

## Jürgen Habermas

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**Jürgen Habermas** (IPA: [ˌjʏʁɡən ˈhaːbɐmaːs]; born [June 18, 1929](#)) is a [German philosopher](#) and [sociologist](#) in the tradition of [critical theory](#) and American [pragmatism](#). He is best known for his work on the concept of the [public sphere](#), which he has based in his theory of [communicative action](#). His work has focused on the foundations of [social theory](#) and [epistemology](#), the analysis of [advanced capitalistic societies](#) and [democracy](#), the [rule of law](#) in a critical [social-evolutionary context](#), and contemporary [politics](#) -- particularly German politics. Habermas's theoretical system is devoted to revealing the possibility of reason, [emancipation](#) and rational-critical communication latent in modern institutions and in the human capacity to deliberate and pursue rational interests.

### Biography

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Habermas was born in [Düsseldorf, North Rhine-Westphalia](#).

Until his graduation from [gymnasium](#), Habermas lived in [Gummersbach](#), near Cologne. His father, Ernst Habermas, was executive director of the Cologne Chamber of Industry and Commerce. He studied at the universities of Göttingen (1949/50), Zürich (1950/51), and Bonn (1951–54) and earned a doctorate in philosophy<sup>[1]</sup> from Bonn in 1954 with a dissertation entitled, *Das Absolute und die Geschichte. Von der Zwiespältigkeit in Schellings Denken* ("The absolute and history: on ambivalence in [Schelling's](#) thought"). His dissertation committee included [Erich Rothacker](#) and [Oskar Becker](#).

From 1956 on, he studied [philosophy](#) and [sociology](#) under the [critical theorists](#) [Max Horkheimer](#) and [Theodor Adorno](#) at the [Institute for Social Research](#) at the [Johann Wolfgang Goethe University Frankfurt am Main](#), but because of a rift between the two over his [dissertation](#) -- Horkheimer had made unacceptable demands for revision -- as well as his own belief that the [Frankfurt School](#) had become paralyzed with political skepticism and disdain for modern culture - he finished his *habilitation* in [political science](#) at the [University of Marburg](#) under the Marxist [Wolfgang Abendroth](#). His *habilitation* work was entitled, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit; Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der Bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (published in English translation in 1989 as *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: an Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*). In 1961, he became a *privatdozent* in Marburg, and -- in a move that was highly unusual for the German academic scene of that time -- he was offered the position of "extraordinary professor" (professor without chair) of philosophy at the [University of Heidelberg](#) (at the instigation of [Hans-Georg Gadamer](#) and [Karl Löwith](#)) in 1962, which he accepted. In 1964, strongly supported by

Adorno, Habermas returned to Frankfurt to take over Horkheimer's chair in philosophy and sociology.

He accepted the position of Director of the [Max Planck Institute](#) in [Starnberg](#) (near [Munich](#)) in 1971, and worked there until 1983, two years after the publication of his [magnum opus](#), *The Theory of Communicative Action*. Habermas then returned to his chair at Frankfurt and the directorship of the Institute for Social Research. Since retiring from Frankfurt in 1993, Habermas has continued to publish extensively. In 1986, he received the [Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Prize](#) of the [Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft](#), which is the highest honour awarded in German research. He is also a Permanent Visiting Professor at [Northwestern University](#) in Evanston, Illinois. In 1988 he was elected as a member of the [Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts](#).

Habermas visited the [People's Republic of China](#) in April 2001 and received a big welcome. He gave numerous speeches under titles such as "Nation-States under the Pressure of Globalisation." Habermas was also the 2004 [Kyoto Laureate](#) in the [Arts and Philosophy](#) section. He traveled to [San Diego](#) and on March 5, 2005, as part of the [University of San Diego's Kyoto Symposium](#), gave a speech entitled *The Public Role of Religion in Secular Context*, regarding the evolution of separation of [Church](#) and [State](#) from neutrality to intense [secularism](#). He received the 2005 [Holberg International Memorial Prize](#) (about € 520 000).

### **Teacher and mentor**

Habermas is famous as a teacher and mentor. Among his most prominent students have been the political sociologist [Claus Offe](#) (professor at the [Hertie School of Governance](#) in Berlin) , the social philosopher Johann Arnason (professor at the La Trobe University and chief editor of the *Thesis Eleven*), the sociological theorist [Hans Joas](#) (professor at the [University of Erfurt](#) and at the [University of Chicago](#)), the theorist of societal evolution [Klaus Eder](#), the social philosopher [Axel Honneth](#) (the current director of the Institute for Social Research), the American philosopher [Thomas McCarthy](#), the co-creator of mindful inquiry in social research [Jeremy J. Shapiro](#), and the assassinated Serbian prime minister [Zoran Đinđić](#).

### Theory

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Habermas has constructed a comprehensive framework of [social theory](#) and philosophy drawing on a number of intellectual traditions:

the [German philosophical thought](#) of [Immanuel Kant](#), [Friedrich Schelling](#), [G. W. F. Hegel](#), [Wilhelm Dilthey](#), [Edmund Husserl](#), and [Hans-Georg Gadamer](#)

the [Marxian](#) tradition — both the theory of [Karl Marx](#) himself as well as the critical [neo-Marxian](#) theory of the [Frankfurt School](#), i.e. [Max Horkheimer](#), [Theodor Adorno](#), and [Herbert Marcuse](#)

the sociological theories of Max Weber, Émile Durkheim, and George Herbert Mead  
the linguistic philosophy and speech act theories of Ludwig Wittgenstein, J.L. Austin,  
P. F. Strawson, Stephen Toulmin and John Searle

the developmental psychology of Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg

the American pragmatist tradition of Charles Sanders Peirce and John Dewey, and the  
sociological systems theory of Talcott Parsons and Niklas Luhmann

Neo-Kantian thought

Jürgen Habermas considers his own major achievement the development of the concept and theory of **communicative reason** or **communicative rationality**, which distinguishes itself from the **rationalist tradition** by locating **rationality** in structures of interpersonal linguistic **communication** rather than in the structure of either the **cosmos** or the knowing subject. This **social theory** advances the goals of **human emancipation**, while maintaining an inclusive **universalist moral** framework. This framework rests on the argument called **universal pragmatics** - that all **speech acts** have an inherent **telos** (the **Greek** word for "purpose" or "goal") — the goal of mutual **understanding**, and that human beings possess the communicative competence to bring about such understanding. Habermas built the framework out of the **speech-act** philosophy of **Ludwig Wittgenstein**, **J. L. Austin**, and **John Searle**, the sociological theory of the interactional constitution of mind and self of **George Herbert Mead**, the **theories of moral development** of **Jean Piaget** and **Lawrence Kohlberg**, and the **discourse ethics** of his Heidelberg colleague **Karl-Otto Apel**.

He carries forward the traditions of Kant and **the Enlightenment** and of **democratic socialism** through his emphasis on the potential for transforming the world and arriving at a more humane, just, and egalitarian society through the realization of the human potential for reason, in part through **discourse ethics**. While Habermas concedes that the Enlightenment is an "unfinished project," he argues it should be corrected and complemented, not discarded. In this he distanced himself from the Frankfurt School, criticizing it, as well as much of **postmodernist** thought, for excessive pessimism, misdirected radicalism and exaggerations.

Within sociology, Habermas's major contribution is the development of a comprehensive theory of **societal evolution** and **modernization** focusing on the difference between **communicative rationality** and **rationalization** on the one hand and **strategic/instrumental rationality** and rationalization on the other. This includes a critique from a communicative standpoint of the differentiation-based **theory of social systems** developed by **Niklas Luhmann**, a student of **Talcott Parsons**.

His defence of **modernity** and **civil society** has been a source of inspiration to others, and is considered a major philosophical alternative to the varieties of **poststructuralism**. He has also offered an influential analysis of **late capitalism**.

Habermas sees the rationalization, **humanization**, and **democratization** of society in terms of the **institutionalization** of the potential for rationality that is inherent in the **communicative competence** that is unique to the **human species**. Habermas believes communicative competence has developed through the course of **evolution**, but in contemporary society it is often suppressed or weakened by the way in which major domains of social life, such as the **market**, the **state**, and **organizations**, have been given over to or taken over by strategic/instrumental rationality, so that the logic of the system supplants that of the *lifeworld*.

## The public sphere

*For more details on this topic, see [public sphere](#).*

Jürgen Habermas wrote extensively on the concept of the **public sphere**, using accounts of dialogue that took place in **coffee houses** in 18th century England. It was this public sphere of rational debate on matters of political importance, made possible by the development of the **bourgeois culture** centered around coffeehouses, intellectual and **literary salons**, and the **print media** that helped to make **parliamentary democracy** possible and which promoted Enlightenment ideals of equality, human rights and justice. The public sphere was guided by a norm of rational argumentation and critical discussion in which the strength of one's argument was more important than one's identity.

According to Habermas, a variety of factors resulted in the eventual decay of the **bourgeois** public sphere of the Enlightenment. Most importantly, **structural forces**, particularly the growth of a **commercial mass media**, resulted in a situation in which media became more of a **commodity** – something to be consumed – rather than a tool for public discourse.

In his **magnum opus** *Theory of Communicative Action* (1981) he criticized the one-sided process of modernization led by forces of economic and administrative rationalization. Habermas traced the growing intervention of formal systems in our everyday lives as parallel to development of the **welfare state**, **corporate capitalism** and the culture of **mass consumption**. These reinforcing trends rationalize widening areas of public life, submitting them to a generalizing logic of efficiency and control. As routinized political parties and interest groups substitute for participatory democracy, society is increasingly administered at a level remote from input of citizens. As a result, boundaries between public and private, the individual and society, the system and the **lifeworld** are deteriorating. Democratic public life only thrives where institutions enable citizens to debate matters of public importance. He describes an **ideal type** of "**ideal speech situation**"<sup>[1]</sup>, where actors are equally endowed with the capacities of discourse,

recognize each other's basic social equality and speech is undistorted by ideology or misrecognition.

Habermas is optimistic about the possibility of the revival of the public sphere. He sees hope for the future in the new era of political community that transcends the nation-state based on ethnic and cultural likeness for one based on the equal rights and obligations of legally vested citizens. This **discursive theory of democracy** requires a political community which can collectively define its political will and implement it as policy at the level of the **legislative system**. This **political system** requires an activist public sphere, where matters of common interest and political issues can be discussed, and the force of public opinion can influence the decision-making process.

Several noted academics have provided various criticisms of Habermas's notions regarding the public sphere. **John B. Thompson**, a Professor of **Sociology** at the **University of Cambridge**, has pointed out that Habermas's notion of the public sphere is antiquated due to the proliferation of mass-media communications. **Michael Schudson** from the **University of California, San Diego** argues more generally that a public sphere as a place of purely rational independent **debate** never existed.

#### [edit] **Historians' Quarrel**

Habermas is famous as a **public intellectual** as well as a scholar; most notably, in the 1980s he used the **popular press** to attack the German historians **Ernst Nolte**, **Michael Stürmer**, and **Andreas Hillgruber**. Habermas first expressed his views on the above-mentioned historians in the *Die Zeit* newspaper on July 11, 1986 in a *feuilleton* (opinion piece) entitled "A Kind of Settlement of Damages". Habermas criticized the three historians for "apologetic" history writing in regards to the Nazi era, and for seeking to "close Germany's opening to the West" that in Habermas's view had existed since 1945<sup>[2]</sup>. He argued that they had tried to detach **Nazi** rule and the **Holocaust** from the mainstream of **German history**, explain away Nazism as a reaction to **Bolshevism**, and partially rehabilitate the reputation of the **Wehrmacht** (German Army) during **World War II**. The so-called *Historikerstreit* ("Historians' Quarrel") was not at all one-sided, because Habermas was himself attacked by scholars like **Joachim Fest** and **Klaus Hildebrand**<sup>[3]</sup>

#### [edit] **Habermas and Derrida**

Habermas and **Jacques Derrida** engaged in somewhat acrimonious disputes beginning in the 1980s and culminating in a mutual refusal to participate in extended debate and a tendency to talk past one another. Following Habermas' publication of "Beyond a Temporalized Philosophy of Origins: Derrida" (in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*), Derrida, citing Habermas as an example, remarked that, "those who have

accused me of reducing philosophy to literature or logic to rhetoric ... have visibly and carefully avoided reading me" ("Is There a Philosophical Language?" p. 218, in *Points...*). Others prominent in [postmodern](#) thought, notably [Jean-François Lyotard](#), engaged in more extended polemics against Habermas, whereas [Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe](#) found these polemics counterproductive. In hindsight, these contentious exchanges contributed to divisions within [continental philosophy](#) by focusing too heavily on a purported opposition between [modernism](#) and [postmodernism](#) — these terms were occasionally elevated to [totemic](#) if not [cosmological](#) importance in the 1980s, due in no small part to works by Lyotard and Habermas and their often enthusiastic and sometimes incautious reception in American universities. It may be suggested that schematic terminology like "[poststructuralism](#)", trafficked heavily in the United States but virtually unknown in France, found expression in Habermas' understanding of his French contemporaries, bringing with them the baggage of the "[culture wars](#)" raging within American academic circles at the time. In short: although the differences between Habermas and Derrida (if not deconstruction generally) were profound but not necessarily irreconcilable, they were fueled by polemical responses to mischaracterizations of those differences, which in turn sharply inhibited meaningful discussion.

In the aftermath of [9/11](#), Derrida and Habermas established a limited political solidarity and put their previous disputes behind them in the interest of "friendly and open-minded interchange," as Habermas put it. After laying out their individual opinions on 9/11 in [Giovanna Borradori's](#) *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, Derrida wrote a foreword expressing his unqualified subscription to Habermas's declaration, "February 15, or, What Binds Europeans Together: Plea for a Common Foreign Policy, Beginning in Core Europe," in *Old Europe, New Europe, Core Europe* (Verso, 2005). Habermas has offered further context for this declaration in an [interview](#). Quite distinct from this, [Geoffrey Bennington](#), a close associate of Derrida's, has in a further conciliatory gesture offered an [account](#) of deconstruction intended to provide some mutual intelligibility. Derrida was already extremely ill by the time the two had begun their new exchange, and the two were not able to develop this such that they could substantially revisit previous disagreements or find more profound terms of discussion before Derrida's death. Nevertheless, this late collaboration has encouraged some scholars to revisit the positions, recent and past, of both thinkers, vis-a-vis the other.

Jürgen Habermas stunned his admirers not long ago with the following characterization of [egalitarian universalism](#):

Christianity has functioned for the normative self-understanding of modernity as more than a mere precursor or a catalyst. Egalitarian universalism, from which sprang the ideas of freedom and social solidarity, of an autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, of the individual morality of conscience, human rights, and democracy, is the direct heir to the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love. This legacy, substantially unchanged, has been the object of continual critical appropriation and reinterpretation. To this day, there is no alternative to it. And in the light of the current challenges of a postnational constellation, we continue to draw on the substance of this heritage. Everything else is just idle postmodern talk.

– "Conversation about God and the World." Time of transitions. Cambridge: Polity Press 2006, p. 150-151

### **Dialogue with Joseph Ratzinger (now Benedict XVI)**

In early 2007, Ignatius Press published a dialogue between Habermas and [Joseph Ratzinger](#), entitled *The Dialectics of Secularization*. It addresses such important contemporary questions as these: Is a public culture of reason and ordered liberty possible in our post-metaphysical age? Is philosophy permanently cut adrift from its grounding in being and anthropology? Does this decline of rationality signal an opportunity or a deep crisis for religion itself?