



STEFAN MÜLLER-DOOHM

Habermas

A Biography

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Stefan Müller-Doohm

Translated by Daniel Steuer

polity

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Preface

No one has the right to behave towards me as if he knew me.

Robert Walser¹

Many labels have been attached to Jürgen Habermas over the years: 'advocate of modernity' and 'master of communication', 'the public conscience of political culture' and the 'Hegel of the Federal Republic', the 'power at the Main',* the 'hothead of Frankfurt' [*Frankfurter Feuerkopf*] and 'Praeceptor Germaniae' [teacher of Germany], to name just a few.² That this list of references to Habermas in the media – some of which are less than flattering – could easily be extended demonstrates just how newsworthy he is considered to be; his activities as an academic and as a commentator on contemporary developments certainly do not suffer from a lack of public attention. Why then, in light of all this, write a biography of this man, especially one that neither intends to place Jürgen Habermas, the (somewhat unknown) private person, at its centre nor aims to erect a monument to a 'master thinker' on the occasion of his eighty-fifth birthday? After all, we live in times which, according to Habermas himself, need neither heroes nor anti-heroes. What has driven me, as a sociologist, into the arms of biographical research, and has led me to try my hand at writing a biography once again, is the conviction that the visible traces of a life such as that of Jürgen Habermas are particularly suited for a study of what was, in a certain sense, the central concern of the sociological perspective from the very beginning: namely, the dialectic between individual and society. How is it that someone in

* The River Main flows through Frankfurt, and the city is often referred to as the 'Mainmetropole', the metropolis on the Main. The German 'Macht am Main' plays on the title of a patriotic song – 'Die Wacht am Rhein' [The guard at the Rhine] – associated with French–German rivalry during the nineteenth century and up to the Great War. All notes in the body of the text are the translator's, as are any additions in square brackets in the Notes.

interaction with others becomes an individual, and that individuals thus become capable of forging their own unique and specific biographies, but only through a process of engagement with and within their times?

It is admittedly a great temptation to present *this* particular biography as a story of exceptional success. However, not only would that amount to a misleading attenuation of some of the darker strands in this life's biography (some of which are well known), it would also contradict its, at least on the face of it, conventional bourgeois trajectory. In conversations, Habermas has repeatedly emphasized that the more or less linear course his life has taken fitted into the parameters of the historical circumstances of his generation and fell within the possibilities offered to this generation's members in terms of realizing their personal ambitions under conditions of a regained freedom. If we were to take this self-characterization at face value, we might conclude that Habermas's *vita* proceeded from phase to phase in the even steps of a standard biography. And it is true that it was characterized by a continuity based on a great degree of outward security: childhood, schooling, student days, marriage, children, profession, etc. As in every life, there were of course ruptures, setbacks and turning points. What, then, makes this existence unique? Where lies the unusual within the usual?

Of course, it is obvious what a remarkable career Habermas has had. With his monographs and collected essays, which have been translated into more than forty languages, he has established a tremendous national and international reputation as a scholar, and as an author he has found a responsive audience even beyond the academic world. With this in mind, one might conclude that Habermas's biography is simply the story of his published work. However, his life is so fascinating precisely because it amounts to more than just a stack of learned books: here is someone who continually left the protective space of academia in order to assume the role of a participant in controversial debates and, in this way, sought to influence the development of the national mentality in his home country. And, we may add, he was successful in this. In that sense, the retracing of the events that formed Habermas's life provides only the *basso ostinato*, so to speak, for what is actually the main interest of this biography: namely, to present a portrait of the entanglement of his main profession with his second occupation, of the interrelations between the development of a philosopher's thought and the interventions of a public intellectual, as seen against the backdrop of contemporary events.

No matter where a biographer may place the emphases, he is always guilty of a certain presumption; this is simply to be acknowledged. Biographical research and writing always involve a certain indiscretion – one may even speak of biographical investigations as

hostile acts. A biographer cannot but make a private life the object of his curious gaze. Even worse: he roams around in the life of his protagonist and assumes the authority to decide which events will be looked at in detail and which will only be touched upon, or which will be considered so insignificant as to be left out altogether. Thus, he has to decide which moments of a life will be omitted, which connections will be left out, and if and when gaps will be filled by means of applying the method of 'exact fantasy' (Theodor W. Adorno).

At such moments, a biographer is not that far removed from the novelist. He is as much in the dark as to the significance of the insights gained while reviewing the course of a life as the protagonist in Max Frisch's *Gantenbein* – 'What really happened?' In order to capture the ruptures and contradictions in a life's history, a biographer adopts the stance of Frisch's protagonist, who feigns blindness: 'I imagine.'³ And then the search for the story of the story begins – a search in which, as compared to the novelist, the biographer may have the advantage that he can refer to a body of sources that guides his narration.

From all this follows that a biography may at best offer trustworthiness but never certainty. I believe that any attempt at representing the events that make up a life *as they really happened*, and be it on a miniature scale, is doomed to failure from the start. Thus, this biography does not claim to be true in that sense, and it must disappoint those readers who expect that the biographer will offer them a kind of intimate contact with the object of biographical curiosity, or that he may even include some sensational revelations about it.

This book shines the spotlight on Habermas's life and on significant movements in his thought and forgoes the chimera of an authentic representation of the person, as in a portrait. Instead, distinct types of texts are at the centre of this biographical study. To put it in simple terms: it is in the first instance about deeds and only in the second instance about the doer. I shall read first and foremost the traces left by Habermas as an author in the widest possible sense: as a philosopher *and* as an example of those intellectuals who, as doers, advance the political process.

The institutional spaces in which to find these traces are, of course, archives. Among them is my own Habermas Archive, which I compiled systematically over many years from sources I considered significant, such as available publications by Habermas, parts of his correspondence, interviews and autobiographical fragments, and the majority of the articles he published in daily and weekly newspapers and in cultural journals from 1953 onwards. In addition, there are photographs and other images, and also records of conversations with Habermas's acquaintances and contemporaries.⁴ The principles employed in the selection, systematic compilation and then analysis of the sources from this and other archives were

informed by the specific question asked by this biography: how did Habermas become the philosopher of communicative reason, on the one hand, and the influential public intellectual, on the other?

As far as the discursive practice of the intellectual is concerned, the centre of attention will be not Habermas's personality but his concrete interventions in the public sphere. In this context, an important aspect will be the question of how the various battles for attention and intellectual dominance in the interpretation of events, which Habermas continually engaged in (and some of which he also initiated), led to the development of polarizations within the public life of the Federal Republic. I also consider the question of which discursive means – or strategies in the politics of ideas [*ideenpolitische Strategien*] – he used as a protagonist in intellectual controversies. And, finally, I ask how Habermas, who is often assigned the function of an *opinion leader** of the left-liberal camp, if one wants to call it that, actually delineates his position through the process of his intellectual interventions.

This biography is structured by the interplay between philosophical reflections and intellectual interventions that characterizes Habermas's activities. For the most part it avoids focusing exclusively on the individual, and it eschews speculation about what Habermas might have 'thought' or 'felt' on this or that occasion. Rather, the aim is to present the interdependency of life and work within the historical context.

What role does the attitude of the biographer play in this? Without a doubt, the challenge of biographical writing is to succeed in walking the tightrope between intimacy and detachment, between the external perspective of neutral analysis and the internal perspective of hermeneutical exegesis and a sensitive understanding only possible on the basis of openness and empathy. This was no different for me; I also had to navigate my own path between intimacy and detachment. Along this path, I have tried to isolate certain threads from the tangled skein of Habermas's life history and thus to make visible how the trajectories of his life have developed. I proceed mostly in chronological fashion, though at times I go backwards or forwards in time in order to highlight connections that might otherwise be masked by the chronological surface. And there is another feature worth mentioning: those themes that have occupied Habermas throughout his life are focused on and magnified for the purpose of closer inspection. This is the case in particular where the continuities and discontinuities of Habermas's theoretical development are concerned. Here, too, I have held back with my own interpretations and mostly let Habermas speak for himself.

* 'Opinion leader' in English in the original.

Finally, I would like to mention that there are of course limits to what can be said in this biography. Everything purely private and intimate is excluded, unless it contributes something that is useful for understanding Habermas's philosophy and intellectual practice. And, naturally, this is an open-ended book – its subject is a *life and work in progress*.*

* 'Life and work in progress' in English in the original.

Acknowledgements

After I had completed my Adorno biography, I told Jürgen Habermas that I intended to continue my activities in the field of biographical research and to make his life and work the next subject of my endeavours, with a view to reconstructing his role as a public intellectual as well as his intellectual path as a philosopher and social theorist. His reaction was altogether restrained. His concise response was that it felt strange to him that someone would want to 'rummage around' in his 'entrails'.

As my research progressed, Ute and Jürgen Habermas became more open towards the project, without ever giving up an appropriate restraint. I would like to thank them especially for retaining this balanced attitude between openness and distance. Without the opportunity of looking at drafts for Habermas's planned autobiography, of sifting through and making use of the more than 200 files of correspondence at the family home with my assistants, without the private conversations with Ute and Jürgen Habermas and their patience in answering my countless questions, this biography could never have been written.

Of course, the author is responsible in every sense for the content of his book. However, more people were involved in bringing it about than are mentioned on the cover. The authors in this wider sense are in the first place the academic staff of the German Research Foundation's projects on 'Jürgen Habermas als Sozialtheoretiker und öffentlicher Intellektueller' [Jürgen Habermas as social theorist and public intellectual] and on 'Ideenpolitik in der Öffentlichkeit' [The politics of ideas in the public sphere]. Christian Ziegler has built up an extensive press archive over the years and has documented and analysed Habermas's presence in the media. Franziska Charlotte Thiele, occasionally with support from Leiv Erik Voigtländer, carried out discourse analyses of the debates with great methodological skill, and Hartwig Germer concentrated on the investigation of the strategies used by left-liberal and liberal-conservative ideological groups in the battles over the politics of ideas from the late

1960s onwards. I owe all collaborators thanks not only for the time of our joint research but also for their help during the development and completion of the biography. I would also like to thank the German Research Foundation for the financial support, over five years, of the projects mentioned above.

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Prologue: The Other among his Peers

It is true that I do not share the fundamental assumptions of 'Critical Theory' in the form in which they took shape at the beginning of the 1940s.¹



Ironic birthday greetings from a cartoonist. Strictly speaking, Habermas does not belong in this well-known group portrait by the draughtsman, poet and jazz musician Volker Kriegel, who came into contact with the individuals it depicts during his time as a student in 1960s Frankfurt. What stands out when one looks at the image is the oversized figure of Max Horkheimer, a patriarchal figure towering over three important personalities, who are shrunk to dwarf-like size 'under him': Herbert Marcuse, Theodor W. Adorno and Jürgen Habermas. The message of the portrait – that this is the quadriga of Critical Theory – can only be taken ironically. It is true that Max Horkheimer, the *spiritus rector* of Frankfurt School Critical Theory and someone who, according to Adorno, had a 'flair for power relations',² wrote academic history during his lifetime. It was he who coined the term 'Critical Theory'. But he was anything but a selfless mentor to these three wholly different spirits, who were united under one roof in the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research but were certainly not always in agreement with one another. These three

did not form a tight-knit, like-minded community and certainly not one that flocked around a charismatic 'leader', as for instance the circle around the poet Stefan George or the Paris existentialists around Jean-Paul Sartre. Rather, they were autonomous and independent representatives of different manners and styles of thinking. Nevertheless, there was one common denominator, albeit a small one, and that was an attitude which aimed at an enlightening critique of what they saw as social malformations.

It would certainly be an exaggeration simply to call Habermas – who was, not only in this caricature but also in reality, much taller than Marcuse or Adorno – the renegade within this group of four philosophers. And yet he was the Other among his peers. Habermas is about thirty years younger than Horkheimer, Marcuse and Adorno, each of whom, in their own way, was an intellectual role model for him. He therefore belongs to a different generation. As opposed to the three older philosophers, he came not from a Jewish family but from a Protestant environment. Habermas, whose childhood and early youth fell in the time of National Socialism, was spared the experience of racism and political persecution, as well as the fate of exile. Further, it is another significant difference between the Jewish left-wing intellectuals and Habermas that the latter – despite his speech impediment, resulting from a cleft palate – never saw himself as an outsider. Instead, it was largely his experience in the years immediately following the Second World War that gave rise to his development as a *homo politicus*. The way the political establishment of the young Federal Republic dealt with the legacy of the criminal Nazi regime and the shortcomings that became apparent regarding the creation of democratic forms of life in Germany were both crucial to Habermas's political development. But, despite all the critical distance that he maintained towards the political situation around him – and still maintains today – he always saw himself as an active participant in the social and political process. Thus, in his case, there can be no talk of that fundamental feeling of displacement and marginalization, that peculiar feeling of not belonging, which accompanied Adorno or Marcuse all their lives. In conversation, Habermas said that, all in all, his life took an unspectacular course.³ And, indeed, his biography does not contain any deep fissures or discontinuities; it is above all a story of academic success, on the one hand, and of energetic interventions into political affairs on the other.

While Adorno and Marcuse were occasionally in competition for the approval of Horkheimer (who skilfully exploited this situation to his strategic advantage), Habermas, as a temporary collaborator of the restored Frankfurt Institute of Social Research, immediately earned the explicit disapproval of its director. Horkheimer was irritated by the political commitments of the new assistant and by his

theoretical project, which aimed at an adaptation of Marxism as a philosophy of history for practical purposes. In the climate of restoration of post-war Germany, Horkheimer pursued a policy of pointed inconspicuousness, at least towards the outside world. This attitude was not shared by the majority of the institute's members and was difficult to reconcile with the non-conformism and the kind of progressive, Marxist social criticism that characterized the institute before its forced exile from Nazi Germany.

However, Habermas never saw the 'Frankfurt School' – as it became known to the world from the 1960s onwards – as a sharply defined programme. And this was possibly the most important reason why he was the Other among his peers at the time. 'For me', he admitted in an interview, 'there was no critical theory, no consistent doctrine.'⁴ As points of orientation, he could take only those few scattered books and articles that were published up to the end of the 1960s. The institute's groundbreaking studies, its members from the Weimar years and from the time in American exile, 'these did not exist. Horkheimer had a great fear that we would get to the crate' in which the collected volumes of the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* [Journal for Social Research] from the years 1932 to 1941 were stored away⁵ – the journal that was programmatic for the original conception of Critical Theory. However, Habermas was not going to be deterred by this; for whoever wanted to do so could get hold of the legendary journal, 'this sunken continent' of the revolutionary legacy,⁶ at the neighbouring Institut für Politische Wissenschaft [Institute for Political Science], where Carlo Schmid held a chair. Schmid's assistant, Wilhelm Hennis, had acquired the volumes from an antiquarian bookshop in Paris and made them part of the institute's library. Habermas's reading, in his own words, 'sharpen[ed] [his] sense of the precarious connection between democracy, state and the economy'.⁷ However, in the early 1970s, partly under the influence of Anglo-American linguistic theory, Habermas began to develop his own paradigm of communicative reason and actions oriented towards reaching understanding; he thus departed from the course pursued by the representatives of the first generation of the Frankfurt School. From then on, his philosophy concentrated on 'clarifying the conditions under which moral as well as ethical questions can be answered in a rational fashion by those concerned.'⁸

Deviation and attribution. When Volker Kriegel's cartoon first appeared, Habermas was in his forties. He had already become aware of the deficiencies of classical Critical Theory at that point and had worked on the foundations of his own philosophical programme. The received wisdom that there is a strict continuity from the first through to the third generation of the Frankfurt School is therefore, upon closer inspection, incorrect. The trivial reason