

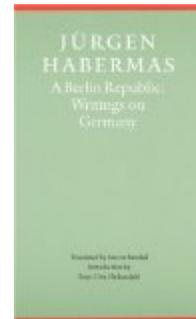
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Juergen Habermas. *A Berlin Republic: Writings on Germany*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997. xxiv + 187 pp. \$14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8032-7306-1; \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8032-2381-3.

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This book contains translations of recent essays and interviews in which Juergen Habermas, in his role as public intellectual, reflects on German unification and on the relationship of his major theoretical works to practical politics. Like all of Habermas's works, this book demonstrates his extraordinary breadth of knowledge and interests. In such short essays and interviews, however, Habermas cannot develop his ideas within the context of his theoretical system. Outside of that context, Habermas's critical views on unification and his concrete suggestions for political change seem alternately obvious and impractical.

Despite Peter Hohendahl's introduction, which both adumbrates the major themes of the essays that follow and illustrates their relationship to the remainder of Habermas's corpus, a reader unfamiliar with Habermas's *Theory of Communicative Action* and *Between Facts and Norms* will most likely be lost among the trees of this unfamiliar forest. I wonder, for example, what such a reader will make of Habermas's repeated use of the phrase, "postconventional moral conscience." Those at home in the Habermasian universe, however, will find little new here. The book thus faces a problem of audience.

The eleven essays in the volume are divided into six sections. The first three essays, however—presented in sections entitled "Can We Learn From History?" and "A Double Past," together with the final essay, which gets its own section, "Which History Can We Learn From?"—really form a unit. These essays relate to a number of shared themes. First, Habermas passionately believes that Germans must learn from their past, but he wants to limit the lessons to be drawn from history. Habermas

criticizes the cynical use of history in the *Volkskammer* elections of spring 1990. There, CDU rhetoric held up the history of the Federal Republic as a precedent worthy of imitation. But history, according to Habermas, can only tell us what not to do. History "functions as an authority that demands not so much imitation as revision" (p. 13).

There are two major problems with this argument as presented in these essays. First, Habermas here provides no support for his interesting theory that history only teaches us what not to do. Holding the Federal Republic up as a model worthy of imitation would not be problematic, it seems to me, if we really believed it to be such a model. The obvious objection that historical lessons must always be adapted to changing circumstances and not simply applied mechanically holds true whether we are trying to learn negative or positive lessons from the past. Second, Habermas believes that there are lessons that we can only learn from history. Is it really true, however, that only history can teach us, for example, that anti-Semitism is wrong? Since Habermas concludes that "history may *at best* [emphasis mine] be the teacher who tells us how we ought not to do things" (p. 13), it seems he could echo Reinhart Koselleck and announce an end to *Historia Magistra Vitae*. However, Habermas is unwilling to foreclose the possibility of pointing to history as providing the definitive rebuke to his conservative foes.

Habermas's second theme in these essays is familiar to those who followed his contributions to the Historians' Debate of the mid-1980s. Germans may well feel a sense of identification with their state, but that identification should be based on constitutional patriotism and commitment to political democracy rather than on the nation. In this context, Habermas presents an argument

that recurs in various forms throughout the book: Germans can be proud of the level of political democracy they have achieved in the Federal Republic, but they must also consider that such democracy was possible in Germany “because of Auschwitz, because of reflection on the incomprehensible” (p. 164). Only by contemplating the German past have Germans come to appreciate the core values of human rights and democracy.

Habermas is at his best in considering his third theme, the status of former East Germans in the new Germany and the historical relativism inherent in attempted analogies between de-Nazification and, metaphorically speaking, de-Stasification. He points out the extent to which East Germans have already been silenced in the national debate and approves of Gerd Heidenreich’s suggestion that coming to terms with East Germany’s past must inevitably involve coming to terms with the shared German past. Still, the amount of space Habermas devotes to the writings of that “traumatized visionary” (p. 24) Ernst Nolte indicates the temporal lag as well as the social mandarism that occasionally haunt Habermas’s pronouncements on German politics.

Although the later sections of the book focus on intellectual history and on Habermas’s philosophical works, the political and historical themes recur. The section, “German Uncertainties,” contains three interviews. The first begins with the interviewer’s suggestion of a comparison of Adorno’s and Heidegger’s diagnoses of the modern condition. Habermas is predictably alarmed to hear the two names mentioned in the same breath, but he recovers, and, with his usual subtlety and charm, presents a plausible account of why the comparison, while tempting, is inapposite. He then seizes upon the opportunity to defend his mentor’s diagnosis while acknowledging its flaws. The remainder of that interview and the one that follows it return to the political themes of the essays discussed earlier. The final interview in this section focuses on Habermas’s recent works and their relation both to his earlier works and to the Frankfurt School tradition.

The fourth section contains a letter to Christa Wolf and brief essays on Carl Schmitt and on Adorno’s correspondence with Benjamin. The letter to Wolf is interesting mostly for an extraordinary passage in which Habermas recalls the hostile response of East German intellectuals to a passage in one of his earlier works. There, Habermas asserted that political rhetoric in East Germany could be “more ruinous for the spiritual hy-

giene of Germany than all the concentrated resentment of five or six generations of anti-enlightenment, anti-Semitic, false romantic, jingoistic obscurantists” (p. 99). This passage is reminiscent of the kind of historical relativism that Habermas denounces in the first section of this book, but he is dumbfounded that East German intellectuals criticized him. Habermas’s denunciations of Schmitt and of anyone who shows any symptoms of interest in Schmitt recur throughout the volume, and his essay on Schmitt’s influence is remarkable only for the variety of German intellectuals whom Habermas now considers to be “neo-conservatives,” a term he applies even to people for whom the “neo” would constitute the real insult.

The most interesting section of the book is surely the “Conversation about Questions of Political Theory,” in which Habermas fields extremely intelligent questions from Mikael Carleheden and Rene Gabriels on *Between Facts and Norms*. Readers should be grateful for the summaries and commentaries on *Between Facts and Norms* that Carleheden and Gabriels provide. It is a rare interview in which the questions rival the answers in length. Habermas’s answers, while interesting, do not fully answer the questions posed, and one wishes the interviewers had allowed themselves the liberty of follow-up questions. Nevertheless, the resulting “conversation” illuminates both the main themes of Habermas’s most recent theoretical work and the main criticisms to which that work has been subjected.

The translator has made some curious choices. *Aufarbeitung* is translated as “working off.” The apparent intention was to free Adorno’s use of the term from its Freudian overtones, but it is the same word in German, and the English “working off” conveys an entirely different meaning. The translation of the essay on Adorno and Benjamin suffers from both infelicities and typographical errors. These flaws mar an otherwise attractive packaging of Habermas’s often homely prose. Although readers unfamiliar with Habermas’s systematic philosophy will sometimes be puzzled by his formulations, the directness of the interview format is often helpful in clarifying, for the benefit of the uninitiated, the import of Habermas’s work.

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