

The Question of German Guilt in the Intellectual Biography of Jürgen Habermas*

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Abstract. The essay reconstructs the place of the question of German guilt in the intellectual biography of Jürgen Habermas. Its point of departure is the statement *Grundsätze der Solidarität* of 13 November 2023, whose polarized reception – the essay argues – misconstrued Habermas’s stand because it ignored what German guilt means, biographically and in terms of public memory, for his generation. Following a history-of-ideas approach in which biographical reconstruction operates as a corrective to impersonal historiographical narratives, the essay retraces the stages of a lifelong process of clarification: childhood under the Third Reich and the “democratic conversion” of 1945; the return of the exiles and the Frankfurt apprenticeship; the Auschwitz trial; the generational conflict of 1968; the *Historikerstreit*; German unification; the controversy over the Holocaust memorial in Berlin; and the diagnosis of secondary antisemitism. Drawing on the critical legacy of the Frankfurt School, Habermas entrusts to the public sphere a labour of clarification in which the memory of the Holocaust emerges not as a mere historical legacy but as an ethical task structuring the democratic self-understanding of the Federal Republic. The question of guilt thus proves central to the construction of a collective consciousness and of a political culture – epitomized by constitutional patriotism and governed by the imperative of non-regression – capable of opposing revisionist tendencies and the return of nationalism. The essay’s specific contribution is to read these successive controversies as a single learning process governed by Karl Jaspers’s distinction between moral guilt and political liability (*Haftung*): each episode displaces the site in which that liability is publicly discharged – from the individual conscience to the courts, from the generational conflict to historiography, and from the constitution to the European public sphere.

Keywords: German guilt; Jürgen Habermas; Holocaust memory; public sphere; constitutional patriotism; secondary antisemitism.

Riassunto. Il saggio ricostruisce il posto della “questione della colpa” tedesca nella biografia intellettuale di Jürgen Habermas. Il punto di avvio è la dichiarazione *Grundsätze der Solidarität* del 13 novembre 2023, la cui ricezione polarizzata – si sostiene qui – ha frainteso la presa di posizione di Habermas perché ha ignorato che cosa significhi la colpa tedesca, sul piano biografico e su quello della memoria pubblica, per la sua generazione. Secondo un approccio di storia delle idee in cui la ricostruzione biografica opera come correttivo delle narrazioni storiografiche impersonali, il saggio ripercorre le tappe di un processo di chiarificazione durato tutta una vita: l’infanzia sotto il Terzo Reich e la “conversione democratica” del 1945; il ritorno degli esuli e l’apprendistato francofortese; il processo di Francoforte su Auschwitz; il conflitto generazionale del Sessantotto; la disputa degli storici; l’unificazione tedesca; la polemica sul monumento all’Olocausto di Berlino; la diagnosi dell’antisemitismo secondario. Raccogliendo l’eredità critica della Scuola di Francoforte, Habermas affida alla sfera pubblica un lavoro di chiarificazione in cui la memoria dell’Olocausto emerge non come semplice lascito storico, ma come compito etico che struttura l’autocomprensione democratica della Repubblica Federale. La questione della colpa si rivela così centrale nella costruzione di una coscienza collettiva e di una cultura politica – compendiata dal patriottismo costituzionale e retta dall’imperativo della non-regressione – capace di opporsi alle tendenze revisioniste e al ritorno del nazionalismo. Il contributo specifico del saggio consiste nel leggere queste controversie successive come un unico processo di apprendimento governato dalla distinzione di Karl Jaspers fra colpa morale e responsabilità politica (*Haftung*): ogni episodio sposta il luogo in cui tale responsabilità viene pubblicamente assunta – dalla coscienza individuale ai tribunali, dal conflitto generazionale alla storiografia, dalla costituzione alla sfera pubblica europea.

Parole chiave: colpa tedesca; Jürgen Habermas; memoria dell’Olocausto; sfera pubblica; patriottismo costituzionale; antisemitismo secondario.

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1. Introduction

On 13 November 2023, the research centre Normative Orders of the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University in Frankfurt am Main published the letter *Grundsätze der Solidarität* (Principles of Solidarity. A Statement), signed by Nicole Deitelhoff and by the two founders and directors of the Cluster of Excellence, Rainer Forst and Klaus Günther. At the bottom of the document appears the signature of Jürgen Habermas, who had been the teacher of the two scholars since the 1980s. Addressing the Israeli–Palestinian conflict in the days following the mass kidnapping carried out during Hamas’s attack in southern Israel – on 7 October around 251 people were abducted – and the Israeli response with the occupation of Palestinian territories, the four scholars express concern about the rise of antisemitic attacks in Germany and worldwide “after the beginning of the latest war between Israel and Hamas.” The letter states in full: “The Hamas massacre, with its declared intention of eliminating Jewish life in general, has pushed Israel to counterattack. The modalities of this retaliation, justified in principle, are the subject of controversial debate; the principles of proportionality, of preventing civilian casualties, and of waging war with a view to a future peace must be the guiding principles. Despite the concern for the fate of the Palestinian population, however, standards of judgment slip completely when genocidal intentions are attributed to Israel’s actions. In particular, Israel’s actions do not in any way justify antisemitic reactions, especially in Germany. It is intolerable that Jews in Germany are once again exposed to threats to life and physical safety and must fear violence in the streets. The democratic ethics of the Federal Republic of Germany, oriented toward the obligation to respect human dignity, is tied to a political culture in which Jewish life and Israel’s right to exist are central elements deserving special protection in light of the mass crimes of the Nazi era” (Habermas et al., 2023).

The reactions of journalists, researchers and students were immediately polarized into the two camps of the indignant and the enthusiastic, each quick to politicize for present purposes Habermas’s stand against the «intentional extermination of Jews as such», against the «Israeli reaction» and against an antisemitism that today finds «a perfect occasion» to raise its head. What both camps failed to consider – and here, in my view, lies the source of the misunderstanding of Habermas’s position – is what German guilt means for his generation, in biographical terms and in terms of public memory, with respect to the Shoah and, in a fuller sense, to the “Holocaust”. The episode of November 2023 is therefore of interest here not in itself, but as the epiphenomenon of a deeper motivational question, one that involves Habermas’s intellectual biography and German political culture as a whole.

That question has, for Habermas, a long prehistory. He has always criticized the presence within German high culture of a “mixture of intelligence and autism”, exemplified by the tragic career of the *Geisteswissenschaften*. Ever since Romanticism, an ambiguous relationship developed between a “belated nation” in the process of modernization and a *Kultur* that was rewriting its history. Recalling the days of the *Deutsches Jungvolk*, Habermas traces the historical lines of a representation of the Germanic ethos that ended by reconciling itself all too readily with the political institutions of the “New Reich”: «I remember the war years, when the young Nazis (*Jungvolk*) used to gather on 9 November, in front of the war memorials and with burning braziers, to practise the rituals of the Nazi cult of death. [...] In Germany, national consciousness and republican sentiment were last integrated in the revolutionary movement of 1848, as they still are today in the classical nation-states of the West. Since then, nationalism among us has been consumed – down to its racist consequences – at the expense of the republican spirit, and this zero-sum of political effects branded the seventy-five years of the state from 1871 to 1945. In German heads, the unity and strength of the nation were associated with the expulsion of internal enemies. First came the enemies of the Reich, the Social Democrats, the Catholics, the national minorities; then the Jews and the radical democrats, the left and the intellectuals, the Gypsies, homosexuals and the disabled – in short, all those elements alien to the people» (1990a: 158).

Habermas’s intellectual biography is interwoven with twentieth-century German history, tracing a path that reflects the tensions between memory, identity and ethical responsibility. Its trajectory is retraced here by following the stages of a process of clarification that accompanied the democratization of the Federal Republic and the consolidation of a public consciousness oriented towards the principles of the *Rechtsstaat*. On this point I may be permitted to refer to methodological considerations developed

elsewhere: biographical reconstruction has no anecdotal value here, but operates as a «“corrective” to impersonal historiographical narratives», on the conviction that «individual decisions and agency also orient the intellectual developments that sustain ideas and theories» (Corchia, 2026: 183). The essay opens with a flashback to childhood under the Third Reich and to the democratic conversion that marked Habermas’s youth; it then examines the return of the exiles and the significance of their integrity in the context of reconstruction. There follow the Frankfurt Auschwitz trial, the generational conflict of 1968 and the controversy with the historians over the past – all crucial moments in the definition of a shared memory. Finally, the most contemporary knots are addressed: German unification, constitutional patriotism as an antidote to nationalist drifts, the controversy over the Holocaust memorial, and the new risks of secondary antisemitism.

The question that organizes this reconstruction can be stated in one sentence: how did the question of German guilt become, for Habermas, not one theme among others but the biographical matrix of his political theory – the point at which the categories of the public sphere, of post-conventional identity and of non-regression were forged? The literature on Habermas and German memory is by now extensive, and the present essay is indebted to it at every step: to the biographies of Müller-Doohm and Yos, to the political-historical readings of Specter, Pensky and Holub, and to the conceptual analyses of Niesen and Rees. What it adds is threefold. First, it treats the successive controversies – the Heidegger case, the Auschwitz trial, 1968, the *Historikerstreit*, unification, the memorial, secondary antisemitism – not as a series of interventions but as a single learning process, governed throughout by one distinction that the literature mentions in passing but seldom uses as an analytical thread: Jaspers’s distinction between moral guilt, which cannot be imputed to those born afterwards, and political liability (*Haftung*), which is inherited along with citizenship. Second, it shows that each episode marks a displacement of the site in which that liability is discharged – from the individual conscience of 1945 to the university, from the courtroom to the generational conflict, from historiography to the constitution and finally to the European public sphere – so that the theory of constitutional patriotism appears as the institutional form that *Haftung* takes once it can no longer be borne by the biographical generation of the *Nachgeborenen*. Third, it draws on Habermas’s most recent testimony, above all the conversations published in 2024, to correct on one decisive point the standard narrative of an Adornian inheritance: by his own admission, the reading of the imperative of non-regression that he defended in 1986 derives from Jaspers rather than from Adorno, and this bifurcation, unnoticed at the time, is what makes his position in 2023 intelligible.

The question of guilt thus emerges as a central knot in the critical construction of a collective consciousness capable of resisting revisionist drifts. Running beneath it is the research on the conditions of prejudice and on the authoritarian personality. The insistence on recalling the memory of the atrocities committed in the name of an autocratic nation of “supermen” (*Herrenmenschen*) must be traced back both to an aversion to National Socialism, with its myths and its state violence, and to the conviction that it is a responsibility to work to avert any relapse into barbarism (Müller-Doohm, 2009/2010: 445). Such lucidity, it should be added, was anything but immediate: that blindness to the significance of antisemitism was not the preserve of conservatives alone is documented by Martin Jay with regard to the Institut für Sozialforschung itself – «the members of the Institut were anxious to deny any significance at all to their ethnic roots», to the point that even in the midst of the war «even so hardheaded a realist as Franz Neumann could write in *Behemoth* that “the German people are the least anti-Semitic of all”», a judgement which, Jay notes, «seems to have been supported by almost all of his Institut colleagues» (1973: 32). Collective identity in West Germany underwent a cultural trauma whose overcoming – still under way – has been possible not only through repression but also through critical working-through: «After the war it had become impossible to appropriate our traditions without prior examination. As for me, I regarded this labour of reflection, of critique in the literal sense, equally as a professional duty. People like me are reproached with a negative nationalism; it is said that we poison what is our own, that we over-moralize, or again that we have made an ambiguous change of camp by identifying with the victims. If, in 1945, we proceeded to a change of elites, this entailed mental continuities that remained intact until the 1960s and 1970s. Such a background makes it possible to understand that my generation, it seems to me, contributed more than others to opening up the Federal Republic of

Germany intellectually» (Habermas, 2001a). Reflection on German guilt thus shows how the memory of the Holocaust is not a mere historical legacy, but an ethical task that structures the democratic self-understanding of contemporary Germany. From the critique of national mythologies to the defence of constitutional patriotism, Habermas identifies in the solidary remembrance of the victims the foundation of a public responsibility capable of countering every revisionist resurgence. His intellectual biography thus becomes the paradigm of a critical labour upon history which, far from being accusatory, aims to preserve the conditions of non-regression and to reaffirm the imperative of an emancipatory modernity.

2. Childhood under the Third Reich

Habermas was born on 18 June 1929. We know a good deal about his early years thanks to a number of interviews, to the intellectual biography written by Stefan Müller-Doohm (2014/2016), to Roman Yos's study *Der junge Habermas* (2019), and to the recent book-length interview *Es musste etwas besser werden*, again conducted by Müller-Doohm and Yos (2024/2026). It should be recalled that 1929 has passed into the annals of history as the year of the world economic-financial crisis, which had fatal repercussions for the young Weimar Republic, already weakened by the attempts at political destabilization mounted by the communist left and the nationalist right and by the many fault lines running through civil society. During the "Great Depression" the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP) became a mass movement, came to power at the national level, and set about establishing the "new Reich" through squad violence and emergency powers.

Habermas's primary socialization took place in a Protestant family of the professional middle class in Gummersbach, a small town in North Rhine-Westphalia. His father Ernst was a legal adviser with a doctorate in economics and ordo-liberal affinities, who later became director of the local Chamber of Industry and Commerce, while his mother, Margarete Köttgen, devoted herself, as was customary, to running the household and educating the three children. On 5 March 1933 almost half the voters of Gummersbach voted for the National Socialist Party, and from the following year onwards the municipalities of the Oberberg were the scene of persecutions of Jews and of the imprisonment of political opponents, communists above all. National-conservative in political orientation and a social expression of the "elite of officials", traditionally loyal – if not servile – towards the authority of power, Ernst had joined the National Socialist Party in the spring of 1933. On how that membership is to be qualified, and above all on how the son related to it, Müller-Doohm's biography offers clarifications worth taking up. Like most of those who belonged to the functional elite, Ernst Habermas «went along with the wave of self-coordination [*Selbstgleichschaltung*]», and the new masters «were greeted with a loyalty befitting the traditional ideas of an authoritarian state that already had wide currency, especially among civil servants» (Müller-Doohm, 2014/2016: 32). He was economic adviser to the NSDAP for the district and, having volunteered for the Wehrmacht, reached the rank of major. The biographer is careful, however, to place him precisely: taking as his criterion the «regime's policies of terror and annihilation», Ernst Habermas «is, strictly speaking, not to be counted as a member of the Nazi elite. There is no evidence to suggest that he was a prototypical ardent follower of that "greatest commander of all times".

We should assume, then, that Ernst Habermas was not a member of that "generation of the unconditional"» – born between 1900 and 1919 – which constituted the group responsible for the extermination. Habermas has described the political atmosphere of his father's house as «unremarkable for the time», that is, characterized by «a bourgeois adaptation to the political environment, while neither fully identifying with it, nor seriously criticizing it». And above all: «Although the son would later become one of the most vehement critics of that "communicative silence" [*kommunikatives Beschweigen*] and its pragmatic justification, he shied away from confrontation with his father. He did not doubt that their political differences could not be bridged, but this did not touch upon their personal relationship» (ibidem). Afflicted from birth by a cleft palate, a malformation that made speaking difficult and made his relations with others personally traumatic (Habermas, 2005/2008: 14), Jürgen was protected by his solicitous mother, Margarete, née Köttgen (1894-1983), the daughter of a Düsseldorf brewery owner who had served as a nurse in a military hospital during the First World War. The child experienced the

totalitarian state of the National Socialist regime as one reality among many. On turning ten, disappointed at having been rejected by the *Deutsches Jungvolk*, he was admitted, on his father's initiative, as an auxiliary of the medical service (Yos, 2019: 33). In a few rare autobiographical references Habermas recalls that he was little motivated by adherence to the Nazi *Weltanschauung* with its cult of the warrior, and attributes to his "disability" an effect of distancing from militarism and from the totalitarian temptation. Years later, in 2006, that membership would be held against him by the magazine "Cicero"¹, as it was against other intellectuals of that generation such as Günter Grass; it prompted the German scholar's reply (2006a) and was settled in a civil action for defamation won by Habermas. There was never, however, any dissidence. Everyday life ran on quietly and, despite the "harelip", the young man was an excellent student, from primary school through to the Gymnasium Moltkestraße (today merged into the Städtisches Lindengymnasium Gummersbach), with a marked vocation for the medical profession. His schoolmate Hans-Ulrich Wehler, two years his junior, would recall a school environment in which the teachers for the most part identified with right-wing liberal conservatism, even if many endorsed National Socialist ideology (2006: 176).

It was the war that changed the perception of German history. At the outbreak of hostilities, in the summer of 1939, Habermas's father volunteered for the ranks of the Wehrmacht and became an "officer". He would describe him as «someone with the ambitions typical of the educated bourgeois class, someone for whom the military was important in the first instance because it gave him the status associated with the title of a major» (Müller-Doohm, 2014/2016: 43). Then came the Anglo-American bombardments, and the cities of Germany, from north to south, were almost all razed to the ground. Gummersbach was a minor target. What made an impression on the very young Habermas was the internal order by which Hitler turned repression upon the German population, decreeing the death penalty for deserters. In February-March 1945 those born in 1928 and 1929 were conscripted as *Luftwaffenhelfer*, that is, as support personnel for the air force. Although both had been regimented in the *Deutsches Jungvolk*, Habermas did not undergo the experience of the young men commonly designated as the *Flakhelfer-Generation* (cf. Bude, 1987; Wehler, 2008). Again because of his "disability", he was assigned to the army medical service, also on account of his inclination towards medical studies. He did not have combatant status and never took up arms, even though he found himself on one occasion very close to the front. Habermas describes the end of the Second World War in 1945 as a veritable "revolutionary caesura". Compared with the older generations, young men like him enjoyed the demographic advantage of the "grace of a late birth" (the celebrated formula used by Helmut Kohl). In the same direction one should read an observation Habermas has formulated only recently about his own generation which, having no direct responsibility for omissions or complicity with Nazism, was able to perceive «the abyss behind the façade of normality» (2024/2026: 9). Here, moreover, Habermas reads back upon the whole affair of the *Historikerstreit*. Reconstructing the conditions under which his generation was able to become aware of the «depth of the rupture represented by Nazi domination», he specifies that such lucidity was no merit of theirs: «our young age, through no merit of our own, made us sensitive enough to perceive the abyss behind the façade of normality that we were leaving behind us. Fundamentally, we had no acts or omissions to answer for, nor memories of situations of complicity that might have obstructed this coming to awareness». And he adds a remark of direct relevance here: «in the *Historikerstreit* I have always found the differences of age illuminating» among the contending parties (ibidem). The historians' dispute was thus, in his eyes, not merely a conflict between historiographical paradigms and ideological conceptions, but the collision of biographical trajectories that had entertained a structurally different relationship with complicity in Nazism.

¹ In 2006, in the wake of the Grass scandal, Jürgen Busche – an influential German journalist, writer and literary critic – published in "Cicero" (2006) an attack on Habermas, accusing him of having concealed a position of command in the Hitler Youth. The article insinuated a biographical hypocrisy designed to protect his moral authority. Habermas reacted first with a reply (2006a), proving documentarily that he had already discussed his own past in earlier writings, and then in court, obtaining a legal injunction for defamation. The affair ended with victory before the Hamburg court. On the alleged evidence of his involvement in National Socialism Ralf Dahrendorf also intervened, in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*: «Anyone who believes such nonsense has suspended his normal powers of judgement; there would, after all, be simpler methods for getting rid of a piece of paper, if that were necessary» (2006).

That this sensibility was formed against a precise experience is shown by the episode of his first university semester, again recounted in the conversations with Müller-Doohm and Yos. What shocked him were not the militants of the far right, but the leaders of the BHE, of the German Party and of the CDU – Oberländer, Seehofer, Merkatz – who behaved «exactly like the radical right» and who «shortly afterwards all reappeared as ministers in Adenauer’s first cabinet»: «with their brazen rhetoric, they showed that they had no sense whatever of the need for a break with the Nazi period» (ivi: 17). At the first stanza of the *Deutschlandlied*, intoned amid the roar of the hall, the young student rushed out of the room, wondering whether he was really the only one to bear in mind that «for twelve years that national anthem had been fused into an indissoluble unity with the *Horst-Wessel-Lied*, the anthem of the National Socialist party».² It is in the same context that the formula from which the book-interview takes its title must be placed: recalling that first semester, Habermas writes that «those political certainties come back to life with which the intellectual need for a philosophical enlightenment was then, so to speak, impregnated: a better world had to be built, and that depended on us» (ibidem). Habermas’s theoretical ambition and his political commitment were thus generated from the same biographical root: not from the discovery of a doctrine, but from the recognition of a continuity of personal experiences and of rhetorics that 1945 had by no means interrupted.

3. A Democratic Conversion

For the young Habermas, the immediate post-war years were marked by the wait – shared with his mother and his younger sister Anja – for the return home of his father and his elder brother Hans-Joachim from American prison camps. There were, moreover, the family’s material hardships in a period of poverty, with black markets and official food rations below subsistence level. To help at home, Habermas too found work on a farm nearby in the Bergisches Land; but what he chiefly remembered was his mother’s “unstable character” and her “severity” at a time when she «took over the role of the head of the family with courage during her husband’s absence» (Müller-Doohm, 2014/2016: 45). The dominant emotional tonality was nonetheless the sense of relief that spreads with the end of a war, even among the defeated. Sometime later he would recall having experienced 1945 as a turning point, and the death of the dictator together with Germany’s unconditional surrender not as a “humiliation” but as «a liberation, historical and personal» (Habermas, 1979/1981: 512). Above all he recounts the shock of the terrifying images of the extermination of the Jews in a documentary on the concentration camps by the American Counsel for the Prosecution of Axis Criminality and, in November 1945, of listening on the radio to the Nuremberg trials of the regime’s leaders, among them Hermann Göring, Alfred Rosenberg, Rudolf Hess, Joachim von Ribbentrop, Robert Ley and Hans Frank: «After the revelations concerning Auschwitz, nothing could be taken at face value. What we had experienced as a more or less normal childhood and adolescence now transpired to be everyday life in the shadow of a rupture in civilization. Without having done anything to deserve it, my cohort had the opportunity to learn without reservation from the Nuremberg war crimes trials, which we followed on the radio. We made Karl Jaspers’s distinction between collective guilt and collective liability our own and took very seriously the responsibility for the consequences of a regime that had been supported by the mass of the population» (2005/2008: 18)³. The sudden awareness of having lived rather serenely within a “criminal

² His aversion to national anthems, Habermas notes, has remained with him to this day: as late as 1994, at the Federal Assembly, he had Peter Glotz warn him of the exact moment to leave the hall before the German anthem was played (Habermas, 2024/2026: 17).

³ The interview *Un référendum pour une Constitution européenne*, conducted by Nicolas Truong on 1 March 2001 for *Le Monde de l’éducation*, opens with a personal recollection of that collective experience: «Leaving aside the turbulent final years of the Second World War, I grew up in what seemed to me at the time to be the normal conditions of a small town in the Rhenish Massif. In childhood and early youth one understands well enough that it is the everyday lifeworld – the family, the neighbourhood, the school – that establishes the coordinates of the habitual and the unusual. Only with adolescence does one acquire a certain distance from these self-evident facts. I was not yet sixteen when the Americans arrived. And the contrast produced by the images and the information that struck me during the summer of 1945 could not have been more intense. I was not prepared to see in the cinema the images of those walking skeletons who presented themselves to the Allies after the liberation of the camp at Bergen-Belsen. In the newspapers I read the incredible figure

political system” impelled him to interrogate the “question of guilt” of the German people, and the “human face” of that crime, through his readings of Jaspers and Arendt. It is worth establishing at the outset the Jaspersian distinction that governs the whole affair beneath the surface. Müller-Doohm and Yos recall that his «distinction between collective guilt and collective liability was of great importance to Habermas, who was as shocked by Auschwitz and the war crimes as he was by the widespread silence over the deeds that had been committed» (2019: 579). From his first readings of *Die Schuldfrage* (1946/2001) onwards, Habermas held that Jaspers had rightly insisted «that all of its citizens are collectively liable for the political guilt incurred by a criminal state» (1956/1971: 96). The formula is decisive because it shifts the centre of gravity from individual moral imputation – which cannot be ascribed to those born afterwards – to *Haftung*, to the political liability that is inherited along with citizenship. It is on this differential that the entire architecture of the public use of history will rest forty years later. In his study *Der junge Habermas*, Yos documents with precision the context of those readings and those broadcasts, showing that the coming to awareness occurred through an accumulation of heterogeneous materials. Already during his post-war secondary-school years Habermas was obtaining from the communist bookshop in Gummersbach pamphlets containing texts by Marx and Engels printed in East Berlin; he took note «with interest of what only a few years earlier was still regarded as reprehensible or “degenerate”» and followed the reports of the Nuremberg trials on the radio; in one of the first books on the National Socialist system – Eugen Kogon’s *Der SS-Staat* (1946) – and in the earliest filmed documentation of the extermination camps «he found a world altogether different from the one that until May 1945 had appeared to him as “normality”». The adverb with which Habermas has repeatedly placed that experience on record is “*schockartig*”: the crimes entered his consciousness «all at once», and he therefore belongs among those for whom 1945 meant a biographical caesura, the moment at which «personal life-rhythm and great historical events converged» (Yos, 2019: 32). From this Yos draws an interpretive consequence worth recording, since it bears directly on the nexus between guilt and identity: the collapse of the National Socialist system «must have appeared to him at the same time as the collapse of the identity he had acquired up to that point», given that he had grown up in a household «on the whole adapted to the circumstances» (ivi: 32-33).

The dismay in the face of the abysses of one’s own history and the growing awareness of the criminal inhumanity of Nazism were a crucial turning point in Habermas’s intellectual biography. He has repeatedly described the situation of dispossession into which the population fell when confronted with the impossibility of defining collective identity upon the continuity of a tradition wholly compromised by the experience of the concentration camps. Thus, in the interview with Jean-Marc Ferry on the limits of neo-historicism, he states: «“Tradition” means, after all, that we unproblematically continue what others began and have taught us. We usually imagine that, were we to meet these forebears face to face, they would not completely deceive us, would not play the role of a *deus malignus*. In my view, it is precisely this basis of trust which was destroyed before the gas chambers. The complex preparation and extensive organization of a coldly calculated mass murder, in which hundreds of thousands – indirectly a whole people – were involved, took place, after all, with the appearance of normality preserved, and was even dependent on the normality of highly civilized social intercourse. The monstrous occurred, without interrupting the steady respiration of everyday life» (1988a/1990: 150).

The generational placement deserves to be fixed with precision, for it is this that gives the story its profile. Specter recalls that Habermas «was not among those who had the “gift” of late birth [...]: Born in 1929, Habermas was recruited to the Hitler Youth in 1944 and sent with his youth cohort to help man

of six million exterminated Jews. From the radio I learned of the crimes that were later judged at Nuremberg, and I heard the reticent voice of those responsible. If one considers that the normality offered by the everyday context to a still rather introverted boy was utterly disintegrated, it is not at all surprising that, after such a shock, my expectations in the matter of normality took some time to re-establish themselves. One thinks about it one’s whole life long. What imposed itself upon us above all in that period is the question that still disquiets the young people who read Goldhagen today. Despite all the clarifications provided by historiography, it remains difficult to understand how, in a highly civilized country, our contemporaries could collaborate, assent, or simply look on in silence when, from the very first days, the process of segregating the Jews, the persecution of communists and social democrats, the manifest assaults on elementary rights, all took place before everyone’s eyes. In one way or another, there is a trauma that has marked my generation» (2001a: 17).

the anti-aircraft artillery of the western wall defenses» (Specter, 2010: 4). This is the cohort that scholars have called the *Flakhelfer-Generation* or, with A. Dirk Moses, the «45er»⁴, who are credited with the major role in the «discursive democratization» of the Federal Republic, as the «key generation [...] uniquely placed to commence the process of republican value development» (ivi: 5). The reason for the date is biographical before it is historiographical: «“What really determined my political life was 1945”, wrote Habermas. “At that point the rhythm of my personal development intersected with the great historical events of the time” [...] He describes himself as transfixed by the radio broadcasts of the Nuremberg trials in 1945–6, from which he first learned of the Holocaust and its atrocities. Thus 1945 has been called Habermas’s “existentially motivated philosophical birthday”» (ivi: 6). Specter nonetheless prefers the label of “58ers”, which is the one Habermas himself favours – «“I am, if anything, a ‘58er and cannot speak for the ‘68er generation”», he has repeated on several occasions – because «it directs our attention toward the years in which Habermas emerged as a public intellectual with meaningful contributions to the German debate on the state and constitution» (ivi: 6-7). The clarification has direct effects on our argument: the memory of guilt is not a content passively inherited, but the vector of a political-cultural reconversion of which it was the active subject. In order to render the notion of generation methodically usable, it is worth recalling Karl Mannheim’s distinction between “generational location” (*Generationslagerung*) and “generational connection” (*Generationszusammenhang*), which makes it possible to recover an otherwise slippery concept such as that of the «spirit of the age» without dissolving it into a presumed homogeneity (Corchia, 2026: 183).

In this grim light one better understands the unreserved identification – the re-education – with the liberal-democratic ideals that had been imported by the Western powers, the sense of historical responsibility for the growth of democratic culture, and the importance of defending it against the return of arbitrary powers (*Machtbildungen*). He has repeatedly insisted that without the caesura of ’45 he would not have felt the fire of public commitment and would not have come to the study of philosophy and social theory (2005/2008: 171). Thus it was that, wishing to understand the “urgent problems of the age”, in the first curriculum vitae written for his school-leaving certificate the self-projection towards the medical profession gave way to one towards “journalism” and to the dense and profound thoughts of existentialist readings “which he barely understood” (2002: 52). That generation, whose primary socialization (childhood, schooling and adolescence) took place under National Socialism and the war, includes figures important for the history of the Federal Republic, such as the intellectuals Hermann Lübbe, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Niklas Luhmann, Hans-Ulrich Wehler, Odo Marquard, Alexander Kluge, the brothers Hans and Wolfgang Mommsen, Günter Grass, and the politicians Helmut Kohl and Johannes Rau (Brunkhorst & Müller-Dooch, 2017: 1). That “class of 1929” was a generation of people too young to be stained by crimes or by the guilt of their parents, yet old enough to live through its full drama. As Habermas would write, the generation of those who «simply for reasons of age were not discredited by committing or keeping silent about the deeds of the Nazi period, and yet were formed with clear memories of a fascism that had consequences for the biography of every individual» (1969a: 49). They felt obliged to take a position with regard to the Nazi regime and, above all, to make a non-negotiable choice of camp in favour of democracy. Rolf Wiggershaus describes the resulting position as a twofold mistrust without immediate outlets: coming «from a politically conformist middleclass family», Habermas was sceptical of the SPD and still more of the communists; but he was also «a product of post-war “re-education”», whose ideals he took so seriously that he remained equally sceptical of the right-wing parties, «which he thought had made no radical break with the disasters of the past». The outcome is recorded in a terse sentence: «Initially, he could not see any political force with which he would be able to identify himself» (1988/1995: 538).

⁴ Yos specifies that only the cohorts from 1926 to 1928 were called up towards the end of the war as Flak- or *Luftwaffenhelfer*; the cohort of 1929, to which Habermas belongs, «was no longer regularly conscripted, or only in a few cases, though it was sometimes enrolled in the *Volkssturm*», which – these are the words of Rolf Schörken, whom Yos takes as his reference – sets «clear limits in experience» with respect to the immediately preceding cohorts (Yos, 2019: 20). It follows that the label *Flakhelfer-Generation* is improper in the strict sense, and that the preferable designation is that of the «45er», borrowed from Moses.

4. The Return of the Exiles, the Heidegger Case and the Frankfurt Apprenticeship

In 1949 the Christian Democratic Party, in which not a few people compromised with the previous regime had gathered, won the first elections, and Konrad Adenauer was elected Chancellor of the Federal Republic, inaugurating a “normalization” based politically on anti-communism and economically on pride in reconstruction and national development. Chancellor from 1949 to 1963, Adenauer had set in motion a process aimed at returning West Germany to a “normal” condition of political, economic and cultural stability after the catastrophe of Nazism and the defeat of 1945. This had come about, however, through a repression of the past that permitted an internal reconciliation, shifting attention to economic reconstruction rather than to the memory of Nazi crimes and the working-through of German guilt. In the interview with Bolaffi, the “Adenauer period” is described as «driven by a tremendous desire for stability and restoration, by a privately oriented and aggressive will to reconstruct. This period lasted until the beginning of the sixties – economically vital, culturally rigid and provincial (if one excludes painting), yet already characterized by a kind of division of labour between politics and culture» (1988d/1992: 229-230). It is against this climate of restoration that the young Habermas’s dismay at the first federal elections must be read.⁵

Having graduated in 1954 after studies in philosophy, psychology, German literature, history and economics between Göttingen (Hartmann, Wein), Zurich (Barth) and Bonn, Habermas was formed by the integrity of the returning exiles: «What made a difference for us at the time was the divisiveness of the political fates of those banished philosophers who returned. The perception of the fates of Karl Löwith or Helmuth Plessner as émigrés, whose books we read at the philosophy department in Bonn alongside those of Hans Freyer and Arnold Gehlen, is the key to understanding the outstanding importance that Jewish philosophers acquired in the old Federal Republic for the education of some members of my generation and many members of the following generation. The breakdown in civilization had made us suspicious of what was specifically German in the depths – or better, the shallows – of German traditions» (2011a/2015: 106). The young Habermas, as noted, followed political events closely. His commitment to the democratization of the Federal Republic became still stronger from the “normalization” of ’49 onwards, with the election and formation of Konrad Adenauer’s first government.

His secondary schooling continued until the first semester of 1949 and, compared with the university ferment in which Dahrendorf was immersed, the Gymnasium kept well clear of the problems of the present. Müller-Doohm reports a conversation in which Habermas recalls that his teachers – to whose memory he would devote a brief piece in the school magazine in 2002 – provided no content whatever for orienting oneself in contemporary history, still less on embarrassing political themes: «According to Habermas, sensitive political topics such as National Socialism, the Second World War and Auschwitz were not covered» (2014/2016: 50). Although he was developing socialist convictions, he found no representation in Kurt Schumacher’s SPD, whose programme expressed a left-wing nationalism. From Adenauer’s inaugural address onwards – in which nothing was said about the collective responsibility of the Germans or about the crimes of National Socialism – the new climate of “normalization” led him to conclude that a radical and broader democratization of German culture and society was necessary: «There had been no break with the past, no new beginning in terms of personnel, no change in mentality – neither a moral renewal nor a revolution of political mindset» (2005/2008: 19). To the “mortgages of Adenauer’s restoration” Habermas would devote part of the interview given to Markus Schwering for the “Kölner Stadtanzeiger”. Looking back, he acknowledged the “real importance” of the foreign policy of that period, with the firm anchoring of the Federal Republic to the West, but he

⁵ In his recollection, the tones of the leaders of the centre-right parties appeared close to those of Otto Ernst Remer’s far right. The testimony is given at length in the conversations with Müller-Doohm and Yos: «What shocked me at the time were rather the leaders of the BHE, of the German Party and of the CDU, because they behaved exactly like the radical right. They were Oberländer, Seeböhm and Merkat, whom I came to know as arrogant and rancorous orators against the occupying powers, and who shortly afterwards all reappeared as ministers in Adenauer’s first cabinet! With their brazen rhetoric, they showed that they had no sense whatever of the need for a break with the Nazi period» (2024/2026: 17).

also bore witness to strong grounds for dissent: «In the 1950s, I was outraged by the horrendous moral debts incurred by the domestic policies of Adenauer's restoration, by the cynical insensitivity to all the encumbrances he imposed, without a moment's thought, on our political culture. At that time there was not the kind of change of elites that has been so zealously carried out in the former GDR. The "garden gnome" cultural climate Sieburg described did not produce the necessary cultural break with mentalities that went back to the Wilhelmine period, and continued through the Weimar Republic and the Nazi era right up until the beginning of the 1960s – a break that would have been so good for the spiritual health of the country» (1994b/1997: 88-89).

Returning to his university education in Bonn, Habermas attended the philosophy courses of Oskar Becker, a former student of Husserl, and the cultural anthropology courses of Erich Rothacker – both conservative in orientation and compromised with the Nazi regime. In the course of his studies he was able to work through the texts of Humboldt, Fichte, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Cassirer, Scheler, Bühler, Weisgerber, Gehlen and Plessner, finding existential answers in the analytic of Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* and in the writings of Jean-Paul Sartre, Otto F. Bollnow and Wilhelm Jerusalem. A "conscious mistrust" of his own cultural tradition nonetheless accompanied Habermas's formation within a university that counted important scholars involved with Nazism (his own doctoral supervisors, Rothacker and Becker, were among them), and in which one could still hear, in Arnold Gehlen's lectures, an echo of the brutal polemic against humanitarianism⁶. The composition of that teaching body is summed up by Wiggershaus in a fact worth more than many descriptions: «Apart from one, Theodor Litt, all the professors who were of significance to him during the course of his studies had been either convinced Nazis or at least conformists, carrying on their work as usual during the Nazi regime» (1988/1995: 538-539).

It was on the university benches that Habermas formed a friendship and an intellectual relationship with Paul Lorenzen and Karl-Otto Apel. The latter, seven years his senior and Rothacker's assistant, would influence him by orienting him towards the currents of the philosophy of language, hermeneutics and pragmatism. It was Apel who, in the summer of 1953, gave him a copy of Heidegger's *Einführung in die Metaphysik*, in which the master of Freiburg republished, without any commentary save for a few interpolations, the lectures held in the summer semester of 1935 at the University of Freiburg im Breisgau – and in which he evoked the identity between the "men of the future" and the Nazi leaders and the "inner truth and greatness of this movement" (1953/1959). The "incredulous horror" that impelled him to write a critique in the columns of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* would mark a turning point in Habermas's biography. In the article *Martin Heidegger: On the Publication of the Lectures of 1935* (1953/1993), Habermas brings out the problematic nexus between philosophy and politics in Heideggerian thought. The 1935 lecture course, two years after Heidegger's adherence to Nazism, contained expressions that revealed the persistence of a language compromised with the ideology of the regime. Habermas underlined how the Heideggerian lexicon ("inner greatness", "destiny of the people")

⁶ Replying to Jean-Marc Ferry, Habermas states that the experience of the moral catastrophe of the National Socialist regime and of the obscurantist legacies of the former intellectual avant-garde inoculated him for the rest of his academic life against every celebrated version of the radical critique of the normative principles of modernity, «beginning with those that founded their instruments on a captious reading of Nietzsche's writings. In this respect there was never any need for great theoretical effort. For my generation, the instinctive rejection of anti-humanist chatter imposed itself of its own accord» (2001b: 102). In this period, then, Habermas's mistrust consolidates itself towards that apolitical – but for the most part collaborationist – self-understanding of the intellectual elites, and towards that deep current of typically German thought hostile to modern civilisation: «The change of perspective that occurred in 1945, and that opened a new day upon everything which until then had seemed to me normal and self-evident, inoculated me, so to speak, against whatever seductiveness certain themes and casts of mind might have – against the pathos of decision, the haughty heroism and the lieutenant's mentality of the young conservatives in which figures such as Ernst Jünger, Hans Freyer and Arnold Gehlen could cloak themselves. The presumptuous rhetoric and the intoxication with profundity in which the Nietzscheans delight repel me as much as the ostentation with which the mandarins welded Germany and ancient Greece together in an elitist posture. [...] My intellectual development cannot be understood apart from the confrontation which, throughout my life, has set me against figures such as Heidegger or Carl Schmitt. National Socialism was able to draw on such resources all the less in that the reservoir of ideas from which it could draw was so vast. The moral corruption of the German university from 1933 onwards cannot be explained without this manifold intellectual affinity, which many were unwilling to admit after 1945» (2001a: 18).

was not neutral, but impregnated with National Socialist pathos. He brought to light the tension between the claim to an “originary” philosophy and its historical implication: the appeal to the “essence of truth” and to “being” is interwoven with categories that legitimate a decisionist and authoritarian vision. Heideggerian metaphysics, far from being apolitical, became a horizon that justified “great politics”. In particular, Habermas denounced the risk of a “structural complicity” between ontological language and the political mythology of Nazism. For Habermas, the publication of the *Vorlesung* called for a critical reflection on the German philosophical tradition and on its relationship to power and to its own past. The 1935 lecture course was not a philosophical document, but a symptom of the crisis of reason in the twentieth century. At twenty-four Habermas was suddenly catapulted into the centre of German intellectual debate and won the esteem of many scholars, including – as we shall see – that of Adorno, who shared the association Habermas had drawn between the philosophical thought of the turn (*Kehre*) and Heidegger’s political positions under the National Socialist regime, and who, with still greater resonance, invoked in his public interventions the function of the intellectual against the repression of the German people’s responsibility.

Habermas belongs among those who raised the Heidegger case, a discussion opened beyond the embarrassments of the Heideggerian school with regard to the post-war attempt to denazify that philosophy. The essay *Martin Heidegger: Work and Weltanschauung*, included as a Preface to Victor Farias’s study *Heidegger et le Nazisme* (1988/1989), sets out to clarify his political conduct in the light of his philosophical thought: «I would like here to supplement Farias’s investigation with a few remarks, taking up a question I previously broached in another place (cf. 1985a/1987): whether there was an internal connection between Heidegger’s philosophy and his political perception of the world-historical situation» (1989/1989: 145). The legitimate distinction between a thinker’s person and his work should not prevent us from asking whether – and to what extent – Heidegger’s philosophical project may have been shaped, in its very substance, by the intrusion of elements belonging to what Germans call *Weltanschauung*, an ideologically inflected worldview. While separating person and work, Habermas shows the intrusion of an intrinsically authoritarian world-view: «one may say, with Otto Pöggeler, an absolutely loyal follower of the master, that Heidegger, to the very end, never moved out of the shadow of National Socialism. Only if one keeps this truth in mind can one properly appreciate the disruptive significance of *Being and Time*. The apologists do Heidegger a disservice» (1988c/1990: 30). The point that, according to Wiggershaus, that controversy disclosed is the internal nexus between work and world-view: it was a matter of recognizing that «what was objectionable in Heidegger was not just the speech he gave in 1935 as rector, but his philosophy itself: a glorification of Nazism emerged from its objective structure». The charge was circumstantial: Habermas accused Heidegger «of using the history of Being to sanction the elimination of the idea of the equality of all before God, the idea of individual freedom, and the idea of providing a practical and rationalist corrective to technological progress» (1988/1995: 539). Heidegger is an extraordinary “antidote” in a twofold sense: he offers motifs for reflection on temporality and language, but also the example of a philosophy that chooses the leap into the esoteric as the supreme form of possession, authoritatively imposing silence: «From the rubble of the transcendental architectonic there is salvaged a philosophy that continues to be competent for being detached from the ontic. Being assumes the historicized form of a truth mediated and set to work destinally by leaders [*Führer*] and by poets [...] For Heidegger, scientific thought and methodically conducted research are henceforth merely the expression of a destiny of being oriented towards the technical domination of the world. As a symptom of the oblivion of being, the modern sciences take their place in the fateful history of metaphysics that fulfils itself as an epochal transformation of world-pictures and linguistic ontologies. Philosophy alone, in the dialogue of thinkers with poets, maintains a relation, as intimate as it is devout, with these obscure events» (1990c/1991: 40).

The Heidegger case was not one debut among others. Max Pensky places it at the origin of a posture that lasted half a century: «His first publication indicted Heidegger’s refusal to amend passages in the republication of the 1935 lectures titled *Introduction to Metaphysics* that were open in their praise of Nazism [...] Given the extraordinary popularity of Heidegger both within and outside the West German academy at that time», the essay «was a major intervention, introducing themes that would continue with remarkable consistency over the next half-century». The theme thus inaugurated is precisely the

one reconstructed here: «For Habermas, West Germany had a special responsibility to construct an open, democratic, fully modern political culture through deliberate critical discourse on the continuities and discontinuities with its fascist past». That such a demand should appear obvious in retrospect must not mislead us: «it was hardly so in the Federal Republic's early years, which were marked by deep conservatism and a general distaste for political engagement, features that help explain much of Heidegger's postwar popularity» (2019a: 201). Specter places the episode within the experience of a disillusionment that multiplies its significance: the discovery that «the philosopher he so admired had written in 1935 of the “. . . inner truth and greatness of the Nazi movement”», and that in 1953 he had republished those lectures «without retraction of the astonishing passage», confining himself to adding an explanatory note (Specter, 2010: 9). The point that concerns us here is that the dismay was not a strictly philosophical matter – *Being and Time* had been the horizon in which, until then, Habermas had lived – but brought to light the failure of the new German state to take seriously the task of denazifying the universities; and it matured into a critique broader than the one levelled by Fritz Ringer (1969) at the antimodern mentality of the German “mandarins” – a world that did not disappear in 1933: «the “mandarin mentality” is a term that symbolically condenses all the authoritarian, irrationalist, or anti-democratic attitudes against which Habermas defines himself» (2010: 11). For the argument of this essay the episode marks a first displacement. What Habermas holds Heidegger accountable for is not a deed but a language, and the failure to retract it: liability, in Jaspers's sense, is here extended from the political community to the university and to the philosophical tradition in which the past survives unavowed. It is the same charge – that a vocabulary can carry a past that its speakers refuse to name – that he would bring, thirty years later, against the neoconservative historians.

While writing his dissertation, Habermas's formation was enriched by his reading of Karl Löwith's *From Hegel to Nietzsche* (1941/1964), György Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* (1923/1971) and Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno's *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (1947/1972) (1981/1992: 98). These coordinates are to be found in the articles of literary, theatrical and film criticism that he wrote for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, the *Frankfurter Hefte* and the *Handelsblatt*, as well as in the essays published in the renowned journal *Merkur* on the critique of mechanization, of bureaucracy and of the dangers of mass society, in which the question of the working-through of the past (*Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit*) by German intellectuals recurs frequently. Those émigrés who had returned home – Adorno, Horkheimer, Arendt, Löwith – together with the rehabilitated Karl Jaspers are the “unscathed figures” who took on “intellectually redemptive” traits and whose importance Habermas has repeatedly recalled. These intellectuals made it possible to recover, without mistrust, a capacity to learn from one's own theoretical traditions, that is, the chance of an unprejudiced reception (1988c/1990: 30). On this stratification Habermas has returned with an autobiographical formula of rare concision: «I read Marx already as a schoolboy, and my last book also contains a chapter on Marx. I have always been a Hegelian Marxist whose thought was shaped by Kant and subsequently by pragmatism. I was initially impressed by *History and Class Consciousness* and was later strongly influenced by the Weberian Marxism of early Critical Theory» (2020b: 29).

The picture of that return must, however, be specified on a point that Habermas has made explicit only in the most recent conversations, and which concerns the disciplinary geography of the conflict. The public clash over the past, he observes, «in the last analysis derived from different attitudes towards the National Socialist past», but «it flared up only with the student movement» and, in philosophy as in the other humanistic disciplines, «it took place more among the members of my generation than among our teachers»; «the situation was very different in sociology, where the returning émigrés and the old Nazis confronted one another» (Habermas, 2024/2026: 20). The difference is not a matter of detail: it explains why German sociology was able to assume early on the function of a seismograph of institutional continuity, and why the philosophical controversy instead erupted with a generation's delay. Habermas recalls, moreover, that the controversy was «fuelled also by the “FAZ” [...] and by its co-editor Joachim Fest» (ibidem) – the same man who twenty years later would be among his opponents in the historians' dispute: an element of biographical continuity on the adversary side that deserves to be recorded alongside the better-known ones in the Habermasian camp. As for the notion of generation, the common trait is for Habermas not a shared position but a shared experience to which people react

differently: «even if a generation is formed through a shared experience, its members differ from one another in the way they react to that experience». What united the liberal and left-wing camp was rather a twofold conviction: «the impulse towards a new beginning, perceived as inescapable, and the critical awareness that German traditions could no longer be carried forward unfiltered» (ivi: 21). This is, almost to the letter, the formula we shall find again in the thesis of the *Historikerstreit*, according to which the only patriotism practicable for the Federal Republic is the one that passes through the filter of Auschwitz.

Without academic prospects but gifted as a writer, Habermas was for the most part a freelance journalist. Among his essays, *Die Dialektik der Rationalisierung* of August 1954 stood out: a rereading of Karl Marx's theory of capitalism, in particular of the alienation of industrial labour and of mass consumption, whose common condition was subsumed under the concept of "compensation". There was also the proposal to extend the category of rationality from the technical to the practical-moral sphere. In the Preface to the collection of essays *Dialettica della razionalizzazione*, edited by Emilio Agazzi, he would state years later, with reference to the theory of commodification, that «the key ideas of this article contain the nucleus of much of what I wrote later in the Theory of Communicative Action» – a declaration to be set against his judgement that it was elaborated «in a still rather clumsy manner» (1983a/1983: I). The intellectual affinity between Habermas and the first "Critical Theory" was being born *in nuce*. To this critical disposition Habermas gave a first explicit political formulation in May 1955, with the article *Ohne mich auf dem Index*, which appeared in the *Deutsche Studentenzeitung* at the height of the mobilization against rearmament. Claiming for himself a mentality that anti-communist propaganda branded as defeatism, he defined it as «a mentality shaped by the particular experiences of the totalitarian system and of its collapse», whose motives politics ought first of all to understand before reacting to them with an eye to public opinion (Yos, 2019: 176). The distinctions he introduces are already those of a theorist of the public sphere: it makes a difference «whether one has no interests» or is merely prevented «from expressing interests in a socially effective way», and it makes a difference whether one has no goals «or whether one fears the programmes that distort them» (ivi: 177). The positive side of the «count me out» is bound up with the «awareness of the unrepeatable opportunity of 1945», an opportunity compromised by the fact that subsequent developments had unfolded «on the crumbling ground of a tabooed past» (ivi: 177-178). The passage on the national question deserves to be recorded in full, because it anticipates by thirty years the argumentative structure of the constitutional patriotism to be discussed below: «the national idea has lost its tensile force. If we nonetheless desire and pursue national unity, this happens out of a concern and a bond more closely referred to the individual, familial or neighbourly. The commonality of the most recent history is stronger than that of a great past. The fact of being able to converse without a pocket dictionary is stronger than the questionable commonality of blood and of ethnic traditions» (ivi: 179).

Habermas was hired by the Institut für Sozialforschung in mid-February 1956 and became Adorno's first assistant for the chair of philosophy and sociology at the Goethe Universität for a little more than two years, during which he was involved in and directed some of the research under way, took part in the IfS conferences – among them the important one for the centenary of Freud's birth in 1956, where he met Marcuse – held seminars, continued to publish feuilleton articles, drafted his first essays on Marxism – which cost him the hostility of the director, Max Horkheimer – and drew up his Habilitation project. It should be said that in those years Habermas knew very little of the tradition of social philosophy that would later be labelled the "Frankfurt School". He had come to appreciate the intellectual "integrity" of these Marxist Jews forced into exile by the Nazi regime and only recently returned to the German university; besides the *Dialektik der Aufklärung* he had read the collection *Prisms* (1955a/1967) and had listened on the radio to Adorno's interventions on the question of guilt. In an academic world largely compromised with the Nazi past and dominated by a conservative and antimodernist cultural orientation, "unscathed figures" such as Horkheimer and Adorno, but also Hannah Arendt and Karl Löwith, took on "intellectually redemptive traits", allowing students to embark upon an "unprejudiced reception" of German cultural traditions and to apply philosophical categories to socially relevant problems (1988c/1990: 30). To the critical function of the "returnees" with respect to German culture Habermas has devoted innumerable passages of his works, as in the essay *Jewish Philosophers*

and *Sociologists as Returnees in the Early Federal Republic of Germany: A Recollection*, in which he brings out the fact that the “returnees” did not merely resume their academic careers: they brought with them critical perspectives matured in exile, which made it possible to call into question practices and narratives consolidated in the Federal Republic (2011a/2015: 108). Habermas emphasizes that this critique was often uncomfortable for the academic and political elites, but necessary for a genuine working-through of the past. In the book-interview *Es musste etwas besser werden*, Habermas recalls the importance of the exiles’ return, since they brought with them the living presence of the Jewish and republican cultural universe of pre-Nazi Weimar (2024/2026: 34). The measure of the recognition accorded to the “returnees” is given by an institutional fact: in November 1951 Horkheimer was elected rector of the University of Frankfurt and, as Jay observes, «perhaps more symbolic still, he was the first Jew to achieve that post after the war». At the end of his term he received the Goethe Prize, the city’s highest honour. Once settled in Frankfurt, he «was lionized by a Frankfurt community grateful for the recapture of at least one survivor of Weimar culture», associated with Adenauer and appeared regularly on radio, on television and in the press (1973: 286-287). On Adorno’s position, the testimony Habermas would consign to his obituary is telling: «In every institutional setting he was “out of place”, and not as if he intended to be», and «academic philosophy [...] never really acknowledged this unusual intellectual»; despite the influence he exercised for fifteen years over the literary public sphere, «Adorno did not get one of the official prizes», so that «his joy was disproportionately great when the German Association for Sociology made him its president» (1969b/1983: 102).

On the other hand, Habermas had no impression of a systematic reflection: «I didn’t think of it that way at the time. For me there was no critical theory, no connecting doctrine. Adorno wrote critical essays on culture and held seminars on Hegel. He made contemporary a certain Marxist background. That was it» (1981/1992: 98). Moreover, a young scholar could not grasp the lines of continuity with the critical theory of the 1920s and 1930s. As we have said, the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* had been unavailable since the advent of Nazism and, despite the insistence of Heinz Maus and Habermas, Horkheimer was opposed to republishing its volumes⁷. The critical theory of the interwar period was in any case «largely invisible» to him, retrospectively little more than «a submerged continent» (Specter, 2010: 29). The fact is less anecdotal than it may appear: it means that the resumption of the Frankfurt legacy was an act of critical reappropriation, not of institutional continuity – the very disposition that Habermas would recommend for the Germans’ relationship with their own traditions. Nonetheless, he managed to make the constitutive programme of the first critical theory his own. It was the converging theoretical coordinates, besides the fine prose and the democratic ideals, that drew him towards Adorno’s thought, for which he felt a genuine fascination, and with which he sought to elaborate a critical conception of modern rationalization of his own. In the furrow of the Frankfurt tradition lay also the invitation to the social sciences to renew a fruitful relationship with concrete praxis, not only on the technical-instrumental but also on the practical-moral plane, taking on the task of being a “ferment” and a “guide to the right life”. Adorno’s influence could also be felt in the appeal to the concept of “self-reflection”, according to which every specialized body of knowledge ought to reflect on the epistemological conditions of knowledge and on the historical-social conditions of its genesis, organization and use. The hypothesis advanced was that the relationship between organized capitalism and mass democracy was producing a series of effects: first, the bureaucratization of the private and public spheres, with the erosion of spaces of autonomy in work and consumption; second, the predominance of technocrats, political leaders and pressure groups in representative institutions and in public administration; third, the exclusion of workers, consumers and citizens from decision-making. The contradiction Habermas meant to highlight was that, alongside the progressive politicization of society brought about by state intervention in all domains of the lifeworld, one was witnessing the depoliticization of the masses.

⁷ In reality, as Müller-Doohm documented, contrary to Habermas’s assertion, while it is true that Horkheimer «had a great fear that we would get to the crate in the institute’s cellar that contained a complete set of the *Zeitschrift*» (1981/1992: 97), he not only knew about the existence of another complete edition, but had also consulted the entire collection purchased by Wilhelm Hennis, assistant to Carl Schmid, and archived at the Institut für Politische Wissenschaft (2014/2016: 20).

In January 1962 Habermas had presented to the Berlin University Days the paper *Von den kritischen und konservativen Aufgaben der Soziologie*. It was, in the first place, a reconstruction in the history of ideas aimed at «ascertaining, from the standpoint of the history of science, how sociology has understood its political relationship to the established order» (1962b/1971: 291). In the *pars construens*, Habermas defended the thesis that a critical sociology was possible only as “historical sociology”, whose object had to be «the development of society as a whole» (ivi: 300). The problem of the nexus between theory and praxis – with the assignment to sociology of the task of «clarifying practical consciousness in the process of the formation of the general will» (ibidem) – was traced back to the normative problem of grounding critique. In that period Habermas believed he could find the justification of value-references in reflection on the universalistic principles constitutionalized in democratic *Rechtsstaaten*, and in the critique of ideology the specific function of a critical theory that protects itself and society from an uncritical elaboration of the existing order: «If, then, a task can nonetheless be assigned to sociology beyond the pragmatics of an empirical science of planning, that task is this: instead of making evident what happens in any case, to bring to consciousness what in any case we must do [...] from the fictitiously anticipated perspective of a generalized subject of social action». And again, critical sociology «takes at its word the meaning claimed by existing institutions, since even when these are utopian words they – if realistically understood – disclose within the existing order what it is not» (ivi: 304). The solution is entirely internal to the Frankfurt paradigm. The conflict with Horkheimer concerned precisely this point. It was the 1957 essay on the philosophical debate over Marx and Marxism that furnished him with «grounds for urgently recommending Habermas’s removal from the Institute»; and when the publication of *Student und Politik* was blocked, the director objected to Adorno that the «imagination of the average reader» could not realize by democratic means the potential invoked: «How is a people which is “being held in the shackles of bourgeois society by a liberal constitution” to change into the so-called political society for which, according to H., it is “more than ripe”, other than by violence?» (cited in Wiggershaus, 1988/1995: 554). The final judgement on Habermas was blunt: «He probably has a good, or even brilliant, career as a writer in front of him, but he would only cause the Institute immense damage» (ivi: 555).

The study of the structural transformations of the public sphere (1962a/1989), carried out under the supervision of Wolfgang Abendroth at Marburg, belongs to a programme aimed at reconstructing the normative foundations of Frankfurt critical theory. It could also be read as a political critique of Adenauer’s *Kanzlerdemokratie*, he having just been re-elected in the national elections. The work does not deal directly with Nazism and the question of German guilt, but it provided an interpretive key for analysing the post-war Federal Republic, bringing out the crisis of legitimacy of German democracy and the limits of a political participation reduced to media consumption. In this sense Habermas became one of the young intellectuals most valued by the “New Left” and by the student movement that was beginning to occupy the public stage. And to sociological analysis he joined active commitment in the ranks of the Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund (SDS). In the lecture *Der Hermann Heller der frühen Bundesrepublik. Wolfgang Abendroth zum 100. Geburtstag* (2006b/2008), Habermas reconstructs Abendroth’s intellectual and political profile, relating it to the transformations of twentieth-century German history. He presents Abendroth as the exemplary figure of an intellectual who, though marked by the experience of National Socialism and by exile or marginalization, remains faithful to a project of social democracy and of radical critique of institutions. The text underscores the tension between memory and normalization in the Federal Republic and the role that intellectuals such as Abendroth played in keeping alive a critical consciousness of democracy. Habermas values Abendroth as a model of the public intellectual who neither withdraws into the ivory tower nor reduces himself to a mere technical consultant. Abendroth is described as a supporter of participatory democracy and as a critic of the authoritarian tendencies that can resurface even in formally democratic contexts. For Habermas, Abendroth’s personal trajectory – which introduced him into the Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund – his trade-union commitment, his legal militancy and his theoretical critique reflect the need for a *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* that does not confine itself to formal gestures but engages political culture and the structures of power. The essay highlights his attention to the material conditions of democracy, to the protection of social rights and to the need for an informed and pluralistic public

discourse. In commenting on German history, Habermas uses the figure of Abendroth to argue that the recognition of historical guilt must translate neither into a permanent self-condemnation nor into a functional repression. Abendroth embodies the position according to which the memory of the Holocaust and of Nazi crimes must constitute a normative constraint for contemporary politics, orienting the construction of institutions that prevent new authoritarian degenerations. The distinction between historical responsibility and personal guilt promotes a constitutional patriotism grounded in rights and democracy.

5. The Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial

Retrospectively, Habermas identifies throughout the “incubation period” of the 1960s a tendency towards a collective identity that problematizes the past and redefines self-understanding no longer on the basis of foreign policy – anti-communism and Atlanticism – and of the country’s successes as an economic nation, but also as a nation of citizens of a democratic *Rechtsstaat* which had pushed the question of national identity into the background. A key moment was the affair of the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial (1963-1965), which marked a decisive turning point in the working-through of the Nazi past in West Germany, breaking the climate of collective repression and silence typical of the 1950s. The initiative was due to Fritz Bauer, chief prosecutor of Hesse, who in the early months of 1959 received incriminating documents on more than ninety members of the SS who had served at the extermination camp (Frei, 1996). Aware of the strong institutional resistances and of the presence of former Nazi officials in the judicial apparatus of the time, Bauer entrusted the investigations to young prosecutors (Joachim K  gler, Georg Friedrich Vogel and Gerhard Wiese) untainted by any involvement with the regime. The inquiry had to overcome formidable obstacles: severe shortages of resources, bureaucratic boycotts, and even open intimidation by fellow magistrates. In tracing the surviving witnesses – dispersed in countries such as Poland, Hungary and Israel, with which the Federal Republic had no diplomatic relations – the contribution of Hermann Langbein, representative of the International Auschwitz Committee, was decisive. The extent of those resistances deserves emphasis, because it says something essential about the relationship between state apparatuses and memory in the Federal Republic of the decades preceding the *Historikerstreit*. On the procedural plane, Bauer’s action was made possible by a precise institutional step: on the basis of the material he had received, he applied to the Federal Court of Justice, which assigned to the District Court of Frankfurt am Main jurisdiction over all crimes committed at Auschwitz, thereby withdrawing for the first time from an international court competence over a case of that magnitude. Until 1959, indeed, Nazi criminals had been tried by Allied tribunals, both because their norms were better suited to the purpose and because occupied Germany was in no position to institute proceedings of such scope. The choice of very young prosecutors was not a generational preference but a precaution: «Bauer probably chose very young prosecutors deliberately, so as to exclude any involvement of theirs with National Socialism», in a context in which «the strong continuity of the personnel of the police and of the judicial apparatus with the National Socialist past made it very difficult to investigate Nazi crimes» (Franceschi, 2017). The investigation proved unpopular within the judiciary itself: it was repeatedly sabotaged and left without adequate resources, to the point that the prosecutors used the greengrocer’s fax machine, slept in police stations or on a bench in the Tiergarten, and drew on their own salaries to balance the accounts of their missions. The investigating magistrate Heinz D  x reported that, shortly after taking on the proceedings, he had been approached by two authoritative colleagues offering him “advice” on the handling of the case, and concluded that the aim was not to help him but to dissuade him from bringing it to trial. To other forms of obstruction – the withholding of urgent correspondence at the Hessian Ministry of Justice, the denial of funding on specious grounds – was added the fact that, after nine months waiting for authorization for an official mission to Auschwitz, D  x travelled to the camp during his own holidays, taking there the photographs later produced in court. Among the openly hostile colleagues was an elderly and respected magistrate who in 1942 had been present at the Wannsee Conference (D  x, 2004: 31).

Langbein’s role too deserves a quantitative specification that measures its weight. A survivor of Auschwitz and representative of the Internationales Auschwitz-Komitee, Langbein recommended the expert witnesses, indicated the incriminating evidence, supplied the information about the camp and,

above all, procured the names of half the witnesses questioned in the course of the investigations (Wojak, 2009: 323). The figure is no detail: it means that the judicial reconstruction of Auschwitz rested, for a decisive part, on the self-organization of the victims, that is, on a collective subject external both to the state and to the corporation of jurists. It is the first appearance, in the history of the Federal Republic, of what Habermas will call a memory that constitutes itself in the public sphere before it does so in the institutions.

Opened on 20 December 1963 and concluded on 20 August 1965, the trial was the largest proceeding for Nazi crimes in the history of post-war Germany. In the dock sat twenty-two former administrators and guards of Auschwitz (among them physicians, adjutants and a kapo). The trial unfolded over 183 sessions, saw the deposition of more than 350 witnesses and the collection of 124 volumes of records. The verdict imposed seven life sentences and ten terms of imprisonment, alongside three acquittals and two stays of proceedings. The trial also registered, however, the precise limits of the German penal code of the time, which lacked specific norms for prosecuting a bureaucratically organized state genocide. The need to apply ordinary criminal law forced the prosecution to focus on individual guilt and motivation for the offence of murder, fragmenting the perception of the systemic responsibility of Auschwitz. On this point the sharpest formulation is that of Devin O. Pendas, according to whom German law «fundamentally lacked the theoretical apparatus to comprehend and pass judgement upon a state-sponsored, bureaucratically and systematically organized genocide» (2006: 53). Criminal law had been conceived to judge individual crimes committed for individual motives, and since for German law intent corresponds to a subjective mental state, the centrality of the individual defendant's will as a criterion of culpability made it «extremely difficult to comprehend the Auschwitz system and to pass judgement upon it» (Franceschi, 2017). The investigation was therefore conducted according to the parameters of an ordinary murder trial, with a strictly defined objective: to determine the personal guilt of the defendants. From this follows a consequence of direct interest to us. The trial produced a judicial truth that was at once rigorous and structurally inadequate to its object: the legal form, applied to a state crime, returned its image fragmented into a sum of personal responsibilities. The disjunction between the juridical structure of the trial and the historical character of the Shoah is precisely the gap into which, twenty years later, the task Habermas assigns to the public use of history will insert itself: what the court cannot say by statute – the nexus between bureaucratic rationality, obedience and extermination – must be said elsewhere, in the public sphere, and with other argumentative instruments. Put in Jaspers's terms, the trial institutionalized one side of his distinction and left the other without a forum: it could establish criminal guilt, person by person, but the political liability of the community that had made the camp possible lay by construction outside its jurisdiction. This is why the Frankfurt trial is a turning point in the itinerary reconstructed here, and not merely an episode in its background: it is the moment at which the question of guilt, having found its judicial answer, reveals that it still lacks a public one.

Media coverage was imposing (almost a thousand articles in the leading newspapers). The press, however, often favoured a narrative that portrayed the defendants as “monsters” and “demons”, allowing public opinion to distance itself from the crimes and turning the event into a voyeuristic tale (as criticized by intellectuals such as Martin Walser and Erich Kuby). The two criticisms must, however, be distinguished, because they identify opposite risks. For Martin Walser, who intervened in «*Kursbuch*» with the essay *Unser Auschwitz*, the true significance of the trial lay not in the judicial proceeding but «in the education of a population that could not be brought to know what had happened in any other way» (Walser, 1965: 189); the problem was that this *Aufklärung* had proved insufficient, since the detailed and almost voyeuristic account of the atrocities had allowed the public to distance itself not only from the facts but from their authors. Isolated from any historical context, Walser warned, the fascination would be short-lived: «since no Höss, no Heydrich, no Himmler, no race ideologist or director of IG-Farben sits in the courtroom, it would be possible for the Auschwitz trial to become a monstrous jumble of murders; one that could involve us only as consumers of sharp headlines. And these are forgotten as soon as they are replaced by new headlines» (ivi: 195). Erich Kuby, by contrast, feared the symmetrical outcome, that is, not the wrong lesson but the absence of any lesson: «social reality is such that it would be utopian to expect that the public would not try to repress this trial, as it

represses everything that is uncomfortable» (1994: 7). The two concerns – that the public might ignore the proceedings despite their grandeur, or that, while following them, it might not draw «the right lesson» – circumscribe with precision the problem Habermas would inherit: the publicity of a memorial event by no means guarantees its formative efficacy, and indeed the very form of media narration may neutralize it. It is no accident that, in following the trial, the press replicated the legal narrative of individual guilt, unintentionally shifting attention from the Holocaust as a historical process – with lasting implications for German society – to a vision of Auschwitz as an earthly inferno, largely incomprehensible, peopled by «monsters», «demons» and «devils» (Franceschi, 2017). While the communist newspapers of the GDR used the trial to attack the Western capitalist system and the nationalist ones sought to minimize the guilt, the moderate and conservative press concentrated on formal respect for the rule of law (*Rechtsstaat*). The four discursive strategies deserve to be named, because they prefigure with notable precision the positions in the field during the historians' dispute. The communist camp practised what may be called a cynical historicism: it maintained that the trial did not do justice to the historical context of Auschwitz, but did so by reducing the entire causality of the genocide to the greed of IG Farben and by drawing a polemical, and openly antihistorical, line between Auschwitz and Adenauer's chancellorship. Since the antifascist founding myth of the GDR was endangered precisely by the fact that it was the West Germans who were trying the Nazis, the attack could not be direct: at the close of the proceedings «*Der Morgen*» was thus able to write that if the Auschwitz trial had been accomplished, the guilt of Auschwitz had remained unexpiated because the system had not been condemned.

The nationalist camp, gathered around the *Deutsche National-Zeitung* and the nascent NPD, practised instead a “cynical legalism” coupled with trivialization: it rejected the law in the name of the law itself, pressing procedural guarantees to the point where the perpetrators remained presumed innocent in defiance of the evidence, while at the same time casting doubt on the number of victims, on the coherence of the survivors' depositions and on the very existence of a deliberate policy of extermination, invoking a general amnesty for all war crimes according to the *tu quoque* schema. For them the trial was merely one further episode of «national masochism», and the political programme opposed to it demanded, in Otto Hess's words, «respect, balance, common sense, and self-awareness» (cf. Klessmann, 1988: 100). As can be seen, the arguments we shall meet again in the nationalist apologetics of the mid-1980s are already present in 1964.

In the camp that supported the proceedings, finally, the Social Democrats adopted a didactic moralism that emphasized the moral lessons of the outcome while neglecting the substance of the trial, and traced the defendants' motives back to an excessive «sense of duty» presented as an archetypally German trait – nothing more than an anonymous order had turned innocent men into mass murderers – while the conservatives defended the inviolability of the *Rechtsstaat* against every «political» contamination of the trial, without realizing that such an avowedly apolitical form was itself a political position. The early history of the Federal Republic may thus be understood in terms of two parallel practices: the social reintegration of former Nazis and, together with it, a political-judicial design aimed at circumscribing the crimes of National Socialism by identifying the “worst criminals”, so as to fix the boundary of what was morally acceptable without endangering the political loyalty of millions of fellow citizens (Franceschi, 2017).

Despite the divergences in public opinion, the Frankfurt Trial remained an indispensable moment of historical awareness. The available survey data nonetheless require that this coming to awareness be measured with caution. A June 1964 survey by the DIVO Institute found that 40% of respondents had not followed the trial through any medium of information (Schmidt and Becker, 1967: 111); a poll of the following month indicated instead that 83% of Germans had heard of it and 42% were able to name its location, figures close to but not higher than those recorded for the Eichmann trial (87% and 46%), despite the imposing press coverage. More significant still is that at the beginning of 1965 a survey by the Institut für Demoskopie in Allensbach, founded and directed by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, found 57% of the population opposed to further proceedings against Nazis, within a trend that rises from 34% in 1958 to 44% in 1966 (Franceschi, 2017).

The resulting picture is one of a divergence between media resonance and moral assent: the press did everything possible to bring the trial before the eyes of the country, without this translating into

consent to the judicial operation. This is why, from the point of view that concerns us here, the Frankfurt Trial is to be read less as a collective conversion than as the opening of a conflict: the irreversible entry of Auschwitz into German public space and, at the same time, the birth of the discursive strategies destined to contain its implications. The conclusion to be drawn defines exactly the space in which the Habermasian intervention will be located: neither delegation to the judiciary nor repression, but the discursive labour – permanent and always revocable – of a public sphere that takes upon itself what the verdict cannot establish.

Both Adorno and Habermas experienced at first hand, in Frankfurt, the political and cultural climate of the years of the trial, and both expressed crucial reflections on the event. Adorno, who as early as 9 November 1959 had delivered, at the Koordinierungsrat für Christlich-Jüdische Zusammenarbeit in Wiesbaden, the lecture *The Meaning of Working Through the Past* (1959/1998), followed the debate around the trial attentively. In the immediate aftermath of its conclusion, Adorno delivered the celebrated radio lecture *Education after Auschwitz* (1966b/1998), in which he pointed out the limits of the judicial path. While recognizing the importance of Fritz Bauer's work, Adorno showed how criminal justice, by concentrating on the punishment of individual perpetrators, risked proving a purely formal working-through unless accompanied by an analysis of the social and psychological structure that had made Nazism possible. For Adorno the danger lay in the persistence of the "authoritarian character" and in the psychological conformism of the German population. Hence the need for an educational turn. It is worth recalling that those lectures were not isolated episodes but the culmination of a public posture deliberately assumed ever since his return from American exile, when Adorno «deliberately takes on the risk of speaking of the noose in the hangman's house» (Müller-Doohm, 2005: 272) and, in 1951, provokes his readership with the dictum on the barbarism of writing poetry after Auschwitz. Between the late 1950s and the early 1960s – in a phase marked by antisemitic movements in West Germany – he placed the reputation of his scholarly standing at the service of a public warning about the survival of National Socialism, going so far as to declare: «I consider the survival of National Socialism within democracy to be potentially more menacing than the survival of fascist tendencies against democracy» (Adorno, 1959/1998: 90). The accompanying diagnosis is that «democracy has not become naturalized to the point where people truly experience it as their own and see themselves as subjects of the political process» (ivi: 93). Adorno himself defines his contribution to intellectual enlightenment, in terms of social theory, as «a turn toward the subject, the reinforcement of a person's self-consciousness» (ivi: 102). And it is precisely this imperative, tirelessly opposed to public silence, that fixes his agonistic location: Adorno «positions himself as a militant naysayer, even as a disturber of the peace» (Müller-Doohm, 2005: 273). His critique of the various defences against making German guilt an object of conscious discussion contributed to Germany's process of self-understanding with regard to history and democracy, to the point that he must be granted a share of responsibility for what has been called a "second founding" – an intellectual one – of the German republic. It is necessary, however, to register also the aporia that such a posture carries with it, because it marks the limit of the Adornian model with respect to the one Habermas would adopt twenty years later. Adorno vehemently pleaded for the working-through of the past and for the use of the possibilities offered by the democratic constitution, and was at the same time convinced that the political sphere was a façade no less than the political public sphere, whose media he nonetheless used extensively (ivi: 274). Hence the formula from *Minima Moralia* in which the aporia is condensed: «Whatever the intellectual does, is wrong» (Adorno, 1951/1974: 133). It is exactly the position that a critique which renders conscious will have to overcome – not by abandoning the task of unmasking, but by restoring to it an addressee. The judicial path appeared to Adorno structurally insufficient, and not simply incomplete. For Adorno, Auschwitz does not represent an accident along the way but the catastrophic outcome of Western civilization: the rationalization described in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947/1972), born to emancipate man from myth, has reversed into a new form of blindness. Culture not only failed to prevent barbarism; it was complicit in it through its very structure. If reason has become purely instrumental, capable of organizing extermination with the same efficiency with which a factory is managed, then a procedural apparatus that ascertains the guilty will of individual perpetrators cannot, by construction, reach what is properly social in that crime. It is the same asymmetry between legal form and historical object that the Frankfurt trial

made visible, but read from the standpoint of the diagnosis of civilization rather than from the limits of the penal code. From this follows the specificity of the pedagogical proposal. Education cannot confine itself to the transmission of technical knowledge, but must become an «education towards contradiction and resistance», with the aim of preventing human beings from once again becoming objects capable of executing criminal orders in the name of efficiency. The subjective presupposition of Auschwitz Adorno locates in «bourgeois coldness», that is, in the incapacity to love and to identify with the suffering of others, and in that “fetishism of technology” which permits one to act without reflecting: «People are inclined to take technology to be the thing itself, as an end in itself, a force of its own, and they forget that it is an extension of human dexterity. The means – and technology is the epitome of the means of self-preservation of the human species – are fetishized, because the ends – a life of human dignity – are concealed and removed from the consciousness of people» (1966b/1998: 200). The aim of education is therefore the formation of an autonomous subject, capable of saying “no” to the pressures of the collective, which implies a critique of the culture industry inasmuch as it habituates the masses to passivity and repetition: the Adornian position presents itself as an applied sociology, aimed at unmasking the mechanisms that transform the individual into an «atom» of the crowd. That lexicon derives, in no small part, from the study *Schuld und Abwehr* (1955b) contained in the *Gruppenexperiment* of 1955, whose central mechanism Wiggershaus summarizes thus: hardly any of the participants was prepared to say «It was right that they should be killed»; it was rather a matter of making one’s own excessive identification with the collective compatible with knowledge of the crimes, and therefore «one denies or minimizes such knowledge in order not to lose the possibility of identifying with the collective that psychologically enables countless people to overcome an unbearable sense of their own powerlessness» (cited in Wiggershaus, 1988/1995: 474). To the «anthropological» reaction thus identified Adorno gave the name of «collective narcissism», and Wiggershaus can therefore describe that study as «the first, and in the 1950s the most penetrating, analysis of the post-Hitler German inability to mourn» (ivi: 476).

The relation to the Habermasian position can then be specified by way of difference. Habermas shares the demand that the working-through should not be exhausted in the verdict, but he shifts the centre of gravity from the formation of character to the structure of public communication: where Adorno calls for a «de-barbarization» starting from an awareness of one’s own aggressive impulses, Habermas will call for discursive procedures capable of rendering arguable what ritual and sentence leave implicit. They are two responses to the same problem – the fragility of the subjective presuppositions of democracy – diverging on the point at which the lever is to be placed: the formation of the individual for the former, the conditions of the public sphere for the latter. Habermas himself identified in the trial a fundamental moment of rupture in the political evolution of the Federal Republic – the moment at which the truth about Nazi crimes irrupted irrevocably into public space. The trial forced German society to abandon apologetic memory and the narrative of the Germans solely as “victims of the war”. The democratic identity of post-war Germany could no longer be based on a traditional national belonging or on an uncritical historical continuity, but on the assumption of collective responsibility for the Holocaust and on strict respect for the principles of the *Rechtsstaat* and of the human rights that emerged precisely through trials such as the one led by Fritz Bauer.

6. 1968 and the Conflict of Generations over the Past

The 1960s were also a period of great domestic and international events. There was the Vietnam War, diplomatically supported by the FRG government; the subversive activities of the CIA in South America; the civil rights movement in the United States; the Palestinian question with the Six-Day War in the Middle East; the nationalist struggles of the anticolonial movements; the military coup in Greece and many other occurrences. There were the treaties with the Eastern countries, the recognition of the GDR, the policy of détente and the abatement of anti-communism, the strengthening of the European Community and the divergences between Europe and the United States. The critical potential hitherto confined to the circles of the critical intelligentsia found its sounding board in schools, universities and publishing, ending by forming the opinion of a vast part of the population. In national politics, in

December 1966, the first *Große Koalition* was formed, through the agreement between the Christian Democratic Union and the Social Democratic Party to support the government of Chancellor Kurt G. Kiesinger. Habermas had opposed it before its formation, stating at a round table that there were good reasons to fear the new government more than the old one and charging the SPD with “opportunism” (1966/1998). In those years the ferment of the new generation had turned into rebellion. Although he was one of the intellectuals of reference for the Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund – in which the Berlin section led by Rudi Dutschke had assumed a pre-eminent position – Habermas was among the first to come into collision with the student movement, out of which, in Germany and elsewhere, the galaxy of collectives and political groups of the “new left” was being born. Riding the wave of global and national political events, the youth protest continued to grow and radicalize, attracting the attention of the media, with demonstrations, occupations, sit-ins and many other, more creative forms. The Springer publishing group launched an opinion campaign to persuade the political leadership to react with repressive measures. The turning point came with the protests that followed the repression of the demonstrations of 2 June 1967 against the state visit of the Shah of Persia in Berlin, in which the police killed the student Benno Ohnesorg. The following week, student demonstrations against the repressive police operations took place throughout the Federal Republic. Habermas was “shocked” by the head-long course of events and feared that the students’ demonstrative actions might accelerate the passage of the emergency laws, under discussion since 1965 – that is, a limitation of constitutionally guaranteed civil and political rights. His criticism of the line taken by the university leaders – many of them students of his own and of Adorno’s, or inspired by Frankfurt publications – was sharp, and issued in the celebrated expression “left-wing fascism”, pronounced on 9 June during the crowded assembly that followed Ohnesorg’s funeral in Hanover. To the assembly – entitled *Hochschule und Demokratie. Bedingungen und Organisation des Widerstandes* (“The University and Democracy: Conditions and Organization of Resistance”) – only four professors had been invited: Margherita von Brentano, Hartmut von Hentig, Abendroth and Habermas himself. His *Rede über die politische Rolle der Studentenschaft in der Bundesrepublik* (“Speech on the Political Role of the Student Body in the Federal Republic”) denounced the police operations as an “act of terror” and an “intentional intimidation”, and identified in the students’ protest a legitimate, necessary and urgent expression of commitment with which to reawaken democratic consciousness. Habermas nonetheless warned against a subversive “actionism” at any cost, above all the “masochistic” variety that seeks to «provoke a transformation of the indirect violence of institutions into manifest violence» (1967/1969: 145). The intervention was contested by Hans-Jürgen Krahel, a student of Adorno’s and spokesman of the Frankfurt SDS, according to whom, in the face of the “bloody and brutal lash” of the violent machinery of the state, the ritualized forms of student provocation were legitimate; and by Dutschke, by then a leading figure of the movement, who accused Habermas of wanting to «kill the emancipatory subject with his senseless objectivism» and of defending the “irrational” democracy in power. Müller-Doohm reports his reaction, which generated the famous formula, as follows: «Habermas was alarmed but did not immediately react. Only later, long past midnight, when he was about to leave the congress, did he change his mind; he returned from the car park (‘I was already in my car’) to the hall, where the discussion continued. In his ‘Question to Rudi Dutschke’ (the name given to Habermas’s intervention by the documentary film-makers Hans Dieter Müller and Günther Hörmann in their *Ruhestörung*), Habermas suggested that Dutschke, who was no longer present at that point, supported a voluntaristic ideology ‘which was called utopian socialism in 1848, but which under present conditions – I believe I have reason for using this terminology – must be called “left-wing fascism”.’ The audience was split down the middle and reacted with both booing and applause» (2014/2016: 192).

The echo of the accusation was resounding and was taken up by the entire national press, itself polarized into political positions that had become irreconcilable. Over time, Habermas never ceased to regard as a misfortune a whole series of features characteristic of the student protest: the naïve use of the concept of revolution typical of a youth movement that represents itself «as the *longa manus* of Che Guevara in the metropolises» and turns its gaze towards the East (China, Vietnam, Cambodia, etc.) or towards the Latin American countries (Cuba, Mexico, etc.); a mistaken reading of a historical situation that was anything but revolutionary; the underestimation of the democratic *Rechtsstaat* through a

misconstrual of what was entirely obvious even to Marx, namely that no human emancipation can be achieved without the realization of the so-called bourgeois liberties; and the total discrediting of the institutional spaces of public discussion – universities, parliaments, courts, party congresses – interpreted as outposts of power in which to intervene with acts of provocation and violence aimed at “subverting the function” (1988d/1992: 232).

Habermas’s denunciation, in the summer of ’68, of the political activists (the “left-wing fascists”) – many of whom had, moreover, taken up in their own way the theses set out in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962/1971) – must be understood in this context. In the exasperated sabotage of the political and cultural institutions of the democratic state he saw not merely a latently terroristic politics whose results – the apparent legitimization of the real terrorists and a repressive state policy supported by the silent majority of citizens – were the opposite of the hoped-for shock effect. The decisive aspect remains the incapacity of the ’68 movement – scarcely encouraged, to be sure – to take part in the life of the political institutions, failing to recognize the formidable opportunity that had arisen after the rupture of 1945 (1988d/1992: 236).

The judgement on the lack of a sense of “historical measure” with respect to the functions secured by the *Bundesrepublik* goes hand in hand with Habermas’s satisfaction at the path towards a politics of civil and social rights: «Under administratively regulated capitalism, Germany (the Federal Republic) has, for the first time in centuries, become a contemporary of Western Europe. Superstitiously one still fears to say it out loud: We are living today in one of the six or seven most liberal nations and in one of the six or seven social systems with the fewest internal conflicts» (1971/1983: 8). In an interview published in 1988, Habermas would reflect on the legacy of the student movement of 1968 and on its impact upon the political culture of the Federal Republic. The starting point is the question: “What remains of ’68?”, and how the legacies of that era are interwoven with the crisis of the antifascist consensus. That consensus, nourished by the “radical failure of Nazi policies” and by the repugnant image of Soviet communism, had oriented Germany towards the West (1988b/1989: 190-191).

On the one hand, the cultural revolution of the young played an absolutely central role in feeding the so-called anti-authoritarian movement which, from the early 1970s, established itself through different and often wholly original forms of political participation in Western countries, such as civil disobedience and symbolic violence. The realization of political ideals is pursued, first of all, in the sphere of everyday life, in associations, communities of every kind, consciousness-raising groups, and on the basis of highly individualized lifestyles that place new themes at the centre of public discussion: the valorization of forms of sociality and of the many paths in the search for an authentic life that realizes the person; the great problems of contemporary world politics; pacifism; ecologically compatible development; the formation of post-national identities, and so on: «The student protest scene brought about the first advance of a fundamental liberalization (Karl Mannheim once spoke of “fundamental democratization”). I am thinking of the new individualism of lifestyles, oriented to libertarian models, but also the new forms of autonomous public sphere, in which the borderlines between demonstration and civil disobedience, between discussion, festival, and expressive self-presentation tend to dissolve. Here I perceive a long-term effect of the forms of protest of that period, and of what Marcuse, at the time, called a “new sensibility”» (1988d/1992: 234). The great historical importance Habermas assigns to the caesura in German political culture and civic consciousness generated by the long wave of ’68 – second only to the liberation from Nazism – is amply attested by the closing answer of the Interview with Angelo Bolaffi: «Without the pressure of attitudes which emerged during that period, we would today have no Greens, no alternative scenes in the big cities, no awareness of the fact that subcultural and ethnic plurality enriches our streamlined culture – we would not have the degree of urbanity which is gradually being established, and it is likely that there would be less sensitivity on the part of the rulers towards the mood of the populace, perhaps there would not even be the so-called liberal wing in the CDU» (ivi: 236).

Habermas has retrospectively expressed second thoughts, in particular on the merits of a new generation that confronted the legacy of Nazism without reserve, both within the privacy of families and publicly, raising the question of the German people’s responsibility for the crimes of Nazism and of whether Nazism was in some way part of the “German national character” or the work of a small

criminal clique, so that the German population had – as was claimed – been a victim of Nazism: «The student protest movement put an end to the shoving aside of a Nazi past that was sweepingly condemned but generally bracketed out» (1990b/1991: 87).

After 1968, the demand for “democracy in cash” (that is, effective rights, real participation) pushed towards a politicization of civil society and the birth of autonomous counter-public spheres (ecological, feminist and pacifist movements). This process rendered more fragile the model of integration based on strong parties and favoured a more pluralist and critical political culture, but also one more exposed to identitarian tensions⁸.

The significance of 1968 for the question of guilt can now be stated with precision, since it explains an apparent paradox: the same Habermas who accused the student leaders of “left-wing fascism” would later credit their movement with having ended the “shoving aside” of the Nazi past. The generation of 1968 transformed the question of liability into an accusation of moral guilt directed at the fathers and, by extension, at the institutions of a Federal Republic that had reintegrated them; and it was against this extension – not against the accusation itself – that Habermas reacted. For him the democratic *Rechtsstaat* was not the continuation of the compromised past under another name, but the only forum in which political liability could be publicly discharged, and to delegitimize it in the name of the past was to destroy the instrument of its working-through. The conflict of generations thus marks a further displacement in the itinerary traced here: the question of guilt left the privacy of families and became a matter of public political culture, but Habermas insisted that it be settled in the institutions of the constitutional state rather than against them. It is this position, formed in 1967-68, that made the *Historikerstreit* possible.

7. The Historians’ Dispute

After the efforts of the generation of the 1960s, which, refusing to be content with the repressive strategy pursued by its parents, forcefully insisted on obtaining answers to the most disturbing questions about the German past, the theme of the Nazi legacy returned to the centre of debate in the Federal Republic in the early 1980s. Habermas detected in this, in many respects, a belated confirmation of the *Tendenzwende*, that is, of the ideological shift already under way by the mid-1970s. The ramifications of a neoconservative stabilization in the political-cultural domain are analysed in many essays in which he engages with the reactions to terrorism, the new obscurity resulting from the loss of utopian energies, the resurgence of nationalism and the impulses towards a “reconciliation with the past” that evades the question of how Auschwitz was possible. See, by way of example, the intervention *Linke, Terroristen, Sympathisanten. Eine Briefwechsel mit Kurt Sontheimer*, in the “Süddeutsche Zeitung” of 27 November 1977; the interview given to Angelo Bolaffi at the Max Planck Institut in Starnberg on 29 May 1978,

⁸ In his reply to Angelo Bolaffi on the role played by the student protest in breaking the deceptive “communicative silence” about Nazism, Habermas develops an overall argument that takes its cue from the criticisms he received during those years for his harsh assessment and ends with a strictly autobiographical reflection: «When Inge Marcuse suggested to me, in 1969 in Korcula, that – with the student rebellion – a generation had appeared for the first time in postwar Germany which was prepared to confront the heritage of fascism critically, and without reservations, I was hurt, indeed outraged. I knew my Frankfurt students, just as I knew my contemporaries, for example Alexander Kluge, who was writing his *Lebensläufe* at the end of the 1950s. I experienced the suggestion as an injury. In one respect I was probably right, because for the most part the left-wing students had a rather clichéd notion of fascism. At that time it cost a real effort to assert in public that the organs of state also carried out functions which helped to secure freedom, or that, in spite of everything, the *Bundesrepublik* was one of the six or seven most liberal countries in the world. It was difficult for me to find an audience for such statements, which were intended to introduce a sense of historical proportion. In another respect, however, I was wrong to react to Inge Marcuse as I did: the ’68 generation was probably the first in Germany which did not shy away from asking for face to face explanations – from parents, from older people in general, in front of the television set, and so on. [...] The student protest was the staging of a public – and sometimes rather self-righteous – reckoning, also reaching into the private domain, with collective avoidance of the German responsibility, of the historical liability, for National Socialism and its horrors. When I was a student, in 1953, I wrote a comparable article on Heidegger’s 1935 lectures, because I was outraged by the inability of the protagonists (such as Heidegger, Carl Schmitt, Gehlen and so on) to utter even one word admitting a political error. But I avoided any confrontation with my father, who was certainly only considered to be a passive sympathizer. In short, the generational clocks were set in such a way that the ’68ers were able to insist, without any embarrassment, on a specific confrontation with the past. This confrontation had perhaps had something abstract about it up until then» (1988d/1992: 231).

entitled *I potenziali critici nella società*; the lecture *Die Kulturkritik der Neokonservativen in den USA und in der Bundesrepublik*, published in “Merkur” in November 1981; and the interview *Conservative Politics, Work, Socialism and Utopia Today* given to the “Magazin der Basler Zeitung” (1984/1992). Precisely under the long Christian Democratic chancellorship of Helmut Kohl – begun in 1982 with the constructive vote of no confidence against Helmut Schmidt, and clearly confirmed by the federal elections of 6 March 1983 – centred on economic stability, tax reduction and the strengthening of the alliance with the USA, the general atmosphere, according to Habermas, gradually changed «in a markedly pessimistic direction», assuming in some of its features the appearance of a veritable “counter-revolution” fuelled by “rancour” and “resentment”. The “historians’ dispute” is situated in this context (1988d/1992: 230). Robert Holub’s reconstruction converges on this reading and specifies its steps. The change of government in 1982, from Helmut Schmidt to Helmut Kohl, «seemed to herald a shift not only in politics, but also in the way the past was instrumentalized for political ends»; and Kohl’s handshake with Ronald Reagan in the military cemetery of Bitburg, in May 1985, «seemed symbolically to consign to the past both the former enmity between the two allies and German responsibility for the crimes committed by the National Socialist regime». Holub isolates three tendencies damaging to a responsible relationship with history: reducing the Third Reich to «an aberration perpetrated by a small minority»; re-establishing a continuity with the past «on the plane of everyday life and subjective experience», as in the television series *Heimat*, conceived as a German alternative to *the American series Holocaust*; and finally the political recourse to anti-socialist and anti-communist sentiments, whereby «the Federal Republic thus became the continuator of a fundamentally sound Nazi foreign policy» (Holub, 2019: 165). Upstream of all this stood the address delivered in January 1983 by the conservative philosopher Hermann Lübbe for the fiftieth anniversary of Adolf Hitler’s rise to power, entitled *Der Nationalsozialismus im politischen Bewußtsein der Gegenwart*. Lübbe «suggested that silence about the past was essential to the healthy development of the nascent German democracy, while the agitation about the past during the student movement of the 1960s deserved censure» (1983/2008: 580). This intervention has entered the history of world historiography because in it Lübbe introduced the celebrated sociological concept of “communicative silence”. The philosopher defended the initial reticence and the collective silence of 1950s Germany about complicity with Nazism, maintaining that such an “agreed silence” was not a cowardly psychological repression, but an asymmetrical yet necessary social condition for allowing citizens to integrate peacefully and to rebuild the foundations of the newborn liberal democracy of West Germany.

In 1986-1987 there flared up in West Germany the debate ignited by the revisionist theses of the historians Ernst Nolte, Andreas Hillgruber, Klaus Hildebrand, Rainer Zitelmann and of the journalist Joachim Fest. The dispute is situated historically after the Bitburg controversy, concerning a commemorative ceremony in a German military cemetery where 2,000 soldiers were buried, among them members of the Waffen-SS. Invited by Chancellor Helmut Kohl to the ceremony of 5 May 1985 marking forty years since the end of the Second World War, the President of the United States, Ronald Reagan, stated in one passage of his speech that the Schutzstaffel men buried at Bitburg were victims of Hitler just as much as the murdered Jews, and that «they [the Germans] have a feeling of guilt that has been imposed upon them and I just think it is unnecessary» (cf. Kattago, 2001: 62). On the nexus between Bitburg and the dispute Müller-Doohm supplies a chronological element worth making explicit. To Reagan’s visit of May 1985 there corresponded, on the opposite side, Richard von Weizsäcker’s address before the Bundestag on 8 May, which «ran counter to the conservative spirit of the times and its “intellectual-moral turn”»: the federal president emphasized that 8 May 1945 had not been a day of defeat but «a “day of liberation from the inhumane system of National Socialist violent rule”», and concluded: «Let us today, on the 8th of May, look the truth in the eye as well as we can» (Weizsäcker, 1985; Müller-Doohm, 2014/2016: 399). Deeply struck by that address, Habermas was by contrast outraged by the spectacle of Bitburg and expressed his indignation in the columns of “*Die Zeit*” on 24 May (1985b/1986). Reagan’s speech was praised by Michael Stürmer – Kohl’s adviser and speechwriter (1986/1993). The German people should no longer feel a special guilt for Nazi crimes, and the new generations of Germans were to find grounds for pride in past and recent German history. This was the beginning of the “normalization” of the Nazi past, from which the *Historikerstreit* took its start in a

context of the recovery of traditional identities, among them the powerful one of *Heimat*. The position taken by the conservatives, and by Ernst Nolte in particular, was that there had been no special historical path leading Germany from autocracy to National Socialism [*Sonderweg*], that the Holocaust was not a unique event and that the Germans should bear no special burden of guilt for the “Final Solution of the Jewish question”. For the conservative historians in particular, there was no moral difference between the genocides of the “Gulag Archipelago” in the Soviet Union and those of the concentration camps in Nazi Germany (1980/1993; 1986/1993). These positions provoked a reaction from Habermas, Hans-Ulrich Wehler, Jürgen Kocka, Hans and Wolfgang Mommsen, Martin Broszat and Heinrich August Winkler. The dispute was conducted through articles and letters to the editor in the newspapers *Die Zeit* and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and inflamed the public debate of the *Bundesrepublik*, spreading rapidly to the specialist and cultural press throughout the West. As Gian Enrico Rusconi specified in setting out the object of the controversy: «None of the authors who intervened casts doubt on the horrendous dimensions and the criminal nature of the Nazi actions, in particular of what is customarily called the Jewish Holocaust in Europe. No one intends to erase those crimes or to “rehabilitate” Nazism. [...] Beyond the provocative, exasperated or infelicitous expressions, the problem common to all the contenders is the search for the right attitude of today’s Germans towards the horror of Nazism. [...] The debate soon reaches the threshold of fundamental questions that remain open. How are the guiltless of today to work through the “memory owed” to the victims of a past to which they inexorably belong? [...] Here too the scholars divide» (Rusconi, 1987: IX-X). The reading Specter proposes of that conjuncture brings out its overall political stake. The commemorations of the fortieth anniversary of the Allied victory promoted by Kohl «prompted a firestorm of controversy about how the Federal Republic should remember Nazism and the Holocaust», and «the scandal of Bitburg gave new impetus to an existing debate over public memory and West German national identity. Kohl’s push to establish museums of German history in Bonn and Berlin indicated that a struggle was underway concerning the right way to remember the Nazi past» (2010: 147). The decisive point, for our argument, is the nexus Specter establishes between historiographical rewriting and foreign policy: «Habermas believed that Kohl’s domestic and foreign policy goals were of a piece. If German identity could be “normalized” through revisionist history-writing and museum work, German nationalism would be strengthened; a stronger national identity would enable excessive German assertiveness in *Mitteleuropa*» (ivi: 148). This was therefore no academic dispute: as Hans-Ulrich Wehler wrote in his intervention *Entsorgung der Vergangenheit? Ein polemischer Essay zum “Historikerstreit”*, it revealed «symptoms of a minor “cultural revolution” from the Right. The *Historikerstreit* doggedly continues the long conceptual and political struggle for hegemony which the neoconservatives have so zealously pursued» (1988/1990: 216; cf. Torpey, 1988: 5-24). Wehler criticized conservative historical revisionism, defending the singularity of the Holocaust against comparisons with Soviet crimes. And he reasserted the need for a critical analysis grounded in structural German culpabilities, rejecting the use of historiography as an instrument of national integration. That the argumentative schema was not unprecedented is shown by the fact that Wiggershaus had already isolated it with regard to Hofstätter’s polemic against the *Gruppenexperiment*, describing it as «a tried and tested procedure which is popular to this day: playing down the dangers from the right, presenting the “exposers” of such dangers as totalitarian moralists and idealists themselves, and declaring genuine reflection on this to be a private affair» (1988/1995: 477).

In the article *A Kind of Settling of Damages (Apologetic Tendencies)* (1986a/1989), published in *Die Zeit* on 11 July 1986, Habermas sharply criticized Nolte, Hillgruber and Stürmer for having undertaken an “apologetic” historiographical rewriting of the Nazi era. He denounced the attempt to relativize the Shoah, presented as a defensive “reaction” to the Stalinist gulag, by trading on the demand that today’s Germans “identify” with the Wehrmacht’s last stand on the eastern front and with the sufferings of the civilian population. It is the twofold thesis of the “comparison” of Bolshevik and Nazi crimes and of their “causal nexus”. For Habermas, this revisionism performs the political function of discharging an “immoral past” in order to reinvigorate a national sense “without guilt”. In this sense he speaks of a “settling of damages” of the German past by means of a “balancing out” of the crimes. In Jaspers’s terms, what the revisionists sought to discharge was not moral guilt – which no one any longer imputed to those born afterwards – but political liability, the only form of guilt that citizenship transmits; and it

is precisely because that liability cannot be settled by comparison that the “balancing out” of crimes appeared to Habermas as an apologetic device rather than a historiographical thesis. In the same direction were to be understood the projects for the German Historical Museum in Berlin and the House of the History of the Federal Republic of Germany in Bonn, which Habermas criticized as part of a broader «operation to entice German public opinion into supporting the conservative cultural climate, eager to settle accounts once and for all with an oppressive past» (Rusconi, 1987: VII)⁹. For Habermas, on the contrary, it was necessary to insist on the historical irreducibility of the Shoah: a singular crime, not assimilable to other crimes. Recognizing its uniqueness was a presupposition of the *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, the process undertaken by the German people to confront the Nazi legacy. The collective memory of the Shoah was not one detail among many but an identity-forming nucleus of post-war democracy. It is an epochal event, endowed with paradigmatic value for the formation of the historical memory of a rupture in civilization, and it functions as an originary normative constraint for German civic consciousness.

Here the fundamental distance from Adorno’s thought emerges. The master’s reflection on regression as a way of describing the repression of guilt, and on secondary antisemitism, is contextualized and internalized in order to specify the fracture of Nazism: «Whereas Adorno sees the universal effect of a regressive pressure lurking within the process of civilization, Habermas’s understanding of the normativity of non-regression is indexically referred to German history» (Niesen, 2023: 213). Habermas has recently returned to this distinction with a clarification that modifies its retrospective range. Reconstructing the sense of Adorno’s imperative in *Education after Auschwitz*, he first acknowledges that the «never again Auschwitz»¹⁰ entailed politically relevant consequences for the history of mentalities of the Federal Republic of Germany. But he adds that, as Niesen has shown, «this exorcizing warning against regression too betrays Adorno’s totalizing vision of evil»: the Holocaust constitutes the historical event that marks the «relapse into barbarism» for humanity as a whole, since «barbarism continues to subsist for as long as the conditions that brought that relapse to maturity substantially persist» (Habermas, 2024/2026: 66). The decisive point comes immediately afterwards. Habermas recalls that in the Federal Republic «another interpretation of Adorno’s imperative against regression established itself, different from the generalizing thesis, in terms of a philosophy of history, of an enduring regression»: this is the interpretation «already formulated in 1949 by Karl Jaspers and taken up by me during the historians’ dispute», according to which «the moral appeal to assume responsibility for the consequences of the rupture in civilization caused by one’s own nation is addressed in particular to those born afterwards – personally innocent – the generations of the German perpetrators» (ivi: 66-67). And he concludes with an admission of considerable documentary value: «I myself, during the controversy, had not realized the difference between the two interpretations» (ivi: 67). The confession is precious for our reconstruction, because it at once confirms and complicates the thesis of internalization. On the one hand it attests that the Habermasian reading of the imperative derives not from Adorno but from Jaspers, and that its foundation is not a philosophy of history but the ascription of a determinate responsibility to the *Nachgeborenen*. On the other hand it shows that this divergence was not thematized at the time of the dispute, but became visible only in retrospect. It follows that the distinction between the universal imperative and the internalized imperative is to be read not as a declared divergence between master and pupil, but as a bifurcation that the history of reception has made explicit on the basis of a shared formulation. Habermas reiterates, moreover, that he was always disquieted by Adorno’s «fundamental schema of a systematically negative philosophy of history», «which emerges most

⁹ « If one has a look at the composition of the commissions that have designed the plan for the German Historical Museum in Berlin and the House of the History of the Federal Republic in Bonn, one cannot help but get the impression that the new revisionism is to be realized in these museums in the form of displays and pedagogically effective exhibits» (Habermas 1986a/1993: 41).

¹⁰ «Every debate about the ideals of education is trivial and inconsequential compared to this single ideal: never again Auschwitz. It was the barbarism all education strives against. One speaks of the threat of a relapse into barbarism. But it is not a threat—Auschwitz was this relapse, and barbarism continues as long as the fundamental conditions that favored that relapse continue largely unchanged. That is the whole horror» (Adorno, 1966b/1998: 191).

sharply in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*», while declaring himself struck «by the way in which Adorno reads a transcending impulse of hope into the anguished critique of a desperate state of the world, one that goes beyond Kant's exhortation to the use of rational freedom» (*Ibidem*).

Collective memory has the duty to keep remembrance alive, through reflection on guilt, as the condition of a constitutional patriotism that is pluralist, democratic and aware of the responsibilities arising from the crimes of the fathers. Habermas shares Wolfgang Mommsen's judgement on the "liberation" of 1945: «There is no getting around the bitter truth that the defeat of National Socialist Germany was not only in the interest of the peoples who were bulldozed by Hitler's war and of the peoples who were selected by his henchmen for annihilation or oppression and exploitation – it was also in the interest of the Germans» (1986/1993: 212). Consciousness of the catastrophic history of the Nazi regime, with its crimes ineliminable from collective memory, was for Habermas too the great chance to develop a post-conventional identity, beyond the confines of nationalism: «The unconditional opening of the Federal Republic to the political culture of the West is the greatest intellectual achievement of our postwar period; my generation should be especially proud of this» (1986a/1993: 43).

Let us specify the operation Habermas performs in adopting that expression, since it does not originally belong to him. As Rainer Nickel reconstructs, in 1987, «in the wake of the *Historikerstreit*», Habermas takes up the phrase «constitutional patriotism» – coined by the political scientist Dolf Sternberger in a celebrated intervention of 23 May 1979 (1979/1990) – introducing a semantic shift rich in consequences. Sternberger meant to save patriotism as a variant of "love of one's country" (*Vaterlandsliebe*), understanding the constitution as the expression of a national community of values and the state as an "association of friendship" (*Freundschaftsverband*). Habermas, by contrast, asserted a postnational version of patriotism, free of any reference to cultural values, shared destinies and homogeneous populations. Constitutional patriotism therefore represents a historical learning process that leaves the old nation-state behind, and the new postnational state «is not suited to ecstatic emotional attachment» – which Nickel illustrates with Federal President Gustav Heinemann's celebrated reply to someone who asked him whether he loved Germany: «I do not love the state. I love my wife». In place of state patriotism there thus enter «pride in, and loyalty towards, the procedures of democratic will-formation and the legal guarantees of the constitution», which promote «the coexistence and communication of equally entitled forms of life» (Nickel, 2017: 514).

The confrontation continued with numerous interventions from both fronts. On 11 August, Habermas took up his pen again to write a letter to the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. Under the title *Geschichtsschreibung und Geschichtsbewußtsein*, he charged Nolte with having played down the "so-called" extermination of the Jews by equating them with enemies fighting against the German army – starting from Chaim Weizmann's declaration of early September 1939, according to which the Jews would fight alongside England. This would have justified treating them as prisoners of war and interning them in concentration camps (1986b/1993: 59). The most interesting essay, however, is *Vom öffentlichen Gebrauch der Historie*, published for the first time in the newspaper *Die Zeit* on 7 November 1986. Here Habermas extends his reflection on the risks that a historiography practised in the first person, from the standpoint of the participants, outside specialized venues and with explicit political judgements on the present and the future, may become an instrument for reworking historical traumas through an operation designed to relaunch a "normal patriotism" – a use that becomes functional to a kind of national reinterpretation without the guilt of the extermination. The intent «impatiently urged by the politicians of the Wende government» is to erase historical responsibilities and return to a carefree national pride: «But words are again streaming out of mouths long held shut, words that for good reasons have not been used since 1945, at least not in public» (1986c/1993: 163). The episode of the Bitburg ceremony, with President Reagan and Chancellor Kohl laying wreaths at the cemetery to honour members of the Waffen-SS, had precisely this threefold symbolic valence: «The aura of the military cemetery was supposed to waken national sentiment and thereby a "historical consciousness"; the juxtaposition of hills of corpses in the concentration camp and the SS graves in the cemetery of honor, the sequence of Bergen-Belsen in the morning and Bitburg in the afternoon, implicitly disputed the

singularity of the Nazi crimes; and shaking hands with the veteran generals in the presence of the U.S. president was, finally, a demonstration that we had really always stood on the right side in the fight against Bolshevism» (*Ibidem*)¹¹.

It is worth recording the passage in which constitutional patriotism is formulated as an explicit counter-move, because it displays its memorial foundation. Replying to Stürmer in July 1986, Habermas takes up a figure already used in an essay on *Die Kulturkritik der Neokonservativen in den USA und in der Bundesrepublik* (1982/1985): «the unreserved opening of the Federal Republic to the political culture of the West is the great intellectual achievement of the postwar period, of which my generation in particular can be proud. The result will not be stabilized by a NATO philosophy coloured with German nationalism. That opening was achieved precisely by overcoming the ideology of the centre which our revisionists are now warming up again with their geopolitical chatter about “the old geographically central position of the Germans in Europe” (Stürmer) and “the reconstruction of the destroyed European Center” (Hillgruber)» (Habermas, 1986a/1993: 43). And shortly afterwards, in the formulation that matters most here: «The only patriotism that will not estrange us from the West is a constitutional patriotism. Unfortunately, it took Auschwitz to make possible to the old culture nation of the Germans binding universalist constitutional principles anchored in conviction. Those who want to drive the shame about this fact out of us with phrases such as “obsession with guilt” (Stürmer and Oppenheimer), those who desire to call the Germans back to conventional forms of their national identity, are destroying the only reliable foundation for our ties to the West» (ivi: 43-44). From this follows the criterion Habermas opposes to Stürmer: «Historiography should aim at enlightenment, not social integration» (Specter, 2010: 150), since – as Habermas writes – «those who seek to do more than revivify a sense of identity naively rooted in national consciousness, those who allow themselves to be guided by functional imperatives of predictability, consensus-formation, social integration via endowing meaning, are bound to avoid the enlightening effect of history writing and reject a broad pluralism of historical interpretations» (1986a/1993: 42).

On the third target the stakes rise still further. Nolte, «trained not as a historian but as a philosopher under Martin Heidegger», advanced three theses: that «the preoccupation with the Holocaust has diverted our attention from other important questions»; that «the black-and-white schema provided by the Third Reich as a lens for evaluating historical events distorts our view of the past»; and that «the failure to normalize Nazism has illicitly served the interests of specific groups», among them «the persecuted and their descendants, who seek an undeserved privileged status» (Holub, 2019: 167). At the centre stood the contestation of the uniqueness of the Holocaust, reduced to one among many genocidal attempts or «therapies of annihilation», and presented as an «Asiatic deed» imitative of the Stalinist gulag, whose only innovation would have been «the technical procedure of gassing» (*ibidem*). Habermas's objections are two, and both bear on our theme: that Nolte «relativizes responsibility for the destruction of European Jewry and thus produces an apologia for that moral responsibility which had become, from Karl Jaspers's 1946 essay on the question of German guilt onwards, the cornerstone of public discourse on the subject»; and that, «by relegating ultimate responsibility for the Holocaust to the Soviet Union, he preserved a link between a purified German identity and the anti-communist politics of NATO's conservative wing» (*ibidem*).

On the method by which those theses were constructed it is worth recording Lutz Klinkhammer's analysis, since it identifies the device that renders them unusable as historiography. Nolte and his followers, he observes, employed «a method more philosophical-phenomenological than historical», for

¹¹ In an interview given to Enrico Filippini on 16 December 1986 for the newspaper “la Repubblica”, Habermas condensed the “three sources of unease” with regard to revisionism that he had already expressed in the article On the Public Use of History: «I believe that the kernel of the whole affair lies in this: one must and one wishes to find some form of national and collective identity to compensate for certain internal political uncertainties, which today run very deep. One must and one wishes to strengthen historical consciousness in order to revitalize a thousand-year-old tradition. One must and one wishes to relativize the Nazi caesura; one must say that it was not absolute evil because Bolshevism was “more” evil: in order to forget it. What is wanted is a reintegration of the horror so as to neutralize it... All this, all these historians, who are of unequal worth, would be nothing if they were not instrumentalized. In the Germany of Chancellor Kohl, however, they are... You must understand: I became a man of the left through the Nuremberg trials...» (Habermas, 1986d/2013: 23).

which «to historicize meant first of all to give ample space to the thought of the protagonists»; but «it is clear that from giving voice to the Nazi protagonists one can easily arrive at victimization», since understanding those figures ends by «reproducing the protagonists' self-definition without confronting it with the facts: for example, citing only those sentences that indicate what the protagonists thought and wanted» (2002: 359). The outcome is that «ideas and facts, claims and actions» end up on the same plane, as in the sentence in which Nolte writes that «against the claims of the Soviet Union, Hitler reacted with great energies, even if these were probably excessive» – where «the “claims” of Bolshevism serve to explain Hitler's intervention – that is, in our words: a war of extermination – and the alleged re-action is minimized even in its quantitative measure through the words “probably excessive”» (ivi: 360). That Nolte should then go so far as to recognize «a historical right to National Socialism» is, for Klinkhammer, «a distortion and a path that voluntarily departs from the range of terms scientifically usable by professional historians». The antidote proposed is at once modest and binding: «the documentary method, that is, a historiography of facts: facts understood as weak certainties, but methodologically controlled» (ibidem).

The outcome of the dispute also deserves to be recorded, because it is the sharpest confirmation of the Habermasian thesis on the regime of circulation of historical knowledge. «To a large extent», Holub writes, «the public debate that ensued missed Habermas's principal concerns»: his critique «concerned the conservative attempt to manipulate history and to produce a new national identity that would undo the moral consensus about the Nazi past. He objected to the public use and abuse of history; methodological disputes and quarrels internal to the discipline were of secondary importance» (2019: 167). Habermas was instead accused of insufficient historical competence, of partisanship and «of having misquoted and distorted his opponents», as well as «of confusing scholarship, which is objective and judged by experts, with politics and morality» – which was exactly «the accusation Habermas levelled at the historians». His fundamental theses, set out in the final section of the initial essay, in the first reply and in the lecture delivered in Denmark in May 1987, «were virtually ignored by friends and adversaries alike» (ibidem).

Habermas is not opposed to the public use of history. History must be understood not only as an academic discipline, but as a medium for the formation of the political and moral identity of a community¹². The public use of history is not mere commemoration, but the reflexive appropriation of the past in the present, which in Germany's case is connected «not by purely contingent circumstances, but intimately, with that context of life [...] which made Auschwitz possible» (ivi: 102). The public use of history is the ensemble of practices through which German society reflects critically on the past in public spaces – institutions, media, civil society – in order to assume historical responsibility for the crimes of Nazism, to orient the present and the future on the basis of democratic values, and to prevent revisionisms that relativize the guilt and responsibilities of the past. Replying to the criticisms of Hillgruber, Hildebrand, Stürmer and Fest concerning his alleged intellectual dishonesty, in the “Note” of 23 February 1987 Habermas reiterated that «the National Socialist era constitutes a particularly inadequate object for the aim of promoting an identity-conferring normalization» (1987a/1987: 159).

On the occasion of the award of the Sonning Prize, in Copenhagen on 14 May 1987, Habermas returns to the theme of “historical consciousness and post-traditional identity”, reaffirming that the inclusion of the Federal Republic in the West is not a mere matter of alliances, but the result – and the continuing task – of a post-traditional restructuring of the political and moral identity of the Germans. The point of departure is the dismantling of the ideology of the *Mittellage* (Germany's “middle position” between East and West) and of the *Sonderweg* (the “special path” – the cultural aspiration to a German destiny distinct from that of Western Europe), both definitively compromised by Auschwitz. From this derives the idea that West Germany's orientation to the West is normative, not merely geopolitical, and must translate into a critical, post-conventional historical consciousness and into a constitutional patriotism. The awareness that a “civilized people” could have closed its eyes before mass

¹² «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. [...] It is about the public use of history» (Habermas 1986c/1989: 167-168).

crimes imposes a labour of memory that renders tradition suspect and open to criticism, rather than a repertoire to be rehabilitated by means of “levelling comparisons”. Every normalization that dilutes the singularity of the crime risks degrading the memory of the victims into a “farce”. This is why the official self-representation of the Federal Republic (from Heuss to Heinemann and on to Weizsäcker) has laid down as a condition that German identity be derived from the “best traditions” filtered through Auschwitz – that is, through a critical appropriation of national history. This consensus, Habermas observes, was called into question by the right in the 1980s. In an interview given to the “Frankfurter Rundschau”, the stake for Germany’s future is brought into focus: «beneath the debate on the question in what sense the Nazi mass crimes were unique lies the deeper question of what attitude we want to take toward the continuities of German history – whether we can affirm our political existence while maintaining a clear awareness of a break with our more sinister traditions. Can we, and do we want to, give up the comforts and the dangers of a conventional identity that is incompatible with a critical appropriation of traditions? Nationalism is as virulent as ever. This question, I am afraid, has not yet come due» (1988b/1989: 193). In revisionism he saw a “disquieting, hermeneutically unreflective procedure”, capable only of “empathetically identifying” with the situation of the Germans who lived through the dramatic days of the Russian front and of the collapse: «It is as though the Right, discredited in the shadow of National Socialism, had only been waiting for a pretext to rise up again against the “Ideas of 1789”; only this ghostly projection can explain the intensity of the emotions aroused» (1988d/1992: 230-231). And in the essay *Zur Stellung der Sozial- und Geisteswissenschaften. Ein Blick auf ihre Nachkriegsentwicklung*, he discusses the results of Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann’s survey on the wounded nation, in which a country deeply disoriented in its own spirit is “painted in dark colours”, its elites supposedly incapable of transmitting shared values to the new generations and unproductive with respect to the old culture whose fame has by now faded. In a lecture on the evolution of the social sciences and the humanities in the Federal Republic, delivered at the conference “The Contemporary German Mind” at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Habermas observes that – although «blind spots in our knowledge» persist – the data must be examined with care, because the opening to the West might instead be an index of a «society that learns» the advantages of normality, reflects on the long shadow of its uncomfortable past and chooses for itself a «more appropriate diet» (1988e/1993: 210).

8. German Unification and the Return of “Normality”

After the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) faced an explosive situation of protests and political crises. On 18 March 1990 the first free elections were held, won by the parties favourable to reunification, and on 31 August the Unification Treaty was signed, sanctioning the entry of the eastern Länder into the Federal Republic; it came into force on 3 October. To these events Habermas devoted journalistic interventions, several essays and the book-interview collected by Michael Haller, *The Past As Future* (1991a/1994), expanded in the Italian edition by the interview *Qualche risposta sul post-comunismo* [“What Answers to Post-Communism”] (1991b/1992). In the early 1990s, with the Berlin Wall now fallen and the two Germanys merging into a single state, the temptation of a “return to normality” re-emerged forcefully in public opinion and in the political class (1990e). After forty-five years of division, there spread the desire to take leave of the mortgages of the post-war period, to overcome the trauma of the mass crimes and to regain, at last, a national innocence. Yet the question of German identity could never have dispensed with a direct and permanent confrontation with the guilt of the Holocaust. The true birth of the Federal Republic and of its democratic civilization rested not on a glorious history of the state or on traditional patriotism, but on the experience of catastrophe, on the void of civilization and on the cultural trauma (*Zivilisationsbruch*) that issued from Auschwitz. After Nazism, the critical working-through of the past was not a simple historiographical duty, but the highest political achievement of the entire post-war period. Only the painful renunciation of a merely façade-like consciousness of “normality” had allowed Germany to develop an authentic democratic culture, sensitive to the universalism of human rights. This historical legacy implied special moral obligations, in the first place towards the protection of, and solidarity with, Israel. The wounds bequeathed to subsequent generations required that sensitivity to the suffering

inflicted be kept always alive in the land of the guilty. To liquidate this awareness in the name of a recovered great-power role, or to mask it behind an alleged “flight from responsibility”, meant yielding to a dangerous aestheticization of power and war. The headlong process of unification, however, conducted by purely economic-administrative means, risked compromising this delicate political-cultural equilibrium. Faced with the temptation of a «second» or «third guilt» – understood as the collective repression of responsibility and the search for a psychological amnesty – there emerged the risk of an elite nationalism calculated at the drawing board in order to accelerate integration. Unification thereby posed, for the first time, the question of whether political liability survives a change in the subject that inherits it: the GDR had exempted itself from that liability by means of its antifascist founding myth, and the enlarged Federal Republic now had to decide whether to extend the “mortgages of the post-war period” to its new citizens or to take the occasion to be rid of them. That is why, in Habermas’s eyes, the mode of unification – administrative annexation or democratic self-determination – was inseparable from the question of guilt. An ambiguous emotional tension was unleashed in the Federal Republic by the fall of that “absurd” wall which since 1961 had separated it from those compatriots who, with the end of the war, had suffered the “worse fate”. On 23 November 1989, a few days after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the German question still appeared to Habermas an open one: on the one side, the government and the CDU-CSU parliamentary majority, many local administrations and important press organs, among them the FAZ, expressed unequivocally the national will for a reunification conducted, so to speak, “under the tutelage” of the Deutschmark; on the other side, the red-green minority, some local administrations and newspapers, and Habermas himself who, while favourable to unification, stressed the opportunity for a public discussion in which the democratic self-determination of German citizens might be accomplished. This is clearly to be read in the intervention *Die Stunde der nationalen Entdeckung. Republikanische Gesinnung oder Nationalbewußtsein?*: «Some listen to the patriotic heartbeat of the nation, others perceive in the enthusiasm for freedom the desire for a more radical democracy. [...] These aims are not mutually exclusive, if one looks far enough ahead. But the next steps, the political choices, will differ according to priorities. The alternatives are not the existence of two states or annexation, but rather an unconditional orientation towards the goal of a radical democratization that entrusts the decision to those who bear its consequences, or else the instrumentalization of the rhetoric of self-determination for a policy of annexation carried out by the means of foreign economic policy» (1990a: 159). The joy at recovered freedom and at German reunification is accompanied by an “hour of national feeling” that raises questions about the nature of German identity. The most worrying aspect lies in the possible consequences on the plane of culture – which in forty years had only with difficulty set out towards the political traditions of freedom, even without a “republican way of thinking and feeling” – in the face of the risk of a “vortex effect” that might suck politics and public opinion into the “whirlpool of nationalism” (ivi: 161). The history of Nazism has made continuity with tradition impossible. Habermas distinguishes between spontaneous solidarity and political nationalism: while the former is a legitimate expression of empathy towards fellow citizens in the East, the latter risks reactivating identitarian rhetorics that Germany, after Auschwitz, can no longer assume without reservations of history. The catastrophe of 1933-1945 severed the nexus between state and identity, imposing a new paradigm alternative to ethnic nationalism: *Verfassungspatriotismus*, founded on democratic and universalistic principles.

The course of events did not follow Habermas’s proposal to grant economic aid – as the spearhead of a European-level coordinated effort – in order to restructure a socialist society in a radical-democratic direction (1990b/1991: 90). What came true instead was his fear of a “cold hollowing out” of the GDR’s political sovereignty through a capitalist restructuring of the economy that ends by producing a “creeping assimilation” by means of a “stick-and-carrot” policy (1990a: 161), and a “destabilization” both of the provisional government led by Hans Modrow from 13 November 1989 to 12 April 1990 and of the only institutional embodiment of the resistance (the “Round Table”), conducted with its customary charm by the Chancellery – though the SPD opposition is not exempt from criticism either, having agreed to colonize the electoral contest within the GDR (1990b/1991: 94). *Yet Again: German Identity – A Unified Nation of Angry DM-Burghers?* thus thematizes the question of German identity in the context of the reunification of 1989-1990, interpreting it as a historical challenge that reactivates latent

tensions in Germany's political culture. The point of departure is the awareness that cultural, linguistic and historical unity does not necessarily coincide with statehood: Germany has never been a classical *Staatsnation*, but rather a *Kulturnation*. The experience of National Socialism and the catastrophe of 1945 shattered every possibility of a naïve national identity. The tendency to approach a «normal kind of western national identity», founded on “pride” in one's own democratic institutions, is confirmed by a series of studies that take account of the acceleration history has undergone with the fall of the Berlin Wall (ivi: 95). On the other hand, Habermas fears the resurgence of economic nationalisms and of identitarian rhetorics capable of obscuring the lesson of Auschwitz, which remains a “point of no return”. Unification must take place under the sign of European integration and of a postnational culture, avoiding a return to a “normalization” that trivializes historical responsibility. Habermas warns that economic rhetoric (“the power of the Deutschmark”) risks turning into a surrogate for nationalism, feeding a *Wirtschaftsnationalismus* that could undermine the European perspective. For this reason unification must be accompanied by a strengthening of constitutional patriotism, as a guarantee against the resurgence of antisemitic stereotypes and authoritarian nostalgias. A recrudescence of those nationalistic tensions would have immediate consequences for the process of building the European Union: «If we do not rid ourselves of the prepolitical crutches of nationality and community of fate, we will be unable to continue unburdened on the very path that we have long since chosen: the path to a multicultural society, the path to a federal state with wide regional differences and strong federal power, and above all the path to a unified European state of many nationalities. A national identity which is not based predominantly on republican self-understanding and constitutional patriotism necessarily collides with the universalist rules of mutual coexistence for human beings; it collides with the fact that state integration is now happening simultaneously on three levels – the state, the federation, and the European Community» (ivi: 96). He fears the resurfacing of the «stream of energy, which was crystallized in the “ideas of 1914”», which must never be regenerated. It is a «question of spiritual hygiene, not of repression» (ivi: 99).

A year later, considering the “normative deficits of unification”, Habermas denounces the fact that the “pure sentiment” of “euphoric exultation” at the eminently civil enthusiasm of eastern compatriots regaining their freedom soon gave way to a dispassionate assessment of the resolute role of the Kohl chancellorship in determining the direction and the modalities of the unification process. He acknowledges that the chances for a «reform of socialism in a democratic direction» were not well founded: «The economy was unproductive. The administrative institutions were an apparatus of repression. There was an advanced degree of delegitimation, at least among the younger generations. Even the social system's core of legitimation, a low-level social security bought with concealed unemployment, was rotten: it was housed inside a shell that, as Marx would say, kept all the forces of production in fetters» (1991a/1994: 34). Faced with «landgrabbing territorial fetishism», however, Habermas does not conceal his «nervousness» (ivi: 36). Annexation contributed to dispersing the self-esteem that the citizens of the East had gained as “actors of history”, even while one must admit the passive character of the movement: «The locus of control doesn't seem to have been located within the engaged, demonstrating masses and their brave and civil leaders nearly to the extent that it appeared, at first, from the exciting images of the omnipresent television cameras» (ivi: 40). The modes and timing of unification were determined by the German government: «The most striking physiognomic feature of this is the instrumental character of the administrative procedure itself. Despite all the carefully installed foreign-policy cushioning, despite all the tailoring to economic imperatives, this procedure never won any democratic dynamic of its own. [...] They set the course for a process that proceeded primarily in the categories of economic organization – without ever having made the political alternatives into a theme for discussion» (ivi: 41-42).

On 2 August 1990 the tanks of Saddam Hussein's Iraq invaded Kuwait. The international community reacted with sanctions and, after Iraq's refusal to withdraw, a coalition led by the United States was formed under a UN mandate. The military operation began with the air phase “Desert Storm” on 17 January 1991, followed by the ground offensive on 24 February. Within a few days the allied forces liberated Kuwait; the ceasefire was declared on 28 February. The conflict highlighted the role of the

USA as a global power. On the national plane, the “confused” and “hasty” German participation in the coalition marked a turning point, even though it had taken place only through military supplies and financial support. Bound until then by a prudent and pacifist post-war foreign policy, Germany was beginning to assume global military and political responsibilities. Habermas asked himself about the risk of a national normalization, that is, a return to a logic of power and to nationalistic drifts. The need to seal the “recovered normality” of unified Germany by regaining a military role at the international level was keenly felt by the right-wing political camps: «The right pins the blame for such criticism squarely on its own government, and warns of a new German special path – not so much because they fear it, but because, with the misleading notion of a German “normalcy” to be won, they see a chance of finally crossing that finish line that had always been out of their reach. One sees this most recently in the Historians’ Debate» (ivi: 25). While pointing out the unpreparedness of the government, absorbed as it was in the economic difficulties of reunification, Habermas nonetheless does not consider that the choice to renounce direct engagement should be stigmatized as a “flight from responsibility”. He does not regard as at all controversial the readiness of the German armed forces to take part in United Nations monitoring and peace missions, carried out by the blue helmets under a precise international mandate – but not a commitment with allies that neither has nor borrows, *ex ante* or *ex post*, a legitimation from the UN. Habermas interprets the ardent desire for a field of military action independent of the UN and of its system of alliances – and thus the rupture of so-called Genscherism – as the reassertion of the «principle of German *raison d’État*» and as a renewed proposal of those «extra-ordinary exercises in audacious being-there» which are absolutely forbidden to German citizens. The first international test of reunified Germany was thus confronted in the celebrated intervention *Wider die Logik des Krieges* in the columns of “*Die Zeit*” on 15 February 1991, which marked the debate on German identity throughout the 1990s. In this sense, the Gulf War would catalyse nationalistic tendencies already present in German society: «So far, the backers of an undialectical “return to normalcy” haven’t been successful in bringing it off. But now they see a window of opportunity for reversing a transformation of mentality that took place over the last several decades, and for launching Greater Germany on the course toward a “normalization” that will finally free us of the trauma of mass crimes and give us back our national innocence» (1991a/1994: 29). The Gulf War of 1991 represented for Germany, reunified only a few months earlier, the first dramatic political and existential test on the post-Cold War international stage. In a climate of profound disorientation and heated debate, Habermas outlined a complex position that would mark the discussion of political culture and German identity throughout the 1990s. If on the one hand he acknowledged the juridical and moral legitimacy of the multinational operation promoted by the United Nations to counter the Iraqi aggression against Kuwait, on the other he maintained the need for a rigorous military self-restraint on Germany’s part, identifying a single, non-derogable exception: the moral and historical obligation of solidarity with the security of the State of Israel. The Habermasian reflection went beyond the single warlike event to bear upon the very nature of the new Federal Republic. The philosopher criticized the temptation of the conservative elites to exploit the Gulf crisis in order to decree the end of the post-war German «anomaly» and to promote a rapid geopolitical “normalization”. Habermas denounced the risk that a new and insidious «sense of exceptionality», or *Sonderbewusstsein*, was being regenerated, oscillating dangerously between an abstract, isolationist pacifism and a search for power of the traditional kind (1993a/1997).

This attempt to liquidate the past risked rekindling the historic mistrust of Germany’s European partners, in particular French concerns at the resurgence of German hegemony in the heart of Europe (1993b/1997). In recalling the historical constraints and the legacies of the first Bonn Republic (1994b/1997), Habermas stressed that Germany’s democratic identity could not be founded on a collective amnesia. The obligatory working-through of the past (1992/1997) did not represent an obstacle to be overcome in order to become a “normal” nation, but rather the fundamental achievement of German democratic civilization. In posing the fundamental question of whether it was still possible to «learn from history» (1994a/1997), Habermas made it clear that the turn of 1989 and the birth of the future “Berlin Republic” had to remain firmly placed in the shadow of 1945 (1995/1997). For a united Germany, adherence to the values of the universalism of human rights and to constitutional patriotism

remained the only real bulwark against the resurfacing of dangerous nationalist temptations. In the final analysis, Habermas's position on the Gulf War demonstrated that Germany's true political maturity would be measured not by its capacity to project military force outwards, but by its unconditional fidelity to the historical memory of guilt and of the trauma of Auschwitz.

9. Constitutional Patriotism as an Antidote to Nationalism

In his later reflections, from the early 1990s onwards – for example in *Citizenship and National Identity* (1990d/1996), and then more fully in the studies in political theory contained in *Die Einbeziehung des Anderen*, in particular in the two essays *The European Nation-State: On the Past and Future of Sovereignty and Citizenship* (1996a/1998) and *On the Relation between the Nation, the Rule of Law, and Democracy* (1996b/1998) – Habermas identifies in German guilt not a limit but a reflexive motor for the construction of a form of constitutional patriotism that extends from national boundaries to the transnational plane, first of all the European one. A patriotism founded on democratic values and secularity, starting from the critical working-through of the past. The concept refers to a core of identity and to a form of loyalty within a political community that is grounded not on ethnic, cultural or nationalistic identities, but on the universal and democratic principles of the rule of law enshrined in the constitution. From this standpoint, the recognition of collective guilt for the Shoah becomes the occasion for a new social pact – not only German but European – which rejects ethnic-nationalist identitarianisms and grounds the political legitimacy of the European community on public dialogue and on respect for human dignity. Democratic Germany and European integration are understood as institutional devices for preventing a return to barbarism and for countering democratic regression. In *Bestiality and Humanity: A War on the Border between Law and Morality*, Habermas registers the maturation of German political culture in the Kosovo question: «The military intervention of the German Federal Army means the end of a long period of restraint which had imprinted itself on the civil traits of the postwar German mentality. [...] Fortunately, the familiar stifling tones remain absent from the German debate. No longing for fate [*Schicksalssehnsucht*], no intellectual rolling of the drums for the “good comrades”. During the Gulf War the rhetoric of the emergency situation, alongside incantations of stately pathos, dignity, tragedy, and manly maturity, were mobilized against a vocal peace movement. Not much remains of either. Here and there, still a bit of malice in reference to a subdued pacifism, or hardline slogans along the lines of “we’re abandoning the moral high ground”. Even this tenor fails to cut any ice, however, since both supporters and opponents of the military action make use of a crystal clear normative language. [...] [in Germany] the public debate and mood do not differ from that in other West European countries. No special path [*Sonderweg*], no special consciousness» (1999a/1999: 263-264). In the interview given to Giancarlo Bosetti for the online journal “Caffè Europa” on 14 December 2000, Habermas reaffirms that Germany – by now much larger than the other major members of the Union in population, gross income and number of members of the European Parliament – «should have no aspiration to a special leading role in Europe, nor should it lend substance to the fear that we Germans might have such aspirations. The tradition of the old *Bundesrepublik* is still strong enough to immunize the Berlin Republic against false temptations. What I hope for is a cooperative Germany within a Europe that grows together» (2000). That constitutional patriotism is not an identitarian fallback but the political form of a renunciation of univocity is the thesis with which Specter closes his central chapter: «his greatest contribution to the resolution of West German identity was to describe it in terms of a series of nonidentities» (Specter, 2010: 168). The dimensions of that non-identity are three: «First, by remaining nonidentical with itself, the *Rechtsstaat* refused the legal closure of its moral horizon. Second, by making the constitution nonidentical with the political culture, the values of society could evolve. Third, the idea of the West was not reducible to the “Atlantic value community” of NATO and therefore was not identical to it». The common denominator of his adversaries, in all three disputes – rearmament, historiography, civil disobedience – is the refusal of «his antagonists to tolerate ambiguity» (ivi: 169). It is the same mentality, in the military, historical and juristic professions, which clings to unambiguities all the more when those involved feel that the rug is being pulled from under their feet: «Authoritarian legalism renounces the human substance of the ambiguous at precisely the point that the democratic

constitutional state acquires nourishment from this substance» (Habermas, 1983b/1985: 112).

The Jaspersian ancestry of the formula deserves to be made explicit, because it clarifies at once its genesis and its function. The expression *Verfassungspatriotismus* – Dafydd Huw Rees recalls – «was introduced by political scientist Dolf Sternberger in 1979, drawing on Jaspers’s ideas about collective guilt. The term expresses the theory that, in modern democratic states, the constitution can and should play the role once played by the nation in generating civic solidarity». The question to which it responds is precisely the one posed by Jaspers: «Germans could not simply return to an unproblematic sense of national identity following the horrors of the Third Reich and the Holocaust», so that it was necessary to establish «what kind of collective identity, then, could bind its citizens together and ensure their loyalty to the new liberal-democratic order» (Rees, 2019: 66). The lineage is not a matter of erudition: it shows that constitutional patriotism is the institutional form that political liability assumes once it can no longer rest on the biographical memory of a generation. What Jaspers had entrusted to the conscience of citizens in 1946, and what Habermas had defended as the duty of the *Nachgeborenen* in 1986, is here transferred to a procedure – a relation to the constitution that any future citizen can enter, whatever his or her descent. Against the recurrent charge of abstractness, it must be stressed that constitutional patriotism is by no means a bloodless construct: citizens interpret the principles contained in their constitution – which represent universal moral norms and might be found in any liberal-democratic constitution – in the light of the unique historical experience of their community, so that «each country’s constitutional patriotism will be different, inflected by the particular past that country has “worked through” – the German version, inflected by memories of fascism and the Holocaust, collective guilt, division, and reunification, will be different from the French version, inflected by a tradition of revolutionary democracy» (ivi: 67). It follows that the aim is not to erase national identity: «Constitutional patriotism does not aim to eliminate national identity, but rather to decenter it and deprive it of its political function» (ivi: 66). The distance from the first Frankfurt generation is sharp. For Horkheimer and Adorno, the true emancipation of the Jew could come only from the end of domination, and «only when reconciliation, which ironically was the highest value of the Jewish faith, was realized in the social sphere could anti-Semitism truly end. Partial solutions such as Zionism and assimilation were destined to fail» (Jay, 1973: 233). Constitutional patriotism is, by contrast, a «partial solution» of that kind, but one claimed as such: not reconciliation achieved, but a procedure that keeps conflict open and binds its outcome to universalistic principles.

10. The Controversy over the Holocaust Memorial

On 31 March 1999 Habermas intervened in the pages of “*Die Zeit*” with *Der Zeigefinger: Die Deutschen und ihr Denkmal*. The debate on the memorial to the murdered Jews in Berlin is treated by interpreting that monument as crucial to the formation of Germany’s political identity. The essay is articulated around five nuclei: the historical and political context; the meaning of the memorial; who speaks through the memorial; the challenge and openness towards the future; and the function and form of the memorial (1999b/2006: 38-39). After decades of hesitation, the memorial project becomes possible only at the end of the 1990s, at a moment when reunified Germany risks sliding towards a “normality” that might obscure the critical memory of the past. It is not a question of “giving the Jews a monument”, but of an act through which the descendants of the perpetrators assume historical responsibility and incorporate it into their own political self-understanding. The Berlin memorial represents a sign of rupture with compromised traditions and of the commitment not to repeat the horror. Only German citizens, heirs of the culture that made the crime possible, can and must decide the meaning of the monument that addresses their conscience. The question “who speaks through the memorial” is, once again, the Jaspersian question: the memorial gives material form not to a guilt that would be attributed to the descendants, but to the liability they assume by deciding, in public, what is to be remembered in their name. The remembrance of the victims must remain central. Its function is not to represent a “mark of shame” for the national image: the memorial is not a sign of “self-humiliation”, but an act of civilization that breaks with the nationalistic cult of sacrifice. It inaugurates a public memory oriented towards universal responsibility, not as a static repository of historical facts, but as an active social process. The

Holocaust monument is addressed to future generations. It must stimulate a critical confrontation with Auschwitz as a permanent “admonitory index” within collective memory, the condition of a democracy that integrates the universalism of rights with historical self-criticism. Finally, it is of interest that, for Habermas, on the formal plane the memorial should be conceived neither as a museum nor as a didactic site, but as an austere artistic sign, capable of provoking reflection and of resisting trivialization. He defends the choice of an abstract, non-monumental language (Eisenman’s field of stelae), one that expresses negativity without triumphalism.

The episode well exemplifies a more general reflection on memory. The reconstruction of the past also questions us about the repressions of the past and about our own complicities, whether we are implicated through deeds and/or through omissions. We may therefore interpret this affair with the categories of Jeffrey Olick and Joyce Robbins (1998), systematized a decade later by Olick himself (2007), in the attempt to understand how societies “decide” what to remember and what to forget. The title of Paolo Jedlowski’s essay – *Intenzioni di memoria* – is meant to underline precisely this “anamnesic” aspect of collective life: «there are mnestic phenomena of an unintentional character, but also processes in which intentions play a role. For forgetting can be encouraged» (2016: 11). Among the mechanisms of forgetting that intentionally aim to forget and to make others forget are censorship, silences, erasures, omissions and the deliberate manipulation of traces. Among the “exercises of memory” are ceremonies, monuments, plaques, meetings and occasions for the narration of facts and for reflection, educational programmes and so on. These moments of remembrance have gradually shifted more and more from physical places – cafés, drawing rooms, civic clubs, squares, assemblies and the like – to media ones, including the «immense and heterogeneous ensemble that comprises documentaries, films, essays, novels, television programmes, graphic novels, as well as the comments, evaluations and discourses that accompany them from time to time» (ivi: 117).

11. Secondary Antisemitism in Germany and in Europe

Over the last two decades, Jürgen Habermas’s political-philosophical reflection has engaged closely with the transformations of German identity in the aftermath of reunification and in the context of European integration. At the centre of his thought there remains one indispensable idea: the Federal Republic of Germany cannot accede to a presumed geopolitical or cultural “normality” by repressing the legacy of the Holocaust. On the contrary, the memory of historical guilt and the constant working-through of its psychological and political ramifications constitute the only legitimate foundation for a mature, open and authentically European democracy. One of the most critical knots addressed by Habermas concerns the metamorphoses of anti-Jewish prejudice in contemporary Germany. In an interview given in the early 2000s, the philosopher drew attention to the persistence and the dangerousness of secondary antisemitism (*sekundärer Antisemitismus*) (Habermas, 2004b). Unlike the traditional form of racial or religious hatred, secondary antisemitism manifests itself not in spite of Auschwitz but, paradoxically, because of Auschwitz. It is a reactive resentment, fed by the psychological and political desire to escape the moral burden of historical guilt and to put an end to a duty of memory perceived as an imposition. For Habermas, the secondary forms of antisemitism are narratives that supplant the sense of collective guilt with accusations that the survivors are “exploiting” the memory of the Holocaust – an antisemitism not “in spite of” but “by way of” Auschwitz. The delay with which this drift has been recognized is denounced without extenuation: «In Germany, it has taken far too long for Nazi marches, anti-Semitic attacks and even the murder of a politician to serve as a wake-up call for a public indoctrinated with anti-communism and Islamophobia» (Habermas, 2020b: 20).

The diagnosis has a direct antecedent in Adorno’s analysis of prejudice, which it is worth recalling because it illuminates its psychological structure. In the chapter “Elemente des Antisemitismus” of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer (1947) describe the antisemite through the theory of «false projection»: antisemitism is not a simple cognitive error or a residue of religious hatred, but a disease of civilization; the authoritarian subject, repressed by a society that imposes constant sacrifices upon him, projects onto the Jew his own forbidden desires and his own frustration. The Jew becomes the perfect scapegoat because he represents what capitalist society has rendered abstract and intangible:

the circulation of money, an intellectuality unbound to the soil, a happiness not subjugated to labour. The structure of this persistence had thus already been anticipated. Jay summarizes the conclusion as follows: Horkheimer and Adorno «took little comfort in the “defeat” of anti-Semitism brought by the victory of the Allies over Hitler. Overt antagonism to the Jews might have been successfully extirpated, but its underlying cause had been preserved» in what they called a “ticket mentality”; so that «Hitler’s conquerors might have eliminated the more obvious effects of anti-Semitism, but they had done little to destroy its root causes» (1973: 233-234). The empirical elaboration, moreover, was that of *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno, 1950), where the predisposition to prejudice was analysed as the outcome of a fragile psychic structure that seeks security in submission to power and in aggression towards the “different”. Sociologically, antisemitism is explained as the pathological reaction to reification: in a world in which man is reduced to a commodity, hatred of the other is the only way in which the subject feels able to assert his own identity. As Stefano Petrucciani observes, Adorno’s critique unmasks a social system that produces individuals incapable of real experience and drives them to take refuge in destructive collective stereotypes (2007: 89).

In the light of this schema, secondary antisemitism appears not as a belated anomaly, but as the historically updated variant of the same mechanism: what is projected onto the victim is no longer the repressed desire, but the moral burden the subject refuses to bear. Guilt, instead of being worked through, is attributed to those who remember it – or, in the terms that have guided this reconstruction, political liability is refused by converting it into a moral guilt that one can then deny. This is why the Habermasian and the Adornian readings converge on the decisive point: neither regards prejudice as a residue destined to die out with generational turnover, since both trace it back to social conditions still in operation. The universal competition and the fear of social decline which, according to Adorno, create the fertile ground of the authoritarian personality continue in fact to operate in contemporary democracies: when the economic system reduces individuals to replaceable functions, the accumulated rage seeks an outlet directed outwards. In the same direction went the transformation of morality into ideology, of which Wiggershaus reports two examples of disconcerting topicality: against restitution and compensation it was objected that, «in view of the gravity of the crimes, restitution was not possible anyway»; and in defence of the racial measures it was maintained «that they were at least honest, and had also helped the Jews to create Israel» (1988/1995: 475). To this is added a discursive automatism that Habermas qualifies as an «apologetic reflex»: until recently, moderate German politicians could not take a stand against right-wing violence «without simultaneously pointing out [...] the symmetry between right-wing and left-wing extremism» (Habermas, 2020b: 20).

In November 2023, together with three other German intellectuals – Nicole Deitelhoff, Rainer Forst and Klaus Günther – he signed a statement published by “Normative Orders” at the University of Frankfurt and relaunched by Reset DOC. The massacre carried out by Hamas, aimed at “eliminating Jewish life in general”, is firmly condemned. Israel’s reaction is considered justified in principle, although it must adhere to criteria of proportionality, aim at the protection of civilians and favour a prospect of future peace. In any case, the document expresses full support for Israel and for all Jews in Germany, in response to the reappearance of antisemitic acts on German streets: «The democratic ethos of the Federal Republic of Germany, oriented to the respect of human dignity, is bound to a political culture for which Jewish life and the right of Israel to exist are central elements, worthy of special protection in the light of the mass crimes of the Nazi era» (2023). Habermas, however, does not concentrate on the instruments of the *streitbare Demokratie* (“militant democracy”), such as the banning of extremist parties, but proposes once again, as a strategy, the strengthening of a democratic consciousness of human rights within the German and European public sphere. The collective memory of the Holocaust lies at the centre of the construction of a postnational identity capable of recognizing antisemitism above all where it is instrumentalized by revisionism in order to deny guilt and responsibility. Habermas emphasizes that antisemitism in Germany retains a destructive charge and a gravity far greater than in the rest of Europe (Habermas, 2004b). This judgement has, within Habermas’s intellectual biography, a counterpoint that must be recalled: the decades-long relationship with Israel and with Gershom Scholem. «Israel was the other pole», Habermas declares, recalling his first journey to Jerusalem in 1977 for Scholem’s eightieth birthday, when Scholem «laid the city, so to speak, at our feet» and accompanied

him «like an expert guide through the quarters and the surroundings of this exemplarily “historical” city» – «he who, as a Zionist, had come to that land in 1923 and had never forgotten the problem of the expelled Palestinians» (2024/2026: 43). The remark, a few lines long, says much about the posture Habermas would assume in 2023: solidarity with Israel is not conceived as an alternative to the recognition of the wrong done to the Palestinians, and it is learned from a Jewish interlocutor who held the two terms together. Of his later stays Habermas recalls the lectures at the Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem; the long period spent with his family during the outbreak of the war in Lebanon – lived through «in a convulsive state of mobilization» in a country «of a moving beauty but, as could be seen once again, profoundly threatened in its very essence»; Scholem’s funeral, «when each participant in the long funeral procession laid a stone upon the grave»; and his last visit in 2012 for the inauguration of the lecture series on Buber (ivi: 144). The bond with Scholem had been born in 1963 out of a footnote on the correspondences between Jakob Böhme and Isaac Luria, and turned into a friendship between the two families (ivi: 144-145). This biographical stratum is not ornamental with respect to the argument. It shows that the Habermasian position on German antisemitism does not derive from a theorem about national guilt, but from a long and concrete familiarity with German Jewish life dispersed by emigration: that New York of Hannah Arendt, Hans Jonas and Aron Gurwitsch in which, «even more than two decades after the end of the war, our present seemed to awaken, in that context, distant memories, in which we were involved as though we had taken part in them» (ivi: 142). It is the personal form of that “anamnesic solidarity” which, on the theoretical plane, he would demand of the German public sphere. In the land of the guilty, every attempt to minimize the Shoah or to turn historical memory into a mere façade-like formalism risks reopening civic wounds and undermining democratic political culture. Historical responsibility is not exhausted by generational turnover; it is reflected directly also in relations of neighbourhood and in sensitivity towards the peoples who suffered Nazi aggression. Analysing the complexity of the historical relations between Germany and Poland, Habermas notes that understanding the historical reservations and fears of the countries of Eastern Europe must remain a priority ethical imperative for German identity, obstructing any resurgence of revanchist sentiments or of national self-sufficiency (2004a/2006). On the side of communicative conditions, he would later connect the increase in antisemitism to the «de-formalisation of public communication» and to the reduced distance between published opinions and the semi-public opinions of the digital «“soapbox”»; but he judges worse still «the organisational potential offered by the formation of bubbles and niches in the “dark” Internet», with extremist networks infiltrated into the police, the Bundeswehr and the intelligence services, which «today conjure up the nightmare of a deep state» (2020b: 22).

In parallel with his critique of secondary antisemitism, Habermas has denounced the attempts of conservative political culture to redefine national identity through the concept of *Leitkultur* (“guiding” or hegemonic culture). In a harsh intervention prompted by the resurgence of xenophobic and Islamophobic impulses, the philosopher showed how the debate betrays a nation’s fear of losing itself in an irremediably plural and multicultural society. To seek to impose a majority culture of ethnic-national derivation as a criterion of assimilation for religious and immigrant minorities means taking a step backwards with respect to the achievements of constitutional patriotism. For Habermas, German identity cannot take refuge in an idealized cultural homogeneity, which risks fuelling a pathological intolerance (Habermas, 2010b).

The only “guiding culture” compatible with the lesson of Auschwitz is the one rooted in the universalistic principles of the Basic Law, in the practices of the inclusion of the other and in unconditional respect for difference. Habermas’s reflection on national identity is inextricably interwoven with Germany’s role within the European Union. With the outbreak of the financial and euro crisis in the 2000s and 2010s, the philosopher discerned the re-emergence of a “New German Question” (Habermas et al., 2011). United Germany, having become the dominant economic power on the continent, began to display a dangerous re-nationalization of its political horizon, replacing its traditional European vocation with a short-sighted protection of its own budgetary interests (Habermas, 2010a; Habermas, 2011b).

Habermas has sharply criticized the attitude of the German political elites – and in particular Chancellor Angela Merkel’s management – describing it as a resounding «failure of the elites» (*Elitenversagen*). By imposing policies of rigorous austerity on the countries of Europe’s southern periphery

without offering in exchange any prospect of democratic integration and risk-sharing, Germany risked turning the Union into an instrument of economic hegemony. To sleep «on the edge of a volcano» and to forget that European integration was the historical response to the disaster provoked by German nationalism in the twentieth century means, for Habermas, betraying the memory of 1945 (Habermas, 2013). The single currency and the European Union are not mere accounting arrangements, but a common destiny in which the very resilience of Western democracies is at stake (Habermas, 2010c). Faced with the risks of the continent's fragmentation and with the rise of far-right populist movements within Germany itself, Habermas has repeatedly issued public appeals for a rebirth of the European spirit, reaffirming that the national perspective is by now inadequate to meet global challenges (Habermas et al., 2018). It is an enlargement of constitutional patriotism through the construction of a European public sphere and the integration of institutions.

Thirty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the philosopher has often returned to drawing up a balance sheet of the process of Germany's political and cultural unification. In the interview *For God's sake, spare us governing philosophers!*, given to Borja Hermoso for "El País" on 25 May 1998, he calls himself a "German patriot": not of the ethnic nation, but of the country that after 1945 produced a stable democracy and, through decades of polarization, a liberal political culture. It is the constitutional patriotism of 1986, which nonetheless requires a narrative background: the Constitution must be felt as a national achievement. German identity is plural and regenerative – it includes Turkish, Iranian and Greek immigrants of the second and third generation – and the populist rejection of those people is senseless.

Habermas's position traces a coherent red thread: Germany cannot define its identity by separating itself from its own history or from its European context. From the struggle against the creeping forms of secondary antisemitism (Habermas, 2004b) to the rejection of an exclusionary *Leitkultur* (2010b), and on to the critique of economic hegemonism in Brussels (2011b; 2013), the philosopher reiterates that German democratic civilization exists only as a culture of self-criticism. In this perspective, the memory of guilt is not a paralysing constraint, but the fundamental ethical compass that requires Germany to be the motor, and not the obstacle, of a united and solidary Europe (Habermas et al., 2018). Analysing the change of course in European unification brought about in the wake of the pandemic crisis – with the acceptance of debt mutualization for the recovery funds – Habermas has glimpsed in it a "second chance" for Germany (2020a). The first chance, in 1989, risked being exhausted in a purely administrative and accounting unification, marked by the illusion of being able to return to being a "normal" nation-state. This second chance instead allows Germany to understand that the completion of its own internal unity is indissolubly bound to the completion of European unity.

This coherence must be framed within the Habermasian diagnosis of the «postnational constellation», which constitutes its sociological premise. Pensky sums up its outcome in the terms that concern us here: to the gap between economic globalization and the regulative capacities of states there corresponds a «rise of economic and political inequality, a shift of economic risks from states to individual persons and vulnerable groups, and, most troubling, the return of older reactionary forms of group solidarity. Politically, this is visible in the reactivations of exclusive national and ethnic forms of ascriptive identity, nativism and xenophobic reactions to immigrants, the revitalization of nationalist parties, and the gradual collapse of the cosmopolitan project» (Pensky, 2019b: 323-324). Specter identifies it as the Habermasian legacy: the multidimensional political crisis of 1981-1987, «from Euromissiles to *Historikerstreit* – was the theater in which Habermas worked out his own account of *Westbindung*, the key to which was his redefinition of the West as a fallibilistic, open, democratic experiment». Hence the formula that epitomizes the relation between memory and institutions: «The price exacted for constitutional patriotism was civil disobedience». The reconstructive work of the 1980s on the concepts of modernity and constitutionalism, Specter concludes, «staged a mutually transformative encounter between Germany and the West that has helped to keep the meaning of Western liberal democracy open for all its citizens» (2010: 207). Against this background one understands why the Habermasian defence of democratic values ended by assuming, as Pensky himself notes, a «conservative mission», in the sense that «the genuine achievements of German political culture in the half-century following total collapse – a robust democracy, with broad political inclusion, tolerance of cultural and ethnic diversity,

a functional social security system to offset the effects of economic competition, and a national commitment to a peaceful and open Europe – themselves seemed to come under increasing threat» (Pensky, 2019a: 203). As late as 2021, Habermas intervened once more in the debate on German historical memory. On 23 May, A. Dirk Moses published in “*Geschichte der Gegenwart*” the intervention *Der Katechismus der Deutschen*: German memory would be a quasi-religious catechism with five articles – the uniqueness of the Shoah, a special responsibility towards the Jews, the security of Israel as *raison d’État*, antisemitism as distinct from racism, anti-Zionism as equivalent to antisemitism – which sanctions dissent. In the background: the Mbembe case (2020), the Bundestag’s BDS resolution (2019), the German reception of Rothberg’s *Multidirectional Memory* and the reticent memory of German colonial crimes. Between June and September, Frei, Diner, Friedländer, Aly and Zimmerer intervened. Habermas came last, and it was he who imposed the label “*Historikerstreit 2.0*” – which Moses and Zimmerer would reject. Habermas starts from a methodological concession: like every historical fact, the Holocaust too is comparable with other genocides; it is the meaning of the comparison that depends on the context. In 1986 what was at stake was not the admissibility of the comparison with Stalinist crimes, but its use: to relieve Germans born afterwards of political responsibility – Jaspers’s *Haftung*. The same criterion applies now. Against Moses, Habermas denies that German memory is an identitarian catechism and vindicates its conflictual genesis: a hard-won achievement of post-war political culture, not an imposed dogma. He then reformulates singularity in non-quantitative terms: colonial genocides struck strangers, whereas the extermination of the Jews struck fellow citizens constructed as an “internal enemy” – a Schmittian category – that is, as a subversive danger internal to the nation. Hence the “dialectic of normalization”: the Federal Republic became normal precisely by assuming the abnormality of its own past, and to renounce this in the name of mnemonic pluralism would mean losing the normative foundation of its own democracy. Habermas does not deny that colonial crimes must be remembered, and he legitimates the comparison; but he denies that remembering them requires relativizing Auschwitz, defending the singularity of the Shoah as a rupture in civilization. The thread linking back to 1986 is the criterion of the public use of history: not which comparisons are admissible, but what political function they perform in the self-understanding of a democratic community (2021). It must be recalled that the «postnational constellation» is not for Habermas one category among others, but the framework within which are arrayed the challenges that from the 1990s onwards occupy the centre of his reflection: «economic globalization and the melting pot», the «supranational processes of integration, such as the European one», «the advent of populisms and separatist movements», «the waves of migration, the tearing of the solidary fabric of communities that struggle to govern pluralism» (Corchia, 2026: 190).

12. Conclusions

The path traversed – from childhood under the Third Reich and the democratic conversion of 1945, through the return of the exiles, the Auschwitz trial, the generational conflict of 1968 and the *Historikerstreit*, down to unification, the controversy over the memorial and the diagnosis of secondary antisemitism – makes it possible to recognize in the concept of *Nicht-Regression* (non-regression) the normative imperative that Adorno and Habermas develop in response to the *Zivilisationsbruch* of National Socialism and in order to prevent gradual erosions of democratic institutions (Niesen, 2023). Both converge in regarding National Socialism as a total regression, but they decline the imperative differently. For Adorno it is universal: barbarism is a latent threat inherent in modern civilization and in administered capitalism, and post-1945 Germany is not immune to it. Habermas, by contrast, internalizes it: Germany bears a specific historical responsibility, because the crime took place “here”, creating an existential bond with traditions poisoned by unspeakable crimes. He rejects the notion of collective guilt and insists on the shared responsibility of the *Nachgeborenen*, those “born afterwards”, for the Nazi past. The Adornian declension of this imperative – the frontal attack on the culture of “turning the page” in the Germany of the economic miracle and the denunciation of the «empty rituals» of monumental memory (Adorno, 1959/1998) – is discussed analytically in the companion essay (Corchia and Hassan, 2026). On one point, however, the road taken by Habermas diverges from that of his masters,

and Jay unwittingly indicates the reason: the fecundity of the Institute in exile had been conditioned by its isolation, and it was public recognition that eroded the cutting edge of critique (1973: 287-288). The Habermasian wager is exactly the reverse: to entrust the guarantee of non-regression to the public sphere, and not to distance from it. For both, in any case, the memory of the past functions as a mechanism against the return of authoritarian forms; and the imperative is concrete: to defend the historical level of freedom and justice attained.

Read through the Jaspersian distinction, the itinerary reconstructed here displays a coherent logic that neither a history of ideas nor a political chronology could bring out on its own. The distinction between moral guilt and political liability, adopted in 1945 from the radio broadcasts of the Nuremberg trials, is not a static premise but the variable that each episode redefines. The Heidegger case extended liability to the language of the philosophical tradition; the Auschwitz trial showed that the courts can establish guilt but not liability, and thereby opened the space of the public sphere; the conflict of 1968 brought the question out of the privacy of families while forcing Habermas to defend the *Rechtsstaat* as the only forum in which liability can be discharged; the *Historikerstreit* made explicit that what the revisionists sought to discharge was liability and not guilt; unification asked whether liability survives a change in the subject that inherits it; and constitutional patriotism, the memorial and the diagnosis of secondary antisemitism are three answers to the same problem – how liability is to be transmitted once the generation of the *Nachgeborenen* has itself passed. This is what the essay adds to the literature on Habermas and German memory: not a new episode, but the demonstration that the episodes are stages of one learning process, and that the theory of the public use of history and of constitutional patriotism is the form that Jaspers's *Haftung* takes when it is entrusted no longer to consciences but to institutions.

The memory of the past is connected, moreover, to constitutional stability and to European integration. The passage from the national to the European plane is not, however, immediate, and the literature has insisted on the point. Christian Joerges recalls that «the topos of constitutional patriotism, which refers to the specific historical context of the early Federal Republic, concerns Germany's past and the re-civilization of the country – the transformation of its political culture after the Second World War» (Joerges, 2017: 545). It is precisely this rootedness that makes it possible to reject the objection according to which constitutional patriotism would be sociologically too «thin» to guarantee the cohesion of modern societies: for Habermas the nation-state, and Germany in particular, represent «an ambivalent achievement», and if republicanism prevailed – that is, if «the “nation of the state” (*Staatsnation*) succeeded the “nation of the people” (*Volksnation*)» – this happened only through «a painful process of abstraction by which local and dynastic loyalties were finally transformed into the self-consciousness of democratic citizens as belonging to one and the same nation» (ibidem).

From this rootedness follows a prudential criterion that holds for our conclusion as well: «the idea of constitutional patriotism cannot be transferred to the European plane without further mediations», since no European political framework would be definable «if all European societies declared sacrosanct the forms they have historically and culturally assumed»; it must therefore be understood «in programmatic terms: the plurality of Europe must not be transformed into homogeneity, but must rather give rise to reciprocal relations of recognition» (Joerges, 2017: 546). German *Zerknirschung*, in other words, is not exportable as content, but only as form: not the obligation for every European country to remember the same guilt, but rather that of subjecting its own history to the same labour of critical abstraction.

The same logic, finally, governs Habermas's positions on the use of force, touched upon here only in passing. From the first Gulf War onwards, Anna Geis recalls, Habermas criticized «the tendency of the sole Western superpower to turn a justified “police action” into a “perfectly normal war” in order to secure its own interests in the Middle East» (2017: 582) – where the word normal returns to designate, as in the historians' dispute, the operation by which one would take leave of a historical exception. An overall conclusion may now be drawn, and it leads back to the misunderstanding from which we set out. Habermas's intellectual biography shows that the consciousness of guilt is not a paralysing burden, but the condition of possibility of a post-national political culture: only a memory that keeps the wound open – from the culture of *Zerknirschung* to constitutional patriotism – safeguards the historical level

of freedom and justice attained and prevents «normalization» from turning into oblivion. Read in this light, the statement of 13 November 2023 appears not as a partisan episode but as the coherent application of the imperative of non-regression. This is the legacy that the German experience, in its exemplary function, hands down to the Italian and European debate as well. It may serve as a farewell to recall the formula with which Habermas indicated the minimum threshold below which a society ceases to be one: «Any society that wants to preserve a trace of humanity must demand that much transcendence of itself, which means that much orientation beyond oneself and what exists» (2020b: 29).

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