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978-0-521-73831-6 - Habermas: An Intellectual Biography

Matthew G. Specter

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## HABERMAS: AN INTELLECTUAL BIOGRAPHY

This book follows postwar Germany's leading philosopher and social thinker, Jürgen Habermas, through four decades of political and constitutional struggle over the shape of liberal democracy in Germany. Habermas's most influential theories – of the public sphere, communicative action, and modernity – were decisively shaped by major West German political events: the failure to denazify the judiciary, the rise of a powerful constitutional court, student rebellions in the late 1960s, the changing fortunes of the Social Democratic Party, NATO's decision to station nuclear weapons in Germany, and the unexpected collapse of East Germany. In turn, Habermas's writings on state, law, and constitution played a critical role in reorienting German political thought and culture toward a progressive liberal-democratic model. Matthew G. Specter uniquely illuminates the interrelationship between the thinker and his culture.

Matthew G. Specter is Assistant Professor of History at Central Connecticut State University. He has published in the journals *Modern Intellectual History* and *The European Legacy* and has presented his work at Harvard's Center for European Studies, the National Humanities Center, the German Historical Institute in Washington, DC, the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, and the American Historical Association, as well as to audiences in Vienna, Frankfurt, Berlin, Cortona, and Haifa. Professor Specter received a Ph.D. from Duke University, and previously held the position of Postdoctoral Fellow at George Mason University.

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“This is an original work of the first importance both for our understanding of Habermas – one of the most important European philosophers and political theorists of the twentieth century – and the political-intellectual history of the West German republic. In addition, it is an exemplary work of intellectual history; it shows convincingly how the disciplinary approach can reveal meanings and dimensions of a highly abstract body of thought that a purely conceptual interpretation inevitably misses.”

– Gerald Izenberg, Washington University in St. Louis

“This is a remarkable piece of work. No other book has situated Habermas’s thinking within its intellectual-historical context as deftly and with such sophistication. Specter digs widely and deeply into the German-language writings of Habermas’s interlocutors (as well as his named and often unnamed adversaries) in each of postwar Germany’s periods of crisis. His argument for a continuity (traceable through attention to the law) in Habermas’s corpus is courageous and convincing.”

– John P. McCormick, University of Chicago

“I have found Matthew Specter’s *Habermas: An Intellectual Biography* immensely rewarding. By showing how deeply Jürgen Habermas was implicated in debates over constitutional and legal theory in West Germany from the mid-1950s onward, Specter has given me a far clearer understanding than I was previously able to muster of a figure who has a strong claim to being the most important political thinker of the second half of the twentieth century – and of today as well. This is contextualizing intellectual history of the best kind. Specter never treats Habermas’s interventions as mere ‘discourse.’ On the contrary, he enters into the substance of the theoretical issues that Habermas has addressed. Indeed, his own clear voice can occasionally be heard as he enters into a discreet and respectful dialogue with a man who did much for the transformation of German public culture in the years since 1945.”

– Allan Megill, University of Virginia

“For lawyers, Jürgen Habermas is a political authority. His work symbolizes the change from ‘state’ to ‘constitution,’ from the ontological system of values to processuality, pluralism, and discourse. Matthew G. Specter pictures the ‘political Habermas’ and gives us a fascinating panorama of the intellectual scene in Western Germany on its way to ‘normality.’”

– Michael Stolleis, Johann Wolfgang Goethe-University Frankfurt

“This book offers an eye-opening and richly historical account of the dominant intellectual figure of the Federal Republic. It enriches our understanding of Habermas, by placing him as part of the ongoing struggle to create a democratic Germany.”

– Adam Tooze, Yale University

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*For three great teachers – Tom de Zengotita, Frank Moretti,  
and Roman Zwarycz.*

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