

# "The United Colours of Jürgen Habermas: A Life's Work"

*by Lev Lafayette; a presentation to the Existentialist Society, Melbourne. May 2, 2026.*

## 1.0 Introduction

### 1.1 Welcome and Title

Once again I find myself thanking David Miller, the long-standing secretary and convenor of the Existentialist Society in Melbourne, Australia, for at least more than the thirty years I've lived in this city, for inviting me to speak today. David has asked to be speak today as the originally allocated speaker, Professor Steven Taubeneck, is unable to present today on their talk "Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Marx, Nietzsche and Beyond", although I may note it is still advertised as such on the website. If anyone has come to hear Professor Taubeneck, I am afraid you will have to wait for another day! Instead, David asked me to present today knowing that I was quite keen to on the topic of "The United Colours of Habermas: A Life's Project", a title that combines recognition that Europe's most important philosopher and social theorist of the late twentieth century, Jurgen Habermas, died recently, on March 14th 2026, aged 96, and that he dedicated his life to a philosophical project that emphasised the unity between people.

The title, for those don't know, also refers to the advertising campaign of the Italian Benneton fashion label, popular in the 1980s and early 1990s, that used "multiracial advertisements" a seemingly radical idea at the time. I don't know whether David is aware of it, but according to the Existentialist Society website (which is sometimes perhaps inaccurate), that this is a first time, since regular monthly meetings started in February 1974, that a person has delivered a lecture to the society in two consecutive months. I understand that the circumstances are more opportunistic than deliberate, but I do see this as a significant, if accidental, honour, and hopefully I'll give credit not only to the Society, but also to the subject - which I may note is somewhat related to last month's presentation, "The Decline of French Philosophy", as in both cases the discussion is primarily about contemporary Western European philosophy and the outcome of the Enlightenment and modernity.

### 1.2 Who is Habermas anyway?

It is necessary to give a brief biography and overview of the life and ideas of Jurgen Habermas. He was born in Düsseldorf, in June 1929 and notably with a cleft palate that would lead to speech

problems; later he would acknowledge that this encouraged his consideration of the dependence of communication within society, indeed to even generate a society. He grew up in a Protestant environment near Cologne; his grandfather had been the director of the local seminary and his father the executive director of the Cologne Chamber of Industry and Commerce, joining the Nazi Party in 1933 and advised it from 1939. As a teenager during World War II Habermas joined the Hitler Youth, at his father's instigation. He organised first aid training as part of medical corps service and from August 1944, his detachment operated anti-aircraft guns.

In the late 1940s and into the 1950s Habermas was a student at the the universities of Göttingen), Zurich (1950–1951), and Bonn (1951–1954), completing a doctorate in philosophy from Bonn with a "Heideggerian" dissertation on Schelling. This dissertation led him to the ideas of the early Marx, via the phenomenologist, Karl Löwith. In 1956, Habermas became Theodor Adorno's research assistant at the University of Frankfurt am Main's Institute for Social Research (IfS), "The Frankfurt School", where he studied philosophy, sociology, and critical theory under Adorno and Max Horkheimer for the next three years. Habermas' political activism led him in conflict with Horkheimer, leading Habermas to leave Frankfurt to the University of Marburg under the Wolfgang Abendroth, where he completed his groundbreaking habilitation work in 1961, "Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit: Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft" (published in English as "The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere : An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society").

That year he was offered and accepted the position of "extraordinary professor" (professor without chair) of philosophy at the University of Heidelberg, and in 1964, supported by Adorno and reconciled with Horkheimer, he returned to Frankfurt become chair in philosophy and sociology, during which time "Erkenntnis und Interesse" ("Knowledge and Human Interests" was published in 1968. Following Adorno's death in 1969, he turned down the directorship of the Institute of Social Research and instead took up a role as co-director of the Max Planck Institute for the Study of the Scientific and Technical World in Starnberg in 1971 where he worked until 1983, when he returned to the chair at Frankfurt. During his time at the Max Planck Institute he would publish a number of extremely important books including, Legitimationsprobleme im Spätkapitalismus ("Legitimation Crisis") in 1973 and the two-volume "Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns" (Theory of Communicative Action") in 1981. During his returned time at Frankfurt he would publish "Der Philosophische Diskurs der Moderne" ("The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity") in 1985, and "Faktizität und Geltung" ("Between Facts and Norms") in 1992 and, in 1986, he received the Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Prize, the highest honour awarded in German research.

Although retired from Frankfurt in 1994, he continued to hold professorship positions and continued to publish including "Die Einbeziehung des Anderen" ("The Inclusion of the Other", 1996), "Dialektik der Säkularisierung" ("The Dialectics of Secularisation", in 2004 with Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (who would become Pope Benedict XVI), ""Zur Verfassung Europas" (published as "The Crisis of the European Union", 2011, although the literal translation is "Toward a Constitution of Europe"), and the three-volume "Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie" ("Also a History of Philosophy"), 2024-2025. It must be acknowledged here that this is only a selection of his major publications; there are many others and I apologise to any Habermas researchers - of which I include myself - for not including a number of books or essay collections. His output, in depth, scope, and page-count, was nothing short of extraordinary.

It must be noted that in the course of his career and publications, Habermas engaged in a number of high-profile and often very public debates with Gadamer's hermeneutics, Popper and Albert's critical rationalism, Luhmann's systems theory, Foucault's post-structuralism, and an attempted "post-secular" rapprochement with religious thinkers. With such a vast scope in philosophy and social theory it is necessary here to be somewhat selective. Influenced by critical Marxism, linguistic philosophy, pragmatism, developmental psychology, and functionalist sociology, Habermas was certainly a powerful synthetic thinker, whose contributions will be felt for many decades to come. As a result Discussion of his sociology and political theory, extremely important topics in their own right, will be relatively brief in favour of philosophy; after all this is an Existentialist Society presentation. Thus, Habermas' distinctive contributions on social evolution, social structures, the history of rationality, the system-lifeworld distinction, etc will not be elaborated (a second presentation is perhaps needed). Instead, this presentation will concentrate on Habermas' participation in the linguistic turn, the notions of rationality and interests, communication, the topology of universal pragmatics, discourse ethics, and their commitment to the project of the Enlightenment and modernity.

## **2.0 Habermas' Contributions to Philosophy**

### **2.1 The Linguistic Turn**

From the mid-twentieth century onwards, contemporary philosophy has been dominated by a turn toward understanding the role of language. Whilst there are precursors (notably Frege), Habermas like many others credits Ludwig Wittgenstein as the leading thinker to advocate that philosophical

problems are typically linguistic problems and, credit Wittgenstein with a revolution in philosophy that overcame the limitations of the subjective-objective dichotomy by incorporating the use of language and intersubjectivity ("there is no private language", Witt), along with the recognition of the connection between words, meaning, and action. From the former, Habermas grounds social existence drawing from George Herbert Mead and Émile Durkheim, and from latter a move toward pragmatics evident in the contributors to ordinary language philosophy, such as J.L. Austin's and John Searle's "speech-acts".

In doing so, Habermas moved significantly beyond Wittgenstein. Whilst Wittgenstein sought to dissolve philosophical confusions (a brilliant and often quoted line: "Most philosophical problems are nothing more than linguistic confusions due to our failure to understand the logic of our language"), for Habermas the use of language explains the universal conditions of the world and provides an avenue for rational communication. Viewed in this manner deliberative democracy and argumentation is an opportunity for emancipation, providing standard to understand, to diagnose, to critique social pathologies, and rather than using "language games" (which are more popular in the post-structuralist tradition with its emphasis on ambiguity and difference), Habermas sees understanding through language for communicative action that respects autonomy and generates solidarity: "Communicative action is the switching station for the energies of social solidarity" (TCA, Vol 2, p57).

In this manner Habermas also engages in his critique of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Wilhelm Dilthey's hermeneutics, and Paul Ricoeur's combination of phenomenology and hermeneutics. Whilst the importance of historical and contextual understanding ["*verstehen*"] is recognised by Habermas, along with their rejection of positivism, the hermeneutic approach over-emphasises an allegiance to tradition which, for Habermas, is rather like the phenomenological allegiance to subjective experience. Both weaken the prospect of critique and therefore blunt the possibility of improvement, change, and emancipation. Being sensitive to context should not mean being trapped by it. This is not a simple rejection of phenomenology and hermeneutics however but rather an incorporation into critical theory; a critical theory that uses intersubjectivity and is informed by phenomenology and hermeneutics.

## **2.2 Interests and Communicative Rationality**

With the emphasis on language already in place, the practical application of this tool for interests and rationality was another part of Habermas' project. One of his earliest texts, "Knowledge and

Human Interests", from 1968, provided a critique of positivism from the perspective of pragmatism, and especially from C.S. Peirce (PUSS) and the aforementioned Dilthey. An even stronger critique was levelled at psychoanalysis, particularly its claims to be science. Instead, Habermas felt that psychoanalysis and other forms of self-reflection were better placed as part of the humanities rather than making bold predictive claims on the basis of facticity; a favourite piece of anthropology is the examples from Claude Lévi-Strauss (and others) that witch-doctors were often better at therapy as clinical psychoanalysts. At the time it was a challenging suggestion, but with Karl Popper providing a similar criticism, it is now more commonly accepted.

Overcoming both the positivist pretensions to understand everything under the guise of objectivity and logic, or subjectivist claims of relativism to the point of solipsism, Habermas draws upon different types of speech, different types of argumentation, what issues they raise, and what sort of epistemological validity claims they make. "Normative regulated actions and expressive self-representations have, like assertions or constative speech acts, the character of meaningful expressions, understandable in their context, which are connected with criticizable validity claims" (TCA Vol 1, p15). Obviously, rather than making claims are the truth of a claim, such as one finds in constative propositions, normative claims make validity claims on the rightness of practical action, whereas expressive dramaturgical expressions raise claims of their sincerity. This is notably more advanced than the fact-value distinction that finds its way into academia as the distinction between quantitative and qualitative research.

Once one is raising claims for verification or falsification then the propositions are tested against different criteria of rationality and in particular contexts. For the former, Habermas engages in a lengthy review of the contributions of the sociologist Max Weber, and especially Weber's concerns with the disenchantment of traditional metaphysical worldviews and the rise of instrumental reason in modernity. and especially a rationalist grounding of why Western metaphysical approaches, a combination of Judeo-Christianity ethics and Hellenic cognitive contemplation offered such a high rationalisation potential. It should be noted that this is, in many ways, far too idealistic and a simpler interpretation can come down to geography and resources. On the other hand, Habermas improves Popper's ontological three world theory, commonly espoused as the objective world, the subjective world, and products of thought. However, even when reviewing Popper directly it is revealed that the third world is more appropriately considered a social, intersubjective world. With that in mind, a union of attitudes and worlds form a rationalisation complex for universal pragmatics.

## 2.3 Universal Pragmatics

With his Frankfurt colleague Karl-Otto Apel, Habermas developed the model of universal pragmatics, reviewing the conditions for communication and the validity claims of propositions. Apel described his model as "transcendental pragmatics" which, in the same spirit as Immanuel Kant, he considered to be foundational and a priori. In contrast, Habermas considered this new approach to pragmatism, which is married with ordinary language philosophy, to be more reconstructive and the result of social development. Further, Habermas considered "formal pragmatics" to be a more mature refinement of the "universal pragmatics" that he had previously published. Describing it as "formal pragmatics" however does conflict in the namespace with the broader use in linguistics. As a result, "universal pragmatics" is used here in preference.

By comparing the ontology of objective, social, and subjective worlds with the epistemological attitudes of constative, normative, or expressive attitudes a rationalisation complex is generated where the individual intersection of each world and attitude creates value spheres that correspond to action systems, cognitive potential and communication practises, the prospect of balanced institutionalisation (a sociological concern), along with points of connection and distinction. Further, it illuminates to what degree - and this is very much the pragmatic part - whether one can make a sensible proposition about a value-sphere at all; for example, any normative expressions to the objective world are considered irrationalisable; it is simply not possible to come to a conclusion, whether blue skies or grey skies are more or less moral than the other. Elaborating even further, your speaker today also notes that these complexes are encapsulated in a reality that is both empirical and rational whose foundations, whether materialist, idealist, or symbolicist, are inaccessible to our minds. This is, of course, all difficult and would be lengthy to express in words alone, however the visual aid of a table is very useful at this point:

### World Orientations and Verification in Universal Pragmatics

Unverifiable Metaphysics	Physicalist, Symbolist, Idealist Theology		
Verifiable Reality	Logical and Empirical Philosophy		
Orientations/Worlds (verification)	1. Objective or "The" External World	2. Intersubjective or "Our" Social World	3. Subjective or "My" Internal World
1. Propositions of Truth - Sciences (correspondence)	Scientific facts	Social facts	Unverifiable
2. Propositions of Justice - Laws (consensus)	Unverifiable	Legal Norms	Moral Norms
3. Propositions of Beauty –	Aesthetic Expressions	Unverifiable	Sensual Expressions

Arts (sincerity)			
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Elaborated from Habermas (1984, TCA Vol I, p239)

## 2.4 The Ideal Speech Situation and Discourse Ethics

Now it would be a magnificent world if all we had to do was to meet up, work out what we are saying, whether it is rationalisable, and come to a conclusion through talking about it. Both Habermas and Otto-Apel were quite aware that this is not how things happen in the real world and developed some procedural rules and standards that would be known at "The Ideal Speech Situation" originally, and then "Discourse Ethics" later on. The general idea is that not only are speakers free from coercive influences, both external and internal, in expressing or questioning a proposition. More importantly, there was an need for all participants in the conversation to be motivated solely by the desire to obtain a rational consensus. This compared to more manipulative types of communication that where participants see each other as strategic targets for goal attainments.

Discourse ethics consists of two components; the Principle of Discourse (D), that valid norms consists of anything that reaches approval through a communicative process from autonomous participator actors who are competent to make a decision, who reason-governed, and whose input is inclusive. This is the sort of proposal that was established as initially as the Ideal Speech Situation. Secondly, there is the Principle of Universalization (U), "All affected can accept the consequences and the side effects that [the norm's] general observance can be anticipated to have for the satisfaction of everyone's interests, and the consequences are preferred to those of known alternative possibilities for regulation" (Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991, p65).

It should be clear that the ideal speech situation, as an ideal speaker, or discourse ethics, as a process, are counter-factual although Habermas makes a strong case that they are recognised in everyday communication and, to a large extent, carried out. Indeed, they are about as counter-factual as the assumptions of a free market economy which, interestingly, also makes similar sorts of claims. A difference being is that Habermas is aware that these are counter-factual statements whereas one cannot help but observe that nearly all advocates for a free market assume that the conditions are already in place. In many ways discourse ethics is a reformulation of Kant's deontological ethics into communication as a procedural, rather than substantive moral system. In other words, universal procedures that allow for relative content.

## 2.5 Modernity and Enlightenment

The core of Habermas' motivation is a commitment to Enlightenment ideals and to the modernist project; especially and explicitly deriving from Kant. Both, of course, argued that philosophers should engage as public intellectuals, and Habermas has certainly followed that principle. Likewise Habermas draws from Kant's federalism to encourage a cosmopolitan and constitutional order dedicated to protecting human rights, of which Habermas' advocacy of the European Union is the most prominent example, encouraging a post-national constitutional patriotism ("Verfassungspatriotismus" c.f., Hannah Arendt's comments in "On Revolution") based on liberal and democratic values and social welfare, and expressed deep concerns about executive power being carried out on intergovernmental levels rather than from the European parliament, or by an over-reliance on technocrats. An ongoing debate exists in a practical manner when Habermas supported NATO's unauthorised use of force against Serbia on the basis of protecting human rights. Habermas recognised that it was carried out without UN approval and contrary to state sovereignty, but was part of what was the emerging doctrine of the Responsibility to Protect. Just before his death, Habermas was an advocate for a negotiated peace in Ukraine and opposed accusations of genocidal intent by Israel in Gaza, which now has been confirmed by the United Nations.

Habermas' advocacy of modernity and the Enlightenment recognises that sometimes the values are not always implemented; in his early works he will speak that sometimes genuine critics of social pathologies take an anti-modernist avenue, such as the "hippie" counter-culture which would often incorporate pre-modernist nonsense. Later, he would refer to a modernism "at variance with itself" (The Question Concerning Modernity, 1984, p36), where the instrumental and strategic rationality (that is control and efficiency) of the modern social system (economy the state, money and power) was weakening the capacity of the lifeworld (everyday life, shared meaning and understanding) to utilise the rational spheres of sciences, laws, and arts as cognitive sources to enrich experience. These distinctions are the core principles of Habermas' critical sociology. The commitment to modernity and the Enlightenment also brought Habermas into public dispute with the post-structuralists and post-modernists; Habermas' initial definition of post-modernism in Legitimation Crisis, 1973 spurred a lot of the subsequent debate). Habermas claims the post-structuralists, such as Foucault, Derrida, et al (all discussed in last month's presentation to the Existentialist Society) confuse the pathologies of modernism with the project itself.

In the last decades of his life, Habermas increasingly became a voice for a rapprochement with religious voices, arguing for a post-secular society of faith and reason. Rejecting the idea that modernity involved the disenchantment of the world that relegated faith to the private sphere, Habermas argued that the secularism rested on normative principles that came from a Judeo-Christian origins. In wanting to resist some advancements of science and technology, especially in bioethics, Habermas also turned to religion as a source for offering moral guidance. Whilst Habermas' retained a loyalty to the secular state; that is, the public institutions must remain neutral, religious language ought to be encouraged in the public sphere, but with accessible, pluralistic, rational argumentation to keep fundamentalist tendencies in check. This was certainly an area where many felt that Habermas was least successful in resolving, not only for the idea of a "post-secularism", but with an thoroughly idealistic assessment that religious institutions would willingly limit themselves in the manner he described, or that metaphysical articles of faith can be reconciled with secular reason.

### **3.0 A Critique and the Future of Critical Theory**

The presentation today is part of what will be an ongoing legacy of the works and thought of Jurgen Habermas, a public intellectual and philosopher and social theorist of enormous scope whose works spanned decades and incorporated a vast multitude of streams of thought. In doing so, this presentation largely limited itself to the philosophical contributions of Habermas, that is, their contribution to the linguistic turn, to communicative rationality, to universal pragmatics, discourse ethics, and finally their advocacy of the modernist project and Enlightenment values. As has been seen, however, Habermas sometimes seemed to take a wrong turn in their own philosophy or its implementation. A Habermas at variance with himself, one could say. Often idealised, supportive critics of Habermas, such as feminist Nancy Fraser, would identify emancipatory potential in promoting inclusive and democratic discourse, but at the same time noting that Habermas tended to overlook in a substantive sense how numerous social groups have been marginalised and, rather like Lawrence Kohlberg, tended to emphasise an abstract more rationality rather than emotional affectivity as a moral principle. This did have some influence; Habermas' "Between Facts and Norms" is notable for a more inclusive approach.

Part of the issue - and this conclusion definitely moves towards a critique of Habermas' social theory - is that the idealisation in philosophy is likewise matched with an idealisation of social institutions. Whereas Habermas provides some incredibly valuable work in his criticism of how social systems "colonise" the lifeworld, and provided one of the most pithy descriptions of the

contradictions of advanced capitalism in "Legitimation Crisis", this is all done without much reference to political economy. Indeed, nowhere in any of Habermas' extensive works does one find a thorough study of political economy and class relations. The debate about the conditions of discourse and the context of ideas, could certainly do with a hefty input of institutional economics and class analysis; as Anthony Giddens once remarked in a review of *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas should have used more Marx and less Weber. Perhaps if that was done, and a text as extensive as *The Theory of Communicative Action* had been written in the spirit of *Legitimation Crisis*, Habermas' own project would not have as awry in the early 21st century.

What we are left with, however, is an incomplete legacy and in many ways that is how it should be. The Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt and the body of Critical Theory that it developed remains a powerful and challenging body of interdisciplinary research with the practical aim of furthering the freedom and welfare of all. It has, since Horkheimer's influential essay distinguishing from "Traditional Theory" rejected the idea that existing social orders are given, and always sought practical and transformative improvements to social life, although one would really have to return to the works of the second director, Friedrich Pollock, and his works on automation to find an especially deep focus on working-class life. Of course, it must be recognised too that Habermas was not the only member of the second-generation of the Frankfurt School; Alfred Schmidt, Albrecht Wellmer, Oskar Negt, and Claus Offe must also be mentioned, along with a third generation that includes Axel Honneth, Nancy Fraser, Seyla Benhabib, and Christoph Menke, and a fourth including Stephan Lessenich and Ferdinand Sütterlütü. The degree that they further develop and improve the contributions of Habermas to further the practical task of emancipation will be the degree that critical theory remains of critical importance.