Jürgen Habermas—Germany's state philosopher turns 85

Ulrich Rippert
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The 85th birthday of the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, who was born on June 18, 1929 in the city of Düsseldorf, has triggered a flood of congratulatory greetings and articles. He has been variously described as an “impressive intellectual and political authority”, “a moral-philosophical power”, and “the greatest contemporary thinker in Europe”.

Suhrkamp publishers have published by a 750-page biography to coincide with his birthday. In his letter of congratulation the leader of the Social Democratic Party Sigmar Gabriel declared that Habermas' contributions to “discourse ethics in the sphere of educational enlightenment”, “decision-making in deliberative democracy”, his theory of “domination-free discourse”, “self-empowerment by the political against the superior power of the financial sector” and “constitutional patriotism” are indispensable for socially critical debate.

The hymns of praise for Habermas resemble a swan song for the German system of social partnership and class collaboration.

In a number of articles, the WSWS has demonstrated how Habermas's discourse theory and his writings on social harmony serve to obscure the class nature of society. Such a stance has become more and more untenable in wake of the deepening of the capitalist crisis over the last twenty years. Increasingly his theories have served as the ideological background music for welfare cuts, attacks on democratic rights and the return of militarism.

Fifteen years ago, Habermas justified the NATO war against Serbia, and the WSWS showed how his “critical theory” had mutated into a theory of war. Recently, Habermas has placed the defense of the European Union against its growing rejection by broad layers of the population at the center of his philosophical and political efforts.

We reproduce here a commentary by Ulrich Rippert, which deals with Habermas's support for the NATO war against Serbia. It was first published on the WSWS on June 2, 1999.

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Bestiality, humanity and servility

By Ulrich Ripper, 5 June 1999

The renowned German weekly *Die Zeit* provided the noted Frankfurt philosopher Jürgen Habermas with three full pages and a headline. The editorial board knew for certain it would be no easy task for him to complete. The sixth week of war had just begun. With each night's bombing the doubts and questions increased.

The talk about humanitarian aims and the defence of the Kosovars had long been turned into an absurdity by the stark reality of the war. Foreign Minister [Joschka] Fischer and Defence Minister [Rudolf] Scharping resorted to the most inappropriate and inane comparisons between the regime in Belgrade and Nazi Germany. This caused a few more sober historians to wag their index finger in warning. Moreover, the Green party's special conference was about to start.

The situation called for a real expert in morals.

Against all the doubters, Professor Jürgen Habermas stepped forward to defend the NATO bombing, under the headline “Bestiality and Humanity—a war on the borderline between law and morality”.

This is by no means the first time that Habermas has intervened into the political debate. In the past there was hardly a social issue on which he refrained from stating his position. What is new is that he now baldly acts as a propagandist for war. Seven years ago, when he supported the bombing of Iraq, it was still hesitantly and “with a heavy heart”. Now, he completely adopts the arguments of NATO headquarters. “Critical theory” functions as war theory.

Habermas embodies the political transformation that can be observed in many of those from the late 1960s who at one time protested against the prevailing political conditions, and particularly against the Vietnam War. To mention but a few: Daniel Cohn-Bendit calls for the rapid deployment of NATO ground troops into Kosovo. Thomas Schmid, who for years called for a boycott of Axel Springer's press empire, raises the same demand. For some time now he has been earning a crust as a chief correspondent of *Die Welt* (published by Springer). Bernd Rabehl, once a legendary student leader alongside Rudi Dutschke, is now a professor at the Free University in Berlin. He gives interviews to the right-wing rag *Freie Welt* and warns that Germany is being swamped with foreigners. Then there is Joschka Fischer, the former Frankfurt radical and squatter, now Germany's foreign minister.

The trend these political turncoats represent is fed by many sources. For one, many of Germany's rebellious sons have, over the years, become heirs. Along with their wealth has grown social power and recognition. This leads to “respect for the institutions”, as Thomas Schmid once put it so aptly. This conversion was always combined with a radical transformation of their arguments, and here Habermas was not infrequently the trendsetter. His role in this regard flows directly from his theoretical conceptions.

If one asks, “How could the Critical Spirit descend to the point of becoming a crass apologist for the military?” one is obliged to seek the answer in an investigation of the evolution of this theoretician of the Frankfurt School.

In 1964, when Jürgen Habermas took over the Chair of Philosophy and Sociology from Max Horkheimer, the long-standing leader of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, the Frankfurt School played a big role in student debates. Horkheimer's 1940s paper about the “Authoritarian State” caused feelings to run high. Horkheimer not only demonstrated the connection between fascism and capitalism, but he also opposed Stalinism, which he defined as “state socialism”. He warned against illusions in the proletariat as the “objectively predetermined bearer of the revolution”. Instead, Horkheimer said the social transformation that would “put an end to rule” would arise out of the conscious “will of the

individual”.

Horkheimer's thoughts about the “authoritarian state” strongly influenced the concepts of the anti-authoritarian student movement, with its conceptions of “direct action”. Habermas quickly came to oppose such actions and condemned them as “fake revolution”. Instead, he proposed seeking collaboration with the trade unions and groups with a “major chance to influence”, that had “access to the mass media”. Later, he stressed that the decisive question in social change was how various interests were justified and discussed.

In his main work, *Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas underscores this social “Discourse Theory”. There are two distinctive “cognition-conductive mechanisms”: human labour, and, on the same level, but separate from it, language. Through labour, external nature is appropriated; through language humans make themselves understood and organise their life together. Reality is divided into two spheres, each with its own logic.

If, in the sphere of labour, this logic follows the structure of “rationally directed and success-oriented activity”, then in the “context of communicative action” it follows “binding consensual norms, which define reciprocal expectations about behaviour and must be understood and recognised by at least two active individuals”.

“The institutional framework of a society”, according to Habermas, comprises such “norms that direct the linguistically mediated interaction”. (Quoted from the German original: J. Habermas, Erkenntis und Interesse [Knowledge and Human Interests], Frankfurt 1973).

“Good old dualism...” commented Christoph Türcke, private lecturer in philosophy at Kassel University, in his essay “Habermas, or how Critical Theory became acceptable in good society.” Türcke makes clear what lies behind the bombastic “yawn-inducing complicated science-speak overloaded with foreign terms”. The pompous “sociological terminologic-chatterism” only serves to hide the threadbare theoretical kernel, that one can critically discuss and interpret everything, without changing reality one iota.

Türcke draws the conclusion that Habermas's critical communication theory raises “critique of rule to a level where it no longer needs fear a ban on being employed by the state or falling into resignation”. Behind the verbosely championed “de-constraining of communication”—that is, unlimited communication—is hidden the call for everyone to say whatever he wishes to say. In Habermas's hands the demand for the democratisation of social relations is transformed into the demand for the “democratisation of the relations of communication”.

With no less than 80 talk shows every week on German television, and many politicians, like Schroeder and his foreign minister, conducting politics as if it were a permanent talk show, this theoretician of general palaver has become a much-quoted and highly fashionable philosopher.

But now, let us turn to Habermas's justification for the war.

What is most noticeable here as well, is that reality is completely left out. The professor is not interested in questions about the origins of the war—the real reasons why 19 NATO states are reducing a small country to ruins and terrorising the population, by means of a relentless bombardment that makes use of the most modern weapons. He simply repeats the war propaganda that the bombing is a “punitive military action against Yugoslavia”, which became unavoidable following the collapse of Rambouillet. Its supposed aim is “to ensure a liberal resolution of Kosovar autonomy inside Serbia”.

This is written after six weeks of a most brutal war, in which the foundations of life both in Serbia and Kosovo have been largely destroyed.

In better times, Habermas, resting on Hegel, spoke about form and content, and pointed out that the form of a social development is moulded by its content, and that form is essential. What then must be deduced from the brutal form of this war about its aims and content? Here the good professor remains silent.

The more the reality of the war belies the propaganda, the more professor Habermas raises the debate to the level of complete abstraction—as if abstract terms had taken up arms. According to his Communication Theory, the warmongers and opponents are on the same level. In his eyes, both are pacifists: “conscientious pacifists”, on the one hand, and “legal pacifists” on the other.

And both can marshal good arguments. The “legal pacifists” orient towards international law and condemn the war because it contravenes international law, just as it contravenes the constitutional proscription on wars of aggression. The “conscientious pacifists” make human rights their starting point and legitimise the war as a humanitarian intervention “preventing crimes against humanity”.

Then comes his main argument: the “legal pacifism” (here Habermas uses the English term) of Germany's Red-Green government places “the transformation of international law into international civil rights on the agenda”. For the first time, the German government is taking human rights seriously. “Direct membership in an association of world citizens would even protect national subjects against the arbitrary actions of their own government.” The war should be “understood as an armed peace-enforcing mission, authorised by the international community (even without a UN mandate).” It represents “a step on the path from the classical international law of nations towards the cosmopolitan law of a world civil society”.

Such hocus pocus is employed to obscure the simple fact that a little country is being terrorised by a coalition of imperialist great powers, in order to establish a type of NATO protectorate in Kosovo.

This theoretician would have us believe that NATO terror will produce a democratic world civil society. But where, pray tell, were the citizens themselves consulted about this? Where have they agreed to it? Do the Serbs not also belong to this “world civil society”? The arguments of this social philosopher recall the comments of an American general in the Vietnam War, who justified the torching of a village by saying it had to be destroyed in order to be “saved.”

The rejection and mistrust of this kind of “humanitarian intervention” becomes greater with each night's bombing, even if this growing opposition is only able to articulate itself in a very limited way, as those parties and social movements that had earlier organised protests now comprise the governments of the belligerent nations.

As democratic legitimisation of the war, Habermas cites the “19 undoubtedly democratic states” of the NATO coalition. “The ‘air attacks' have so lowered Habermas's democratic standards, that even Turkey is raised to the level of an ‘undoubtedly democratic state',” commented Josef Lang in the Swiss weekly *Wochenzeitung* on May 20.

Professor Habermas's war propaganda provides no new thoughts about the tragedy unfolding in the Balkans. However, it does clarify the fact that the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School belongs to a period that is coming to an end together with this war.