TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION
2025, VOL. 30, NO. 6, 1343–1362
https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2025.2466001

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Habermas as an ethnic thinker *Par Excellence:* on critique, Palestine and the role of intellectuals

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ABSTRACT

Taking Habermas' 2023 statement on Palestinians-Israel as the point of entry, this article examines his concept of critique. Against the dominant view of him as a philosopher of 'universalism' and 'critical rationality,' my thesis is that Habermas is an *ethnic* thinker, for, his ideas of critique and universalism unidirectionally rest on 'to all' rather than 'from all.' Consequently, it is missionary and borders on Islamophobia, particularly after 9/11. I show how Habermas' denial of Palestinians' genocide and his unqualified support to 'Israel's right to exist' as integral to Germany's 'democratic ethos' is neither an ample departure from his participation in the Hitler Youth nor from his understanding of the Enlightenment-modernity but largely their offshoots. I also juxtapose Habermas' role as a public intellectual with that of Imam Malik (d. 795) who chose to be flogged rather than parrot unjust language of power elites. I conclude with three broad implications this article has in the field of teaching in higher education.

ينطلق هذا المقال من تصريح يورغن هابرماس عام 2023 حول الفلسطينيين وإسرائيل ليتناول مفهومه للنقد. وعلى خلاف الرؤية الشائعة له كفيلسوف "الشمولية" و "العقلانية النقدية،" أطرح في هذا البحث أن هابرماس مفكر< إثني > بحت، إذ تقوم فكرته عن النقد والشمولية على مبدأ "إلى الجميع" بدلاً من ان يكون "من الجميع"، ما يجعلها ذات طابع تبشيري بل معادية للإسلام ، لا سيما بعد أحداث 11 سبتمبر. أظهر في هذا المقال كيف أن إنكار هابرماس للإبادة الجماعية للفلسطينيين ودعمه غير المشروط "لحق إسرائيل في الوجود" باعتباره جزءًا لا يتجزأ من "الأخلاق الديمقراطية" لألمانيا، لا يشكل قطيعة مع ماضيه كعضو سابق في "شباب هتلر"، ولا مع فهمه للحداثة والتنوير، بل يمثل امتدادًا طبيعيًا لهما. كما أقارن بين دوره كمثقف عام ودور الإمام مالك (ت. 795)، الذي فضّل أن يُجلَد على مجاراة الخطاب الجائر لنخب السلطة. أختم هذا المقال بثلاث تداعيات نظرية لأطروحتي على مجال التدريس في التعليم العالي.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 23 November 2024
Accepted 29 January 2025

KEYWORDS
Critique; colonialism; the enlightenment; genocide; Islam; Palestine

Introduction

Jürgen Habermas is considered as 'the principal voice of the Enlightenment's … critical rationality' (Burke 2011, 507), one engaged in defending 'the project of modernity and universalism' (Chambers 1996, 13). This essay aims not at finding, as philosophers Nancy Fraser (1995, 22) and Allen Amy (2016, 49), respectively, do 'deficiency' and 'lacunae' in his thoughts. Nor do I see Habermas' 2023 statement

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on Palestine-Israel (see below), as sociologist Asef Bayat (2023) does in a response that amounts to venerating the former, as a 'contradiction.' To read it as contradiction is to understand neither Habermas nor the Enlightenment or modernity of which Habermas is simultaneously a product and defender. My goal, instead, is to analyze the concept of critique in his writings and subject the entirety of it to a critique proper to itself. This mode of inquiry frees us from the easy charge of Eurocentrism lazily levelled against Habermas by Bayat and others. Beyond label-throwing in which Eurocentrism is made to stand apart from rather than seen as part of both the Enlightenment and Orientalism (Hallaq 2018), it allows us to track origin, structure and tradition of thinking Habermas partakes in, as well as, assess if and how within this wider complex his statement is a contradiction or continuation thereof. This is the task of part one in this essay.

In part two, I discuss how his notion of critique relates to his 'statement' about the post-October-7 situation in Gaza, signed by Habermas and three others. I locate this statement, as Agamben (2009, 64) reads statements in Foucault's work, as 'signature,' predetermining as it does 'its interpretation and distributes its uses and efficacy according to rules, practices, and precepts that it is our task to recognize.' Here, I discuss sources of Habermas' unconditional support to Israel as almost constitutive of modernity, a key feature of which has been its hostility to Islam. In the concluding part three, I outline an alternative notion of critique and intellectual freedom as signatures in the Islamic tradition. Unlike both Habermas and Kant (Horkheimer 1989, 85) whose writings often come close to appeasing, if not worshipping, the power that be – Habermas, after all, is neo-Kantian – scholars-philosophers in the Islamic tradition take their roles as critics of the regnant power (Winkel 1989). To illustrate this point, I juxtapose the 2023 statement by Habermas as a public intellectual with the role of Imam Mālik Ibn Anas (d. 795) who courageously preferred to be flogged in public rather than obey the unjust ruler. This juxtaposition is heuristically purposive so as to comparatively unveil different traditions of critique. To this end, it stresses that the role of public intellectuals as critics is not to sanctify the lawful, which, through most of history, has been awful (apartheid in South Africa was lawful as was the gory British Raj) but to inaugurate the possible as beautiful. That is, beyond Habermas' dualistic typology of strategic or instrumental and communicative action, there is a third possibility – of truthful action. I end with three broad implications of my critique of Habermas for teaching in higher education: namely; teaching, learning and research.

The essay's argument proceeds as follows. Contrary to Habermas himself and his defenders, his concept of critique bears the signature of Western philosophy as distinctly *ethnic* rather than *universal* (Ahmad 2017). This is evident even in his seemingly non-ethnic ideas of constitutional patriotism and cosmopolitan democracy (1998, 2003; cf. Ahmad and Kang 2022) and so on. Second, in his 2023 statement in particular and in his writings on Islam and Muslim world in general (especially, after the 'War on Terror'), including his defense of wars against Iraq (1991) and Afghanistan (in 2001), he exhibits tenets of Islamophobia and Orientalism, the scholarly apparatus of Western colonialism (Ahmad 2023a). Third, Habermas' thinking mostly serves raison d'état or Staatsräson. As such, it is disloyal to justice because it stands compromised due to crass proceduralism, legalism (he called himself a 'lay lawyer,' Specter 2011, 23)

and 'Occidental rationalism' (Habermas 1984, 6, ff., 1987) his notion of critique rests on, ethnocentrically and precariously as it were.

Understanding Habermas' statement on Palestine – and the reason behind it – is impossible without unpacking the term Staatsräson as integral to German politics. It means 'the secured existence of Israel is in the national interest of Germany,' hence 'part of our reason of state,' a credo asserted by Chancellor Angela Merkel in the Israeli Parliament (Marwecki 2020, 195, 2). Rather than exercise his own reason and display any autonomy from Staatsräson, Habermas simply repeats it. As discussed in this essay later, it is ironic that while attempting to distance himself from the ethnic cleansing of Jews in his country, as a self-proclaimed 'universalist,' now he defends the ethnic supremacist state of Israel engaged in ethnic cleansing of Palestinians. One cannot help but wonder to what extent and in what ways the Nazi experience has helped to shape the unconscious of contemporary Germans wedded to Staatsräson.

Pre-text of Habermas' notion of critique

In an autobiographical account, Habermas (2008, 12, 16–8, 20) observes that ideas 'are no more than an expression of the biography from which they spring.' He was born in 1929 with cleft palate, which tormented him due, among others, to scorn hurled at him. Aged five, he underwent second surgery, which he 'remembers clearly.' From his disability, Habermas learnt interdependence among humans and centrality of language and communication. Second, 'the caesura of 1945 that first led to the eye-opening experience for my generation.' By this, Habermas means encountering 'the Nazi past,' which informed his adult life. He writes: 'Without having done anything to deserve it, my cohort' learnt from 'the Nuremberg war crimes trials.' Just before his sixteenth birthday, WW II ended, thereby marking 'the liberation' of his generation and 'opening to the West' ('democracy,' 'the magic word'). Here, Habermas highlights his 1953 attack on Martin Heidegger (d.1976). According to him, Heidegger 'stylized fascism as a 'destiny of Being.' Habermas was 'irritated,' moreover, by Heidegger's 'anti-Christian and anti-Western' stance 'against … the Enlightenment.'

Astonishingly, Habermas erases his own role in National Socialism. It can't be that while he recalls clearly surgery he had at five and the scorn hurled at him as a child, he has no memory of his involvement in the Nazi regime at a more mature age. Aged 10, he joined the Deutsches Jungvolk and later the Hitler Youth, both Nazi outfits respectively for age groups between 10 and 14 and 15 and 18. Their membership meant subscription to racist Nazi weltanschauung. Manning anti-aircraft defenses during WW II, he fought against the Allies (Müller-Doohm 2016; Ahmad 2023c).

Most accounts of Habermas too either efface this or often mention it as nearly trivial. Matthew Specter (2011, 7), a biographer of Habermas, skips this because 'very little evidence' exists about his teenage life. But is this not precisely his duty to research, especially when Habermas is alive, as are his many contemporaries? Scholars also seem to take Habermas' own account as truth rather than scrutinize it (e.g. Baxter 2011, 1). Matustik (2001, 4), another biographer, cites him as follows: my father was 'considered to be a passive sympathizer' of the Nazi. But he doesn't discuss what passive sympathy means, let alone its relation with Habermas' upbringing and thinking. Reproducing Habermas' passive sentence, Matustik also does not inquire into how did the father view himself and

son the father. From Müller-Doohm's (2016) biography we learn, however, that the elder Habermas was anything but a passive sympathizer. The story of Habermas joining Deutsches Jungvolk is curious. Since initially he hadn't been notified to join it, he felt 'excluded.' His father, the director of the Bureau of Trade and Industry (grandfather was a Protestant minister), then, contacted the authority, which admitted him. That father appealed for son's joining by no means proves the former as 'passive.' Notably, the father had already joined the Nazi party in 1933, a year after Hitler visited, amidst theatrical processions and church services, Gummersbach, a town in North Rhine-Westphalia adjacent to Düsseldorf and Cologne, where Habermas was born and lived in. And just before Hitler unleashed total terror, in 1939 his father became an advisor to the National Socialist German Workers' Party, the political wing of Nazism. That his father was a 'passive sympathizer' of the Nazi seems mistaken. I will return to this in the concluding section.

In the autobiographical account, Habermas (2008, 12) describes 'public space,' 'discourse,' and 'reason' at the core of his scholarship. To the degree this trinity or 'triad' forms the core, its valence is traceable and intelligible in relation primarily to his concern about re-positioning and reconstruction of post-WW II Germany as a nation-state (which substitutes for 'society' in many of his writings). His engagement with philosophy, critical theory, sociology, law, media and the like emanates from and contributes, in the final analysis, to this monumental concern (Specter 2011). The still-pervasive image that Habermas is a Marxist – in 1989 he claimed that 'I am the last Marxist' (Amy 2016, 40) – and anti-capitalist is as shaky as the view of him as a 'universalist' (see below). His anti-Left position was evident as early as 1981. In his magnum opus (Amy 2016, 37), the two-volume *The Theory of Communicative Action* (henceforth *TCA*), he described capitalism as 'norm-free:' capitalist 'market is the most important example of a norm-free regulation of cooperative contexts' (Habermas 1985 [1981], 150). Though he withdrew (Czingon, Diefenbach, and Kempf 2020, 26) his characterization of capitalism as 'norm-free sociality,' the withdrawal was only in its linguistic 'expression,' not in substance. At any rate, unless specified, the descriptor Marxist has little analytical value. For instance, Ber Borochov (d. 1917), a Russian Jew, coined 'proletarian Zionism,' which later served as 'Marxist apologetic for Zionism' for Israeli socialists (Turner 1978, 4, & chapter 2). Likewise, Anderson's (1983, 11, italics in original) book on nationalism aimed to explain why rather than come together communist nation-states like Cambodia, China, the USSR and Vietnam not only battled against one another but justified the bloodshed in a '*Marxist* theoretical perspective.' In India of 1990s at Jawaharlal Nehru University, a Marxist vouching for environmentalism was taken as 'a lacky of the bourgeoisie' whereas at University of Amsterdam which I joined in 2000s, she was considered a radical Marxist.

Relevant here is also Habermas' stance vis-à-vis the 1960s student movement. In 1967, Reza Shah Pahlavi (the Shah), Iran's dictator-monarch, visited Germany. Students – from Socialist German Student Federation, Commune 1, Iranian diaspora and more – staged a protest. They disliked the ties between the Shah and German President Karl Lübke who rolled out red carpet to the Shah. Notably, students viewed their protest internationally, opposing 'inhuman living conditions, no matter whether … in Germany, Vietnam, Greece, Persia' (in Darkifard 2010, 20). The police brutally suppressed the peaceful protest, killing Benno Ohnesorg, a student who held a placard inscribed with 'autonomy

for the Teheran University' (in Darkifard 2010, 36). Later protest intensified. Habermas termed it as 'fascism of the left' (Specter 2011, 102), becoming thereby a suspect among students who counted him as their ally. He also showed hostility to students' demand for radical democratization. In short, Habermas stood for 'reformism,' not radicalism (ibid.:116).

Yet, part of radicalism survived; in *Theory and Practice* (1973, 4), he noted 'the incompatibility of the imperatives that rule the capitalistic economic system with a democratic process for forming the public will.' With the fall of the USSR and Berlin Wall, Habermas' liberal position became stark (Selk and Jörke 2019, 44). In an essay on his 2013 book, *The Lure of Technocracy*, Streeck (2016, 251), stresses how for Habermas the enemy is not capitalism but its 'management' and technocracy. In 2013, Tony Abbott, a liberal, explained his win as Australia's Prime Minister as follows: 'I declare that Australia is under new management and … open for business' (Sky News 2013). In *Unjust Legality*, Marsh (2001, x) discusses Habermas as 'an enthusiastic apologist for … capitalism in its all viciousness at home and abroad.' Unsurprisingly, Habermas speaks of European democracy and European Monetary Union in the same breath, christening Euro as the 'cunning of economic reason' (2015, 67, 68). He inserts 'economic' in Hegel's metaphysical concept of 'the cunning of reason' (List der Vernunft), a conversion of Kant's 'hidden plan of nature' (Ullmann-Margalit 2017, 155). His recent exposition continues this path. With no vision of an alternative, Habermas dwarfs thinking itself such that its goal – and with it, of academics in higher education – becomes finding ways in which capitalism 'could be tamed' (in Czingon, Diefenbach, and Kempf 2020, 26).

Critique-crisis and occidental reason

The *TCA* demonstrates Habermas' fidelity not to Marx but Max Weber whose rank orientalism, especially about Islam, is well-documented (Salvatore 1996, 2016; Turner 2010). Here, as in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (hereafter *PDM*), he is heavily dependent on Weber. His conceptual dependence on Weber is in part because of the latter's 'anti-Marxist' (Frank 1975, 432; Gouldner 1970, 121) theorization. Notably, as a 'sociologist of empire' (Allen 2017), Weber's ideas became 'fundamental aspects' of German politics via Carl Schmitt's influence (Turner 2009, 3). In a vital study, Barbalet (2023, 109, 110–12) shows how Weber's writings are not scholarly but equally political, the latter stamping his 'sociological and methodological arguments.' 'An unabashed German [ethno-]nationalist,' (Lebow 2017, 2), Weber was devoted to its imperialist impulse. Habermas' dependency on Weber is also due to Talcott Parsons, an influential sociologist of post-WW II US academy, a votary of functionalism and a 'leading disciple' of Weber (Frank 1975, 432). While sociologists like Ilyas Ba-Yunus see Parsons as a partisan of the *status quo* (in Winkel 1989, 23), others take him as a positivist (Holmwood 2009, 40). To Avin Gouldner, Parsons' focus on system and social order 'reeks of an oppressive, anti-emancipatory conservatism' (in Nichols 2021, 4). In *TCA*, Weber and Parsons, inter alios, figure as pillars on which Habermas hoists his own theory, declaring that no theory can be 'taken seriously' unless it is situated 'in respect to Parsons' (1985, 199, also see, 1981).

A central theme in *TCA* (1984, xli) is to identify the present crisis – colonization of lifeworld by system – which also expresses Habermas' notion of critique. Following

Koselleck (1959), Habermas (2001, 135) takes 'crisis and critique' as concurrent, crisis stirring critique toward 'the good' (1973, 214). *PDM* begins with Weber's thesis about 'Occidental rationality' as peculiar to Europe where alone due to Protestant ethic rationalization of economy, i.e. capitalism, took place. He reads Weber's thesis on modernity as (i) secularization of 'Western *culture*,' (ii) rationalization of 'modern *societies*' and (iii) 'differentiation' of society into 'functionally intermeshing systems' of capitalism and modern state (1987, 1; italics in original). Notice that Habermas writes society in plural but culture in singular, implying thereby that there is a unified, singular Western culture irrespective of diversity in societies. He connects this reading of modernity by Weber to Kant's 'latent theory of modernity' through his three 'Critiques.' Kant differentiated theoretical reason, practical reason and judgment, assigning each its own sphere. However, Kantian differentiation – elsewhere (1990, 19) glossed as science, morals and art – led to 'the crisis of the diremption of life itself' (Habermas 1987, 21, 32) to which Hegel responded through his 'critique' of 'divided modernity.'[1] The singular wording of Western culture as well as modernity by Habermas is striking.

Contra *PDM*, in *TCA* crisis-critique dynamic's concern is more empirical and practical: namely, the post-1960s crisis in Western capitalist welfare states, particularly in Germany, marked by their 'socially disintegrative side effects' and 'increasing sociopsychological and cultural costs' (1984, xli, xlii). Importantly, 'Occidental rationalism' is itself under question, the restoration of which Habermas takes as his task and that of critical theory at large (1985, ch. viii). At the heart of the crisis leading to disintegrative side effects is the gap or discord between system on one hand and lifeworld on the other. System comprises separately conceived subsystems of the economy and the state, elsewhere named simply as money and power (1985, 267, 154). Parsonian schema of society, culture and personality as demarcated domains based on which social order is produced becomes lifeworld in Habermas. In the intersubjective lifeworld, interaction is based on natural language, trust and normative harmony. Lifeworld, then, is the locus of 'communicative action' or rationality aimed at reaching 'understanding' in which the role of language is foundational. The obverse of communicative action is 'strategic action' based on instrumental rationality, which hampers social integration (Heath 2011). The crisis, then, is this: 'internal colonization [by] the economy and state … as [they] penetrate ever deeper into the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld' (Habermas 1985, 367).[2]

Critique-as-response to this crisis by Habermas is to separate communicative rationality from instrumental rationality. This enables Habermas (1984, 144, 2001, 141) to also criticize *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* by Horkheimer and Adorno who, unlike Weber, had very little, if any, ambivalence toward rationality/reason (Vernunft), because they took it as synonym for instrumental reason and viewed 'Enlightenment as mass deception' (2002, xviii, 94). Hence, Habermas' repetitive calls to defend modernity and the Enlightenment. That this Occidental rationality originated from and is part of Western Christianity is integral to Weber's thesis as it is to Habermas'.

Colonization of Palestine & combat concepts

There are known criticisms of Habermas: for instance, dichotomy between lifeworld and system, its treatment in four inconsistent ways in the same text and problematic premise

of methodological individualism in his theory of action (Fultner 2011, 5; Heath 2011, 75, 82). My goal here is to critique Habermas' very notion of critique as a judge. In my reading, the following premises characterize his notion of critique:

- Critique and Occident as locus of reason ushered in by the Christian Reformation and the Enlightenment (1987, 17) are coeval; and
- Exposition of 'internal colonization' of lifeworld by system without a situated, discerning account of external colonization by European-Western powers.

Eloquent about 'internal colonization' of lifeworld by system in Western plutocracies, Habermas has been conceptually silent about external colonialism (Mendieta 2019), including the ongoing brutalization of lifeworld of Palestinians who have no system of their own, as they (un)live under occupation of the Israeli settler colonial state (Dana and Jarbawi 2017; Khalidi 2020; Pappé 2012). In November 2023, Habermas issued a 301-word statement. Titled 'principles of solidarity. [*sic*] a statement,' points pertinent to my archeological examination of Habermas' notion of critique are as follows:

1. The statement's aim is to express 'solidarity with Israel and Jews in Germany;'
2. 'The Hamas massacre' aimed at 'eliminating *Jewish life* in general;' 'retaliation' by Israel is thus 'justified' as 'waging of a war' for '*future peace*.'
3. 'Despite all the concern for the fate of the Palestinian *population*,' those who see 'genocidal intentions' in Israeli attacks are in error.
4. 'Israel's *actions* in no way justify anti-Semitic reactions, *especially not in Germany*. … ' 'The *democratic ethos* of … *Germany*, which is orientated towards the obligation *to respect human dignity*, is *linked to* a political culture for which *Jewish life* and *Israel's right to exist* are … worthy of special protection in light of the mass crimes of the Nazi era. The commitment to this is fundamental to *our political life*' (Habermas et al. 2023; italics added).

A detailed critique of each part of Habermas' statement is in order. Which reason – the foundation of critique, indeed of philosophy itself, (1984, esp. ch. viii; 1990, 3–4) and modernity's 'only authority' (2001, 133) in his writings – is at work when Habermas monopolizes 'solidarity' for 'Israel' and 'Jews in Germany,' with Palestinians not even mentioned? Doesn't it hierarchize lives (Asad 2007, 93) such that certain lives are elevated while others are degraded as sub-human – to Israel, Palestinians are 'human animals' (Ahmad 2023b)? Is Habermas' discursive elimination aloof from elimination of Palestinians by Israel's military? To which universe of discourse does Habermas' universalism belong in which its figures are only German state, Israeli state and Jews in Germany? For instance, what about Jews living neither in Germany nor in Israel?

As for the second part, how does Habermas know that Hamas' goal was to 'eliminate Jewish life in general'? In Hamas' own account, its attack was a 'necessary step' against 'occupation and colonialism' which 'started 105 years ago, including 30 years of British colonialism and 75 years of Zionist occupation' (LeMond 2024). Hence, rather than call the Hamas target 'occupiers,' or Israelis, why he instead dubs it as 'Jewish life,' that too 'in general'? For the syntagma 'in general' to be valid, it needs proof of Hamas targeting Jews everywhere, for example, those in Australia. Importantly, which

reasoning allows to describe Hamas' military action as 'massacre,' not resistance? Doesn't Habermas, a 'lay lawyer,' know that the UN's 1982 resolution grants 'legitimacy of the struggle of peoples for … liberation from colonial … domination and foreign occupation by all available means, *including armed struggle*' (in Cohen 2017, emphasis added). Thus viewed, the portrayal of Israel's military attack as 'retaliation' logically falls apart, as does its (un)reasoning that an occupying force aims to achieve 'peace.' Here, Habermas also failed to take up the opportunity to practice comparative philosophy: parallels between Warsaw ghetto and Gaza as a far bigger ghetto. In 1943, Jews in Warsaw ghetto resisted the Nazi terror under which their lives were made unlivable. Forced between dying with dignity and dying like hunted animals, Warsaw Jews, like Gazans, mounted an armed resistance (Ahmad 2023b).

Curiously, Habermas depicts Jews in terms of 'Jewish life,' while Palestinians are referred to as a mere population, their sentential location itself belittled: 'Despite all the concern for the fate of the Palestinian population.' The word population thus used as a countable noun in its second meaning, according to the Oxford dictionary (2024, italics mine), means a 'group of people or *animals*.' And Habermas seems certain that killing of Palestinians *en masse* by Israel is not intentional. Here Habermas the lawyer takes a legal approach to genocide the 1948 UN definition of which requires '*intent* to destroy.' But in Holocaust studies, there is also a historical approach. As are 'intentionalist' and 'functionalist' schools. The insistence on intent and its evidence, thus, is anything but innocent. To shield perpetrators by stripping them of their intent, Joseph Goebbels and Hitler described the 1938 anti-Jewish pogrom as 'spontaneous' (Hill 1996, 103). Here is the observation by Goldberg (2024, 9, italics added; also see, Asad 2024; Keane 2024), a scholar of Holocaust Studies, which shows how wooden – or, should it be impoverished? – is Habermas' position.

> What is happening in Gaza is a genocide … because the level and pace of indiscriminate killing, destruction, mass expulsion, displacement, deliberate famine, executions, the wiping out of universities, cultural and religious institutions, the crushing of elites (including the killing of journalists), and the sweeping dehumanization of the Palestinians create an overall picture of genocide, of *the intentional and conscious shattering of Palestinian existence* …

In fairness, let me note that there is a time gap between Habermas' and Goldberg's statement. But well before Habermas made his statement public, Israel had already killed over 11,000 Palestinians (BBC 2023). At stake, therefore, is not simply number or magnitude of destruction unleashed by Israel, but the perspective, which in Habermas' case is divested of history. He assumes that nothing occurred before October 7. I mean not only effacement of 1917 Balfour declaration but also Christian restorationism (Merkley 1993) that preceded Zionism, including the idea by Western powers to impose a state in Palestine. To recall, Christian restorationism – with its primacy of the Hebrew scripture and Christian import of Palestine – was an offshoot of the Reformation, which Habermas (1987, 17) takes as integral to the Enlightenment.

The final part of Habermas' statement shows his worry not about planetary justice but Germany's (inter)national image as a state. He forges a link between German democracy and 'Israel's right to exist,' which is not general but 'worthy of special protection.' In this link, key actors are states, Germany and Israel, with humans subordinated to them. As

noted earlier, among humans Jews alone, not Palestinians, deserve solidarity. Scholars of international relations have noted that Habermas' theory, like Kant's, is 'state-centered' (Rustin 1999, 171). This state-centeredness is manifest, above all, in deployment of the phrase: 'Israel has the right to exist.' Moncef Khane (2024), an ex UN official engaged for long in human rights, describes it as a propaganda like Goebbels'. The word 'right' implies that it is legal. But the UN Charter has no authority to create any state. The right of self-determination of a people like the Palestinians instead is part of it (Article 1). I cite Khane at length:

> Repeating propaganda does not nullify international law, according to which no state has an inherent 'right' to exist, but peoples have an inalienable right to self-determination. An occupying power has no inherent right of self-defense against the people it subjugates, but the people under occupation have an inherent right of self-defense against their occupiers, as the International Court of Justice has ruled. … [Israel was born out of] the ethnic cleansing and a violent land grab campaign by Zionist militias, including the Haganah, the Stern Gang (Lehi) and the Irgun, which Albert Einstein called in a 1948 letter a 'terrorist, right wing, chauvinist organization.'

If Khane is right, then, Habermas' statement repeating 'Israel's right to exist' partakes in a propaganda rather than engage with reason qua reason. His simultaneous effacing of Palestinians' right to resistance and freedom, moreover, shows how (anti)universal is his philosophy and what 'Occidental rationalism' (un)does. Consider too that for Habermas Antisemitism exists but rampant Islamophobia in Germany post-October 7 (or earlier; see, Ahmad 2013a) doesn't, even as attacks on Muslims swelled. To remind ourselves, Germany banned democratic pro-Palestinian protests against the relentless Israeli aggression (Connolly 2023). Critical to note here is the resignation by the leading Australian critical political theorist, John Keane, from the Berlin Social Science Center (WZB) where he was a research professor for over two decades (Keane 2024, 13). WZB charged him with supporting terrorist organization.

On a deeper analysis, the segment of Habermas' statement about Germany's '*democratic ethos* … orientated towards the obligation *to respect human dignity*' which 'is *linked to* a political culture for which *Jewish life* and *Israel's right to exist* are … worthy of special protection in light of the mass crimes of the Nazi era' is actually a recipe for supporting dictatorship, which in turn annuls the claim of Germany's democratic ethos and '*our political life*' (who does 'our' refer to?). Is it a 'democratic ethos' in the first place whose survival is possible only on its dependence on Israel, which has a track record of having supported dreadful dictators involved in massive violation of human rights and mass crimes? Here are some examples: Israel's support to the apartheid South Africa; Indonesia's dictator, General Suharto (1960s); Romania's Nicolae Ceausescu (1965–89) who was also anti-Semite; Haiti's Francois Duvalier and his son (1957–86), and Alfredo Stroessner, Paraguay's dictator. The last one is particularly eye-opening because of its white-washing of the Nazi crime. Israel struck a deal with Paraguay, which had given refuge to Nazi war criminals, including Dr. Josef Mengele, responsible for murdering hundreds of Jews in Auschwitz. In this deal, Israel aimed to get rid of sixty thousand Palestinians, ten percent of the total population, by transferring them to Paraguay (Loewenstein 2023, 32–6). Such deals that defy democracy's supposed transparency to remain in dark secrecy (van der Veer 2004), however, find no mention in Habermas' theory of public sphere ([1964] 1991).

Table 1. Universe of explicit combat concepts in Habermas' 2023 statement.

Palestine	Israel	Germany
Hamas' extreme atrocity	Israel's response/actions	
The Hamas massacre	Prompted Israel to strike back	
Eliminating Jewish life	Retaliation by Israel justified	
		No place for antiSemitism, especially in Germany
	Solidarity with Israel and Jews in Germany	
	German democracy linked to Jewish life & Israel's right to exist	

Though Habermas doesn't use terrorism in this specific statement, earlier he un-hesitantly spoke of Palestinians using the language of terrorism rather than of resistance. When asked to define terrorism, in a long post- 9/11 interview with Giovanna Borradori (2003, 33), he replied: 'Palestinian terrorism … revolves around murder … indiscriminate annihilation of enemies, women and children – life against life.' Here, Habermas makes Palestinians typify a form of terrorism: indiscriminate guerilla warfare. He presents Al-Qaeda as a case of global terrorism, which is 'new' but not political; hence, outside Habermas' pre-determined boundary of rationality. Such expositions leave us wonder if there is a line separating philosopher from accounts of journalists or security study experts like Peter Neumann (2009), a partisan of 'new terrorism' who made it identical with Islam. Seen from the framework of this essay, not only is Habermas' statement fiercely partisan, it carries overtone of combat concepts informed by Schmitt's notion of politics.

In *Futures Past* (1979, 158–9) Koselleck used 'asymmetrical counterconcepts' and 'antithetical' concepts. Later, scholars extended this line of inquiry into 'combat-concept' (Ahmad 2022), which pertains to Koselleck's notion of politics shaped by Schmitt. To Schmitt, politics was not about a welfare state that amicably allocated resources to its citizens. It was instead about demarcating friends from foes, warfare being its fulcrum. To Koselleck, what marked modernity was not happy 'progress,' but enmity. That is, war in politics is war in language, combat-concepts being its weapons. As oppositional labels, they are 'employed only in one direction and unequal fashion' (Koselleck 1979, 155,156) to ignite unity within and opposition without. Premised not on mutuality but on exclusivity, they are 'not merely a sign for, but also a factor in, politics or social groupings.' To illustrate his thesis, Koselleck (161–91) examined combat-concepts like Hellenes vs barbarian and Christians vs heathens. As Table 1 shows, Habermas' combat-concepts instantly ensure sympathy for Israel and vilify Palestinians such that ruthless Israeli military attacks simply become 'actions.'

Habermas' combat-concepts approximate enacting enemy-friend warfare rather than reaching 'understanding' (Verstehen), deemed central to communicative rationality. Oddly, this warfare stands expelled from his account of crisis of Western welfare states and colonization of lifeworld. This expulsion in turn stems from a notion of politics that takes welfare and warfare as divided, not in tandem. Critiquing President Lyndon Johnson's 1960s plan for a 'Great Society,' Herbert Marcuse (2001, 79) underlined how it 'would be like a welfare state prepared to turn into a warfare state.' Indeed, it is plausible to read modern politics as algebra of warfare-welfare (Ahmad 2019).

Ethnic character of western philosophy

For my critique of Habermas' notion of critique to be comprehensive, we ought to also study methodological mechanisms in his thinking and the degree to which they have

shaped pedagogical modes as well as curricular contents in higher education. Above, I showed his analytical separatism in which welfare and warfare are set apart. One encounters a different sort of separatism when connexion between Western states and politics in the Middle East, a post-WW II neologism (Ahmad 2011b), stand severed. While applauding post-WW II Germany's opening to the West, i.e. democracy, 'the magic word,' he doesn't ask: why the US and Britain enabled Germany to democratize but Iran to de-democratize in 1953? After all, in the anti-Shah protest students in Germany also raised slogans like 'Mo, Mo, Mossadegh' (Darkifard 2010, 34). Mosaddeq was an elected, popular prime minister of Iran, who, asserting its sovereignty, nationalized the oil sector, then controlled by the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (later to become British Petroleum). To subvert Iran's democracy, the US-UK organized a coup against him and installed the Shah in power who as a dictator ruled until 1979. This coup d'état became a model for regime change in Latin America (Ahmad 2011a, 2012). True to the methodology of erasure, after 9/11, Habermas (in Borradori 2003, 31) spoke of Iran's post-1979 'theocracy' but wiped the 1953 coup out; as he did the Israel's 1978 position favoring a regime 'in the form of a military coup' in Iran (Loewenstein 2023, 34).

Such effacements by Habermas are not a matter of chance bias or ignorance; rather, they are constitutive of modern Western philosophy that takes Christianity, Protestantism in particular, as a 'rational,' 'good' religion form the particularistic lens, structure and history of which every other religion is assessed. In his interview with Borradori (2003, 31, 33), Habermas proudly says that due to secularization Christianity is unique in its 'self-reflexive achievement' and, then, rushes to present 'Islamic fundamentalism' as its anti-thesis. Islam as obverse of the Enlightenment informs his other writings too. Defending liberalism as individual rights, its counter example he gives are German citizens with origins in Türkiye, who due to 'Islamic tradition' debar their daughters from education (Habermas 1995, 850). On universalistic versus particularistic validity claim in international politics, he presents 'ethnocentrically sealed-off' Turkey and 'aggressive' Erdogan as the latter's example (in Czingon, Diefenbach, and Kempf 2020, 24–5). That Israel is foundationally an ethnocentric state is left out.

Habermas also justified the Afghan government's overthrow. Contra Chomsky (2010) for whom it was 'totally illegal … criminal,' according to Habermas, 'naturally there were good reasons, even normative ones, to forcibly remove the Taliban regime which brutally oppressed not only women but the entire population' (in Borradori 2003, 27). There is a name for this mode of 'rational' (un)reasoning: 'imperialist feminism' around which intellectuals, among them 'liberal' and 'left' too, rallied after 9/11 to defend Afghanistan's invasion (Toor 2012; Hirschkind and Mahmood 2002).[3] About Western war against Iraq in 1991, the Gulf War, Habermas observed:

> The Gulf War was at best a kind of hybrid. It wasn't carried out under the Command of the United Nations … And yet the Allies claimed the legitimation of the UN until the end. In theory, they acted as deputies of the world organization. That's better than nothing. (in Matustik 2001, 175)

Notice how in resistance against reasoning and fairness, legitimacy of the UN is denied and affirmed in the same stroke. To state the obvious, I am defending neither the internal brutality by the Saddam regime nor its attack on Kuwait. My point is about the mode of

Habermas' argumentation, it's supposed grounding in critical reason and the claim of universalism. More importantly, behind Habermas' justification was the logic of 'new face of Fascism in Iraq' and Germany's duty toward Israel, 'encircled by the entire Arab world and threatened with the most terrific kinds of weapons;' ergo, 'military sanctions against Iraq was justified' (in Matustik 2001, 7, 178).

In describing Iraq as 'new face of Fascism,' Habermas externalizes what is internal and generalizes what is specific to Europe. Behind this methodological move, however, lurks an intellectual fear to ask question that Talal Asad (2024) poses: why 'did Zionism not emerge among Palestinian Jews … who had lived for centuries in … the Ottoman Empire until the end of the First World War?' One may likewise ask: why did Fascism originate in Europe and not elsewhere? And does a relation obtain among Fascism, Christianity and the Enlightenment? For Habermas, obviously, it does not! In highlighting Heidegger's Fascism and his criticism thereof, he wrote: 'I was also irritated by the anti-Christian and anti-Western sentiments directed [by Heidegger] against the egalitarian universalism of the Enlightenment' (2008, 20). Here Habermas strikes a homology among Christianity, West and the Enlightenment the trinity of which is crafted as external to Fascism with Heidegger as its exemplar. But to call Heidegger anti-Christian is inaccurate. He did rebel against Catholicism and converted to 'undogmatic Protestantism.' Later, he became a votary of mystical quietism. After WW II, his stance toward his native faith, however, toned-down, observing 'origins always remain one's future.' His burial was Catholic (Wolfe 2019). The supposition of Christianity being anti-Fascism is also incorrect. Recent scholarship shows intimacy between the two: 'hundreds of thousands … of fervent, practicing Christians, Orthodox, Protestant and Roman Catholic … were attracted to fascism precisely because it seemed to fulfil and advance their religious aspirations' (Pollard 2007, 443). Historian Steigmann-Galls (2003, 2) documents how Gauleiter Erich Koch, president of the Protestant Church in East Prussia, linked Nazism and Lutheran project. In a testimony after the War, Koch said: 'I held the view that the Nazi idea had to develop from a basic Prussian-Protestant attitude … and from Luther's unfinished Reformation.'

In Habermas' (2009, 75) reading, as Christianity is unique in its 'self-reflexive achievement' owing to secularization set in motion by the Reformation which, in alliance with the Enlightenment, inaugurated modernity – 'Modernity – an Unfinished Project,' as he puts it (1987, xix) – he prescribes the same teleological road to Muslims in Europe. As with the Protestant churches in Germany, he admonishes, Muslims 'still have to undergo this painful learning process [of secularization]' and adopt 'a historical-hermeneutic approach to the teaching of the Qur'an.'[4] In 1964, in a powerful critique of Orientalism well before Edward Said's, Abdul Latif Tibawi had already recognized the missionary intent of calls like Habermas' to reform Islam. Habermas' missionary philosophy also extends to his conceptualization of instrumental rationality vis-à-vis the bio-world, which he (mis)takes as 'nature' (Habermas 1975, cf., Keane 1984).

What I characterize as missionary, for Habermas, it is simply 'universal' – a notion, which, it is safe to conjecture, prevails in most institutions of higher education (see next section). He takes universalism as 'open to all' (in Borradori 2003, 42). But what exactly is 'the thing' – its history, content, worth, feature, future and so on – which is presented '*to all*?' Readers of Habermas know well that for him the depot of universalism is West and its philosophy, which in his later writings become 'Judeo-Christian tradition'

(in Ahmad 2021a, viii). Arthur Cohen (1969) termed the post-WW II neologism of Judeo-Christian tradition as 'myth' and wondered how Christianity, deemed as 'successor and completion of Judaism,' should appropriate 'the body and substance of that Jewish teaching which it believed to be defective.' In circulation initially more in the US than in Europe, the myth of Judeo-Christian tradition, however, is successful and pervasive now, particularly in anti-Muslim mobilizations of leaders like Geert Wilders in the Netherlands and Marine Le Pen in France (Ahmad 2021a). In subscribing to and staging the myth of Judeo-Christian tradition as the core at once of European identity and universalism, it doesn't occur to Habermas, as it didn't to Kant and Hegel too, that universal must also be '*from all*.' That is, in the footsteps of Kant and Hegel – in fact, of most philosophers before and after them, Habermas disregards intellectual traditions such as Islamic. In fact, it is far more than disregard, it is stigmatization. His (dis)agreements with Kant and Hegel notwithstanding, they all largely converge on their (mis)treatment of Islam. For instance, to Kant, the danger to philosophy and reason were enthusiasm, superstition, fanaticism, nomadism and the like, all of which he transferred to Islam and Prophet Muhammad (Ahmad 2017, 38).

In conclusion: between Habermas and Imām Mālik

Traced to ancient Greece, the history of intellectual freedom and critique in Europe is juxtaposed to the Church and the ecclesiastic establishment. That is, the obverse of academic freedom is the Church – first the Roman Catholic Church and later the Protestant ones that succeed it (Fuchs 1963; Altbach 2001). We thus enter the familiar narrative of secularism to which academic freedom is said to belong. In the received wisdom, Germany is depicted as the birthplace of 'the modern conception of academic freedom' (Fuchs 1963, 435). As documented and analyzed in this essay, in the absence of the Church, Habermas' account of the Reformation, the Enlightenment, reason and Occidental rationalism will simply have no bearing. Manifestly, his notion of critique is derived from, rests on and is signed by this European-Christian ensemble a key feature of which is its relentless practice of othering vis-à-vis Islam.

Unlike in Europe and in Christianity, in Islam the history of freedom is not juxtaposed to the Church, because Islam has no church in the first place. Likewise, in marked contradistinction to Europe, critique (*naqd/tanqīd/intiqād*) in Islamic tradition is not opposed to the divine; rather, God Himself is its source and facilitator. The fundamental message of the Qur'an as Allah's revelation is submission to God. This message as *huda* (guidance) aimed to enact an all-round reform (*iṣlāḥ*) of all. The mission of all prophets since Adam was to convey the divine message and accordingly enact the work of reform. And to reform was to critique. Since Muslims believe that there is no prophet after Muhammad, the task of reform, critique and renewal (*tajdīd*) of Allah's message was allocated to ʿulema, heirs to the prophets.[5] The word-limit disallows me to dwell at length on this matter here, suffice to note that the subsequent elaboration of reform-critique-renewal mission by scholars doesn't discard the Greek, pre-Muhammad, or Western tradition but the former can't be subsumed within the latter either.[6] The genealogy of critique in Islam, therefore, is radically different from its Western counterpart. So is the role of public intellectual. For Habermas, the role of a public intellectual, himself being one, is to be 'a kind of stand-in for the universalistic values that represent the

normative contents of modernity' (Gabriëls 2009, 566). In light of my critique of Habermas' notion as well as practice of Occidental rationalism, particularly in relation to the Israeli aggression against Palestinians, there is a need to underline the duty of intellectuals prior to modernity, itself an oppressive category (Ahmad 2022). Imam Mālik ibn Anas (d. 795), a prominent '*ālim*, scholar, had the courage to declare that the coercive practice of extracting oath by the caliph Al-Mansur was wrong. Rather than bow to the power, Imam Mālik exercised his power of critique and spoke truth to power. For his practice of critique, he was publicly flogged such that his one arm got dislocated (Maududi 1960; Al-Tabari 1965).[7]

Contrast Imam Mālik's stance with that of Habermas vis-à-vis the ongoing genocide by Israel against Palestinians. The likely objection that his position be understood in relation to Germany's past and 'the mass crimes of the Nazi era' (which his statement mentions) is less than reliable; it is lacking in reflexivity oriented to justice rather than to raison d'état. This is so because it does not ask basic justice-affirming questions such as this: was there a 'moral justification for uprooting another people located outside of Europe for the sake of a colonizing project that began long before the rise of Nazism'? (Bishara 2022, 78). The idea of Germany's guilt as widely understood too seems inadequate. A guilty conscience at the service of a project engaged in justifying riddance of the object of guilt by transferring it to the Arab world is one in which guilt is actually unconscientious and conscience far from guilty. As a son of Jewish parents who survived holocaust, while Norman Finkelstein as a public intellectual summons moral courage to articulate Palestinians' condition as well as critique Israel's settler colonialism (Ridgen and Rossier 2009; Finkelstein 2018; Halper 2024; TRT 2024), Habermas whose past bears signature of his association with the Hitler Youth does almost the opposite. Contra Habermas, whose thesis on colonization of lifeworld rests on the 'alleged distinction' (Steinhoff 2009, 23) between strategic rationality on one hand and communicative rationality on the other, Finkelstein defies this binary to signal a new type: neither instrumental nor communicative but *truthful action*, one radiant with beauty and justice!

From the horizon of critical thinking enunciated and employed in this essay, it is not Occidental rationalism mobilized by Habermas that should hurriedly be deployed to understand Gaza; rather, Gaza should become the conceptual ground with a notion of critique that is its own and from which to assess the history, worth, and consequence of the Reformation, the Enlightenment and modernity the conglomeration of which constitute 'Occidental rationalism.' A plea such as this is salient to understand as well as (re)configure the role of teaching in higher education with which intellectuals have often been associated since the late nineteenth century or earlier. Hence the value of this journal's special issue on *critique/critical* (Luckett and Bhatt 2024). Habermas is taught in universities across the world: for instance, at Emory, Harvard, McGill, and Utrecht universities (ContemporaryThinkers, Undated). Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, no major graduate program in social theory in American universities was considered serious unless it had a critical theorist on its faculty and with Habermas' thoughts addressed (Marsh 2001, ix). Of the many implications this article has in the realm of teaching in higher education, three broad ones are worth noting.

The Western idea of critique presented in a teleological narrative as the Reformation → the Enlightenment → Modernity is not *the* critique; instead, it is just one

among many forms of critique. I briefly outlined the genealogy of critique in Islamic tradition where, unlike the Enlightenment narrative of it and which Habermas is wedded to, it is not opposed to the divine and where God Himself is its source. Thus, in our practices of teaching in higher education, the hegemonic Western notion of critique derived from European-Christian tradition should be taught *critically* and *comparatively*. This logically entails that reasoned viewpoints of students in higher education – particularly from 'un/non-enlightened' societies the historical trajectories of which differ substantially from their Western counterparts – should not simply be tolerated but encouraged and harnessed to broaden and radicalize the idea of critique, and with it of higher study itself. Finally, orientations, themes, methods and theories of research undertaken by teachers as well as advanced students in higher education are dialogically open to this article's plea for a critical inquiry into the Western idea of critique, Habermas being one of its most influential figures in our time.

Notes

1. Habermas takes Kant's differentiation of theoretical reason, practical reason and judgment as given and truth. But there is no reason to believe that this differentiation is the last word and unproblematic. The Plato in Kant's writings is not based on original sources of the former's work: 'Kant never read any original works of Plato or at least he read very little' (Serck-Hanssen and Emilsson 2004, 71). Hence, his understanding of Plato on many fundamental issues is inaccurate (Spiker 2022). Habermas' claim about Kantian notion of reason as subjective and his own as intersubjective (hence indispensable to his theory of communication) is also contested. Scholars argue that the intersubjective was already present in Kant (Strong and Sposito 1995, 268–9).
2. Contra Habermas, the economy and state or money and power are not neatly separate; invariably, it is political economy (Ahmad 2013b).
3. Sheedy (2018) avers that Habermas' position is a 'soft version of the "clash of civilizations."'
4. On the treatment of religion in Habermas' writings over time, see, Badar (2022).
5. To clarify, I don't use *ʿulema* (sing. *ʿālim*) in the usual contemporary (misleading) sense to mean 'theologian,' or 'cleric.' Rather, I mean scholar/intellectual (Ahmad 2017, 50, 214n20).
6. For a monograph-length treatment of the notion of critique in Islam in comparison to Western notion of critique, see Ahmad (2017).
7. The choice of Imam Mālik entails justifications. In Islamic history, *ʿulema* (scholars) are classified into two key categories: *ʿulema-e-ḥaq* (ʿulema of truth) and *ʿulema-e-sū*, false ʿulema (Faruqi 1986, 13; Ahmad 2015). Of course, unlike Mālik, many ʿulema in the past also sided with the power, as did/do many now. For instance, ʿAli Jumʿa (b. 1952) or Ali Gomaa as Egypt's Grand Mufti opposed the 2011 revolution and later justified the coup against the first elected President, Mohammad Morsi. He also rationalized the 2013 Rabaa massacre, which Human rights Watch termed as 'one of the world's largest killings of demonstrators in a single day … .' (in Al-Azami 2019, 231, 227 ff.). Conversely, ʿulema and democracy activists who opposed the coup were/are jailed (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2013). Mālik represents the category of ʿulema who, unlike Gomaa and his ilk, defied unjust power to uphold the cause of the wronged. Moreover, as noted earlier, juxtaposition of Habermas and Mālik is 'heuristically purposive' to 'comparatively unveil different traditions of critique.' As an advocate of 'Unfinished Modernity,' for Habermas, the Enlightenment is the source of reason, critique as well as the idea of a public intellectual whereas Imam Mālik represents a tradition of critique and reasoning rooted in Islam but *well before* modernity. Due precisely to this, I also don't include Edward Said, a Palestinian émigré committed to and known globally for his fight for the Palestinian cause. A 'secularist liberal' and a 'victim … of theology of the progress,' Said, however, dismissed

the intellectual traditions of Islam as signs of 'the traditional' and for him 'a real or true Orient (Islam, Arab or whatever)' was non-existent (Hallaq 2018, 105,142). In fact, for Said, to be a critic was to be obligatorily secular and religion itself had no capacity to critique (Ahmad 2021b, also see Omar 2021).

Acknowledgements

First of all, I thank the three anonymous reviewers for their pertinent criticisms and comments. I am also thankful to editors of *Teaching in Higher Education* for their guidance throughout the review process. As readers of an earlier version of this essay, Rizwan Ahmad, Talal Asad, Ibrar Bhatt, John Keane and Peter van der Veer critically commented on it. I wish to express my gratitude to them. Saleh Khaled Ibrahim Hafez, my research assistant, helped me with cross checking of quotes and references. I thank Rahime Seyit for translating the abstract into Arabic (Rizwan Ahmad and Mazen Alagawany modified it). I am alone responsible for the position this essay institutes, as am I for any error – conceptual or factual.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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