

# Defending democracy

The threat to the public sphere from social media

**MARK HANNAM**

**ALSO A HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY**

Volume 1: The project of a genealogy of postmetaphysical thinking

**JÜRGEN HABERMAS**

Translated by Ciaran Cronin  
448pp. Polity. £35.

**A NEW STRUCTURAL TRANSFORMATION OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE AND DELIBERATIVE POLITICS**

**JÜRGEN HABERMAS**

Translated by Ciaran Cronin  
128pp. Polity. Paperback, £9.99.



Jürgen Habermas at Frankfurt University, 1969

“HABERMAS IS A BLOCKHEAD. It is simply impossible to tell what kind of damage he is still going to cause in the future”, wrote Karl Popper in 1969. The following year he added: “Most of what he says seems to me trivial; the rest seems to me mistaken”. Five decades later these Popperian conjectures have been roundly refuted. Now in his mid-nineties, Jürgen Habermas is one of the pre-eminent philosophers and public intellectuals of our time. In Germany his generation enjoyed the mercy of being born too late. In 2004, in a speech given on receipt of the Kyoto prize in arts and philosophy, he observed that “we did not have to answer for choosing the wrong side and for political errors and their dire consequences”. He came to maturity in a society that he judged complacent and insufficiently distanced from its recent past. This experience sets the context for his academic work and political interventions.

Polity has recently published two new books by Habermas, both translated by Ciaran Cronin, providing English readers access to the latest iterations of

his distinctive themes and methods. He defends a capacious concept of human reason, a collaborative learning process that operates through discussions in which participants appeal only to the force of the better argument. Different kinds of discussion – about scientific facts, moral norms or aesthetic judgements – employ different standards of justification, so what counts as a valid reason depends on context, but all progress, regardless of the field, relies on our conversations following the path along which reason leads us. Habermas’s principal claim is that human reason, appropriately deployed, retains its liberating potential for the species.

His first book, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962), traced the emergence in the eighteenth century of the public sphere. This was a functionally distinct social space, located between the privacy of civil society and the formal offices of the modern state, where citizens could engage in processes of democratic deliberation. Habermas drew attention to a range of contemporary phenomena, including the organization of opinion by

political parties and the development of mass media funded by advertising, that have disrupted the possibility of widespread, well-informed political debate. Modern democracy, he argued, was increasingly characterized by the technocratic organization of interests, rather than by the open discussion of principles and values.

Habermas then addressed the philosophical question of how we might understand our shared interests, distinguishing between the production of technical knowledge, the development of interpretative understanding and the emancipatory insights achieved through critical theories. In *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1968), he examined arguments by G. W. F. Hegel, Karl Marx, Auguste Comte, C. S. Peirce, Wilhelm Dilthey and Sigmund Freud, drawing attention to limitations in their approach while borrowing insights that he could repurpose for himself. This strategy – which he called rational reconstruction, but which might best be understood as a process of perpetual upcycling whereby old ideas are improved and reused – became central to his work.

In the 1970s Habermas turned his attention from what we can credibly believe to what we can justifiably argue. The range of thinkers from whom he borrowed expanded to include Max Weber, Talcott Parsons, George Herbert Mead and J. L. Austin, but his central concern remained the same: the tendencies within modern societies that must be overcome for democratic will formation to flourish. In *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1981), he offered a new conceptual framework to explore this challenge: how the “lifeworld”, characterized by the development of normative learning processes that support social integration, might protect itself against colonization by systems of economic, technological and political power, which achieve their goals without cultivating public consent.

His next major work, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1985), was a critique of recent French poststructuralist thought. Habermas argued that the work of Michel Foucault implied that the formation of power and the formation of knowledge are inextricably linked, a position that results ineluctably in the flattening of the complexities of social modernization. His book was, in addition, a considered response to Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), the most pessimistic text produced by the first generation of the Frankfurt School. In reply to his former teachers Habermas defended modernity as “an unfinished project” that, for all its failings and disappointments, retains significant value as the mechanism for the expansion of human freedom and happiness.

How reasoning processes become embedded in our social practices is the theme of *Between Facts and Norms* (1992), which presents the law as an institution residing between the facticity of modern science and the normativity of social interaction. In modern democracies, characterized by a pluralism of ultimate values and goals, only a procedural conception of law generates the blend of legality and legitimacy required to maintain social cohesion without unjustifiable coercion. Habermas conceives of legal reasoning as a quest, neither for truth nor for goodness, but for legitimacy: justice as fair communicative process.

In parallel with his academic career he has repeatedly engaged in political controversies: he criticized Martin Heidegger for a lack of remorse over his support for the Nazis; he supported the student protest movement, but rebuked those who undertook illegal activity for its own sake; he rebutted claims that left-wing academics were responsible for terrorist atrocities; he defended the peace movement’s civil disobedience strategies; he challenged revisionist historians for downplaying German responsibility for the Holocaust; he chided the leaders of the EU for their unwillingness to support deeper integration and wider solidarity; he participated in discussions about bioethics; and he debated the role of the churches in modern democracies.

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A *New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and Deliberative Politics* (published in German in 2022) revisits Habermas's earlier work on threats to the public sphere. He notes that social media have improved access for a wider range of voices to participate, allowing users to express themselves as authors. That said, he argues that the lack of editorial oversight by social media platforms poses three challenges: first, a weakening of political debate prior to formal decision-making, as public attention is diverted away from consequential issues to trivial matters; second, the tendency of consumers of social media to congregate in like-minded networks, unwilling to engage with those whose interests differ; and third, the erosion of the public sphere itself, as users participate in an "anonymous intimacy" that encourages the expressive sharing of private views without regard for the inclusiveness and engagement that is required by a democratic public sphere.

Also a *History of Philosophy* (published in German in 2019) is a systematic account of the development of western philosophy and a defence of the variant of post-metaphysical thought that explains the world, including ourselves as objects in the world, and reflects on what this means for us as moral subjects. Ancient religious teachers and philosophers, from Buddha to Laozi to Plato, sought a transcendent viewpoint from which the essential

form of reality could be perceived, and downgraded the everyday world to mere appearance. Habermas suggests that modern scientism, which discards the idea of transcendence and regards everyday experience as a mere object to be measured and classified, leaves no room for critical reflection on our inter-subjective and symbolically structured lifeworld.

The book starts with the anti-modernism of Carl Schmitt and Heidegger, before heading back 2,500 years to the Axial Age, that turning point in history when the myths and rituals that had defined the sacred realm were replaced by systematic teachings, in the form of Jewish monotheism, Buddhism, Confucianism and Greek metaphysics. Habermas identifies shared features of these worldviews with respect to the development of cognitive and social learning processes, which emerge as responses to periodic failures of our comprehension of the world and organization of social interaction.

The second volume, due later this year, will focus on the specifically western combination of knowledge and faith that developed out of Athens and Jerusalem, up until their forced separation in the seventeenth century. The third volume, due in 2025, will describe two variants of post-metaphysical thinking: the Humean, which leads eventually to the attenuated self-understanding of modern scientism, passing over in silence questions

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**Habermas conceives of legal reasoning as a quest, neither for truth nor for goodness, but for legitimacy**

regarding moral norms and the search for meaning; and the Kantian, which progresses by way of the Young Hegelians, Søren Kierkegaard and the pragmatists to contemporary critical theory.

Do we need another 400 pages of Habermas? Threats to the integrity of the democratic public sphere have grown in form and scope during the sixty years since he first addressed these issues. The widespread circulation of social media content of dubious origin and quality, for which platform owners accept no liability, raises important questions about regulation, and Habermas's observation that competition law is the wrong tool to address this challenge is apposite. Furthermore, the recognition that diverse world-views have demonstrated the ability to resolve cognitive and social challenges through the employment of learning processes suggests that philosophy in the western tradition might continue to say important things about the universal human condition, without also presuming its inherent superiority over other views.

The capacity of reason to sustain human progress remains unexhausted, yet our ability to learn is matched by a propensity to forget. Jürgen Habermas's continuing labour of perpetual upcycling provides a salutary reminder that the ideal of a deliberatively democratic society of equals remains worthy of our investment. ■

# The other Moses

A Jewish philosopher who influenced Aquinas and Spinoza

**STEVEN NADLER**

**MAIMONIDES**

Faith in reason

**ALBERTO MANGUEL**

256pp. Yale University Press. £16.99 (US \$26).

**F**ROM MOSES TO MOSES there was none like unto Moses": so reads the epitaph on the tomb of Moses ben Maimon, or Maimonides (1138-1204), in Tiberias. He remains the greatest of Jewish philosophers and an unavoidable authority on *halakha* (Jewish law). Born in Almoravid Andalusia and later flourishing in Egypt, Maimonides spent his entire life in Muslim lands (with the exception of a brief sojourn in Christian Palestine), so was deeply immersed in the theological, philosophical and legal traditions of two faiths. In turn later Christian and Jewish thinkers were influenced by his writings, not least Thomas Aquinas and Baruch Spinoza - especially by his philosophical masterpiece *The Guide of the Perplexed*, but in some cases also his *Commentary on the Mishnah* and *Mishneh Torah*, a magisterial compendium of Jewish law.

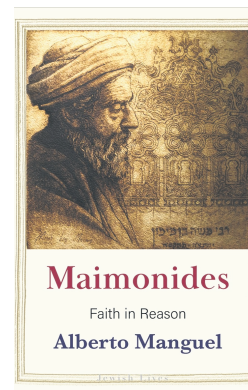
These days Maimonides is no doubt more often mentioned than read, or even read about. Fortunately he now takes his rightful place in the "Jewish Lives" series published by Yale University Press, along with Jacob, Moses, Elijah, Moses Mendelssohn, Martin Buber and, of course, Groucho Marx, Barbra Streisand and Bugsy Siegel.

One might well be surprised to see Alberto Manguel say, in his opening paragraph, "I had a vague notion of who Maimonides was (a great philosopher, a great legislator, a great medical doctor), and I remembered the intriguing title of his *Guide of the Perplexed*, but little more". The reader is thus led to wonder what awaits. Maimonides is an extraordinarily difficult and complex thinker, and even the most seasoned experts wrestle with his texts. Manguel is not only a learned scholar, however, but also a gifted writer, and he has produced an elegant and accessible book, even if he relies quite heavily

(with long quotations) on what others have had to say about Maimonides.

Manguel reviews the wanderings of the young Maimonides family as they flee the new, intolerant Almohad regime in Andalusia for Fez - recent biographers disagree over whether they converted to Islam for their safety - then on to the Holy Land and, finally, Fustat (Old Cairo). There Maimonides became leader of the Jewish community, court physician under Saladin and corresponding rabbi for many communities around the Levant. Manguel does an erudite job of putting Maimonides's life and writings in their historical, religious and intellectual contexts, and of illuminating his vast influence over the centuries. The cast of characters includes many Jewish and Muslim thinkers, of course, but also Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Seneca, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Stendhal, Simone Weil, Jorge Luis Borges, Cynthia Ozick and others.

One of the primary themes running through this book concerns what philosophy meant to Maimonides, how it offers a coherent, rational approach to interpreting and integrating biblical texts, religious beliefs and practices, alongside scientific and philosophical truths. The book comes up somewhat short, however, when it comes to explaining exactly what Maimonides's philosophical views are. A reader seeking details of the great rabbi's theological, moral, metaphysical, cosmological and legal thought - including his rationalization of Judaism and Jewish law - will be disappointed by the relatively cursory and scattered treatment they receive. More space is devoted to a long Jewish joke about the Talmud than to any analysis of Maimonides's understanding of God. "Eight Chapters", his introduction to his commentary on the Mishnah tractate *Avot* - an essential source for his ethical views - is mentioned, but aside from brief remarks here and there about the doctrine of the mean, the centrepiece of Maimonides's Aristotelian account of virtue, nothing is really said about its content or about the hierarchical relationship between moral virtue and human (intellectual) perfection. Contrary to what Manguel says, Maimonides does not believe that anyone is "gifted" with "inherent"



virtue, nor that virtue lies "in the will of the unknowable God"; like any good Aristotelian he regards virtue as a state of character that is acquired through habitual practice and learning; we are responsible for becoming virtuous.

Manguel does note that, for Maimonides, "to worship God under a false guise is not to worship him at all", but we are not told much about what constitutes the true and proper guise. Much of *The Guide of the Perplexed* is devoted to rejecting categorically any corporeal representation of God. But Maimonides goes even further and discourages any kind of anthropomorphizing of God, including attributing to Him psychological and moral characteristics modelled on human nature and activity. All Manguel says is: "this conception of an immaterial, emotionless, and featureless God did not convince everyone". I imagine not.

Especially surprising is the claim that Maimonides had no interest in theodicy - a rational solution to the problem of evil and an explanation as to why bad things happen to good people. "Maimonides ... seems not to have been concerned with the question Why us? ... [he] felt that to ask why bad things happen is to question God's knowledge and his sense of justice." In fact, this was an important question for Maimonides, and much of the final Part Three of the *Guide* is devoted to an extensive and serious account of divine providence and moral luck, one that directly addresses evil and the question "Why us?".

Despite these shortcomings Alberto Manguel has written an eloquent little volume on Maimonides and his place not just in Jewish traditions, but in religious and intellectual history. ■

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