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Habermas for Historians

Four Approaches to his Works

Undoubtedly Jürgen Habermas is Germany's most important living philosopher. His writings on the public sphere, technology and science, communicative action, law and democracy, and the post-secular and the post-national society have influenced generations of scholars in various disciplines. For historians, Habermas' life, his works, and his polemics are a challenge.¹ His broad scope, the topicality of his work, and slight, but noteworthy transitions of his ideas – over a period of more than half a century – make it difficult to position the sociologist philosopher in the cultural and intellectual debates of our times. As a philosopher, Habermas changed from a Neo-Marxist critic modern society into a defender of modernity. As a polemist, Habermas has been involved in many public debates, amongst others about nuclear proliferation, the Rote Armee Fraktion, the place of the Holocaust in German history, the German unification, constitutional patriotism, and gene technology. Although Habermas has never felt himself a historian, his influence on historiography is considerable. On the one hand, historians very often refer to his early work on the structural transformation of the public sphere, on the other to his leading role in the *Historikerstreit*. Could this all be brought together into one picture?

This article is meant to outline Habermas' contribution to historiography by contextualizing his ideas first. To do so, I think we should distinguish four different approaches to his work: within the context of the History of Philosophy, of Critical Theory, of the German intellectual debate after World War II, and finally of a certain discipline, be it sociology, law, economics, political science, linguistics, or history. Since this article is called 'Habermas for historians', I will discuss the aspects in which Habermas' work did, and did not influence the discipline. I will analyse how Habermas' early work, the *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, has today become both dated and, indeed, very topical. And I will explain Habermas' concern with the use and misuse of history in his own country. The four approaches together should not be mutually exclusive (sadly, this is often the case). Ideally, they are interconnected. Finally, I will try to find the link.

1 I would like to thank Wiep van Bunge for his comments and Dick Smakman for his corrections.

Habermas and the philosophical *longue durée*

Of course, it is very well possible to outline Habermas' work within the general History of Philosophy; to discuss his contribution to the philosophical *longue durée*, from Hegel, Heidegger to Habermas. To study his role in the genesis of modern thought, Habermas gives important clues in his writings, since he positioned himself in the field as no other. In his works, he has been in discussion with his predecessors, teachers, friends, colleagues, and opponents. One finds many references, discussions and debates with key philosophers, such as (the young) Hegel, Marx, Peirce, Weber, Lukács, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Jaspers, and others.² His most important discussants were not his first teachers, but his later 'employers' Theodor Adorno, Wolfgang Abendroth, and Hans-Georg Gadamer; his friends Karl-Otto Appel, Alexander Mitscherlich, and Hans-Ulrich Wehler. Habermas is well known for his polemics with important contemporaries such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Hilary Putnam.

Being an important representative of continental philosophy, Habermas bridged German and Anglo-American traditions of thought. Particularly his interest in speech act theory and his defence of the Modern Project – his personal and theoretical encounter with postmodern thought – brought him into contact with analytical philosophy, and made his philosophy part of Germano-Franco-Anglo-American disputes.³ This makes his work ideal subject matter for an extended intellectual biography, which still has to be written.⁴

Critical Theory

The longitudinal perspective on Habermas' place in the History of Philosophy differs from the second approach to Habermas' work, which focuses on his contribution to Critical Theory. Habermasian and post-Habermasian interpreters, such as, respectively, Stefan Müller-Doohm (see his article in this volume) and Harry Kunneman, did a tremendous job by building and rebuilding the academic body of knowledge of Habermas' work, by translating his complex philosophical writings for a larger public, and by teaching the students of my generation on the uses and boundaries of Critical Theory. Many of his followers not only know the ins and outs of his work, but they

2 In general Habermas' work is full of references. More specifically, see: Jürgen Habermas, *Philosophisch-politische Profile* (Frankfurt am Main 1981).

3 See: Harry Kunneman and Hent de Vries, 'Introduction', in: *ibid.*, *Enlightenments, Encounters between Critical Theory and Contemporary French Thought* (Kampen 1993) 7.

4 This year Matthew Specter will publish *Habermas: An Intellectual Biography* (Cambridge 2010). It is my impression that this book will be particularly about Habermas' position in the German intellectual debate (which suits very well to the third approach in this essay). Short biographies are: Stefan Müller –Doohm, *Jürgen Habermas, Leben Werk Wirkung* (Frankfurt am Main 2008); and Rolf Wiggershaus, *Jürgen Habermas* (Reinbek 2004).

also met the philosopher-sociologist personally, and discussed with him the specific meanings, implementations, and consequences of his thinking.

The international success of Habermas' philosophy, starting with the publication of *Technik und Wissenschaft als 'Ideologie'* (1968), brought about a transnational movement of Habermasian philosophers and sociologists. In the Seventies and Eighties interpreters of Habermas' Critical Theory were sooner or later appointed professor at many universities. Some remained dedicated to his works, others, such as Harry Kunneman, who, together with Michiel Korthals and Willem van Reijen introduced the German sociologist philosopher in the Netherlands, went 'beyond' Habermas. Kunneman in particular made an interesting move, since he 'stretched' Habermas' concept of communication by broadening it. Next to Habermas' concept of communication, defined by linguistic means; Kunneman included 'body language' as a new field of rationalities, paradoxically incorporating postmodern interrelations within modern theory.⁵

Postwar intellectual

Whereas Habermasians and post-Habermasians generally underline the internal coherence and topicality of his philosophy, the third approach studies the various roles of Habermas as a public intellectual, focusing on his evolving positions in the cultural field of postwar Germany, Europe, and the world.⁶ Seen from this perspective, Habermas seems to have lived several lives. He is often considered a representative of a very successful German generation of *Flakhelfer*, who were too young to fight as a *Wehrmacht* soldier at the eastern front, but old enough to support, as a child soldier, the anti aircraft defence (the *Flak*) or, in the case of Habermas, the defence of the West German border: the *West Wall* or Siegfried Line. Habermas' generation of 'Forty Fivers' marked the cultural climate of the Bonner Republic, from Günter Grass, Niklas Luhmann, Hans-Ulrich Wehler, Hans-Dietrich Genscher to the current pope Benedictus XVI.

Habermas' change of vision and change of position within German society is an interesting subject. Although the main topics of his research remained the same – the praxis of science, technique, and communication in modern societies, or, as he stated himself: “the conceptual *trias* of the public sphere, discourse, and reason”⁷ – the meaning of these topics changed, due

5 See particularly Harry Kunneman, 'Stretching Habermas', in: Harry Kunneman and Hent de Vries (ed.), *Enlightenments*, 77-91; and: *ibid.*, *Van theemutscultuur naar Walkman-ego, Contouren van een postmoderne idividualiteit* (Amsterdam 1996).

6 See: Jan-Werner Müller, *Another Country, German Intellectuals, Unification and National Identity* (New Haven 2000) and also Clemens Albrecht, Günther C. Behrmann, (a.o.), *Die intellektuelle Gründung der Bundesrepublik, Eine Wirkungsgeschichte der Frankfurter Schule* (Frankfurt am Main 1999).

7 Jürgen Habermas, 'Öffentlicher Raum und politische Öffentlichkeit, Lebensgeschichtliche Wurzeln von zwei Gedankenmotive', in: *ibid.*, *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion, Philosophische Aufsätze* (Frankfurt am Main 2005) 16.

to slight transitions of his world view. At the end of the Fifties, Habermas was searching for a Neo-Marxist theory of democracy, and found a shelter in the ideas of Wolfgang Abendroth, his supervisor of his 'Habilschrift' *Die Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* and a reformed Marxist, specialized in public international law (which was a rare combination). Abendroth wanted to lay down social welfare in the Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany. Thanks to Abendroth, Habermas became interested in critical law studies, which resulted much later, in 1992 in the publication of *Faktizität und Geltung*.⁸

From Marx to Kant

Habermas' work could be read as a revision of the Marxist theory of historical materialism, since this theory, focusing on changing modes of production, ignores the significance of the public sphere and of communicative action. This revision was the leitmotiv of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, in which the transition of a representative court culture into a bourgeois public sphere is described. In line with the Neo-Marxist paradigm, Habermas defended both dialectics and the idea of a totality as basic assumptions of sociology in the 1961-1963 *Positivismusstreit*. But these ideas of Habermas faded into the background.

In the Sixties and Seventies, he developed from a Neo-Marxist critic into a valued spokesman of the liberal wing of the German counterculture. At the end of the Sixties, *The Structural Transformation* appeared to be topical, since the book referred to the aims of a younger generation of students, who wanted to transform the public sphere by public protests, by distributing hand-outs, by new journalism, by a democracy from below. Habermas was both a sympathizer and a criticiser of the Student Protest movement, which made him a welcome commentator in the public sphere. As a known supporter of the student protesters, he warned them for 'left fascism' as well. Since then, his books and articles have found a wide readership. Also, the upcoming 'Science and Society' movement was inspired by Habermas' 1968 essay *Technik und Wissenschaft als 'Ideologie'*, in which he criticized the Marxist concept of rationality and of the modes of production by focussing on two new developments in capitalist societies: the growing influence of the state and the growing interdependence between research and technology. This interdependence has made technology a productive power, an ideology, instead of a means to gain power. Habermas proposed to diminish the power of technology as an ideology through reflexivity and through communicative action.⁹

8 Jürgen Habermas, *Faktizität und Geltung, Beiträge zur Diskurstheorie des Rechts und des demokratischen Rechtsstaats* (Frankfurt am Main 1992).

9 Jürgen Habermas, *Technik und Wissenschaft als 'Ideologie'* (Frankfurt am Main 1970) 74, 90-91.

In the meantime, he felt more and more at home in the Republic. In 1973, he linked his technology criticism to earlier ideas about the 'life world'.¹⁰ This life world should be protected against the power of economic or bureaucratic systems through rational critical communication. When he in 1981 finally formulated these ideas in the *Theorie des Kommunikativen Handelns*, he was at the height of his career.

Habermas' position in the intellectual field changed again from an intellectual avant-gardist into a defender of those values which had become important for the successful reconstruction of the Federal Republic after the War, of the Modern Project, of German postnationalism, of social and democratic values. His anxiety for a new German nationalism made him a fierce critic of the German unification. He became one of the advocates of constitutional patriotism, at first within the German context, later transposed to the European Union.

In 1992, in his *Faktizität und Geltung*, Habermas connected his ideas of constitutionalism with social reform. Several commentators commemorated Habermas' changing orientation as a move from Hegel and Marx on the one hand towards Kant on the other. This Kantian view of modernity is characterized by a belief in a procedural rationality which gives credence to our views in the areas of objective knowledge, moral-practical insight, and aesthetic judgement.¹¹ For Habermas, this procedural rationality functioned as a defence of the vulnerable German federal democracy against reactionary forces. His launching of the *Historikerstreit*, his criticism of the reunification of Germany, and his support of constitutional patriotism should be seen in this context.

Facing criticism

From the Nineteen Eighties onwards, as a leading public intellectual, Habermas faced the criticism of rising intellectuals, from postmodernists, agonists, and finally also from his own followers. Habermas' defence of the Modern Project is based on his theories of communicative action, in which he describes how the life world of human beings should be protected against the systems in capitalist society by communicative action, based on a reflective attitude and on the rational exchange of arguments. Postmodernists like Jean Francois Lyotard, however, deconstructed Habermas' theories as language games, with its own local rules, legitimations and practices. Another criticism came from the agonists, among them the Belgian philosopher Chantal Mouffe, who criticised Habermas' model of consensual decision making on a rational basis, and its claims of universal validity

10 Jürgen Habermas, 'Further Reflections on the Public Sphere', in: Graig Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge Mass. 1992) 443-444.

11 Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (Cambridge Mass. 1990) 4; see also: Graig Calhoun (1992) 2.

for deliberative democracies. Instead, Mouffe stresses a return of the political: to identify with politics, politicians should draw boundaries and define their political adversary, instead of ironing out all differences, which leads to political passivity.¹²

In the era of George W. Bush, Habermas indeed did not seem to be the leading philosopher anymore. However, directly after 9/11, having a feel for topical issues, Habermas opened up a new debate about the place of religion in post-secular societies, which he defined as societies in which the secularist certainty that religion will disappear has lost ground.¹³ This being so, it is better to have an open mind towards religious legacies, intuitions and encoded semantic potentialities, which could give answers to unanswered questions in secular philosophy. In 2004, Habermas discussed his views on religion with Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, the current pope. Remarkably, this even upset his own followers, who like Habermas strive for a secular and disenchanted world. But it also brought him at the centre of the debate: his reflections on religion in a secular age both rival and correspond with the ideas of Charles Taylor and of Gianni Vattimo.

Historicising philosophy

The debates about postmodernity, about the return of the political, and about the post-secular society, make clear how vivid Habermas' ideas still are. His encounters with so many intellectuals of the Twentieth and Twenty-first Century have given his work a topical relevance up until today. In 2001 Habermas toured China to discuss Critical Theory with Chinese intellectuals, which gave his ideas of a structural transformation of the public sphere a topicality within the context of the newly industrialised countries as well.¹⁴

However, his influence is not always recognised in those academic disciplines, which one would expect, such as Media Studies, or even Communication Sciences, his works are, for example, thoroughly read by linguists who study the discourse of law.¹⁵ Even in philosophy, his position in the academic field is under discussion, since analytical philosophy wins ground, for example in the Netherlands, thanks to the rapidly growing status of publishing in English and American journals. Many professional Dutch philosophers are convinced that analytical philosophy is simply better.

Those scholars who follow Habermas' Critical Theory are usually not eager to historicize his work. Jan Philip Reemtsma, for example, considers historicizing Habermas as an attempt to denigrate his philosophy, to set him

12 See: Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (London 2005) 83-89.

13 Jürgen Habermas, *Glauben und Wissen* (Frankfurt am Main 2001).

14 Sijun Tong, 'Habermas and the Chinese discourse of modernity', *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy*, 1 (2001) 1, 81-105; and Weidong Cao, 'The Historical Effect of Habermas in the Chinese Context: A Case Study of the Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere', *Frontiers of Philosophy in China*, 1 (2006) 1, 41-50.

15 Depending on where one studies; the examples are taken from the University of Amsterdam.

back as a typical representative of the *Bonner Republik*, of West Germany before the fall of the Wall.¹⁶ However, I would deny that historicizing has anything to do with downgrading Habermas' philosophy. Since present times will be history in the near future anyway, historicizing is an inescapable fate. Only a lucky few will be included in the historical narrative of a certain period.

Habermas wrote his first important article in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* more than half a century ago, in 1953. In this article he attacked Heidegger for publishing his 1935 lecture notes uncritically, without taking distance of his opinions in the Nazi period.¹⁷ This appealing and well written article – Habermas was only 24 years old – is not only a key publication in his oeuvre, but also an important text of the Nineteen Fifties, the period of the *Wirtschaftswunder*. As stated, Habermas interfered in many important intellectual debates after. Historicizing Habermas has nothing to do with relegating his work to a remote period of history, but all the more with positioning him at the centre of the debate, indeed, in a certain period.

Rethinking the Public Sphere

Now the first three approaches have been delineated, I will analyse the last, which is: Habermas for historians. Habermas never considered himself a historian but a sociologist philosopher; he wrote his books with this readership in mind. His interest in history served and substantiated his social theory. On the other hand, historians did not discuss his whole oeuvre, but merely his specific contributions to the discipline. Many historians underline the topicality of the *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, often as if the book was published just a couple of years ago.¹⁸ Yet, the *Strukturwandel* is a typical product of the early Sixties. One may ask if contemporary historians in 1962, when the book was published in German, even took notice of his masterpiece.¹⁹ In the English-speaking countries, the book is not often noticed before it was translated in 1989. Given the long-winded, not very accessible prose of the young Habermas, one might wonder why and how the book became the most successful *Habilschrift* ever.²⁰ An important explanation of its success is of course that his argument of a structural trans-

16 Jan Philipp Reemtsma, 'Laudatio', in: Jürgen Habermas, *Glauben und Wissen*, 35.

17 Republished in: Jürgen Habermas, *Philosophisch – politische Profile*, 65-71.

18 For example, in Dutch: Jan Bloemendal en Arjen van Dixhoorn, 'De scharpheit van een gladde tong', *Literaire teksten en publieke opinievorming in de vroegmoderne Nederlanden*, *Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, 125, 1 (2010), 3-28.

19 In the bibliography of his work and of works about Habermas only one review of the *Strukturwandel* is registered. The enormous production of texts about his works started in 1967, see: René Görtzen, *Jürgen Habermas: Eine Bibliographie seiner Schriften und der Sekundärliteratur 1952-1981* (Frankfurt am Main 1982).

20 See also Tim Blanning, *The Culture of Power and the Power of Culture, Old Regime Europe 1660-1789* (Oxford 2001), 6.

formation is later recognized by social historians of ideas as their argument. Particularly for historians of the Eighteenth Century, Habermas' analysis was way ahead of its time. From the Nineteen Seventies onwards, these historians have been searching for social, mental, and cultural explanations of the Enlightenment, and of the origins of the French Revolution in particular, by focussing on ways of reading (*die Leserevolution*), on the history of books, and on the diffusion of radical enlightened ideas in salons, free-masons' lodges, and in clandestine literature.²¹ As Margaret Jacob observed: "Not everyone accepts all aspects of Habermas' argument, but he deserves the credit for having first made it."²²

Of course, much of the success can be explained by the later status of the philosopher. Also, the idea of a transformation of the public sphere received a new strong impetus in 1989, when the Berlin Wall came down. One of the explanations of a Velvet Revolution was indeed a structural transformation of the public sphere, both in the Soviet Union, with its policy of glasnost and perestroika, and in the German Democratic Republic, where inhabitants massively watched West-German television. Habermas' book was translated into English in this revolutionary year.

The last, and perhaps most important explanation of the later success of the book lies in its metaphoric title. As a strong metaphor, the *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* could compete with metaphorical titles such as E.J. Dijksterhuis' *Mechanisation of the World Picture* and Edward Said's *Orientalism* or Max Weber's 'disenchantment of the world'. Of course, we should not be seduced just by the beauty and attractiveness of these metaphors. But whatever one thinks of these metaphors, one should not underestimate their importance, since they have given cause and direction to a lot of scholarly debate and to a lot of new research.

Habermas' prime purpose in the *Structural Transformation* is to analyse what went wrong in modern culture, and how it could, or should be revised. Therefore, he discussed the role of the public sphere in the transition of a court culture into a bourgeois capitalist society. In the analysis of Marx, this social transition was caused by changing modes of production. However, according to Habermas, this transition had to be explained by a changing balance of the private and public sphere in bourgeois families as well. This change was made possible by two developments: through the exchange of goods and the exchange of information.

In a representational court culture, the private and public sphere still corresponded with each other. However, since the Seventeenth Century, members of bourgeois families took part in a rapidly developing public sphere, in which rational criticism and argumentation became the guiding

21 With leading authors as Rolf Engelsing, Rogier Chartier, Robert Darnton, and Margaret Jacob, see further: Gary Kates, (red.), *The French Revolution, Recent debates and new controversies* (Londen 1998), and Tim Blanning, *The French Revolution, Class War or Culture Clash?* (Basingstoke 1998).

22 Margaret Jacob, 'The mental landscape of the public sphere, a European perspective', *Eighteenth Century Studies*, 28 (1994), 110, n. 1, also quoted by Blanning, 14.

principles. This public sphere developed in public places, such as coffee houses and salons, and in a growing literary culture and the printing press.²³ In the Nineteenth Century, this rational critical debate blurred thanks to a growing world market, a developing social welfare state, the rise of the mass media, public relations, and consumer culture.

As indicated, particularly historians should be aware of both the datedness and topicality of the book; it is time to rethink Habermas' public sphere, as, amongst others, the author himself already did in 1989.²⁴ There are three points to discuss here. First, as already stated, the underlying point of departure of the book was a contribution to Neo-Marxist theory. Habermas studied the social implications of a developing public sphere by analysing the 'culture industry', a concept of Adorno and Horkheimer.²⁵ This debate was of great importance in the Sixties, but evaporated in such a way, that this message of the book is not noticed anymore. The younger generation of historians is not attracted by Marxist theory, and is not aware of the contemporary debates about Marxist theories, such as Popper's *The Poverty of Historicism*, published in 1957 and the *Positivismusstreit*, of which Habermas was one of the contestants.

In line with Neo-Marxist thought, Habermas analysed society in a holistic way, as a totality. His concept of the public sphere was not divided in sub-spheres but should be seen as a whole. As Harald Mah showed, historians use various concepts of the public sphere. Mostly, they consider the public sphere as a spatialized domain that one can enter, occupy and leave. Historians mostly describe how specific social groups get access to this domain. Of course, for historians, it is much easier to isolate a social group, and study their publications, or to juxtapose regional public spheres, than to study *the* public sphere in general, which was Habermas' aim. A second difference lies in the kinds of expression historians study: affected by anthropology, historians study besides literary forms of communication, also other forms, such as body language, clothing, rites, ceremonies, festivals, satire, and carnivals.²⁶

A second point of discussion is that Habermas' thinking about the public sphere did not stop in 1962. For philosophers, the importance of the *Strukturwandel* is of course the link with Habermas' later work, particularly his 1981 *Theory of Communicative Action*. One may ask why historians hardly responded to Habermas' ideas about the systems and the life world, which he worked out in his magnum opus. Whereas the young Habermas con-

23 Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit, Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (Neuwied 1962), 43, 58.

24 Jürgen Habermas, 'Further Reflections on the Public Sphere', in: Graig Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, 421-461, see also: Harald Mah, 'Phantasies of the Public Sphere: Rethinking the Habermas of Historians', *Journal of Modern History* 72 (March 2000), 153-182, and Anthony La Vopa, 'Conceiving a Public: Ideas and Society in Eighteenth-Century Europe', *Journal of Modern History* 64 (1992), 79-116.

25 Peter Uwe Hohendahl, 'Critical theory, public sphere and culture: Jürgen Habermas and his Critics', *New German Critique*, XVI (1979), 90.

26 Harald Mah, 'Phantasies of the Public Sphere', 160, 164.

firmed the Neo-Marxist idea that the separation of the state and the society could be overcome by self-organisation, channelled through the public communication of freely associated members, the older Habermas aims to erect a democratic dam against the logistics of the main systems within society, which, with their own rules, encroach, threaten and harm the life world. In his 1992 'Further Reflections on the Public Sphere', Habermas admits that his earlier holistic notion of a societal totality in which the associated individuals participate like members of an encompassing organisation is, ill-suited to get access to the realities of an economic system regulated through markets, and to get access to an administrative system regulated through power.²⁷ With his architecture of system and life world, Habermas designed both a more integrated and diversified concept of powers within society. This model could contribute to the current debates about civil society. Also historians could have studied the history of systems, such as the economic or the bureaucratic system, with their own internal rules, and the history of the colonisation of the life world. But I don't know any historian who has done research this way. It is anyhow highly remarkable to pick up an old theory of a philosopher, and to leave out his newer ideas, which are very much related to the old. Also remarkable is the fact that historians hardly orient themselves to newer theories about the public sphere by other philosophers,²⁸ but rather refer to the Habermas' concept of almost fifty years ago.

The last point of discussion is the topicality of the *Structural Transformation*, seen from a historiographical point of view. One of the earlier criticisms of the book was that Habermas' category of a bourgeois public sphere is presented as an ideal type, without acknowledging differentiations, or considering inclusions and exclusions. This becomes more obvious, when one realizes that Habermas' analysis implies a replacement of an aristocratic representative court culture by a modern bourgeois public sphere. However, Enlightenment criticism had a mixture of backgrounds; many enlightened philosophers were part of the aristocracy themselves, like Montesquieu, whose full name was Charles Louis de Secondat, baron de la Brède et de Montesquieu. Even the most famous Dutch patriot, Joan Derk van der Capellen tot den Pol, was a baron, not very typical of Dutch citizenship.²⁹ Thanks to the studies of social historians of ideas, often called 'diffusionists', the originally French-focused concept of the Republic of Letters, in which only a limited number of learned and well educated European male figured, has been extended to a wide variety of people all over the world, male and female. As Tim Blanning remarks, the public sphere was more like Noah's Ark than a merchantmen. It was not only socially heterogeneous; it was also politically multi-directional.³⁰ One may indeed ask if this

27 Habermas, 'Further Reflections', 443.

28 Besides the many publications about the civil society, see: Nick Crossley and John Michael Roberts (ed.), *After Habermas, New Perspectives on the Public Sphere* (Oxford 2004).

29 Habermas did not discuss the Dutch Patriots in the *Strukturwandel*.

30 Tim Blanning, *The Culture of Power and the Power of Culture*, 12.

public sphere was as rational critical and as modern as assumed. Jonathan Israel showed not only how important the Radical Enlightenment was for the making of modernity, but also how mainstream the *public* sphere was.³¹ Many moderate enlightened figures in France and in Germany were in favour of a sort of constitutional monarchy, modelled after the British. Radicals usually published their work clandestinely, anonymously, or incognito. After having experienced the Fall of the Berlin Wall, the peaceful Velvet Revolution, and the collapse of the Soviet Union, it is worthwhile to rethink the relations between the private, clandestine and public sphere of the Eighteenth Century from that perspective as well.

Blanning presents two other reservations of Habermas' concept.³² One is the relation between the state and the public sphere, which was in some periods of history hostile, but was mostly mutually supportive. The state promoted education, created a bureaucracy, and enforced secularisation. One could even reverse Habermas' argument, as Christopher Bayly made clear.³³ He researched the early modern Indian public sphere and explained the late Eighteenth Century strategic successes of the East India Company through the information policy of its servants. Bayly showed how the well informed Company servants benefitted from their knowledge of Indian politics, trade and culture. In general, it was and still is in the interest of the state that their citizenry is well educated and informed.

The last critical reflection is on Habermas' idea that the criticism develops first in the cultural realm and later moves on to politics. Nowadays, historians of the Early Modern period, such as Jonathan Israel, have indicated and described a much earlier political awareness, particularly in the Seventeenth Century. To conclude, the idea of a structural transformation of the public sphere is attractive for several periods in history, but the complexity of the concept and of its effects is often ignored or at least underestimated.

Reflexivity

A strong continuity in Habermas' work is his defence of democratic values against any conservative, subversive and undemocratic undercurrent in the German culture. From his first publication in 1953 onwards, these worries have been on top of his agenda. The philosophical undercurrent Habermas warned for was embodied by two persons: Martin Heidegger and Carl Schmitt. In his '53 FAZ-article, Habermas attacked Heidegger for publishing his 1935 lecture notes, in which he mentioned, on page 152, the inner truth and magnitude of the [National Socialist, H.J.] movement.³⁴ Habermas

31 Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment* (Oxford 2001), and *ibid.*, *Enlightenment Contested* (Oxford 2006).

32 Blanning, 13-14.

33 C.A. Bayly, *Empire and Information, Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870* (Cambridge 1996).

34 Jürgen Habermas, *Philosophisch – politische Profile*, 66.

asked why Heidegger had not left out this quote, nor took the opportunity to comment on it. Since Heidegger not at all reflected on his 1935 notes, he asked rhetorically if fascism and the German tradition were more linked to each other than assumed. According to Habermas, the reason why National Socialism was considered strange to German culture, as an intruder, as forced upon the tradition, was that mediocre fascist politicians did not accept the offer of the German mandarins, who were willing to guide the movement intellectually. According to Habermas, Heidegger and Schmitt not only represented a culture of silencing the crimes of the past, but also uncritically kept alive a tradition, which was earlier responsible for creating an intellectual climate in which National Socialism could flourish.³⁵

In the Nineteen Eighties, Habermas still combated this tradition. He was a fierce opponent of Ronald Reagan's 1985 visit to the German war cemetery of Bitburg, where American soldiers had been buried, but their bodies were moved to the US, and where only the graves of 49 members of the Waffen SS remained. In the *Historikerstreit*, which he launched a year later, he fiercely criticized the historian Michael Stürmer, who supported Helmut Kohl's politics of promoting German historical consciousness, a new *Geschichtspolitik*, which included the establishment of two history museums. Stürmer wanted to give back the Germans their history as a part of identity building and of giving meaning to future lives. Habermas countered this revisionist recasting of German history and identity, which he saw a sort of settlement of the claim ("Eine Art Schadensabwicklung").

His main opponent in the *Historikerstreit* was Ernst Nolte, whose philosophy of history was, according to Habermas, inspired by both Heidegger and Schmitt (indeed Nolte was a pupil, admirer, and apologist of Heidegger). In Nolte's arguments, the Nazi crimes lost their singularity, since he analysed the Holocaust as a distorted copy of the Soviet Gulag camps, build in reaction to a, still existing, Bolshevik thread. The Nazi concentration camps were not original; only the technical innovation was new. According to Habermas, the arguments of Stürmer and Nolte not only add to the culture of hiding and suppressing an incriminating history, but also of denying the importance of the universalistic values underlying the constitutional basis of the Federal Republic of Germany. Since, Germany's orientation on western politics and universalistic values was only made possible after Auschwitz.

There seems to be a consensus among historians that the *Historikerstreit* did neither bring new insights, new methods, nor the discovery of new facts.³⁶ I would like to make two remarks on this claim. First, although it is difficult to measure the effects of the *Historikerstreit*, I am convinced that in the long run many new insights are gained thanks to this quarrel. Impor-

35 Ibid, 'Carl Schmitt in der politischen Geistesgeschichte der Bundesrepublik', in: *Die Normalität einer Berliner Republik* (Frankfurt am Main 1995) 112-122.

36 Georgi Verbeek, 'In de schaduw van Auschwitz en de Goelag Archipel. De *Historikerstreit*', in: Patrick Dassen en Ton Nijhuis, *Gegijzeld door het verleden, Controverses in Duitsland, van de Historikerstreit tot het Sloterdijkdebat* (Amsterdam 2001) 23, 34.

tant scholarly debates – such as the debate about Max Weber’s claim of the affinitive relationship between protestant ethics and the rise of capitalism always relegate new research. It is undeniable that the historiography of the Shoah in the last decades has developed rapidly. In the much earlier debates between intentionalists and functionalists the main focus was on the concentration camps, on *Mein Kampf*, and on the ‘final decision’ made at the Wannsee Conference. However, after the *Historikerstreit* the Nazi terror in general came under view. The concentration camps appeared to be the most horrible expression of more general tactics of the Nazis at the Eastern front. The importance of the Wannsee conference could be put into perspective. Also, new research clarified the role of ordinary German soldiers and policemen in the mass shootings of Jews in Eastern Europe.³⁷ This new research was built upon earlier scholarly debates, particularly the *Historikerstreit*, which questions were incorporated by these researchers.

A second remark brings me to the question if Habermas’ interference in the *Historikerstreit* is well understood. Habermas’ criticism of Nolte was similar to his earlier criticism of Heidegger. As a young student, Habermas became acquainted with earlier, widely available scholarly research which was instrumentalised by political dictatorship. The Nazis used scientific knowledge in the broadest sense to manipulate power. The moral catastrophe of Auschwitz immediately made this knowledge obsolete. After the 1945 catastrophe, after humanity was harshly taken out of a presupposed continuity, it is only possible to get access to the past in a reflexive way. Since, historians have been coping with ambivalences, multiform values, and multiform views of the present and of past.³⁸ According to Habermas, the thread is unreflected knowledge of the past, which is vulnerable to new present-day manipulations. Reflexivity should be seen as a chance to get insights in languages and discourses, which are not ours anymore. His ideas about reflexive science, in general about communicative reflexivity, are the key to Habermas’ works.

37 For example: Christopher Browning, *Nazi Policy, Jewish Workers, German Killers* (Cambridge 2000) and of course the Goldhagen debate.

38 Jürgen Habermas, ‘Eine Diskussionsbemerkung’, in: *Eine Art Schadensabwicklung* (Frankfurt 1987), 117-119, and *ibid.*, ‘Grenzen des Neohistorismus’, in: *Die nachholende Revolution* (Frankfurt am Main 1990), 149-157