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ARTICLE

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Jürgen Habermas and the public intellectual in modern democratic life

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Abstract

This paper provides an overview of Jürgen Habermas's writings as a public intellectual and relates this work to recent debates about the proper relationship of theory to practice. In addition to being one of the most influential continental philosophers of the postwar era, Habermas is also the leading public intellectual of the Federal Republic of Germany and increasingly of the European Union as well. Unfortunately, his political writings have not received the attention they deserve. As a result, he is often misconstrued as an ideal theorist who is both ignorant of and apathetic toward 'real' politics. By showing how his philosophy relates to his political engagement, I present Habermas as a model for how the philosopher can apply theoretical insights to political developments in an indirect, mediated manner that focuses on debates within the democratic public sphere. This approach has distinct advantages when compared to active participation in the policymaking process and the direct application of philosophy to political practice, both of which threaten the principle of democratic equality in the public sphere.

1 | INTRODUCTION

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 (see Bredin, 1986). Since then this label has been applied to cultural, intellectual and literary figures who intervene in public life for a humanitarian cause or in concrete cases of rights

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violation. While not speaking as experts, their intellectual authority and political independence allows them – in the words of Edward Saïd (1996, pp. 85, 113) – to 'speak truth to power' and to be the voice 'of the poor, the disadvantaged, the voiceless, the unrepresented, the powerless'.

In line with these historical origins, public intellectuals have usually been literary figures. However, during the postwar era philosophers have increasingly taken on this appellation. While Jean-Paul Sartre is the most prominent (Baert, 2015), others prominent examples include Hannah Arendt, Theodor Adorno, and Slavoj Žižek. By acting as 'connected critics' (Walzer, 1988), who seek to 'keep the conversation going' (Richard Rorty in Jennings & Kemp-Welch, 1997, p. 298) by translating and interpreting contemporary discourses (Bauman, 1989: 127ff), as engaged citizens they are able to draw on the general view of society accorded to them by their philosophical work to agitate in the name of universal causes.

One of the most prominent – but often overlooked – public intellectuals of postwar Europe is Jürgen Habermas (Verovšek, 2021a). In addition to his philosophical work, he has also acted as 'an engaged public intellectual in the very same "political public sphere" that he theorized as a philosopher' (Pensky, 2013, p. 31). Although Habermas is often accused of being ignorant of and apathetic towards 'real politics' (Rossi & Sleat, 2014, p. 695), he has both (1) a well-developed theory of the function of the philosopher in public debate, as well as (2) an extensive track record as a public intellectual. In focusing on Habermas's understanding of the place of the public intellectual in modern democratic life, this paper lays out the former, that is, his theoretical understanding of philosophy in public life, using brief examples from the latter to illustrate how he has put these ideas into practice.

My argument fits within a broader contemporary methodological dispute (*Methodenstreit*) regarding the relationship of theory to practice. This issue has taken on particular urgency during the Coronavirus pandemic. While Habermas (2021; see Verovšek, 2022) and many other philosophers, including Judith Butler (2020), have sought to use the awareness that we are all 'equally at risk of falling ill' to call for greater solidarity that will allow humanity 'to re-imagine our world as if it were ordered by a collective desire for radical equality', others have intervened in a more problematic manner. For example, in deploying his ideas to warn against 'the increasing tendency to use *the state of exception* as the normal paradigm of government', Giorgio Agamben (2020, translation mine) has also overstepped the bounds of his philosophical knowledge by claiming that COVID-19 is 'a normal influenza, not at all dissimilar to those that normally recur every year'.

These examples testify to both the urgency and the contested nature of debates about the role of philosophy in modern democratic life (see Verovšek, 2020a). This is particularly visible in analytic philosophy, where an 'applied turn' (Bright, 2021) has led political theorists to engage in public affairs more frequently. These interventions take a number of different forms. Whereas so-called 'public philosophers' seek to use their expertise to intervene directly as policy advisors and supporters of 'democratic underlabouring' offer concrete suggestions to orient political action, a group of 'realist' seeks to integrate actual politics directly into political philosophy.

In contrast to these three positions, Habermas strictly separates theory from practice. He points out that as an actor in the public sphere, the philosopher is but one citizen among many engaged in a practice of public communication in which every participant has an equal voice. Given the context of the public sphere, which differs in many ways from the professional arena of scholarship, he argues that while philosophers can use their epistemological and normative insights to increase the quality of public debate, they cannot determine in advance what is to be done, what shape social change should take, or how it can be achieved. Instead, on his mediated model, the answers to these questions can only result from actual discourses in which the philosopher may choose to participate as a public intellectual.

My basic argument is that Habermas presents a coherent defense of philosophy as an academic enterprise oriented toward truth that at the same time also allows the theorist to participate in political debates in a way that acknowledges the independence of both politics and philosophical research as separate spheres of life with their own internal norms and presuppositions. The paper starts by summarizing Habermas's understanding of himself as a public intellectual. In the second section, I outline how this role differentiation fits into his conceptualization of the relationship of theory and practice. Part three then relates this division of labour to recent debates about how

philosophy should engage with politics. I conclude with a plea for a more democratic form of political theory that respects the autonomy and equality of all participants in the public sphere.

2 | SITUATING HABERMAS'S POLITICAL WRITINGS

In recent years, a number of commentators have attacked Habermas's thought as a quietist, mainstream theory that needs to be drawn out 'into a "real" world from which it otherwise remains isolated' (Whyman, 2019). Unfortunately, these critiques ignore the fact that Habermas (2004, p. xl) has consistently sought to performatively 'refute the objection that the theory of communicative action is blind to institutional reality'. Starting with his widely publicized attack on Martin Heidegger for failing to apologize for his collaboration with the Nazis in 1953 to his participation in the Historians' Debate about the meaning of the Nazi past in the mid-1980s, Habermas has intervened in almost every important debate in Germany since 1945. In his recent interventions regarding the future of the European Union (EU), he has expanded his remit to include key issues that arise within the emerging transnational European public sphere as well (Verovšek, 2012, 2021b).

Despite the normative implications of his political philosophy for contemporary public affairs, Habermas resists drawing a direct line between theory and practice. As a profession pursued within the modern university, he argues that philosophy is an academic discipline engaged in the search for 'scientific truth as a form of truth which can be defined only in terms of methodological research' (Hohendahl, 1997, p. 218). In contrast to pre-nineteenth century ideas of grand theory based on wide-ranging philosophies of history, Habermas (1994, p. 114) concludes that today 'one has to talk about philosophical questions philosophically, sociological questions sociologically, political questions politically'.

Habermas mediates the modern distinction between theory and practice by dividing the person of the philosopher into distinct roles. As a scholar, the theorist works in a context where 'the production of research and knowledge follows accepted methodological rules' (Hohendahl, 1997, p. 218). In light of globalisation, multi-culturalism and the broader pluralisation of worldviews in the contemporary world, Habermas (see 1984/1987, p. I.364) argues that philosophy is no longer able to define what should be done and by whom ahead of time. Even though it is reduced 'to elucidate[ing] the nature of situations in which people have the choice to redefine the rules and regulations by which they live', he argues that philosophy is still able to contribute to practice by 'systematically considering the interrelations between different social value spheres'. While the theorist acting as a public intellectual may feel the temptation to short-circuit this process, such direct approaches are doomed to fail given challenges and complexity of contemporary society: 'Before we can engage in attempts to mediate theory and practice toward any end, we must insure that each problem has been examined and pursued in terms of its inner logic' (Dahms, 1997, pp. 207, 195, 206).

These limitations do not, however, mean that philosophers cannot engage with politics. On the contrary, as engaged citizens political theorists can play 'the role of the public intellectual who intervenes where the apparatus has become unable to extricate itself' (Hohendahl, 1997, p. 226). Because their livelihood is governed by 'professional involvement in contexts of meaning that have an autonomous logic of their own' (1989, p. 87), Habermas argues that public intellectuals retain the ability to 'speak truth to power' given their 'privilege of having to deal with public issues only as a sideline' (2009, p. 55). As social critics, philosophers are able to intervene 'when current events are threatening to spin out of control – but then promptly, as an early warning system'. While they can play an important role as a 'dilettante who questions the demarcation lines between various realms and provokes through his or her very lack of expertise' (Biebricher, 2011, p. 713), the limited scope of theory under modern conditions of radical pluralism mean that the philosopher 'cannot rely on anything except the strength and precision of his or her arguments' (Habermas, 2018, pp. 56–57).

Habermas therefore contends that public intellectuals are 'limited to mobilising the relevant issues, information and arguments for public disputes' (in Czingon et al., 2020, p. 9). While constrained, this role is also crucial because it allows such figures to defend the feedback loop 'between an informed elite discourse and a responsive civil society'

(Habermas, 2006, p. 412). Public intellectuals thus play a key role in ensuring that the opinions generated in the public sphere have 'benefited from information, thoughtfulness, and the exchange of ideas' (Chambers, 2017, pp. 271, 273). While they may occasionally take stances that are partisan, this is not a problem as long as these positions are not 'detached from civil society inputs and can no longer claim to be responding to a flow of information from the periphery to the center'.

For example, in his interventions in the 'Historians' Dispute' (*Historikerstreit*) in the mid-1980s, Habermas objected to the attempt of German Chancellor Helmut Kohl and a group of conservative historians to 'normalize' West Germany's relationship to its Nazi past by arguing that far from being unique, the gas chambers were merely a response to the atrocities committed by the Soviet Union and the fear they generated in western Europe. His comments were clearly partisan; Habermas even went so far as to label these scholars 'new conservatives.' However, while he clearly made use of incendiary political rhetoric, Habermas's (1989, p. 193) argument regarding the need for Germans to retain 'a clear awareness of a break with our more sinister traditions' was still connected to inputs from civil society. This is visible in the fact that he persuaded most participants in public debate, ultimately forcing Kohl and his allies to back down from their proposed changes to the politics of memory in the Federal Republic (Baldwin, 1990).

As this example shows, the separation Habermas enforces between the academic philosopher and the engaged social critic is not 'the kind of division of labour in which one thing has nothing to do with the other'. On the contrary, while these spheres are connected, he believes that it is impossible to draw a direct line from theory to practice. This explains Habermas's frustration with 'the aggressiveness of people who do not see the role-differentiation in me' (Habermas, 1992, p. 127). In contrast to calls for a more "*political* political theory" (Waldron, 2016), in the next section I show that Habermas follows Adorno, his mentor at the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, in holding that 'theory is much more capable of having practical consequences owing to the strength of its own objectivity than if it had subjected itself to praxis from the start' (quoted in Richter & Adorno, 2002, p. 15).

3 | MEDIATING THEORY AND PRACTICE

I have already noted Habermas's limited understanding of 'what theories can accomplish'. In light of his views on this issue, Habermas (1994, pp. 113, 99) argues that modern philosophy must forego any claim to be the final arbiter and judge of knowledge that can 'offe[r] a theory that's supposed to be able to solve all of life's problems'. Rather, he argues, 'To get anything out of theoretical work, you have to follow it for its own sake'.

This does not mean that philosophy is useless in practical matters. On the contrary, Habermas (1994, p. 116) observes that by acting as a 'stand-in' or 'interpreter', philosophy can help to translate the specialized, technical insights of the academic research by focusing on what 'the knowledge we have acquired about the world (including the human being as another entity in the world) means "for us"' (Habermas, 2018, p. 147). This understanding of the discipline has important implications for the relationship of theory to practice. Most notably, it implies that the academic search for truth must remain separate from direct interventions in society and politics. While philosophers retain the right to intervene in public affairs as citizens, Habermas holds that they betray this professional vocation if they delude themselves into believing that philosophy 'can facilitate better, more effective political action on its own' (McKean, 2016, p. 881).

Although Raymond Guess (2008, p. 8) accuses him of creating an 'ideal theory of how we should act, and then… apply[ing] that ideal theory to the action of political agents', Habermas explicitly rejects this model. In contrast to such a two-step approach, which is more typical in Anglo-American analytic political philosophy (Verovšek, 2021c), he instead divides the move from theory to practice into three separate functions: (a) the development of theory on the basis of true statements that 'stand up to scientific discourse'; (b) the identification of social actors who mobilize the 'organization of processes of enlightenment'; and (c) the 'selection of appropriate strategies…[for] the conduct of the political struggle' (Habermas, 1974, p. 32). He thus follows Adorno in arguing that philosophers are only in a privileged position in the first step, where theory 'effects change precisely by remaining itself' (Adorno quoted in Richter

& Adorno, 2002, p. 19). Although philosophy can contribute to the second stage by clarifying the preconditions for transformation, the identification of appropriate actors and strategies for political struggles can only achieved 'in practical discourse, among the participants' (1974, p. 34); it cannot be determined ahead of time.

For instance, in his public interventions over the course of the sovereign debt crisis brought on by the Great Recession of 2008, Habermas repeatedly encouraged Germany and the rest of northern Europe to show more solidarity with the crisis-ridden member-states of the European south. In his public-facing texts he often drew on his philosophical background by engaging in what he called 'little exercise[s] in conceptual analysis' to show that the 'asymmetric effects of the politically unregulated interdependencies between the national economies entail an obligation to act in solidarity' (2014). While Habermas identified Germany and northern Europe as the key institutional actors, his appeals were addressed to the citizens of these states, who will have to support measures demonstrating increased solidarity. In this sense, the explicit goal of his commentaries is to 'broaden the spectrum of relevant arguments in an attempt to improve the lamentable level of public debates' (2009, p. 52). This example shows how Habermas thinks that philosophers can engage in the public sphere as participants, without short-circuiting the open nature of deliberation defined by the equality of all voices.

In addition to these philosophical considerations, Habermas's understanding of the role that philosophers can legitimately play in social and political life is also shaped the widespread collaboration of German thinkers with the Nazi regime. As a student in the 1950s, he was shocked to discover how many leading philosophers – including luminaries such as Carl Schmitt, Martin Heidegger and his doctoral supervisor, Ernst Rothacker – had actively supported Adolf Hitler's totalitarian policies. For Habermas, this demonstrated a profound lack of judgement and serves as evidence that philosophers suffer from a *déformation professionnelle* leads them to think that they can 'lead the leader' (*den Führer führen*). Following Adorno (1963, p. 32), who wrote disdainfully of the 'elitist desire for authority' (*elitären Herrschaftswunsche*) demonstrated by many theorists during the Third Reich, Habermas (1992, p. 199) insists that philosophers can no longer act as 'teachers of the nation'.

In light of these concerns, it is no accident that Habermas's first major intervention in the German public sphere was a piece he wrote in 1953 castigating Heidegger for not only allowing a series of lectures delivered in 1935 to be reproduced without excising a passage praising the 'inner truth and greatness' of National Socialism, but also for failing to publicly apologize for his support of the Nazi regime. Interestingly – and in line with his understanding of philosophy in the public sphere – Habermas (1977, p. 155) makes it clear up front that he is 'concerned here with the philosopher Martin Heidegger not as philosopher, but as a political personality'. While Habermas praises Heidegger's scholarship, he objects to the way that he sought to apply his philosophy directly to politics by 'foster[ing] an interpretation of genius that has the consequence of political destruction'. He (2008, p. 20) is particularly dismayed by Heidegger's 'fatal linking of a heroic call to "creative violence" with a cult of sacrifice', which presents the philosopher as an oracle who not only knows the direction of history, but seeks to use 'excitable and easily enthused students' as vehicles to further a violent political ideology (1977, p. 155).

Despite the limitations Habermas places on direct philosophical engagement in political discourse, he (2018, p. 152) still believes that it should 'play a public role in the context of a liberal political culture'. Although it 'does not provide instructions for action' (in Czingon et al., 2020, p. 20), Habermas does not sever theory from practice completely; instead, he mediates it in a way that respects the inner logics of both of these separate enterprises. This conceptualization of the relationship of theory to practice contrasts to more recent approaches advocated by public philosophers, a self-styled 'realist' movement and proponents of so-called 'democratic underlabouring'.

4 | METHODENSTREITEN REGARDING PHILOSOPHY AND POLITICS

Although many philosophers continue to argue that practical insights and action guidance are 'are not precipitates of a theory' (Schmidtz, 2006, p. 27), within analytic philosophy there is a growing consensus that philosophers should 'have socio-political ambitions for their work' (Bright, 2021) and that they 'have a responsibility to take matters of

public policy seriously' (Wolff, 2011, p. 1). However, there is no discernable agreement about how such ambitions should be redeemed. Given the limited space available to me here, I highlight three of the most important positions in these recent methodological debates before comparing them to the model of the philosopher as public intellectual advocated by Habermas.

First, 'public philosophers' tend to follow John Dunn (2014, p. 193) in arguing that the 'purpose of political theory is to diagnose practical predicaments and to show us how best to confront them'. Proponents of this approach argue that they have much to offer public policy debates due to their readily translatable analytic skills: 'We know about patterns of argument, with standard objections, and thoughtful replies. [...] We know how to depersonalize arguments and consider them on their merits' (Wolff, 2011, p. 201). As a result, public philosophers believe that their tools are applicable to a broad range of issues, including public safety, health care, sustainability, crime, etc., without the need to specialized knowledge. In this sense, they are predisposed to believe – 'rather pompously', as Jo Wolff (2011, p. 1) admits – 'that philosophers should have something to contribute to all of these policy areas'. While they may engage in public debate in ways that are not dissimilar to the kinds of discursive interventions Habermas associates with the public intellectual, the key difference is that they do so explicitly as philosophers by intervening directly 'as advisers to governments and members of think tanks, government commissions, and policy committees' (Small, 2002, p. 4).

Defenders of the second, 'realist' position hold that political philosophy should not focus on basic rights and the creation of a just society, as much of the discipline has done since the second half of the twentieth century, but instead should adopt an approach that is directly 'connected to practical interventions' (Geuss, 2008, p. 98). While public philosophers focus on advising political actors as a task that exists alongside their academic work, realists seek to integrate practice into their work by calling on political philosophy to 'theorise about the distinctive forces that shape real politics' (Rossi & Sleat, 2014, p. 689) in a way 'which gives greater autonomy to distinctively political thought' (Williams, 2005, p. 3). Unfortunately, what exactly such an approach to political philosophy would entail in practice is unclear, as this movement has 'devoted much more space to his critique of mainstream political theory than to the formulation of his alternative approach' (Rossi, 2016, p. 410).

A third alternative, known as 'democratic underlabouring', seeks to direct 'attention towards evidence about the forms in which, and conditions under which, the arguments of political theory are comprehensible to a wider public' (Baderin, 2016, p. 225). Much like public philosophy, its proponents assign the discipline a 'specific place in the political and policymaking process', which allows the philosopher to not only examine the implications of existing proposals, but also to 'offer arguments and justifications of her own' (Swift & White, 2008, pp. 49, 54). While its supporters admit that democratic political decisions must ultimately be left up to voters and their duly elected representatives, they argue that political philosophers 'can facilitate better, more effective political action' (McKean, 2016, p. 881) by offering 'orienting action-guidance' (Ulaş, 2020).

Despite their internal disagreements, supporters of all three positions argue that 'political theorists need to be genuine participants in public debate' (Waldron, 1993, p. 61) in their professional capacity as philosophers. Far from separating theory and practice, they instead seek to bring these different sphere of life, which are governed by different rules and expectations, into closer alignment with each other. By contrast, the model of the public intellectual defended by Habermas calls on philosophers to take a more indirect, critical role. In light of the modern separation of value spheres, he argues that the academic search for truth must remain separate from practical interventions 'for fear of their mutual corruption and contamination' (Haysome, 2014, p. 193). Instead of providing 'analysis of public policy, exploring foundational values, and consolidating them into theories and prototype policies that could, with reasonable adjustment, fit practical needs to improve...our public lives' (Wolff, 2011, pp. 2–3), as outsiders to the policy process with no special claim to authority, Habermas contends that philosophers acting as public intellectuals are limited to improving the quality of public debate.

In light of these commitments, Habermas encourages philosophers to follow in the footsteps of Immanuel Kant (1991, pp. 55, 57, 56), who saw it as his duty '*as a man of learning* addressing the entire *reading public*' to 'use his own reason and speak in his own person' in order to ensure that he 'publicly voices his thoughts on the impropriety or even injustice' of public policy. Rather than participating in politics directly or applying theory to practice in an unmediated

manner, public intellectuals instead seek to encourage political deliberation from the outside by 'writing letters to newspapers, appearing in the media, setting up pressure groups, helping to fund campaigns,' etc. (Wolff, 2011, p. 8). By seeking to persuade their fellow-citizens as equals within the public sphere, this approach not only respects the separation of the value spheres of both academic research and politics as independent areas of social life with their own internal logics, but also the democratic equality of all affected within the public sphere that Habermas has spent so much of his philosophical career theorizing and defending.

5 | CONCLUSION

On its face, there is nothing undemocratic about philosophers applying their insights to public policy by serving as political advisors or by engaging in the policy process by sitting on governmental boards and commissions. Insofar as such engagement ensures evidence-based policy-making that is based on the kind of expertise that is necessary to achieve political goals, it is most welcome. However, at a time when democratic citizens are increasingly demonstrating that they 'have had enough of experts,' as Michael Gove famously argued during the campaign for Great Britain to leave the EU (see Verovšek, 2020b), there is a real worry that such efforts to 'provide guidance when special interests collide' (Wolff & de-Shalit, 2007, p. 97) may end up being counterproductive in the long run.

My basic thesis is that Habermas's defense of the public intellectual, who contributing to debates in the public sphere from the outside and without any special claim to authority, does a better job of striking a balance between 'truth seeking and democratic responsiveness' (Baderin, 2016, p. 209) than the alternative models presented above. It does so by respecting the equality of all citizens as potential participants in public discourse, instead of seeking to gain influence behind the scenes through 'privilege connected to public service' (William Davies quoted in Beckett, 2017). Although Habermas's philosophical and political positions are clearly related, he separates these activities by publishing in different places (academic journals vs. newspapers) and using different styles of writing (academic jargon vs. rhetorical persuasion) in order to respect the values of these different spheres of life. In this way, while explicitly separating theory from practice, the 'void left by Habermas the philosopher is filled by Habermas the intellectual' (Beibricher, 2011, p. 719). I argue that this mediated, indirect form of engaged philosophy allows political theorists to apply their knowledge within the public square – which public philosophers, democratic underlabourers and realists also call for – with the added advantage of not undermining their status as academic philosophers, whose research is oriented towards truth.

Some proponents of the more direct approaches to philosophical engagement I have examined are aware of this problem. Wolff, who has been directly involved in public policy in a number different areas, therefore divides analytic public philosophy into two basic forms: applied and engaged. In the former, one 'start[s] with a reasonably well-worked out philosophical theory which one then applies to the world rather in the way you might simplistically imagine that a scientific theory is applied' (in Kouris & Wolff, 2021). However, Wolff notes that this approach is problematic, as it does not speak to those who does not share the same theoretical commitments. As a result, it is dogmatic and ineffective. Doing public philosophy this way is also potentially dangerous, as the practical implications of philosophical theories are often not well worked out or plausible. Wolff therefore councils political philosophers against the 'applied' approach.

Instead of searching for the right answer a priori – as the analytic philosopher is wont to do – he notes, 'what matters in public policy debate is not convincing yourself that you have the best position, but carrying others with you…working out how people can get much of what they want without taking too much away from others' (2011, p. 203). He therefore advises prospective public philosophers to adopt an 'engaged' style, which seeks 'to justify change from the status quo, rather than exploring different positions in a vacuum'. While this more modest approach does not allow the philosopher to insert preexisting theoretical considerations straight to public policy, Wolff argues that in this way 'we will at least enrich the public debate, even if we don't have an answer for everything' (in Kouris & Wolff, 2021).

It is true that the 'engaged' approach advocated by Wolff, with its emphasis on understanding the problem at hand and on reaching consensus, seeks ensure that the prerequisites of democratic legitimacy are met when philosophers engage in public policy. However, given its preference for direct intervention in the policy process itself, it is much easier proponents of the direct approaches I described to ultimately 'supplant or short circuit the democratic process, not contribute to it' (Swift & White, 2008, p. 55), even if that is not their intention. As a result, giving philosophers a direct place or role in the policy process – as advocated by supporters of public philosophy and democratic underlabouring – still runs the risk of bypassing public deliberation, while making theory itself more 'realistic' undermines philosophy's objectivity as a separate and autonomous sphere of life.

The actual problem with such unmediated forms of engagement is that they encourage philosophers to act 'behind the backs' of their fellow citizens. As Hannah Arendt points out, theorists must always remember that their status comes from their disciplinary search for truth governed by disciplinary norms. As a result, they must be wary of giving into the desire to exert power. In the German version of her essay 'Truth and Politics', she (2000, p. 330, translation mine) notes: 'The philosopher, who wants to intervene in public directly, is no longer a philosopher, but a politician; he no longer wants truth, but power'. Habermas (1974, p. 33) seconds this point, observing that philosophers 'must never imagine the addressees of social theory, or even society itself, as a subject writ large' whose desires and interests can be assumed from the outside. On the contrary, he notes that in democratic discourse 'there are only participants'.

Does this mean that analytic public philosophy is not viable or that philosophers should refuse to participate directly in the policy process when asked to do so? Of course not. However, they must work hard to ensure that they are practicing a form of engaged theory that is focused on enhancing public debate, not imposing their predetermined views on others (Verovšek, 2020b). The advantage of the public intellectual model, in Habermas's words (2018, pp. 56–57), is that it forces philosophers to 'renounce all other forms of authority and narcissism' in their public interventions. In his understudied political writings, Habermas shows how the philosopher can use the limited role of the public intellectual to still exert great influence on society and politics without undermining the objectivity of their academic works.

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