

## MID-ATLANTIC GERMAN HISTORY SEMINAR

### EPITAPH FOR THE BONN REPUBLIC: INTERPRETING THE POLITICAL THEORY OF JÜRGEN HABERMAS, 1984–1996

Seminar at the GHI, April 21, 2007. Conveners: Marion Deshmukh (George Mason University), Gisela Mettele (GHI). Speaker: Matthew Specter (George Mason University).

The semiannual Mid-Atlantic German History Seminar met to discuss “Epitaph for the Bonn Republic: Interpreting the Political Theory of Jürgen Habermas, 1984–1996,” presented by Matthew Specter. Specter, who received his Ph.D. from Duke University in 2006, is currently a postdoctoral Western Civilization Fellow at George Mason University. In his paper, he closely examined Habermas’s *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Democracy* (1992). He attempted to historicize its composition over a critical period in German history, during which the German Democratic Republic collapsed and merged with the Federal Republic. According to Specter, *Between Facts and Norms* “faces backwards more than forwards . . . [it is] a resumé of the achievements and limits of West German constitutionalism [rather] than a manifesto for the Berlin Republic. . . .”

After summarizing the essay as part of a larger book project, Specter discussed a variety of issues that emerged from Habermas’s career as an academic and public intellectual, as well as from his major writings. Specter maintained that Habermas’s “obsession” with legal theory was an ongoing interest that occupied him for decades. After Specter’s presentation, discussion centered on contextualizing the volume’s major themes. These included the role of the courts, the parliaments, and the notions of popular sovereignty and the welfare state within the chronological trajectory of events and political leadership from the 1970s to the 1990s. One question addressed Habermas’s ability to reconcile notions of popular sovereignty with the possibility of the tyranny of a majority. Others asked about Habermas’s role as an actor or a passive observer on the political stage during the *Wende*. Several seminar participants wished to know more about the relationship between Habermas’s notions of law and political economy; his self-characterization as left of the SPD but right of the Greens; his views on law as a medium of social integration versus social conflict; and his notion of civil disobedience as a “touchstone for the rightness of a mature political culture.” In his response to these ques-

tions, Specter drew in part on face-to-face interviews he had with Habermas as well as Habermas's responses to written questions sent to him. In these responses, Habermas opined that "the principles of the constitution will not take root in our souls until reason has assured itself of those principles' orientation, future-directed contents." Specter summarized Habermas's position by observing that "the ostensible objective of his project [*Between Facts and Norms*]*—*to dissolve tenacious antinomies in Western political thought between the rule of law and democracy, human rights and popular sovereignty, public and private autonomy*—*refracts lessons Habermas perceived in German and West German historical experiences with statism."

The seminar's discussion was fruitful for both the paper's author and seminar participants. The next meeting, to be chaired by Peter Jelavich of Johns Hopkins University, will be held in the fall of 2007.

*Marion F. Deshmukh*