

A rare interview with Jürgen Habermas

By Stuart Jeffries

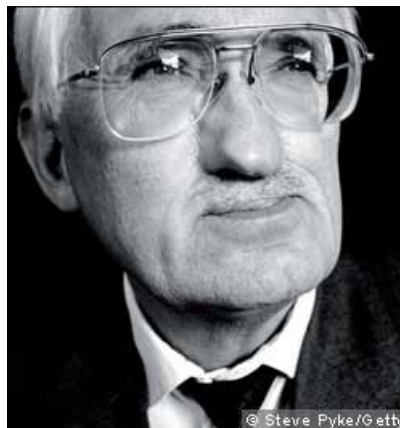
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Portions of Stuart Jeffries' interview with Jürgen Habermas can be found below this profile

In January, one of the world's leading intellectuals fell prey to an internet hoax. An anonymous prankster set up a fake Twitter feed purporting to be by Jürgen Habermas, professor emeritus of philosophy at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University of Frankfurt. "It irritated me because the sender's identity was a fake," Habermas told me recently. Like Apple co-founder Steve Jobs, Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe and former US secretary of state Condoleezza Rice before him, Habermas had been "twitterjacked".

Twitter closed down the fake Habermas feed, but not before the philosophy blogosphere had become very excited. Could it be that the 80-year-old German thinker was joining Sarah Brown and Stephen Fry among the Twitterati? Was he really trying to explain his ethico-political theories in 140 characters or fewer? Some were taken in, others dubious. One blogger wrote sceptically: "Firstly, the sentence 'Sprechen Sie Deutsch, bitte?' does not seem to be a sentence uttered by a native German speaker – he would have simply asked 'Sprechen Sie Deutsch?' or said 'Sprechen Sie bitte Deutsch?'"



But some of the tweets were authentic Habermas. For instance, at 5.38pm on January 29, "Jürgen Habermas" tweeted the following: "It's true that the internet has reactivated the grass-roots of an egalitarian public sphere of writers and readers." At 5.40pm: "It also counterbalances the deficits from the impersonal and asymmetrical character of broadcasting insofar as..." At 5.41pm: "...it reintroduces deliberative elements in communication. Besides that, it can undermine the censorship of authoritarian regimes..." At 5.44pm: "But the rise of millions of fragmented discussions across the world tend instead to lead to fragmentation of audiences into isolated publics."

I fed these tweets into Google and found that they were all taken from footnote three to the English translation of Habermas's 2006 paper "Political Communication in Media Society: Does Democracy Still Enjoy an Epistemic Dimension?" Why would Habermas cut and paste from his own paper? Of course, it turned out that he hadn't.

To find out who had, I posted appeals for information on philosophy blogs from Chicago to Leiden. Would the real creator of the fake Habermas please stand up? After a few weeks, I received an e-mail from someone called Raphael, a Brazilian studying for a PhD in politics in the US, confessing he created the feed. At first he used it to "inform people about [Habermas's] most recent publications", as a form of flattery to the man he had admired since he was an undergraduate. But one day, an Austrian professor sent him a message asking if he was the real Habermas. "I thought that it would be funny to pretend a little bit. Then I quoted the passage about the internet and the fragmentation of the public sphere. It was interesting to see people's reaction." Raphael doesn't want to disclose his surname or where he's studying, out of embarrassment.

But in tweeting Habermas's thoughts on the internet, he succeeded in titillating many philosophers and sociologists. They were intrigued by how one of Habermas's key concepts, the "public sphere", which he developed in his classic 1962 book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, might apply to the internet age.

This isn't a trivial matter: at a time when disgust for traditional democratic party politics runs deep and when the so-called democratic deficit makes European political integration look like a scheme concocted by self-serving elites, perhaps the internet offers hope for change. Think, after all, of how [social networking sites](#) were used during last year's [Iranian elections](#) to mobilise young voters.

But what is a public sphere? It's not as obvious as you might think. "By the 'public sphere' we mean first of all the realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed," writes (the real) Habermas. "Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an - unrestricted fashion – that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions – about matters of general interest."

For Habermas, in a Marx-inflected and certainly historically dialectical account of European civilisation, the public sphere briefly flourished at a specific historical moment. Just before the industrial revolution, literary men and women met in London's coffee houses, Paris's salons and - Germany's Tischgesellschaften ("table talks") for what Habermas calls "rational-critical discussion". "In its clash with the arcane and bureaucratic practices of the absolutist state," writes Habermas, "the emergent bourgeoisie gradually replaced a public sphere in which the ruler's power was merely represented before the people with a sphere in which state authority was publicly monitored through informed and critical discourse by the people."

But that 18th-century "public sphere" was killed in its cradle. Habermas found lots of different fingerprints on the murder weapon: the welfare state, mass media, the rise of public relations, the undermining of parliamentary politics by the rise of political parties. The fact that most of us know more about Paris Hilton than post-endogenous growth theory probably doesn't help either. Habermas's thinking has a nostalgic tenor: if only we were more like all those well-read, well-informed, critically minded coffee-house denizens, then democracy might have a chance in the 21st century.





Habermas addressing students in Frankfurt in 1968. He agonised over whether the student protests that swept Europe and the US at the time were 'left fascism' or, more hopefully, attempts to 'politicise the public sphere'

Isn't this, one might think, what the internet offers – a hopeful space, unconstrained by status and spin, for critical political discussion? Habermas, when I put these thoughts to him by e-mail during an extremely rare interview, is sceptical. (Even if he has a reputation as a public intellectual, Habermas hardly ever gives press interviews, preferring instead to comment very occasionally in German newspapers such as *Die Zeit*.)

"The internet generates a centrifugal force," he says. "It releases an anarchic wave of highly fragmented circuits of communication that - infrequently overlap. Of course, the spontaneous and egalitarian nature of unlimited communication can have subversive effects under authoritarian regimes. But the web itself does not produce any public spheres. Its structure is not suited to focusing the attention of a dispersed public of citizens who form opinions simultaneously on the same topics and contributions which have been scrutinised and filtered by experts."

Perhaps social networking websites might help create that solidarity? "Since I use the internet only for specific purposes and not very intensively, I have no experience of social networks like Facebook and cannot speak to the solidarising effect of electronic communication, if there is any.

"As regards its impact on the public sphere, accelerated communication opens up entirely new possibilities for organising activities and for large-scale political mobilisations of widely dispersed addressees. I still receive at least one e-mail per week from Obama's election team. These communications refer to issues and events within the political system, which they in turn influence. However, they remain contingent on their relation to the real decision-making processes that take place outside the virtual space of electronically networked monads."

Quite so. Electronically networked monads (or independent units) cannot on their own create a public sphere. But the dream of recreating something akin to that 18th-century public sphere, where citizens of a political community act as more than consumers, by influencing each other through debate, has been central to Habermas's thinking.

That he became so temperamentally idealistic was perhaps a surprise, given the circumstances of his early years. Jürgen Habermas should have been yet another philosophical Cassandra; instead, he is more like its Pollyanna. Born near Düsseldorf in 1929, he came of age in postwar Germany. As his Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry notes: "The Nuremberg Trials were a key formative moment that brought home to him the depth of Germany's moral and political failure under National Socialism." Philosophy, his chosen intellectual discipline, was hardly exempt. Indeed, one of his first acts as a public intellectual came when, in 1953, he challenged the great philosopher and one-time Nazi sympathiser Martin Heidegger to explain what Heidegger meant by an allusion in his *Introduction to Metaphysics* to the "inner truth and greatness" of National Socialism. Heidegger's silence confirmed Habermas's conviction that the German philosophical tradition had failed in its moment of reckoning.

Unlike Heidegger, Habermas never shirked the intellectual's responsibility of engaging with difficult moral and political issues in public – that, after all, was how the public sphere was supposed to work. Andrew Bowie, professor of philosophy and German at Royal Holloway, University of London, argues: "In many respects, he has been, and remains, the exemplary intellectual figure in the German public sphere since the 1970s, as social theorist, legal theorist, social critic, political actor and as a philosopher concerned to advocate a new direction for German thought after the Nazi period."



After the war he challenged Heidegger on his allusion to the 'inner truth and greatness' of the Nazis

Typical of that public engagement in the German press was his intervention in the *Historikerstreit*, or historians' quarrel, about how the Holocaust should be interpreted. Ernst Nolte, in 1986, wrote an article arguing that Germany "reasonably" turned to Nazism in the face of the Bolshevik threat. Habermas took issue with this view and with rightwing historians who contended that Nazism was a breach with German history by a small criminal clique. Habermas argued that these historians were trying to get a nation off the hook for its responsibility in Nazi atrocities.

His role in the *Historikerstreit* highlighted how he felt intellectuals ought to act to ensure that public debate was an issue of concern to every German citizen. It was perhaps the manifestation of another key concept in his intellectual armoury, namely "communicative rationality" (a term - developed in his forbidding 1981 masterpiece *The Theory of Communicative Action*), whereby participants in argument learn from others and from themselves and question suppositions typically taken for granted. In the aftermath of one of the most brutal centuries in recorded history and with the threat of worse to come, it sounded welcome – like an ongoing and global version of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Habermas's new and hopeful direction for German philosophy looks like a rebellious response to the philosophical despair of Theodor Adorno, his greatest teacher. Adorno, philosopher of "negative dialectics", a style of thinking that scorned method, held out against creating just the kind of rationally achieved consensus that has guided Habermas's work.

Adorno mused with the guilt of a Holocaust survivor on whether "one who escaped [Auschwitz] by accident, one who by rights should have been killed, may go on living". Habermas went beyond his teacher's guilt. Unlike Heidegger, he took responsibility; unlike Adorno, he declined to despair. Unlike his teacher, too, he has sought to develop system and method, and to work out how, as he describes it to me, "the citizens of a political community could still exercise collective influence over their social destiny through the democratic process".

But wasn't Adorno right to despair? True, we may have left behind the Third Reich, but we are in an era in which commitment to democracy appears to be at a low ebb. The notion of a well-functioning public sphere seems the barmy dream of a cock-eyed optimist. "There are good reasons to be alarmed," retorts Habermas. "Some people already think that authoritarian mass democracies will provide the functionally



Unlike Theodor Adorno, who mused with the guilt of a Holocaust survivor, Habermas did not despair

superior model under conditions of a globalised world economy... Today many people are intimidated by a growing social complexity which is ensnaring individuals in increasingly dense contexts of action and communication.

"My impression is that the whole world has become more conservative and shares the attitude towards life summed up by my colleague Nicholas Luhmann [the German sociologist] in the formula: 'Everything is changing and nothing works any more.'

Habermas casts the situation in even stronger terms: "In this mood, the notion that the citizens of a political community could still exercise collective influence over their social destiny through the democratic process is also being denounced by intellectuals as a misguided Enlightenment inheritance. Liberal confidence in the idea of an autonomous life is now confined to the individual freedom of choice of consumers who are living off the drip-feed of contingent opportunity structures."

Drip-fed consumers are unable to discuss effectively serious issues that affect their lives. Consider, Habermas suggests, the public debate about **Obama's healthcare reforms**. He seethes about the "progressive destruction of the infrastructure" that would allow a conversation about the substance of the proposals and their relative merits, rather than the bandying about of ideologies. "If we consider the information on the basis of which a majority of the American population demonises even modest healthcare reforms as an outgrowth of 'socialism' or 'communism', we cannot assume that the public sphere and political education are still functioning properly in western countries."

Even newspapers are under dire threat: "In our own countries, too, the national press, which until now has been the backbone of democratic discourse, is in severe danger. No one has yet come up with a business model that would ensure the survival of the important national newspapers on the internet."

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For Habermas, even the grimdest diagnosis does not give licence for despair. He remains committed to the dream of European unification – something that in 2010 looks utopian, given how the **Greek debt crisis** threatens to destroy the eurozone and thus the foundation of political integration. Why is European unification important to Habermas? In his latest book, *Europe: The Faltering Project*, he argues that the "monstrous mass crimes of the twentieth century" mean that nations can no longer be presumed to be innocents and thus immune to international law. Petty nationalist pasts should be left behind in a better, more rational organisation based on worldwide consensus. Bertrand Russell had a similar idea, even if he didn't think it through with Habermas's thoroughness.

Habermas's hope is that a more unified Europe could work closely with the US to build a more stable and equitable international order. Europe, he argues, should be bolstering Obama in his international goals, such as **disarmament** and securing Middle East peace, as well as encouraging Washington to lead efforts to regulate financial markets and stem **climate change**. "But as so often is the case, the Europeans lack the political will and the necessary strength. Measured against the expectations which it encounters at the global level, Europe is a major failure on the international stage." Significantly, the German title of the book is *Ach, Europa*.

Does the recent Greek debt crisis doom that European project? "Greece's debt crisis has had a welcome political side-effect," says Habermas, snatching optimism from the jaws of defeat. "At one of its weakest moments, the European Union has been plunged into a discussion concerning the central problem of its future development."

But if Habermas believes the EU is vulnerable, one of its biggest problems, he says, is his homeland's renewed narcissism. Angela Merkel's - Germany is as nationalistic as Thatcher's Britain. "The German elites apparently seem to be enjoying the comforts of self-satisfied national normalcy: 'We can be like the others once again!' ... The willingness of a totally defeated people to learn more quickly has disappeared. The narcissistic mentality of a complacent colossus in the middle of Europe is no longer even a guarantee that the unstable status quo in the EU will be preserved."

Worse yet, European unification remains an elite project. Like the internet, Europe has created no public sphere in which citizens can express their views freely and without regard to status. How can this be changed? Habermas argues that "a co-ordination of the economic policies in the eurozone would also lead to an integration of policies in other sectors. Here what has until now tended to be an administratively driven project could also put down roots in the minds and hearts of the national populations."

But that seems remote, especially as Europe's leaders revel in cross-border sniping. For instance, in March this year Merkel told the Bundestag that it could become necessary to throw debt-addled Greece out of the eurozone. Habermas attacks her, saying: "Such a lack of solidarity would certainly scupper the whole project ... There can be no better illustration of the new indifference of the new Federal Republic than her insensitivity to the disastrous impact of her words in the other member states."

Why does Habermas pin so much hope on an integrated Europe? Why not plump for a neo-liberal network of European states, each just one, selfish player in a capitalistic world? "Aside from the insensitivity to the external costs of the social upheavals that [neo-liberal policy] casually takes for granted," he replies, "what annoys me is the lack of a historical understanding of the shifts in the relationship between the market and - political power."

"Since the beginning of the modern period, expanding markets and communications networks had an explosive force, with simultaneously individualising and liberating consequences for individual citizens; but each such opening was followed by a reorganisation of the old relations of solidarity within an expanded institutional framework." This is typical Habermas: instead of wallowing in the hopelessness of a Marxist-inspired philosopher confronted with capitalism – endlessly rampant and utterly destructive of the kind of egalitarian politics he wants to see – he tells a story about the past that seems to suggest things aren't as hopeless as he fears. "Time and again, a sufficient equilibrium between the market and politics was achieved to ensure that the network of social relations between citizens of a political community was not damaged beyond repair. According to this rhythm, the current phase of financial market-driven globalisation should also be followed by a strengthening of the international community."

Habermas always finds reasons to be positive, to mutate from Cassandra into Pollyanna. And not just a European Pollyanna, but a global one. "Today we need institutions capable of acting on a global scale," he tells me. "We can see that the noble resolutions of the G20 summit in London on stock market oversight and regulation of the financial markets remain empty words without worldwide political co-ordination. The tentative measures undertaken by individual national governments in this area are condemned to failure for obvious reasons."

There is an Irish story about a driver who asks a passerby how to get to Dublin. "If I wished to go to Dublin," comes the reply, "I wouldn't start from here." But we have to start from here, Habermas realises, even if we are hobbled by egotistical nation states, a trivia-obsessed media, citizens incapable of forming an intelligent public sphere able to monitor political elites. Whether the ideals he yearns for – communicative - rationality, European integration, an equitable world order, citizens to share his high-mindedness rather than tweet his thoughts – will materialise is debatable. But even in his ninth decade, Habermas won't yield to despair.





Demonstrators clash with Athens riot police in March during a protest against government austerity measures

The cost and challenge of the eurozone debt crisis

Jürgen Habermas's responses in full

*In 2008, you published a book entitled *Ach, Europa* (published in the UK as *Europe: The Faltering Project*). How does Greece's debt crisis deepen the worries you expressed there for the future of the European project?*

Greece's debt crisis has had a welcome political side-effect. At one of its weakest moments, the European Union has been plunged into a discussion concerning the central problem of its future development. The crisis shifts the focus of public discussion – and not only in the business sections of our national papers – of an issue that many regard as the birth defect of an incomplete political union stuck in midstream. A common market with a partially shared currency has evolved within an economic zone of continental scale with a huge population; but European-level institutions with sufficient powers to ensure effective co-ordination of the economic policies of the member states have not been created. That the debt crisis and the unstable euro at least touch upon the pivotal question could reflect a trace of the cunning of reason: is a stability pact riddled with holes sufficient to counterbalance the unintended consequences of a planned asymmetry between economic and political unification? The [collapse of the Spanish real estate market](#) shows that the problem is more than a matter of cheating by the Greeks. The commissioner for monetary affairs, Olli Rehn, has good reasons to call for rights of consultation and intervention for the European Commission in national budget planning.

Germany's finance minister, Wolfgang Schäuble, has advocated the creation of a European Monetary Fund that could provide aid in future crises. Is that feasible or desirable? Can Europe effectively resist the depredations of speculative capitalism that have threatened to bankrupt Greece and destroy the eurozone?

The current threat throws light on a fundamental problem because it affects the deeper conflict within the EU between integrationists and, let me say, market Europeans. At its most recent sitting, the European Council established a "task force" under the leadership of its president Herman Van Rompuy, which is expected to develop proposals for avoiding future state bankruptcies. Schäuble's plan for a [European Monetary Fund](#) will play a role in this process, just as will the insistence of the European Commission on greater influence over the budget planning of the member states. It is important to recognise the ambiguity of both initiatives. In each case the declared intention is only to create instruments within the framework of the treaties to ensure more effective compliance with the stability pact. On the other hand, the enhanced inspection and control rights that would either be attached to loans or permanently exercised by the Commission can also be understood as a starter drug for developing an economic government, at least in the eurozone. The EU finance commissioner would like to inspect the draft budgets of the national governments even before they are submitted to the national parliaments. Since budgetary law is the core of parliamentary democracy, such a prior right of inspection of the Commission would be far from harmless and require a further shift of competences towards the European Parliament.

Angela Merkel told the Bundestag that existing EU rules were not strong enough to deal with the crisis triggered by Greece, and that in such circumstances it may be necessary to throw a country out of the eurozone. Is she right? And what would be the consequences for the European project?

Such a lack of solidarity would certainly scupper the whole project. Of course, Merkel's statement was intended at the time for domestic consumption in the run-up to the important [regional election in North Rhine-Westphalia](#). But there can be no better illustration of the new indifference of the new Federal Republic than her insensitivity to the disastrous impact of her words in the other member states. Merkel is a good example of the phenomenon that "gut politicians who were ready to take domestic political risks for Europe are a dying breed". This is a quotation from Jean-Claude Juncker, himself one of the last pro-European dinosaurs. Admittedly, Angela Merkel grew up in East Germany and the Rhinelander Jürgen Rüttgers [another CDU politician] would not speak like her. But German intransigence has deeper roots. Apart from Joschka Fischer, who ran out of steam too quickly, the generation of rulers in Germany since the chancellorship of Gerhard Schröder has pursued an inward-looking national policy. I don't want to overestimate the role of Germany in Europe. But the breach in mentalities which set in after Helmut Kohl has major significance for Europe.

Within the constellation following the second world war, the cautious pursuit of European unification was in the country's interests because it wanted to return to the fold of civilised nations in the wake of the Holocaust. It looked like the West Germans would have to come to terms with the partition of the country in any case. Mindful of the consequences of their former nationalistic excesses, they had no difficulty in relinquishing the recovery of sovereignty rights and, if necessary, making concessions that would in any case pay off for the Federal Republic. This perspective has changed since the reunification. The German elites seem to be enjoying the comforts of self-satisfied national normalcy: "We can be like the others once again!" I don't share Margaret Thatcher's one-time fear that this "normalisation" of public consciousness entails the return of old dangers. But a total defeat connected with an inconceivable moral corruption also created an opportunity for the following generation to learn more quickly. Looking at our present political elite, this window of opportunity seems to be closed. The narcissistic mentality of a self-satisfied colossus in the middle of Europe is no longer even a guarantee that the unstable status quo in the EU will be preserved.

Why is maintaining the eurozone important for the future of Europe as a political project?

Economic unification is the core of political unification. On the continent, we already experienced this during the 19th-century processes of national unification. In complete contrast to that time, however, European unification remains to this day an elite project. We have yet to experience a European election in which the outcome turned on anything other than national topics and tickets. Until the Maastricht treaty, the unification process was also, if not primarily, driven by economic interests. Since the interests of the "market Europeans" were satisfied at that time, the economic impulses driving a further deepening of the institutions have lost their dynamism. The eastward enlargement of the EU was an historic achievement. But the arduous repairs undertaken in the Lisbon treaty revealed the limits of an elitist approach to issues of political integration above the heads of the national populations. The financial crisis has reinforced national egoisms even further but, strangely enough, it has not shaken the underlying neo-liberal convictions of the key players. Today, for the first time, the European project has reached an impasse. Imagine the improbable scenario of a co-ordination of the economic policies of the eurozone countries which would also lead to an integration of policies in other sectors. Here what has until now tended to be an administratively driven project would also take root in the hearts

and minds of the national populations. The symbolic power of a common foreign policy would certainly promote a cross-border awareness of a shared political fate and bolster a further democratisation of the EU.

What is abhorrent to you about a neo-liberal network of European states, each just one selfish player in a capitalistic world?

I am no expert concerning the economic controversies over the doctrine of the Chicago School. But what annoys me – aside from the insensitivity of neo-liberal policy to the external costs of the social upheavals that it callously takes for granted – is the lack of a historical understanding of the shifts in the relationship between the market and political power. More than half a century ago, Karl Polanyi described capitalist development as an interplay between a functionally necessitated opening of society followed in each case by an integrative closure at a higher level. Since the beginning of the modern period, expanding markets and communications networks had an explosive force, with individualising and liberating impacts on individual citizens; but each such opening was followed by a reorganisation of the old relations of solidarity within an expanded institutional framework. Time and again, a sufficient equilibrium between the market and politics was achieved to ensure that the network of social relations between citizens of a political community was not damaged beyond repair. According to this rhythm, the current phase of financial-market-driven globalisation should also be followed by a strengthening not only of the European Union but of the international community. Today, we need institutions capable of acting on a global scale. We can see that the noble resolutions of the G20 summit in London on stock market oversight and regulation of the financial markets remain empty words without worldwide political co-ordination. The tentative measures undertaken by individual national governments in this area are condemned to failure for obvious reasons.

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