

JURGEN HABERMAS

A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH



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Jürgen Habermas is arguably the most important social thinker in the world today. He was born in Düsseldorf, Germany, on June 18, 1929, and his family was middle class and rather traditional. Habermas's father was director of the Chamber of Commerce. In his early teens, during World War II, Habermas was profoundly affected by the war. The end of the war brought new hope and opportunities for many Germans, including Habermas. The fall of Nazism brought optimism about the future of Germany, but Habermas was disappointed in the lack of dramatic progress in the years immediately after the war. With the end of Nazism, all sorts of intellectual opportunities arose, and once-banned books became available to the young Habermas. They included Western and German literature, as well as tracts written by Marx and Engels. Between 1949 and 1954, Habermas studied a wide range of topics (for

example, philosophy, psychology, German literature) in Göttingen, Zurich, and Bonn. However, none of the teachers at the schools at which Habermas studied were illustrious, and most were compromised by the fact that they either had supported the Nazis overtly or simply had continued to carry out their academic responsibilities under the Nazi regime. Habermas received his doctorate from the University of Bonn in 1954 and worked for two years as a journalist.

In 1956, Habermas arrived at the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt and became associated with the Frankfurt school. Indeed, he became research assistant to one of the most illustrious members of that school, Theodor Adorno, as well as an associate of the institute (Wiggershaus, 1994). Although the Frankfurt school often is thought of as highly coherent, that was not Habermas's view:

For me there was never a consistent theory. Adorno wrote essays on the critique of culture and also gave seminars on Hegel. He presented a certain Marxist background—and that was it.

(Habermas, cited in Wiggershaus, 1994:2)

While he was associated with the Institute for Social Research, Habermas demonstrated from the beginning an independent intellectual orientation. A 1957 article by Habermas got him into trouble with the leader of the institute, Max Horkheimer. Habermas urged critical thought and practical action, but Horkheimer was afraid that such a position would jeopardize the publicly funded institute. Horkheimer strongly recommended that Habermas be dismissed from the institute. Horkheimer said of Habermas, "He probably has a good, or even brilliant, career as a writer in front of him, but he would only cause the institute immense damage" (cited in Wiggershaus, 1994:555). The article eventually was published, but not under the auspices of the Institute and with virtually no reference to it. Eventually, Horkheimer enforced impossible conditions on Habermas's work and Habermas resigned.

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