



Jürgen  
Habermas

The Postnational  
Constellation

*Political Essays*

*Translated, Edited and with an Introduction by*  
Max Pensky



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Jürgen Habermas

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Polity

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# Editor's Introduction

## I

“Globalization”: the term has become indispensable – and unavoidable – for a spectrum of current debates from political economy and democracy, law and human rights to cultural controversies over identity and difference. It seems to be a term destined to provoke only ambiguous reactions. On the one hand, “globalization” evokes the image of proliferating interconnections and interrelationship, of better communication between the most far-flung regions of the world, challenging old prejudices and pointing toward a future where the cultural, geographical, and political sources of social conflicts have become antiquated. On the other hand, it calls forth panicking images of global markets running out of control, of an unguided and uncontrollable acceleration of modernization processes, devastating the political infrastructures of nation-states and leaving them increasingly unable to manage their economies – and the social and ecological crises they generate. On the one hand, globalization hints at the utopian vision of once-hostile strangers coming into peaceable contact through globalized media of all kinds; on the other hand, it hints at the dystopian specter of forced cultural homogenization either by the decrees of a centralized administration or by market fiat – for developing countries, the eradication of the sources of any cultural identities uncondemned to the mandatory, market-driven adaptation to Western-style modes of life, to be replaced

only by the bland Americanization of a global consumer culture; for Europe, a bureaucratically imposed, standardized Euroculture offered as the regulatory compensation for obsolete national characters, which live on only in the pallid form of commodities for mass tourism. Finally, perhaps the most glaring and disturbing either/or: “globalization” as the last, mutedly triumphant stage in the halting and frequently derailed process of global political democratization that began with the revolutionary introduction of the principles of popular sovereignty at the end of the eighteenth century – globalization, in other words, as a staggering (in both senses) crossing of the finish line that also makes a bit more plausible the hope that a global democracy could be institutionalized with sufficient strength and sensitivity that global crises of war, injustice and inequity, and ecological devastation could become themes for a worldwide democratic process. Or: “globalization” as that market-driven homogenizing, dominating force that reveals precisely how thin the basis of legitimacy for democratic processes actually is within the current constellation of nation-states; globalization as the end of democratization – not as its culmination but as the defining feature of the historical epoch marking the end of the national-state model for the institution of democracy. Thus globalization pointing (maybe not all that dimly) toward a future where global political and social decisions rest on the only structures capable of accommodating their complexity: highly evolved administrative state mechanisms, and highly dynamic and flexible markets, both of which operate much more efficiently by regarding their populations as clients or customers, and largely dispense with the direct participation of citizens. Mustering these conflicting images, fears, and hopes is not so difficult. Finding a way to sort them out, to confront their ambiguity squarely, and to shed some explanatory light on them – to analyze them as challenges, rather than as overwhelming fate – is not so easy. But this is the task that Jürgen Habermas sets for himself in *The Postnational Constellation*.

Since the middle of the twentieth century, Jürgen Habermas has been among the most vocal and influential advocates for an unashamed universalism in political and moral questions. His

sprawling theoretical work, from his theory of rationality, through a theory of “discourse ethics” to a theory of law and democracy, is unified by the simple (and correspondingly ambitious) task of demonstrating that the range of universalistic intuitions in morality, politics, and law – the heritage of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment – is no mere projection of power or local preference. Instead, Habermas argues that universality is embedded in the most basic capacities that we possess as persons capable of speaking, hearing, giving and accepting reasons for our actions, and conducting our lives correspondingly. In the most fundamental and distinctive human capacity – the ability to speak to one another, to decide on the basis of reasons and arguments, to distinguish between understanding and deception – Habermas insists we find a universal, if modest, basis for the great political innovations of popular sovereignty, legally enforceable human rights, democratic procedures, and the inconspicuous but vital solidarity that binds humans together, and makes them accountable to one another, through the mutual recognition of the status of personhood. The central claim of Habermas’s theories is that the institutions based on the communicative use of human reason, from our moral intuitions to the institutions of the democratic constitutional state under the rule of law, are reasonable, and not merely the contingent consequences of historical circumstances.

Given Habermas’s theoretical commitment to this claim to universality, one might have expected his frequent political interventions to carry on, in concrete terms, his larger theoretical ambitions, and indeed any reader familiar with Habermas’s theoretical work will find in the essays collected in *The Postnational Constellation* a clear relation to the theoretical defense of universalism. But to Habermas’s credit – and no other fact speaks more forcefully to the current relevance and ongoing importance of Habermas’s work as a public intellectual – his theory is never simply imposed on his occasional writings; indeed, for a prodigious theory-writer, Habermas has never fallen into the trap of making the facts fit the theory. While intimately involved with his theoretical ambitions, Habermas’s political writings carry on a noticeably tense relation with them.

Political developments certainly can and often do disappoint universalist expectations, and in this sense a universalist position in politics and morality can at the very least provide a vocabulary to make clear why the costs of globalization – missed opportunities for popular political participation, for example, or exacerbated social inequities, or the loss of culture – can be registered as “costs” in a normative, and not merely in a value-neutral, sense. In their complexity and persistence, however, political and social crises also challenge the theoretical position itself, urging the theoretical clarification of “our” universalistic normative intuitions toward a heightened degree of self-criticism, openness, and flexibility.

The resulting dialectic between universalist theory and pointedly particular and up-to-date political writing is nowhere more clear than here, where Habermas confronts the ambiguous consequences of globalization in their full range. Rather than take the simple step of emphasizing the “good,” universalistic reading of globalization, the essays collected here derive much of their value from their unflinching analyses of the “bad”; including the real possibility that the bad might win, all our universalistic sympathies notwithstanding. That globalization *ought* to be the harbinger for a renewed impulse toward global democracy and human rights is uncontested. That market-driven globalization processes in themselves will provide such an impetus, however, is a highly questionable assertion which no amount of theoretical commitment by itself will decide. Following the arguments presented in *The Postnational Constellation* does not require any particular expertise in Habermas’s theories; in fact, taken together they provide a lucid and concise political introduction to why, now more than ever, a broadly ambitious but realistic and flexible theoretical explanation of the ambiguities of social modernization has become indispensable.

## II

This latest installment in a series of political essays dating back to the 1950s nevertheless marks a decisive break from Haber-

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mas's previous writings as a public intellectual, as the title already announces. For over forty years, Jürgen Habermas has been one of the most influential and astute observers of the political developments of the Federal Republic of Germany. In a strong sense, indeed, Habermas has been *the* intellectual figure of the Federal Republic, not just because of the broad influence of his theoretical work in the academic world, but through the depth of his engagement with Germany's ongoing task of developing a political culture of freedom and democracy from the ashes of the Second World War and history's unparalleled moral and political catastrophe. The political and social consequences of that catastrophe for Germany – a divided nation, and a decidedly mixed role as a political and ideological focal point of the Cold War – contain, in miniature, virtually all of the crisis tendencies of postwar Europe. For the unified Federal Republic of Germany, however, the political history of the postwar era continues to reverberate in contemporary debates over nationhood, the role of the state, and the bases of democratic legitimacy. Because pre-unification West Germany's postwar "Basic Law" was imposed by the Allied powers without any popular referendum, the Federal Republic of Germany found itself in the unparalleled situation of standing under a strikingly liberal political constitution without any corresponding basis in a liberal political culture. Much of the political-cultural history of that nation, then, consisted in the unique task of growing a political culture to match institutions already in place. This fact certainly explains Habermas's understandable concern with the "bases of legitimacy" for the democratic process. It also underlies his unwavering attention to the unstable relationship between the democratic process and "the nation," understood as a pre-political form of collective association based on the supposedly organic categories of language, shared history, or common culture. The rhetoric of nationalism – in itself the perfect contradictory to universalism, as it is based virtually entirely on acts of exclusion – was effective in justifying Germany's descent into fascism; for Habermas nothing is more painfully characteristic of the pitfalls of modernization – and the ambiguities and tensions of globalization – than the fact that global problems and challenges

frequently provoke renewed forms of nationalism as their response.

Habermas's role as an engaged public intellectual in the political public sphere of the Federal Republic of Germany has largely consisted in helping to cultivate a "postconventional," post-nationalist, post-particularist political culture, in which the abstract principles of mutual recognition, collective will-formation, and popular sovereignty expressed in the constitution and in the political infrastructure could acquire a broader basis in the attitudes and feelings of citizens. He has been an unflagging critic of any efforts to "renationalize" Germany's political life: he bitterly opposed neoconservative efforts to relativize and lessen the unique burden of moral reflection imposed on Germany by the Holocaust, efforts that culminated in the debacle at Bitburg. He was a harsh critic of the cynical appeals to national feeling that the Kohl administration used to grease the skids of a largely bureaucratically managed unification of Germany, and he fought against the nationalist-inspired sleight-of-hand used to tighten the Federal Republic's liberal immigration and asylum laws by constitutional means. He has continued to be the most forceful and eloquent spokesperson for a conception of "constitutional patriotism" – a sense of shared identity based on the abstract principles of democratic procedure contained in the Federal Republic's Basic Law, and against all efforts to "substantialize" Germany's political culture by any uncritical reappropriation of naturalized categories of nation, language, culture, shared ethnicity, and so on.

All of this, of course, is not without a certain irony: in his passionate defense of a post-traditional, post-nationalist conception of Germany, Habermas had remained, predominantly, a *German* intellectual, in the sense that his universalistic interventions remained intimately tied to the particular issues and problems of his own country. As a moral and political principle, Habermas recognizes, universalism can only be plausibly realized through the very particular history, traditions, and forms of life that continue to characterize national cultures, even as those national cultures begin to buckle under the pressure of social, economic, and political globalization processes.

And this is where the essays collected in this volume mark a decisive turning point for Habermas's role as a politically engaged public intellectual. Rather than mobilizing universalistic orientations and arguments to address specifically German issues and problems, Habermas reverses himself: now German history and specifically German experiences serve pedagogically to provide some instruction about problems that have, like it or not, become global. Globalization has also globalized the political public spheres of citizens, and has thus globalized the focus of public intellectuals operating within those public spheres as well. The end of the nation-state also obliges intellectuals to "universalize" themselves, their subjects, and their audiences, in an unprecedented way.

The dynamic of globalization, ambiguous as it may be, is for Habermas reasonably clear in one respect: it heralds the end of the global dominance of the nation-state as a model for political organization. "Postnational" here means that the globalization of markets and of economic processes generally, of modes of communication and commerce, of culture, and of risk, all increasingly deprive the classical nation-state of its formerly assured bases of sovereign power, which it depended on to fulfill its equally classic functions: to secure peace internally and defend its borders abroad, to set fair conditions for a domestic market economy and to exert what influence it can on domestic markets via macroeconomic policies, to raise taxes and allocate budgets to assure the maintenance of a minimum social standard and the redress of social inequities, to enforce individual rights and take measures to secure conditions for their effective realization. By undermining each and every one of these capacities, Habermas argues, globalization fundamentally challenges the relevance of the nation-state as a continued political model.

Hence the ambiguity of globalization. Market- and technology-driven processes undermine the stability of a form of political organization that itself is, from a normative point of view, incapable of being harmonized with basic universalistic principles: the nation-state is fading, and a good thing too. But at the same time, there is no guarantee that the nation-state will be replaced by anything better. Globalization processes

themselves offer few clues about how the basis of legitimacy for democratic processes can be broadened, in a postnational world, beyond the partial (and in a sense conceptually incoherent) particularist bases that nation-states have so far been able to generate. Taken as a whole, the central essays in *The Postnational Constellation* all respond to this ambiguous situation with an unambiguous message: if the democratic process is to secure a basis for legitimacy beyond the nation-state, then neither state structures nor market mechanisms, but popular processes of collective will-formation alone will have to provide it. Bureaucratic initiatives and market dynamics may succeed in palliating some of the harshest crises that arise from modernization processes. But only effective popular sovereignty – subsisting in transnational networks of communication, in the proliferation of interconnected public spheres, in cooperative non-governmental organizations, in popular political movements with a global outlook – will be able to generate a mode of popular legitimacy broad and strong enough to enable transnational, regional, or global political regimes to carry out binding political decisions and enforce binding social policies. Social solidarity, in other words, which like it or not can no longer coherently subsist within the particular perspective of nation-states, will have to take a further “abstractive step.” As opposed both to the administrative state and to global markets, solidarity will have to emerge as a truly cosmopolitan phenomenon; a global sense of shared responsibility and shared commitments to inclusion and participation will have to develop in the effective attitudes of citizens of the world, if democracy is to survive the demise of the nation-state.

Such a call for a “compulsory” cosmopolitan solidarity, beyond the affective ties of nation, language, place, and heritage, may itself sound hopelessly abstract, and Habermas harbors no naive hopes concerning the difficulty of shifting popular sentiments of inclusion, belonging, and shared interests to such a thin atmosphere. But the difficulty, he insists, is itself an empirical matter and not one of principle, and will thus have to be tested in the choppy political waters of the postnational constellation, rather than dismissed out of hand. Cosmopolitan solidarity is itself nothing other than the mode of sociality



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demanded by the abstract constitutional principles of equal freedom for all under equal rights, the principles that democratic constitutional nation-states themselves rest on.

### III

And here the lessons of German history can help illuminate the pitfalls and potentials of such a project. The first essay of this collection analyses intellectual aspects of the German *Vormärz* (literally, the period of republican foment in German history from 1815 to the failed republican revolution in March 1848) in which German intellectuals struggled to find a vocabulary for appropriating the “ideals of 1789” in the politically and culturally fragmented German context. By focussing on the “Assembly of the Germanists,” in 1846, Habermas shows how German intellectuals were simultaneously energized by the universalizing dynamic of the principles of popular sovereignty, and hobbled by the belief that the realization of such principles could only come about in a political environment defined by “the nation” as the expression of a *Volk*, a people with a pre-political, organic form of shared identity rooted in place, descent, and language. The conceptual incoherence of this belief, which Habermas teases out of the details of the protocols and proceedings of the convention itself, would have enormous consequences, both for the immediate future of German republicanism and for the subsequent train of catastrophes that mark modern German political history. The myth of the “organic” nation turns out, consistently, to be the product of a concerted effort at historiographical construction – and historical fantasy. In the end, such a belief in the supposed need for a scholarly *recovery* of “national identity” or “the spirit of a people,” which German historians, legal scholars, and philologists understood as their special responsibility, proves impossible to reconcile with the *construction* of a constitutional regime based on citizens who live under equal freedom and equal rights. The second essay here, “On the Public Use of History,” reprints Habermas’s controversial defense of Daniel Goldhagen’s

*Hitler's Willing Executioners*, a book whose startlingly simple thesis – Germans committed the Holocaust because they were anti-Semites through and through, in a way different from any other European society – sparked bitter debates in a newly united Germany still struggling with the use or abuse of its recent history. Habermas's essay shows the persistence, and the persistent attraction, of the belief that professional history has a special responsibility to intervene in public debates over collective identity, on behalf of a sense of national belonging based on approved history. The role of historians as uncritical caretakers of national heritage as a source of national health, like the notion of scholars as nation-builders in general, Habermas implies, is an especially poor one for any country wishing to engage in a critical collective dialogue over its collective past, and to move forward with any deserved confidence into its political future.

Taken together these two essays on “the national context” draw lessons for the challenge of globalization. The next three essays apply them to the contemporary world situation. “Learning from Catastrophe?” paints in broad strokes the trends and tendencies that have culminated in the current political constellation, and crystallizes in the call for a new mode of solidarity beyond the nation-state if the crisis tendencies of the twentieth century are to be made into resources for collective learning, rather than omens for the return of old catastrophes.

At the heart of this collection, the long essay on “The Post-national Constellation and the Future of Democracy” spells out Habermas's position in detail. I have already provided some introductory summary of the themes and arguments of this essay, which clearly stands as one of Habermas's most significant and sweeping analyses of the contemporary political scene.

The fifth essay, “Remarks on Legitimation through Human Rights,” provides some fine-tuning of one of the basic arguments of the collection, the current political challenge of shifting the basis of legitimacy for constitutional democracies onto the level of abstract principles. The sixth, “Conceptions of Modernity,” provides a sweeping overview of the development of conceptions of rationality and reason in modern philosophy

and sociology, demonstrating how the project of providing a theory of modernity through the means of a critique of reason became bogged down into conceptual dead ends, which Habermas traces to contemporary postmodern theory. By situating his own conception of a discourse model of human reason as a plausible way out of this dead end, the essay also illuminates the internal connections between Habermas's theory of rationality and his political diagnoses.

The final section of the volume collects some of Habermas's occasional pieces; his brief contributions to the ongoing debate on the ethics of human cloning, in particular, show how moral intuitions must constantly work to keep pace with technological change.

Chapter 5, "Remarks on Legitimation through Human Rights," was translated by William Rehg. The translation of chapter 3, "Learning from Catastrophe? A Look Back at the Short Twentieth Century," is based on an earlier translation by Hella Beister. The translation of chapter 6, "Conceptions of Modernity: A Look Back at Two Traditions," is based on an earlier English version by Professor Habermas. My thanks to Peter Gilgen at Cornell University for consultation, and Lynn Dunlop at Polity Press.

# Foreword

“Flow and boundary” – a suggestive image for a new constellation of border crossings. The Frankfurt “Assembly of the Germanists” of 1846 set out to construct national borders; today those same borders are increasingly fading away. The two introductory essays to this volume illuminate German nationhood from two mutually opposed perspectives. The Germanists of the mid-nineteenth century looked out upon the nation’s republican beginnings; today we look back somberly at its catastrophic end.<sup>1</sup>

The diagnostic retrospective on the short twentieth century is an attempt to explain the feeling of enlightened helplessness that seems to predominate in these times, and to direct our attention to a genuinely disturbing problem that we will all face in the coming century: can democracies based on the social-welfare state survive beyond national borders? The title essay of this volume explores the alternatives to the dominant neoliberal positions – and dispenses with any naive trust in the rhetoric of a “third way” beyond neoliberalism and social democracy.<sup>2</sup>

A unified European monetary policy marks the beginning of a reversal of old alliances: satisfied Market Europeans have now formed common cause with nationalistic Euroskeptics to freeze the status quo of an economically integrated but still politically fragmented Europe. But the price for this status quo is paid in the coin of growing social inequities. It is a price that is almost certainly too high, according to the standards of civility that we have already achieved. In the current context, the claim that

democratic legitimacy cannot be secured without social justice has itself become a conservative principle. However dubious the utopian fantasies of both the Left and the Right have become, it is clear that “revolutionaries” and “conservatives” have exchanged roles: a “revolutionary” attempt is underway to defamiliarize the population with the standards of egalitarian universalism, and to trace socially generated inequities back to the natural characteristics of “winners” and “losers.”

In the national context, of course, it is harder than ever for politics to keep pace with global competition. I see the only normatively satisfactory alternative as a socially and economically effective European Union, constituted along federalist lines – an alternative that points to a future cosmopolitan order sensitive both to difference and to social equality. Only a Europe in which the domestication of violence engages each and every form of society and culture would be immune from the postcolonial relapse into Eurocentrism. And an intercultural discourse on human rights provides the terms in which a truly decentered perspective must prove itself.

The final three chapters provide a rough sketch of the philosophical background for my analyses of the challenges of the postnational constellation in the volume’s central section. Finally, a concept of autonomy that lies at the heart of the self-understanding of modernity forms the basis for an argument against human cloning.

J.H.

Starnberg, June 1998

