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Teaching & Learning Guide for: Jürgen Habermas and the Public Intellectual in Modern Democratic Life

Peter J. Verovšek 

University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK

Correspondence

Peter J. Verovšek, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK.

Email: peter.verovsek@gmail.com

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1 | AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION

Jürgen Habermas is the most important German philosopher and critical theorist of the postwar era. The concept of the public sphere (*Öffentlichkeit*), which forms the basis for his 'talk-' rather than 'vote-centric' understanding of democratic politics, lies at the heart of his theoretical system. In addition to theorising the role of public debate in democratic life, Habermas has also sought to spur deliberation on important issues as an engaged intellectual. However, although almost half his work consists of public-facing commentary, these publications – some of which have been appeared in the twelve German editions of his *Kleine politische Schriften* ("short political writings") – are often overlooked. This is notable, as Habermas is the leading public intellectual of the Federal Republic of Germany and increasingly of the European Union as well.

In response to this oversight in the reception of Habermas, I provide an overview of his work as a public intellectual and relate this approach to philosophical intervention in the public sphere to recent debates about the relationship of theory to practice. By showing how his political engagement fits with his philosophical commitments and fulfils them in practice, Habermas shows how the philosopher can apply theoretical insights to political developments. In contrast to calls for political theorists to participate directly in the policymaking process or for the direct application of philosophy to political practice, both of which threaten the principle of democratic equality, Habermas presents a model in which the philosopher influences politics in a mediated manner that focuses on deliberation

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within the democratic public sphere. At the start of the twenty-first century, when public debate is increasingly under threat from digitization, censorship, political correctness and “fake news,” such an examination of Habermas's lifelong project of rescuing the modern public sphere – both in theory and in practice – is especially urgent and timely.

2 | AUTHOR RECOMMENDS

Bredin, J. (1986). *The affair: The case of Alfred Dreyfus*. New York: George Braziller.

The concept of the public intellectual dates to the end of the nineteenth century, when a group of French writers, including Émile Zola, André Gide and Marcel Proust, spoke out to secure the release of the Jewish army captain Alfred Dreyfus, who was falsely accused of treason. This book analyses both this case and the role it played in the development of the idea of the public intellectual.

Biebricher, T. (2011). The practices of theorists: Habermas and Foucault as public intellectuals. *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 37(6), 709-734. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453711400244>.

While Jürgen Habermas is the most prominent public intellectual of postwar Germany, his friend and philosophical sparring partner Michel Foucault played a similar role in France. However, while both are committed to public engagement, they have different views regarding whether the public intellectual should stick to their area of expertise (Foucault) or make more broad-ranging contributions to public debate (Habermas).

Habermas, J. (1974). *Theory and practice*. Boston: Beacon Press.

In addition to playing the role of a publicly-engaged philosopher, Habermas has also written extensively on the relation of theory to practice. In this book he presents his model for how theory can only be applied to practice in a mediated manner separates theory from the identification of actors, who can mobilise for social change, and the selection of the proper methods for political struggle.

Habermas, J. (1989) "Heinrich Heine and the Role of the Intellectual in Germany." In *The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historians' Debate.*, Translated by S. W. NicholSEN. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Although Habermas is a committed public intellectual, he rarely speaks or writes about public intellectuals. This text, which is based on Habermas's opening address to the February 1986 conference on 'Young Germany in 1835: Literature and Censorship in the Pre-1848 Period,' organised by the Heinrich Heine Institute in Dusseldorf, is one of the few places where he explicitly discusses these issues.

Hohendahl, P. U. (1997). The scholar, the intellectual, and the essay: Weber, Lukács, Adorno, and postwar Germany. *The German Quarterly*, 70(3), 217-232. <https://doi.org/10.2307/408201>.

This text situates Habermas's understanding of the role of the public intellectual – as well as its primary literary genre, the essay – in its broader context in postwar Germany. Habermas's understanding of the role of the public intellectual was very influenced by his predecessors, particularly Weber, Lukács and Adorno.

Jennings, J., & Kemp-Welch, A. (Eds.). (1997). *Intellectuals in politics: From the Dreyfus affair to Salman Rushdie*. London: Routledge.

This edited volume provides a good overview of the debates about the role of public intellectuals in politics beyond Habermas's views.

Müller-Doohm, Stefan. (2005). Theodor W. Adorno and Jürgen Habermas – Two Ways of being a Public Intellectual: Sociological Observations Concerning the Transformation of a Social Figure of Modernity. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 8(3), 269-80. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368431005054794>.

Written by the author of the most comprehensive authorised intellectual biography of Habermas, this piece analyses the role that Adorno played in spurring Habermas to take on this role, as well as how Habermas's understanding differs from that of his mentor at the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt.

Verovšek, Peter J. (2021). The philosopher as engaged citizen: Habermas on the role of the public intellectual in the modern democratic public sphere. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 24(4), 526-44, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13684310211003192>.

This piece provides a more in-depth, scholarly treatment of the issues presented in my article for *Philosophy Compass*.

Wolff, Jo. (2011). *Ethics and public policy: A philosophical inquiry*. London: Routledge.

While Habermas is the most prominent continental public intellectual of the twentieth century, this book presents the more direct approach to philosophical participation in public affairs advocated by most analytic philosophers. It is based on Jo Wolff's extensive experience seeking to influence public policy by working on various government committees.

3 | ONLINE MATERIALS

Jürgen Habermas: Democracy in Europe, the University of Stavanger, on 11 September, 2014 as part of the ten-year anniversary of the Holberg Prize

<https://youtu.be/0sLtMOhNnVc>.

This speech is a wonderful example of Habermas acting as a public intellectual. It shows how he puts his theoretical ideals into practice.

3.1 | Noam Chomsky - The Responsibility of Intellectuals

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_36lAosXZec.

Other prominent intellectuals have also discussed how they see their public role. Noam Chomsky is a particularly prominent example. Here he discusses the views he presented in an important piece from 1966 on 'The Responsibility of Intellectuals.'

3.2 | Public intellectuals & the future of information | Erica Stone | TEDxMileHighWomen

The role of public intellectuals has changed due to the rise of the digital public sphere. Online, it is often hard to tell information from misinformation. In this talk, Erica Stone argues that our universities have a duty to engage with the public by translating expert, scholarly work for the masses.

Verovšek, P.J. (2022). Habermas on the legitimacy of lockdown. *Eurozine*, February 14, <https://www.eurozine.com/habermas-on-the-legitimacy-of-lockdown/>.

In this piece, I analyse Habermas's public interventions regarding the legitimacy of lockdowns during the Covid-19 pandemic. More generally, *Eurozine* is a wonderful example of an outlet that allows public intellectuals to speak on important issues. It is part of a broader attempt to create a transnational, European public sphere.

4 | SAMPLE SYLLABUS

4.1 | Week I: Introduction & Overview

Reading.

- Chomsky, N. 'The Responsibility of Intellectuals.' *The New York Review of Books* (23 February, 1967), <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1967/02/23/a-special-supplement-the-responsibility-of-intelle/>.
- Saïd, E. W. *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures*. New York: Vintage Books, 1996.

4.2 | Week II – The Realist Turn in Contemporary Political Theory

Readings.

- Galston, W. 'Realism in Political Theory.' *European Journal of Political Theory* 9.4 (2010): 385–411.
- Rossi, E. and Sleat, M., 'Realism in Normative Political Theory', *Philosophy Compass* 9/10 (2014): 741–744, [10.1111/phc3.12162](https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12162)
- Ulaş, L. (2020). 'Can political realism be action-guiding?' *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 1-26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698230.2020.1774855>.

4.3 | Week II – The Political Theorist as Democratic Underlabourer

Readings.

- Swift, A., & White, S. (2008). 'Political theory, social science, and real politics.' In D. Leopold, & M. Stears (Eds.), *Political theory: Methods and approaches* (pp. 49-69). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Baderin, A. (2016). 'Political theory and public opinion: Against democratic restraint.' *Politics, Philosophy & Economics*, 15(3), 209-233. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470594X15621044>

4.4 | Week III – The Public Philosopher

Readings.

- Wolff, Jo. (2011). *Ethics and public policy: A philosophical inquiry*. London: Routledge.
- Bright, L. (2021). 'The end of analytic philosophy.' *The Sooty Empiric*, May 23, Retrieved from <https://sootyempiric.blogspot.com/2021/05/the-end-of-analytic-philosophy.html>.

4.5 | Week IV – The Habermasian Public Intellectual

Readings.

- Habermas, J. (1989) 'Heinrich Heine and the Role of the Intellectual in Germany.' In *The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historians' Debate.*, Translated by Shierry Weber NicholSEN. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Pensky, M. 'Jürgen Habermas and the Antinomies of the Intellectual.' Chap. 7, In *Habermas: A Critical Reader.*, Edited by Peter Dews. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999, 211-237.

4.6 | Week V – The Relationship between Political Theory and Public Policy

Readings.

- Verovšek, P. J. 'Direct Engagement or Discursive Impact?: Public Philosophy in the United Kingdom and Germany,' *Angermion* 14:1 (2021): pp. 193-216.
- Kouris, Y., & Wolff, J. (2021). 'Philosophy & public policy.' *Institute for Alternative Politics Blog*, 24 April, Retrieved from <https://www.enainstitute.org/en/publication/philosophy-public-policy-interview-with-jonathan-wolff/>

5 | FOCUS QUESTIONS

1. What is the proper relationship of theory to practice in political philosophy?
2. How and when should political theorists (and philosophers more generally) intervene in public policy?
3. Should political philosophy itself be more overtly political, or are philosophers better served by pursuing theory for its own sake?
4. Which of the existing models – political realism, democratic underlabouring, public philosophy or the philosopher as public intellectual – provides the best account of the relationship between philosophy and politics? Why?

6 | SEMINAR/PROJECT IDEA

As an exercise, have students think about a contemporary political problem. Have political philosophers shaped the public discourse about this issue in any way? Who is a prominent example? Does this person follow any of the existing models detailed above (political realism, democratic underlabouring, public philosophy or the philosopher as public intellectual)? Was this strategy effective? Once students have had a chance to consider these ideas (either as a take home assignment or working in class in small groups) have a discussion of these issues through the examples they come up with.

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ORCID

Peter J. Verovšek  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8946-2014>

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