

REVIEWS

Martin Beck Matušík, *Jürgen Habermas: A Philosophical-Political Profile*
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OVERCOMING EMANCIPATION

Jürgen Habermas is the only contemporary philosopher whose *œuvre* could withstand comparison to the encyclopaedic accomplishments of German Idealism. To all appearances, the ambition of the early Frankfurt School to transform this philosophical legacy into a social theory that would negotiate between the projects of Marx, Weber and Freud seems to have not only been realized, but exceeded in scale: the tradition of Horkheimer and Adorno now embraces a vast array of post-war agendas in linguistics, normative political philosophy, international relations, child psychology and bioethics. Running through this ongoing synthetic enterprise is a spirit of public engagement that has informed numerous highly visible interventions into the political debates of the Federal Republic of Germany, from the 1950s to the present. Habermas is arguably a unique case in intellectual history—a philosopher for whom *esprit de système* has rarely precluded deft adjustments to the prevailing trends.

Martin Beck Matušík's profile offers the first critical overview of his entire career as a public intellectual in any language. A former Fulbright student of Habermas, Matušík approaches his subject with an appealing combination of enormous respect and shrewd scepticism. The design of this biography is an unconventional present-tense narrative that scans the same life in three registers: an excavation of the political unconscious of the first

post-war generation of young adults, indelibly marked by the German catastrophe; a meticulous story of topical evolution unfolding through successive conjunctures; and a more uneven account tracking the turning points in the development of Habermas's conception of critical social theory. Matušík reconstructs the stream of his political interventions as a sequence of existential encounters with the decisive moments of post-war politics and of flawed translations of theory into practice. Written in an unpretentious, if somewhat over-italicized style, this portrait effectively captures the formative episodes of a figure who has persistently sought to define the boundaries of responsible opposition.

Born in Düsseldorf in 1929, Habermas was raised in the small town of Gummersbach, the son of a modestly affluent, politically conformist merchant, who—it is one of Matušík's revelations—was a member of the Nazi Party from 1 May 1933 to the fall of Berlin in 1945. His son passed through the Third Reich without incident, briefly serving in the Hitler Youth near the end of the war. Catastrophic defeat—subsequently rendered as liberation—was the defining experience of his generation. The disclosures of the Nuremberg trials cast an eerie retrospective light on the normality of everyday life in this milieu. In interviews Habermas has described the early post-war years of occupation, re-education and tutelary democracy as a time of unrealistic hopes for a clean break from a suspicious, if still largely unexamined, national past. Before the dawning of the Cold War, Sartre, Mann, Kafka and even Brecht had begun to shape the outlook of a generational cohort that would strike periodic notes of cautious dissent in the restorationist atmosphere of the 50s. Habermas began a dissertation on Schelling under the influence of Heidegger, a looming presence in the intellectual landscape of the early Federal Republic. A sheltering silence still concealed the Nazi careers of many leading academics, including Habermas's own mentors at Göttingen, Erich Rothacker and Oskar Becker. Heidegger's decision to republish a text from the mid-30s sombrely referring, in passing, to the 'inner truth and greatness' of National Socialism (now rendered as 'the movement'), and his subsequent refusal to recant, elicited an anguished response from a now deeply disillusioned young admirer.

A change of orientation immediately ensued: while finishing his dissertation Habermas began to read seriously the Young Hegelians, early Marx and the Lukács of *History and Class Consciousness*. This experience opened his horizons to the intellectual world of the émigrés. The Nazi regime had effectively removed Marx and Freud from German culture; after the war they could initially seem like exotic fossils from another age. Personal contact with Marcuse was the initial point of entry into the orbit of the newly re-established Frankfurt school. The return of Horkheimer and Adorno to Frankfurt was part of the wider post-war restoration of sociology, a discipline

which in short time revealed a familiar field of contrasts between schools of a more philosophical bent and those championing value-free social science. Habermas remembers that reading *Dialectic of Enlightenment* allowed him to appreciate for the first time the contemporary relevance of Marx—a rather surprising claim in that Marx, let alone the class struggle or socialism, features hardly at all in this work. To Horkheimer's alarm, Habermas also began to recover buried treasures from the archives of the pre-war Institute. But in sharp contrast to his elders, he was simultaneously attuned to the imported wares of logical positivism, empirical social psychology and pragmatism. Tensions between Horkheimer and Habermas began to rise, not over these new-found interests, but rather as a result of the younger thinker's first attempts to develop a critical theory that might inform a politics of opposition. Horkheimer, living in dread of fascist recidivism, saw no alternative to the American-guaranteed order in West Germany, and took umbrage at Habermas's participation in the campaign for nuclear disarmament. While punctually discussing this conflict, Matušítk does not explore the longer-term influence of Horkheimer and Adorno on Habermas as examples of political conduct. But Habermas's subsequent stance towards radical activism can be read as an unspoken tribute to their enduring authority, a relationship Matušítk's generational account tends to obscure.

Horkheimer's politically motivated rejection of the research that would become Habermas's dissertation, the groundwork for *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, prompted its author's departure from Frankfurt to Marburg, to work under Wolfgang Abendroth, at that time one of the Federal Republic's few Marxist professors. Published in 1962, today this work enjoys an international reception that has firmly established its reputation as a masterpiece of historical sociology. But though now probably the best-known of his writings, it has a strange status in contemporary estimations of Habermas's thought, recalling an earlier, more radical vocation for critical theory. At its centre is an ideal-type representation of the early modern 'public sphere'—a bourgeois milieu of coffee houses, salons, debating clubs, grub street publishing and learned correspondence, which formed the communicative infrastructure of the Enlightenment in France and England. After tracking the gradual decline of this multi-national Republic of Letters into the depths of twentieth-century mass media and manipulated public opinion, Habermas held out the remote prospect of an Enlightenment to come, in which a critical democracy might not merely reverse the degeneration of liberal traditions, but develop a more egalitarian order beyond them.

As a stark sketch of the historical conditions of possibility for a cultural revolution in the advanced capitalist West, this text remains in many ways unsurpassed. Matušítk's study of Habermas's trajectory could profitably

have taken more of its bearings from this doctoral opus, since it provides one of the few instances in his career where a political practice can be judged by a theoretical prognosis. Certainly, it is significant that Habermas, once he started to be published in English, seems for many years to have discouraged its translation, much in the spirit of Horkheimer's attitude to his own pre-war writings. For in Germany, its appearance in the early sixties electrified radical students, becoming a key reference for the SDS after its expulsion from the ranks of the SPD. It was not long after the completion of this work that Habermas's academic fortunes began to soar. With Adorno's support, he returned to Frankfurt in 1964 as a professor of philosophy and sociology, occupying the position that Horkheimer had held. Successive levies of increasingly dissident students now came to view him as a critical supporter of their causes.

Marcuse was a more central catalyst in this ferment; his notions of 'repressive desublimation', 'one-dimensional man', and 'the great refusal' captured more vividly the confluence of anti-imperialism, US ghetto upheavals and the generational discontents of affluent capitalism. By contrast, Habermas's writings from this period were always more sceptical about any ready translation of the Frankfurt legacy into a living politics. His 1963 collection of essays *Theory and Practice* offered a genealogy of positivist conceptions of social science, which held that politics hinged on the selection of value-free means to attain rationally unjustifiable ultimate ends. Against such doctrines, Habermas floated the idea of a self-reflexive social theory capable of overcoming the relativism entrenched in the different areas of a fractured society by formulating criteria for an emancipatory politics, without raising dogmatic claims to an Archimedean, holistic perspective. A more systematic work later in the decade, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, sought to anchor the possibility of such a reflexive methodological orientation in a quasi-transcendental human interest in lightening the load of man-made hardship, above and beyond our natural finitude. Commitment to this interest, he claimed, forms the horizon within which social relations can be conceptualized as the opaque screen of systematically damaged forms of life. Psychoanalysis rather than Marxism provided the model for the indicated diagnostics.

Matušík sees the leitmotif of this emerging project as a synthesis of the liberal-democratic reckoning of 1945 with the revolutionary aspirations of the 60s. When German students' increasingly militant anti-imperialism threatened to overstep the parameters of this mission, however, they were met with a hail of determined rebukes. From 1967 to 1969 the tense relationship between radical student groups and the elders of the Frankfurt School erupted into open hostilities. Matušík re-creates a now legendary piece of political theatre in vivid detail. In 1967, within a few days of the kill-

ing of Benno Ohnesorg by the Berlin police during a demonstration against the Shah, Habermas stunned his admirers by denouncing a quite mild call by Rudi Dutschke for campus action as tantamount to 'left fascism'. The wildness of the charge sent shock waves through a non-violent, if raucous protest culture. Matušík observes that this imprecation, more than anything Habermas was to write, came to define his relation to those on his Left. A more measured, if equally caustic verdict was issued in 1969: the rebellion of the previous year, he claimed, had been a phantom revolution, leaving society untransformed, but thoroughly on edge. Identification with revolutionary struggles in the Third World was the illusory compensation for an inability to come to terms with the democratic immobility of advanced capitalist societies. Such were the bitter parting comments of Horkheimer's successor. Adorno's death brought the demoralization of the previous few years to a head, leading to the final break-up of the Frankfurt School, and Habermas's departure for the Max Planck Institute at Starnberg.

In 1969 the first post-war German government of the Left under Willy Brandt had come to power with the slogan: 'dare more democracy'. But the reformist programme of the Social-Democratic government soon collided with the world economic downturn that began in the early 70s, setting off what would eventually become a permanent chorus of conservative alarm at the insupportable burdens of the welfare state and the malaise of an overly reflexive, liberated society. While Matušík brings the cultural-revolutionary drama of 68 admirably to life, he fails to register the impact of this later material conjuncture on Habermas's conception of critical theory. For this is the moment when his scepticism towards the classical agenda of social emancipation became programmatic. Habermas spent most of this decade working on what is arguably his magnum opus, the two volumes of his *Theory of Communicative Action*, published in 1981. In it he exhibits a polymathic fluency in nearly every language of social theory from the late 18th century to the present. But whereas Marx and Freud had previously provided the major coordinates of his vision of a dialectic of enlightenment, here it is the systems theory of Talcott Parsons that discloses the architectonic shape of modernity, outlining more circumscribed boundaries for the rational critique of society. By not exploring its conclusions, Matušík fails to track the conservative drift in Habermas's theoretical outlook, as the civil restoration of 45 effectively eclipsed the Fronde of 68, now visible only as a luminous—or alternatively ominous—fringe of the *Grundgesetz*.

Resuscitating a venerable trope of sociology, modernization was now presented as the differentiation of society into separate spheres—administration, markets and a more fluid realm of communicative fellowship—each governed by distinct standards of performance. Culture, in this account, is divested of its traditional legitimating function as a comprehensive world

view, and is recast on a grid of specialization where science, law and art develop distinct, immanent norms of judgement. Habermas maintains that this autopoiesis of rationalization requires ongoing enlightenment in the nebula of the life-world, if the human face of modern society is to be preserved. Embedded in the performative conditions of human utterance is a normative expectation that consensus will arise out of unimpeded communication. This principle provides a vantage point for a critique of the vast, intricately intertwining operations of money, administration and technical expertise that tend to thwart such unforced agreement. As opposed to a critique of political economy, focusing on the exploitation or emancipation of reified labour-power, the norm of undistorted communication traces the only realistic horizon of improvement in advanced societies. But a politics informed by it must stay within the limits set by the impersonal orders of bureaucracy and money, as any attempt to overstep them in upsurges of would-be self-determination can only cancel the achievements of social rationalization. The remote prospect of a radical assertion of popular sovereignty that Habermas held out in *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* has been definitively retracted. The salvageable core of a politics of emancipation is no more than a civilized balance between money, power and solidarity.

Habermas offered, however, no optimistic gloss for liberal-democratic capitalism. Although a constitutional welfare state energized by protest politics coming from alternative lifestyles is presented as the final form of social rationalization, *Theory of Communicative Action* ends with the bleak observation that capitalist crisis had effectively checked the forward march of this process, and was setting in motion trends that now threatened to reverse post-war advances through a long, demoralizing attrition. This disconcerting conclusion, in which the severity of the predicament is aggravated by the impossibility of any concerted political solution, recapitulates the uneasiness the late Hegel felt before a modernity that had failed to settle into its purportedly comprehended, architectonic form. But in Habermas's case it is not the tremors of popular sovereignty that disturb the stately edifice of objective reason, but the attenuation of what has come to stand in for them.

Meanwhile another, more ominous phantom revolution was threatening civil peace in Germany. While Habermas was still writing these tomes at the Max Planck Institute, the Federal Republic was rocked by a series of spectacular assassinations of prominent politicians and businessmen, carried out by underground cells of the Red Army Faction. The political reaction that had failed to materialize in the aftermath of 68 now went into full swing. Yellow journalism, academic black lists, loyalty oaths and prison deaths recalled states of emergency from other times. Matušík explores Habermas's courageous response to the Hot Autumn of 77, when he stood his ground before

counter-terrorist panic, while defending the Frankfurt School from accusations that it had planted the seeds of violence in the previous decade.

Confounding expectations of a long era of Social Democratic ascendancy, a Centre-Right coalition came to power in 1982 with the defection of the FDP under Genscher to the side of the CDU. Christian Democratic rule would demonstrate a more solid grasp of the organic formulas of government in the decade of the Second Cold War. Habermas's return to Frankfurt in 1982 coincided with massive protests against the Kohl government's welcome for the installation of Pershing missiles by the US. Habermas saw in the ensuing campaign of civil disobedience a healthy manifestation of resistance from the life-world to unaccountable power and—overcoming previous inhibitions—defended its compatibility with the authentic spirit of the Basic Law. Despite these expressions of sympathy, he did not question West Germany's allegiance to NATO. Matušík passes over Habermas's tense relationship with the newly formed Green Party, a political formation drawing on the still intact sub-cultures of 68. The philosopher sternly reprimanded the early Greens for their 'lunatic' antics in the Bundestag, 'irresponsible' anti-Americanism and nostalgic vision of a divided nation, trapped between nuclear power blocs.

Matušík offers instead a detailed account of Habermas's battles with a resurgent neo-conservatism, which he feared might reverse the Federal Republic's fraught passage into the comity of Western culture. The prospect of Reagan and Kohl commemorating the casualties of the Second World War before SS graves at Bitburg raised the spectre of an unsettling revisionism in which Germany's role in the post-war Alliance could be represented as a continuation of its wartime efforts on the Eastern Front. Just this implication was developed in the historian Ernst Nolte's incendiary thesis that Nazism in Germany should be seen as a pathological response of bourgeois society to the annihilating threat of the Red Terror in Russia—and as such calling for potentially more empathetic comprehension. The Historians' Debate that broke out in 1986 around this, and other attempts to offer an allegedly more balanced retrospective judgement on the historic predicaments of the German Reich, captured international attention, as Habermas weighed in to attack the suggestion that there was anything salvageable in this geopolitical legacy. Intermingled with his powerful rebuttals, however, was a curt dismissal of any attempt to revive the anachronistic agenda of national reunification. The like-minded Hans-Ulrich Wehler complained that conservative nostalgia for such unity did more to endanger the Federal Republic's allegiance to the West than even the foolish prattle of the Greens. Habermas declared that the only viable form of collective identity that remained for the Federal Republic was a constitutional patriotism, voided of all retro-nationalist vestiges.

While no one could foresee that within three years the GDR would be erased from the map, Habermas's blindness to the division of the country compared poorly with the record of others on the Left less fixated on Bonn, and more sensitive to historical realities likely to outlast the Cold War. It is greatly to his credit that when in 1990 reunification came, Habermas argued against immediate *Anschluss* of the East, calling instead for a new constitutional settlement to be approved by a referendum in both parts of the country, in accordance with Article 15 of the *Grundgesetz*. But the force of his appeal was weakened by his prior failure—in common with virtually the whole left-liberal mainstream in the West, which uncritically celebrated 1945 as a year of Allied deliverance—to respond with any imagination to the consequences of post-war partition.

Not long after, anti-immigrant pogroms erupted in old and new *Länder* alike, and the Basic Law's generous asylum provisions, an émigré legacy of the post-war settlement, came under broad attack. Here too Habermas spoke up with commendable clarity and vigour against the dangers of incipient racism, expressing his long-standing commitment to a vision of political order grounded in humanitarian norms. German reunification could be reconciled to these, he argued, only with an unequivocal disavowal of any intention to flex new muscles in Europe, and a determination to pursue ever-greater integration into the EC. Developing the conception of a post-national democracy, he warned that return to the old capital in the Berlin Republic encouraged a complacent verdict that normal nationhood had at last been attained. At the very moment when world history had slated the nation for down-sizing, neo-conservative nostalgia was muddying the waters of cultural understanding, deferring a mature engagement with the times.

In such interventions—over Bitburg, the Historians' Debate, Reunification, the Asylum Law—Habermas has played the role of a vigilant intellectual guardian, alerting the public to the omnipresent dangers of political amnesia. It is a balance-sheet Matušík understandably honours. But it cannot be separated so easily from the side of Habermas that came to disturb him. For it was in this capacity too that Habermas, in an extraordinary display of indifference to historical accuracy that took even close friends on the liberal Left aback, hailed Daniel Goldhagen's grotesque distillation of modern German national identity prior to occupation into a psychotic anti-Semitism. The trashiness of this American best-seller was apparently less important to him than its serviceability as political grist to his mill. Spectres from a haunted past, always threatening to return, could be exorcized only through abjuring forever the temptation to become an autonomous state. Self-dissolution into a European—and eventually world—federation is a way of working off this debt to other countries, which can set their own timetables for entering into the post-national age. Matušík is reluctant to challenge Habermas's lofty

perch in the watchtower of the nation's conscience, but it is from just this position that an anachronistic anti-Fascism would pass judgement on the fate of Belgrade and Baghdad.

For this was the moment at which Matušítk entered Habermas's circle in Frankfurt, an experience that left an indelible impression on him. Despite his respect for the philosopher, he could not follow him in endorsing America's wars in the Gulf and the Balkans. Most painful of all, in this association with 'cluster-bomb liberals', was the glaring contrast between Habermas's intemperate denunciation of the unarmed student protests of 68 and his complaisance towards the raining down of high-tech military violence by the most powerful state machine in the world—'his fear of student street activism and revolutionary aspirations' on the one hand, and his 'support for extreme levels of the state monopoly of violence and killing', on the other. The passion of Matušítk's reproaches is all the more impressive for the sincerity of his attachment to Habermas. Nor can he shut his eyes to other signs of adherence to the Atlantic status quo. Commenting on *Between Facts and Norms*, he writes:

The need for economic democracy exists in Habermas's theory neither as a theoretical nor a practical possibility. Existing capital, labour and investment markets are left undisputed: they are designed for efficiency by the market economists and utilized by entrepreneurs since efficiency cannot be translated into the language of social justice and vice versa . . . In sum, capitalism and democracy are not a contradiction, since there is nothing undemocratic about efficiency and nothing economic about democracy.

These are criticisms of an admirer whose good faith is beyond question. They are prompted by a conviction that Habermas—the living embodiment of critical theory, in Matušítk's view—has in such cases failed to understand the political logic of his own theoretical project. But if one accepts the premise that its origin lay in a deep-going attempt to bring to light the hidden potentials for emancipation in the present, it is more reasonable to conclude that Habermas has now abandoned this agenda for another. The problem today is how to universalize and institutionally anchor the norms of liberal-democratic civilization with due regard to the diversity of human cultures, ultimately grounded in the symbolic remnants of world religions. In the light of this contemporary preoccupation, the classical conception of popular sovereignty as the constituent power of a self-determining society can be rejected as a primitive national metaphysics. Archaic fantasies of collective emancipation—Habermas has explained he no longer uses the term—are being superseded by a nascent geopolitics of human rights.

According to this prospectus, a clear view of the horizon of modernity can emerge only when we abandon the figment of a sovereign people as a collec-

tive subject for a proceduralist constitutionalism, rooted in inter-subjective rules of unforced mutual agreement. Misgivings that such consensus might still be an artefact of some opaque impersonal coercion are now relegated to the occasional aside. The new Habermas is an essentially establishment philosopher, with little taste for the hermeneutics of suspicion. The task of criticism is simply to clarify the intuitions underlying the existing constitutional dispensation, blocking the path to any regressive majoritarianism. Where older theories of democracy mistakenly conceived of individual rights as checks on the will of a hypostasized collective subject, Habermas argues that a radical democracy must on the contrary conceive such rights as the necessary condition for the formation of a true consensus; though why this is more radical, and not less, is not itself explained. Historically, those who denounced radical democracy—fearing the coercive power of sovereign multitudes to dissolve property rights and introduce a more sweeping equality—have with good reason identified it with the former, not the latter conception.

For Habermas, by contrast, modern constitutions are open to their own supersession, not by any insurgency arising out of the depths of an endangered life-world, but through governments dissolving the jurisdiction of their own states into an overarching, cosmopolitan legal order. Europe is the first step for Germany, supposedly en route to a world federation. This passage, we are reminded, is fraught with risk, as the trend lines of globalization are extremely difficult to extrapolate. A mood of 'enlightened helplessness' is rampant on the mainstream Left, but that is unwarranted in Habermas's view, because as solidarities of national welfare *Gemeinschaft* dry up, new ones are emerging in the milieu of a multi-cultural *Gesellschaft*. Habermas offers his revised understanding of democracy as a guideline for managing the ensuing ethno-religious frictions in a society of strangers. But the rhetoric of multi-culturalism also provides a convenient idiom for a certain way of disposing of the legacies of colonialism. He writes in *The Inclusion of the Other*:

Eurocentrism and the hegemony of Western culture are in the last analysis catchwords for a struggle for recognition at an international level. The Gulf War made us aware of this. Under the shadow of colonial history that is still vivid in people's minds, the allied intervention was regarded by religiously motivated masses and secularized intellectuals alike as a failure to respect the identity and autonomy of the Islamic-Arabic world. The historical relationship between the Occident and the Orient, and especially the First, to the former Third World, continues to bear the marks of a denial of recognition.

The turn towards discourse ethics allows a curtain of mystifying euphemism to be drawn across the enormity of contemporary imperialism.

But what calculations of real forces lie behind Habermas's redefinition of democracy? In the twenty years since the publication of *Theory of Communicative Action* the power of capital has taken a Great Leap Forward. Habermas concedes that this development threatens to negate the formula of modernity as a balance between money, power and solidarity. Unleashed, uncomprehended money appears to be cancelling the autonomy of the state, and overwhelming one outpost of the life-world after another. Do we now move from Talcott Parsons back to Karl Marx? Not at all. For the time being, there is no political solution to our predicament. Certainly no nationalist closure or secession from the world market can be considered, but seen in the light of 20th century attempts to exercise this option, that is nothing to regret. For according to Habermas modernity is precisely this process of periodic 'expansion' of the life-world through waves of creative destruction. We stand in the midst of another Great Transformation, and like the one that unfolded from the mid-19th century to the Belle Époque, it is reshaping the social order through the unregulated agency of money so rapidly that only those riding in the fiery chariots of world finance have the wind in their banners.

But this Polanyian account inevitably leads to an unsettling parallel that Habermas chooses not to draw. For in this reckoning, the first era of globalization led to the horrors of world war and fascism before the Bretton Woods order neutralized the volatility of world capitalism. Habermas argues that the defining moment of the 20th century was not the defeat of Communism but rather the vanquishing of Fascism, as this is what made possible the democratic welfare state and decolonization—the two decisive advances of post-war history. But he does not consider, in turn, whether the end of the Cold War, whose significance is reduced to a second instalment of victory over totalitarianism, has set into motion a trend in the opposite direction—towards a new form of laissez-faire imperialism. Following the Polanyian narrative one could conclude that we are once again heading to the brink of catastrophe.

The horizon of this second era of globalization seems dark but Habermas implies that we can see this process through to another era of social regulation without an intervening time of catastrophes. The danger is that this Great Transformation, even more than the first, seems to be uprooting the solidarities needed for a future democratic response. Where is the refuge of optimism on this blighted landscape of inequality and atomization? The unstated premise that follows is paradoxical: the decline of older communities of fate is precisely what makes possible two major advances in the rationalization process—the euthanasia of nationalism in the lands of its origin, and an irreversible, ongoing feminization of society. For the German historian Lutz Niethammer this bizarre juxtaposition of progressive and regressive developments forms the distinguishing pattern of an age of

identity politics—a world all too liable to break apart in Hobbesian culture wars. Habermas appears to be more sanguine. But if multi-culturalism and feminism will not suffice to stave off catastrophic meltdowns and nationalist backlashes outside of the OECD zone, what is the force that will hold the world together in the coming time of transition?

Habermas is counting on the rationalization of inter-state relations going into high gear. Unlike the first half of the twentieth century, the second reveals a trend, in his view, towards the pacification of inter-state relations. First, completely breaking with historic precedent, all the developed capitalist countries became liberal democracies, locked into an American-dominated security framework that has made war between them unthinkable. Second, the collapse of the Soviet empire has eliminated, for the time being, the threat of nuclear war that previously hung over this internal rationalization of Western state and society. For Habermas the post-Cold War era offers the prospect that Kant's vision of historical progress towards a world federation is finally on the agenda. In this perspective, open season on rogue states is a spring-cleaning of the historical debris left over from the era of nationalism.

Throughout the 90s Habermas developed this conception of a new world order crystallizing around humanitarian norms, undaunted by the cavalier legalities and collateral damage of neo-imperial warfare. The historical experience of the last half-century, he has suggested, affords a revision of the essential premises of Kant's sketch of the unfolding of international law within the world of war, commerce and diplomacy. According to Kant, state power would be compelled by an emerging European-wide sphere of public opinion firstly to conform to constitutional limitations, then to renounce war against other constitutional states and, finally, to leap into irrevocable federation with them. Kant steadfastly opposed the idea that any one state could ever be entrusted to establish this condition on its own terms. The result, Habermas observes, is that 'he must rely exclusively on each government's own moral self-obligation. But such trust is scarcely reconcilable with Kant's soberly realistic description of the politics of his own time.'

What has changed in the world since Kant's time that now warrants a less soberly realistic description of international affairs? Habermas claims that in the era of globalization, "soft power" displaces "hard power" and robs the subjects to whom Kant's association of free states was tailored of the very basis of their independence'. As a result, a global 'civil society' that provides the political setting for a human-rights agenda has emerged. Even a world media domain divided between multinational giants and postmodern robber barons offers episodic coverage of human-rights violations, famines and other calamities of interest. Habermas seems to think that had Kant lived to see the beginning of the Second American Century, he might also

have thrown caution to the winds and embraced a republican empire with the power to vault over the threshold of sovereign statehood and establish a new kind of world polity.

While Habermas expressed the hope that this process would unfold within the framework of a reformed United Nations, it was clear from the establishment of the Anglo-American no-fly zones over Iraq, and certainly from the time of the Rambouillet diktat, that the outlines of another world order were emerging, reducing the General Assembly to absolute irrelevance, and the Security Council to the undignified role of providing, when solicited, legal cover for the sovereign decisions of the White House. Habermas, like many on the European Left, has difficulty perceiving the United Nations as it is. But in a time of transition between old and new inter-state regimes, his normative political theory can perform an essential ideological function. It offers a method for bridging the interpretive no-man's-land between the increasingly defunct norms of the Charter and the imputed ideal structure of obligations under a supposedly nascent international law—that is to say, a legal order that has yet to come into being, but whose humanitarian norms can be invoked by the most powerful state in the world to authorize any departure from the Charter framework. The incipient soft norms of human rights turn out to require an emergency regime of hard steel and high explosives to come into being.

Confronted with current US assertions of America's eternal supremacy, as the Pentagon gears up to seize Baghdad, Habermas has not been moved to revise his confidence in the West's new *mission civilisatrice*. While expressing conventional European misgivings about the dangers of 'unilateralism', he has deplored Schroeder's declaration that Germany would not join an invasion of Iraq, even were the Security Council to mandate one, as failing to display 'unreserved respect for the authority of the UN'. The more loyal attitude of Foreign Minister Fischer—a favourite of both the State Department and the philosopher—was preferable. For Habermas, once again, the decisive question is the *language* to be used in justifying the latest state of exception, as if this is what determines the final architecture of world politics. Here is the distinction with which (in a recent *Nation* interview) he garlanded motives for the Balkan War:

In Continental Europe, proponents of intervention took pains to shore up rather weak arguments from international law by pointing out that the action was intended to promote what they saw as the transition from a soft international law toward a fully implemented human rights regime, whereas both US and British advocates remained in their tradition of liberal nationalism. They did not appeal to 'principles' of a future cosmopolitan order but were satisfied to enforce their demand for international recognition of what they perceived to be the universalistic force of their own national 'values'.

The shell game of principles versus values defines the parameters of the only debate that the later Habermas considers worthwhile. Conversations with Rawls and Rorty—‘the heirs of Jefferson’—boil down to justifying the writ of liberal democracy in different idioms. Acknowledgment that ‘the idea of a just and peaceful cosmopolitan order lacks any historical and philosophical support’ does not deter Habermas from concluding that there is no alternative to striving for its realization, even if its military expressions, for all their good will, so far leave something to be desired. The suspicion that such wishful thinking might preclude historical and philosophical comprehension of the real world has been successfully kept at bay. Habermas recently wrote of Herbert Marcuse that he believed he had to introduce a vocabulary that could only open eyes clouded to realities that had grown invisible ‘by bathing apparently unfamiliar phenomena in a harsh counterlight’. But reconstructing this forgotten language, and learning how to speak it, is the sole vocation of a theory that is genuinely critical.