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## Editors' Introduction:

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*Adieu—Welcome!*

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If “poetry is the utopia of language,” as Umberto Eco wrote, then surely philosophy is the utopia of thinking—that no-where, that no-place, where thinking unmakes and outdoes itself. Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) was unquestionably the most roguish of pirates, the unrelentingly audacious charter of those un-mapped seas of the utopia of thinking.

Jacques Derrida already occupies a most singular place in the history of Western philosophy and letters, a place not granted to but taken by him. Few in the twentieth century have done greater honor to the name “radical philosophy,” while at the same time leaving an indelible mark on perhaps every region of human cultural activity. While the jealous and sclerotic guardians of the temples of philosophical rigor shamelessly disavow Derrida’s inheritance, radical philosophers should be proud that so many claimed his name and seek to hold on to a trace of his teaching. It would be philosophy’s death, and a democratic people’s demise, if philosophy were only to be accessible to and claimed by the professors in their sports jackets and turtlenecks. We ought to be thankful to Derrida that he invited so many to come and take what is theirs—as if echoing Abbie Hoffman’s *Steal this Book!*, we must all steal philosophy away from its betrayers and detractors. And while those priests of disciplinary purity seek to shut the doors to the temple of thinking, Jacques Derrida



has smuggled out for us a treasure trove of philosophizing, thus exemplifying, in a gloriously anarchical and insurgent way, what he called our “right to philosophy.”

The list of authors and texts that Derrida approached with such piety, tenderness, and care, which then entitled him to subject them to the most searing and disclosing readings, is simply staggering. No philosopher has been so ecumenical and cosmopolitan in his reading practices, and at the same time, few philosophers have read diverse texts with such perspicacity and subtlety. Derrida was a devout reader. He was also one of the most prolific philosophers of the twentieth century; as many a student has moaned, “he publishes faster than I can read.” However, Derrida was also a mesmerizing teacher, Socrates redux. There are many of us who were baptized—if not as Derrideans, then at the least as apostates of “established philosophy”—at the two-, three-, and four-hour lecture/seminar. In following the dialectical circle of reading, teaching, and writing that cleared the space of thinking for Derrida’s work, one comes to the realization that what is called *deconstruction* was really, as Simon Critchley put it pithily, *pedagogy*. Derrida approvingly quoted Kant’s retort that “philosophy can never be learned ..., we can at most learn to *philosophize*.”<sup>1</sup> Derrida taught us that philosophy is not a corpus, a tradition, a set of axioms and syllogisms, much less a canon, but is rather the ceaseless pursuit of an ethical imperative: to be taught by others, by our neighbor, by the one that arrives uninvited, unexpectedly, by the one who seeks refuge, who has been rendered stateless, without rights, and who is thus not heard, not seen, not felt—in short, the one whose reason is not the reason of the strong, but whose only power is the power of reason. As philosophy is pedagogy, then deconstruction is also hospitality.

In this issue of *Radical Philosophy Review*, we publish three tributes, three questionings, to Derrida, under the idea of *Adieu—Welcome!* Michael Naas has provided an unparalleled service through his many translations (with Pascale-Anne Brault) into English of Derrida’s works, including one of Derrida’s last and perhaps most important books: *Rogues*. In his very personal commemoration, Naas provides a unique testament to Derrida’s unmitigated humility and generosity. Nancy Holland explores her relationship to Derrida in order to work through his contributions to another roguish territory of philosophy, feminist thinking. The questions of gender—the philosophy of gender, the gender of philosophy—are interwoven with the questions of fraternity, of friendship, of whether the male philosopher has been a good friend to the female philosopher. To Holland’s invocation that she was *not* Derrida’s friend, we must ask: how have we been friends of feminist thinking? Bill Martin, that early friend of Derridean deconstructive politics, and one of the most

1. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (London, Macmillan, 1958), 657; quoted in Jacques Derrida, *Eyes of the University: Right to Philosophy 2*, trans. Jan Plug (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 56.



original U.S. radical philosophers through his engagements with Mao, with Sartre, and with critical theory, remembers Derrida as a teacher of the “democracy to come.” Martin, who for over a decade has been remarking on the radical political project entailed by deconstruction, finds in Derrida’s “last” book, *Rogues*, an anti-imperialist militancy that connects him, once again, to that other “last” book, Sartre’s *Hope Now*.

The rogue is the lawless tyrant, Schmitt’s *Fuhrer*; reason, even and especially when we are invested in saving its honor, its purity, and its rigor, turns servant of the rogue. This reason of the strong, however, is countered by the reason of the democracy to come, of the philosophy to come, as it is a reason that can be reasoned with. Here it is best to quote the last sentences of that “last” book:

Reason reasons, to be sure, it is right [*elle a raison*], and it gives itself reason [*se donner raison*], to do so, so as to protect itself or keep itself [*se garder*], so as to keep within reason [*raison garder*]. It is in this that it is and thus wants to be *itself*; that is its sovereign ipseity. But to make its ipseity see reason, it must be reasoned with. A reason must let itself be reasoned with.<sup>2</sup>

The project of the democracy to come, of a “sovereignty without conditionality,” is linked with the project of a “reason that can be reasoned with.” Thus, a radical politics of hospitality emerges in the lifework of Derrida, one that entwines in passionate embrace reason, democracy, and philosophy.

We continue to pay tribute to Derrida with the introduction to an English-speaking audience of René Schérer’s work *Hospitalités* (ably translated and prefaced by Ron Haas). While hospitality is obviously a theme of no small importance to Derrida, it is less well known that Schérer’s work influenced Derrida, who in turn served as an inspiration to Scherer; it is crucial, today, that Schérer’s work on hospitality, utopia, and their common fate in the modern world, be more widely translated, discussed and disseminated. In our age of dystopias, Schérer revives and rescues the utopian dimension of socialist thinking, in the heart of which warmly beats what Ernst Bloch called the “principle of hope.” Today, we have too much of cold reason, cynical reason, brutal reason, roguish reason, unreason as reason, naked avarice and greed as reason. There is no reason without hospitality, Schérer implores us, for as he puts it: “Hospitality is what ‘brings us back to reason’ when reason degenerates into rightness.”

A few more important contributions round out this issue of *RPR*. We must be infinitely grateful to Noam Chomsky, and public intellectuals like him, who are the civic and moral conscience of citizens of the U.S. The interview printed here,

2. Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, translated by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 2005), 159.



conducted in the spring of 2003, has the timeless character to it that shapes most of what Chomsky writes and says. If there is a kind of fixity to these words, it is not because he keeps repeating himself, but rather because the U.S. keeps making the same vile imperial mistakes, blundering like some drunken Viking or deranged Crusader, wreaking havoc abroad and at home. The interview gives us a glimpse into Chomsky's vast knowledge of U.S.-Latin American relations over the last century, and a sharp explanation of changes affecting Mexico, Brazil, Venezuela, Colombia, and Cuba. In the bleak picture that he paints, however, there are some rays of hope: the limits of imperial power.

This issue also contains a special forum on Martin Beck Matušík's book *Jürgen Habermas: A Philosophical-Political Profile*. Matušík's book is the first in English to offer a psycho-historical biography of this most significant philosopher of the second half of the twentieth century. It was a courageous book to write, not just because its subject is alive, but also because it seeks to place Habermasian critical theory in the context of the history of social transformations in Germany and throughout Europe. After this book no one will be able to doubt that Habermas was and remains one of Germany's most engaged public intellectuals; Matušík returns to Habermas the richness of thought and engagement that he deserves, and which is all too often stripped from him by his U.S. interlocutors, critics and epigones alike. Matušík has made a tremendous contribution, as well, to the history of existential biographies, among the exemplars of which are Sartre's *Saint Genet* and *The Family Idiot: Gustave Flaubert*.

Derrida and Habermas, who came together in 2003 to protest and engage the so-called War on Terrorism, each remind us of our important ethical commitments to democracy and discourse. In speaking, we seek to offer and demand reasons, but this giving and taking of reasons is also related to solidarity: the space of reasons is also a space of vulnerability. Within this space we may find hospitality, democracy, and the reason that opposes the lawless tyrant. Hope for a democracy to come leads us to ask: To what, and to whom, must we say *Adieu*, and to what, and to whom, will we say—*Welcome!*

# Critical Theory and Learning from History

— David S. Owen —

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*Abstract: In this paper I utilize Martin Beck Matušík's intellectual biography of Habermas as a means for reflecting on the meaning that critical theory has for us in the wake of September 11. I argue that the significant contribution of Matušík's book is that it fruitfully continues the conversation about the meaning of critical theory by underscoring the sociohistorical contexts that frame Habermas's intellectual engagements. Matušík's figure of the critical theorist as witness refocuses attention on the critical theorist in context, nevertheless as critical theorists we also need to be mindful of the plurality of disastrous events that continue to shape our world.*

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One of the more profound consequences of 9/11 was that it triggered a widespread inclination to reexamine and rethink the existential choices each of us makes everyday as we reflect on our values and priorities, our choice of careers, and the sorts of persons we seek to become. As a scholar and an educator, I also reflected on the meaning and purpose of my vocation in the wake of these events. It is too often the case that scholarship is too abstracted from everyday life to provide concrete guidance and orientation to action. What I have always found most compelling about critical theory is its rejection of theory for theory's sake and its embrace of praxis—a form of theoretically informed practice, where theory develops

out of practice and in turn informs that practice. In the shadow of 9/11, Martin Beck Matušík's focus on the existential question of the meaning of critical theory for us becomes especially timely and significant.

Jürgen Habermas is a towering example of the critical theorist at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries, and Matušík's intellectual biography of Habermas provides a useful frame of reference for exploring the question of what it means to be a critical theorist today. In what follows, I want to consider Matušík's existential<sup>1</sup> reading of Habermas's lifework with the aim of contributing to the discussion concerning the meaning and purpose of critical social theory. This discussion is necessarily open because the critical theorist is always already situated in a historical context that is by definition in continuous flux. Thus, since critical theory is self-reflective about its own historical circumstances, the conception of its meaning and purpose must also always be in flux as well.

Matušík intends his reading of Habermas's lifework to be a contribution to critical theory's self-reflection on its own meaning, for he states that "This book stands at the crossroads of a *new critical theory* ... between Habermas as a twentieth-century political thinker in a distinct tradition of Critical Theory [the Frankfurt School] and the future prospects of critical social theory" (xxv). But Matušík certainly has not written a standard intellectual biography. Rather, he adopts an existential approach to understand the trajectory of Habermas's theoretical and political corpus. Matušík's argues that "Habermas's profile can be reconstructed from his formative and intellectual life in postwar Germany and in relation to his generational sensibilities" (xiv). In this essay I will focus on how he conceives of the relationship between the critical theorist and her historical context—and by extension between critical social theory and history. There is no doubt these are complex and multidimensional relationships, but Matušík provides an intriguing understanding of this relation by suggesting that we think of the critical theorist as a witness to history.

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1. In his written response, Matušík notes that he distinguishes between an existential and an existentialist reading, where 'existential' is a transhistorical and attitudinal term and 'existentialist' is a more scholastic and historically specific term. In an earlier version of this essay, I used these terms interchangeably. While I did not, and still do not, impute to Matušík the claim that Habermas is an existentialist, I nevertheless think that this distinction in terminology is a very fine one at best. Since an existential methodology clearly derives from, and is a variant of, the core concepts and motivations of the classic existentialist thinkers, I fail to see what the distinction achieves. In short, it is a distinction without a difference. Since I do not see much value in the distinction, I have in this version used 'existential' throughout in order to better represent Matušík's own intentions.

## I. An Existential Philosophical-Political Profile

Throughout his growing body of work, Matušík has consistently argued that "existential critique and social critique complement each other and overcome their respective limitations."<sup>2</sup> Existentialist philosophy contributes to emancipatory praxis by thematizing and uncovering the motives and implicit ideals that orient the choices individuals make within determinate historical contexts. In fact, Matušík defines the existential as "a form of praxis rooted in the attitude of critical examination of those motives and presuppositions that influence the formations of identity, the parameters of communication, and theoretical ideals."<sup>3</sup>

We see this same orientation applied to Habermas's life and work in Matušík's most recent book. Reading Habermas's philosophical-political profile by means of an existential methodology allows Matušík to identify and uncover the relations between the motivational impulses and orienting ideals that shape that profile and Habermas's sociohistorical situation. What I take Matušík to be elaborating throughout this work is a particular conception of praxis. He seeks to analyze and clarify in the exemplary life of Habermas the ways that the critical theorist's sociohistorical situation and experiences define and shape the motivations, presuppositions, and ideals of theoretical constructs, and in turn how those same motivations, presuppositions, and ideals inform and direct concrete political action. Matušík thus adopts a multi-layered *and* multi-dimensional approach.

By organizing Habermas's lifework according to three, non-exhaustive "question areas" that he finds in Habermas's corpus and that he maintains Habermas himself has raised: (1) Situations; (2) Profiles and Interventions; and (3) Impacts and Discontents one can see the three layers of Habermas's lifework. Matušík, however, also recognizes that there are two axes or dimensions by means of which each of these questions can be approached: the dramatic and the structural. The dramatic axis focuses on the dynamics of the production of Habermas's lifework. In the dramatic axis our attention is drawn to the existential decisions that are made in response to differing situations, contexts, and encounters. What Matušík refers to as Habermas's *authoring* are those "pervasive motives and core intuitions [that form] the temporal trajectory" of Habermas's corpus (xxi). This axis or dimension is contrasted with the structural axis of the various generations that intersect Habermas's life and his theoretical and political productions and interventions. This, Habermas's *authorship*, is constituted by the architectonic of his theoretical corpus and political writings. In focusing on the praxial dimension, Matušík shows how Habermas's

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2. Martin J. Matušík, *Postnational Identity: Critical Theory and Existential Philosophy in Habermas, Kierkegaard, and Havel* (New York: Guilford Press, 1993), ix.

3. Matušík, *Postnational Identity*, ix.

authoring and authorship are dialectically related to one another. This is confirmed when he asserts that the unique strength of his existential reading is found in its capacity to integrate the “singularity of Habermas’s authoring within the pluralistic structure of his authorship” (221).

There are two obvious objections to Matušík’s existential reading of Habermas life and work that he confronts head on. The first is that this approach commits the naturalistic fallacy by inferring Habermas’s theoretical architectonic from the biographical and historical facts of his life. The second objection is that this approach faces the inductive problem of inferring a normative theory from the compilation of individual sets of experiences. Reading Matušík (reading Habermas) as clarifying the concept of praxis, however, explains Matušík’s denial that he commits either of these errors (xxi). An existential reading provides, not a justification of Habermas’s theoretical edifice from his biographical details, but rather an elaboration of the trajectory of Habermas’s intellectual and political life; it illuminates the dialectical relation between the individual and his context, which constitutes Habermas’s unique embodiment of praxis. Since Habermas’s self-understanding is as a critical theorist, interpreting his lifework as embodying a conception of praxis will generate a more complete and fruitful understanding of his life and work. Matušík seeks to show just how Habermas embodies this conception of praxis by clarifying the ways in which the motives and presuppositions that are formed by Habermas’s biographical situations shape his theoretical production, which in turn orients his political praxis. The value of Matušík’s study is not just in the new profile of Habermas’s intellectual and political life that it provides us, but also in the clarification of the concept of praxis that is essential to the project of critical social theory.

This multi-layered, multi-dimensional approach also has the strength of generating an open framework for further interpretation. Constructing his narrative by cross-cutting each of the questioning levels by these two dramatic and structural dimensions, Matušík produces a complex account of how the critical theorist’s formative situations, the sociohistorical context of her lifespan, and the theoretical and political debates she encounters interact to produce a unique praxial narrative. Thus, while Matušík does not claim completeness for his account, it does have the virtue of recognizing the existential, historical, theoretical, and political complexities of the lifework of any critical theorist.

Despite the coherence and virtues of this methodology, the organization and content of the book do not quite match our expectations. The book is divided into three parts, corresponding to the three question areas. The first two parts track the trajectory of Habermas’s lifework from his “existential birthday” in the summer of 1945 to the post-1989 challenges of German reunification and postnational constellations. But in the first of these two parts Matušík emphasizes the dramatic axis,

and in the second he emphasizes the structural axis. In the third part, however, he integrates the two axes in an account of Habermas’s influence and reception. It is not clear why each part does not provide an integrated account of both the dynamics and structure, or the authoring and authorship, of his lifework. The conception of praxis that is intimated in Matušík’s existential reading would imply that one’s formative situations and the historical past intimately shape not just the present but also the critical theorist’s orientation to the future. Thus, both the authoring and authorship of Habermas’s lifework are inseparably linked in the praxial narrative of his profile. If this is the case, then even a shift of emphasis in presentation between the authoring and authorship will disrupt and distort the narrative of Habermas’s lifework when it is conceived as an embodiment of praxis.

## II. Critical Theory and History

One of the central themes Matušík identifies in Habermas’s lifework is the notion of learning from disaster: “Everything is existentially at stake for him when his philosophical-political birthday [in 1945] is threatened by the dangers of losing the future by way of forgetting the past. The twentieth century puts at risk its future by not learning from—by badly forgetting—its own disaster” (139). In an essay reflecting on the “short” twentieth century, Habermas remarks that “The twentieth century ‘generated’ more victims, more dead soldiers, more murdered civilians, more displaced minorities, more torture, more dead from cold, from hunger, from maltreatment, more political prisoners and refugees, than could ever have been imagined. The phenomena of violence and barbarism mark the distinctive signature of the age.”<sup>4</sup> Reflecting on this, Habermas notes that 1945 marked the turning point of the century, what he hopes will be a turn towards “mastering the force of barbarism.”<sup>5</sup> The question that is begged by this, as Habermas recognizes, is whether we genuinely have the capacity to learn from this history of barbarism.

On Matušík’s reading, however, Habermas’s philosophical-political profile is delimited by two central “integrative concepts”: the concept of learning from disaster is historically complemented by that of a permanent democratic revolution. Matušík argues that “The existential modes of Habermas’ and *our* contemporary historical presents are *learning by disaster* and *permanent democratic revolution*” (204). Matušík takes Habermas to be the exemplary critical theorist *for us*, meaning that while our situations, institutional crises, generational profiles, and

4. Jürgen Habermas, “Learning from Catastrophe? A Look Back at the Short Twentieth Century” in *The Postnational Constellation: Political Essays*, translated, edited, and with an introduction by Max Pensky (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001), 45.

5. Habermas, “Learning from Catastrophe,” 45.



historical contingencies may differ from his, we nevertheless are oriented with Habermas along the line between the horizon of the disasters of the twentieth century and the horizon of future democratic possibilities. On Matušík's reading, then, we at the very least share these two horizon-defining integrative concepts with Habermas, and because of this, traveling with Habermas through the late twentieth century is valuable in exploring the meaning critical theory has for us today.

The imagery generated by thinking of the concept of learning by disaster as defining the horizon of our collective past is useful for us as we articulate our own understanding of critical social theory today, but only to a degree. There is no doubt that catastrophes of our past form the unavoidable—and sometimes unspeakable—historical markers by which we situate ourselves today. We cannot existentially reflect on ourselves in historical mode without making reference to the Holocaust, as well as to the catastrophes of war that have been perpetrated during this century. And I find persuasive Matušík's argument that Habermas's philosophical-political profile is shaped in an essential way by his ongoing response to his existential birthday in 1945 when he learned of the horrors of the Holocaust. While I do not doubt that such disasters do impact our existential self-understandings in fundamental ways, I think that the questions of who we are and who we want to be are also shaped and formed in a fundamental way by historical legacies of a different sort. Reducing the notion of learning by disaster only to particular reference events occludes other significant legacies of our past, legacies that must be the object of critical theoretic concern because they as well continue to represent unredeemed injustices and suffering.

Consider, for example, the case of the Atlantic slave trade. The consequences throughout the Western world of the trade in slaves forcefully removed from the African continent continue to produce profound social, political, economic, and cultural injustices and suffering. At a minimum this trade was a primary factor in the development, entrenchment, and institutionalization of the modern idea of race, which in turn underwrote the development of capitalism and colonialism, and which continues to be a fundamental force shaping our current sociocultural reality. While this certainly can be described as a catastrophe, it cannot be reduced to single event or date that represents its horrors. In what sense does the figure of learning from disaster apply to the Atlantic slave trade? Or consider the injustices and suffering that continue to be manifested by patriarchal social structures, capitalist industrialization, globalization, heterosexist orthodoxy, and the normalization of the needs and interests of able-bodied individuals.<sup>6</sup> While each is certainly a disaster in its own right, none of these are

6. I do not mean to suggest that Matušík is not passionately concerned about these forms of injustice and suffering. His concern is amply demonstrated throughout his *Specters of Liberation: Great Refusals in the New World Order* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998). Rather, my concern here has to do with his framing of historical catastrophes as events or identifiable moments that define the horizon of an era.



definable by a particular historical event or frame. If learning from disaster is to be a useful figure for today's critical social theorist, it needs to be interpreted broadly and pluralistically so as to include not just readily identifiable disasters, but also those historical phenomena that have had disastrous consequences over the long durée.

But what does it mean to learn from disaster? Matušík asks: "Is there only a melancholy recollection of the past that neither lets itself be mourned nor allows itself to pass away? Can the traumatic past be worked off and remembered *today* rather than worked over and normalized by revisionist historians, museum archivalists, politicians?" (141). The answer requires us to acknowledge our "intersubjective liability" (as distinct from collective guilt) for working through the disasters of the past.<sup>7</sup> This involves two aspects: "*anamnestic solidarity* with the victims of history," and "a future-oriented critical praxis" (141). After completing the manuscript for this book, Matušík expanded on his thesis by exploring in more depth the idea of the critical theorist as witness to the traumatic past.<sup>8</sup> Anamnestic solidarity with the traumatic past is how we recognize the unavoidable present effect of the past. If we do not recognize the ways that the past continues to live in the present, we cannot begin to step into the future, *our* future. But simply remembering the past clearly is not enough to enact change. We must also, at the same time that we engage in anamnestic solidarity, enact a critical praxis in order to redeem the sufferings of the victims of disasters in a *concrete* way. This entails that critical social theory must engage in a critical examination of present social, political, economic, and cultural structures from the perspective of the victims of *past* injustices. This historically-oriented vision must be a central element of our conception of critical social theory.

Matušík's recovery of Walter Benjamin's anamnestic solidarity with the traumatic past is a significant and too often missing aspect of critical social theory. Habermas's reconstruction of the formal pragmatics of communicative interaction has inspired much critical-theoretic work. However, much of this work reduces critical social theory to the identification of systemic asymmetries in contexts of communicative interaction. What should not be left out is an account of the ways that our past forms and shapes our present across the full range of our personal, social, cultural, and political lives. Our critical-theoretic accounts must reckon with the ways that these systemic social asymmetries are a consequence of our historical heritage, and Matušík's understanding of the

7. For Habermas's clarification of this distinction, see Jürgen Habermas, "Historical Consciousness and Post-Traditional Identity: The Federal Republic's Orientation to the West," in *The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historian's Debate*, edited and translated by Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1989).

8. Martin Beck Matušík, "The Critical Theorist as Witness: Habermas and the Holocaust," in *Perspectives on Habermas*, edited by Lewis Edwin Hahn (Chicago: Open Court, 2000), 339-366.



critical theorist as witness contributes significantly to correcting this distortion in the self-understanding of critical theory today.

### III. Conclusion

What does the figure of the critical theorist as witness mean for us today, in the shadow of 9/11, as we make crucial existential choices? 9/11 should remind us that the comprehension of such traumatic and catastrophic events is an ongoing and open-ended process. As Matušík notes, the past must be open if we are to act critically in a future-oriented posture.<sup>9</sup> Thus, we cannot presume to ever have the final interpretation of any historical event or phenomenon, and we cannot presume to comprehend 9/11 in a final way. Nevertheless, in order to redeem the suffering of the victims we must collectively work through the meaning of this catastrophe by engaging in a future-oriented, yet historically contextualized, praxis.

We also are reminded that the social and cultural conditions that made 9/11 possible have historical roots. In attempting to work through this disaster and in attempting to respond responsibly, we must not ignore the past and the ways that past actions shape the present. Responding to 9/11 as if it were a rupture in history—a set of actions and events with no explanation—will deny us the possibility of learning from disaster. When we understand such events as if they have no continuity to what historically preceded them, we treat them like historical beginnings that lack the possibility of explanations, and we thus close off the past. Removing 9/11 from its historical context will lead to responses that are grounded more in the emotion of revenge and assertions of power than in reflective attempts to make the *world* a better place than it was prior to 9/11. It must be possible to recognize the unspeakable horror at the core of these attacks, and at the same time to acknowledge that such events are also a part of a historical continuum, with reasons, causes, and explanations. It is the task of the critical theorist, if she is to learn from disaster, to see such events in their historical context. Only by resisting the forgetfulness of this, as well as the suffering of the victims, can the critical theorist begin (and only begin) to redeem the sufferings of the past.

Finding in Habermas's lifework the figure of the critical social theorist as witness, Martin Matušík has provided us with a fruitful way to think through what critical theory means for us today. His existential reading of Habermas has the advantage of uncovering the context that shapes the motivations, paths, and tentative solutions, as well as the blind spots, of Habermas's public self as expressed in his lifework. While I do not think this is, or should be, the only reading possible of Habermas's profile, it nevertheless contributes to the continuous re-imagining of the

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9. Matušík, "The Critical Theorist as Witness."

project of critical social theory itself. Such a complex subject as Habermas and his lifework cannot be contained adequately in a single book, and the best one can hope for is that, in thinking through Habermas's life, both author and reader contribute to the renewal of critical social theory. Matušík's book fulfills this hope by providing us with a new, valuable, and stimulating conception of praxis and of critical social theory, and in this way he keeps the conversation going. — • —

# Jürgen Habermas, Existential Hero?

— Max Pensky —

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*Abstract:* This review of Martin Matušík's Jürgen Habermas: A Philosophical-Political Profile questions whether Matušík's description of the existentialist dimensions of Habermas's political theory is adequate to the internal differentiation of Habermas's conception of a substantive ethical life. In doing so, it questions whether Habermas' own theory adequately distinguishes between first-person singular and first-person plural ethical discourse. The review closes with a reflection on ethical self-reflection and the collective past, a theme that Matušík's book discusses under the theme of "anamnestic solidarity."

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**M**artin Matušík's *Philosophical-Political Profile* of Jürgen Habermas presents a powerful and provocative interpretation of Habermas's status as an engaged political thinker. Some of Matušík's most important claims will appear familiar to readers who have followed the trajectory of Habermas's political writings over the last decades. Other claims—specifically Matušík's emphasis on the irreducibly existentialist component in Habermas's politics—are new and sure to be controversial. In what follows I will certainly not attempt to cover all the bases in this large and complex study. I want to do only two things in this short paper. First, I will attempt to analyze Matušík's claims concerning the existentialist—specifically,

the Kierkegaardian—dimension of Habermas’s political writings, and I will do so by placing this existentialist element more closely in relation to Habermas’s theory of communicative rationality than it appears in Matušík’s study. This reconstruction may be helpful in identifying the *sources* of Habermas’s peculiar appropriation of Kierkegaard, both theoretically and metatheoretically. Second, I will apply the results of the first section to Matušík’s dramatic reading of the notion of “anamnesic solidarity,” or a solidarity based upon memory, which he interprets—rightly, I think—to be a central but largely overlooked category in Habermas’s own understanding of the particular challenges of any politically engaged intellectual who confronts the task of justifying the normative content of social and political modernity.

## I. An Existential Philosophical-Political Profile

I begin with what I take to be the central claim of Matušík’s account of Habermas the politically engaged writer (in distinction to Habermas the academic theorist). Matušík begins by applying a reasonably familiar “generational logic” (which he borrows largely from Clemens Albrecht)<sup>1</sup> according to which Habermas, born in 1929, is a member of a “skeptical generation,” whose members were too young to experience national socialism and the German catastrophe as adults, but too old to share the political intoxication of 1968. The generation was caught between conflicting generational and hence cultural and political needs: on the one hand, the need to recover from disaster by securing the institutional and motivational grounds of a normal liberal democracy, but on the other hand, the need to revolt against the elements of complacency and repression of (West) German political culture, its distinctive silences and hypocrisies, its strategic thirst for re-appropriating even the most bankrupt of national and cultural traditions, its unreflective anti-Communism, its smug material culture. Like his cohorts in this “skeptical” middle generation (Günter Grass, Hans-Magnus Enzensberger), Habermas inherits a range of pre-established existential and social-political problems to solve. It is attractive and productive to describe this situation in existentialist terms. The revolt against the fathers, in the name of authenticity and honesty, against an unjustified prosperity based on existential lies, demands an existentially motivated criticism of the taken-for-granted, of a devastated life-world, and this criticism, in turn, demands the existential choice of what sort of life one chooses to live, even what sort of life-world one chooses to live it in. At the same time, though, the revolt itself must justify its own motivations, attitudes, and rhetoric against the charges of inauthenticity—of narcissism masquerading as political commitment, of an aesthetic approach to life masquerad-

1. See Clemens Albrecht, et al., *Die intellektuelle Gründung der Bundesrepublik: Eine Wirkungsgeschichte der Frankfurter Schule* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 1999).

ing as ethical choice. Between a rock and a hard place, emblematically for his entire skeptical generation, Habermas is obliged to appropriate both the conservative and radical impulses in order to distinguish what remains justifiable (authentic) in them both, and create from out of this odd hybrid of historical experiences a coherent and compelling body of work, both theoretical and practical. The coherence of his work, its enduring relevance for the self-understanding of postwar Germans across generational and political divisions, and Habermas’s ongoing status as Germany’s most powerful and influential theoretical voice for the rest of the world, attests to how successful he has been in negotiating these extraordinary pressures. Yet inevitably such existential pressure produces fissures and instabilities of its own.

Matušík portrays Habermas as a social theorist whose theorizing enacts an interminable Kierkegaardian either/or; for Matušík, injecting this demand for existential self-choice in the face of conflicting cultural and political pressures constitutes Habermas’s most distinctive contribution to critical social theory. Many readers of Habermas may follow Matušík willingly up until the last of these assertions, which of course is Matušík’s original contribution to the reception of Habermas. And indeed it does seem, at first blush, an extraordinarily counter-intuitive stretch to see Habermas—one of the most rigorously and uncompromisingly formalist theorists of modern times—as an existentialist hero. This is the same Habermas, after all, whose *Theory of Communicative Action* undertakes to reconcile macro- and micro-sociological theories of social modernity by demonstrating that phenomenologically thick accounts of life-worlds (in which we all live our eccentric and distinctive lives) must conform to the same sorts of universal pragmatic rules as the most abstract of formal arguments. This is the same Habermas whose reception of micro-sociology—Mead’s symbolic interactionism—yields an “individuation-through-socialization” thesis: individuality in the final analysis is understood as an effect of always-already institutionally established socialization processes, such that individuality cannot ever plausibly maintain any claim to irreducibility. This is the same Habermas whose deontological moral theory is as formalist and as cognitivist as any since Kant. And perhaps most significantly, this is the same Habermas who has spent half a century writing about and within a public sphere, whose work has consistently demanded the public, intersubjective character of ethical self-evaluation. This demand seems inconsistent with what I take to be a distinctive characteristic of the kind of existential self-choice that Kierkegaard expresses, namely, the subjective inwardness, even the bracketing of the social, necessary for an authentic self-relation.

As a way of coming to grips with the claim of Habermas as existential hero, it’s helpful to situate the problem of existential self-relation within Habermas’s own theory, first in the most abstract version of Habermas’s theory of practical reasoning, and then in the application of that theory to the role of ethical discourses in

contemporary political life. Habermas's notorious distinction between pragmatic, ethical, and moral discourse intends to thematize the relevant difference between formal-universal and substantial-particular forms of justifying norms by insisting that *ethical discourse* confine itself to the question of the good life, and that this question be framed primarily as a hermeneutical challenge concerning individual or collective identity: what sort of life do I (or we) wish to live? For Habermas, such questions are always *particular*, insofar as they always thematize portions of a particular life-world, and thus offer reasons that are meant to convince fellow members of a particular life-world, and not rational beings as such. For the same reason they are also always *substantive*, insofar as reasons given, and grounds for assent or denial, are caught up in particular sets of shared experiences that constitute the substantial whole of a shared ethical life, a *Sittlichkeit*. Finally, ethical debates are always *hermeneutical*, insofar as the successful conclusion of an ethical discourse must be measured in the *changed nature of a shared self-understanding*, rather than the conformity of norms to universalization demands, or successfully concluded actions.<sup>2</sup>

My suspicion is that this understanding of the distinctive forms of practical reasoning just isn't compatible with a form of existentialist encounter as robust as Matušík claims. Just as discourse ethics would regard Kantian moral deliberation as an artificially isolated version of what is in essence an intersubjective discursive practice, so too "ethical discourse" in its *existentialist reading*—in which the isolated individual, alone with her conscience and her life-history, must confront herself honestly and ruthlessly—is the derivative, secondary form of an ongoing ethical discourse, in which we are all always already involved. Modern life-worlds are modern, after all, in large measure because the particular, substantive reservoir of shared meanings, values, and interpretations, the taken-for-granted aspect of the life-world, falls well short of the hermeneutic needs of their participants to endow meaning and purpose to their own lives, tendentially obliging them to shoulder more and more of the share of the reproduction of the life-world on their own.

Given this distinction within Habermas's own theory of practical reasoning, Matušík quite correctly identifies a crucial ambiguity between the existential dynamic of *solitary* and *collective* processes of self-interpretation. Habermas understands "ethical" discourses—in an important sense the *primary* locus of interest from the point of view of social theory—as involving an always-already situated first-person, yet Habermas himself does not distinguish sharply (or sharply enough) between the first-person singular and first-person plural versions of such discourse.

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2. See Jürgen Habermas, "On the Pragmatic, the Ethical, and the Moral Employments of Practical Reason," in *Justification and Application: Remarks on Discourse Ethics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993).

In the context of the 1980s Historians' Debate, Habermas defined the primacy of Kierkegaardian self-choice in this way: "Every individual first encounters himself as the historical product of contingent life circumstances, but in 'choosing' himself as this product he constitutes a self to which the rich concreteness of the life history in which he merely found himself is attributed as something for which he will account retrospectively."<sup>3</sup> Ethical talk is talk about self-understanding, and the paradigm case of such self-understanding, the self-reflective formation of a personal identity, compels the existential subject to examine critically and take responsibility for what could otherwise appear as a purely contingent past, for a present which bore only a contingent relationship to that past, and for a future left open to choice. Existential self-encounter is always diachronic; it involves both retentive and protentive moments, and requires the individual to grant a narrative coherence to her own life, to see it as a meaningful whole with a certain developmental sense, even if that sense is difficult to bear, defined by mistakes large and small.

The Kierkegaardian notion of choosing to give one's life a narrative meaning was a mid-century protest against the essentializing effects of Hegel's conception of *Sittlichkeit*, the ethical whole of the State in which individuals first encountered the resources to construct a meaningful life history. And while Kierkegaard never failed to recognize the extent to which the individual's either/or was situated in the context of an intersubjective, public life, he nevertheless insisted upon the character of inwardness, on the solitary encounter of the individual with her own life. But from a Habermasian perspective, this primacy of inwardness is only relative, perhaps even deceptive. Pursued with stringency, thoroughly authentic inwardness leads *out* of the individual *to* the confrontation with concrete social and political conditions, institutions and practices for which the individual *cannot* take any other personal responsibility than the responsibility for engaged public action. At the same time, authentic reflection on the realm of private life experiences leads to a second reflection in which the individual can recognize the extent to which her own individuality is grounded in, and generated by, a range of social practices, shared identities and common understandings—including the understanding of such terms as "individual" and "inwardness"—for which she must take responsibility in a public sphere of possible actions. No one can coherently take responsibility for her life history, can retrospectively endow her experiences with an overarching sense, without having this self-ownership contextualize itself within a range of experiences accessible only via an ethical discourse that precedes and that will survive the individual. Rather than the Kierkegaardian movement, in which inwardness moves to the public realm

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3. Jürgen Habermas, "Historical Consciousness and Post-traditional Identity," *The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historians' Debate* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), 260.

only to secure the terms for its return to the subjectivity of faith, a Habermasian reading of Kierkegaard would have to insist on inwardness as a mediating moment between an unreflective and a self-reflective form of publicity. Hence the public aspect of ethical discourse remains primary, with inwardness one of its moments.

Yet if this is so, it is also true that Habermas over-emphasizes the degree to which the “I” of the private ethical discourse is analogous to the “we” of public discourses about collective identities. Even if the moment of subjective inwardness is in fact a moment of a more primary public ethical discourse, the two forms of ethics remain distinct insofar as private ethical talk is not simply an internalized public ethical talk (in the sense that private moral testing procedures, such as Kant’s categorical imperative, can be seen as internalized public moral discourse). One’s self-relation retains a range of finally private, un-generalizable experiences, interpretations and affects that simply cannot be incorporated meaningfully into public ethical discourses; Habermas himself collects this range of private self-relation under the rather unhelpful category of “authenticity” in the *Theory of Communicative Action*, where he is careful to point out that no public, discursive procedures are available for testing the validity claims raised by speech acts thematized under the illocutionary force of personal authenticity. This claim—that there are discourses of fact and norm but none of authenticity—might have made Habermas more careful not to conflate the “I” and the “we” perspectives in the realm of specifically ethical normative discourse. And this might have resulted in a more circumspect distinction between them, avoiding the occasional impression Habermas gives that “post-traditional identity” is a term that can be applied to both individuals and collectivities.

In his reading of Kierkegaard in the context of the Historians’ Debate, Habermas seemed to have this point very much in mind. Habermas appealed to Kierkegaard to describe the dynamics of a *collective* ethical encounter with identity-generating traditions, a critical encounter that entails the painful task of critically interrogating, and in part rejecting, parts of a shared identity:

The analogies between this process of appropriation [of shared traditions] and Kierkegaard’s model of the responsible assumption of one’s individual life history should not be taken too far. The decisionism of “either/or” represents an extreme stylization, even with regard to an individual life. The weight of “the decision” here is meant primarily to stress the autonomous and conscious character of the act of taking hold of oneself.<sup>4</sup>

A better interpretation of the relation between inwardness and publicity in ethical discourses of identity thus seems to favor a dialectical understanding of the relation between first-person singular and plural. This dialectic enacts the movement in

4. Habermas, “Historical Consciousness and Post-traditional Identity,” 262.

which the *private* attempt to grant retrospective narrative significance to one’s own life runs up against the *public*, the objective and structural impediments to meaningful life as such: impediments that can for the first time illuminate otherwise occluded social and political forms of oppression. The model for this dialectical reading of inwardness is Adorno’s *Minima Moralia*, which claims that a meaningful, good life—a human life—cannot be lived in the present world. Adorno, who had earlier written an entire book attempting to reveal the enabling social conditions for Kierkegaard’s inwardness, provides an extreme example of this, of course.<sup>5</sup> A tamer version of this dialectical insight can be found in Habermas himself, who understands that the end of inwardness is the profane political recognition of the need for public engagement, and the aim of public engagement is to change the world such that meaningful lives can be lived:

Then, of course, we may ask how intersubjectively shared life contexts must be structured in order not only to leave room for the development of exacting personal identities but also to support such processes of self discovery. What would group identities have to be like to be capable of complementing and stabilizing the improbable and endangered type of ego identity that Kierkegaard outlines?<sup>6</sup>

Habermas’s well-known answer to this question receives a clear formulation in the essay on “The Unity of Reason in the Diversity of its Voices”:

The analysis of the necessary conditions for mutual understanding in general at least allows us to develop the idea of an intact intersubjectivity, which makes possible both a mutual and constraint free understanding among individuals in their dealings with one another and the identity of individuals who come to a compulsion free understanding with themselves. This intact intersubjectivity is a glimmer of symmetrical relations marked by free, reciprocal recognition. But this idea must not be filled in as the totality of a reconciled form of life and projected into the future as a utopia.<sup>7</sup>

## II. Anamnestic Solidarity

Habermas frequently employs the idea of “anamnestic solidarity”—a debt to past victims of historical injustice—as a way of describing the distinctive motivational grounds for Germans to recognize their collective liability for the continuity of

5. See Theodor W. Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

6. Habermas, “Historical Consciousness and Post-traditional Identity,” 261.

7. Jürgen Habermas, “The Unity of Reason in the Diversity of its Voices,” in *Justification and Application* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 145.

traditions and values in which the Holocaust was possible. The melancholy awareness of the finality of historical suffering—even worse, the awareness of the dependence of the prosperous present on the unredeemed suffering of past victims—is an awareness of the contradiction inherent in the moral ideal of absolute justice. Memory thus emerges as a supplement to an otherwise harshly abstract moral universalism through the paradoxical exercise of an impossible solidarity, one that can be approached, if at all, only by practicing a remembrance of vanished victims.

In another context I have discussed the peculiarity of Habermas's appropriation of this notion of anamnestic solidarity.<sup>8</sup> In its Benjaminian version (contained in Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History"), remembrance is granted a messianic power: the dead demand justice, but justice can be had only through the messianic interruption of the span of historical time itself. Materialist criticism, by mobilizing the strength of generations of unfulfilled wishes for happiness and unredeemed suffering, enables the construction of critical interventions (Benjamin called them "dialectical images") so shocking in their effect that they point toward the revolutionary potential always latent within the heart of the present. On the basis of this messianic potential of social criticism, Benjamin's reflections even hint at the "openness" of the past itself, that the dead are still not safe from a kind of retrospective violence—a claim that brought a rebuke from Horkheimer, irritated by what he perceived as a moment of unreflective theology. "The assertion of the un-closedness [of history]," Horkheimer wrote to Benjamin, "is idealistic, if closedness isn't included in it. Past injustice is over and done with. The murdered really are murdered."<sup>9</sup> Seeking a corrective to Horkheimer's secular imperative, Benjamin insists that history, understood both as a social science and a mode of recollection [*Eingedenken*], entails a historical consciousness interwoven with both objectifying and normative dimensions.

What science has "determined," recollection can modify. Recollection can make the un-closed in history (happiness) into something closed, and the closed (suffering) into something un-closed. That's theology; but in recollection we undergo an experience that forbids us from conceiving of history in fundamentally a-theological terms, even as we remain unable of writing history in directly theological concepts.<sup>10</sup>

Habermas in effect secularizes and defuses this messianic-revolutionary reading of collective memory, insisting that a post-metaphysical reading of collective memory must restrict itself to describing the collective intuitions in which a genu-

8. Max Pensky, "The Use and Abuse of Memory: Habermas, 'Anamnestic Solidarity' and the Historikerstreit." *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 15, no. 4, (1990): 351-380.

9. See Benjamin's own meditations on this letter from Horkheimer in Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 471.

10. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 589.

ine coming-to-terms with one's own collective past first becomes possible. Carefully avoiding both religious and psychological terms (such as messianism, redemption, trauma, working-through, etc.), Habermas insists that anamnestic solidarity is the normatively appropriate response to the inheritors of Auschwitz.

In the (infrequent) attempts to interpret the role of this peculiar concept of anamnestic solidarity in Habermas's work there has been a considerable degree of bafflement. It clearly has no readily discernible *theoretical* status. It is not a subset, for example, of a broader argument about the interrelation of justice and solidarity; it probably comes closer to a phenomenological description of a peculiar set of affects—like mourning and compassion—that mark the limits of moral universalism.<sup>11</sup> Nor does it square with Habermas's otherwise relentless "presentism" that characterizes his social theory of modernity. One of the entailments of post-metaphysical thinking is the abandonment of a philosophy of history that would grant theoretical weight to any notion of memory beyond a description of the often tortured relation of a society with its own historical life-world.

Neither theological nor moral, then, anamnestic solidarity appears as an ethical conception. This links discussion of anamnestic solidarity directly to the conception of an ethical first-person plural expressed in an ongoing existential narrative. The "we" called upon to practice anamnestic solidarity, in other words, appears to be an ethical we: present-day Germans who were not directly implicated in the Holocaust, but who nevertheless find themselves obliged to confront the task of rejecting continuities that *otherwise appear* to be normatively neutral, or even pragmatically beneficial. Anamnestic solidarity, in this sense, describes a form of ethical motivation, a "problem from the past" that presents itself initially as a range of intuitions—or even normative and affective impulses—that will not go away. But if this interpretation is correct, it squarely contradicts Matušík's attempt to appropriate the notion of anamnestic solidarity from Habermas's work in its full range of religious, moral, and political implications—implications that move far beyond anything plausibly connected with Habermas's own work.

Matušík very perceptively connects anamnestic solidarity with the thesis of the existential grounding of Habermas's political criticism, showing why the problem of anamnestic solidarity must appear as urgent for Habermas as a representative of the "skeptical" generation. "Everything Habermas says, does, and writes can be rendered intelligible by this one core referent, the Holocaust" (143), he writes. This extreme formulation (which with I would actually agree, *mutatis mutandis*) is the basis for a reading of anamnestic solidarity startlingly stronger and more messianic than the one Habermas himself would give.

11. On this issue see Jürgen Habermas, "Reply to My Critics," in *Habermas: Critical Debates*, edited by John B. Thompson and David Held (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982), 247.

Habermas as a critical social theorist adopts the position of a witness—he restores the shattered solidarity in acts of dangerous remembrance. The danger does not consist in bringing the victims back from history, but in the emancipatory promise that the present generation enacts on behalf of the past and future generations. With acts of anamnestic solidarity one assumes liability. Both this past-oriented solidary remembrance and the future-oriented responsibility jointly motivate the task of social critique and transformation. (145)

Matušík's argument, then, is that the existential task of interrogating the grounds of one's own present, the spur to move one's life forward responsibly into the future, "moves by virtue of the dangerous memory of the past injustices" (145). Hence liability appears as the only existentially authentic response to this "dangerous memory." And Matušík further argues that Habermas's engagement in public controversies over collective memory, above all the Historians' Debate, must be seen as a sort of existential crisis provoked by a threatened solidarity with the past.

Perhaps in line with his Kierkegaardian aims, Matušík concedes the secularity of Habermas's version of anamnestic solidarity while at the same time insisting that it retains much of its inherently theological force:

In *this* age, when "God" is increasingly becoming dead, humans share in their responsibility to co-create, indeed, hasten the coming of the messiah. This redemptive responsibility marks the post-secular thought of liberation. The anamnestic solidarity with the victims of history cannot be to a "God" who alone is made responsible for saving us. Rather, an active solidarity turns into liberation praxis. In this recourse to myth we meet Habermas's peculiar dialectical atheism. He appropriates religious themes—Benjamin's or Metz's redemptive solidarity and dangerous memory with the victims of history—and integrates them into a more secular mode of public discourses on the future of our traditions. (146)

Now, it is certainly true—in fact increasingly true—that Habermas follows Adorno's dictum that the theological themes and problems that make up the core set of intuitions we possess about the possibility of justice and a good life must be encouraged to migrate, one way or another, into the secular. Unlike Adorno, however, Habermas has been extraordinarily careful to maintain a methodological and terminological barrier between metaphysical-religious language and the far more procedural and abstract terms of post-metaphysical philosophy. At times the post-metaphysical versions for theological terms bear only a passing resemblance to their earlier versions; think for example of his rather underwhelming interpretation of the old Christian conception of the Absolute re-imagined as the linguistically structured life-world. But in fact the very *unsatisfactory* translation of religious into secular, modern form is the point. While virtually all specifically

modern intuitions concerning moral recognition derive from originally religious language, and indeed while virtually all specifically modern moral impulses continue to "nourish themselves," as Habermas would put it, from those sources of religious consciousness that remain accessible in post-metaphysical conditions, it is also true that this is almost always poor nourishment. Secularized modernity is relentless in its exceptionless devaluation of formerly meaning-giving and meaning-sustaining metaphysical explanations of the world, which is why existential crisis and secularization have always gone hand in hand, a fact already noticed by Durkheim and Weber. In the present context, the true significance of anamnestic solidarity beyond the particular public crises of postwar Germany is that it evokes precisely the *impossibility* of finding an adequate answer to a modern question with modern resources. The question is the demand of universal justice, once that demand extends not only to present and even future generations but to past generations as well. The impossibility that imposes itself on this crucial demand—what in German would be called the *Nichtwiedergutzumachende*, that which under no circumstances can ever be made right again—calls forth not a new form of religiosity that would somehow re-open the past that modernity has sealed, as Matušík wants, but rather the duty for ongoing collective reflection on the historical conditions of the present, the profoundly secular task of taking responsibility for one's own existence.

We are familiar with the way in which existentialist philosophers construed this task in terms of the individual life. Even in the wake of Habermas's work, I would say, the meaning of a collective ethical discourse beyond a collective subject of discourse remains far from clear. But religion, no matter how indispensable, will not help in this regard either. In contrast to Matušík's neo-religiosity, Habermas's essay "Faith and Knowledge," written in the wake of the September 11 attacks, summarizes his views on the theological status of anamnestic solidarity as clearly as could be desired:

The wish for forgiveness is still bound up with the unsentimental wish to undo the harm inflicted on others. But what is even more disturbing is the irreversibility of *past* sufferings—the injustice inflicted on innocent people who were abused, debased, and murdered, reaching far beyond any reparation within human power. The lost hope for resurrection is keenly felt as a void. Horkheimer's justified skepticism—"the murdered really are murdered"—with which he countered Benjamin's emphatic, or rather excessive hope for the anamnestic power of reparation inherent in human remembrance is far from denying the helpless impulse to change what cannot be changed any more. ... In moments like these, the non-believing sons and daughters of modernity seem to believe that they owe more to one another, and need more for themselves, than what is accessible to them, in translation, from

religious tradition—as if the semantic potential of the latter were still not exhausted.<sup>12</sup>

It seems to me that we ought to be very careful not to over-interpret the religious or metaphysical dimension of Habermas's version of anamnestic solidarity. We should think of such solidarity as describing the particular predicament of a modern normativity that finds itself called upon but unable to appeal to religious consciousness in order to make good on its own claims. But I take it that re-introducing religious consciousness is nevertheless precisely what Matušík wishes to do—even where Habermas's own texts do not justify such a project. In a lengthy reading of Benjamin, Matušík argues that Habermas's need to “witness” the holocaust can only be met if, in a way analogous to Benjamin, Habermas regards history as “un-closed.”

But can there be witnesses to the disaster of tradition if the past is closed? ... My claim is that Habermas' life and his philosophical-political profile, and, with some qualifications, his reflective answer to the Benjaminian issue of the past, testify to the openness of history. (147)

Matušík offers as proof a comment in an interview where Habermas, describing the Benjaminian version of anamnestic solidarity, remarks that “Now our responsibility extends to the past as well. This cannot simply be accepted as something fixed and over and done with” (149). I myself am far from certain that this really represents Habermas's own position. In the relevant passage Habermas is describing, not advocating, this position. In any case, this claim is certainly belied by a great deal of Habermas's work on the post-metaphysical reception of religious themes and problems, which Matušík does not introduce. We can certainly argue that by the “openness” of history, Habermas could mean nothing more than the dynamics of collective memory itself—that a shared identity entails an ongoing discursive appropriation of a shared past, and that the *meaning* of the past is never fixed but always the material for ethical debate. This wholly secular sense of the openness of the past is manifestly Habermas's motivation for his attacks on the conservative historians' attempt to intervene strategically in this ongoing hermeneutical encounter in the context of the *Historikerstreit*. But such a secular conception of the openness of the past—innocuous enough to require little defending, as far as I can tell—appears to fall considerably short of what a theological reading of anamnestic solidarity requires. In any case, Matušík has in mind a far more Benjaminian, far more theological conception than I believe a reading of Habermas can sustain.

12. Jürgen Habermas, “Faith and Knowledge,” in *The Future of Human Nature* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), 11.

“I can safely conclude,” Matušík writes, “that Habermas's mature profile situates him between Benjamin and Horkheimer and, with a more nuanced reading, closer to the former” (149). He continues, “I can now affirm my claim about Habermas's profile from his own Benjaminian affirmation: because the past is not closed, witnessing to disasters is not impossible; ergo, present and future generations can face their traumas” (149). But if the openness of the past enables the act of witnessing, it also appears, conversely, that witnessing enables anamnestic solidarity. “Witnessing,” Matušík claims, “empowers our anamnestic solidarity with the victims of history. ... This anamnestic praxis exercises a solidary-redemptive role in the present vis-à-vis the past. ... The critical witness hastens a more just future to come now by extending solidary relations to the past” (150).

My disagreement with Matušík at this point is clear enough: Habermas is closer—far closer—to Horkheimer than to Benjamin here. I am not certain what is gained by the notion of redemption in this kind of claim. It seems to me that the existential, public debate about the kind of traditions that a society is and is not willing to continue on ethical grounds is a normative claim already strong enough to support, without requiring the additional burden of justifying a theology of redemption as well. The past is a problem. But the openness of the past seems to me to be precisely a way of framing the persistence and the profundity of this problem *for us*. Anamnestic solidarity, in fact, actually seems to *lose* a great deal, perhaps all, of its affective and motivational power if we interpret it as constituting an actual relation between us and the dead that requires a response beyond the ethical challenge of reshaping a shared identity. — • —



# Singular Existence and Critical Theory

— Martin Beck Matušík —

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*Abstract: Two questions were addressed to my existential biography of Habermas: Is my use of existential categories to discuss his theory compatible with his recovery of the publicity of facts and norms? Can I concede a secular reading of anamnestic solidarity to Habermas and retain this conception to sustain a Benjaminian-Kierkegaardian openness of history? The best answer would be to reprint Habermas's astonishing autobiography from Kyoto (his thank you speech on the occasion of the Kyoto Award on 11 November 2004). The second best is first to situate it and then take up the two questions in light of his self-presentation.*

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I do not believe in heroism. Echoing Bertold Brecht, Tina Turner, and Jürgen Habermas, *I pity the land that is in need of heroes.*<sup>1</sup> I esteem greatness. Writing a biography of Habermas as “an existential hero” would stage a comedy of errors. His lifework inspires not by some superhuman qualities, but because of its aspiration to greatness despite setbacks, failures, and dead-ends that every human being

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1. See Jürgen Habermas, “Fundamentalism and Terror,” in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, edited by Giovanna Borradori (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 43. See also Martin Beck Matušík, “Between Hope and Terror: Derrida and Habermas Plead for the Im/Possible,” to Jacques Derrida in memoriam (1930-2004), *Epoche* 9, 1 (Fall 2004): 1-18, especially 12.

undergoes in time, thought, and action. Greatness of lifetime achievement does not render human existence immune to finitude and even blindness. Heroism serves politicians who need to march nations to wars, greatness belongs to courageous singularity in the face of trials and even opposition.

Habermas delivered a very singular address on November 11, 2004, on the occasion of receiving the Kyoto Award for his lifetime achievement. Georg Blume wrote about the speech: “For the first time he presented himself as a person, and for the first time he reflected on his philosophy in biography.”<sup>2</sup> On the road to Purdue where he was to speak on the critical ideal of cosmopolitan law,<sup>3</sup> Professor Habermas told me that he had been reluctant to delve seriously into my biography of him for two years after it was published, but now he was writing an autobiographical essay for the Kyoto ceremony. He was glad the essay would be delivered in a far away corner of the world. When European media published the speech, Habermas’s musings during our ride to Purdue impressed me even more, as his Kyoto self-disclosure provided an affirmation of and a fitting afterword to my philosophical-political profile of him.

Two key questions have been addressed to my existential biography of Habermas: Is my use of existential categories to discuss his theory compatible with his recovery of the publicity of facts and norms? Can I concede a secular reading of anamnestic solidarity to Habermas and retain this very conception to sustain a Benjaminian-Kierkegaardian openness of history?<sup>4</sup> The best answer would be to reprint Habermas’s astonishing autobiography,<sup>5</sup> the second best will be first to situate it and then take up the two questions in light of his self-presentation.

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2. Blume, Georg, “Der widerwillige Meister,” *Die Zeit*, No. 48, Feuilleton (November 11, 2004).

3. Jürgen Habermas, “The Kantian Project of Cosmopolitan Law,” lecture at Purdue University (October 15, 2004); on-line video-stream of the lecture and question-and-answers period at <http://web.ics.purdue.edu/~mmatustk/> (accessed September 5, 2005). Blume notes that Habermas gave this “polemical lecture” at Northwestern University after the reelection of Bush, but the more dynamic and politically charged presentation was given to more than 500 people at Purdue on October 15, 2004.

4. My response is in part with reference to Max Pensky’s “Jürgen Habermas, Existential Hero?” *Radical Philosophy Review* 8, no. 2 (2005): 197-209, and David Owens’s “Critical Theory and Learning from History,” *Radical Philosophy Review* 8, no. 2 (2005): 187-195, both in this issue. The discussion took place in Atlanta on December 27, 2001, during the APA panel on my book.

5. Jürgen Habermas, “Öffentlicher Raum und politische Öffentlichkeit: Lebensgeschichtliche Wurzeln zweier Gedankenmotive,” a thank you speech on the occasion of the Kyoto Award on November 11, 2004, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (December 11, 2004).

## I. Habermas’s Autobiography: An Afterword to *A Philosophical Political Profile*

Habermas distinguishes two types of public sphere: the one intrudes into the private life of celebrities; the other allows for an open exchange of views. The focus on topics replaces in the latter one’s personal narrative. The public is no longer a passive hearer and onlooker but rather transforms into speakers and addressees in a conversation. The private sphere moves to the background of the public sphere, as speakers “need not speak about themselves.”<sup>6</sup> Habermas has a view about the relationship of philosophy and biography that is not so different from Heidegger’s: “as philosophy professors we limit ourselves in our lectures about Aristotle or St. Thomas or Kant to bare life dates: when they were born, lived, and died.” The events from the life of philosophers fall behind the work and do not of themselves make it into a classic.

Yet “every obsession has autobiographical roots,” he declares openly and as a proof introduces his reflections about “the relationship between theory and biography.” Habermas distinguishes four relevant autobiographical situations that provide the contexts for the emergence of his thought. First, after birth and in early childhood he underwent a traumatic palate surgery. He intimates that this medical intervention impacted his natural trust in the environment. “But this intervention could have woken up the feeling of dependence on and the sense of relevance of the relationship with others.” His theoretical starting point comprises an insight into the social nature of humans. Humans are “animals existing in a public space.” The palate surgery was repeated at age 5, and this sharpened his sense of human inter-dependence. Habermas locates in these formative experiences the experiential roots of his interest in Humboldt, hermeneutics, American pragmatism, and late Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language. “The intuition of deep-reaching reciprocal dependence of one on another” defines the core of his later communication theory. As his corrective to vintage textbook existentialism, Habermas describes human interiority as “an inner center of the person” that is always already built on the basis of achieved communicative and interpersonal competencies. One is capable of uttering the “I” of the first person singular because one was addressed by an originary “You” first.

Secondly, in the early schooling, Habermas suffered difficulties in communicating with his peers on account of his disability. He recalls two experiences: not being understood by others due to his speech disability and the characteristic nasal articulation that made comprehending his spoken words difficult without some attention and adjustment by the hearers. And there was a subsequent and repeated rejection

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6. Habermas, “Öffentlicher Raum und politische Öffentlichkeit.” The quotations that follow are also from this speech.



by his peers. Not without insignificance, the school experiences of discrimination of Habermas “as the other” occurred during the Nazi period and thus among the cohorts who comprised the age group during Habermas’s entry at age 10, in 1939, into the Hitler Youth. Given the Nazi penchant for physical fitness, the birth defect and speech handicap must have had a pronounced effect on Habermas’s alienation from others in his immediate surroundings. He writes, “only those who speak can be silent. Only because we are from the beginning connected with others, we can become individuated.” The trauma of speech hindrance provided the seeds for his later reflection on the communicative medium as the ground of individuation. “Language does not mirror the world,” he says, “but opens our entry into it.”

Habermas notes two further effects of his struggle with the speech impediment: He developed a marked preference for the written word and its precise discursive form. It is in discourse that we exchange grounds and require examination of problematic claims to validity in order to reach a better argument. He grades students on the basis of their written work and to this day prefers a written interview form. Furthermore, globalization comes to mean that we can imagine what it is to be a stranger or excluded from the human community. The need for reciprocal recognition is inscribed into our interiority as that fragility to which we are introduced through empathy. Moral sensibility offers protection against the injury of those who have been communicatively socialized and individualized; and hospitality and solidarity emerge as moral protections against marginalization.

Thirdly, in adolescence Habermas confronted the break of 1945. While I was not free to write about his first two experiences in my biography before Habermas had the courage to speak about them openly in his own voice, I did begin his profile with the phenomenological figure of his *existential philosophical-political birthday* at age 15. May 1945 was the time of Germany’s defeat and liberation, Habermas’s death and rebirth. From here Habermas’s self-presentation basically parallels the structure of my biography of him. When Habermas acknowledges his “luck of late birth,” he ascribes to himself an inter-generational position: Too late to commit the crimes of his parental and teachers’ generation, but old enough to suffer the trauma of the Hitler Youth time and the national breach.

I brought Habermas’s core intuitions and motives under these generational umbrellas. The postwar generation lived through Germany’s Nazi dictatorship and its defeat. As a teen, Habermas witnessed Germany at once freed by the allies and with its daily normality overnight lying in ruins. As a mature thinker, he affirms the first core motive of his lifework in an uncanny intuition that reason, even with the life-world catastrophically injured, is able to act against its failures from within its own resources. I say this is uncanny because after Auschwitz the warrants of hope and reason are for him a “double ground” of normality and civilizational breakdown.



Habermas takes a secular recourse to the modern pietistic and Kabbalistic notion of the absentee God brought to life through human co-creation. *Nihil contra Deum, nisi Deus ipse*. The contemporary relevance of Habermas’s work is that he turns the defining aspiration of the generation of 1945 into a life-long search for the non-ideological foundations for a democratic, constitutional, and lawful state. “Democracy,” not the Anglo-Saxon liberalism, was for him the postwar “magic word.” In his view, only a democratic polity can survive in today’s pluralist, multicultural, and multireligious societies.

All the greater was his disappointment with the preceding generation of parental and teacher authorities. With Heidegger, ironically, political biography and philosophy come together for Habermas for the first time. If the link between existence and theory matters in Heidegger’s case, since he also theorized it, that link is pronounced in Habermas’s surprising autobiographical reconstruction of the sources of his own thinking. Among the chief objections to Heidegger’s generation is its heroic call to creative power, the cult of German mandarins, the anti-modern attitude, and the failure of responsibility for and distancing from the Nazi ideology. Habermas absorbed early Heidegger “through Kierkegaardian lenses,” but for this same reason he neither espoused the heroic ideal nor became an existential hero. National, religious, or even personal heroism would be in any event alien to Kierkegaard’s notion of greatness. As a budding philosopher of communication, at age 24 risking his Ph.D. and career, Habermas confronted in Heidegger’s unexplainably unrepentant republication in 1953 of his 1935 Nazi-flavored lectures the incomprehensible if not guilty silence of the German elite. Habermas’s act was not some romantic heroism, but a seed of singularity, what I called his *signature event*.

Fourthly, his adulthood was marred by the slow and endangered process of Germany’s postwar democratization. Against the horizon of Germany’s disaster, the second core motive of his lifework was inspired by the generation of Habermas’s students. In 1968, they were protesting against the fascist continuities that had survived in the values of their parents, teachers, political authorities, and in general culture. From the student revolt, Habermas adopts the intuition that no human culture or tradition can claim for itself an original innocence. His reflection on the past and future of national founding myths is marked by a profound ambivalence towards nationalism that impacted his youth and by the fresh need to engage in public discussions concerning those bankrupt traditions, which we must jettison, and those life-giving traditions we need to affirm. This existential either/or projected into the public sphere as the question for both *I* and *we*—How to safeguard democratic institutions today?—highlights the second aspect of contemporary relevance of Habermas’s lifework: He envisions political culture maturing into a postnational attitude that sheds raw, emotive, sectarian nationalism for the civic virtues of con-



stitutional patriotism. Kierkegaard's existential distancing from bankrupt traditions, be it Christendom or nationalism, offers Habermas the category, existential and social at once, of singular existence that is rooted in the attitude diametrically opposed to both religious and secular heroism.

While I was only age 11 in 1968 when the Soviet Empire under the pretense of brotherly help and liberation invaded my native Czechoslovakia, I was privileged to study with Habermas as a Fulbrighter in 1989 just as the Berlin Wall crumbled and the Velvet Revolution in my native country symbolized new beginnings. In those historical months, I discovered in Habermas not only a bold thinker, but also a great teacher and passionately engaged intellectual. Habermas's third motive arose from this most recent world constellation in which the fall of the Iron Curtain, Germany's unification, the European Union's expansion, and the global impact of the state of international relations all test anew the generational aspirations: The '45ers founded the democratic state on a patriotism that rallied around constitution and law, while the '68ers resisted cultural restoration of authoritarian regimes at the heart of democracy. Habermas's third core intuition comes to life in the *hope now* that against all odds we may rescue ethical communities by rooting them in our solidarity with the victims of history. Enter the third aspect of contemporary relevance of his lifework: It consists in guiding our learning how to sustain global institutions in a more robust democracy of world cosmopolitan citizenship and international law.

Habermas's theoretical articulation of the first core motive and intuition points us to his philosophical-political origins—integrating the securing generational sensibilities of the '45ers. In the articulation of the second motive and intuition, he learns from the student rebellion against the fear of open society. His third articulation comes from a post-1989, future-projected ideal that completes this entire equation: *Habermas's lifework integrates the constitutional-democratic needs of the securing '45ers and the revolutionary core of the protesting '68ers.* He inhabits a soberly critical ground between the conserving and progressive interests. To say this most succinctly, the contemporary relevance of Habermas's lifework is a thorough articulation of what must be at once conserved institutionally and protected by nonviolent forms of civil dissent when endangered—the deliberative democratic check-and-balances on the strategic dominance of power and money.

## II. Should Critical Theory Be Afraid of Inwardness?

Two things become indisputably clear from Habermas's autobiography: Firstly, Heidegger's momentary lapse into national-heroism as a form of authentic resolve is the case brought as a key political argument against existential categories such as inwardness. Thanks to his *existential* confrontation with Heidegger, Habermas does



not conflate singularity with heroism. Greatness is a category distinct from heroism, as the latter alone can be celebrated *en masse* and thus foster abusive power. For this reason I wrote of Habermas's greatness, but never of him as “an existentialist hero.”<sup>7</sup> Habermas underscores this difference in a key distinction between the divided roles of the intellectual as a critical professional and a public figure.<sup>8</sup> The critical role of influence should never have truck with political power. He writes about this because he feels the need to learn from his own failures as much as from those of his predecessors. “In the public office the intellectuals cease to be intellectuals.” The possibility of failures or mistaken influence should turn the intellectuals neither to mandarins nor to “cynics.” Secondly, Habermas's autobiography puts at rest the truncated view of him as aloof formal theorist bereft of singular and robust motives and intuitions. If anything, his Kyoto self-disclosure confirms my view of his normative theorizing arising from his existential singularity.

Academic thinkers on the left often hide behind cases such as Heidegger's to mask their own pronounced propensity to misconceive the category of singular greatness. With that confusion between heroism and inwardness, critical theory grows all-too-weary to resist religious as well as secular forms of modern fundamentalism. But it is those very forms, and the religious or secular veneer plays here no difference, that fall into the category of the heroic. *Pity the lands that need heroes, pity the critical theory that robs itself of resources to critique them!*

Pensky examines the question from Habermas's 1987 Copenhagen lecture, the very question on which I based my earlier book: “What would group identities have to be like to be capable of complementing and stabilizing the improbable and endangered type of ego-identity that Kierkegaard outlines?”<sup>9</sup> I addressed the issue of compatibility between and even mutual requirement of communicative ethics and radically honest existential attitude, a requirement Habermas acknowledged in my first conversation with him on this topic.<sup>10</sup> The fear that existential categories are incompatible with the recovery of the publicity of facts and norms rests on mistakes typical among social theorists.

The first is the equivocation between ‘existential’ and ‘existentialist’ viewed either as the same category<sup>11</sup> or used equivocally as in “existential hero” or “existentialist

7. See Pensky, “Jürgen Habermas: Existential Hero?”

8. Habermas, “Öffentlicher Raum und politische Öffentlichkeit.”

9. Pensky, “Jürgen Habermas: Existential Hero?”; Jürgen Habermas, *The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historians' Debate*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 261; Martin J. Beck Matušík, *Postnational Identity: Critical Theory and Existential Philosophy in Habermas, Kierkegaard, and Havel*. (New York: Guilford, 1993), 5-20.

10. Matušík, *Postnational Identity*, 250-264.

11. See Owen, “Critical Theory as History,” 188, n. 1.



hero.”<sup>12</sup> ‘Existentialist’ refers to the twentieth-century, mostly textbook readings of radical self-choice as a validity domain divorced from social situations. This is how the ascriptions of unsituated freedom often become the container for the acosmic readings of inwardness. The second mistake is made by almost all critical theorists following in this regard Habermas who identifies existential self-choice with the clinical or narrative questions of the good life (*eudaimonia*). Habermas and his commentators distinguish the latter from moral autonomy and self-determination. Besides pragmatic questions, there only are ethical and moral types of practical questions, and inwardness is subsumed by the Habermasian architectonic under the ethical, understood as the Aristotelian or Hegelian good. Pensky’s description of inwardness is a vintage example: “‘ethical discourse’ in its *existentialist reading*—in which the isolated individual, alone in her conscience and her life-history, must confront herself honestly and ruthlessly is the derivative, secondary form of an ongoing ethical discourse, in which we are always already involved.”<sup>13</sup> Pensky concedes that there is a dialectic between the first-person singular (inward self-choice) and the first-person plural (publicity of norms), yet he corrects the perceived ambiguity of this relation in Habermas by insisting, “this primacy of inwardness is only relative, perhaps even deceptive.”<sup>14</sup>

The bugbear of asocial inwardness comes from all-too-common superficial reading of Kierkegaard, minimally, for whom this category neither describes psychological states nor the philosophy of mind, nor is it some *validity claim* in competition with the publicity of the ethical, moral, and legal discourses. In order for inwardness to function as “a mediating moment between an unreflective and a self-reflective form of publicity,”<sup>15</sup> it would have to become a *mode* of inwardness that is capable of critical distance on the received practices, institutions, and cultural ethos. But if all distancing is derivative from one’s being born, socialized, and individualized as a German or American, that is if all terms of self-reflectivity are preset by received individualization through socialization, then no such distance from one-dimensional thinking could occur. Kierkegaard begins where Hegel, Mead, Peirce, late Wittgenstein, and Habermas end: with well socialized citizens, in his case the Christened Danes, who are no Robinson Crusoes, but rather cultured and sagacious offsprings of the nationalist-cum-esthetic religiosity of their, not unlike our, times. Kierkegaard’s requirements of *becoming subjective* and *becoming sober* call for a mode of radically honest and open inwardness requisite of the demand for the critical publicity of facts and norms. His combined requirement attacks the false

12. See Pensky, “Jürgen Habermas: Existential Hero?” 199, 200.

13. Pensky, “Jürgen Habermas: Existential Hero?” 200.

14. Pensky, “Jürgen Habermas: Existential Hero?” 201.

15. Pensky, “Jürgen Habermas: Existential Hero?” 201.



religious publicity of Christendom in ways that unmask its ideology and strip its socialized hold on the self-deceptive mode of one’s self-relation.

My argument has been all along that critical theory needs the category of existence or inwardness as a mode. This is the missing third member that accounts for the ability of socialized adults to take distance on bankrupt religious and secular traditions, and this modal category is thus distinct from the ethical-clinical questions of the good life and the moral-normative questions of self-determination. Habermas’s lifework and his self-reflection open up this access to the mode of sober inwardness in creative ways that my biography of him explored without adulation, reductionism, or vain suggestion that he succeeded in carrying it through. It is by witnessing Habermas’s singular struggles for truthfulness, as a critical theorist of his in-between generation, that we also meet his existential greatness. We do best to unmask heroism in those who remain blind sighted by unrepentant “military philosophers.”<sup>16</sup>

### III. Should Critical Theory Be Afraid of the Postsecular Turn?

Is there a postsecular turn in Habermas’s profane architectonic? I did not encounter this term in Habermas prior to 2001, though I applied it in the biography.<sup>17</sup> But it emerges suddenly in his now voluminous writings on tolerance and religion, to be exact, after 9/11.<sup>18</sup> Should critical theorists be afraid that the great thinker has gone

16. See Perry Anderson, “Arms and Rights: Rawls, Habermas and Bobbio in an Age of War,” *The New Left Review*, No. 31 (Jan/Feb 2005): 5-40.

17. Martin J. Beck Matustik, *Jürgen Habermas: A Philosophical-Political Profile* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), 142, 146f., 149, 223, 226f., 265-274.

18. For instance, in the following texts: “America and the World,” interview with Eduardo Mendieta, trans. Jeffrey Craig Miller, *Logos* 3, no. 3 (Summer 2004), [http://www.logos-journal.com/habermas\\_america.htm](http://www.logos-journal.com/habermas_america.htm) (accessed September 5, 2005); “Equal Treatment of Cultures and the Limits of Postmodern Liberalism,” trans. Jeffrey Flynn (Ms., 2004), 1-44; “Zum Friedenspreis des deutschen Buchhandels: Eine Dankrede,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (October 15, 2001) and “Faith and Knowledge,” lecture delivered October 14, 2001, at Frankfurt’s Paulskirche on the occasion of receiving the Peace Award of the German Publishers, each printed in *The Future of Human Nature*, trans. Hella Beister and Max Pensky (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2003), 101-115 and 126-127; “Fundamentalism and Terror”; *Der gespaltene Westen* (Frankfurt a/M: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2004); “Intolerance and Discrimination,” *International Journal of Constitutional Law* 1, 1 (January, 2003): 2-12; “Religious Tolerance—The Pacemaker for Cultural Rights,” *Philosophy* 79 (2004): 5-18 (text is roughly identical to “Intolerance and Discrimination”); “Ein letzter Gruss,” obituary for Jacques Derrida, *The Frankfurter Rundschau* (October 10, 2004); “On the Relation between the Secular Liberal State and Religion,” trans. by Matthias Fritsch, in Eduardo Mendieta, ed., *The Frankfurt School on Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 337-346; *Religion and Rationality: Essays on Reason, God, and Modernity*, ed. and with an introduction by Eduardo Mendieta (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), especially the final interview.

‘soft’ or even *neo-religious*? (Pensky worries so for me.<sup>19</sup>) The meaning of witnessing must be located in what I named the *countermonumental* quality of Habermas’s uncanny hope that propels his active critical work. But, please, in the face of unforgivable and radically evil deeds, any such hope, however much it profanes itself, is always already postsecular. Following the announced death of God, *our* hope-to-come, expected after our unforgivable deeds, denotes what Jacques Derrida and others called a religion without religion.<sup>20</sup> The uncanny here names *our* waiting that our historical present can rescue its future from the past of the victims of history—*whether or not we can bring dead back to life*.<sup>21</sup> That such hope ever can be in our sole power is neither a true meaning of the Buddhist awakening, nor of Ezekiel’s prophesy that the dry bones shall rise.

The notion of redemption holds for Habermas a Janus-faced ethico-religious status of *redeeming* rational claims to validity in public discourse and *hoping* that things do get better where disasters destroyed the human capacity to forgive and repair. I do not dispute Pensky’s claim that Habermas avoids all strictly theological implications found in Benjamin’s rescue for the victims of history. But by rendering human solidarity in political rather than spiritual terms, our hope that after Auschwitz we can speak and write again with joy becomes no less uncanny. Critical theory’s disconsolate and countermonumental hope, and this sobriety I never denied to Habermas, arrogates to itself a robust postsecular expectation. By hoping against hope, critical theory assigns to itself a dual task of existential responsibility and waiting for or redemptive witnessing of hope-to-come. We might be just waiting for Godot, that possibility one need not deny to secular thinkers, but if hope comes, is that just because of our doing? It is not so much my articulation of the notion of redemption that reintroduces religious consciousness into critical theory,<sup>22</sup> it is reason’s faith in its recovery of reasonableness, hope that hope is to be given even where it became utterly disconsolate, that turns performatively postsecular.

These questions are addressed by Habermas’s Frankfurt Paulskirche speech and his lectures on secularization.<sup>23</sup> Perhaps under the impact of 9/11, he speaks for

19. See Pensky, “Jürgen Habermas: Existential Hero?” 207.

20. See Matustik, “Between Hope and Terror”; Martin Beck Matustik, “Habermas’s Turn?” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 32, no. 1 (2006); Habermas, “America and the World”; Habermas, “Ein letzter Gruss.”

21. See Pensky, “Jürgen Habermas: Existential Hero?” 208.

22. See Pensky, “Jürgen Habermas: Existential Hero?” 208.

23. Habermas’s Frankfurt Paulskirche speech, entitled “Faith and Knowledge”; the lectures on secularization include *Dialektik der Säkularisierung* (Frankfurt a/M: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2005); “Intolerance and Discrimination”; “On the Relation between the Secular Liberal State and Religion”; and “Religious Tolerance—The Pacemaker for Cultural Rights.” See also *Religion and Rationality: Essays on Reason, God, and Modernity*; and *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion* (Frankfurt a/M: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2005).

the first time in his work about the ‘postsecular’ constellation complementing his ‘postnational’ constellation.<sup>24</sup> The ‘postsecular’ adjective appears in his Frankfurt speech three times at crucial junctures.<sup>25</sup> After admitting that “the boundaries between secular and religious reasons are fluid,” and even “mined ground,” he calls not only for the translation of the religious into the secular discourses, but also admits the need for their mutual cooperation.<sup>26</sup> Translation and cooperation are two contrarian moves reinforcing the new postsecular sensibility. He revisits the dispute between Benjamin and Horkheimer and, contrary to Pensky’s unnuanced reading, he stakes out his place (with a typical Habermasian ambivalence) between the open and irreversible senses of history, between the “true impulse and its impotence” of our coming to terms with the past.<sup>27</sup> To bypass this ambivalence is to neutralize the hidden intuitions that underwrite the uncanny status of hope itself; indeed, without the at once critical and redemptive role of hope, critical theory makes itself irrelevant to the aspirations of the age.

Rather than plugging what he self-mockingly terms his religiously “tone-deaf” ears, Habermas affirms against the genetic engineers “the absolute difference that exists between the creator and the creature”<sup>28</sup>—and this not so veiled warning against the idolatry of human reason is hardly a secular claim. So when he concedes that “the unbelieving sons and daughters of modernity seem to believe that they owe more to one another, and need more for themselves, than what is accessible to them, in translation, of religious tradition ...”; one must read in-between the lines his indirect acknowledgment of a loss of that redemptive hope that secular social theory, like the inarticulate Godot, expects to arise where disasters struck, yet may not supply from its own “exhausted” sources.<sup>29</sup>

That acknowledgment is most indicative of his reading of Kant against Kant on radical evil: While Kant attempted a “critical *assimilation* of religious content” of evil into his rationally bound moral religion, this “may seem less convincing” in the face of the modern forms of annihilation. Deliberate cruelty is not simply something “morally wrong” but rather something “profoundly evil.” And something was lost, Habermas concedes once more, in the translation of radical evil into the secular moral-legal categories. Neither ethical discourses nor normative moral

24. See his presentation at the World Congress of Philosophy in Istanbul, “Dispute on the past and future of international law. Transition from a national to a postnational constellation,” August 10, 2003.

25. Habermas, “Faith and Knowledge,” 103f.

26. Habermas, “Faith and Knowledge,” 109, 113.

27. Habermas, “Faith and Knowledge,” 111.

28. Habermas, “Faith and Knowledge,” 114, 115.

29. Habermas, “Faith and Knowledge,” 111.

and legal discourses can grant forgiveness, for the publicity of facts and norms can at best present moral culpability and punish. As one social worker explained this nuance to me, modern social theory with its talk of tolerance and deliberative democracy is entirely intellectually useless and existentially helpless in the face of Rwanda or Dafur.

We need to ask here, what is gained by critical theory becoming so flatfooted that it cannot unmask the heroic-esthetic religiosity underpinning sectarian hatred? It has no resources to name, and so render powerless, the religious-demonic cruelty, for it had translated away all religiosity as a critical resource. Yet we need this resource to be able to grasp the upsurge of willed unreasonableness (and this phenomenon is more than intolerance) in human affairs. Without such a resource critical theory has at its disposal no religious critique of the demonic—the trope for every fanaticism and religious ideology. Can critical theory thus impoverished point us to the sources of hope or, minimally, to what after dastardly deeds grants human affairs their reasonableness? Jim Wallis's book, *God's Politics*, provides a fitting subtitle to answer my rhetorical questions: "Why the Right Gets it Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It."<sup>30</sup> Michael Lerner's *Tikkun* call for critical religiosity to be at least seriously considered by progressives steps in to fill this lacuna. In the absence of *redemptive critical theory*, progressives vacated the space to the bigoted forms of religiosity, the new Grand Inquisitors, and their hate-filled holy wars. Social theory begins with the background condition of reasonableness, yet this assumption is at best unwarranted and at worst idolatrous. Adorno was an intellectually honest atheist in prohibiting positive images of hope and voicing doubts about doing philosophy and writing poetry after Auschwitz. Social theory justifies in vain its rational hope in the face of deliberately evil, hence I call them demonic or diabolical, acts such as genocide.

Many often ask, what are the sources of Habermas's unwavering, to the twenty-first-century tone-deaf ears more and more uncanny, optimism that a margin of reason may prevail in the midst of human destruction and insanity? His own remarkable journey through the twentieth century bears witness to the fact that things did get better in postwar Europe. Habermas's theory of communicative action expresses this fact by locating the resources for learning on this side of the world—in human linguistic competencies—that is, in our ability and willingness to rise up from the ashes of our dastardly deeds and rebuild the fragments of fragile social bonds. As long as we do not go entirely mad or cease to communicate with one another as humans about something in the world, what other options do we have (thus he would question his skeptics as often as they question him, and so he would also confront

30. Jim Wallis, *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets it Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2005).

his own unbelief), than take recourse in hope lodged in our very speech, communicative action, and want of mutual recognition?

I recognize in Habermas's hope, vested in the power of mutual understanding, a voice crying in the wilderness. In 2003, Habermas joined with Derrida, who passed away on October 8, 2004, on the side of world-wide antiwar protests.<sup>31</sup> The two of them crossing the modern/postmodern divide strove to resurrect Kant's dream from 200 years ago of perpetual peace and the league of nations. Habermas does not pretend to deliver us from death or offer his theory as redemption. Yet his very sobriety is a recognizable *religious* act proscribing the carved images of redemptive hope. In that nuance of Habermasian ambivalence and self-limitation, I situate my philosophical-political profile of him. Nowadays his hope is perhaps even more sober than that of many a secular politician or religious leader alike. In a Camusque *atheistic declaration of the postsecular phenomena* of the unforgivable, a good century, Habermas, writes: "There is no devil, but the fallen archangel still wreaks havoc—in the perverted good of the monstrous deed, but also in the unrestrained urge for retaliation that promptly follows."<sup>32</sup> Perhaps in this self-limitation, questioning radical evil in the postsecular sensibility still available to our wit, huddled in solidarity under the earthly sun, a new redemptive critical theory may become a placeholder where genuinely non-ideological questions of how or to whom hope is granted can still be asked. — • —

31. Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida, "Plädoyer zu einer Wiedergeburt Europas," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (May 31, 2003); and "February 15, or, What Binds Europeans Together: A Plea for a Common Foreign Policy, Beginning in Core Europe," in *Globalizing Critical Theory*, trans. and ed. by Max Pensky (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2005). See also Habermas, "Letter to America," interview by Danny Postel, *The Nation* (December 16, 2002); "Was bedeutet das Denkmalsturz?" *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (April 17, 2003), translated as "Interpreting the Fall of a Monument," in *Globalizing Critical Theory*; and "Neue Welt Europa" *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (January 24, 2003).

32. Habermas, "Faith and Knowledge," 110.

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