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The Reluctant Postmodernism of Jürgen Habermas: Reevaluating Habermas's Debates with Foucault and Derrida

Peter J. Verovšek

Abstract: Politicians and scholars alike have blamed postmodernism—and the identity politics that have emerged in its wake—for the pathologies of the early twenty-first century. Despite his limited defense of the Enlightenment and his disputes with his French contemporaries, I argue that Habermas's philosophy displays many postmodern characteristics that are often overlooked. These include its decentering of the autonomous subject, its skepticism towards metaphysics, and its rejection of stadial philosophies of history. In light of the fact that Habermas adopts weaker versions of many postmodern commitments, I reconsider his disputes with Foucault and Derrida regarding the legacy of the Enlightenment. I conclude that rather than interpreting Habermas as a conservative critic of his more radical counterparts in France, we should instead see these three thinkers as part of a shared attempt to come to terms with the problems of postwar Europe in a public, discursive manner.

Introduction

Jürgen Habermas is widely recognized as one of the most important philosophers of the postwar era. Although he is associated with critical theory, his thought does not carry the progressive cache of Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and Herbert Marcuse. In contrast to these thinkers of the first generation of the Frankfurt School, Habermas is often seen as a mainstream liberal who advocates a "philosophy which finds peace within itself . . . [and] has nothing to do with critical theory," as Tom Rockmore puts it.[1]

Peter J. Verovšek is lecturer (assistant professor) in the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Sheffield, Elmfield, Northumberland Road, Sheffield, S10 2TU, United Kingdom (p.j.verovsek@sheffield.ac.uk).

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[1]Tom Rockmore, *Habermas on Historical Materialism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 166.

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Habermas has therefore been a target for many theorists of postmodernism who question the political and epistemological implications of his work.

More specifically, Jean-François Lyotard reproaches Habermas for relying on unnecessary foundational "rules or metaprescriptions [that] are universally valid for language."[2] The fact that Habermas positions himself as a champion of "the unfinished project of modernity" only reinforces the impression that he has "abandoned" the emancipatory legacy of the early Frankfurt School to engage in an anachronistic program.[3] While the university-based uprisings of 1968 in Germany drew inspiration from Habermas's work on the public sphere, since his (in)famous break with that movement, radical activists have tended to looked to Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and other "French left-wingers" for inspiration.[4] In contrast to Habermas's defense of the Enlightenment, these postmodern thinkers adopt a more negative orientation to *les Lumières*, refusing to give in to what Foucault refers to as "the 'blackmail' of the Enlightenment," that is, to the idea that its values and supposedly firm normative foundations are unavoidable.[5]

The conflict between defenders of the Enlightenment philosophy and adherents of the postmodern turn is still very much alive. Not only does this debate continue to divide philosophers; in recent years it has also become politically salient as well.[6] Most notably, French president Emmanuel Macron, who is well versed in twentieth-century French philosophy, has repeatedly blamed the growing illiberalism visible on both the right and left in France on Foucault, Derrida, and postmodernism more generally. In an interview with the German magazine *Der Spiegel*, for example, Macron took aim at his compatriots, noting that "post-modernism was the worst thing that could have happened to our democracy. The idea that you have to deconstruct and destroy all grand narratives is not a good one. Since then, trust has evaporated in everything and

[2]Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 72, 65. For more on the political implications of this critique, see Kari Karppinen, Hallvard Moe, and Jakob Svensson, "Habermas, Mouffe and Political Communication," *Javnost—the Public* 15, no. 3 (2008).

[3]Maurizio Passerin d'Entrèves and Seyla Benhabib, eds., *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity: Critical Essays on the Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 1996); Chris Thornhill, *Political Theory in Modern Germany* (London: Blackwell, 2000), 173.

[4]Habermas quoted in Michaël Foessel and Jürgen Habermas, "Critique and Communication: Philosophy's Missions," *Eurozine*, Oct. 16, 2015, 4.

[5]Michel Foucault, "What Is Enlightenment?," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1997), 312.

[6]Richard T. Peterson, *Democratic Philosophy and the Politics of Knowledge* (State College: Penn State University Press, 1996).

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everyone."[7] Similar criticisms of postmodernism—and the identity politics that have supposedly materialized in its wake—have emerged in other Western states as well, including the United States and Great Britain.[8]

Habermas might be expected to sympathize with these critiques given that he engaged in a number of high-profile disputes with his counterparts on the other side of the Rhine. However, although he argued, as Matthias Fritsch puts it, that "the left-leaning critiques of Foucault and Derrida fail to justify their normative sources,"[9] in recent years Habermas has gone out of his way to defend them from public attacks by scholars as well as other public figures.[10] Since the early 1990s, he has also revised his strident opposition to the postmodernism of his two main French interlocutors, owing to his recognition that Foucault and Derrida share many of his political goals, despite the differences in their philosophical approaches (see section 3 below). This change is surprising in light of Habermas's strident critiques of Foucault and Derrida in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1985).[11]

This article seeks to explain this change in Habermas's thinking by reevaluating his stance on postmodernism. It is true that he is committed to the Enlightenment and seeks to "rescue" its basic values and orientations from certain forms of antirationalism that he associates with "dark," romantic responses to modernization. However, despite his explicit rejection of postmodernism, I show that his discourse theory of communicative action, which does not rely on strong notions of subjectivity, firm metaphysical foundations, or teleological philosophies of history, has more in common with Foucault and Derrida than is usually recognized. Moreover, I argue that Habermas's basic philosophical approach draws on many of the basic features usually associated with postmodernism.

In light of the shared methodological presuppositions that I highlight, my basic thesis is that it is better to interpret the differences between Habermas and the postmoderns as a matter of philosophical emphasis, rather than ideological polarity. Prominent commentators, including Manfred Frank,[12] Simon

[7]Klaus Brinkbäumer, Julia Amalia Heyer, and Britta Sandberg, "We Need to Develop Political Heroism: Interview with Emmanuel Macron," *Der Spiegel*, Oct. 13, 2017.

[8]For example, Richard Seymour, "How Postmodernism Became the Universal Scapegoat of the Era," *New Statesman*, June 24, 2021; Aaron Hanlon, "Postmodernism Didn't Cause Trump. It Explains Him," *Washington Post*, Aug. 31, 2018; Mark Lilla, "The End of Identity Liberalism," *New York Times*, Nov. 18, 2016.

[9]Matthias Fritsch, "Futures of Habermas's Work," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, Aug. 11, 2019, https://www.lareviewofbooks.org/article/futures-habermass-work/.

[10]For example, Foessel and Habermas, "Critique and Communication," 4–5.

[11]Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987).

[12]Manfred Frank, *Die Grenzen der Verständigung: Ein Geistergespräch zwischen Lyotard und Habermas* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988).

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Critchley,[13] Thomas McCarthy,[14] Beatrice Hansen,[15] and Pauline Johnson,[16] have recognized some of these similarities. I draw on their insights and add to the scholarship by highlighting the ways that Habermas borrows important methodological features of postmodernism—albeit in a weaker form—to further his own qualified defense of the Enlightenment. In contrast to much of the literature on the debate between modernism and postmodernism, in which one side is often caricatured, I provide a sympathetic reading of both positions. I show that despite their methodological differences and seemingly opposing stances in regard to modernity, Habermas, Foucault, and Derrida share a common political project that seeks to use social criticism to generate debate about how to create better, more just living circumstances for all.

While I emphasize Habermas's surprising proximity to certain aspects of postmodern philosophy, this focus should not elide the important remaining differences between these thinkers.[17] Most notably, while Habermas is still committed to what I describe as a "weak" form of foundationalism rooted in the presuppositions of linguistic communication, Foucault, Derrida, and his other French interlocutors are skeptical about what Chantal Mouffe has referred to as Habermas's "search for a final rational resolution."[18] More specifically, they fear that his "deliberative emphasis on communicative reason leads inevitably to support the status quo in terms of existing exclusions and inequalities."[19] Postmodern thinkers therefore argue that social criticism does not require a firm epistemological or metaphysical foundation.

Despite his explicit defense of modernity, I show that Habermas's philosophical approach adopts many of postmodernism's fundamental methodological insights. This defines what I call his reluctant postmodernism.[20] I make this point by showing that Habermas endorses all three of the core positions that Jane Flax famously associates with postmodernity, namely, a commitment to (1) the Death of Man, (2) the Death of History, and (3) the

[13]Simon Critchley, "Remarks on Derrida and Habermas," *Constellations* 7, no. 4 (2000).

[14]Thomas McCarthy, "The Critique of Impure Reason: Foucault and the Frankfurt School," *Political Theory* 18, no. 3 (1990).

[15]Beatrice Hansen, *Critique of Violence: Between Poststructuralism and Critical Theory* (London: Routledge, 2000).

[16]Pauline Johnson, "Romantic and Enlightenment Legacies: Habermas and the Postmodern Critics," *Contemporary Political Theory* 5, no. 1 (2006).

[17]These differences are highlighted by Seyla Benhabib, "Democracy and Difference: Reflections on the Metapolitics of Lyotard and Derrida," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 2, no. 1 (1994): 1–23.

[18]Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (New York: Verso, 2000), 93.

[19]Karppinen, Moe, and Svensson, "Habermas, Mouffe and Political Communication," 9.

[20]I borrow and adapt this phrase from Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

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Death of Metaphysics.[21] Although holding weaker versions of these theses than his postmodern counterparts, Habermas is actually more similar to his contemporaries in postwar France than to his eighteenth- and nineteenth-century predecessors in Germany. Rather than focusing on the differences between modernism and postmodernism as an example of the historical, philosophical, and cultural gulf between France and Germany, I follow Pierre Bourdieu's advice by focusing instead on "the common points of reference at the interface of philosophy and sociology, which despite being kept disastrously separate from one another, undoubtedly form the basis for shared questions."[22]

I start by outlining the basic characteristics of postmodernism and show how these are expressed in the work of Foucault and Derrida, the interlocutors with whom Habermas has engaged most fully (section 1).[23] I then demonstrate how Habermas's discourse theory of communicative action leads him to weaker versions of the philosophical commitments associated with postmodernism (section 2). In the final substantive section of the argument, I consider the implications this has for Habermas's disputes with Foucault and Derrida regarding the legacy of the Enlightenment (section 3). I conclude with some reflections on the implications of my argument for our understanding of how Habermas's support for the "radical reformism" of a "*non-communist Left*, to the left of social democracy"[24] compares to the political positions taken by his postmodern counterparts (section 4).

1. The Three Basic Theses of Postmodern Philosophy

Given its many flavors, postmodernism is difficult to subsume with a single clear definition. Perhaps the most famous statement comes from Lyotard. In *La condition postmoderne: Rapport sur le savoir* (1979), he applies this concept, which had previously been used more frequently in art criticism, to philosophy by focusing on the epistemological implications of rejecting the possibility of a metalanguage (hence the subtitle "a report on knowledge"). This leads him to attack grand narratives that "determine criteria of competence and/or illustrate how they are to be applied." Lyotard notes: "Simplifying to the

[21]Jane Flax, *Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Postmodernism in the Contemporary West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 32ff.

[22]Pierre Bourdieu, "Vive le Streit! Jürgen Habermas zum Geburtstag," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, June 18, 1999.

[23]I do not provide a general overview of postmodernism, but merely identify elements that are helpful for understanding both the affinities between Habermas's philosophy and postmodernism, as well as the differences that remain.

[24]Jürgen Habermas, "What Does Socialism Mean Today? The Revolutions of Recuperation and the Need for New Thinking," in *After the Fall: The Failure of Communism and the Future of Socialism*, ed. Robin Blackburn (London: Verso, 1991), 36, 41–42, emphasis in original.

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extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity towards metanarratives."[25] In line with the Greek prefix *meta-*, meaning "after" or "beyond," he seeks to overcome the "grand narratives" that define the foundationalist "apparatus of legitimation" posited by Enlightenment philosophy.[26]

This does not mean however that Lyotard rejects modernity wholesale. On the contrary, in seeking to cast off the unnecessary and potentially dangerous foundationalist aspirations of the Enlightenment, he opposes Max Weber's understanding of modernity as "a line of development having *universal* significance and value" by setting a new grounding for rationalization defined in terms of the "disenchantment of the world."[27] Instead, under conditions of postmodernity, defined by plurality and a lack of shared metaphysical starting points, Lyotard argues the "narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal."[28] As a result, the world is increasingly defined by dispersal of certain narrative elements of language that can no longer be combined into unified stories set on secure foundations.

Lyotard therefore argues that no single language can legitimate the multiple forms of practical knowledge necessary for the reproduction of common social bonds within society. Although this reading captures a number of the key characteristics of postmodernism, Judith Butler notes that Lyotard "cannot be made into the example of what all the rest of the purported postmodernists are doing."[29] Breaking from reactive, negative definitions of postmodernism, Flax identifies three substantive commitments that characterize this position. Recognizing the postmodern destruction of three of the most basic categories of modern philosophy, she frames her tripartite definition through the language of death.

The first fundamental thesis on the "Death of Man" highlights the fact that postmodernism rejects the concept of "Man" or "Mankind" as a universal and fundamentally male category, favoring an understanding based on specific, historically situated individuals defined by their plurality and diversity. Building on Martin Heidegger, this first thesis signals postmodernism's broader rejection of the autonomous thinking subject as the basic category of ontological Being (*Sein*). In contrast to the rational, self-contained, masculine individual who undergirds the classic texts of modern philosophy, such as René Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), postmodernism argues that "Man is a social, historical, or linguistic artifact, not a noumenal

[25]Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, xxiv.

[26]Ibid., 23.

[27]Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London: Unwin, 1985), 13, emphasis in original.

[28]Ibid., 23.

[29]Judith Butler, "Contingent Foundations," in *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*, by Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell, and Nancy Fraser (New York: Routledge, 1995), 37.

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or transcendental Being." In words that clearly link postmodernism to the linguistic turn, Flax concludes that "the subject is merely another position in language," not the building block of all foundational knowledge.[30]

Flax frames her second thesis as the "Death of History." In contrast to the "universal history" that Weber associates with occidental modernity, for postmodernism, "The idea that History exists for or is his Being is more than just another precondition and justification for the fiction of Man."[31] This insight leads postmodern thinkers to reject Enlightenment readings of History as narratives of progress, since "such an idea of Man and History privileges and presupposes the value of unity, homogeneity, totality, closure, and identity."[32] In so doing they emphasize plurality, rather than seeking to subsume everything into preexisting or predetermined universal categories.

The final thesis concerns the "Death of Metaphysics." Problematizing modernity's search for a "true" grounding of the world "as it is," Flax notes, "For postmodernists this quest for the Real conceals most Western philosophers' desire, which is to master the world once and for all by enclosing it within an illusory but absolute system they believe represents or corresponds to a unitary Being beyond history, particularity and change."[33] In its attentiveness to the claims of otherness, postmodernism thus undermines the foundational, privileged position of philosophy as the "interrogator of truth claims [which] must play a 'foundational' role in all 'positive knowledge.'"[34] Postmodernism seeks to break apart universals instead of subsuming them within the hierarchical taxonomies of modern science.

As Flax's three theses make clear, this philosophical approach is defined by its questioning of the preconditions of knowledge assumed by modernity. As part of its broader project, Seyla Benhabib notes that the Enlightenment sought to undermine God and scripture as the primary sources of knowledge to link "the order of representations in consciousness with the order of representations outside the self" using the scientific method.[35] In what Richard Rorty refers to as this "Kantian picture of philosophy as centered on epistemology," the discipline's core purpose is to provide a "theory of knowledge" that is "distinct from the sciences because it is their *foundation*."[36]

By contrast, postmodernism questions the "mirror" theory of nature upon which the Enlightenment relies. The paradigmatic postmodern statement questioning the foundational epistemological position comes from Rorty,

[30]Flax, *Thinking Fragments*, 32.

[31]Ibid., 33.

[32]Ibid.

[33]Ibid., 34.

[34]Ibid.

[35]Seyla Benhabib, "Epistemologies of Postmodernism: A Rejoinder to Jean-François Lyotard," *New German Critique*, no. 33 (1984): 106.

[36]Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 133, 132, emphasis in original.

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who rejects the idea of "'knowledge' as something about which there ought to be a 'theory' and which has 'foundations.'"[37] He adopts more fluid and flexible notions of truth and knowledge, where these labels are understood as honorifics bestowed on certain claims as a way of asserting what certain individuals in a concrete time and place think about the matter at hand. Benhabib notes that by adopting such a flexible, communal understanding of truth, postmodernism also undermines the modern understanding of speech, where "the meaning of a word was what it designates, while the primary function of language was denotative, namely to inform us about objectively existing states of affairs."[38]

Flax's three theses highlight the close connection between postmodernism, the linguistic turn, and the antifoundationalism of postwar French philosophy, particularly the work of Foucault and Derrida, to whom Habermas responds most directly. Starting with the former, Béatrice Han-Pile observes that a concern with how discourse shapes the "conditions of possibility of knowledge in the West" is a red thread through Foucault's thought.[39] Despite his divergences from Lyotard, Foucault also seeks to undermine the metanarratives put forward by modern philosophy. Rather than getting caught up with being "'for' or 'against' the Enlightenment," he focuses on "ourselves as beings who are historically determined."[40] While this position undermines the foundational location of Man in Enlightenment philosophy, Foucault argues that such postmodern, situated individuals retain the ability to question "what is not or is no longer indispensable for the constitution of ourselves as autonomous subjects."[41]

In contrast to Kant, who argues that Man writ large can use reason as a force for liberation from his "self-incurred immaturity"[42] regardless of his external circumstances, Foucault contends that there is no "outside" to power and that individuals do not have access to any universal conception of reason. Instead, human beings are always caught a "multiplicity" or "web of discourses" that shape who they are and what they can know.[43] Foucault's work thus not only contributes to the Death of Metaphysics, it also posits the Death of Man, as the autonomous knowing subject becomes

[37]Ibid., 7.

[38]Seyla Benhabib, "Epistemologies of Postmodernism," 107.

[39]Béatrice Han-Pile, "Is Early Foucault a Historian? History, History and the Analytic of Finitude," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 31, no. 5–6 (2005): 586.

[40]Michel Foucault, "What Is Enlightenment?," 312.

[41]Ibid.

[42]Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?," in *Political Writings*, ed. H. S. Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 54, emphasis removed.

[43]Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 6, 33, 30.

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"like a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea."[44] In line with the Death of History, Foucault also rejects teleological interpretations of the past. He concludes that all the philosopher can do is "analyze questions of general import in their historically unique form."[45]

Derrida also fits within this broad outline of the postmodern philosophical perspective. He argues that Western philosophy—which he often refers to simply as "the heritage"—is based on the identification of essences in language. In contrast to analytic philosophy, which takes this search seriously, Derrida goes in the opposite direction. Rather than isolating "clear and distinct ideas" through an exploration of grammar, syntax, and speech-acts, Derrida focuses on the "arbitrariness of the linguistic sign."[46] This also involves a shift to what Nancy Fraser calls the "discursive problematic."[47] In adopting this approach, Derrida focuses on the capacity of concrete texts to disclose the world. His deconstructive approach targets the "metaphysics of presence."[48] In contrast to the ontological dualities posed by modernist philosophy, he shows how these standard modes of thought conceal important contradictions and paradoxes that undermine the dichotomies themselves, revealing their unstable and open-ended nature. The goal is thus to show that all solutions to conceptual problems are temporary, since they inevitably suppress or conceal certain possibilities. As Geoffrey Bennington points out, Derrida "quite consistently . . . gives no grounds for any doctrinal ontology, epistemology or ethics."[49]

More generally, Derrida opposes the foundationalism of Enlightenment metaphysics, by arguing that we do not have to build from the ground up, that is, from the "clear and distinct ideas" posited by Descartes. Instead, it is enough to start from "wherever we are: in a text already where we believe ourselves to be"[50] since individuals always already find themselves in what Bennington refers to as "a complex network involving the language in which we write, with all the sedimentations that language brings with it, and all the differential and semi-independent histories that intersect at this

[44]Michel Foucault, *On the Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Routledge, 2002), 422.

[45]Foucault, "What Is Enlightenment?," 318.

[46]Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988); John R. Searle, "Reiterating the Differences: A Reply to Derrida," *Glyph*, no. 1 (1977): 198–208; Raoul Moati, *Derrida/Searle: Deconstruction and Ordinary Language*, trans. Timothy Attanucci and Maureen Chun (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

[47]Nancy Fraser, "Pragmatism, Feminism, and the Linguistic Turn," in *Feminist Contentions*, 157.

[48]Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 23ff.

[49]Geoffrey Bennington, *Interrupting Derrida* (London: Routledge, 2000), 16.

[50]Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 162.

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point, on this occasion, this circumstance."[51] This highlights Derrida's broader attempt to radicalize what Rodolphe Gasché refers to as the "philosophy of reflection" by showing that philosophical thought depends on a series of "infrastructures" that themselves are not open to rational reflection.[52]

In addition to this focus on the Death of Metaphysics, Derrida's deconstructive approach, which places the focus of philosophical analysis firmly on the written word, not the author or the concept, also roots the Death of Man in his methodology. More substantively, his emphasis on the text is clearly visible in his treatment of the American Declaration of Independence, to pick just one example. Derrida argues that "the people" in whose name the declaration is made actually do not exist at the moment of the signing. They only come into being as a people in its aftermath, that is, "after the fact or after the coup [*après coup*]." In this sense, "we the people" who declare their independence, can act even though "they do *not* exist as an entity."[53]

By undermining the tradition of Western metaphysics and the modern assumption of the autonomous subject as the basis of all knowledge, Derrida also unravels the historical narratives of the Enlightenment by revealing their internal contradictions. For example, his political theory focuses on how basic concepts and values are inevitably displaced into the future "to come" (*à venir*) as ongoing projects, not achievements to be valorized and defended. He thus contributes to the Death of History by rejecting philosophies of history that are oriented to a clear *telos* or end. He reframes philosophical temporality in terms of the question "of the horizon and of any horizontal *seeing-come* in general. And it is also the question of the Enlightenment."[54]

Despite their internal differences, both Foucault and Derrida defend relatively strong versions of Flax's three theses. In Joel Whitebook's view, "These thinkers, in so far as they raise the spectres of irrationalism, nihilism and political regression for Habermas, represent the enemy."[55] However, given his defenses of Foucault and Derrida in recent years and his personal reconciliations with them, this does not appear to be the case. On the contrary, although Habermas explicitly identifies himself as "a defender of modernity . . . in the tradition of philosophy from Descartes to Kant,"[56] his thought differs

[51]Bennington, *Interrupting Derrida*, 1.

[52]Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986).

[53]Jacques Derrida, "Declarations of Independence," *New Political Science* 7, no. 1 (1986): 10.

[54]Jacques Derrida, "The 'World' of the Enlightenment to Come (Exception, Calculation, Sovereignty)," *Research in Phenomenology* 33 (2003): 20.

[55]Joel Whitebook, "Intersubjectivity and the Monadic Core of the Psyche: Habermas and Castoriadis on the Unconscious," in *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity: Critical Essays on "The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity,"* ed. Maurizio Passerin d'Entrèves and Seyla Benhabib (Cambridge: Polity, 1996), 172.

[56]Maurizio Passerin d'Entrèves, introduction to *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity*, 13.

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from the classic thinkers of the Enlightenment in important ways. In fact, by defending modernity's pursuit of universal standards of rationality via a discursive theory of action, I show that Habermas ends up endorsing weak versions of all three of Flax's fundamental theses of postmodernity. In this sense, my argument highlights the fact that he defends modernity in a way that actually brings it closer to the postmodern position that he criticizes.

2. Habermas's Weak Postmodernism

Although Habermas explicitly identifies as a defender of the Enlightenment, his approach departs significantly from the traditional foundations of modern philosophy. Most notably, his conception of reason is not rooted in the Cartesian subject (Death of Man), he rejects any suggestions of necessary historical progress guided by "world Spirit" (*Weltgeist*) or the "cunning of reason" (*List der Vernunft*) (Death of History), and he abandons the firm metaphysical foundations of the key thinkers of modern science in favor of what he calls "postmetaphysical thinking" (Death of Metaphysics).[57] As a result, I argue that Habermas has more in common with postmodernism than he has realized until relatively recently, despite the fact that he positions himself as an opponent of this movement.

Many of the parallels between Habermas's approach and postmodernism are tied to the fact that he also works within the paradigm of discourse. While Habermas displays a greater faith in the ability of linguistically mediated interaction to produce intersubjectively shared forms of meaning or horizon-expanding "mutual understanding" (*Verständigung*) between the parties than either Foucault or Derrida, their shared emphasis on communication provides an important and often overlooked link between them. All three are part of a what Fraser refers to as common shift from "an epistemological problematic, in which mind is conceived as reflecting or mirroring reality," to a paradigm "in which culturally constructed social meanings are accorded density and weight."[58]

A. Habermas on the Death of Man

Habermas's endorsement of the Enlightenment is in large part tied to his continued belief in reason as a universal source of normativity. The fact that he still holds, contra Foucault, that reason can form an "outside to power" goes a long way to explaining why critics such as Colin Koopman and Amy Allen accuse him of building on a "romantic ideal of freedom as autonomy"[59] or of "positing a concrete vision of a power-free

[57]Jürgen Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays*, trans. William Mark Hohengarten (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 145.

[58]Fraser, "Pragmatism, Feminism, and the Linguistic Turn," 157.

[59]Colin Koopman, *Genealogy as Critique: Foucault and the Problems of Modernity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 172.

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utopia."[60] Conversely, his formulation of the power of reason in terms of "the unforced force of the better argument," not the innate capacities of the rational human being posited by the history of Western philosophy, also signals his receptivity to the idea of the Death of Man.

Although Habermas does not go so far as to speak of the "death of the subject"[61] or the "death of the author,"[62] two phrases that are typically associated with postmodernism, he shares many of this movement's intuitions regarding the problems involved in the philosophy of the subject in the aftermath of the linguistic turn. However, rather than abandoning subjectivity, he advocates an intersubjective approach based on "a concept of communicative rationality which is built into speech and action."[63] This position, in which rationality is expressed in the willingness of individuals "to be persuaded by the truth of a statement, the rightness of a norm, or the truthfulness of an utterance,"[64] allows Habermas to endorse the notion of the reasoning agent, while still admitting that this consciousness is dependent on its broader social, linguistic, and discursive surroundings to produce a communicatively mediated form of rationality.

Preserving the traditional attributes of the subject, including its self-reflexivity, capacity to act on principles, rational accountability, and so forth, is crucial to Habermas's partial endorsement of the Enlightenment. However, he also acknowledges the important insights postmodernism provides. While taking a weak position on the Death of Man distances him from the more radical idea that there is no "doer behind the deed,"[65] it also separates him from the traditional thinkers of the Enlightenment. For example, although he claims to be following Kant in his moral philosophy, upon closer examination Critchley observes that "Habermas's understanding of morality does not begin from the individuality of Kantian moral self-consciousness, but rather from the recognition of the intersubjective constitution of moral norms and their embeddedness in shared forms of communicative praxis."[66]

The same is true of his social and political philosophy, which seeks to identify "the general structures of an unimpaired intersubjectivity in the formal

[60] Amy R. Allen, "Emancipation without Utopia: Subjection, Modernity, and the Normative Claims of Feminist Critical Theory," *Hypatia* 30, no. 3 (Summer 2015): 525.

[61] Amy R. Allen, "The Anti-Subjective Hypothesis: Michel Foucault and the Death of the Subject," *Philosophical Forum* 31, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 113–30.

[62] Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image-Music-Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978).

[63] Jürgen Habermas, "On the German-Jewish Heritage," *Telos* 44 (Summer 1980): 130.

[64] Jürgen Habermas, *Philosophical-Political Profiles*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983), 173.

[65] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 34.

[66] Critchley, "Remarks on Derrida and Habermas," 459.

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properties of communicative action or praxis."[67] A key part of this system was the so-called ideal speech situation, whose "defining feature . . . is that any consensus attainable under its conditions can count per se as a rational consensus."[68] Even though Habermas abandoned this unfortunate formulation soon after proposing it, it still testifies to his rejection of the Cartesian subject. This move has important implications. For example, it allows him to develop a discourse theory of democracy based not on voting, mechanisms of fair aggregation, or rhetorical persuasion, but on the quality of debate in the public sphere. Rather than building on the autonomous reasoning individual of the Enlightenment or abandoning subjectivity completely, Habermas creates an intersubjective, communicative paradigm in which discourse between individuals results in a form of politics that is no longer centered on the subject insofar as "sovereignty makes itself felt in the power of public discourses."[69]

In light of these considerations, it is clear to Fritsch that Habermas agrees with "the 'postmodern' (i.e., mostly French) critics of modernity that the philosophy of the subject is exhausted."[70] Camil Ungureanu similarly notes that he "continue[s] Kant's critical project through linguistic-pragmatic means."[71] Despite usually being cast as a steadfast opponent of postmodernism, McCarthy concludes that Habermas agrees with Foucault and Derrida about the need to "reject the Cartesian picture of an autonomous rational subject set over against a world of objects which it seeks to represent and, through representing, to master."[72] While Habermas still wants to defend the philosophical project of modernity that Foucault and Derrida reject, he does so by adopting a weaker version of the postmodern position regarding the Death of Man.

B. Habermas on the Death of History

In addition to holding a weak version of the postmodern thesis of the Death of Man, Habermas also endorses a modest interpretation of the Death of History. Despite his defense of the basic values of the Enlightenment, he forcefully rejects the grand narratives associated with thinkers such as Kant, Hegel, and Marx. These Enlightenment-era philosophies of history treat "progress as a 'fact'" that allows for "broad-based historical learning and sociocultural

[67]Habermas, *Philosophical-Political Profiles*, 175.

[68]Jürgen Habermas, *On the Pragmatics of Social Interaction: Preliminary Studies in the Theory of Communicative Action* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 97.

[69]Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 486.

[70]Fritsch, "Futures of Habermas's Work."

[71]Camil Ungureanu, "Derrida on Free Decision: Between Habermas' Discursivism and Schmitt's Decisionism," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 16, no. 3 (2008): 295.

[72]McCarthy, "Critique of Impure Reason," 438.

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development."[73] As Amy Allen—whose language I borrow—points out, such an approach is problematic because it served "to underwrite the normative perspective" of their Eurocentric ideals.[74] The stadial notions of history they underpinned were then often used to support conceptions of a developmental ladder with supposedly "inferior," "primitive" peoples placed under the West.

It is certainly true that the past plays an important role in Habermas's philosophy. However, in contrast to some interpretations of his work that see it as deeply rooted in the philosophy of history, I argue that his theoretical framework does not rely on the kinds of metanarratives that his postmodern critics problematize. On the contrary, rather than building triumphalist accounts of progress "as a fact," Habermas treats the past—particularly West German collective remembrance of World War II—as a record of mistakes whose memory can motivate social transformation. Moreover, in adopting a conception of progress inspired by Adorno, who defines *Fortschritt* as "simply the prevention and avoidance of total catastrophe,"[75] I argue that Habermas rejects backward-looking understandings of history in favor of a forward-looking approach that treats it as a project whose achievement lies in the future.[76]

The key methodological step is Habermas's move from the philosophy of history to the paradigm of collective memory.[77] Rather than using historical narratives to justify and legitimize current events, he draws on shared remembrance of catastrophic moments to call for transformation. The symbolic date of 1945, in which Habermas observes that "the rhythm of my personal development intersected with the great historical events of the time," plays a particularly important role in this tragic understanding of the need to "learn from catastrophe."[78] Instead of relying on justificatory philosophies of history to make peace with the past, he focuses on historical atrocities as moral and political "ruptures" (*Brüche*) or "caesuras" (*Zäsuren*) that force individuals to confront the past through "learning-processes" (*Lernprozesse*).[79]

[73]Amy R. Allen, *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 32.

[74]Ibid., 11.

[75]Theodor W. Adorno, *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964–1965*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), 143.

[76]I have expanded on this in Peter J. Verovšek, "Historical Criticism without Progress: Memory as an Emancipatory Resource for Critical Theory," *Constellations* 26, no. 1 (2019): 132–47.

[77]For more on the paradigm of collective memory and its differences from the philosophy of history, see Peter J. Verovšek, "Collective Memory, Politics, and the Influence of the Past: The Politics of Memory as a Research Paradigm," *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 4, no. 3 (2016): 529–43.

[78]Jürgen Habermas, *Autonomy and Solidarity: Interviews*, ed. Peter Dews (London: Verso, 1992), 77.

[79]Jürgen Habermas, "The Postnational Constellation and the Future of Democracy," in *The Postnational Constellation: Political Essays*, trans. Max Pensky (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 26–37.

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The desire to learn from history while simultaneously avoiding the pitfalls of the backward-looking philosophies of history of the Enlightenment lead Habermas to seek an "active remembrance—working through the past and hoping for a better future."[80] Following Adorno, Habermas argues that "after the revelations concerning Auschwitz, nothing could be taken at face value."[81] By thematizing institutions and traditions that had previously been taken for granted, the past can help to expand social perceptions of what it is possible to achieve. This requires reflection on "the better traditions of our history, a history that is not unexamined but instead appropriated critically."[82] In this sense, "negative point[s] of reference" ground a historical vision that treats the past as an imperative for change.[83] Habermas's turn to the paradigm of collective memory demonstrates that he rejects metanarratives of progress, just as his postmodern counterparts do.

However, in light of the fact that individuals and members of communities inevitably locate themselves historically using certain events or socially constructed periods of time as markers of distance and change, he argues that strong interpretations of the Death of History imperil our ability to situate ourselves temporally. Therefore, pushing back against Foucault and Derrida, he critiques the postmodern movement that "rejected the idea of the philosophy of history, but simultaneously employed its tropes, to proclaim a new epoch after the end of 'modernity,' after Enlightenment and humanism."[84] Although Habermas shares Foucault's and Derrida's rejection of essentialist, monocausal "grand narratives," he holds on to the ability to use comparisons with the past in order to be able to tell what Allen refers to as forward-looking narratives of progress "as an imperative."[85]

Habermas's adoption of this perspective is visible in his reconstruction of democracy in the German Federal Republic. Reflecting on "the experience of 1945 and after," Habermas notes that in addition to his rejection of nationalism and violence, he retained something else as well: "Things really got rather better. One must use that as a starting-point too."[86] Although this

[80]Habermas quoted in Martin Joseph Matuštík, *Jürgen Habermas: A Philosophical-Political Profile* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 10.

[81]Jürgen Habermas, "Public Space and Political Public Sphere: The Biographical Roots of Two Motifs in My Thought," in *Between Naturalism and Religion* (London: Polity, 2008), 18.

[82]Jürgen Habermas, *The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historians' Debate*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 234.

[83]Habermas, "Public Space and Political Public Sphere," 17, 21.

[84]Habermas in Claudia Czingon, Aletta Diefenbach, and Victor Kempf, "Moral Universalism at a Time of Political Regression: A Conversation with Jürgen Habermas about the Present and His Life's Work," *Theory, Culture & Society* 37, no. 7–8 (2020): 13.

[85]Jürgen Habermas, "Equal Treatment of Cultures and the Limits of Postmodern Liberalism," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 13, no. 1 (2005): 1–28.

[86]Habermas, *Autonomy and Solidarity*, 126.

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admission is backward looking, it does not look to the past in a triumphalist, teleological manner. Instead, it conceives of history as a process of moral-practical learning from catastrophe that is limited in scope. Far from the philosophies of historical progress posited by Kant, Hegel, and Marx, Habermas's mnemonic conception of the past is more similar to what Allen calls "progress in history"—understood as "progress in a specific domain as judged by standards that are themselves historically and contextually grounded"[87]—than she realizes in her critique of Habermas as a representative of Enlightenment philosophy.

In addition to reflecting Habermas's reluctant postmodernism in regard to the Death of History, such a conceptualization of forward-looking, local forms of learning build on the intersubjective interpretation of reason that emerges from Habermas's weak reading of the Death of Man. Bringing these two points together reveals how he seeks to empower groups of individuals to create discursive communities that allow them to learn from the past to build better futures that are not determined by the anonymous forces of history or external agents acting in their name. It also shows how Habermas's approach has more in common with postmodern approaches than is usually recognized, even as he draws on these ideas as part of a qualified defense of the Enlightenment project.

C. Habermas on the Death of Metaphysics

Finally, I turn to Habermas's partial acceptance of the Death of Metaphysics. On one level, his support for this thesis is relatively straightforward, given that he has published two volumes bearing the title *Postmetaphysical Thinking* (1992, 2017). However, as with his endorsement of "weaker" versions of the previous two core aspects of postmodern philosophy, Habermas's definition of this phrase and the strength of his claim regarding metaphysics compared to his Francophone critics is crucial. In its strongest forms, the idea of the Death of Metaphysics grounds the postmodern attack on the idea that philosophy can develop an objective "view from nowhere" that allows its practitioners to frame a comprehensive understanding not only of the world, but also of the place of human beings within it by fusing cognitive, normative, and evaluative perspectives within a single, unified framework. For the most strident critics of this classic approach—including Heidegger and Derrida—this attack on metaphysics signals what Flax refers to as a denial of the idea that "philosophy as the privileged representative of the Real and interrogator of truth claims must play a 'foundational' role in all 'positive knowledge.'"[88]

Habermas rejects this strong interpretation. As a result of the mutual processes of rationalization and specialization, he argues that modern

[87]Allen, *End of Progress*, 32, 174.
[88]Flax, *Thinking Fragments*, 34.

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philosophy "must respect the autonomous logics of the differentiated 'value spheres' (Max Weber) of science and technology, law and morality, and art and art criticism, just as it must respect the autonomy of any discipline within the science system."[89] His reading of Weber thus leads him to endorse two basic conceptions of philosophy as a form of postmetaphysical thinking. First, it can function as a collaborative form of knowledge that brings together insights from other areas of science to make claims about some limited but general preconditions of human socio-cultural existence. Second, it may proceed by constraining its claims to the reflexive illumination of particular forms of life within existing lifeworlds.

At this point Habermas's disagreements with his postmodern interlocutors become clear. Whereas defenders of stronger versions of the Death of Metaphysics want to challenge the ability of philosophy to make any overarching judgments about different claims owing to the lack of a solid Archimedean point, Habermas argues that although it has been forced to abandon its universalistic, omniscient pretensions, postmetaphysical thinking can still engage in what Harry Dahms refers to as "systematically considering the interrelations between different social value spheres"[90] by employing argumentation "in the medium of reason-giving speech."[91] Even though it is reduced to "elucidat[ing] the nature of situations in which people have the choice to redefine the rules and regulations by which they live,"[92] by working within concrete lifeworlds philosophy is still able to "*re*construc[t] the rational core of these pre-existing cultural and social structures."[93]

Although Habermas abandons the universalistic vision of critique assumed by classical metaphysics, he does not embrace the more radical antifoundationalism of Foucault and Derrida.[94] The problem, from Habermas's perspective, is that one cannot engage in social criticism without losing the "ground" (*Grund*—also reason) upon which critique can stand. Habermas's commitment to a "weaker" version of the Death of Metaphysics also leads him to endorse a "weaker" form of the foundationalism than is typically associated with Enlightenment philosophy. As Robert Holub points out, Habermas's "quasi-transcendental" grounding of thought and critique "does not reside in some metaphysical principle, but in normal linguistic competence,"[95] which allows individuals to engage in meaningful encounters in an

[89]Jürgen Habermas, *Philosophical Introductions: Five Approaches to Communicative Reason* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018), 154.

[90]Harry F. Dahms, "Theory in Weberian Marxism: Patterns of Critical Social Theory in Lukacs and Habermas," *Sociological Theory* 15, no. 3 (1997): 195.

[91]Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking*, 145.

[92]Dahms, "Theory in Weberian Marxism," 207.

[93]Habermas, *Philosophical Introductions*, 154, emphasis in original.

[94]Sabina Lovibond, "Feminism and Postmodernism," *New Left Review* 178 (November–December 1989): 22.

[95]Robert C. Holub, *Jürgen Habermas: Critic in the Public Sphere* (London: Routledge, 1991), 149.

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intersubjective realm where statements are submitted to testing via mutually binding validity claims.

However, even this tepid endorsement of foundationalism is too much for some of his postmodern interlocutors, who remain "skeptical about the avowedly *postmetaphysical* orientation of Habermas's work, where all matters must be either empirically or normatively justified."[96] In contrast to his focus on universal pragmatics and the internal presuppositions of communicative interaction, they argue that critique does not require any universalistic basis. Instead, these thinkers contend that specific, concrete narratives —"*les petits récits*"—are sufficient to ground social critique.[97] The broader epistemological point is that all knowledge always requires a supplement of faith. In this sense the postmodern perspective does not see local narratives as an alternative to metaphysics, but instead points out that metaphysics is just another story among many that also requires a narrative supplement to ground itself.

This insight links the Death of History to the Death of Metaphysics. However, given his continued commitment to the Enlightenment project, Habermas worries that stronger forms of antifoundationalism undermine the possibility of critique altogether, not just metanarratives of legitimation. Richard Wolin notes that for Habermas it is unclear how Foucault, Derrida, or Lyotard "expects to convince readers of the rectitude of his position if not via recourse to time-honored discursive means: the marshalling of supporting evidence and force of the better argument."[98] This continued dependence on the basic structure of communicative interaction underlies his worries about the "crypto-normativity" of his French counterparts—as well as the "performative contradictions" that enter into their work—when they "replace the precepts of argumentation with rhetoric, aesthetics, or agonistics."[99]

In his recent work—most of which has been published after the deaths of Foucault (1984) and Derrida (2004)—Habermas has come to recognize that such situated narratives, particularly those contained within religious traditions, play an important role in providing meaning in ways that supplement "the weak grammatical normativity of speech."[100] Whereas previously he presented himself as an avowed secularist, he has come to see that postmetaphysical thinking, rooted in "the willingness to cooperate among communicatively socialized subjects,"[101] needs to continue to learn and draw from

[96]Critchley, "Remarks on Derrida and Habermas," 456, emphasis in original.

[97]Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 23.

[98]Richard Wolin, *The Seduction of Unreason: The Intellectual Romance with Fascism from Nietzsche to Postmodernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 8.

[99]Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 282, 185.

[100]Jürgen Habermas, *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2019), 1:265.

[101]Ibid., 1:14.

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local traditions and religion in order to "*anchor* the moral point of view in the hearts of acting subjects."[102] In this sense, he now acknowledges that the normative resources contained within cultural traditions and other "acts of faith" have an important role to play in providing motivational impulses and energy to the rationalized impulses of the Enlightenment.[103]

Habermas has sought to further clarify his understanding of the relationship of history to modernity in his two-volume *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie* (Also a history of philosophy, 2019). While the genealogical approach he adopts vindicates the Kantian project of modernity rooted in the "universal aspirations of postmetaphysical thought," he sets this philosophical aspiration on different foundations by acknowledging that that European movement is situated within a "particular context of origin" that cannot simply be transposed and applied in other settings.[104] Instead of defending a singular, global conception of "the Enlightenment," he argues for a "reflexive conception of 'modernity'" that acts as an arena in which individuals with differing religious, cultural, and philosophical backgrounds interact, seeking common ground and mutual understanding.[105] While Habermas rejects the view from nowhere outside of power relations and the teleological philosophies of history posited by the thinkers of the high Enlightenment, he defends the position that "communicatively socialized individuals" can still make use of postmetaphysical thinking "to *improve* the justice of existing living conditions through collectively agreed interventions."[106]

3. Reevaluating the Meaning of the Enlightenment

Habermas's move away from the general, universalizing, or "leveling" narratives of the rationalizing Enlightenment, as well as the "reluctant postmodernism" that I diagnose, provides the foundation for a rethinking of his relation to his French sparring partners.[107] In particular, this insight helps to explain his recent expressions of regret regarding the "many

[102]Jürgen Habermas, "Reply to My Critics," in *Habermas and Religion*, ed. Craig J. Calhoun, Eduardo Mendieta, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 355, emphasis in original.

[103]For more on the ways in which religion still "counts" and is "counted on" in the modern world, see Jacques Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone," in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (Routledge: London, 2002).

[104]Habermas, *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie*, 1:110. Since the forthcoming English translation was not available at the time of writing, I have translated the quotations from the original German.

[105]Ibid., 1:118.

[106]Ibid., 2:806 and 2:802, emphasis in original.

[107]Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 83–106.

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misunderstandings between the philosophers on this side of the Rhine and those on the other side" and his desire "to clear up the misunderstandings between us."[108] My argument regarding Habermas's critique of Cartesian subjectivity, his embrace of the paradigm of collective memory over Enlightenment philosophies of history, and his rejection of universalistic metaphysics further bolsters McCarthy's contention that "Foucault and the Frankfurt School should be located rather close to one another on the map of contemporary theoretical options."[109] I push this point further by extending it to Derrida and by demonstrating that Habermas adopts weaker versions of three key commitments of postmodernism, summarized by Flax as the Death of Man, of Metaphysics, and of History.

In addition to the unexpected parallels in their philosophical approaches as a result of what I have called Habermas's "reluctant postmodernism," upon closer examination it is clear that the approaches that Derrida and Foucault take to the Enlightenment—especially in their later writings—are surprisingly similar to Habermas's understanding of modernity as an unfinished project. To start, it is necessary to realize that Habermas's attitude to the Enlightenment and its philosophical legacy is not one of triumphalism or total embrace. On the contrary, he is well aware of what he describes as

> the indisputable ideological role repeatedly played in the history of western modernity by the selective application of our western standards of egalitarian and individualistic universalism. They often served, and still do serve, to cover up the practice of double standards—both in the hypocritical justification of repressive regimes, and in the imperialist destruction and exploitation of foreign cultures.[110]

As a result of admissions like this, Johnson notes that "Habermas consistently repudiates a one-sided appreciation of our Enlightenment legacy."[111] By recognizing the double-edged nature of this Western inheritance he seeks to engage in a historical "learning process" by building on its positive aspects—such as its call for all individuals "to make autonomous use of their reason and to practically shape their social existence"[112]—while recognizing the dangerous, flattening, and colonizing tendencies this universalism can have on existing forms of life in the non-West. In particular, he notes that despite the problems it presents, philosophically and politically speaking "any criticism of a hypocritically selective application of universalist standards must appeal to the standards of this very same universalism."[113]

From this perspective, it is possible to argue that just as Habermas should be seen as a "reluctant postmodern," so Derrida and Foucault can also be seen

[108]Habermas quoted in Foessel and Habermas, *Critique and Communication*, 3, 4.
[109]McCarthy, "Critique of Impure Reason," 441.
[110]Habermas quoted in Foessel and Habermas, *Critique and Communication*, 4.
[111]Johnson, "Romantic and Enlightenment Legacies," 70.
[112]Habermas, *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie*, 1:13.
[113]Habermas quoted in Foessel and Habermas, *Critique and Communication*, 4.

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as "reluctant" proponents of the Enlightenment. For example, in his eulogy of Foucault, Habermas noted his surprise that his colleague considered himself to be the heir of a philosophical tradition that runs from Kant through "Hegel, Nietzsche, and Max Weber to Horkheimer and Adorno."[114] As Hanssen points out, in his later work Foucault even integrated various aspects of Habermas's critiques by admitting that the monolithic conception of power purely as force or violence had neglected the enabling aspects of Habermas's notion of communicative action.[115]

As Fritsch observes, in contrast to his previous rejections of the Western heritage, visible in his statements about the death of the subject and author, "Foucault himself, perhaps at least partly in response to Habermas, associated himself more clearly with the Enlightenment and, in what some have called his 'ethical turn,' with the notion of freedom."[116] Abandoning his previous emphasis on the powerful frames of normalization, Foucault began to take up issues relating to ethical obligations from within the Western tradition by turning his attention to "the care of the self" or "the art of self-government." The partial reconciliation between the two is also visible in Habermas's observation that "Foucault's microanalysis of power calls our attention to an invisible dialectic between the egalitarian tendencies of the age and those new unfreedoms that settled into the pores of simultaneously emancipated and systematically distorted communicative practices."[117]

Similarly, despite his wariness regarding Habermas's embrace of the ideals of Western modernity, Derrida also sees this period as representative of "the realization—and, moreover, the *deformed* realization—of Enlightenment in history, and is therefore an *incomplete* project."[118] In addition to this philosophical point, the rapprochement between Habermas and Derrida is driven by agreements on the shared political implications of their approaches. In particular, echoing Benhabib's suggestion that he needs to give the "concrete other" a place in his philosophical system alongside the abstract, "generalized other" of his existing social and political theory, Habermas recognizes the importance of Derrida's emphasis on humanity's unconditional responsibilities to singular others.[119]

[114]Jürgen Habermas, "Taking Aim at the Heart of the Present: On Foucault's Lecture on Kant's What Is Enlightenment?," in *Critique and Power: Recasting the Foucault/Habermas Debate*, ed. Michael Kelly (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 150.

[115]Beatrice Hanssen, *Critique of Violence: Between Poststructuralism and Critical Theory* (London: Routledge, 2000), 149ff.

[116]Fritsch, "Futures of Habermas's Work."

[117]Jürgen Habermas, *The Past as Future*, trans. Max Pensky (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 119.

[118]Critchley, "Remarks on Derrida and Habermas," 456, emphasis in original.

[119]Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community, and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

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4. Concluding Remarks

There is a lot more to be said about these philosophical issues and the important theoretical disagreements that remain between Habermas as a "reluctant postmodern" on the one side and Foucault and Derrida as "reluctant heirs" to the Enlightenment on the other. However, I conclude by reflecting on the overlap that emerges between these thinkers, despite their remaining philosophical disagreements. This contention is supported by the fact that Habermas later admitted that some of his critiques of his postmodern interlocutors were "polemically exaggerated and thus unfair."[120] Habermas was later able to build on this foundation by establishing what he refers to as "amicable relations" with Foucault and Derrida before their untimely deaths.[121]

I want to make the further claim that this reconciliation goes beyond personal relations to touch on fundamental philosophical issues as well. More specifically, I argue that these three thinkers also broadly agree on the political implications of their work. For example, in the aftermath of 9/11 Habermas and Derrida collaborated on a number of projects.[122] The two of them even published an op-ed together, which appeared simultaneously in France and Germany, calling on the European Union to build on its shared historical legacy, which had resulted in a suspicion towards market solutions, strong support for the welfare state with a strong social safety net, a belief in multilateral cooperation through international organizations, and a preference for diplomatic over military solutions to geopolitical problems, in order to develop its own foreign policy separate from that of the United States.[123] In light of these collaborations with Derrida, Holub notes that the fact that Habermas has been "made to appear a cryptoconservative unable to fathom the depth and significance of his opponents" is also unfair and inaccurate.[124]

The same can be said of Foucault who, like Habermas, devoted much of his time to writing public-facing essays and op-eds, signing political statements and participating in broader social movements as a public intellectual on top of his theoretical work.[125] While they disagree on whether a social critic should speak as a "general intellectual," who "seeks to represent all those

[120]Habermas quoted in Foessel and Habermas, *Critique and Communication*, 4.

[121]Habermas in Czingon, Diefenbach, and Kempf, "Moral Universalism," 13.

[122]For example, Giovanna Borradori, ed., *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

[123]Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida, "February 15, Or What Binds Europeans Together: A Plea for a Common Foreign Policy, Beginning in the Core of Europe," *Constellations* 10, no. 3 (2003). See also Peter J. Verovšek, "Meeting Principles and Lifeworlds Halfway: Habermas's Thought on the Future of Europe," *Political Studies* 60, no. 2 (2012).

[124]Holub, *Jürgen Habermas*, 153.

[125]Peter J. Verovšek, "The Philosopher as Engaged Citizen: Habermas on the Role of the Public Intellectual," *European Journal of Social Theory* 24, no. 4 (2021).

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excluded from the circuits of public debate" (the position taken by Habermas),[126] or a "specific intellectual," who merely seeks to "provide instruments of analysis" to the public (the perspective defended by Foucault),[127] they both argue that social critics have a duty to help improve the quality of debate in the public sphere. Reflecting on these commonalities, Thomas Biebricher concludes that "the politics of Habermas and Foucault—and for that matter Derrida and many others as well—are often remarkably similar. Publicity, access to the circuits of public debate and individual rights are elements on which those writers . . . seem to be able to agree."[128]

In addition to their similar politics, this shared approach to political engagement as public intellectuals also signals a mutual acceptance of a Kantian vision of the democratic public sphere, in which "*as a man of learning* addressing the entire *reading public*" the philosopher is called upon to "use his own reason and speak in his own person" in the service of society as a whole.[129] Insofar as this approach signals a commitment to communication "as a practice toward the possibility of ethical and political transformation,"[130] it also says something about the form that such transformation is supposed to take. In contrast to approaches that require fundamental, often violent breaks with the existing social order, the shared commitment of Habermas, Foucault, and Derrida to the persuasive role of the public intellectual suggests that the latter two thinkers actually share a version of Habermas's "radical reformism."[131] In this sense, all three agree that political transformation will come about by working within "the institutions of present day capitalism in order to challenge and to test the basic or kernel institutions of this system."[132]

Given these similarities, what explains the rancor of the disagreements between Habermas and his postmodern interlocutors? In addition to some personal characteristics of the individuals involved—for example, in a private letter Habermas once observed, "My wife claims that I complain [*schimpfe*] about everyone"[133]—much of his opposition to postmodernism is driven by his objections to the sources on which Foucault and Derrida

[126]Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977* (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 128.

[127]Ibid., 62.

[128]Thomas Biebricher, "The Practices of Theorists: Habermas and Foucault as Public Intellectuals," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 37, no. 6 (2011): 729.

[129]Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?," 55, 57, emphasis in original.

[130]Habermas quoted in Boris Frankel and Jürgen Habermas, "Habermas Talking: An Interview," *Theory and Society* 1, no. 1 (1974): 53.

[131]Ibid.

[132]Ibid.

[133]Habermas to R. W. Leonhardt (*Die Zeit*), 16.6.64, Habermas Vorlass, Korrespondenzen 1950er und 1960er Jahre, Folder 5—1964 (A–Z), Johann von Senkenburg Library at the Goethe University in Frankfurt am Main.

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draw, not their actual conclusions. Habermas is particularly wary of their theoretical appeals to Friedrich Nietzsche, Carl Schmitt, and Martin Heidegger. His reticence is driven by the way that these authors were used to support Nazism and other totalitarian ideals, either directly (in the case of Schmitt and Heidegger) or indirectly (in Nietzsche's case), to which he and his postmodern interlocutors object, both philosophically and politically.

Looking back on his disputes with Foucault and Derrida, Habermas has expressed regret for labeling colleagues "young conservatives."[134] However, he stands by his negative appraisal of their reception of these interwar German thinkers whose "elitist desires for authority" (*elitären Herrschaftswünsche*)[135]—I borrow this phrase from Adorno—led them to think that they could use Hitler as a vehicle to realize their theoretical ideals by "leading the Führer" (*den Führer führen*).[136] In this sense, Habermas notes that he "was attempting to make them [Derrida and Foucault] aware that German authors, whom they invoke above all others, are placed in a politically poisoned context . . . which stand[s] in stark contrast to the intentions of a reflective Enlightenment and, indeed, left-wing traditions in general."[137] While this does not excuse the polemical tone that he adopts, it does explain what he thinks is at stake philosophically in the postmodern attempt to rehabilitate Nietzsche, Schmitt, and Heidegger in the aftermath of Auschwitz.

My core conclusion is that the philosophical and political relationship between Habermas, Foucault, and Derrida should not be reduced to pitting modernity against postmodernity, the Enlightenment against Romanticism, mainstream liberalism (or even crypto-conservatism) against the radical Left. Instead, following Johnson, these thinkers should be interpreted as part of a common attempt to find a way to think through the "ambivalent Enlightenment legacies [that] make room for the significance of unreconciled Romantic longings" in postwar Europe.[138] While important differences remain, they should be seen as the result of the differing philosophical and political contexts of France and West Germany, respectively, which has shaped what Bourdieu has referred to as a "common problematic . . . [focused on] the relationship between authority and communication" in the aftermath of Europe's experience of total war in the first half of the twentieth century.[139] Philosophers and politicians who blame postmodernism for identity politics and growing illiberalism would do well to remember that this

[134]Foessel and Habermas, *Critique and Communication*, 4.

[135]Theodor W. Adorno, *Eingriffe: Neun Kritische Modelle* (Frankfurt am Main: Edition Suhrkamp, 1963), 32.

[136]Otto Pöggeler, "Den Führer Führen? Heidegger und Kein Ende," *Philosophische Rundschau* 32, no. 1 (1985).

[137]Foessel and Habermas, *Critique and Communication*, 4.

[138]Johnson, "Romantic and Enlightenment Legacies," 83.

[139]Bourdieu, "Vive le Streit!"

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approach does not necessarily lead to relativism, nor does adopting its insights require abandoning the social and intellectual project of the Enlightenment that grounds support for democracy, at least in the West.

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