

Reviews

Habermas: A Biography

by Stefan Müller-Doohm

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by William Outhwaite

Stefan Müller-Doohm studied in Frankfurt in the 1960s when Adorno, Horkheimer and Habermas were all there, and has been at the University of Oldenburg, in North-West Germany, since 1974. I met him there in the 1980s on a faculty exchange with the School of European Studies at Sussex and again at a conference he organised in 1990 on interpretative method, and we have been in regular contact since then. His work has been mainly in the sociology of the media and communication and especially the sociology of intellectuals, with his two massive biographies, of Adorno in 2003 and Habermas in 2014, as the most prominent ‘outputs’.¹

The Adorno biography was one of three published around the same time, the hundredth anniversary of his birth, and the three authors compared notes as they went along. Stefan’s was immediately recognised as the definitive one. By 2007, if not before, he was working on that of Habermas, which is only a little shorter, at 750 pages as against over 1000. Adorno had been dead for 30 years, but Habermas is very much alive, the book arriving in time for his 85th birthday, and, along with his wife Ute, fully supported the project, despite expressing with his familiar ironic scepticism some doubts about whether his life ‘for scholarship’ had been interesting enough for a biographer. Whereas Adorno was exiled in the US, and might easily have stayed there, as Marcuse and others did, the teenage Habermas, born in 1929, squeezed through the Nazi regime and the war, to experience the retrospective trauma which has shaped his political orientation and his theory.²

An early expression of this was his outraged response in a newspaper article to Heidegger’s republication without comment in 1953 of a 1935 text in which he had praised the ‘inner truth and greatness’ of the Nazi movement. Martin Jay (1985) has described the early critical theorists as ‘permanent exiles’ and it is true that Adorno and Horkheimer did not feel comfortable either in an interwar Germany sliding gradually to the right until, with the Nazis, it went off the scale, nor in the US, nor in the post-war

Federal Republic, with Horkheimer retaining, with some difficulty, his US citizenship and Adorno only resuming his German one in 1955. Habermas, by contrast, does not seem to have seen himself as an outsider, even when suffering attacks from the right-wing press or the disgusting attitude of the University of Munich, which denied him the usual academic courtesies. The city, as he pointed out, was more welcoming.

But as Stefan points out, even a relatively smooth-running life like Habermas's provides a particularly fruitful way into the classic sociological topic of 'the dialectic between individual and society'. Like Adorno in the post-war years, he has been a major presence in the media, and also in academic publishing and other spheres. His academic and public life intersect throughout the book, with his biographer providing expert and carefully judged summaries and evaluations of his main works.³ The contours of Habermas's relation to earlier critical theory are only now becoming clear, and are still a matter of controversy (Müller-Doohm, 2016a). As for his role as a public intellectual, he often intervenes when something 'irritates' him, and, in a much-quoted phrase which appears on the back cover of the book, claimed that it is this irritability, excitability or sensitivity (*Reizbarkeit*) which makes scholars into intellectuals.⁴

Stefan's comprehensive biography skilfully draws on little-known essays, often from his own massive Habermas archive. In one of these essays, while he was working briefly as a journalist in the mid-1950s before becoming Adorno's assistant, he sounds almost like Roland Barthes when he compares driving to hermeneutics, 'interpreting strange worlds and anticipating strange styles, manners and quirks' of other road users (Müller-Doohm, 2016a, pp. 71-2). More seriously, the book also documents his virtual expulsion from the Institute by the managerially-minded Horkheimer, for whom he was too radical in both his theoretical work and his political engagement. After Horkheimer's death in 1973, a letter was published from Horkheimer to Adorno in 1958 urging Adorno to sack him before he 'ruined the Institute' with revolutionary utterances which could only encourage 'the gentlemen in the East' or 'play into the hands of the potential fascists at home' (Müller-Doohm, 2016a, p. 84). Habermas wrote to Marcuse that his survey of Marxist (and, one should add, anti-Marxist) literature could only seem like a revolutionary pamphlet to 'someone suffering from anxieties from the imperial period' (Müller-Doohm, 2016a, p. 86).

Adorno stood by his assistant, but a year later, after Horkheimer had tried to block the publication of *Student und Politik* and threatened to delay or even reject Habermas's habilitation, he resigned and took his thesis, which was to become *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, to Marburg. Adorno, who knew a thing or two about psychoanalysis, suggested that

Habermas reminded Horkheimer uncomfortably of his own radical past, as well as threatening his desire to present the Institute as a site of respectable empirical research. Stefan leaves open the question 'whether Horkheimer misunderstood Habermas, or whether he understood him too well' (Müller-Doohm, 2016a: 86).

In retrospect, Habermas took a rather generous view of this episode, writing that Horkheimer 'preserved his radically pessimistic basic convictions behind an armour of fear and tactical accommodation' in a way which 'deserves our respect' (Müller-Doohm, 2016a: 86). By 1964, they were again on friendly terms, with Habermas congratulating Horkheimer on his seventieth birthday and speaking, along with Talcott Parsons, at a conference session chaired by Horkheimer. When Habermas applied for a trip in 1965 to the US, Horkheimer recommended him to the American Jewish Committee with a glowing reference: 'I would say he is one of the most promising intellectuals in Western Germany' (Müller-Doohm, 2016a, p. 89). As Stefan comments, 'there could be worse *billets d'entrée* into the Anglo-American academic scene' (Müller-Doohm, 2016a, p. 88). By then, in fact, Habermas had moved back to Frankfurt and succeeded Horkheimer as professor of philosophy. His inaugural lecture forms part of *Knowledge and Human Interests*, published in 1968.

The other aspect of this story which is worth mentioning is Habermas's relationship with Hans-Georg Gadamer. Despite their rather acerbic exchanges over the relation between hermeneutics and critical theory, they were personally very friendly. It was Gadamer who invited Habermas to write the survey of literature on Marxism that so upset Horkheimer, and he also 'energetically' facilitated Habermas's appointment to the chair at Heidelberg which he left in 1965.⁵ Habermas (1985, p. 76) has written that it was Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, published in 1960, which 'helped me to find my way back into academic philosophy'. (cited by Müller-Doohm, p. 95). Habermas's exchange with the system theorist Niklas Luhmann also looks a bit different when we learn that Habermas urged that he be invited to join the small academic committee responsible for the very influential Suhrkamp book series *Theorie*. There were anyway more serious antagonisms. The philosopher of religion Jacob Taubes wrote to the old Nazi Carl Schmitt that Habermas would 'shout his "mighty" word *ad fascisti* intelligentsia into the meeting room of the advisors' and mocked the 'braying of the Habermasse' (Müller-Doohm, 2016a: 106). Karl Popper wrote to Hans Albert, his ally in the 'positivism dispute': 'Poor Adorno is dead – but, alas, he did not know what intellectual responsibility (or righteousness) means. And Habermas is a blockhead. It is simply impossible to tell what kind of damage he is still going to cause in the future' (Müller-Doohm, 2016a: 113).

Anyone who has found the details of Habermas's thinking difficult to follow (my former Sussex colleague Zevedei Barbu referred to him in a letter to me as 'Habermas the obscure' (Outhwaite, 2015, p. 161) will appreciate the account which Stefan cites of someone who attended his lectures:

I recall how one of my fellow students interrupted Jürgen Habermas's lecture in the university's largest auditorium to ask him whether he could express himself a little less complicatedly, for it was so difficult to understand him. One half of the audience applauded. He promised to do his best in order to be intelligible, Habermas replied, whereupon the other half of the audience started booing. To those who were now booing, Habermas continued, he could promise that his good intentions were bound to fail. (Müller-Doohm, 2016a: 128)

In 1970 there arose the question of who would succeed to Adorno's chair. Habermas suggested Leszek Kołakowski. The philosophy department attacked this suggestion, leading Habermas, who had earlier declined the directorship of the Institute,⁶ to write an open letter which warned against treating Critical Theory as a kind of institution 'that must be maintained by recruiting orthodox believers' (Müller-Doohm, 2016a, p. 165). Habermas left to co-direct the Max Planck Institute in Starnberg.⁷ It was in Starnberg in the 1970s that Habermas developed his mature programme, *The Theory of Communicative Action*.⁸

In the penultimate chapter, on post-metaphysical philosophy, Stefan addresses the Kantian questions: What can I know? What should I do? What can I hope? He notes that Habermas got into analytic philosophy of science mainly in the context of his concern with the logic of the social sciences. In a brilliantly concise summary of his account of moral judgements, Stefan writes:

For Habermas, moral facts are created by social practices. Nevertheless, there remains the possibility of assessing moral judgments and norms as correct or incorrect because the social world acts as a constraining factor, albeit in a different way from that in which the objective world determines which statements can be true or false. (Müller-Doohm, 2016a, p. 373)

The demand for virtue becomes instead, or as well, an expectation of rationality. Finally, his increasing engagement with the historical relation between philosophy and religion suggests that, while he has become 'old

but not pious' (in Funken 2008, pp. 102 and 105; see Müller-Doohm, 2016a, p. 383), there is more to come in this field.

Stefan asked in relation to Horkheimer's suspicion of Habermas whether there was 'something to it', (Müller-Doohm, 2016a, p. 85) and at the end of the book he returns to the question of Habermas's appetite for conflict, suggesting that what he wrote of Heinrich Heine, that he 'wrote his works in the expectation of provoking dissonant reactions' (Müller-Doohm, 2016a, pp. 416), might also apply to himself. He said in an interview:

If as an intellectual you take a public stance regarding polarizing questions, you pay a price. You have to learn to live with animosity. And sometimes you are exposed to malice for decades. (Müller-Doohm, 2016a, pp. 415-6)

The 'historians' dispute' was perhaps the most memorable example, when Habermas pounced on what he saw as a move towards relativizing the holocaust, lumping together the rather creepy Ernst Nolte with more serious historians like Andreas Hillgruber whose 1986 book title aroused his suspicion, and provoking an equally fierce reaction. Stefan lists a large number of more recent political polemics of more local interest. In the academic field, however, he writes that 'For Habermas, good academic practice means treating objections to one's reflections as opportunities to counteract the cognitive provinciality of a finite mind' (Müller-Doohm, 2016a, p. 420). The many edited volumes about his work typically include a chapter containing his responses. This approach has sometimes been mocked, but having seen it in action at the Wuppertal conference, where he tirelessly and meticulously responded to each of over a dozen papers, one could hardly not be impressed.

Stefan was of course ideally placed to write this biography, and he has produced a work where utterly reliable scholarship coexists with an extremely readable presentation. I read the book, as it happens, on a trip to the US, and it saw me across the Atlantic and back. After two years, I am delighted that it has now reached the Anglosphere, in an exceptionally careful and well annotated translation by Daniel Steuer.

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edited *Brexit. Sociological Responses* (London: Anthem Press, 2017) and is working with Stefan Müller-Doohm and Luca Corchia on an edited volume on the global reception of Habermas's work.

Endnotes

¹ He directs a research centre at Oldenburg on the sociology of intellectuals. His edited book on intellectual friendships (Jung & Müller-Doohm, 2011), in which he co-authored a chapter on Adorno and Siegfried Kracauer, is highly relevant to the sometimes uneasy relations between the critical theorists.

² The book includes a photograph of his Hitler Youth detachment being marched off to reinforce the Siegfried Line (*Westwall*) in August 1944. Later, he luckily missed a round-up for a last-ditch resistance action before the Americans arrived through not being at home that night. His hare-lip also put him at risk from Nazi eugenic obsessions. A rather idiotic affair broke out in 2006 when the historian Joachim Fest, who had been on the other side in the 'historians' dispute' of the 1980s, revived an old rumour which took literally a joking remark by Ute Habermas that he had 'swallowed' a document from that period. Habermas sued and the book was pulped (p. 345).

³ *Die Welt*, the German equivalent of the *Daily Telegraph*, complained that these were too uncritical, and that students should not write biographies of those they followed.

⁴ Stefan told me that when he once noticed a disturbance in front of him in a cinema, it turned out to be Habermas shouting: 'That's pure fascism'.

⁵ On the intellectual background to their exchange, see, for example, my chapter in Glanert and Girard (2017). On Habermas and Marxism, see also Rapic (2014), based on a conference in Wuppertal in 2012. A shortened English version of my contribution is on the *Theory, Culture and Society* website:

<http://theoryculturesociety.org/william-outhwaite-on-habermas-and-historical-materialism/>

⁶ As, incidentally, did another Sussex colleague and friend, Tom Bottomore.

⁷ This, incidentally, is where I first met him when Roy MacLeod, director of

History and Social Studies of Science at Sussex, invited me to a conference. The conference theme was the ‘finalisation thesis’ about the practical applications of mature science, developed by the other team at Starnberg, working with Habermas’s co-director, Friedrich von Weizsäcker. Having been invited to comment, we tried to earn our keep by making critical comments, to an extent which rather upset the researchers. Don’t worry, Habermas said to them, as I recall the discussion. Stick to your guns and say what you want; it doesn’t matter if it’s wrong – if it’s criticised, that’s how scholarly progress happens.

⁸ There is something odd in using the word ‘mature’, when even his earliest work, *pace* Horkheimer, displayed such maturity. Gordon Finlayson once suggested in a talk at Sussex that Habermas represents, not the second-generation Frankfurt School but the first-generation Starnberg school. On this see also Müller-Doohm 2016b. *The Theory of Communicative Action* reached me and other participants at a conference in Duisburg in 1981 (Böckler and Weiss, 1987), where Johannes Weiss had organised a delivery; we gathered around the van like refugees collecting food parcels.

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