

How German philosopher Jürgen Habermas proposes to save the EU

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Jürgen Habermas has joined the debate about the future of the European Union (EU). On August 3, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* newspaper published an article, titled “Change of course for Europe”, written by the 83-year-old philosopher together with Julian Nida-Rümelin and Peter Bofinger.

Nida-Rümelin was minister for culture in the Social Democratic Party (SPD)-Green Party coalition government of Gerhard Schröder (SPD) in 2001-2002 and teaches philosophy at Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich. Bofinger is an economics professor in Würzburg and sits on the 5-member German Council of Economic Experts. His appointment to the body that advises the federal government was originally proposed by the trade unions.

The article is the result of an initiative from SPD chairman Sigmar Gabriel, who asked Habermas to comment on the euro crisis. It is intended to serve as the basis for the SPD's future political program. Gabriel shares the views expressed in it and—a year ahead of the upcoming parliamentary elections—is seeking to emerge from the shadows of Chancellor Angela Merkel's (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) government, whose European policy has until now been fully supported by the SPD.

Habermas and his co-authors criticise the Merkel government, mainly from the right. They have no qualms about the general focus of her European policy, but accuse her of a “lack of political creativity” and a “one-dimensional” approach.

Merkel's European policy manoeuvres between the feuding wings of her governing coalition. While some representatives of the ruling parties call for Greece's expulsion from the euro zone and the end of bailouts, thus placing the future of the euro in question, others seek to save the euro at all costs because its failure would have disastrous consequences for the German export industry.

Merkel tries to placate opponents of bailouts for ailing member states by tying such support to strict austerity conditions and rejecting joint liability for government bonds (euro bonds). At the same time, she has committed herself to the euro and, each time the crisis threatened to spin out of control, agreed to increasing the existing rescue packages or implementing new ones. The SPD supported this policy by securing Merkel large majorities whenever it came to critical votes in parliament.

This course has now stalled. The austerity measures dictated to Greece have triggered a deep recession, causing continued growth of the national debt despite brutal social cuts. Spain and Italy are paying record interest rates on new loans and are threatened with

bankruptcy.

Habermas, Bofinger and Nida-Rümelin therefore argue for an end to manoeuvring and a vigorous commitment to preserving the euro. They accuse the federal government of assuming “that the problems have basically been caused by a lack of fiscal discipline at the national level, and that the solution is primarily to be sought in a rigorous policy of spending cuts by individual countries”. They think this is wrong and the crisis cannot be overcome by restricting efforts to the national level. They call for “collective guarantees for government bonds issued within the eurozone”, a policy Merkel rejects.

But, like Merkel, the three authors make it absolutely clear that financial aid must be tied to tough austerity conditions. The “social Europe” Habermas usually blustered about is mentioned only in a brief aside. Nowhere does the article mention the widespread misery caused by Berlin's austerity dictates, nor the obscene enrichment of a small elite that continues unabated even during the crisis.

The authors are not interested in social equality and justice; they are solely concerned about German economic interests and power. With their ideological support, the SPD is offering itself as a political force capable of resolutely asserting the interests of the German bourgeoisie and placing the European Union at the service of German economic interests even more effectively than in the past.

In this regard, Habermas and his co-authors go much further than the federal government. Their prerequisite for a common debt liability is “strict collective control over national budgets”.

“A transfer of sovereignty to European institutions”, they explain, “is unavoidable in order to impose effective fiscal discipline and guarantee a stable financial system”.

This amounts to a dictatorship of the Brussels authorities over the budgetary policies of all euro zone member countries, as already practised in Greece by the “troika” of the EU, International Monetary Fund and European Central Bank. And as Germany is the largest and economically strongest EU member and sets the tone in Brussels, it would hold sway over all other member countries. This is an attempt to reorganize Europe under German domination.

It is also significant that Habermas and his co-authors want to initially limit their targeted “political union” to a “core Europe of the 17 European Monetary Union (EMU) member states”. The poorer EU members who have not yet adopted the euro, as well as

the UK, are to remain outside. This would further increase German dominance.

Habermas would not be Habermas if he did not try to clothe these plans for a naked dictatorship in democratic robes.

Ever since he took over Frankfurt University's chair of philosophy and sociology from Max Horkheimer in 1964, at age 35, he has been regarded as the most prominent representative of the Frankfurt School and its "Critical Theory". After a brief flirtation with the 1968 student movement, he soon emerged as the German Federal Republic's semi-official political philosopher, who specialized in reconciling "critical" spirits with existing social conditions.

His *Theory of Communicative Action*, which places social discourse on a par with material social relations, is perfectly suited to reducing real social antagonisms to mere communication problems that can be resolved through democratic discourse, without infringing on reality in the slightest.

In the 1990s, he provided the theoretical justification for the Greens' transformation from a petty bourgeois protest party into an establishment party. Among other things, he developed the arguments used by the ex-pacifists to justify German participation in the 1999 war in Yugoslavia (See: "How Jürgen Habermas defends the Balkan war"). Joschka Fischer, the then-foreign minister and spokesman for the Greens, is one of Habermas's self-professed supporters.

Habermas is now crafting a justification for the development of the EU into an authoritarian entity, where Germany calls the tune. According to Habermas, such a "big step towards integration" will not only overcome the euro region's current crisis. He also praises it as the agent for "curbing the evil practices of the shadowy parallel universe that the investment banks and hedge funds have built up alongside the real economy of goods and services", adding: "This requires our politicians to get a grip and take control again".

Elsewhere he writes: "... the institutional underpinning of a collective fiscal, economic and social policy within the eurozone" will serve "the further aim of restoring to policy-makers their lost capacity for action in the face of market imperatives at a transnational level". Only a politically united core Europe can offer "any hope of reversing the process—already far advanced—of transforming a citizens' democracy built on the idea of the social state into a sham democracy governed by market principles".

In other words, Habermas claims that strengthening the EU could break the dominance of the financial markets and restore democracy. This is absurd on two counts.

Firstly, the money Habermas wants to make available by introducing the joint liability of euro zone states for government bonds will flow directly into the "parallel universe" of "the investment banks and hedge funds".

This has already happened in relation to the rescue packages for Greece and Portugal. The banks and hedge funds benefited from the aid money because it allowed them to recover their risky loans. At the same time, the debt of these countries continued to rise despite the brutal austerity measures, and the working class was bled white. The same thing will happen if it comes to issuing euro bonds: they will simply be used to appease the appetite of the

financial markets.

Secondly, the EU has been since its creation a reliable tool of finance capital, ruthlessly serving its interests. The Brussels authorities warily monitor adherence to the free movement of capital and goods, enforce free competition deep into vital areas such as education and health, and dictate the austerity programs that lead to the slashing of pensions and social benefits, lowering of wages, and privatisation of public companies and services.

The strengthening of the European Union, envisaged by Habermas and his co-authors, would not undermine the power of the banks and hedge funds, but rather increase it.

Habermas is fully aware of the "weak democratic foundations of the European Union" and makes a desperate attempt to gloss over the issue. To avoid the "imposition on ... peoples of a centralized executive power that takes on a life of its own above their heads", he says, "the people themselves must have their say".

He wants to achieve this via a constitutional convention and referenda on its outcome: "If the results of the referenda are positive, the peoples of Europe could regain, at a European level, the sovereignty that was stolen from them by 'the markets' a long time ago".

In view of the failure of the EU constitution referendum in France and the Netherlands in 2005, Habermas knows that a new ballot would garner little support. He therefore wants to stimulate that support by offering the promise of European greatness and appealing to anti-Americanism.

"A discussion about the purpose and aim of the unification process would present an opportunity to broaden the focus of public debate, which has hitherto been confined to economic issues", he writes, and adds: "The awareness that global political power is shifting from the West to the East, and the sense that our relationship with the USA is changing, combine to present the synergetic benefits of European unification in a new light".

And if anyone has still failed to understand that this is about power politics and not democracy, he stresses: "The peoples of Europe ... must pool their resources if they want to exert any kind of influence on the international political agenda and the solution of global problems. To abandon European unification now would be to quit the world stage for good".



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