



Habermas in his study in Starnberg.

Tracing a Life

An attempt to reconstruct the development of a way of thinking: Sociologist Stefan Müller-Doohm has written a biography on Jürgen Habermas. An interview

You have been studying Jürgen Habermas for decades and now you have produced the first major biography on him. Can you still remember the first time you met Habermas?

I first encountered the name Jürgen Habermas during a seminar at Frankfurt University. As was often the case the room was far too small for the number of students. At the time, sociology was becoming very fashionable. In the very first session the lecturer Manfred Teschner recommended that we read

Habermas's 1963 collection of essays "Theory and Practice". And then he discreetly mentioned that the author might be leaving Heidelberg to come and teach at Frankfurt. This piece of information was met with an enthusiastic knocking of desks from the students, which encouraged me to get the book and painstakingly work my way through it.

Habermas was then indeed appointed to take over Max Horkheimer's

chair in the summer semester of 1964.

The new professor of philosophy and sociology offered a lecture entitled "The History of Sociology". That was my first face-to-face meeting with Habermas who – unlike Theodor W. Adorno, for example – generally kept to his written notes when he gave lectures. His dense and complex expositions demanded huge concentration. As was usual at the time, the students all tried to take notes – a futile undertaking if mine are anything to go by.

Do you consider yourself a student of Jürgen Habermas?

Anyone lucky enough to experience Habermas as a university professor and prepared to meet his academic demands had no choice but to learn from him. For my generation and for me during my years of study – and of course also later – reading his books was a matter of course. Whether that qualifies me as a student of Habermas I have no idea. I finished studying and did my PhD not in Frankfurt but at Gießen University, under the sociologist Helge Pross.

You differentiate between Habermas as academic and as public intellectual. Which of the two do you identify with more?

I can't really answer that. In his numerous public statements and interviews Habermas has repeatedly emphasised how important it is for him to keep his roles of academic and public intellectual separate. The reflections of the philosopher and the research of the social scientist are not quite the same as the practice of the intransigent intellectual. But in the case of a social theorist like Habermas, who aspired to a contemporary theory of modernity, there are affinities between his academic insights and the direction of his interventions as an intellectual, for example his attack on Chancellor Merkel's European policy, or his conversations with Joseph Ratzinger, the former Pope Benedict XV or, at the peak of the global financial crisis, the articles he wrote defending democracy against the dynamics of global capitalism.

Habermas is an exception in that he has always been prepared to leave the sheltered world of academia to be heard

in the political public sphere – a willingness which still impresses me today.

Did your work on his biography change your view of Habermas?

The biographical research I conduct attempts on the one hand to reconstruct the developmental process of Habermas' thinking and on the other, to understand how he influenced the formation of public opinion and knowledge, the mentality, in the Bundesrepublik before and after reunification. This sort of research naturally leads to new and sometimes surprising insights. It allows one to dis-

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cover whether and how the development of Habermas' thinking and also his political engagement has been influenced by contemporary history. So one can only truly understand the criticism of the young student Habermas in Bonn in 1953 of Martin Heidegger's involvement in the "Third Reich", and his refusal to speak about it, if one sees things from the perspective of the restorative climate of postwar Germany in the Adenauer years, when "communicative silence" prevailed. Over the course of the biographical research projects that I have carried out together with some very inspiring colleagues, I have realised that following the trail of the life history of someone like Jürgen Habermas is a wonderful way to study the whole point of the sociological perspective: the dialectic between individual and society.

Habermas is 85. He is regarded as the representative thinker of the old Bundesrepublik. Do his theoretical approaches still apply today? Do his objections still carry weight?

Habermas has consciously described his social theory as an ongoing project that won't be concluded at some point in the future, but is to be continued as new historical experiences and scientific knowledge are acquired. He has revised his consensus theory of truth on the basis of discourse theory several times; he has constantly refined his theory of modernity, ultimately supplementing it with an elaborate theory of morality, justice and democracy. He is currently working on a draft of a philosophy of religion. In short, Habermas's projects are always works in progress.

The global resonance that his philosophical concepts have had demonstrates the relevance of Habermas's writings. But topicality should not be confused with truth for all time. There is no social theory that can claim relevance for all its assertions beyond historical time. This particularly applies to Habermas, who champions the theory that the knowledge embodied in language has an inherently revisionary power. The explanatory impact of any diagnosis of the times depends on whether its arguments can convince contemporaries because they tell them something about their situation. As I see it, Habermas's conceptual work not only helps us to better understand this age, but his objections as an intellectual have helped to prevent normative demands from disappearing from democratic politics altogether.

Interview: Manfred Richter



Prof. Dr. Stefan Müller-Doohm studied sociology, political science and psychology in Frankfurt, Marburg and Gießen. He earned his PhD at the University of Gießen in 1972. Müller-Doohm was appointed Professor of Sociology at Oldenburg University in 1974, and is still active there as professor emeritus. He heads the Intellectual Sociology research centre and is the founder of the Adorno research centre.