

Moral Universalism at a Time of Political Regression: A Conversation with Jürgen Habermas about the Present and His Life's Work

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Moral Universalism at a Time of Political Regression: A Conversation with Jürgen Habermas about the Present and His Life's Work

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Abstract

In the present interview, Jürgen Habermas answers questions about his wide-ranging work in philosophy and social theory, as well as concerning current social and political developments to whose understanding he has made important theoretical contributions. Among the aspects of his work addressed are his conception of communicative rationality as a countervailing force to the colonization of the life-world by capitalism and his understanding of philosophy after Hegel as postmetaphysical thinking, for which he has recently provided a comprehensive historical grounding. The scope and relevance of his ideas can be seen from his reflections on current issues, ranging from the prospects of translational democracy at a time of resurgent nationalism and populism, to political developments in Germany since reunification, to the role of religion in the public sphere and the impact of the new social media on democratic discourse.

Keywords

capitalism, communicative reason, EU, postmetaphysical thinking, public sphere, postsecularism, transnational democracy

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Extra material: <https://www.theoryculturesociety.org/>

Last year Jürgen Habermas celebrated his 90th birthday. This anniversary provided us with an occasion to discuss current social and political developments with one of the most influential intellectuals of the present day in the context of his philosophical thought. For this purpose, we visited him at his home in Starnberg in March 2019 for an extended preliminary conversation. The actual interview was conducted in writing the following October.

The Fragmentation of the Lifeworld Foundation

Claudia Czingon, Aletta Diefenbach and Victor Kempf: According to your social theory, crises and conflicts occur whenever the rationalised lifeworld of Western societies becomes ‘colonised’, infiltrated or manipulated to a certain extent from the outside by systemic imperatives of the economy or the state administration. Recent diagnoses in the social sciences of current social developments challenge this view insofar as they suggest that the main lines of confrontation within the lifeworld of late-modern societies are themselves breaking up and are taking the form of increasingly irreconcilable cultural conflicts. Andreas Reckwitz speaks in this context of an antagonism between the liberal ‘hyperculture’ of urban, academic milieus, whose cosmopolitan self-understanding is very close to your universalistic model of discourse, and the ‘essentialism’ of non-academic middle and lower classes living in smaller towns, who understand their identities in ways which are marked by emphatic particular affiliations. How do you assess this recent discourse about the cultural conflict between universalist and particularist social blueprints?

Habermas: Andreas Reckwitz has developed a new way of looking at society with considerable constructive talent. He is, if you like, the sociologist of Illies’ ‘Golf Generation’.¹ He has the capacity for vivid sociological description of a David Riesman; but by adopting a libertarian perspective tinged with late Romanticism, he replaces Riesman’s ‘inward-directed’ character with the ‘outward-directed’ character he regards as canonical for advanced modernity. The wealth of phenomena that Reckwitz uncovers with reference to this social character, who eagerly seeks recognition of his individuality, may be impressive. What I find less convincing, however, is how he decouples his social-psychological interpretation of culture to a certain extent from those socio-structural dislocations that are ultimately triggered by the functional imperatives of a globally deregulated world market. To represent neoliberal unrestricted competition as a mere reflection of the inherent cultural logic of the ‘markets of recognition’ is to turn the relations of causality on their head.

Far be it from me to downplay the revolutionary consequences of the new media. But it would be overhasty, to say the least, to ascribe such a representative role for ‘late-modern’ society as a whole to the figure of

the digital user who, in the competition for visibility and recognition, attempts to collect the 'likes' of as many 'followers' as possible through original self-portrayals – even if we interpret the narcissistic aberrations of an American president as a distorted reflection of features of the so-called creative scene. In my opinion, the general picture of the new cultural conflict in which the 'creatives' are the winners fails to ring true when it obscures or suppresses the underlying socio-economic causes.

In Germany, we have experienced a decade of continuous economic growth while the extreme inequality of wealth and income has increased during the same period. Even in the fundamentally conservative business sections of our leading daily newspapers one can now find thoughtful agreement with Thomas Piketty's diagnosis that global capitalism is endangering itself through the connection between growing social inequality and the rise of right-wing populism. Of course, there is no linear connection between the Gini coefficient of an economy and the emergence of identitarian, nationalist and racist movements. In our countries, right-wing populism extends far beyond the strata of the marginalised poor. A whole range of mobilising and unsettling factors are clearly affecting the lifeworld experiences of these susceptible social strata.

While these subcultures may be especially sensitive to the flexibility and dissolution of social relationships and familiar living conditions, not to mention the socio-cognitive dissonances generated by immigration and growing cultural pluralism, the underlying triggers are more systemic. A particularly worrying development, aside from accelerating climate change, is the increasing speed of the technological change associated with the digitalisation of everyday life and the workplace. Yet the problems posed by the end of the natural development of the human organism – the insidious proliferation of 'improving' eugenics free from any form of regulation – have yet to capture public attention. These abstract experiences and premonitions can have enduring unnering effects because they extend the temporal horizon of individual lives beyond what can be currently expected. Among the social strata most acutely affected, they are associated with the all too realistic fear of *loss of status*, on the one hand, and *experiences of political powerlessness*, on the other.

We should not let the drumming of the boots of marching skinheads distract us from the fact that, if I am not mistaken, the phobic emotional states associated with the more widely diffused ethnocentrism betray defensive reactions. This defensiveness is also an expression of contemporary citizens' realistic recognition that the nation-state has lost its capacity for political action, and more generally of the weakness of the politically fragmented world of nation-states when faced with the functional imperatives of deregulated global markets. Deference to the constantly invoked imperatives of international competitiveness sets limits to

what can be funded through public budgets, and thus to the state's scope for action. The enraged citizens (the '*Wutbürger*', as they are called in Germany) are reacting to the resigned response of a demoralised political class in the face of the increasing demands on the organisation of their social livelihoods. Since the social democratic parties are the ones from whom we can still most reasonably expect a political response, their dwindling support is emblematic of the whole misery of a political class that lets itself be cowed by the factual increase in social complexity. It tries to pass off its small-scale opportunism geared to maintaining power as pragmatism, while limiting itself to satisfying group interests in incremental steps and abandoning any *perspective for shaping the future* that transcends the growing competition between individual interests of an increasingly differentiated society. At present, the parties that propagate respectively the global combat against climate change and the regressive invocation of national identity as the overriding political goal are the two that are gaining in popularity.²

This description needs to be extended to include the ambivalent experience of powerlessness that also underlies right-wing populism. For the effects of right-wing populism, which is calling throughout the European Union for a circling of the national wagons, are at the same time an outlet for the fear of confronting head on what, in my opinion, is the greatest political challenge – namely, the *institutional construction and expansion* of democratically controlled *transnational regimes* as the only viable response to the paralysing post-democratic impasse of neoliberal 'governance beyond the nation-state'. Only such regimes – the 'world state', by contrast, is a bogeyman conjured up by their opponents as a deterrent – could implement what had been agreed in treaties on a worldwide scale. Addressing climate change, because it is physically measurable and is therefore sufficiently objectifiable, is presumably the only one of the urgent major contemporary problems in need of global solutions which could still be resolved using the instrument of an international treaty alone. But this instrument already fails when faced with such relatively simple tasks as combating tax evasion or regulating banks or Internet companies.

CC, AD, VK: Given the current developments within the European Union, how do you rate the chances of institutional transformation as a precondition for such transnational democratisation?

Habermas: With the relative decline of the USA in relation to China, the dissolution of the bipolar world order has accelerated and divisions within the West have deepened drastically, and not only since Trump. Quite apart from the flashpoint of the Middle East, these changes should have prompted the EU, and in particular the German and French governments – also, if necessary, against the resistance of the United Kingdom – to begin deepening institutionalised cooperation within core Europe a long time ago. At the

time, of course, the rapid enlargement to include Eastern European countries, which were happy to regain their national sovereignty, was not exactly conducive to such an initiative. Then the global economic crisis which broke out in 2008 fanned the flames of economic nationalism within the monetary union, which plays the role of a pacemaker for further steps towards integration, and served as a general damper on the – in any case weak – willingness to cooperate within the EU. The crisis reinforced the authoritarian regimes in Russia, Turkey and Eastern Europe. And it ultimately exposed the two oldest democracies in the world, as well as the relatively stable democratic countries that form the core of the EU, to the stress test of right-wing populism. These catchwords alone suggest the defeatist answer to your question.

I don't think that these trends can be reversed for the time being, despite the hype over climate policy which has generated pressure for global cooperation on climate change since the European elections. On the other hand, I think that the situation both in global politics and within the EU is unusually volatile. In the EU, the unused scope for political initiatives is in fact legally much more extensive than the stunted political elites care to admit. They are fixated on right-wing populism like a deer caught in the headlights and, like the German government since the beginning of the financial crisis, reject any further steps towards integration. In contrast, the results of a large-scale comparative survey conducted among the populations of 13 EU states tell a completely different story, for the *normatively underchallenged* European peoples signal a pronounced willingness to show solidarity across national borders.³ Therefore, it is not entirely futile at least to hope that the new European Commission under Ursula von der Leyen, who was always the only recognisable European in Merkel's cabinet, may still take some steps towards integration with the help of the EU Parliament and the tailwind of the French government under Macron.

CC, AD, VK: We would like to return to the theoretical level. You attach special importance to the systemic causes of the current shift to the right. However much this background must be taken into account, there can be no question of one-sided causalities here, as you yourself emphasise. The interesting issue seems to be why the unnerving and disempowering experiences you describe are being increasingly processed and answered in nationalistic terms. Surely this must also have something to do with the logic and history of the integration of the communication communities themselves. Shouldn't this also be reconstructed, first of all, as a (pathological) variant of communicatively generated social integration – from the internal perspective centred on the cultural aspect, as it were – instead of resorting to materialistic explanations that suppress the intrinsic logic of symbolic reproduction?

Habermas: I agree with you completely. The future of the European Union will ultimately be decided at precisely this level of a

transformation of social integration – specifically, in the form of a fusion of the different political cultures. For here we must keep a long-term trend in mind: the more culturally heterogeneous the population of a political community becomes, the more the burden of social integration shifts, already within the nation-state, from conditions of life that have evolved naturally to the role of the citizen. And this in turn is increasingly rooted in a political culture that is becoming more abstract and an, if you will, emotionally weak but rationally anchored constitutional patriotism. What *ultimately* unites the citizens across all cultural and social distances is reciprocal recognition as national citizens and political co-legislators. The fact that the opponents of European unification are playing the nationalistic card can be explained by the magnitude of what is being demanded of the populations of the member states, initially in the core European countries: they should be prepared to open up their national identities and ‘supplement’ with a shared European identity. This alone can give rise to a shared political culture in which the constitutionally regulated practices must be anchored. Among other things, it must provide a foothold for a European party system; for without transnational alliances between the political parties, the various groups in the EU Parliament will not become strong enough to generalise social interests across national borders.

However, the outlines of a Europe-wide political culture have long been apparent already in the *overlap* in general value orientations between the national ways of life, which, while different, are products of the *same occidental path of development*. This development began in the Roman Empire with the fusion of the Biblical and the Latin appropriations of Greek traditions and ultimately led, via profound cultural, social and political conflicts, via migrations, confessional wars, class struggles, world wars fought on nationalistic grounds – and, indeed, also the Holocaust – to a recognisable aspiration to a certain European form of civilised coexistence in the second half of the 20th century.

But to come to your theoretical question about the *logic* of social integration. Societies stabilise on two levels as a general rule: on the one hand, through processes of *social integration*, which occur in the context of intersubjectively shared forms of life through communicative action and the evaluative and normative orientations of linguistically socialised subjects; and, on the other hand, through systemic adaptations to the contingencies of the surrounding world – a form of *systemic integration* which, functionally speaking, occurs as it were on the back of social interactions. The phenomena to which you refer can already be recognised in Hegel’s abstract description of crises of social integration. In *The Philosophy of Right*, he described the social cohesion of a modern political community with a sharp clinical eye for the changing constellations of the universal and the particular. But because language is the

medium of social integration, he uses these concepts only from the perspective of the communicatively acting subjects themselves.

The subjects who say 'I' and 'you' encounter one another as 'unique individuals'. When they say 'we', they understand themselves at the same time as members of the same social form of life. Although they participate in this as something 'universal', as a concrete form of life, it is in turn something 'particular' compared to other forms of life; for this 'concrete universal' also provides the context in which the norms that are binding for its members are embedded. At the same time, the members understand each norm which is binding on all addressees alike as an 'abstract universal', because, as a universal norm, it disregards the particularity (but not the freedom) of its addressees (who say 'yes' or 'no').

Hegel therefore distinguishes between the *uniqueness* of the individual persons, the *particular* character of their respective historical forms of life as the *concrete universal* of the 'ethical' whole, and the *abstract universality* of the moral and legal regulations of social interaction. If we take these concepts as our starting point, social integration can succeed only insofar as a balanced relationship becomes established between the individual, the particular and the universal which enables modern societies to develop into an 'ethical totality'. For the systemic context of modern societies, however, the decisive factor is a capitalist economic system; Hegel explains not only the progressive functional differentiation of capitalistic civil society, but also its simultaneous tendency to split up into social classes, in terms of the internal dynamics of the capitalist economy.

Therefore, Hegel marks the beginning of the *philosophical discourse of modernity*. Already prior to Marx, this revolves around how, within the framework of a capitalist society that is becoming more complex at an accelerating pace, a precarious balance can be struck between the solidarity of the familiar but increasingly porous 'ethical' traditional worlds, on the one hand, and the functional imperatives of the economic dynamics, on the other, through just normative conditions. The capitalist dynamic in combination with growing social inequality gives rise to individual alienation from customary conditions of life; but from Hegel's perspective, this alienation can be converted into individualising gains in freedom through the reconciling and justice-promoting organisational power of the state. Hegel believed that the monarchical state would restore the social bond between the increasingly isolated and egoistically encapsulated individuals at progressively higher levels of functional differentiation.

I am far from following Hegel in celebrating a substantial state power, a notion which haunted German constitutional legal theory up to Carl Schmitt and Ernst Forsthoff. But the constellation of basic concepts of the universal, the individual and the particular, interpreted in terms of the philosophy of language, also remains valid when democratic decision-making becomes the guarantor for overcoming the crises of social

integration in the constitutional state. I am not concerned with Hegel as such. But, with suitable adjustments, we can still learn from him that the dynamics of capitalist modernisation are placing societal cohesion under strain through accelerated technological change and growing complexity accompanied by an increase in social inequality – and yet, *in the long run*, these dynamics do not admit of regressive solutions. The capitalist economy takes the lead in the evolution of social modernisation, because it creates functional connections and interdependencies on the systemic level that overshoot socially integrated conditions of life, and as a result generate a backlog of problems in need of political regulation.

Therefore, *social-cognitive* and *normative learning processes* are required, for otherwise power and military force take the place of political cooperation. In the course of modernity, populations have become accustomed to the progressive *social* and *political inclusion* of *underprivileged* classes and strata, *discriminated* groups, cultural minorities and immigrants already within their democratically constituted nation-states. In many cases, this involved not only *one-sided* inclusion, i.e. the recognition of others as members, but also *reciprocal* inclusion of others who want to remain ‘other’. This calls for a willingness on both sides to recognise and treat each other as equal citizens within a lifeworld horizon *that still needs to be culturally and politically extended*. The painful thing about these learning processes is precisely this *abstracting extension* of the form of life which is henceforth regarded as shared and in which the abstract norms of mutual equal treatment have to take root.

Of course, social classes, status groups and subcultures react differently to such a challenge – and they tend to react more defensively the greater their subjective assessment of the perceived and feared social insecurity. However, the defensive reactions are ‘particularistic’ only in the sense that they thematise the threatened, or already lost and retrospectively idealised, forms of life; the forms of life capable of restoring the disrupted social integration *on a new level of differentiation and individualisation* are no less ‘particular’. This political form of life in need of expansion – which, in our case, is the already well-established political culture of the citizens with the mauve-coloured EU passports – is just as particular as the national cultures of the member states (which for their part are regionally diverse and – as in the case of Great Britain, Belgium, Spain and Italy – are still in danger of splitting apart under the current stress).

The Limits of Civil Society Discourse

CC, AD, VK: Since the rise of right-wing populism, public debates have been raging over whether and how to respond to ‘right-wing voices’. From the perspective of discourse ethics, one seems to quickly end up in a conflict between freedom of opinion and the insidious spread of

discriminatory speech, which can assume particularly tragic forms in everyday contexts. The principles of discourse ethics presuppose a highly developed communicative sensibility; but this is based on social and cultural resources which are unequally distributed in society. The responses of many citizens are driven by personal experiences; they act out values emotionally and speak in ambivalent and contradictory ways – often with discriminatory and hurtful effects. But excluding entire cultural milieus from public discourse because of their ‘crude’ modes of expression is not a democratically acceptable solution either. How should we deal with this tension?

Habermas: Let me begin by making two brief observations. Discourse ethics is a moral theory, and as such does not provide instructions for action. Its task is to ground a moral principle, that is, to explicate the point of view from which conflicts over justice can *in principle* be decided rationally. But while the political issues we want to speak about have a moral core, they are far from being exclusively legal and justice issues, but also include political-ethical questions. The latter do not refer to general interests but to shared value orientations and offer participants guidance concerning questions of the type, ‘What is good for us, all things considered?’ The topics dealt with in political discussions are primarily conflicts of interests that cannot be solved by searching for a general interest or shared values, and therefore call for fair compromises. I don’t mean to suggest that the politicians and citizens concerned actually make analytical distinctions between such issues in practice; but in the course of the discussions they learn what kinds of problems they are arguing about and what kinds of arguments have ‘traction’ in each case. If such discussions are to contribute to the democratic legitimacy of ultimately binding political decisions, then from the perspective of political science they must *meet different requirements* depending on where they take place within a democratically constituted polity – in courts or parliaments, in government cabinets or within political parties, in public, etc.

This brings me to the other preliminary observation. Your question refers to political disputes between parties and citizens in a political public sphere in which mass media control the flows of information and circuits of communication. This political mass communication contributes to the citizens’ democratic opinion and will formation, and hence to legitimising legally regulated political rule, insofar as it generates *competing public opinions* on relevant problems that are sufficiently clearly defined. However, this by no means implies, as critics have repeatedly argued, that I advocate ‘the seminar’ as a model for a consensus-oriented and well-behaved public discussion. On the contrary, informal communication among the public at large can also withstand robust demonstrations and heated forms of conflict, because the contribution of the media public is limited to mobilising the relevant issues,

information and arguments for public disputes. After all, the citizens are supposed to make their own more or less rational decisions in the voting booth in the light of *competing opinions*. Legally binding decisions are made elsewhere. Admittedly, this is only a model; but it is one whose reality content is tested, for example, when the infrastructure of a politically functioning public sphere has disintegrated to such an extent that the flows of information required for a democratic election are interrupted and figures like Trump can win and maintain majorities.

Against this conceptual background, my answer to your specific question about how to deal with right-wing populism in the public arena will come as no surprise: I have absolutely no sympathy with the notion that *we should kowtow to the Wutbürger*. Citizens are adults and should be treated as such. In Germany, it has taken far too long for Nazi marches, anti-Semitic attacks and even the murder of a politician to serve as a wake-up call for a public indoctrinated with anti-communism and Islamophobia, and prompt the authorities to shift the focus of preventive and punitive measures from left-wing to right-wing extremists. Until recently, it was impossible for centrist politicians in Germany to risk taking a clear stance against the right-wing mob without simultaneously pointing out – in a kind of apologetic reflex – the symmetry between right-wing and left-wing extremism. The public responses to anniversaries of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 have also reminded us of the *homegrown reasons* for the resurgence of right-wing extremism. The relatively unbiased discussion on public television of the dubious and symptomatic role of the *Treuhand*⁴ was an encouraging example. However, it only flared up briefly and died down again quickly. I believe that informed and sustained debates along these lines should have been conducted years ago on the mistakes made by both sides in *how* the reunification was managed.

You don't need a degree in sociology to identify the *three most serious political mistakes* made by the West German side. Firstly, the robust character of the 'takeover' of administrative power in all domains of life in the German Democratic Republic by West German functional elites deprived the East German population and their remaining elites of any opportunity to make *their own* mistakes and to *learn* from them. Conversely, this made it all the easier to ascribe the negative developments completely to the West German side. The political counterpart of this robust 'annexation' [*Anschluss*] by the social functional systems of the old Federal Republic of Germany was the process of 'accession' of the new federal states under Article 23 of the Basic Law. The latter was actually drafted to enable the accession of Saarland to the FRG⁵ and implicitly assumes a kind of 'historically evolved' national belonging. In fact, this mode of unification deprived the citizens in the East and the West of the opportunity to engage in a tradition-forming rectifying constitutional foundation through which they could have developed the

shared political consciousness of a *desired* fusion that would have exercised enduring effects.

Secondly, the undifferentiated way in which accounts were settled with the elites of the GDR – notwithstanding all the difficulties of diachronic justice – was out of all proportion to the old Federal Republic’s indulgent treatment of its Nazi elites, who got off scot-free. This added a normative element to the economic asymmetries in living conditions which keeps the bizarre discussions about the injustice of the GDR simmering to the present day. The treatment meted out to the remaining East German left-wing intelligentsia must be seen in the same context. Although its members were by no means all regime loyalists, they were mercilessly tarred with the same anti-communist brush as the functionaries who really were politically compromised. The round table⁶ was to all intents and purposes silently cleared away. As a result, the population of the ‘accession territories’ had only a few remaining intellectual voices of its own, so that the smouldering internal conflict between East German civil rights activists and the majority of their own population was not conducted openly either.

Thirdly, the initial national exuberance led to a mutual embrace of the ‘brothers and sisters’, which spared the broad population of the GDR the effort of politically processing the SED regime, something which, as it now turns out, was probably necessary. The Biedenkopf system⁷ did not function quite so well as it had seemed. Even under the far more difficult conditions of the social inequality that was emerging at the time, the population would have had to engage in internal discussions to catch up with what, in the old Federal Republic, had required four decades of conflict-ridden public debates under incomparably more favourable economic conditions. What needed to happen was a public reckoning with the enduring authoritarian mentalities carried over from the Nazi past that, in the meantime, had been concealed and adapted to changed circumstances, and an actual practice of exercising democratic convictions that went beyond mere opportunistic adaptation. But what was imported from the West with red socks campaigns⁸ was at most the repressive anti-communism familiar from the Adenauer period.

Despite these three points of criticism, however, the lachrymose flight of disproportionately large portions of the East German population into the welcoming embrace of a radicalised *Alternative für Deutschland*⁹ does not strike me exactly as a self-confident response. In saying this, I am not forgetting that the extreme right owes its organisational capability to the cadres from the West who began infiltrating the East in the 1990s.

CC, AD, VK: You defend the rather optimistic view that controversial positions should be allowed as stimulating moments of a vital public sphere and political debate, but that certain opinions should also be

opposed and combatted with implacable arguments. But what if discriminatory voices undermine the freedom of expression ‘of all those affected’? Precisely because this is also the declared criterion of liberal democratic societies for both moral and political-ethical discourses, the limits of what can be said are being negotiated with renewed vehemence since the rise of right-wing populism. Meanwhile, the legal regulation of these demarcations between what is and is not legitimate to say is becoming more important and is at the same time highly controversial. This is shown, for example, by a recent ruling of the Berlin District Court, which deemed the insults against Renate Künast on the Internet to be permissible and acceptable expressions of opinion. What is your view of these public conflicts over the limits of what can be said?

Habermas: One should not forget that the Federal Constitutional Court in Karlsruhe first had to enforce the high value of the basic right to freedom of opinion in opposition to the German legal tradition. On the other hand, the libertarian impulses (which, by the way, have also found expression in the mobilisation of mass protests against a long-overdue European regulation of the large IT companies) have generated a certain amount of conceptual confusion. Although I am not familiar with the details of Frau Künast’s case, I understand that, in the meantime, the courts have corrected their ruling.¹⁰ My plea referred to the example of the harsh public controversies in the old Federal Republic, when the editorial offices of the leading political daily and weekly newspapers, despite all the polemics, allowed a more or less unimpeded flow of arguments. In contrast, what we are now witnessing is a de-formalisation of public communication and the impact of the reduced distance between published opinions and the semi-public opinions of the digital ‘soapbox’. The increase in anti-Semitism and the general degradation of public discussion are bad enough. But what I find even worse is the *organisational potential* offered by the formation of bubbles and niches in the ‘dark’ Internet. The islands of communication of the right-wing extremist networks, which have secretly infiltrated the police, the Bundeswehr – in particular the KSK (*Kommando Spezialkräfte*)¹¹ – and even the bureaucracies of the intelligence services, today conjure up the nightmare of a deep state. The digital marketplace does not need to be deregulated, since it conformed to the neoliberal model from the beginning. Thus, the lack of state regulation in this area is all the more painful.

On the Future of the ‘Unfinished Project of Modernity’

CC, AD, VK: In the 1990s, you coined the term the ‘unfinished project of modernity’ to express the notion that social life is becoming increasingly rationalised. Although still ‘unfinished’, this project seemed to be reliably

drawing its impetus from the rational potential of a democratic and critical public sphere and to be gradually overcoming social and cultural particularisms. In the meantime, it has become harder to remain optimistic about progress, since the universalistic resources of meaning of a secular, liberal-democratic civil society are exhausted, damaged, hollowed out or have become highly contentious.

Habermas: In 1980, I delivered an acceptance speech for the Adorno Prize entitled 'Modernity: An Unfinished Project'. This was mainly a contribution to the controversy with the two schools of thought that were fashionable at the time, the politically influential neoconservatives and the philosophically more interesting poststructuralists. The neoconservatives were 'reluctant modernists' who embraced capitalist progress but wanted to cushion its mobilising shocks with 'supporting' traditions; the poststructuralists rejected the idea of the philosophy of history, but simultaneously employed its tropes, to proclaim a new epoch after the end of 'modernity', after Enlightenment and humanism, by appeal to Nietzsche, Schmitt and Heidegger. One of my main points of contention with the poststructuralists concerned how to understand the 'universalism' of rational claims to validity. My amicable relations with Foucault and Derrida change nothing about this substantive disagreement.

We use the term 'universalistic' to describe general norms from which equal rights for all those involved and affected can be derived. These norms are self-referential in an interesting sense. One-sided or hypocritical applications of such norms to concrete historical contexts cannot be convincingly criticised without presupposing the validity of the very norms in question – i.e. without using them performatively – when making the, let us assume, justified criticism. Let me explain this controversial point with reference to an authority to which poststructuralist thinkers on the left such as Chantal Mouffe like to appeal. Carl Schmitt used concrete examples to ridicule hypocritical appeals to human rights by showing that this rhetoric was merely intended to disguise the speaker's own particular interest in the mantle of a general interest; but in making this criticism he had to tacitly adopt the standard that only interests which are in fact generalisable can be regarded as just, a standard derived from the very moral universalism which he rejected out of hand and sought to denounce with such examples. The political existentialist Schmitt could not admit this to himself because he was convinced *a priori* that particular relations of power always have the final say over good reasons.

Since then, postcolonial studies have also used countless debunking examples of the hypocrisy of colonial powers to demonstrate how human rights can be abused. But it would be overhasty to conclude that the normative validity of human rights itself is limited to their occidental origin *per se*. Otherwise it would be difficult to explain, for example,

the progress marked by the development of classical international law into a universalistically justified law of the international community. In short, the universalistic conception of morality and law cannot be refuted by such historical examples, but only by philosophical arguments – and I have yet to see such arguments.

However, you mainly use the formula of the unfinished project of modernity to contrast its supposed optimism concerning progress with the current shift in sentiment in the political public arenas. You describe this trend as a hollowing out of universalistic resources of meaning. I assume that what you have in mind is the dwindling persuasive power in civil societies of those political and cultural convictions and values on which democratic processes ultimately rely. There are indeed a number of indicators pointing in this direction. These symptoms of *political regression* in Western democracies are disturbing. However, I can't see any alternative to our constitutional principles for which one could provide a convincing normative justification, or any stable form of 'illiberal democracy' that could be reconciled with the functional requirements of modern societies *in the long run*. Quite apart from the fact that there is no way to simply reverse the development of mentalities towards a post-materialistic value horizon, systems theory teaches us that – despite the current fascinating counterexample of the People's Republic of China – the steering capacities of authoritarian political communities are not *sufficient* for complex societies.

CC, AD, VK: One might be able to get to political grips with left-wing poststructuralists by accusing them of committing performative self-contradictions. But can the same thing be said of nationalist and right-wing tendencies? In what sense does their rejection of universalism still presuppose a universalistic validity claim? Doesn't their rise mark a return to a decidedly particularistic, self-enclosed form of normativity? What is to prevent mentalities developing towards such a new closure? Or can such a closure be ruled out in general on systemic grounds?

Habermas: The recent invasion of the Syrian territory of the Kurds by Turkish troops, and thus the relapse into a power politics that conforms to the model of classical international law, can serve as an example of the consequences of a, as you put it, particularistic, self-enclosed form of normativity. And let us suppose that in future everyone behaved that way. Although it is an empirical question whether, given current levels of economic globalisation – i.e. of systemic interdependence in almost all functional domains – such a pattern of ruthless national self-assertion would exact a high price in terms of prosperity and security under the always revocable rules of international interaction, it is not really an open question. Even on the conciliatory assumption that the normatively entrenched nation-states merely adopted a hedgehog posture with their

bristles directed outwards without engaging in aggressive sorties like Erdogan, we do not arrive at a more convincing scenario. Some of these ethnocentrically sealed-off nation-states could reckon with good chances of survival in the social Darwinist jungle of a continuing neoliberal world economic regime if they were run like global corporations on the world market – but only at the expense of other nation-states. Of course, anything is possible – but would such a regime be sustainable under the meanwhile irreversible conditions of social modernisation? Not without conflicts that would inevitably end in either war or oppression. And why shouldn't the civil societies of such states *learn* in good time from the threatened disadvantages, and even more so from the disasters of 20th-century European history which are plain for the whole world to see?

In the West, political regimes rest on the commitment to basic human rights for which there are good normative justifications. Judged by these standards, so-called illiberal democracies that rely on a nationalist ideology are regressive because they cannot provide good answers to the criticisms of their oppressed oppositional minorities. *Regressions are always possible* because we are historical existences buffeted by a sea of contingencies. The question is only what costs such regressions have for the citizens themselves. Shouldn't we instead set out our theoretical position so that we include in our description the price that we can expect such a regime to exact on those involved? If we limit ourselves to a theory of power embellished with some insights from cultural studies and merely describe the equally narrow-minded and costly nationalism without including the foreseeable consequences, then we fail to include essential – specifically, normative – aspects of social reality.

CC, AD, VK: In whatever form the 'unfinished project of modernity' is supposed to be revived and re-energised, its normative aspirations are in constant danger of being thwarted by the dynamics of capitalism. In the post-war decades, it looked as if the communicative power of democratic decision-making could coexist peacefully with the imperatives of capitalist valorisation. In an era of neoliberal globalisation, however, it is becoming apparent that the competitive dynamics of the world market, presumptive material constraints and the sheer overwhelming power of capital not only have destructive effects on efforts to extend civil society solidarity at the transnational level but are also threatening to undermine the environmental preconditions for social life. But is the capitalist system up for debate at all? Are there meaningful, non-regressive alternatives to it? At a more fundamental level, would you today still stand by your description of capitalism as a form of 'norm-free sociality'? Or wouldn't it be better to speak of the capitalist market as a sphere of ethical life which is in principle rich in normative presuppositions, or as a sphere of recognition that could also be criticised and transformed in terms of its inherent values and norms?

Habermas: The expression ‘norm-free sociality’ that you have pulled out of the drawer was a misleading formulation that I corrected decades ago. Of course, there are different institutional manifestations of capitalism; but the instructive studies of institutionalist research merely refine a systemic description of the global economic system. It was no accident that Luhmann used the example of the capitalist economy to develop his notion of systems steered by media as recursively closed to the environment, although he then proceeded to over-generalise this example. As the environmental crisis shows, on the other hand, the capitalist system depends on natural as well as lifeworld resources – I have spoken in this connection of the ‘colonisation of the lifeworld’. At the same time, this system is not sensitive to the exhaustibility of these resources because it can only communicate with its ‘environments’ in the language of supply and demand. Capitalism is able to exercise political blackmail so effectively precisely because it is deaf to these social, natural and cultural environments. Therefore, I would not speak of ‘inherent’ values and norms with reference to capitalism. I find the above-mentioned symptoms of a structural disintegration of the political public sphere and of the hollowing out of liberal political culture so disturbing because I cannot imagine how the destructive effects of capitalism on the welfare state and the environment could be tamed without state intervention steered by a halfway functioning democracy.

CC, AD, VK: We also understand your rediscovery of religion as providing a repertoire of possible ideas of human dignity and equal moral worth against this disturbing background. In order to utilise it for the project of modernity, however, you maintain the primacy of a secular reason to which you attribute a higher universalistic potential. Therefore, you demand that both secular and religious citizens should translate religious ideas into a secular vocabulary.

Habermas: I was interested in the ‘translation’ of semantic potentials in two different contexts. In *The History of Philosophy* which I have recently completed, I trace the discourse on faith and knowledge, whose origins reach back to Roman antiquity, in an attempt to demonstrate that the most important practical basic concepts that shape our secular self-understanding – such as reasonable freedom, morality and justice, as well as the notions of free will and the unique individuality of responsibly acting persons – emerged from the *philosophical* appropriation of the Jewish and Christian heritage. The universalism of rational claims to validity is such a legacy, even though particular communities and cultures formed around the religions of the book of the Axial Age. On the other hand, since we cannot know whether that osmotic process of translation is complete, I am also interested in an old theme of political theory which John Rawls revived – namely, the role of religious citizens in the

political public sphere of constitutional states. I just read a newspaper article about the approval of public health insurance coverage for pre-natal blood tests for trisomies, which can be used to determine risks of diseases (not just of Down's syndrome). Such an administrative decision has a far-reaching prejudicial effect on the behaviour of the population and should not be taken without broad and informed public discussions, without extensive parliamentary consultation and a legal basis. My only question is: Should such a discussion which addresses deeper issues cut itself off from the outset from the contents of religious voices – by which I mean from the propositional content, not from the justifications, of the contributions of religious citizens? After all, as long as it is democratically constituted, the secular state is sustained by the voices and the decision-making of a civil society that is still far from being completely secularised, even in Europe.

CC, AD, VK: But the imperative to translate religious ideas into a secular vocabulary entails a twofold danger depending on one's perspective: Isn't the 'semantic potential' – or propositional content – of religion for the 'unfinished project' always also contingent on non-negotiable, particular and sometimes also authoritarian semantic references (for instance, the notion of a divine order), so that the practices of translation into secular terms are essentially an assault on the foundation of that potential and ultimately lead to the disappearance of the religious itself? Or the transfer is successful – but at the price of an increase in the influence exercised by these particular and authoritarian semantic references of religion, which are less accessible to criticism. Their dissolution is precisely what you welcomed in the theory of communicative action as part of the theory of modernisation.

Habermas: From a sociological perspective, the major, and for the time being enduring, influence of religious teachings rests on the fact that they convince the faithful of a *sacral power of redemptive justice*, whether this is conceived in personal or cosmic terms. Participation in communal worship confirms this faith by keeping alive the contact with archaic sources of solidarity. On our occidental path of development, secular thinking has preserved from this devotion to an inspiring power of redemptive justice the universalistic conception of justice and the expectation and imposition of autonomous agency. Of course, such a 'translation' of motifs, experiences and sensitivities changes more than just the mode of taking-to-be-true. This does not leave the content untouched – the authoritarian patterns of thought are also shed. On the other hand, 'translation' does not mean a zero-sum game in which religion is condemned to lose what the secular side gains.

The Transformation of Theory and the Locus of Critique

CC, AD, VK: Looking back on your work to date, one can also discern shifts and turns within your perspective on social theory. Perhaps you were never really a convinced Marxist, yet analyses of the bourgeois public sphere as suffused with ideology and power played a prominent role in your early work. While at that time you still had a quite ambivalent conception of communicative action as equally a practice of symbolic domination and a locus of emancipation qua critique, your later theory focuses on the rational features of communicative action. This rationality of reaching understanding in communication, which linguistifies everything sacred by ‘dissolving’ it in discourse and thereby overcoming it, seemed to posit a continuous learning process which automatically leads to an increasingly democratic, egalitarian and universal communication community. In recent years, however, you have embraced a certain post-secular ‘countermovement’ insofar as you focus on the moral and emancipatory potential of religious meanings. What do you think in retrospect about the development of your own work?

Habermas: Actually I don’t think about it at all. I was only forced to do so when Eva Gilmer approached me on behalf of my publisher Suhrkamp with the proposal to publish a collection of philosophical essays from different periods of my career, which appeared in 2009. The idea at that time was that I would write an introduction to each of the five volumes of thematically grouped essays. This was the first time that I reflected on the context of my work. As you quite rightly suggest, the Gauss Lectures marked a kind of break in my work in the early 1970s, with the transition to the study of the foundations of the theory of communicative action in the philosophy of language. Of course, learning processes always involve corrections – but I think that since then I have been working out these basic ideas fairly consistently in different directions.

I have been interested in religious motifs since my dissertation. Since the mid-1980s, I have merely given greater prominence to the reservation that there could still be untapped semantic potentials of religious origin from which the irreligious daughters and sons of modernity might still have something to learn in their own way. What postmetaphysical thinking as I conceive it shares with reflexive religious beliefs that have nevertheless remained vital is the well-founded fear that socialised subjects are succumbing to a superficial, one-dimensional objectivistic understanding of themselves and their lifeworld – that is, the fear of the *loss of any transcending perspective*, of any *perspective that sees beyond* the totality of the objects we encounter in the world. In my view, now that metaphysics has lost its persuasive power, philosophical thought can no longer adopt

a transcendental point of view – nor should we preach submission to its kitschy avatars, such as the ‘fate of being’ (*Seinsgeschick*), the ‘coming event’ or the ‘completely other’. But we must resist the pull that objectifies everything and saps the spontaneous power of *transcendence from within*. No one can be autonomous on his or her own. Freedom is ‘rational’ insofar as it is geared to the inclusion of each and every person in an intersubjectively shared and completely decentred context of reciprocal relations based on noncoercive communication. Any society that wants to preserve a trace of humanity must demand that much transcendence of itself, which means that much orientation beyond oneself and what exists.

I read Marx already as a schoolboy, and my last book also contains a chapter on Marx. I have always been a Hegelian Marxist whose thought was shaped by Kant and subsequently by pragmatism. I was initially impressed by *History and Class Consciousness* and was later strongly influenced by the Weberian Marxism of early Critical Theory. I always regarded Soviet Marxism as pure metaphysics. The first time you made the transit to East Berlin at Friedrichstrasse was enough to strip you of any remaining illusions about the character of the Soviet regime. I was equally immune to all varieties of functionalist Marxism that sought to derive society as a whole from the imperatives of the valorisation of capital. As regards current political issues, although without ever becoming a member of the party, I have remained a left social democrat who, following the Godesberg Congress, supported the excluded Socialist German Student Union against the leadership of the party.¹²

CC, AD, VK: Let us take a brief sidelong glance at more recent approaches in critical social theory. For all its diversity, a characteristic feature of critical social theory is the attempt to develop the sting of critique in a reconstructive fashion out of the structures of social practice itself, in contrast to postulating a ‘mere ought’. You are renowned for locating the anchor of criticism in communicative action and its rational claims to validity which can be examined as regards their redeemability. The field of recent critical theory is diverse and difficult to classify. But a common denominator is perhaps the attempt to understand emancipatory practice in less cognitivist terms and thus to shed light on alternative sources of motivation, forms and dynamics of criticism. Whereas Axel Honneth emphasises the emotional significance and the importance for identity formation of culturally established expectations of recognition that cannot be properly accommodated by your argumentative discourse model, Rahel Jaeggi locates the dynamics of social transformation in learning processes triggered by crises which render dysfunctional practices liveable once again through practical transformations. Moreover, poststructuralist perspectives strongly influenced by Foucault – a prominent German proponent being Martin Saar – identify the site of criticism

in performative disruptions of social subjectification and in the genealogical development of counter-narratives which throw light on the power-generated, often violent genesis of existing social relations through the revelatory force of pointed and unmasking rhetoric. For all their differences, all three approaches accord central importance to a momentum of critique which cannot be translated directly into rational validity claims and whose effectiveness probably does not reside primarily at the level of argumentation. What is your assessment of this ‘post-cognitivist’ trend in recent critical theory? Do these approaches represent understandable and perhaps necessary paradigm shifts? Or are they once again in danger of losing sight of the normative foundation of criticism and its rational justifiability, as you already argued against Foucault?

Habermas: I can’t discuss the merits of these recent approaches to critical theory here. However, I would not be inclined to ascribe their merits to a ‘post-cognitivist’ turn, but instead to a broadening of our view of the contexts in which the rational potential of what Robert Brandom calls the practice of ‘giving and asking for reasons’ – which is almost always encapsulated in elliptical forms in everyday communication – is embedded. My response to critics who want to dispense with my cognitivism – that is, with the attempt to uncover traces of socially embodied reason in historical learning processes with the analytical instruments of formal pragmatics – takes the form of a simple argument: As a logical matter, no one can criticise unjust social relations or pathologies that take root inconspicuously in social life without recourse to criticisable claims – thus without implicitly appealing to standards in terms of which their fulfilment or non-fulfilment can be judged. The real difficulty resides in the assumption that the ‘sting of critique’, to echo your term, can be *found* in social reality itself. The provocation lies in the assumption that traces of reason can be discovered in the irrational contingencies of history at all. For, under this premise, the scientific observer must, it seems, abandon her objectifying attitude towards the subject area. Then she can no longer limit herself to describing what she perceives, but must reconstructively comprehend and critically judge what objectifications of unreason – and that implicitly means mistaken claims to reason but possible learning processes – she encounters *in the subject matter itself*. An instructive example of this procedure is the type of history of science which not only offers an objectivising description and explanation of the succession of scientific theories, but also reconstructs and evaluates them in the light of reasons (which after all are accessible to the judgement of the observed and the interpreting scientists alike) as corrections of errors.

Of course, this method cannot be transferred directly to the representation of social developments, for the simple reason that social interactions are not only concerned with the truth claims and learning

processes of a community of investigators. Rather, the focus is now on the *entire spectrum of empirical, theoretical and practical claims to validity* to which communicative action owes its socially integrative role because they are geared to intersubjective recognition. If there is a rational potential inherent in society itself, then it resides in everyday communicative practice, specifically in the idealising content of the presuppositions that actors who are oriented to reaching understanding must reciprocally make when, in the context of their lifeworld, they agree with, argue with, misunderstand (or deceive) each other about something in the objective world. The reasons are the rational, and hence objectivising, link between the participants and the interpreting observer. And in the light of a rational reconstruction of these theoretical and practical (i.e. moral and legal, ethical and aesthetic) reasons, it may then become clear what social practices mean for the participants themselves, on the one hand, and for us as critical observers, on the other. This *reconstructive procedure* constitutes the added value of a critical theory of society over the descriptions and explanations of sociology. But I am aware that I have not managed to convince the profession of this point with *The Theory of Communicative Action*.

CC, AD, VK: The controversy with your critics and new research findings presented in the foreword to the reedition of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* in 1990 led you to distance yourself from the 19th-century idealisation of the political public sphere, but also from 20th-century conceptions of the public sphere as completely suffused with power, depoliticised, and de-democratised by mass media, and to conceptualise 'publicness' in more differentiated, pluralistic terms instead. You end the foreword on an interesting note when you ask yourself: What conclusions would you draw for democratic theory if you were to re-examine *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* 30 years after its initial publication? Your answer is that your conclusions might be 'an occasion for a less pessimistic assessment and a less defiant, merely postulating outlook than at that time'. Almost another three decades have passed since then, during which the political public sphere has undergone profound changes. What conclusion would you draw today? Would you once again be more pessimistic?

Habermas: I would be more perplexed than pessimistic. Otherwise I would already have to know the nature of the structural transformation that the public sphere is currently undergoing, which is going to accelerate in the coming decades. Since I must leave these investigations to younger colleagues, all I can do is speculate. For these changes are being driven by digital communication, which represents a deep evolutionary caesura in this and other respects. The following rough sketch may help to explain what I mean. The emergence of a propositionally

differentiated language at the beginnings of humankind must have involved the grammaticalisation of the initial use of individual signs with identical meanings. With this shift, our ancestral species, from which *Homo sapiens* evolved, was able to switch over to the mode of communicative socialisation. This shift also explains the problem of maintaining and renewing an inherently fragile form of social integration which Durkheim investigated with reference to the ritual generation of social solidarity in (modern) tribal societies. After the communicative socialisation of the already highly developed intelligence and drive structure inherited from the hominids, these conspecifics were no longer able to reproduce their lives in a self-centred manner, but only through intentionally controlled cooperation. Since then, the members of social groups have had to strike a balance between the imperatives of individual and collective self-preservation.

The anthropological *significance of language* for the *constitution* of this form of life also explains the relevance of the changes in linguistic modes of communication, that is of the *media revolutions* that have taken place in the course of human history. The digital medium, which has only become widespread since the last decades of the 20th century, marks the *third* revolutionisation, not of the linguistic mode as such, but of the mode of transmission, and thus of the consolidation, social range, tempo and density of communicative understanding. The first revolution was the *introduction of writing* in the first state-organised societies of the ancient advanced civilisations at the turn of the third millennium BCE, the second the *introduction of the printing press* at the beginning of social modernity. Book printing turned all users into *potential readers*, even if it took another three or four centuries before in principle everyone could read. Now the so-called new media have turned all users into *potential authors* – and just as the users of the printing press first had to learn how to read, we also have to learn how to use the new medium. This time the learning process will be far more rapid, but who knows how long it will take.

When you now ask me about the relevance of the new media for the structural transformation of the public sphere, two things occur to me: the role that the public sphere as we know it played in the emergence of democracy, and at the same time the increasing importance of the democratic will formation of *readers* for the political and social integration of our pluralised and individualised societies. What I find striking is the structural problem which has irritated and perplexed me since the introduction of digital communication, that is at the latest since the early 1990s. I simply don't know what a functional equivalent for the communication structure of large-scale political public spheres, which emerged since the 18th century but is now in the process of disintegration, might look like in the digital world. The Internet was *rightly* hailed by its pioneers as liberating precisely in virtue of its anarchic infrastructure. But at

the same time, the moment of commonality which is constitutive for democratic opinion and will formation *also* calls for an answer to the following specific question: How can a public sphere with communication circuits that embrace the population in an *inclusive* way be maintained in the virtual world of the decentralised Internet – i.e. without the professional authority of a limited number of publishing houses and organs with trained editors and journalists who function as both editors and selectors?

After all, it was no accident that political public spheres, also as I described them, arose in the historical context of parliamentarism and the formation of a party system. This communication structure was an essential functional prerequisite for every democracy, because it was able to direct the attention of a large population to relatively few issues of relevance for political decision-making and to awaken and keep alive a general interest in such issues. But the importance of these vertical communication flows, which, in the meantime, are based on the distribution and broadcasting of press, radio and television programmes, is steadily diminishing compared to horizontal communication via the new – in particular, the social – media. The infrastructure of the public sphere has been crumbling for a long time in countries like the United States. The first indications of erosion became apparent following the widespread privatisation of television and especially radio, leading to an *adaptation of the channels to the market*.

Today there is the aggravating factor that the new media are no longer subject to the centripetal pull of the classical public sphere. The centrifugal public sphere of the Web generated by the new media is inherently fragmented, but it is not able to contribute anything *of its own* to immunising the islands of communication that are drifting apart against cognitive dissonance. This is why, as scientific studies of cases such as Obama's health insurance programme have shown, the real world debates within political parties on issues requiring decisions are hardly able to command the attention of the affected democratic voters in the virtual world anymore, so that citizens can no longer be adequately informed about their own political interests.

The classical mass media were able to bundle the attention of a large national audience and focus it on a few relevant topics; the digital network promotes a variety of small niches in which accelerated, but narcissistically self-enclosed, discourses are conducted on different topics. Nobody questions the undeniable advantages of digital technology. But when it comes to the structural transformation of the political public sphere, one aspect interests me: as soon as the centrifugal forces of this 'bubble'-forming communication structure exceed the pull of the inclusive public sphere, competing public opinions which are representative of the population as a whole will not be able to form. The digital public spheres would then develop *at the expense of* a shared and

discursively *filtered* political process of opinion and will formation. As far as I can judge today, the direction that the structural transformation of the public sphere – and, in particular, of the political public sphere – will take depends primarily on solving this problem.

Translated by Ciaran Cronin

Notes

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1. Translator's Note: The author and publisher Florian Illies (b. 1971) scored a popular success in 2000 with his book *Generation Golf: Eine Inspektion* (Berlin: Argon), in which he offered a self-ironical analysis of the attitudes and lifestyle of his generation of Germans, which was loosely organised around advertising slogans for VW's highly successful compact car, the Golf, the first generation of which appeared in 1974.
2. Translator's Note: That is, the Greens and the Alternative for Germany (see note 9 below).
3. See, for example, Jürgen Gerhards et al., *European Solidarity in Times of Crisis* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019).
4. Translator's Note: The *Treuhand* was a controversial privatisation agency established by the German government following the reunification in 1990 to liquidate East German economic assets, largely without public consultation.
5. Translator's Note: On 1 January 1957, the Saar Protectorate formally became part of the Federal Republic of Germany in accordance with the Treaty of Luxembourg, which had been signed by West Germany and France in October 1956. In a plebiscite held in October 1955, the population of the then French-governed protectorate had rejected a proposal to accord Saarland the status of an independent European territory.
6. Translator's Note: This is an allusion to the Central Round Table, a series of meetings of East German civil society groups held in East Berlin in late 1989 and early 1990 as part of a consultation process with the East German government on political reforms which were supposed to lead to free elections.
7. Translator's Note: In October 1990, the conservative West German politician Kurt Biedenkopf was elected Minister President of the new eastern German federal state of Saxony with an absolute majority for the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) party, a position he held until his resignation in 2002 in the wake of mounting corruption scandals. In his book on *Das System Biedenkopf* (2002), the journalist Michael Bartsch argued that Biedenkopf's personalised and authoritarian style of leadership had set the development of democracy in Saxony back a decade.
8. Translator's Note: This is an allusion to a successful propagandistic election advertising campaign conducted by the CDU under Helmut Kohl during the 1990s. It was designed to depict the successor party of the East German Communist Party, the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), which enjoyed considerable electoral support in the new eastern German federal states, as an unreliable potential coalition partner for the rival political parties of the CDU in regional or national governments.

9. Translator's Note: The political party 'Alternative for Germany' was formed in the wake of the 2008 banking and financial crisis with a neoliberal economic platform, but it rapidly embraced a more radical right-wing agenda. It has had considerable electoral success, especially but not exclusively in the eastern German federal states, with an anti-immigrant and at times openly racist and historically revisionist platform.
10. Translator's Note: In 2009, Renate Künast, a prominent German politician of The Greens and a former federal minister, brought a case against Facebook to compel it to reveal the identities of the authors of anonymous insulting posts directed against her. Although the court initially deemed all 22 statements to which Künast had objected to be protected speech, upon appeal it acknowledged that six of them were punishable insults.
11. Translator's Note: I.e. the Special Forces Command, an elite anti-terrorism unit of the German Bundeswehr.
12. Translator's Note: At a conference held in Bad Godesberg in 1959, the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) officially adopted a programme which signalled a fundamental change in orientation from a socialist workers' party to one which sought broad popular support (i.e. a *Volkspartei*). In 1961, the Socialist German Student Union, which had been founded after the war as the student branch of the SPD, was excluded by the leadership and became active in the extra-parliamentary opposition, defending more progressive positions on social issues than the official SPD and opposing the Vietnam War.

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