled "February 15, or What Binds Europeans Together" in 2003 - February 15th being the day of the world's largest demonstration against the invasion of Iraq.

In 2011, Habermas would also publish a collection of essays, "On the Constitution of Europe" (Zur Verfassung Europas) which would be followed "The Lure of Technocracy" (Im Sog Der Technokratie, 2013). In both these publications he observed troubling fractures in the European polity, even in a context where there is increasing support for European identity and the aforementioned values, based on opinion polls. Habermas' concern is two-fold. First, he continues his ongoing concern of the influence of neoliberalism and the destructive role it plays in breaking down social integration, even if it does bring economic benefits (which, viewed according to economic science, has decreasing marginal utility). Secondly, on the political vector, he argues against the management of politic decision making by expertise alone, noting that that too reduces the loyalty of citizens to a system that they can no longer contribute to or feel part of. These are, of course, arguments that Habermas has been using since "Legitimation Crisis", and indeed can be traced all the way back to his original work on the public sphere in 1962. However, in the case of the European Union as an emergent superpower, they have a particular concern for global history. If Europe fails, then the project of modernity, human rights, and democracy, may also fail with it.

Critique and Conclusion: The Environment, Imperialism, and Political Economy

There can be no doubt of Habermas' extensive reading, analysis, and comprehension as a philosopher and social theorist. This is nobody who was able to take such a wide range of philosophy (e.g., linguistics, phenomenology, hermeneutics, pragmatism) and sociology (e.g., Marxism, systems theory, functionalism, post-structuralism, etc) and synthesise them all into a cohesive and grounded social theory that has a common trajectory over six decades of writing. Nevertheless, there are justified criticisms, or more so exclusions, in Habermas' work that remain particularly pertinent today, which can be broadly be categorised as missing analysis on environmentalism, imperialism, and political economy.

Now it is not as if Habermas did not give at least passing consideration to these concerns. For example, one finds in Legitimation Crisis, written in 1973, an acknowledgement of the natural limit of the environment to absorb greenhouse gases. This is a very advanced position for its day. He also refers to the human desire for a "mimetic relationship with nature", a harmonious connection with the natural world. But he doesn't go further than that either in scientific, philosophical, or sociological analysis. He is lacking an ecological understanding even if he is expressing sympathy toward it.

Even more so, Habermas was almost entirely silent on matters of colonialism and imperialism. He certainly had great sympathy for political and even economic refugees, rejecting anti-immigrant sentiments based on the "chauvinism of affluence", and consistently made public arguments in favour of asylum seekers. He also argued for a two-part integration model that encouraged political acculturation whilst also protecting cultural diversity. He also made some nascent arguments that would become a theoretical justification for humanitarian intervention. But at no stage did he review imperialism, its effects and independence movements.

Likewise, he had a very minimal offerings in matters of political economy, although his close collaborator Claus Offe did make several significant contributions in this field, on the welfare state, the transformation of Eastern Europe and European integration, and in universal basic income. Habermas, in contrast, made some references to class compromise approaches in "Legitimation Crisis" as a temporary suspension of competing claims on property rights, and recognises class societies as such but never went significantly beyond this. A tome that is as hefty as "Between Facts and Norms", dedicated to the principles and theories of law and justice, simply doesn't address the basic elements of political economy which are embodied in law.

Rather than rejecting Habermas, whose insights provide a careful and scientific grounding for understanding both the rise of social pathologies and some of their solutions, it is necessary to expand Habermas to include those important elements which were overlooked. Even here and now, in an Australian context of June 2026, he has enormous relevance. We are currently witnessing the rise of One Nation, an extreme right-wing anti-immigration and anti-worker party that seeks to rollback women's rights and youth rights, whilst being heavily funded by conservative mining magnates, and engaging in a disingenuous post-truth social media campaign. Habermas provided a critique of the tendency of social media to fall for such narcissistic lack of quality and constantly warned against the socially destructive tendencies in neoliberalism and technocratic political management.

With two years before the next Federal election, the possibility of preventing a populist and demagogic coup of the Australian system is possible; but it will require a concerted effort to regulate social media to prevent misinformation and fake accounts, to re-orientate the economic system toward public and social welfare, and for governments to open-up participatory forums in the old "town hall" style in preference to rule by management elites. This represents a diagnosis, treatment, and prognosis, of the social pathologies confronting us.