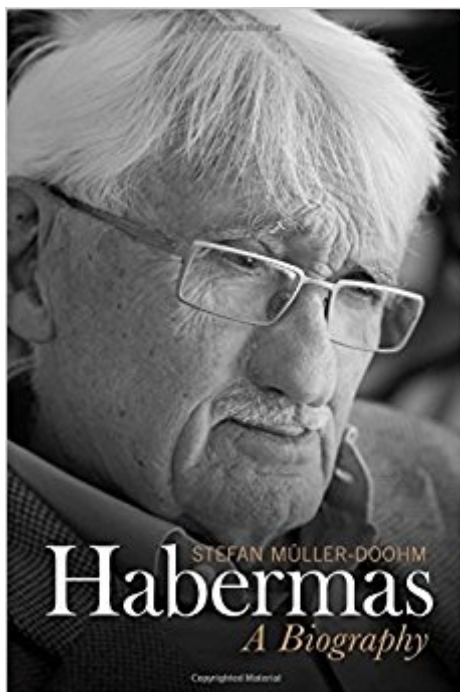


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# Habermas: A Biography



## Synopsis

Jürgen Habermas, wrote the American philosopher Ronald Dworkin on the occasion of the great European thinker's eightieth birthday, "is not only the world's most famous living philosopher. Even his fame is famous." Now, after many years of intensive research and in-depth conversations with contemporaries, colleagues and Habermas himself, Stefan Müller-Doohm presents the first comprehensive biography of one of the most important public intellectuals of our time. From his political and philosophical awakening in West Germany to the formative relationships with Adorno and Horkheimer, Müller-Doohm masterfully traces the major forces that shaped Habermas's intellectual development. He shows how Habermas's life and work were conditioned by the possibilities offered to his generation in the unique circumstances of regained freedom that characterized postwar Germany. And yet Habermas's career is fascinating precisely because it amounts to more than a corpus of scholarly work, however original and influential that may be. For here is someone who continually left the protective space of the university in order to assume the role of a participant in controversial public debates—from the significance of the Holocaust to the future of Europe—and in this way sought to influence the development of social and political life in an arena much broader than the academy. The significance and virtuosity of Habermas's many writings over the years are also fully and expertly documented, ranging from his early work on the public sphere to his more recent writings on communicative action, cosmopolitanism and the postnational condition. What emerges from this biography is a vivid portrait of one of the great public intellectuals of our time—a unique thinker who has made an immense and lasting philosophical contribution but who, when he perceives that society is not living up to its potential for creating free and just conditions for all, becomes one of its most rigorous and persistent critics.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"This [book] makes for fascinating reading" The Guardian "Habermas is a biography of an accomplished living intellectual whose audience is extended much beyond the academic world. Stefan Müller-Doohm is a perfect storyteller and he tells the story of Habermas in such a way that you will not be able to put it down before you finish it. Nobody knows the art of biography better than Müller-Doohm."The Washington Book Review "Few would contest the verdict that Habermas has achieved in both his philosophical work and in his role as a public intellectual a place of enduring significance that surpasses that of any other thinker in our time. The definitive new biography by Stefan Müller-Doohm lays out the evidence for this conclusion with great care and enormous sympathy for its protagonist." The Nation "Heidegger's lapidary biographical summation, The man was born, he worked, and then died, may have been appropriate for Aristotle, but is woefully inadequate for the philosopher who is arguably our era's version of the great Greek polymath, Jürgen Habermas. For not only is he still very much alive and producing new work at a vigorous pace, but it is also the case that his voluminous contributions to philosophy, sociology, political theory, and cultural criticism demand to be read in the context of his remarkable career as a committed public intellectual. As his masterful biography of Adorno already demonstrated, Stefan Müller-Doohm shows himself to be fully up to the task of discerning figures in the intricately woven carpet of a major thinker's life and work."Martin Jay, University of California Berkeley

Stefan Müller-Doohm, born in 1942, studied in Frankfurt under Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer and is now Professor Emeritus of Sociology and Director of the Research Centre for the Sociology of Intellectuals at the University of Oldenburg. His other works include Adorno: A Biography.

A comprehensive account of a great mind at work

A first-class book on Habermas' political life and the development of his intellectual journey.

Doohm's writing is both very illuminating and explanatory for Habermas' social and political theory.

By any measurable standard, Jurgen Habermas is one of the greatest philosophers of the second half of the Twentieth Century, only equaled by Michel Foucault in the breadth and incisiveness of his work. The golden thread through Habermas's philosophy is politics. No matter what aspect of philosophy with which he engages, he is always concerned to link it to our lives lived together. Habermas was among the first philosophers I read in graduate school and I found him, to say the very least, challenging. I was fascinated when reading of his discovery while at university how many of his professors had been pro Nazi during and before WW II. I also found it fascinating that he had at birth suffered a birth defect, commonly called in the US a double cleft palate. Later I heard him lecture and I can attest that he was difficult to understand, through a combination of speech difficulty caused by the defect and his German accent. Nonetheless, I have always been astonished at his enormous intelligence and mastery of a wide range of subject. As a Leftist, I have also been a follower of his work promoting left wing causes in Germany. He truly has been one of my heroes. As a result, I was very excited about a biography of him. Unfortunately, this is much more a biography of Habermas as a brain than as a flesh and blood person. It is almost more a book on the history of his intellectual development than a real biography. I recently read James Harris's biography of David Hume, and in contrast to this biography of Habermas, I there learned a great deal about both Hume and his historical setting. Now, with Habermas the situation is more familiar, though many of the vagaries of German politics, of which I will confess that I'm far too often unfamiliar, much to my chagrin. Habermas in the past few decades has written more and more topically. It wouldn't be too off the mark to compare him to Noam Chomsky in the U.S. Chomsky is easily the most important American figure within the field of linguistics, but in the past few decades he has dedicated himself to writing about political issues. Likewise, Habermas wrote several masterpieces of philosophy, like *THE STRUCTURAL TRANSFORMATION OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE*, *THE PHILOSOPHICAL DISCOURSE OF MODERNITY*, and his masterpiece and one of the classics of 20th Century Philosophy, *THE THEORY OF COMMUNICATIVE ACTION*. One of Habermas's great contributions was helping to break down the distinction between Anglo-American and Continental philosophy. At one point, roughly the forties through the sixties, there was something of a wall between the two. If you wrote about Bertrand Russell and Wittgenstein, you didn't mention Marx or Heidegger. Both sides would read Plato and Kant, but in different ways. Habermas was obviously deeply influenced by Marx and the Frankfurt School, but he also made use of English language philosophers. George

Herbert Mead, for instance, is discussed in some detail in *THE THEORY OF COMMUNICATIVE ACTION*. This book is helpful as a guide to the thought of Habermas, even if it is a bit abstract as a biography. But it wouldn't be the first or second book that I would recommend to learn about his thought. I don't think it is a bad book. It just wasn't the great biography that I was hoping for. The book might better have been subtitled "An Intellectual Biography." Perhaps one should always expect that to be the case, but there are too many biographies of philosophers that show that that isn't necessarily the case, as with the Harris biography of Hume, or Ray Monk's of Wittgenstein or Bertrand Russell, or Rudiger Safranski's biographies of Heidegger, Nietzsche, or Schopenhauer. To be fair, part of the problem is that it is probably too soon to write a biography of Habermas. I think with philosophers, unlike entertainers or even politicians, it is often necessary to have the perspective of two or three decades to reflect more searchingly on a great philosopher's life and work. It is only now that we are seeing good biographies of Jean-Paul Sartre and Heidegger appear, and they both died over thirty years ago. In the meantime, we can continue to read and appreciate Habermas's works.

I first became aware of Jürgen Habermas about six years ago, when he was an outspoken critic of the preservation of the European Union. I didn't realize until more recently that he is more of a philosopher. I thus wanted to know more about him. I certainly did reading this tome! This is a very large book. It's even bigger with 170 pages of notes. The translation is fine, but the emphasis on every minutiae does at times get taxing. However, one learns the motives of Habermas' persona. He was born in 1929, the year of the global Great Depression, when in Germany Nationalists fought bitter battles against the Communists. Early censorship under the Nationalists, the Nazi Regime and then WWII shaped Habermas' liberal tendencies (his father spent time in a US POW camp), and even after the war he has quarrels with former Nationalists. It's no wonder he didn't want to be associated with a particular school or organization. In the 1960s he became a voice for the student protests that swept across Germany. This book, as mentioned above, does bog down with minutiae and could easily have been shorter. For fans of the man, this may be of great interest. Habermas is still alive and will be 90 in 2019, so there may be a revised edition.

Jürgen Habermas is one of the most famous of late-twentieth/early twenty-first century philosophers. He is distinguished by the label of "public philosopher" which connotes a certain freedom of expression and of thought, unfettered as he is by lacking ties to a university and a particular philosophical school. It also connotes a large degree of courage as he is willing to engage

in the public space of ideas and to eke out an uncertain living from his writing. As a survivor of the political upheaval that nearly destroyed Germany in the mid-twentieth century, Habermas eventually discovered and carefully developed an affinity for political thought. The horrors he witnessed when ideology was given free reign, instead of allowing the more practical art of governance to ease Germany through years of economic dismay, had a profound influence on his political thought and ought to be a powerful object lesson to the various democracies that are currently experimenting with building their own versions of an ideological house of cards. I fully expect Habermas to recoil from what he is seeing in Europe and America, as a strong sensation of déjà-vu modifies his thinking once again. More than any other Continental political philosopher, I think that the spirit of Enlightenment that produced the generation of Jefferson, Franklin, Voltaire and Rousseau quietly guides Habermas' thought in the direction of skepticism of human motives and hope for human political aspirations. Stefan Müller-Doohm has written a brilliant biography of Habermas the thinker. It is a lengthy, rather densely argued book that requires patience while reading. Perhaps as much as 75% of the biography is a discussion of an intellectual nature rather than merely a descriptive sojourn along the subject's life. Biographical details are included but usually as they pertain to Habermas the theoretician, acting as something like guideposts in the evolution of his thought. Partly a result of his subject still living as he wrote and partly a result of the lack of exciting, super-hero-like details which rarely accompany the lives of philosophers, Müller-Doohm has given Habermas: A Biography an obvious academic pedigree that requires the reader to generate his/her own sense of adventure over unfolding ideas. Dealing, as it often does, with the sheer exertion involved in critical thinking that is occasionally (if rarely) rewarded with the excitement of intellectual breakthrough, Habermas: A Biography is a challenging book. This kind of reading is not made for the beach but it does tend to have a lengthy shelf-life and it does seem to change the world on occasion. If you are comfortable with thought-provoking subject matter, Habermas: A Biography may prove to be something of a tonic in these troubled times. There are still corners of the world where facts are valued and thought isn't something only "elitists" engage in. In fact, there are places where the intellect is highly prized and those graced with such an attribute are sought-out rather than shunned. Meeting Jürgen Habermas in the pages of this biography may be an antidote to despair as the darkness is kept at bay, for a little while at least. I found this to be a highly rewarding biography.

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