The New Conservatism

JÜRGEN HABERMAS

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Cultural Criticism and the
Historians' Debate

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Polity Press

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Introduction
Richard Wolin

There are not two Germanys, an evil and a good, but only one, which, through devil's cunning, transformed its best into evil. . . .
Thomas Mann, Germany and the Germans, *1945*

I consider the continued existence of National Socialism *within* democracy potentially more threatening than the continued existence of fascist tendencies *against* democracy.
Theodor Adorno, "What Does Coming to Terms with the Past Mean?"

Until now, Jürgen Habermas has been best known in the English-speaking world as the author of a number of seminal works on the metatheoretical foundations of the human sciences: *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1973), *Communication and the Evolution of Society* (1979), and, what will undoubtedly be viewed historically as his masterwork, the two-volume *Theory of Communicative Action* (1984, 1987).[1] In the Federal Republic of Germany, however, his reputation as a scholar has gone hand in hand with his role as a passionate commentator on a wide range of contemporary political themes—in speeches, interviews, and reviews that have appeared in leading German publications such as *Die Zeit* and *Merkur*.[2] The present volume comprises a variety of occasional political and cultural writings conceived by Habermas in the 1980s–an extremely significant decade in the political life of the Federal Republic—which saw thirteen years of Social Democratic rule (1969–1982) come to an end in favor of a coalition headed by the conservative Christian Democrats. Led by Chancellor Helmut Kohl, the Christian

Democrats were returned to office (along with their junior partners, the Free Democrats) in 1987. The political transformation of the 1980s thus represents in many ways a delayed confirmation of the *Tendenzwende* or ideological shift first visible in Germany in the mid-1970s. The multifarious ramifications of this era of neoconservative stabilization in the Federal Republic—in the political, cultural, and intellectual spheres of life—are explored by Habermas in the essays that make up this volume. And while these texts are integrally related to the peculiarities of the West German historical-political context, many of their insights concerning the decline of the welfare state, the function of scholarship under conditions of democracy, and neoconservatism in general are, *mutatis mutandis*, applicable to conditions of other late capitalist societies.

It has recently become fashionable to deny the existence of a causal relation between an author's theoretical position and his or her political convictions[3]—a standpoint consonant with the poststructuralist interest in exposing the limitations of theory in general, which is always suspected of promoting covert, "foundationalist" tendencies. In this respect, the work of Habermas is refreshingly traditional: the political essays continued in *The New Conservatism* represent a studied, practical complement of his theoretical labors of the past thirty years. Indeed, the relationship between "theory" and "practical life" has always been a paramount concern in Habermas's work. In *Knowledge and Human Interests*, for example, he attempted to demystify the misguided, "objectivistic" self-understanding of the human sciences by demonstrating that the so-called observer is an inextricable element of the network of social relations under study. In a similar vein, in his introduction to *Theory and Practice*,[4] Habermas set forth the program of a revitalized critical theory defined as a "theory of society with a practical intent." That he has remained extremely faithful to this early insistence on the practical implications of all social inquiry is attested to by the political texts in this volume. In essence, they may be read as studies in applied critical theory. For despite his telling criticisms of the shortcomings of the first generation of critical theorists,[5] Habermas has, throughout his work, remained faithful to one of the central insights of Max Hork-

heimer: that what distinguishes "critical" from "traditional" theory is an active interest in advancing a more rational and just organization of social life. Or, as he observes in *Theory and Practice*, "We can, if needs be, distinguish theories according to whether or not they are structurally related to possible emancipation."[6]

The central theme that unites the various essays of this volume is the German problem of the *Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit* or "coming to terms with the past." For years, the "German question" as perceived by politicians of Western Europe had been, "How can German aggressiveness be curbed?" But after 1945, this question took on an entirely different, more sinister meaning. It was rephrased to read, "How could the nation of Goethe, Kant, and Schiller become the perpetrator of 'crimes against humanity'?" Or simply, "How was Auschwitz possible?" One could justifiably say that the very "soul" of the nation is at stake in the answer to this question. For the development of a healthy, nonpathological national identity would seem contingent on the forthright acknowledgment of those aspects of the German tradition that facilitated the catastrophe of 1933–1945. And that is why recent efforts on the part of certain German historians—bolstered by an era of conservative stabilization—to circumvent the problem of "coming to terms with the past" are so disturbing. For what is new about this situation—and here I am referring to what has been called the "Historians' Debate"—is the attempt not simply to provide dishonest and evasive answers to the "German question," as stated above, but to declare *the very posing of the question itself null and void.*

Historically, the problem of coming to terms with the past has not been an easy one; and in the first decade and a half of the Federal Republic's existence—the "latency period" of the Adenauer years, which lasted from 1949 until 1963—the nation as a whole did very little of it. Instead, the wrong lesson seemed to have been learned from twelve years of Nazi rule: there was not only a rejection of jingoistic-genocidal politics (which had, after all, brought in its wake unprecedented misery for the Germans, too, an experience they were far from anxious to repeat) but a total rejection of politics, which, in the

post-Hitler era, seemed irrevocably contaminated. These were years of overwhelming political apathy. German political energies, which had once been so robust, were entirely sublimated into economic reconstruction. The result is well known: the creation of the *Wirtschaftswunder* or economic miracle, which catapulted the Federal Republic, within years of its foundation, to the position of one of the world's leading industrial powers. But democratic societies do not come into being overnight. And many features of the Adenauer regime—the incredible political docility of the general populace, the fact that so many officials from the Nazi years so readily found positions of power and influence in his government—suggested that the essential structure of the traditional *Obrigkeitsstaat* (the authoritarian state of the Bismarck and Wilhelmine periods) remained in place beneath the veneer of democratic respectability.

Such conclusions were generally confirmed by social-psychological studies of German character structure in the 1950s. In his incisive analysis of the results of one such study,[7] Adorno noted that many of the attitudes displayed revealed character traits that were highly "neurotic": "defensive gestures when one isn't attacked; massive affect in situations that do not fully warrant it; lack of affect in the face of the most serious matters; and often simply a repression of what was known or half-known." Instead of "coming to terms with the past," the latter was consistently repressed through a series of familiar, highly inventive rationalizations: only five, not six million Jews were killed; Dresden was as bad as Auschwitz; the politics of the Cold War era confirmed what Hitler had always said about communism anyway—which justified in retrospect the war he launched in the East (and from there it is a short step to the conclusion that Hitler was right about a number of other matters as well); the fate of the "East Germans" (i.e., those driven from the eastern territories at the war's end) was comparable to that of the Jews.

The incapacity of the German nation during these years for any honest expression of grief or remorse was brilliantly satirized in a scene from Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum*, where people require onion-cutting ceremonies to help them shed

tears. As one pair of critics astutely observed regarding the German national character of the postwar years: "there is a determining connection between the political and social immobilism and provincialism prevailing in West Germany and the stubbornly maintained rejection of memories, in particular the blocking of any sense of involvement in the events of the Nazi past that are now being so strenuously denied."[8]

Certainly, much has changed in Germany since this initial period, largely through the efforts of the generation of the 1960s, who, refusing to remain satisfied with the strategy of repression pursued by their parents, pressed forcefully for answers to the most troubling questions about the German past.[9] However, just at the point when one is tempted to believe that genuine progress has been made concerning the confrontation with the Nazi years, one runs across studies such as Dieter Bossman's *Was ich über Adolf Hitler gehört habe* (*What I have heard about Adolf Hitler*; Frankfurt, 1977), revealing astonishing ignorance on the part of young Germans concerning their recent past. For example, upon being asked what Hitler had done to the Jews, some of Bossman's young interviewees responded as follows: "Those who were against him, he called Nazis; he put the Nazis into gas chambers" (thirteen year-old); "I think he also killed Jews" (thirteen year-old); "He murdered some 50,000 Jews" (fifteen year-old); "Hitler was himself a Jew" (sixteen year-old).

The work of mourning is essential, not as "penance" but as an indispensable prelude to the formation of autonomous and mature identities for both nations and the individuals who comprise them. As Freud showed in his classic study, "Mourning and Melancholia," unless the labor of mourning has been successfully completed—that is, unless they have sincerely come to terms with the past—individuals exhibit a marked incapacity to live in the present. Instead, they betray a "melancholic" fixation on their "loss," which prevents them from getting on with the business of life. The neurotic symptom-formations that result (as described above by Adorno) can be readily transmitted to the character-structures of future generations, which only compounds the difficulty of confronting the historical trauma that wounded the collective ego. And

thus the crimes of the past tend to fade into oblivion, un-mourned and thus uncomprehended.

Instances of collective repression are, moreover, far from innocent. They prevent the deformations of national character and social structure that facilitated a pathological course of development from coming to light; instead, these abnormalities remain buried deep within the recesses of the collective psyche, from which they may emerge at some later date in historically altered form. In Germany, these "deformations" are often dis-cussed in terms of the persistence of authoritarian patterns of behavior that are a holdover from traditional, predemocratic forms of social organization.[10]

So long as this incapacity to confront the past exists, there usually follows an inability to live realistically in the present. Thus, historically, one of the salient features of Germany as a nation has been a tendency toward a militant exaggeration of the virtues of "nationalism" as a way of compensating for its relatively late and precarious attainment of nationhood under Bismarck in 1871. Or, as Alexander and Margarete Mitscher-lich have expressed it in their landmark study of postwar Ger-man character structure, *The Inability to Mourn*: "World-redeeming dreams of ancient greatness arise in peoples in whom the sense of having been left behind by history evokes feelings of impotence and rage."[11]

Such infantile fantasies of collective omnipotence have led, on not a few occasions, to a false estimation of national strength and some correspondingly catastrophic national defeats. The important point is that unless the historical reasons that have led to disaster have been explored—unless the labor of coming to terms with the past is undertaken in earnest—one risks reenacting the same historical cycle yet again as a type of collective "repetition compulsion": one proceeds to invent new, more sophisticated rationalizations and defenses to protect the idealized image of national greatness from the traumatic blows it has most recently endured—and so on, *ad infinitum.*

Thus, in the immediate postwar period, the theory arose that it was the German leaders alone who were to blame for the most heinous of Nazi crimes, thereby absolving rank-and-file Germans from responsibility. In truth, of course, the Ger-

man populace had given their full and enthusiastic support
to Hitler's war aims and policies; and without the alacritous
and dedicated cooperation of large segments of German soci-
ety—from industrialists and the judiciary to public officials and
railway personnel—the Third Reich and its atrocities would
hardly have been possible.[12]

It is within the context of this longstanding attempt to deny
the Nazi past—as well as its possible repercussions for postwar
German society—that the arguments of Habermas's adversar-
ies in the Historians' Debate must be understood.[13] Their ef-
forts to trivialize and thus finally have quit with past German
sins represent much more than a dubious act of historical
reinterpretation: they constitute an insidious rewriting of his-
tory by virtue of which "the murdered are to be cheated even
out of the one thing that our powerlessness can grant them:
remembrance."[14]

It is also important to recognize, however, that the "revision-
ist" standpoint did not materialize overnight and by chance.
Rather, it complemented a carefully orchestrated campaign on
the part of the ruling Christian Democratic coalition to remove
once and for all the stigma of the Nazi era—perceived as a
troublesome blot on the honor of the nation—and to return
Germany to the status of a "normal nation."

The centerpiece of this process of "normalization" was to
have been the visit of the American President to the German
military cemetery at Bitburg on May 8, 1985, the fortieth an-
niversary of the end of both the Second World War and the
Nazi dictatorship. Kohl, who had been shunned at the Allies'
commemoration of the landings at Normandy the previous
year, had obtained a small degree of consolation in a ceremony
with President Mitterand at Verdun, which thus became a sort
of "dress rehearsal" for Bitburg.

However, it was the Second, not the First World War that
weighed heavily on the German conscience; and Bitburg was
to have symbolized the end of Germany's pariah status and
return to the fold of political normalcy, a *coup de théâtre* that
was to receive international sanction by virtue of the presence
of the "leader of the Free World." As is well known, however,
the affair backfired spectacularly once it was discovered that

forty-seven SS members were also buried in the cemetery at Bitburg.[15] What was intended as a display of German "normalcy" was thereby transformed into a prime example of that country's inclination toward grievous lapses of historical memory.[16]

Unflustered by the Bitburg debacle, the Christian Democratic leadership continued to make "normalization" one of the focal points of the federal election campaign of 1987. Such was the intention of Christian Democratic parliamentary president Alfred Dregger, as he argued vehemently in April 1986 against distinguishing between the "victims" and the "perpetrators" of Nazism in a debate before the Bundestag over a new war memorial. In a similar vein, Franz-Josef Strauss, head of the Christian Socialist Union (the Bavarian allies of the Christian Democrats), repeatedly urged in his campaign addresses that Germany must "emerge from the ruins of the Third Reich and become a normal nation again."

It would not be unfair to say that the major claims of Habermas's antagonists in the Historians' Debate have been perceived by most Western historians as neonationalist provocations.[17] A good example of such "provocation" is the rationale for historical study provided by Michael Stürmer, one of the leading members of the revisionist contingent. Stürmer believes that it falls to historians to provide compensations for the potentially confusing array of value-choices that have arisen with the decline of religion and the rise of modern secularism.[18] According to Stürmer, what is needed is a "higher source of meaning, which, after [the decline of] religion, only the nation and patriotism were able to provide." For Stürmer, it is the task of the historian to assist in the renewal of national self-confidence by providing *positive* images of the past. In his eyes, the historical profession is motivated by the "establishment of inner worldly meaning."[19] For "in a land without history, whoever fills memory, coins the concepts, and interprets the past, wins the future."[20]

In a similar vein, Andreas Hillgruber, in his book, *Two Sorts of Destruction: The Smashing of the German Reich and the End of European Jewry*, suggests that, in scrutinizing Germany's collapse in the East toward the end of World War II, a historian

is faced with the choice of "identifying" with one of three parties: Hitler, the victorious Red Army, or the German army trying to defend the civil population from being overrun by Soviet troops.[21] And in his eyes, the choice is self-evident: the brave German soldiers, desperately fighting to save the fatherland from the atrocities of the Red Army, win hands down. It is as if Hillgruber were attempting to apply literally the "positive" approach to historical study recommended by his colleague Stürmer.

But as Habermas points out in "Apologetic Tendencies," Hillgruber in effect presents us with a series of false choices. Why is it the obligation of the responsible historian to "identify" with *any* of the historical protagonists? In fact, is it not his or her responsibility (in this case, some forty years after the events in question have occurred) to arrive at an independent and morally just verdict regarding the past, rather than to "play favorites"? Morever, Hillgruber can succeed in his choice of "protagonists" only by abstracting from some extremely gruesome facts: It was the same "heroic" German army in the East that established the Jewish ghettos from which concentration camp victims were chosen, that provided logistical support to the SS *Einsatzgruppen* charged with exterminating the Jews, that was responsible for the shooting of thousands of Jews in Serbia and Poland, and in whose hands some two million Soviet prisoners of war perished during the course of the war, either from famine or starvation.[22] It was this army that, as an integral part of Hitler's plans for European domination, served as the guarantor of all Nazi atrocities in Eastern Europe—from mass exterminations to the sadistic enslavement of the populations of the occupied territories. The sad irony of Hillgruber's thesis is that it was the brutal war of aggression in the East launched by the German army (a war that resulted in the death of some twenty million Soviet soldiers and civilians) that was responsible for unleashing the "revenge" of the Red Army on German soil.

But in addition to the important "material" questions that have arisen in the debate concerning the manner in which crucial episodes of the German past should be interpreted, equally important issues concerning the integrity and function of scholarship in a democratic society have emerged. Should

the primary role of historical study in a democracy be to facil-
itate "social integration" through the "establishment of inner-
worldly meaning," as Stürmer claims—an approach that results
in the creation of images of the past with which people can
identify in a positive way, such as Hillgruber's nostalgic portrait
of the German army in the East at the end of the war? Or
should scholarship assume a more skeptical and critical attitude
vis-à-vis the commonplaces of a national past for which Ausch-
witz has become the unavoidable metaphor, thereby assisting
concretely in the process of "coming to terms with the past"?
Compelling support for the historical importance of a "critical"
approach to scholarship has been provided by the historian
Detlev Peukert, who in a recent essay has argued that what was
historically new about the National Socialist practice of geno-
cide was the fact that it received a theoretical grounding
through a determinate conception of "positive" science,
namely, the idea of basing science on racial categories.[23] Ha-
bermas's specific fear is that by subordinating scientific criteria
to an identity-securing function, historical study risks falling
behind conventional standards of liberal scholarship, resulting
in the production of neonationalist "court histories." Indeed,
the very idea championed by Hillgruber that a historian must
in some way "identify" with one or several of the protagonists
of his or her drama represents a throwback to the "empathic"
historiography of German historicism—a school formed in the
German mandarin tradition—for which the writing of history
from a "national" point of view was a common phenomenon.[24]

The most sensational of the theses espoused by Habermas's
opponents in the debate were undoubtedly those set forth by
the Berlin historian and former Heidegger student Ernst
Nolte. In an article that appeared in English,[25] Nolte had re-
vived a choice bit of anti-Semitic propaganda from the early
days of the war: that an alleged declaration by Chaim Weiz-
mann (then president of the Jewish Agency) of September
1939, urging Jews to support the cause of democracy in the
impending world war, "justified" Hitler's treating them as pris-
oners of war, as well as subsequent deportations.

But it was Nolte's contention, in a June 6, 1986, article in
the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, that the atrocities perpe-

trated by Hitler at Auschwitz were merely an understandable
(if exaggerated) "response" to a "more original Asiatic deed"
(Stalin's Gulag), of which Hitler considered himself a potential
victim, that proved the most offensive and ominous of the
revisionist claims. Nolte's argument reads as follows:

A conspicuous shortcoming of the literature on National Socialism is
that it doesn't know, or doesn't want to admit, to what extent every-
thing that was later done by the Nazis, with the sole exception of the
technical procedure of gassing, had already been described in an
extensive literature dating from the early 1920s. . . . Could it be that
the Nazis, that Hitler carried out an "Asiatic" deed only because they
regarded themselves and those like them as potential or actual victims
of an "Asiatic" deed? Was not the Gulag Archipelago more original
than Auschwitz? Was not the "class murder" of the Bolsheviks the
logical and factual *prius* of the "race murder" of the National
Socialists?

And to sum up: the singularity of the Nazi crimes "does not
alter the fact that the so-called [*sic*] annihilation of the Jews
during the Third Reich was a reaction or a distorted copy and
not a first act or an original."[26] Nolte goes on to enumerate an
entire series of twentieth-century crimes, in comparison to
which the uniqueness of the Holocaust is reduced to "the tech-
nical procedure of gassing."

   As Habermas is quick to point out, there is a method behind
Nolte's madness. With the stroke of a pen, the singularity of
the Nazi atrocities is denied: they are reduced to the status of
a "copycat" crime; and at that, merely one among many. The
gist of Nolte's feeble and transparent efforts to rewrite the saga
of Auschwitz may be read as follows: Why continue to blame
the Germans? The communists did it first anyway. And after
all, during the war we were fighting on the right side—at least
in the East.

   In face of such claims, Habermas's response was guided by
an awareness that it is Germany's willingness to deal forth-
rightly with the dark side of its national past that will determine
the moral fiber of the nation in the future; and that only the
"analytical powers of remembrance" can in truth break the
nightmarish grip of the past over Germany's present:

The less internal communality a collective context of life has pre-
served, the more it has maintained itself externally, through the
usurpation and destruction of life that is alien to it, the greater is the
burden of reconciliation imposed on the griefwork and the critical
self-examination of subsequent generations. And does not this very
thesis forbid us to use leveling comparisons to play down the fact
that no one can take our place in the liability required of us? . . .
There is an obligation incumbent upon us in Germany . . . to keep
alive . . . the memory of the sufferings of those who were murdered
by German hands. It is especially these dead who have a claim to the
weak anamnestic power of a solidarity that later generations can
continue to practice only in the medium of a remembrance that is
repeatedly renewed, often desperate, yet continually on one's mind.
If we were to brush aside this Benjaminian legacy, our fellow Jewish
citizens and the sons, daughters, and grandchildren of all those who
were murdered would feel themselves unable to breathe in our coun-
try ("On the Public Use of History").

One of the key theoretical arguments Habermas mobilizes in
his refutation of the revisionist position is the distinction be-
tween conventional and postconventional identities.[27] Within
the framework of developmental psychology, the formation of
a postconventional identity indicates that an individual has
acquired a capacity to evaluate his or her moral convictions in
terms of general ethical maxims; that beliefs concerning right
and wrong are no longer decided by immediate and particu-
laristic points of reference (e.g., the standpoint of one's peer
group or nation), but instead by appeal to universal principles.
Habermas thus views the revisionists' desire for a return to a
conventional national identity as a potential regression behind
the precarious gains the Federal Republic has made as a dem-
ocratic nation since its inception forty years ago.

The "conventionalist" perspective comes through most force-
fully in the positions of Hillgruber and Stürmer, whose argu-
ments betray no small measure of nostalgia for a highly
mythologized image of the old German Reich: Germany as
master of *Mitteleuropa*, capable of mediating the interests of the
nations to the west and east.[28] Their contributions to the debate
are reminiscent of the traditional nineteenth-century argument
for a German *Sonderbewusstsein*, suggesting a "special" historical
course of development for Germany between east and west.
The same nostalgia is also implicit in Nolte's desire to minimize

the historical significance of Auschwitz, thus paving the way
for Germany's return to the status of a "normal nation." But
the bankruptcy of the *Sonderbewusstsein* argument was defini-
tively proved at Stalingrad and Auschwitz, that is, by the infamy
these two places have come to symbolize for the course of
German history. In defiance of this historical lesson, one of the
main strategies of Nolte and the others has been to downplay
the importance of the years 1933–1945 in relation to the tra-
jectory of German history as a whole. But as the opening
citation from Thomas Mann reminds us, the wistful desire to
differentiate in cut-and-dried fashion between "good" and
"bad" Germanys is based on a dichotomy that fails to hold up
under closer historical scrutiny.

It is for this reason that Habermas emphatically insists in
"Apologetic Tendencies" that the unqualified opening of the
Federal Republic to the political culture of the West "is the
great intellectual accomplishment of the postwar period," and
that the attempts to revive neonationalist dogmas—whose di-
sastrous outcome is a painful matter of historical record—must
be combatted by the "only patriotism that does not alienate us
from the West," namely, "a constitutional patriotism."[29] For
Habermas, the latter would be a "postconventional patriotism."
Indeed, the Western constitutional state may be viewed as a
postconventional form of political consciousness, insofar as the
inherent distinction between "law" and "right" (which corre-
sponds to a broader distinction between "reality" and "norm")
mandates that all concrete legislation be evaluated in light of
universal normative precepts embodied in the constitution
itself.

Habermas associates the revisionist offensive in the Histori-
ans' Debate with a neoconservative backlash against the student
and antinuclear movements that seemed to peak in the mid-
1980s. Of course, neoconservatism has been a phenomenon
common to virtually all Western democracies over the course
of the last ten years. But, as Habermas explains in "Neocon-
servative Cultural Criticism in the United States and West Ger-
many," the pecularities of the German version are especially
worthy of note, insofar as its roots are to be found in proto-
fascist ideologies that date from the prewar era.

In a 1984 interview, Habermas recounts his shock as a university student in the immediate postwar years upon learning of the continuities between the leading intellectuals of the pre- and postwar eras, many of whom had been enthusiastic supporters of National Socialism.[30] And although a new generation of thinkers has since come to prominence in the Federal Republic, antidemocratic intellectual habits have been slow to die. In most cases, although the transition to democracy has been grudgingly accepted (which could not have been said for the advocates of a German *Sonderweg* during the days of the Weimar Republic), the dissonances of modernity are perceived as placing such great burdens on the adaptational capacities of social actors that the preservation of "order" (as opposed to "freedom") has become the foremost value in contemporary political life. (One of the concrete and highly controversial political expressions of this mania for order was the *Berufsverbot* or "professional proscription" first decreed in 1972, which aimed at excluding political extremists, sympathizers, and other undesirables from the German civil service.[31]) Hence, those who are perceived as the intellectual and cultural standard bearers of modernity (e.g., artists and critical intellectuals) receive more than their fair share of blame for failures of social integration. But in this way, as Habermas shows, the neoconservatives confuse cause and effect: Responsibility for disturbances of social integration that have their source in functional imperatives of the economic and political-administrative spheres is mistakenly attributed to avant-garde artists and a "new class" of free thinkers.

It is considerations of precisely this nature that dominate the historiographical concerns of Stürmer and Hillgruber, in whose eyes history must take on the affirmative function of reinforcing national consensus. Or, as Habermas remarks in his essay on "Neoconservative Cultural Criticism," "The neoconservatives see their role as, on the one hand, in mobilizing pasts which can be accepted approvingly and, on the other, morally neutralizing other pasts that would provoke only criticism and rejection." The currency of *Ordnungsdenken*—a "philosophy of order"—in West Germany today (evident above all in a preoccupation with questions of "internal security") is at

times reminiscent of the typical historical justifications of a paternalistic *Obrigkeitsstaat* during the Bismarck and Wilhelmine periods. Its widespread currency inevitably provokes grave suspicions concerning the prominence of regressive tendencies in the political culture of the Federal Republic. Even Chancellor Helmut Schmidt was compelled to wonder aloud at the time of the "German autumn" (1977) whether the West Germans have "in their souls" a certain "hysteria for order" (*Ordnungshysterie*).[32] This is also a fact that might help to account for the continued prominence of the authoritarian political doctrines of Carl Schmitt in West Germany today.[33]

Since the early 1980s, Habermas has shown considerable interest in exploring the possible links between the politics of neoconservatism and the philosophical implications of what is known as postmodernism. In his view, it is far from coincidental that what were perhaps the two most significant intellectual trends of the 1980s emerged and flourished concomitantly.

His earliest thoughts on the relationship between the two date back to an influential essay of 1980 that appeared in English under the title "Modernity versus Postmodernity."[34] This article was itself a meditation on the conception of modernity advanced in the recently completed *Theory of Communicative Action* as it pertained to the contemporary political spectrum. In concluding the essay, Habermas differentiates between three types of conservatism: "old conservatism," which longs for a return to premodern forms of life; "new conservatism," which accepts the economic and technological features of modernity while attempting to minimize the potentially explosive elements of cultural modernism; and finally, "young conservatism,"[35] which he associates with postmodernism. His description is worth reproducing in full:

The *young conservatives* embrace the fundamental experience of aesthetic modernity—the disclosure of a decentered subjectivity, freed from all constraints of rational cognition and purposiveness, from all imperatives of labor and utility—and in this way break out of the modern world. They thereby ground an intransigent antimodernism through a modernist attitude. They transpose the spontaneous power of the imagination, the experience of self and affectivity,

into the remote and the archaic; and in manichean fashion, they
counterpose to instrumental reason a principle only accessible via
"evocation": be it the will to power or sovereignty, Being or the
Dionysian power of the poetic. In France this trend leads from
Georges Bataille to Foucault and Derrida. The spirit [*Geist*] of
Nietzsche that was reawakened in the 1970s of course hovers over
them all.

The theoretical bases of Habermas's critique are complex.
They presuppose the theory of modernity developed in *Theory
of Communicative Action* and foreshadow the lecture series that
was first published in 1985 as *The Philosophical Discourse of
Modernity*. Nevertheless, since Habermas's critique of neocon-
servatism stands in an integral relation to his interpretation of
postmodernism (see, for example, the essays "Modern and
Postmodern Architecture" and "Taking Aim at the Heart of
the Present"), a brief discussion of the conceptual foundations
of his position will help facilitate a better understanding of the
bases of his political judgments.

   Habermas's theory of modernity builds on Max Weber's con-
ception of the "differentiation of the spheres." For Weber,
modernity is chiefly characterized by the proliferation of "in-
dependent logics" in the value-spheres of science/technology,
morality/law, and art.[36] In premodern societies, the develop-
ment of autonomous cultural spheres was hindered by the
predominance of all-encompassing "cosmological world views"
(religion, myth), in terms of which all social claims to value and
meaning were forced to legitimate themselves. Only since the
Enlightenment have these individual value-spheres become
self-legitimating[37]; that is, for the first time in history, the realms
of science, morality, and art have been in a position to develop
their own inherent meanings.

   On the one hand, the gains of modernity have been indis-
putable. The institutionalization of professional science, univ-
ersalistic morality, and autonomous art have led to
innumerable cultural benefits; our capacities for technical ex-
pertise, political justice/ethical fairness, and aesthetic experi-
ence have no doubt been tremendously enhanced. It is this
point that separates Habermas most emphatically from the
postmodernists: He believes that to fall behind the threshold

of possibility represented by the cultural achievements of modernity can only result in "regression"—the species would literally have to "unlearn" valuable cultural skills that were only acquired very late and with great difficulty. And it is precisely such "regressive inclinations" among the postmodernists that he singles out for criticism. By generalizing an *aesthetic* critique of modernity (first elaborated in the late nineteenth century by the artistic avant-garde and Nietzsche), the postmodernists show themselves capable of understanding the modern age solely in terms of *one* of its aspects: *instrumental reason*, which then must be combatted at all costs through the (aesthetic) media of provocation, transgression, and play. In this way, they may be considered heirs to Nietzsche's "total critique" of modern values. For like Nietzsche, they reject the method of "immanent critique," insofar as they proceed from the assumption that the values of modernity are irreparably corrupt.[38]

What is lost above all in the heady whirl of postmodern *jouissance* is a capacity to appreciate the universalistic ethical qualities of modernity. It is facile to dismiss the latter as "instrumental," since their very basis is the (Kantian) notion of treating other persons as "ends in themselves," For this reason, Habermas can justifiably accuse the postmodernists of representing a disguised yet profound *antimodernism*: Because their criticisms of modernity as a "generalized instrumentalism" are so reductive, their "program" is governed by an irrepressible longing to be free of the requirements of modernity at all costs, with the "aesthetic moment" as the sole possible survivor.

On the other hand, Habermas himself has been extremely critical of the developmental trajectory of modernity as an empirical social formation. Hence, he believes that, historically speaking, its normative potentials have been inadequately realized. Above all, the various spheres have not developed in an equitable fashion. Instead, the cognitive-instrumental sphere has attained predominance at the expense of the other two spheres, which in turn find themselves marginalized. Instrumental reason, in alliance with the forces of the economy and state administration, increasingly penetrates the sphere of everyday human life—the "life world"—resulting in the creation of "social pathologies." The basis of the life world is inter-

subjectivity, not formal reason. In the life world, social action is governed by an orientation toward reaching an *understanding* (i.e., communicative reason), not by a functionalist orientation toward *success* (i.e., the ends-means rationality of instrumental reason). The latter therefore violates the inner logic of the former by attempting to subject it to alien, "functionalist" imperatives that derive from the administrative-economic sphere. The term Habermas has coined to describe this process is felicitous: *the colonization of the life world.*[39]

It is this point that separates Habermas most emphatically from the neoconservatives. They wish to preserve one-sidedly the economic, technical, and managerial achievements of modernity at the expense of its ethical and aesthetic components. From their standpoint, the bureaucratic colonization of the life world is a positive development. For by extending the functionalist logics of economic and administrative rationality to the life world, technocratic imperatives of system-maintenance are furthered. Thus, neoconservative political views incline toward a theory of government by formally trained elites. From this perspective, popular or democratic "inputs" with regard to governmental decision-making having their origin in the life world are perceived as an unnecessary strain on the imperatives of efficient political "management."

It is at this point that aspects of the neoconservative and young conservative (or postmodernist) position intersect, that is, as potential complements to one another under the conditions of late capitalism. If the latter's main contribution to the course of Western cultural development has been "specialists without spirit and sensualists without heart" (Weber)—that is, reified personality types and social relations that correspond to them—the global assault against modernity undertaken by the postmodernists under the banner of *différance* would appear to be a logical historical outgrowth of and response to this trend. That is, the aestheticist pseudoradicalism of postmodernism ("pseudoradical" because thoroughly depoliticized) may be viewed as a type of historical compensation for the overwhelming pressures of "theoretical and practical rationalism" (Weber again) that have been imposed by modernity as a social formation. Or as Adorno once observed: "Total reification ob-

jectively hatches its opposite."[40] In Heideggerian parlance, the postmodernist celebrations of *jouissance* serve as a kind of "releasement" from the hyperrationalized life world of late capitalism. Yet, as a type of "compensation," such celebrations ultimately have a system-stabilizing effect, insofar as they provide apparent outlets for frustration while leaving the technical-political infrastructure of the system itself essentially untouched.

The postmodernists have been correctly characterized by Habermas as "young conservatives" insofar as they have abandoned any hopes of conscious social change. Indeed, the word "emancipation" seems to have been stricken from their vocabulary. Instead, their aestheticist perspective is content to fall behind the achievements of modernity, a standpoint Habermas likens to "throwing out the baby with the bathwater":

The farewells sung to cultural modernity and the veneration of capitalist modernization can only confirm those who, with their blanket antimodernism, want to throw out the baby with the bath water. If modernity had nothing to offer but what appears in the commendations of neoconservative apologetics, one could well understand why the intellectual youth of today should not rather return to Nietzsche via Derrida and Heidegger and seek their salvation in the portentous voices of a cultically revived, an authentic Young Conservatism not yet distorted by compromise ("Neoconservative Cultural Criticism in the United States and West Germany").

Habermas's alternative to the extremes of neo- and young conservatism is the rebirth of autonomous political subcultures willing to struggle for the creation of new life forms, that stand in opposition to both the increasing pressures of bureaucratic colonization as well as the postmodernist desire to return to a premodern condition of cultural dedifferentiation. "Success" for these political subcultures would mean the creation of new forms of social solidarity capable of linking "social modernization to other, noncapitalist paths." It is an alternative that can come to fruition only if "the life world can develop out of itself institutions that restrict the systematic inner dynamic of economic and administrative systems of action":

At issue are the integrity and autonomy of life styles, perhaps the protection of traditionally established subcultures or changes in the grammar of traditional forms of life. . . . These forms permit the formation of autonomous public spheres, which also enter into communication with one another as soon as the potential for self-organization and the self-organized employment of communications media is made use of. Forms of self-organization strengthen the collective capacity for action beneath the threshold at which organizational goals become detached from the orientations and attitudes of members of the organization and dependent instead on the interest of autonomous organizations in maintaining themselves. . . . The autonomous public spheres would have to achieve a combination of power and intelligent self-restraint that could make the self-regulating mechanisms of the state and the economy sufficiently sensitive to the goal-oriented results of radical democratic will-formation.[41]

With these words from "The New Obscurity," Habermas articulates a vision of radical democratic practice which, coming amidst a chorus of *fin de siècle* pessimism, one cannot help but admire. As he has demonstrated in his contributions to the *Historians' Debate*, there is still much to be accomplished—contemporary naysayers to the contrary—for the ethico-political program of the Enlightenment, out of which that same radical democratic spirit first emerged. And as a new millennium approaches, inspiration can be found in his program of a "social theory with a practical intent," which is tempered by the genuinely egalitarian sentiment that in "discourses of Enlightenment, there can only be participants."

Notes

1. The aforementioned works all appeared with Beacon Press. Of course, Habermas's considerable influence on Anglo-American intellectual life has by no means been limited to these three books. *Legitimation Crisis* (also published by Beacon), has, since its U.S. publication in 1975, become widely regarded as a standard work on the various political/cultural "crisis-manifestations" in late capitalist societies. And *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA, MIT Press), a fascinating critique of post-structuralist thought that appeared late in 1987, has in a very short time achieved a remarkable degree of renown.

For a comprehensive bibliography of Habermas's publications through 1980, as well as of the relevant secondary literature, see Rene Gorzten, *Jürgen Habermas: Eine Bibliographie* (Frankfurt, 1981). For a bibliography of works pertaining to *Theory of Communicative Action*, see Gorzten, "Bibliographie zur *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*," in *Kommunikatives Handeln*, eds. A. Honneth and H. Joas (Frankfurt, 1986), pp. 406–416.

Introduction

2. It is perhaps of interest to note the differences between the American and German public spheres. For example, the German Historians' Debate was for the most part carried out in the daily or weekly press rather than in professional journals: most of the contributions by Nolte, Stürmer, Fest, and Hildebrand first appeared in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*; Habermas's main contributions appeared in the liberal news weekly, *Die Zeit*. The debate, consequently, was followed by a wide spectrum of the German public, whereas a parallel scenario (i.e., a major historical controversy concerning national identity being conducted in the daily press) would be difficult to imagine in the context of of the North American publicity. Several other of Habermas's contributions to the present volume ("Political Culture in Germany since 1968," "Taking Aim at the Heart of the Present") also originated as occasional pieces in various German dailies. It seems that in the Federal Republic there is more overlap between the academic sphere and the daily press.

3. Cf. Michel Foucault, "Politics and Ethics: An Interview," *The Foucault Reader*, ed. P. Rabinow (Berkeley, 1984), where Foucault observes: "There is a very tenuous 'analytic' link between a philosophical conception and the concrete political attitude of someone who is appealing to it; the 'best' theories do not constitute a very effective protection against disastrous political choices; certain great themes such as 'humanism' can be used to any end whatever . . ." p. 374. An argument similar to Foucault's has been advanced by Richard Rorty with reference to Heidegger's odious political allegiances in the 1930s (thereby suggesting that they have nothing to do with his prior philosophical outlook) in *The New Republic* (April 11, 1988).

4. (Boston, 1974). The introduction in question was originally written for the fourth German edition of *Theorie und Praxis* (Frankfurt, 1971).

5. Above all, see *Theory of Communicative Action* I, pp. 339–399; as well as "The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment," *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, (Cambridge, MA, 1987), pp. 106–130.

6. Habermas, *Theorie und Praxis*, p. 37.

7. "Was bedeutet: Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit"; reprinted in *Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt, 1977), pp. 555–572. An English translation of the essay has appeared in *Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspective*, ed. G. Hartman (Indianapolis, 1986), pp. 114–129. Many of Adorno's observations are based on an empirical study of German attitudes toward the Hitler years that was undertaken by the Institute for Social Research in the early 1950s, entitled *Gruppenexperiment. Ein Studienbericht*, ed. F. Pollock (Frankfurt, 1955). Adorno's own lengthy "qualitative analysis" of the study's findings has been republished as "Schuld und Abwehr," *Gesammelte Schriften* 9(2) (Frankfurt, 1975), pp. 121–324.

8. Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich, *The Inability to Mourn*, trans. B. Placzek (New York, 1975), p. xxv. According to the authors, another chief symptom of the German failure to work through its past is a more general "impoverishment of object relations, i.e., of those processes of communication that involve feeling and thought." Ibid., p. 8.

9. At the same time, as Saul Friedländer has pointed out, this generation, by attempting to extend their analysis of fascism to the contemporary West German political scene, ended up by overgeneralizing the concept and thus robbing it of much of its real meaning. Cf. Friedländer, "Some German Struggles with Memory," in *Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspective*, p. 29.

10. The standard account of those aspects of traditional German social structure that facilitated the mentality of popular obedience and passivity during the period of Nazi rule is Ralf Dahrendorf's *Society and Democracy in Germany* (New York, 1979).

11. *The Inability to Mourn*, p. 12

12. Or, as Holocaust historian Raul Hilberg has expressed this thought: "The bureaucrats who were involved in the extermination process were not, as far as their moral constitution is concerned, different from the rest of the population. The German wrongdoer was not a special kind of German; what we know about his mind-set pertains to Germany as a whole and not to him alone" (*Merkur* 413, July 1988, p. 541).

13. It would of course be unfair to argue that no attempts have been made to deal honestly with the German past. Chancellor Willy Brandt's moving gesture of contrition before the Auschwitz memorial in Warsaw in 1972 will forever remain a memorable and courageous act on the road to reconciliation with the victims of Nazism.
    Ironically, the one event that seems to have triggered the greatest amount of national soul-searching was the showing of the U.S. television miniseries "Holocaust" in West Germany in 1979. Serious doubts, however, have been raised over the extent to which a four-part Hollywood-style dramatization can serve as the vehicle of historical expiation that had been sought for in vain for the previous thirty years. See Siegfried Zielinski, "History as Entertainment and Provocation," *New German Critique* 19 (Winter, 1980) pp. 81–96. (This entire issue is devoted to various appraisals of the West German reception of "Holocaust.")

14. Adorno, "What Does Coming to Terms with the Past Mean?," p. 117.

15. According to official reports, when Bitburg had originally been selected as the site for President Reagan's visit in the winter of 1985, a snow cover prevented German officials from noticing the SS graves. Though most of the Bitburg debate has focused on the presence of the SS graves, Raul Hilberg has correctly pointed out that the German Wehrmacht or regular army was itself hardly an innocent bystander to the politics of genocide. Instead, they often provided logistical support to SS troops charged with exterminating the Jews. Its ranking offices (e.g., Field Marshall Keitel and General Jodl) were hanged as war criminals after the war. In truth, the German army was an integral part of Hitler's Reich and its crimes. See Hilberg, "Bitburg as a Symbol," in *Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspective*, pp. 21–22.

16. The American President only compounded the difficulties of the situation by making a series of embarrassing gaffes: he tried to justify his decision to visit the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp on the morning of his Bitburg trip with the explanation that the men buried in the two grave sites were both "victims"—a macabre equation, to say the least. Then he made the inexplicable claim that "the German people have very few alive that remember even the war, and certainly none that were adults and participating in any way." President Reagan himself was in his thirties during World War II.

17. For a representative sample of views, see Charles Maier, "Immoral Equivalence," *The New Republic* (December, 1986); Saul Friedländer, *Kitsch und Tod: Der Widerschein des Nazismus* (Munich, 1986), especially the "Nachwort," pp. 128ff; and Anson Rabinbach, "German Historians Debate the Nazi Past," *Dissent* (Spring, 1988), pp. 192–200.

18. It is far from coincidental that the historian Stürmer doubles as speechwriter and advisor to Chancellor Kohl.

19. Stürmer, *Dissonanzen des Fortschritts* (Munich, 1982), p. 12.