

# Jürgen Habermas (1929–2026): The philosopher who chose the state

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## I

Jürgen Habermas, who died on March 14 in Starnberg at the age of 96, occupied for more than half a century a position of extraordinary influence in German intellectual and political life. Over a career spanning seven decades he produced a large body of work—in philosophy, sociology, political theory and jurisprudence—that attracted international attention and shaped academic debate across multiple disciplines. His major works, above all, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962) and *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1981), were widely read, widely discussed and widely cited. He was, by any institutional measure, one of the most prominent academic figures of the postwar period.

To understand the content of Habermas’ work—and why the limitations of his thought carry consequences that extend far beyond academic philosophy—one must begin not with the man but the political environment in which his life and career unfolded. Habermas was 15 when the Nazi regime collapsed. West Germany after 1945 was a society haunted by its fascist past, administered in many cases by men who had participated in and accommodated themselves to the Nazi regime, and ideologically committed to a ferocious anti-communism that not only precluded a genuine democratic reckoning but also covered up and legitimized Nazi crimes.

The young Federal Republic needed intellectuals who could articulate a basis for political legitimacy that did not rest on the discredited traditions of German nationalism. Habermas filled this role with considerable skill. His concept of “constitutional patriotism” (*Verfassungspatriotismus*)—allegiance not to the German nation as an ethnic or cultural entity but to the universal principles embodied in the postwar Basic Law—provided the West German intelligentsia with a vocabulary for political commitment that did not require the rehabilitation of the national past. This was a genuine service, and it explains why Habermas was, for decades, something close to an unofficial philosopher of state for the Federal Republic.

But therein lies the problem. The subtitle of this essay—“The philosopher who chose the state”—is not merely a description of Habermas’s late-career support for German militarism, though it is that. It points to something deeper: a pattern in German intellectual history that has repeated itself with devastating consequences. The tendency of German thinkers to place their intellectual powers in the service of the existing state—to identify the rational with the actual, to treat the given political order as the framework within which all progressive change must occur—is one of the defining pathologies of the German intelligentsia.

Habermas belongs squarely in this tradition. His philosophical project, for all its elaboration, was from the beginning an attempt to provide the intellectual foundations for the postwar German state—to ground its legitimacy, to defend its institutions and to channel progressive energies into the reform of its procedures rather than its overthrow. That this

project was conducted in the language of critical theory, a tradition that originated in the Marxist critique of bourgeois society, is one of the great ironies of postwar intellectual history.

## II

Habermas was born in Düsseldorf on June 18, 1929 and grew up in the small town of Gummersbach. His father, Ernst Habermas, was executive director of the Cologne Chamber of Industry and Commerce and joined the Nazi Party in May 1933, three months after Hitler became chancellor. Born with a cleft palate, the young Habermas was initially rejected by the Hitler Youth on the grounds that cleft palates were classified in Nazi manuals as a “degenerate quality.” He was subsequently admitted at the age of 10 and, during the final months of the war, at the age of 15 was drawn into the Wehrmacht.

The collapse of the Nazi regime was, by Habermas’s own account, a shattering experience. The Nuremberg trials and the documentary evidence of the concentration camps revealed, as he later put it, that “all at once we saw that we had been living in a politically criminal system.” The young Habermas, like many of his generation, sought a clean break with Germany’s fascist past. When, in 1953, he publicly criticised Martin Heidegger for republishing without retraction a passage praising the “inner truth and greatness” of National Socialism, he displayed a certain amount of moral courage that was not generally found among individuals from his class background.

But what explanation did Habermas develop for the catastrophe that had shaped his life? This is a question of decisive importance, because the answer determined the entire subsequent trajectory of his thought. Habermas never produced a systematic analysis of the rise of fascism. He never seriously examined the class dynamics of the Weimar Republic—the role of German finance capital, the political paralysis of the working class, the criminal failures of both the Social Democrats and the Stalinists. His understanding of fascism remained essentially that of the Frankfurt School: a phenomenon rooted in the pathologies of modernity itself, in the dialectic of enlightenment, in the domination of nature turning into the domination of human beings. In his later work, particularly in the *Historians’ Debate* of 1986, Habermas treated the Nazi period primarily through the lens of collective memory and political culture, as a question of how postwar Germany should relate to its past, rather than as a question of why fascism had triumphed and how its recurrence could be prevented.

This failure was not incidental to his philosophy. It was its underlying foundation. Because Habermas never came to grips with the class analysis of fascism—never understood that the Nazi victory was the product of specific, analysable failures of political leadership within the workers’ movement—he drew from the catastrophe of 1933 a conclusion that was

emotionally understandable but theoretically disastrous: that the perspective of working class revolution was itself the problem, that radical politics led to catastrophe, and that the only safe course was to work within the framework of bourgeois constitutional democracy. Every element of his subsequent theoretical project—the rejection of historical materialism, the turn from political economy to communication theory, the replacement of class struggle with “new social movements,” the defence of the bourgeois public sphere as the unsurpassable horizon of emancipatory politics—flows from this initial, unexamined premise.

Had Habermas studied Trotsky’s writings on the rise of German fascism—developed in real time in the early 1930s, grounding the catastrophe in the dynamics of class struggle and the criminal failures of working class political leadership—he would have encountered an analysis that drew precisely the opposite conclusion from the same events. Trotsky argued that fascism triumphed not because the working class was inherently incapable of revolutionary action, but because its existing leaderships—the Social Democrats, who placed their faith in the bourgeois state, and the Stalinists, whose ultra-left adventurism split the workers’ movement—proved catastrophically unequal to the task. The lesson of 1933, on this analysis, was not that revolution must be abandoned but that the working class required a new, genuinely revolutionary leadership. That Habermas never confronted this analysis—that the entire Trotskyist tradition is virtually absent from his work—is a silence of enormous political significance.

### III

Habermas’s political orientation was inseparable from his theoretical work. He was a lifelong supporter of the Social Democratic Party, though he never formally joined it. He attended SPD cultural conferences regularly from 1983 onward and publicly backed the party in elections. But his most consequential political relationships were not with SPD leaders as such.

From 1986, Habermas held regular discussions at the Dionysos restaurant in Frankfurt with leaders of the Green Party, above all, Joschka Fischer and Daniel Cohn-Bendit. These gatherings brought together academics, intellectuals, media figures and politicians and directly shaped the policy orientation of the Red-Green coalition that came to power in 1998. Fischer described the meetings as foundational, “both academically and politically,” for the SPD-Green political constellation. Habermas greeted the formation of the Schröder-Fischer government as a “stroke of luck,” praising in particular the appointment of Fischer as foreign minister.

At a much-publicised meeting with chancellor-candidate Gerhard Schröder in 1998, Habermas sketched out his vision of a “postnational constellation” and appeared to endorse the new government, declaring that there were finally “alternatives to neoliberalism.” Some close observers, the political theorist Claus Offe among them, formed the impression that Habermas had been manipulated by the politician. Whether or not this is fair to Habermas, it is certainly fair to note what followed: The Schröder-Fischer government carried out the most savage assault on the German welfare state in postwar history through the Agenda 2010 and Hartz IV reforms, deregulated financial markets, and—most consequentially—led Germany into its first offensive military operations since 1945 with the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999. Habermas’s early endorsement was never matched by a correspondingly forceful public critique of the government’s actual policies. Quite the opposite.

When Fischer justified the bombing of Serbia by invoking Auschwitz of all things—thereby sparking a public outcry—Habermas came to his

intellectual defense. In a three-page front-page article in *Die Zeit*, he justified the war of aggression by invoking the Nuremberg Trials. While war is a “crime against peace,” Habermas argued, it is necessary to prevent a “crime against humanity.” That Habermas, the philosopher of constitutional patriotism, the man who had built his public career on the argument that recognition of the Nazi crimes was the foundation of postwar German identity, played such a significant role in justifying new wars tells us something important about the limits of constitutional patriotism as a political programme.

### IV

The political trajectory that led Habermas from the young critic of Heidegger’s Nazism to apologist for NATO bombing campaigns was the logical working-out of theoretical premises adopted decades earlier. The decisive step was his rejection of Marxism, not a sudden break with Marxist terminology, but a sustained process of theoretical liquidation conducted under the banner of “reconstruction.”

In his earliest major writings, Habermas presented himself as working within the Marxist tradition. He described his intellectual formation as shaped by “Western Marxism”—Lukács, Korsch, Bloch, Sartre and the Frankfurt School. As late as 1979 he told an interviewer: “Today I value being considered a Marxist.” But from the beginning, his engagement with Marx was defined by the conviction that Marx’s theoretical framework required fundamental correction.

In “Between Philosophy and Science: Marxism as Criticism” (1960) and throughout *Theory and Practice* (1963), Habermas argued that Marx had wrongly reduced all social relations to relations of production, that the critique of political economy was insufficient as a foundation for critical social theory, and that “the designated executor of a future socialist revolution, the proletariat as proletariat, has been dissolved.” He declared that “the standard of living in advanced capitalist countries has risen to such an extent that the interests in the emancipation of society can no longer be articulated directly in economic terms.” Already in the early 1960s, Habermas sought to supplant Marx’s revolutionary critique of capitalism with a theory that could defend and justify Germany’s system of postwar bourgeois democracy.

By the time of *The Theory of Communicative Action*, very little of Marx’s actual theory remained. Historical materialism had been replaced by an evolutionary theory of social rationalisation drawn from Weber. The critique of political economy had been replaced by systems theory drawn from Parsons and Luhmann. The proletariat had been replaced by “new social movements.” Class struggle had been replaced by the “colonisation of the lifeworld.” The materialist theory of knowledge had been replaced by a pragmatist-Kantian theory of communicative rationality. What Habermas retained from Marx was a critical *intention*—the commitment to human emancipation—detached from every substantive element of Marxist theory.

By removing class struggle from the centre of social theory, Habermas provided intellectual legitimation for the turn away from working class politics and toward the “new social movements”—ecology, feminism, peace—that became the political base of the Green Party and the post-1968 academic left. He argued that the labour movement had been “institutionally pacified” through the welfare state and collective bargaining, and that the new social movements represented a more appropriate form of resistance to the pathologies of late capitalism.

The fundamental error was empirical as well as theoretical. Habermas mistook a historically specific and temporary configuration—the postwar boom, Keynesian welfare states, Cold War class compromise—for a

permanent structural transformation of capitalism. The subsequent decades have brutally refuted that analysis: The dismantling of the welfare state, the explosion of social inequality, the return of mass precarious labour, and the 2008 financial crisis have demonstrated that the class antagonisms Marx analysed were not abolished but merely suppressed and deferred.

The most systematic expression of this project of theoretical liquidation was his essay “Toward a Reconstruction of Historical Materialism,” which deserves close examination.

## V

It would be wrong to say that Habermas simply ignored Marxism. In his 1975 essay “Toward a Reconstruction of Historical Materialism,” republished in expanded form in *Communication and the Evolution of Society* (1979), he engaged with it directly and at length. But the character of the engagement is itself deeply revealing, and at a critical point raises serious questions about Habermas’s intellectual integrity.

Habermas opens the essay by noting that Marx expressed himself “connectedly and fundamentally” on the materialist conception of history only twice, and then makes a remarkable move: He announces that “In 1938 Stalin codified historical materialism in a way that has proven of great consequence; the historical-materialist research since undertaken has remained largely bound to this theoretical framework. The version set down by Stalin needs to be reconstructed.” With this single sentence Habermas establishes Stalin’s crude 1938 pamphlet—*Dialectical and Historical Materialism*, a document distributed in 200 million copies as the official catechism of the Soviet bureaucracy—as the definitive framework of historical materialism, the version to which all subsequent research has been “largely bound.”

This must be understood as a conscious decision, and it is nothing short of a provocation. By the time Habermas published this essay in 1975, Stalin’s grotesque falsification of Marxism was an established and universally acknowledged fact. Khrushchev’s denunciation of the tyrant at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956 had shattered the official myth of Stalin as a Marxist theoretician, and the two decades that followed had produced an enormous body of scholarship documenting the systematic distortion of Marxist thought under the Stalinist regime. To present Stalin—Stalin!—as the central theoretical authority on historical materialism, nearly 20 years after even the Soviet bureaucracy itself had been compelled to distance itself from his crimes, is an act that cannot be explained by ignorance.

Habermas was perfectly well aware that Lenin’s *Philosophical Notebooks*—the penetrating annotations on Hegel’s *Science of Logic* written in 1914–15 and published in German in 1929–30, which had received wide international attention after their publication in English in the early 1960s—demonstrated a level of philosophical engagement with the dialectic that exposed Stalin’s pamphlet as the illiterate fraud it was. He was equally aware that Trotsky, the co-leader of the October Revolution and the foremost Marxist opponent of Stalinism, had developed—in his writings on German fascism, in *The Revolution Betrayed* and in his extensive philosophical and political correspondence—a body of Marxist theory and analysis that represented the living antithesis of everything Stalin stood for, both politically and intellectually.

To bypass Lenin and Trotsky and install Stalin as the representative theoretician of historical materialism was not a scholarly judgment; it was a political act. It served Habermas’s purpose, which was to construct a version of Marxism so crude that its demolition would appear self-

evidently justified. His opposition to revolutionary Marxism was so deep that it led him to misrepresent the tradition he claimed to have transcended.

Having established this fraudulent premise, Habermas proceeds to dismantle historical materialism with considerable thoroughness. He begins by dismissing the theory of capitalist development that Marx worked out in the *Grundrisse* and *Capital* as merely a “subtheory” that fits within the broader framework of historical materialism—a remarkable demotion of what most Marxists would consider Marx’s central scientific achievement.

He then argues that Marx wrongly reduced the specifically human mode of life to instrumental action on nature—that is, to labour—neglecting the autonomous and equally fundamental role of communicative interaction. The distribution of social products, Habermas insists, requires norms that “can be set intersubjectively at the level of linguistic understanding” and cannot be derived from the organisation of production. The “rules of communicative action” are distinct from the “rules of instrumental action,” and this distinction, according to Habermas, is one that Marx fatally overlooked.

This is the theoretical core of the essay: the elevation of communication to the same ontological status as production, and ultimately to a higher status, since it is communicative structures, not productive forces, that Habermas will identify as the driving force of social evolution.

On the base-superstructure theorem, Habermas contends that it holds, at best, only for transitional moments in history, not as a general structural principle of social life. He presents two versions of the theorem, an “economic” one and a weaker one, and argues that neither can be defended as a universal law of social development. On the dialectic of forces and relations of production, he claims that even in its most sophisticated formulation the theorem cannot explain how societies resolve their crises, because resolution depends not on the development of the productive forces but on “learning processes” in the dimension of “moral-practical consciousness.” Normative structures, not material production, are the “pacemakers” of social evolution.

And he proposes replacing the Marxist concept of a developmental sequence of modes of production—which he declares inadequate for capturing the “universals of societal development”—with “principles of social organisation” derived from the developmental psychology of Piaget and Kohlberg, who had theorised the stages of cognitive and moral development in children. Habermas applies this model of individual psychological development to the evolution of entire societies, arguing that social formations can be classified according to the stage of “moral-practical consciousness” they have attained.

The result is a theory that retains the name “historical materialism” while having been emptied of every element that made it a revolutionary critique of capitalist society. The theory of class struggle has been replaced by a theory of “evolutionary learning processes.” The critique of political economy has been replaced by developmental psychology. The revolutionary agency of the working class has been replaced by the abstract progress of “moral-practical consciousness.” The labour theory of value, the base-superstructure model, and the concept of the proletariat as the universal class have all been explicitly abandoned. And the only figure from the Marxist tradition whom Habermas engages with at any depth is Kautsky, whom he quotes approvingly.

Whether one calls this a reconstruction or a rejection is a semantic question. In substance, it was a rejection — and it proceeded from the premise, established in the essay’s opening paragraph, that historical materialism is essentially what Stalin codified it to be.

## VI

Habermas's abandonment of Marxism was inseparable from a broader philosophical retreat—from Hegel back to Kant, from objective idealism to a form of transcendental subjectivism and from the dialectical understanding of history to a procedural theory of rationality.

He inherited from his teachers Horkheimer and Adorno a tradition of Critical Theory that had arrived at a profound impasse. In *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* (1944), they argued that instrumental reason led inexorably to the domination of human beings, culminating in the administered world of late capitalism and the horrors of fascism. Habermas identified the dead end: If all reason is domination, from what standpoint does the critic speak? His solution, the turn to communicative rationality, addressed a real problem.

His relationship with the first generation of the Frankfurt School was complex. Frictions with Horkheimer, who had drawn thoroughly conservative conclusions from the experience of Nazism and was alarmed by the young Habermas's interest in the Institute's prewar Marxist archives, led to Habermas completing his habilitation at Marburg rather than Frankfurt. With Adorno the relationship was warmer, but Habermas came to regard the theoretical pessimism of *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, which he called "their blackest and most nihilistic book," as intellectually untenable. What he shared with both mentors, however, was their aversion to classical Marxism and to the revolutionary role of the working class.

The cost of the turn to communicative rationality was enormous. By retreating from Hegel to Kant, Habermas abandoned precisely those elements of Hegel's thought that Marx had found most productive: the dialectic as a method for grasping real contradictions in reality, and the understanding of history as a process of development driven by definite antagonisms. He replaced the dialectical understanding of history with a theory of social evolution that stripped developmental stages of any connection to material contradictions and class struggle.

Engels argued in *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* that the great basic question of all philosophy is the relation of thinking to being, and that philosophers divide into two camps: materialists, who regard nature as primary, and idealists, who assert the primacy of spirit. Habermas never engaged with this formulation; the materialism-idealism divide does not occupy a central place in his theoretical framework. But from the standpoint of Marxist philosophy, he falls clearly on the idealist side.

His theory of knowledge, developed in *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1968), follows Kant in arguing that the knowing subject constitutes the objects of experience through certain a priori cognitive interests. More fundamentally, his entire theoretical project rests on the primacy of language and communication over material production and social being. Where Marx held that "it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness," Habermas reverses this priority. The fundamental category of *The Theory of Communicative Action* is not labour, production, or the metabolic exchange between humanity and nature, but communicative interaction—the exchange of speech acts oriented toward mutual understanding. This is not a shift of emphasis; it is a philosophical inversion that carries direct political consequences.

## VII

The idealist character of Habermas's philosophy is thrown into sharp relief by his three-decade debate with the American pragmatist Richard Rorty. On the surface, the two appeared opposed: Rorty was an avowed relativist who wanted to eliminate the concept of objective truth;

Habermas insisted on retaining a concept of rational validity. Habermas criticised Rorty for a "performative contradiction"—using rational arguments to undermine the authority of rational argument—and insisted that his own position preserved the universalist dimension of the Enlightenment.

But from the standpoint of Marxist epistemology, the similarities between them are more significant than the differences. Both reject the correspondence theory of truth—the view that a proposition is true if it corresponds to a state of affairs in an objective, mind-independent reality. Rorty replaces truth with coping; Habermas replaces it with consensus under idealised conditions of discourse. Neither grounds truth in the practical engagement of human beings with an independently existing material world, which is the position of dialectical materialism. Marx's position, building on Feuerbach's materialism while correcting its passivity, was that the question of whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but a practical question: "Man must prove the truth, i.e., the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking in practice."

Rorty himself identified the essential common ground with characteristic bluntness: "the only serious or interesting disagreement between Habermas and myself is about whether you need notions like 'unconditionality' and 'universal validity' in order to justify social democratic institutions." Note what is not in dispute: Both agree that the purpose of philosophy is to justify social democratic institutions. The disagreement is about how much Kantian apparatus is required.

The political implications are not trivial. By dissolving the concept of objective truth into the procedures of discourse, however idealised, Habermas left the door open, whatever his intentions, to the radical subjectivism and irrationalism that now pervades bourgeois intellectual life. If truth is constituted by discourse rather than by the correspondence of thought to reality, then the corruption of discourse—through media manipulation, ideological saturation and the sheer weight of economic power—does not merely distort our access to truth. It dissolves truth itself. Habermas spent his career warning against the "colonisation of the lifeworld" by systemic forces, but his own theory provided no ground on which to stand against it. A philosophy that cannot ground truth in objective reality cannot mount a serious critique of the existing social order. It can only propose procedural improvements, which is precisely the political programme Habermas pursued throughout his career.

## VIII

The events of 1989–1991—the collapse of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe and the dissolution of the Soviet Union—appeared to vindicate Habermas's theoretical project. In his 1990 essay "What Does Socialism Mean Today?" he declared that revolutionary socialism was a dead end and that the only viable progressive politics was "the radically reformist self-criticism of a capitalist society, which, in the form of a constitutional democracy with universal suffrage and a welfare state, has developed not only weaknesses but also strengths." With "the bankruptcy of state socialism," he wrote, "this is the eye of the needle through which everything must pass."

The argument rested on a colossal conflation: the identification of Stalinism with socialism as such, and the consequent declaration that capitalism represented the unsurpassable horizon of human political possibility. Habermas never engaged with the analysis that the Stalinist bureaucracy was not the realisation of socialism but its negation—a parasitic caste whose rule was a fundamental obstacle to socialist development, and whose eventual restoration of capitalism would prove

catastrophic for the working class. He had nothing to say about the mass unemployment, plunging life expectancy, oligarchic plunder, and destruction of social infrastructure that followed the capitalist restoration in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

The three decades since 1990 have demonstrated that the “eye of the needle” through which Habermas insisted everything must pass was a gateway to intensified exploitation, rising inequality, financial crisis and the return of militarism. The welfare-state capitalism he celebrated in 1990 was, at that very moment, entering the period of its systematic dismantlement—by the very political forces with which he identified.

## IX

The final chapters of Habermas’s political biography are the most damning. It was the SPD-Green coalition—the government he had helped to theoretically prepare, the government whose formation he greeted as a “stroke of luck”—that opened the way for the revival of German militarism with its support for the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999. Habermas supported the illegal bombing campaign and thereafter consistently rallied support for German military action on the basis of “defending human rights.”

The most recent biography of Habermas, by Philipp Felsch, states the matter with striking directness: “As far as the question of German participation in military interventions since the end of the Cold War is concerned, Habermas has supported the line of the incumbent federal government not only in 1999 in the case of Kosovo, but also in all other cases. In this respect, he proves to be a true thinker of the state.”

A *staatsstragender Denker*—a state-bearing thinker. The philosopher of communicative reason, the theorist of the ideal speech situation, the champion of constitutional patriotism, proved in every concrete political crisis to be an advocate for the policies of the German bourgeois state, however far those policies departed from the ideals he invoked to justify them.

This trajectory reached its culmination in Habermas’s final years. In 2018 he signed an appeal, alongside the current CDU leader and former BlackRock executive Friedrich Merz, demanding the creation of a new European army. In 2022 he backed the German government’s policy in the Ukraine war. In one of his last articles, in March 2025, he argued for the acceleration of European rearmament, declaring that “the member states of the European Union must strengthen and consolidate their military forces because otherwise they will no longer count politically in a world that is geopolitically in motion.”

Habermas’s late-career embrace of religion as a prop for the bourgeois state deserves particular attention, not least because it has been celebrated in the most fatuous terms by his liberal admirers.

In January 2004, Habermas met with the reactionary Catholic Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger—who would become Pope Benedict XVI one year later and proceed to launch a crusade in defence of Western Christian civilisation—for a discussion on the moral foundations of the liberal state. Habermas made a remarkable concession: The liberal democratic state, he argued, depends on ethical resources it cannot generate by itself, and religion preserves moral intuitions that secular reason has failed to replace. The two men agreed that the Christian doctrine that human beings are made “in the image and likeness of God” was mirrored in the secular principle of equal human worth; Habermas called this a “saving translation” of religious content into secular terms.

This was, from the standpoint of any serious commitment to Enlightenment rationalism, an extraordinary capitulation—an admission that the entire edifice of communicative reason, the life’s work of Jürgen

Habermas, was insufficient to sustain the political order it had been constructed to defend, and that the principle of human equality could not be grounded in reason alone but required, at bottom, a theological guarantee.

Yet *The Guardian*’s editorial tribute of March 18, 2026 found in this exchange not a confession of philosophical bankruptcy but a source of inspiration. Noting with approval that “one of the most generous tributes” to Habermas had come from the Vatican, *The Guardian* praised Habermas for “practising what he preached” by finding “common ground” with the Catholic theologian and declared the Ratzinger dialogue “a necessary philosophical line in the sand” for “illiberal times.” One could hardly ask for a more revealing document of the intellectual condition of contemporary liberalism. The “line in the sand” that *The Guardian* commends to its readers is the agreement between the philosopher of communicative reason and the future pope that secular egalitarianism cannot stand on its own feet but requires the crutch of Christian theology—an argument that concedes to the Church precisely the ideological authority that the Enlightenment, in its great period, fought to overthrow. That the liberal press should find “sustenance” in such a concession, from a thinker whose final decades were devoted to supporting NATO wars, EU austerity, European rearmament and cordial exchanges with the intellectual architect of Catholic reaction, tells us a great deal—not about Habermas but about the depths to which liberalism has sunk.

The three political criteria that Habermas had advanced in the 1986 Historians’ Debate—constitutional patriotism, orientation toward the West and recognition of the crimes of Auschwitz—now stand in ruins. Germany’s postwar constitution has been continually undermined by amendments, many introduced by the SPD. His friend Fischer cynically invoked Auschwitz to justify the resumption of German military operations. And Habermas’s plea for an orientation toward the West has been rendered incoherent by the rise of Trump’s fascistic regime—a development that Habermas, in his final writings, drastically underestimated, insisting that the Trump phenomenon bore “no resemblance to the fascism of history.” One year after that assessment, masked bands of ICE agents operate with impunity across the United States, and the Trump administration wages an illegal war of aggression against Iran.

## X

The career of Jürgen Habermas illuminates, with exceptional clarity, the fate of an entire current of postwar European thought and a recurring pattern in the history of the German intelligentsia. The thinker who begins by engaging with Marxism ends by placing his intellectual powers in the service of the bourgeois state. The vocabulary of constitutional patriotism and communicative reason is new, but the political content is not. At every decisive moment, the intellectual chooses the state over the independent movement of the working class.

Habermas was not a hack or a mere propagandist. His theoretical project represented a sustained attempt to provide intellectual foundations for reformist politics after the catastrophes of the 20th century. But having abandoned the critique of political economy, the materialist conception of history and the revolutionary role of the working class, Habermas was compelled by the logic of his own position to seek an alternative basis for social critique in the procedures of bourgeois democracy—in the idealised speech situation, in constitutional patriotism, in the norms of rational discourse. When the crises came—war, austerity, the disintegration of the liberal order he had devoted his career to defending—he had no recourse

but to rally behind the state, lending the prestige of critical theory to the very policies that critical theory had originally claimed to oppose.

The political root of the failure was the one identified at the beginning of this essay: As a consequence of both theoretical and political hostility to Marxism, Habermas never sought to come to grips with the causes of the catastrophe of 1933. Everything else followed from this: the rejection of historical materialism, the retreat from Hegel to Kant, the dissolution of objective truth into discursive procedure, and the long, dispiriting political decline from the young critic of Heidegger's Nazism to the elderly signatory of appeals for European rearmament alongside former BlackRock executives.



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