



ECONOMIC CRISIS IS IMMEDIATELY TRANSFORMED INTO SOCIAL CRISIS

JÜRGEN HABERMAS (1929–)

IN CONTEXT

FOCUS

Legitimation crisis

KEY DATES

1867 In *Das Kapital*, Karl Marx suggests that capitalism is prone to economic crises.

1929 The stock exchange crash on Wall Street, New York, leads to a ten-year economic depression that affects all Western economies.

1950–60s Talcott Parsons discusses legitimation and social order, claiming that through socialization people acquire values that lead them to conform to social norms.

2007 Global economic recession results in a swing across Europe to parties of the political right.

2009 Chilean sociologist Rodrigo Cordero Vega argues, contrary to Habermas, that Marx remains relevant to contemporary society.

Late-capitalist societies experience periodic economic downturns.



Policies to cope with this may seem **unfair** to the majority of voters.



When this happens, citizens **question the authority** of government.



Demonstrations and protests threaten the legitimacy of the state.



Economic crisis is immediately transformed into social crisis.

Karl Marx argued that capitalist societies are prone to economic crises and that these will worsen over time, culminating in a workers' revolution. But why is it that when a society has such a crisis, a somewhat different change in the political climate often follows?

This was the question posed by the German sociologist Jürgen Habermas in the early 1970s. He was intrigued by the relationship between capitalism and crises, having seen the system survive a series of extraordinary events such as the Wall Street Crash of 1929 in the US, the subsequent Great Depression, the rise and fall of fascist movements in Europe, World War II, and the Cold War.

Habermas suggests that traditional Marxist theories of crisis tendencies are not applicable to some Western late-capitalist societies. This is because these societies have become more democratic and have changed significantly thanks to welfare-state policies, such as free healthcare provision, that aim to make up for economic inequalities. In addition, he says, collective identities have fragmented

See also: Adam Ferguson 21 ■ Karl Marx 28–31 ■ Herbert Marcuse 182–87 ■ Daniel Bell 224–25 ■ Michel Foucault 270–77 ■ Stanley Cohen 290

and there is evidence of increased individualization and fewer class-based conflicts.

Crisis of legitimacy

Although the economic cycles of prosperity and recession continue, policy measures by nation-states have enabled them to avert major crises. Unlike earlier capitalist societies, under state-regulated late-capitalism, the primary site of crisis and conflict has shifted to the cultural and political spheres.

The crisis of modern Western society is, according to Habermas, one of legitimation. Legitimacy has become the focal concern because the state, as manager of the “free market” economy, has simultaneously to solve economic problems, ensure democracy, and please the voters. If the public feels government policies are unfair, it withdraws its support for the government. The state therefore

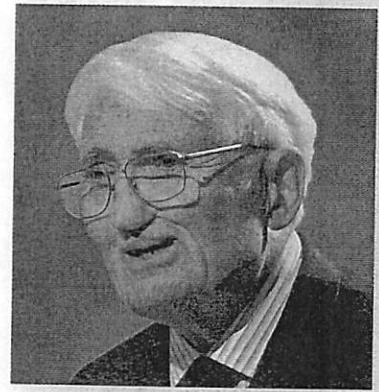
Riot police in Athens, Greece, in 2011 confront demonstrators claiming that government austerity measures to deal with sovereign debt favor the few at the expense of the many.



has the difficult task of balancing the pursuit for capital with maintaining mass support. In other words, state policies must favor business and property owners while appearing to represent the interests of all. This means the conditions exist for government institutions to suffer a large-scale loss of legitimacy.

If citizens sense that the government is just and benevolent, then they will show support. If, however, they feel that policies are not in their interests, people will respond with political apathy or even large-scale discontent and protests. Given a threat to the status quo, a government may try to appease its citizens with short-lived social welfare measures.

Habermas says democratic capitalism is an “unfinished project,” implying the social system can be further improved. Western governments’ actions since the global financial crisis began in 2007 have exposed many social tensions between narrow capital interests, the public interest, mass democracy, and the need to secure institutional legitimacy. ■



Jürgen Habermas

Born in Düsseldorf, Germany, in 1929, Jürgen Habermas’s political awakening came when, as a teenager in the Hitler Youth, he witnessed the aftermath of World War II and the Holocaust—events that inform much of his work.

Habermas is one of the world’s foremost contemporary social thinkers. Many of his writings are concerned with knowledge communication and the changing nature of the public and private spheres. He was born with a cleft palate, which affected his speech and, at times, left him socially isolated in his youth. The experience influenced his work on communication.

He studied sociology and philosophy in Frankfurt at the Institute for Social Research, under Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, who both helped originate critical theory, and in the late 1960s he became director of the Institute for Social Research.

Key works

1968 *Knowledge and Human Interests*

1973 *Legitimation Crisis*

1981 *The Theory of Communicative Action*