Jürgen Habermas

Time of Transitions

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Jürgen Habermas

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Editors' Preface

Time of Transitions, which bears the subtitle "Short Political Writings IX" in the German, is the ninth in a series of volumes devoted to the author's essays and interviews on current political events stretching back to the 1960s. This testifies to the remarkable span of time during which the German-reading public could count on one thing: no matter how tempestuous and unpredictable the course of German politics, no matter how deep or frequent the debate, controversy, or crisis, an essay by Jürgen Habermas would address it with a distinctive combination of analytical insight and political passion. For more than 40 years, from the earliest efforts at rebuilding a democratic culture out of the rubble of totalitarianism, through Germany's struggle with its identity as it re-emerged as a major economic and political power, to the politics of unification and the united Germany's role as an influential global political actor, Habermas's status as an indispensable voice in the German public sphere has remained one of the rare constants.

The present volume differs from other recent collections of his political writings, such as *The Inclusion of the Other* or *The Postnational Constellation*, in blending essays and interviews on contemporary German politics and society with more wide-ranging studies. An important source of thematic unity is, as the title implies, a concern with processes of transition that have shaped or are currently shaping the course of European and world history. The transition which provides the context for all of the others discussed is the process of social modernization which has penetrated and transformed every aspect of life in Western societies while extending inexorably to ever-further

reaches of the globe. Habermas's social and political thought has been devoted to the theoretical understanding of this process and to the articulation of its rational moments on which more just and humane conditions of social life could be founded. In this, he has shown particular sensitivity to the pathologies of modernization, its capacity to destroy the cultural resources necessary for a human existence worthy of the name, and its extraordinary potential for violence, injustice, and inhumanity as witnessed by the history of the twentieth century.

A more restricted historical context for the essays is provided by the process of globalization and the resulting need for a transition from the classical international order of sovereign nation-states to a transnational political order, which Habermas argues should take the form of a "global domestic politics without a world government." A still more narrowly circumscribed context is the transition toward greater political integration within an expanding European Union, a process wth important implications for political developments at the global level. And, finally, there are the longer- and shorter-term transitions of the Federal Republic of Germany which have been the focus of some of Habermas's most impassioned political interventions: the still incomplete postwar transition from the barbarity of the Nazi period to a functioning constitutional democracy, a learning process marked by denials and regressions, but also by notable, if painfully won, achievements; the post-1989 transition from a divided to a "reunited" Germany and the challenge of forging a democratic collective identity under the ambivalent aegis of a "Berlin Republic"; and the transition just begun from a necessarily restrictive understanding of Germany's role in European and world politics to the more expansive role demanded by its economic strength, its importance for European political integration, and its proximity to actual and potential crisis zones in Eastern Europe.

A major question posed by all of these transitions for Habermas is the extent to which the autonomous political practice of democratic citizens, rather than the logic of supposedly "impersonal" economic forces, will determine the course they take. The urgency of the associated challenges can be seen from the fact that, unless modes of democratic political organization and legitimation emerge above the level of nation-states, market-driven globalization threatens to undermine social solidarity within constitutional democracies and to aggravate global injustice and insecurity, not to mention environmental destruction and climate change.

The immediate occasion for the interview which opens the collection was a transition within the transition from Bonn to the Berlin Republic, namely, the 1998 election victory of the "Red-Green" coalition of the Social Democrats and the Greens under Gerhard Schröder and Joschka Fischer, following 16 years of center-right governments under Helmut Kohl. Habermas does not disguise his dismay at the climate of political, economic, and cultural stagnation which gripped the country as the euphoria of the reunification process subsided and which he (rightly!) feared the new government would do little to alter. A major cause of the malaise, he thinks, is the failure to grasp the global dimension of the political challenges facing the country – most ominously, mass unemployment – and the illusion that effective social and economic reforms can still be undertaken at the national level. Yet he refuses to accept that there are no alternatives to a supine politics that merely reacts to the pressures of globalizing markets and thereby consents to its own increasing irrelevance. The alternative he proposes is a politics that responds in a self-critical, reflexive fashion to the growing restrictions on the room for maneuver of the nation-state. This would involve cooperating in the construction of transnational and supranational political institutions and fostering the cultural resources for a transnational public sphere through which the decisions and policies of these institutions could acquire democratic legitimacy. On this analysis, the challenge is to continue the project of constitutional democracy beyond the nation-state with the goal of securing the fragile bases of social solidarity painfully won by the welfare state and promoting democracy and social justice in other regions of the world.

In addition to his advocacy of a "postnational" renewal of the project of constitutional democracy, Habermas here strikes a number of chords that resonate throughout the collection. For example, his suspicion of Schröder's attempts to disguise the poverty of genuine political initiatives through a cultural politics of national symbols, for which the move of the capital from Bonn to Berlin provided ample opportunity, reflects an awareness of the enduring importance of public symbols for forging a collective identity and a shared political culture in constitutional democracies. This is all the more true in the case of Germany, where the public representation and interpretation of symbols of national identity, and especially those associated with the former "imperial capital" Berlin, is inextricably bound up with the process of coming to terms with the Nazi past.

The three short polemical "Interventions" which make up the second part of the volume address three crucial issues in the current German political landscape. The 1999 NATO attacks on Yugoslavia to halt the Kosovo crisis provoked widespread debates in Germany concerning the role that the recently reunified nation should play in military interventions beyond its borders and the political future of regional and global institutions such as NATO and the United Nations. For a nation that had constructed its special form of "normality" on a postwar renunciation of militarism, calls to join a NATO interventionary force in Kosovo that lacked authorization from the UN Security Council were especially wrenching. Among other things, they signaled that Germany would be increasingly forced to confront its altered status in the international community as well as demands to assume greater political responsibilities at the regional and global levels. Viewed within the context of the transition to a postnational political order, the intervention revealed the pitfalls of a politics of human rights and humanitarian intervention, however urgent and compelling its moral motives, that lacks adequate supranational legal and institutional support, and hence the need to work toward the kind of postnational global constitutional order advocated by Habermas.

Around the same time, the so-called "political donations scandal" was rocking Germany, with daily revelations of an extraordinary history of corruption within the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU), the party of Helmut Kohl and the senior partner in the coalition governments led by Kohl from 1982 to 1998. A political culture that was no stranger to scandals was finding it difficult to acknowledge the nature of the scandal, and in particular the scale of the corruption it revealed among some of its highest elected officials. In the essay, "A Sort of Logo of the Free West," Habermas argues that what set the affair apart was precisely that it was *not* a matter of "politics as usual." Behind the anomalies of the scandal – in particular, the obtuse behavior of the principal figures and their stubborn refusal to follow the customary media "script" of such scandals – lurked the fact that the political leadership of a major national party had over decades adopted a purely instrumental attitude toward the federal constitution, which, for Habermas, represents the indispensable basis of Germany's "constitutional patriotism." For this reason, the depth of the scandal is matched by the depth of Habermas's anger. (Also there is some small irony in the fact that the conciliatory tone of Habermas's leave-taking from Kohl in the opening inter-

view was soon to be so rudely disturbed as Kohl once again cast his considerable shadow across German postwar history!)

The third of these brief interventions, "The Finger of Blame," deals with perhaps the most insistent leitmotif in the history of the Federal Republic and a major preoccupation of Habermas's moral and political thought, the challenge of coming to terms with the National Socialist past. The project to erect a "Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe," a field of massive concrete stelae designed by the American architect Peter Eisenmann, in the heart of Berlin provoked heated debates throughout its protracted history. Inevitably, debates over the design, layout, and features of the planned memorial touched off deeper "ethical-political" debates concerning the meaning and function of historical memory in the constitution of German political identity. Always wary of voices which seek to declare an end to the process of coming to terms with the Nazi past in the name of a recovered "normality," Habermas defends a strikingly austere interpretation of the meaning of the memorial whose complex motivations leave it open to misunderstanding. The authors of the memorial are the German descendants of the perpetrators, he argues, and only they, and not the descendants of the victims, be they German Jews or Sinti or Roma, can determine what the memorial should mean. Although the commemoration of the Holocaust must not be instrumentalized for the purposes of forging a collective political identity, nevertheless, what is at stake is the critical appropriation of history as a necessary precondition for Germans' exercise of political autonomy in the present and in the future.

Some valuable light is thrown on the ideas informing Habermas's position on the memorial by the essay on "Symbolic Expression and Ritual Behavior," which forms the third part of the book. Through an interpretation of the contrasting theories of institutions and symbolization of the philosopher Ernst Cassirer and the philosophical anthropologist Arnold Gehlen, Habermas shows how subtle differences in their respective understandings of humans as symbolizing animals, and the role that this capacity plays in the development of social institutions, acquire enhanced significance when refracted through the prism of German political culture. On Habermas's account, Cassirer's and Gehlen's positions represent two stages in the divided philosophical and political reception of Hegel's theory of the individual and the state. But whereas Cassirer remained to the end committed to an Enlightenment conception of social and political institutions as enabling autonomous, symbolically self-constituting

subjects to realize their freedom, the "young conservative" Gehlen understood symbolization as a compensatory faculty of a congenitally unadapted, hence weak and vulnerable, organism, which requires strong institutions to protect it from the forces of internal and external nature that threaten to overwhelm it.

The two essays on "Europe in Transition," which make up the fourth part of the book, constitute a major restatement and clarification of a thesis that Habermas has defended since the early 1990s, namely, that the European Union represents an important contemporary experiment in postnational democratic governance. What course this experiment will take – in particular, what form the transition to a closer political union in Europe will take – depends largely on the unresolved question of whether the EU continues to understand itself as an economic consortium vying for market share with other global economic players, or whether the process of European political integration develops into a political experiment of genuinely global significance. If the latter is to transpire, the EU will have to assume the form of a postnational democratic polity capable of responding to the challenges of globalization not just at the economic level but also in the dimensions of security, communications, the environment, migration, and culture, among others. In these essays, Habermas addresses two important preconditions for the success of this European political project: first, democratic politics, which has until now been conducted exclusively within the confines of nation-states, will have to undergo a self-reflexive transformation with the goal of enhancing political agencies above the level of the nation-state; second, if the legislative decisions and policies of supranational political agencies are to acquire democratic legitimacy – in particular, if the current "democratic deficit" of the EU institutions is to be overcome – new transnational forms of democratic political culture will have to develop based on a complex intermeshing of the public spheres of the member states.

The "Question of Political Theory" addressed in the fifth part of the collection is: how should we understand the relation between democracy and its defining principle of "popular sovereignty," on the one hand, and the constitutional basic rights which secure the "rule of law" on which the individual liberties of liberal democracies are founded, on the other? The insight informing Habermas's mature legal and political theory is that these principles are "co-original," that is, that popular sovereignty and the rule of law mutually imply each other;

hence, the legal and political institutions of constitutional democracies must be designed in such a way that they simultaneously promote individual liberty and the democratic legitimacy of law and political power. A key assumption of Habermas's approach is that human rights should be understood primarily as legal rights and, as such, must be implemented in positive law. In the present essay, he responds to a series of criticisms of his discursive model of democratic legitimation by the American constitutional theorist, Frank Michelman. Michelman's chief criticism is that Habermas cannot explain how a democratic constitution could be founded in the first place because the founding process cannot, on pain of circularity or regress, itself be procedurally legitimated, as Habermas's model requires; for the founding must first establish the necessary legal preconditions for all further democratic legitimation procedures. Habermas's response represents an important development of his procedural model of democratic legitimation: once we understand a democratic constitution as a project – specifically, as a collective learning process that unfolds over time in the medium of democratic discourse – then it becomes apparent that the founding act which gave rise to this project can acquire legitimacy *retrospectively* over time.

The three short book reviews which constitute the sixth part of the collection provide valuable insights into the influence of American pragmatism on Habermas's thought and his understanding of its significance for postwar German philosophy. Most striking is the emphasis he places on the Hegelian roots of pragmatism. The Hegelian legacy ensures a fertile ground for the belated German reception of a classic work such as Dewey's *Quest for Certainty* and for the current vogue of a major contemporary work such as Brandom's *Making it Explicit*, at a time when the American philosophical mainstream remains hostile both to the speculative ambitions of German idealism and to the primacy of the practical at the root of American pragmatism. Most germane to the political concerns of the present volume, however, is the review of Rorty's *Achieving our Country*. For it shows how Rorty, through a patriotic critique of the political paralysis of the American "new Left," converges on positions similar to those at which Habermas arrives through a critique of currents within German public life which seek to exploit national symbols to foster a false sense of normality.

The book concludes with a wide-ranging interview on the role of religion and religious attitudes in the "postmetaphysical" modern

world. Here Habermas addresses a still more ancient transition, that from the archaic world of mythic powers and social structures founded on kinship to monotheistic religion, rational speculation and republican self-determination – symbolized by the names "Jerusalem, Athens, and Rome" – which created the necessary preconditions for the later transition from traditional to modern societies. His remarks on the relation between religion and philosophy, on religious conflict and toleration, on fundamentalism and the appeal to Christian solidarity in the face of global injustice and human suffering, reflect his conviction that, with the transition to a postmetaphysical world, religious claims to truth and validity must become self-reflexive in ways that enable them to acknowledge the rival claims of other religious traditions, as well as the competing truths of science and secular morality. Readers who are familiar with Habermas's works in social and political theory, in which religion figures more at the margins than the center, may be surprised to discover what an important role religious ideas, and ideas about religion, play in his understanding of his thought and its development. However, he is equally insistent that a strict methodological separation must be maintained between philosophy, on the one hand, and religion and theology, on the other. For, with the irreversible differentiation of reason into distinct domains and functions under conditions of modernity, contemporary philosophy would ignore this separation at the cost of forfeiting its claim to seriousness.

Note on the Translation

We have drawn freely on the following existing translations of individual chapters and hereby express our gratitude to the translators and publishers concerned: "Bestiality and Humanity: A War on the Border between Law and Morality" (chapter 2), trans. Franz Solms-Laubach (www.theglobalsite.ac.uk); "The European Nation-State and the Pressures of Globalization" (chapter 6), trans. G. M. Goshgarian (*New Left Review*, 1999, 235:46–59); "Why Europe Needs a Constitution" (chapter 7), (*New Left Review*, new series, 2001, 11:5–26). We are particularly indebted to William Rehg for permission to reprint his translation of chapter 8 (*Political Theory*, 2001, 29/6: 766–781) and for helpful comments on an earlier draft of the preface.

Author's Foreword

The Peace Prize of the German Book Trade is not intended to honor an academic work but to recognize an intellectual role. This encourages me to continue a series of "short political writings" stretching from *Protest Movements and University Reform* (1969), through *The New Obscurity* (1985), to *The Normality of a Berlin Republic* (1995). To be sure, the Red-Green government is still in transition to a Berlin Republic and its loudly trumpeted normality. A change in mentality can't be simply launched. The European Union is also still engaged in a process of transition toward an enlarged and consolidated political shape that remains elusive. Equally unsettling are the risks of the transition from classical international law to a cosmopolitan society; for we are still very far removed from the goal of a global domestic politics without a world government.

The stalled economic recovery seems to lend its signature to a period of stalled transitions in general.

The lectures, interviews, and reviews collected here date from the last three years.

Jürgen Habermas
Starnberg, June 2001

Part I
From Bonn to Berlin

The following interview with Gunter Hofmann and Thomas Assheuer on the "Prospects for the Red-Green Coalition" (which appeared in *Die Zeit*, October 8, 1998) took place immediately following the German federal elections.

1

There are Alternatives!

Question: Herr Habermas, for the first time in the history of the Federal Republic a sitting Chancellor has been voted out of office. Can we draw any conclusions from this about the state of democracy in Germany?

J. H.: I think so. Until now, changes in the ruling coalition were made by tactical agreements among political parties before the end of the scheduled parliamentary term. This is what led to the resignations of both Ludwig Erhart and Helmut Schmidt. This time, citizens took the lead in voting a sitting Chancellor out of office. In a democracy, the citizens need to be convinced that at decisive turning-points their votes really can influence hermetic political processes. In the "old" Federal Republic, it took several decades for a democratic sensibility like this to take root. I have a sense that this process is now more or less complete.

Question: For you, Helmut Kohl always represented a guarantor of the Federal Republic's orientation to the West. Will you miss him?

J. H.: All the criticisms have already been made. Kohl's historical achievement was to link the reunification of Germany with the unification of Europe. But my generation also recognizes him as one of our own. I'm thinking of his almost physical repudiation of the kind of "aesthetics of the state" demanded by our intellectual elites, especially since 1989. Clearly, Kohl never forgot the grotesque orchestration of the "Reich Party Days" and the Chaplinesque Nazi officials.