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The Liberal Social Philosopher Jürgen Habermas Insists upon the Importance of Critical Memory (November 7, 1986)

In this article, the liberal social philosopher Jürgen Habermas attacks the revisionist efforts of conservative intellectuals. He points out that the identity of the Federal Republic rests on the admission of responsibility for the Holocaust and insists on the importance of critical memory as the foundation for democracy.

On the Public Use of History: The Official Self-Understanding of the Federal Republic is Breaking Up

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Jaspers's Question Today

Then as now the simple fact is that those born later have grown up in a way of life in which *that* was possible. Our own life is connected with this context of life in which Auschwitz was possible, not through contingent circumstances, but internally. Our way of life is connected with our parents' and grandparents' way of life through a web of family, local, political, and intellectual transmissions—through a historical milieu that has made us what we are today. Not one of us can sneak out of this milieu because our identity, both as individuals and as Germans, is permanently interwoven with it, from bodily gesture through the language to the rich interplay of intellectual customs. I could never, for example, when I teach at universities abroad, deny the mentality in which the traces are buried of the very German movement of thought from Kant to Marx and Max Weber. We must therefore stand by our traditions of we do not want to deny ourselves. I also agree with Dregger that there are no reasons for such avoidance maneuvres. But what follows from this existential linking with traditions and ways of life that have been poisoned by unspeakable crimes? A completely civilized populace, proud of its humanistic culture and its constitutional state, made itself liable for these crimes. It is in the Jaspersian sense a collective mutual liability. Does something of this liability carry over to the next generation and the one after that? For two reasons, I think, we should answer yes.

There is first of all the obligation that we in Germany—even if no one else any longer assumes it—must, undisguisedly and not simply intellectually, keep awake the memory of the suffering of those murdered by German hands. These dead justifiably have a claim on a weak amnesiac power of solidarity, which those born afterward can only practice in the medium of the constantly renewed, often confused, always worrying memory. If we brush aside this Benjaminian legacy, our Jewish fellow citizens, the sons, the daughters, the grandchildren of the murdered could no longer breathe in our country. That also has political implications. In any case, I do not see, for example, how the relations of the Federal Republic with Israel could in the foreseeable future be "normalized." Many carry openly the

"encumbered remembrance" in name only, while they actually denounce public manifestations of this kind of feeling as rituals of false subservience and as gestures of hypocritical humility. I am amazed that these ladies and gentlemen—if we are going to speak in a Christian way—cannot even distinguish between humility and repentance.

This dispute is not about encumbered remembrance but about the rather more narcissistic question of how we should position ourselves—for our own sakes—toward our own traditions. If we cannot face our own traditions without illusion, then the remembrance of the victims will become a farce. In the officially announced self-understanding of the Federal Republic there was until now a clear and simple answer. It did not sound any different from Weizsäcker than from Heinemann and Heuss. After Auschwitz we can create our national self-understanding solely by appropriating the better traditions of our critically examined history. We can only perpetuate a national context of life that once allowed an incomparable destruction of the substance of human community in the light of healthy traditions. These are the traditions that hold their ground through a perspective trained and made suspicious by moral catastrophe. Otherwise we cannot respect ourselves and cannot expect respect from others.

The official self-understanding of the Federal Republic has until now borne this premise. The consensus is today being abrogated by the Right. One fears one consequence in particular. A critical appropriation of our traditions does not promote naive trust in the moral righteousness of accustomed ways; it does not help in the identification with untested models. Martin Broszat correctly sees the point here where the problems can arise. The Nazi period will be all the less likely to block us from our past the more we view it as a filter through which our cultural tradition must pass, inasmuch as it is adopted deliberately and consciously.

Today, Dregger and those who think like him are against this continuity in the self-understanding of the Federal Republic. As far as I can tell, their discontent feeds on three sources.

Three Sources of Discontent

First, situational interpretations of a neoconservative origin play a part. According to this interpretation, the moralizing view of the most recent past occludes the view of the thousand-year history before 1933. A repressed memory of this national history, which came about under "thought prohibition," cannot lead to a positive self-image. Without collective identity, the forces of social integration would weaken. The lamented "loss of history" is even supposed to contribute to weakening the legitimation of the political system and to endanger the domestic peace and the accountability of foreign policy. This is supposed to be the reason for the compensatory endowing of higher meaning, with which history is to serve those people who have been uprooted by modernization. The attempt to grasp self-identity through national history demands that the negative image of the Nazi period be relativized; for this purpose it is no longer sufficient to bracket out the period. It has to be leveled out in its onerous meaning.

Second, behind a trivializing revisionism there is a deeper motive, completely independent of a functionalist attempt à la Stürmer. About this, since I am no social psychologist, I can only offer speculations. Edith Jacobson once penetratingly formulated the psychological insight that the developing child must gradually learn to attach the experiences with the loving and nurturing mother to the experiences that come from dealing with the mother who rejects and says no. Obviously it is a long and painful process in which we learn to put together the originally competing images of good and bad parents to complex images of the *same* person. [. . .] Thus it is by no means the morally insensitive who felt themselves pressured

to remove from the collective destiny in which their next of kin were involved the blemish of extraordinary moral mortgages.

The third motive lies on yet a different plane. It is the battle to reclaim encumbered traditions. Those who were born later, with their knowledge of the course of history, must confront the ambivalences that present themselves. When the view to appropriating these traditions is directed toward these ambivalences, then even the exemplary cannot be free of the retroactive power of a corrupted history. After 1945 we read Carl Schmidt, Heidegger, and Hans Freyer, even Ernst Jünger, differently than before 1933. For many people this is not easy to bear, particularly for my generation, which—after the war—stood under the intellectual influence of towering figures of this kind. That may, by the way, explain the rehabilitation efforts—not only in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*—urgently directed toward the neoconservative heritage.

Forty years later, then, the dispute, which Jaspers was able to settle in his day with great effort, has broken out again. Can one assume the legal successorship of the German Reich? Can one continue the traditions of German culture without taking over the historical liability for the way of life in which Auschwitz was possible? Can one be liable for the context of the origins of such crimes, with which one's own existence is historically woven, in any other way than through common remembrance of that for which one cannot atone other than in a reflective, testing attitude toward one's own, identity-endowing traditions? Can it not be generally said that the less commonality a collective life-context has afforded, and the more it has maintained itself outwardly by usurpation and destruction of alien life, the greater will be the burden of repentance imposed on the mourning and self-critical examination of the following generations? And does not precisely this sentence prohibit downplaying the weight of the burden with which we are saddled by making leveling comparisons? This is the question of the singularity of the Nazi crimes. How must it seem in the mind of a historian who claims that I "invented" this question?

We conduct the dispute for the correct answer from our own perspective. One should not confuse this arena, in which there can be no impartial ones among us, with the discussion of the scholars who in their work must assume the perspective of an outside observer. The political culture of the Federal Republic is certainly influenced by the comparative work of historians and other scholars. But the results of scholarly work must first pass through the locks of the mediators and the media and then return to the perspective of the participant in the public river of the appropriation of tradition. Only here can comparisons become a kind of settling of accounts. The ruffled feathers about the confounding of politics and scholarship pushes the theme onto the wrong track. Nipperdey and Hildebrand are barking up the wrong tree, or should not be barking at all. They live, it seems, in an ideologically closed milieu no longer reachable by reality. It is not a matter of Popper versus Adorno, nor of scholarly differences of opinion, nor about questions of freedom from value judgments. It is about the public use of history.

From Comparisons Come Squaring of Accounts

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I accept the criticism that "annihilation," not "expulsion," of the kulaks is the appropriate description of this barbaric event. Enlightenment is a mutual undertaking. But the public settling of accounts by Nolte and Fest does not serve the end of enlightenment. They affect the political morality of a community that—after being liberated by Allied troops and without doing anything itself—has been established in the spirit of the occidental conception of freedom, responsibility, and self-determination.

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