

JÜRGEN HABERMAS: A POLITICAL PACIFIST?*

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Abstract: Jürgen Habermas has defended Germany’s cautious support for Ukraine against the ongoing Russian invasion. Instead of trying to defeat Russia on the battlefield, he argued that Western nations should seek a compromise with the attacker. Critics worried that this would lead to more suffering than the war, encourage further Russian aggression, and ignore the concerns of the Ukrainian population. However, one question that has not been addressed is if Habermas’s pleas are part of a wider pacifist commitment—and if so, what kind of pacifist he is. Examining Habermas’s writings on the Ukraine War, his cosmopolitan views and his idea of a “constitutionalization of international law,” I argue that Habermas can be called a political pacifist—someone who seeks to abolish the institutions that provide the ultimate causes of war. While one can still criticize his vision, it deserves to be taken seriously as a pacifist account.

It came as no surprise that Jürgen Habermas, known for commenting on contemporary issues, felt the need to address the Russian invasion of Ukraine. As his biographer Stefan Müller-Doohm said in an interview, Habermas had no other choice (Hesse 2023a). His contribution consisted of two essays published in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, in which Habermas (2022, 2023) reminded Western powers that they should try to negotiate a settlement to end—or at least temporarily halt—the war in Ukraine.

While emphasizing that Ukraine must not lose, Habermas urged caution when supplying weapons without a clear goal on how to end the conflict. Not only does the war cause terrible suffering, but the West is also stuck in a dilemma: it supports Ukraine, but tries to avoid direct involvement. If it keeps providing weapons and the conflict continues, the West may at one point have to decide if it joins the war or lets Ukraine lose. Both options should be avoided. A Ukrainian loss would be worse than a settlement that might at least restore the borders before the 2022 invasion, and if the West joins the war, Habermas fears a nuclear exchange or a direct conflict between NATO and Russia.

* This paper was awarded the 2023 *Res Philosophica* Essay Prize for best unsolicited paper in the special issue on the work of Jürgen Habermas.

This proposal caused some controversy. Habermas was criticized for not caring for Ukraine's independence, for naive views on Russia, as well as for suggesting solutions that may, in the long run, lead to more suffering than a continued war (see Schmelzle 2022, Anheier 2023, Behrends 2023, Cohn-Bendit and Leggewie 2023, Hesse 2023b). Others have argued that Habermas's fears reflect his experiences under the constant threat of nuclear exchange during the Cold War (see Tooze 2022, Neumann 2023). In addition, supporters noted that he merely contemplates options beyond an absolute insistence on total victory (Kister 2023a, 2023b).

However, while Habermas claims that the West has no coherent strategy, does he have one himself? What wider political goals are attached to his insistence on negotiations? And does he have a normative vision for how international politics generally, not just this conflict, should be handled? So far, Habermas's normative ideals in international politics have not received much attention. Tooze (2022) and Müller-Doohm (2010) noted that he is no pacifist, since he supports arms deliveries.¹ At the same time, Müller-Doohm noted that Habermas's relationship with pacifism needs to be explored further (Hesse 2023a). This task extends beyond the question of Ukraine.

In short, then, is he a pacifist or not? This essay will show that, yes, Habermas's articles exemplify a "political pacifism" or a search for a world without war. While "personal pacifists" are occupied with individual refusals to use violence, political pacifists seek institutional reforms to abolish the systems behind war (see Alexandra 2003; Ryan 2013).² In addition, Habermas is a "relative pacifist" for whom violence may be necessary in some instances, contrary to an "absolute pacifist,"³ who condemns violence under all circumstances (Russell 1943).⁴

To defend my interpretation, I search Habermas's political writings for pacifist traces. I show that his pacifism derives from Kant's ideal of a "perpetual peace," as well as Habermas's cosmopolitanism and his rejection of (German) nationalism. However, Habermas goes further than his predecessor. Where Kant was content with a federation of sovereign states securing peace (Carson 1998; Smith and Fine 2004; Delahunty and Yoo 2010),⁵ Habermas proposed a "constitutionalization of international law," in which a global institution—importantly, not a world state—would guar-

¹ Habermas also did not sign a letter from various German activists who urged Ukraine to surrender in order to stop the conflict (Tooze 2022).

² Ryan (2023) argues that pure personal pacifists do not exist and are a caricature drawn up by pacifist's adversaries. All serious pacifists are at least partially political.

³ A notion Habermas (2022) dismisses himself, calling pacifism the idea of "peace at any price."

⁴ Tooze and Müller-Doohm are likely thinking of absolute personal pacifism when saying that Habermas is no pacifist.

⁵ This proposal has been criticized in various ways, such as that Kant's federation would not have its own army and thus be unable to enforce peace or that states could leave the federation any time (see Carson 1988).

antee peace and human rights worldwide (Habermas 2005, 2008, 2014b). He thus occupies a middle ground between a loose federation and a centralized world state (Smith and Fine 2004; Delahunty and Yoo 2010; Mikalsen 2013). This, I argue, is a political pacifist vision: Habermas's prime concern is abolishing the set of institutions that enable and perpetuate the existence of war.

We can better understand Habermas's approach toward the Russian invasion from this perspective. The West—and, as we will see, especially the European Union—already progressed toward his vision. The EU binds its members in institutional arrangements, changes their nationalist identities to “post-heroic” ones, and strengthens international law (Habermas 1999, 2003b)⁶ and Habermas's concern is that a bellicose approach toward the Russian invasion may roll back these achievements. Narrowly focusing on a military solution may transform Western attitudes toward war, making it appear as something normal again. This, Habermas says himself, he seeks to avoid (Habermas 2023).

While a characterization of Habermas's pacifism is difficult and almost certainly incomplete, I believe that we can discern some key points that make his pacifism unique. First, it is reflexive, meaning that Habermas understands the tension between improving the world and being trapped in current conditions (Hutchings 2018, Thaler 2019). Second, his pacifism is Constructivist, meaning that it ascribes to the theory of Constructivism in international relations,⁷ which emphasizes the importance of norms, values and identities (Wendt 1992, 1995). Third, Habermas's pacifism is complex; it acknowledges that politics is non-linear and full of non-reversible processes. Far from accounts that seek stability, for example by balancing national interests, Habermas's pacifism wants to change the foundations of international politics.

These elements provide fertile soil for discussing Habermas's writings on Ukraine. While they do not exhaust the contents of Habermas's pacifism, they are what sets him apart from many other accounts. For critics, as well as supporters, the best way to reach a meaningful discussion will be to scrutinize the elements that make Habermas's pacifism special, and examine if they are adequately applied to the case of Ukraine. This essay, then, is an attempt to find grounds for a rational discourse between critics and supporters of Habermas's Ukraine articles.⁸

To establish this, I will first summarize Habermas's two articles on the Russian invasion and discuss some responses. Next, I outline his politi-

⁶Europeans are also more cautious about markets than, say, Americans. They are more willing to tame capitalism through the welfare state (Habermas and Derrida 2003) and value collective bargaining, trade unions, and social services (Habermas 2001).

⁷To separate Constructivism in international relations theory from constructivism in, for example, sociology, I will capitalize the theory of international relations.

⁸Habermas also seeks a common basis of agreement in his articles on Ukraine. For instance, he shows that no matter how cautious or not Ukraine's supporters are, they must acknowledge the dilemma of supplying weapons while not joining the war (Tooze 2022).

cal pacifism, sketch its intellectual inspirations, and explore the EU's role. From this discussion, I derive the key elements of his pacifism. Lastly, I apply these insights to Habermas's articles on the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This will unveil some new ways to discuss his contributions—for supporters and critics.

Importantly, I write from the perspective of a Western citizen like Habermas. This affects the practical consequences one can draw from my account. For Habermas, as for most Western citizens, pacifism's key question is not whether one personally fights a war. Rather, the West is supplying the Ukrainian army with weapons, and citizens must decide whether they approve or disapprove, how they vote or speak in public, or which movements they donate to. My account is less significant for those who are directly involved in the conflict. But it may prove insightful to those who face similar choices as Habermas does.

1 Habermas and Ukraine

After the Russian invasion in February 2022, Western countries have—with some exceptions⁹—supported Ukraine with military aid. Some called this too lackluster, others too fierce. Joining this debate, Habermas occupied an intermediate position. While he supported Ukraine, he defended the cautious approach of German chancellor Olaf Scholz.¹⁰ Habermas (2022) condemned the invasion, but cautioned that Russia is a nuclear power and thus cannot lose wars in the conventional sense—it can always resort to nuclear strikes.¹¹

Supporters of Ukraine must keep this in mind, but the younger generation only see war as either ending in total defeat or victory.¹² By contrast, those who experienced the Cold War (like Habermas) see options in between: one can support Ukraine while acknowledging that we must negotiate with Russia.¹³ This is because the West is stuck in a dilemma: its

⁹ For example, neutral Austria and Ireland are only supplying humanitarian aid.

¹⁰ The German Chancellor has only reluctantly equipped Ukraine with new weapons systems, while positioning himself alongside the attacked nation. He writes, “My country's history gives it a special responsibility to fight the forces of fascism, authoritarianism, and imperialism. At the same time, our experience of being split in half during an ideological and geopolitical contest gives us a particular appreciation of the risks of a new cold war” (Scholz 2023, 24).

¹¹ Bollfrass and Herzog (2022) counted roughly 20 nuclear threats from Russia in the invasion's first ten weeks. However, that Russian President Putin would resort to nuclear war is contested. As Snyder (2022) notes, Putin can spin reality through state-controlled media. And should the invasion fail, he could announce victory regardless without facing serious criticism.

¹² Habermas frames this as emotional commitment to values, while promoting his own position as a careful consideration of the consequences. Schmelzle (2022) criticizes this rhetorical move, arguing that strong military support is the most likely way to force negotiations—and thus can be defeated from consequentialist grounds as well.

¹³ Habermas acknowledges that Russia does not want to negotiate, but puts some blame on the West, because it did not communicate its goals behind the military-support for Ukraine—creating an ambiguity which left the possibility that the West desired regime change in Russia,

arms deliveries may not suffice for a Ukrainian victory, but direct involvement could spark nuclear war.¹⁴ Thus, Western governments should seek a peaceful settlement or at least an armistice. Of course, the West cannot let Russia blackmail it indefinitely, because then the same situation would arise with other countries, such as Moldova and Georgia. But this merely emphasizes the West's dilemma.

Besides such practical questions, Habermas praises Germany's mentality—developed after the Second World War—which sees dialogue and negotiation as fundamental foreign policy tools. He criticizes those who work towards “the end of the broad pro-dialogue, peace-keeping focus of German policy.” These people, he notes, mostly belong to younger generations, who were pacifist in the past, and have now adopted a more bellicose approach—first and foremost the German foreign minister, Annalena Baerbock.

Habermas thus sees two viewpoints in this conflict—defeating Russia versus ending the war through a compromise—and traces them to “national” or “heroic” versus “post-national” or “post-heroic” mentalities. Those in turn stem from different historical experiences. On the one hand, there are the experiences of younger and older generations in Germany, where the former are people who “were raised to exhibit sensitivity on normative questions, who don't hide their emotions and who have been the loudest in demanding a more forceful engagement in support of Ukraine.” By contrast, the older generations witnessed the Cold War as adults and derived the lesson that nuclear powers cannot be beaten in the traditional sense.

In addition, there is a gap between Ukraine and the West. The Western European population developed post-heroic values after World War II, under the protection of the United States and through the fear of nuclear war. By contrast, the Ukrainian population, occupied and oppressed after World War II, had no chance to acquire this mentality. Only having recently regained independence, they are more willing to defend their nation by force. However, responses to this article criticized an unfair characterization of Ukraine's supporters and a false understanding of the conflict's dynamics (Schmelzle 2022). For instance, Russian president Putin denies the existence of a Ukrainian nation and Russian propaganda regularly delves into the necessity of eradicating the Ukrainian population. Thus, it may not be heroic values that motivate Ukraine's struggle, but the fact that they are literally fighting for survival (Snyder 2022).¹⁵

which is something that Putin must oppose. Instead, the West should have clearly announced its goals when supporting Ukraine.

¹⁴ The dilemma emerges because Habermas claims that the West is already involved in the war, and that Russia decides when it becomes a formal party. However, Schmelzle (2022) notes that Putin decides who Russia fights against, and this is influenced by Western actions, but arms support is *no de facto* involvement in the war, neither according to international law, nor according to common practice.

¹⁵ Snyder adds that there is not only a generational conflict within Germany, but also between Ukraine and Russia. The Russian leaders are a generation older than Ukraine's, and connect this war to an idea of past Russian greatness. By contrast, the Ukrainian decision makers grew

About ten months later, Habermas (2023) published another article, where he repeated that Ukraine must not lose the war, but again worried that the West may become directly involved¹⁶ and thus urged negotiations. Habermas reminds us that war is “crushing violence that should cease as soon as possible” and that even Ukraine’s most ardent supporters must think about the harm it causes every day. Furthermore, he defends the West’s post-heroic values which no longer treat war as normal.¹⁷ These values were specified in the UN Charter, which took away national rights to wage war, at least on paper. The current conflict calls this development into question—something Habermas wants to prevent:

International humanitarian law prohibiting war crimes already represented a not very successful attempt to tame the use of violence *in* war. But at the end of the Second World War, the violence *of* war itself was to be pacified by legal means and replaced by law as the only mode of inter-state conflict resolution. . . . [But a] war, and all the more so the war started by Putin, is a symptom of a regression behind the historically achieved level of civilized interaction between powers—especially between powers that have been able to learn their lesson from the two world wars. (Habermas 2023; emphasis in original)

As with the previous article, criticisms quickly emerged. Anheier (2023) argues that Habermas does not specify how the West can force Russia to negotiate, while Hesse (2023b) rejects Western leaders talking to Russia over the head of Ukraine. Similarly, Neumann (2023) notes that Habermas forgets the importance of defending liberal Western values, while Behrends (2023) argues that Western and especially German leaders have already tried to appease Russia and neglected defense-support for Ukraine—even after the 2014 invasion—which may have invited Putin to launch the 2022 invasion. Putin, he claims, is actually encouraged in his brutality by attempts at negotiating.¹⁸ Lastly, Cohn-Bendit and Leggewie (2023) ques-

up after 1991 and do not yearn for a grandiose past, but want to defend what has been built up since then.

¹⁶ As Hesse (2023b) notes, Habermas uses the term “sleepwalking” [*Schlafwandeln*] to describe how Western states may enter the war. This seems to be borrowed from Christopher Clarke’s *The Sleepwalkers* (2012) which depicts how European powers stumbled into the First World War—an interpretation for which Clarke was accused of whitewashing German culpability (see Clark 2021). Behrends (2023) argues that the term does not describe the current situation. Habermas insinuates that Western leaders are behaving as bellicose as the leaders before World War I, but in reality, they tried to negotiate with Putin before the 2022 invasion and even afterwards.

¹⁷ War was normalized even in the recent past. For instance, Theodore Roosevelt believed that countries should always wage war to revive national spirits. He even suggested an invasion of Canada for this purpose (Ryan 2013).

¹⁸ Behrends has other criticisms too, such as that Habermas seems concerned with ending the suffering caused by the war, but does not explicitly state who is responsible for said suffering.

tion whether a compromise can be reached with a Russian regime that has shown little concern for its citizens' lives.¹⁹

Nonetheless, Neumann (2023) reminds us that solely delivering weapons must feel wrong to someone like Habermas, who emphasizes reason and discourse in politics, and opposes nationalist identities and the wars that stem from them. Similarly, Müller-Doohm stresses that Habermas's discursive ethics and his concept of deliberative politics²⁰ naturally favor peace talks (Hesse 2023a). In addition, Habermas has experienced the beginning and end of the Cold War and, like many of his generation, feels that he escaped nuclear annihilation by sheer luck. Thus, while others focus on the freedom that can be achieved by Ukrainian victory, he is fearful of what might be lost during the attempt (Neumann 2023). Furthermore, Kister (2023a, 2023b) writes that Habermas sees a situation where people deal in absolutes and tries to consider the non-absolute options. Importantly, Habermas thinks that a settlement is not the end goal,²¹ but a step toward ultimately solving the conflict.

In short, Habermas's articles express fear of an escalating war, of revived bellicose and nationalist values, as well as a desire to preserve the ideals of deliberation and compromise. As I argue in the next section, these fears and desires emerge from Habermas's pacifism. To support this point, I will present Habermas's pacifism in more detail. I show his intellectual inspirations and discuss how his own account developed beyond them. Then, I discuss the EU's central role in his pacifist vision.

2 Why Habermas Is a Political Pacifist

By interpreting Habermas as a pacifist, I focus on an aspect that has so far received little attention. In preliminary steps, Müller-Doohm (2010) noted that Habermas's rejection of (German) nationalism connects to a wider pacifist vision—also evident in his opposition to German rearmament and the placement of nuclear weapons on German soil (Habermas 1985). However, in an interview with the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, Müller-

¹⁹ Person and McFaul (2022) claim that Putin primarily opposes democratic expansion. He knows that NATO would never attack Russia, but a thriving democratic Ukraine could weaken his regime's legitimacy. Since he fears a successful Ukraine, it will be difficult to reach settlements that stop him from further destabilizing the country.

²⁰ Discourse clarifies a conflict's source, while deliberation allows the adversaries to reach compromises (Hesse 2023a).

²¹ This distinguishes Habermas from other commentators who called for a settlement. For example, John Mearsheimer claimed that the West is to blame for the war in Ukraine, since the eastwards-enlargement of NATO and Ukrainian ambitions to join the alliance had left Russia with no option but to attack (Mearsheimer 2022). Mearsheimer believes that peace can be best achieved through a carefully managed balance of power in which Ukraine occupies a neutral position between Russia and the West (Mearsheimer 2014). Mearsheimer seeks compromise for the sake of stability as the ultimate goal. Habermas does not.

Doohm emphasized that Habermas's exact position should be discussed further (Hesse 2023a). This section will do exactly that.²²

First of all, there is not one kind of pacifism, but a variety of different forms, including “absolute,” “collectivist,” “epistemological,” or “pragmatic” (Jackson 2018), as well as “transformative” (Fiala 2016), “contingent” (May 2015), and “ethico-political” pacifism (Hutchings 2018, 2019). What unites most of them are some basic commitments, which I group under the term “political pacifism.” Political pacifism as I use it is a doctrine that views certain institutions and systems as ultimate causes of war. They could be national sovereignty (Ryan 2013) or more intricate social arrangements, such as capitalist exploitation (see Ryan 2023). Put simply, for political pacifists, war should not be understood as a collection of many individual acts of violence, but as a set of institutions and practices that perpetuate the existence of violent conflict (Hutchings 2018). When I speak of Habermas as a political pacifist, I mean that he wants to abolish or transform certain institutions which he sees as responsible for war.

This focus on war as institution separates political pacifism from other approaches to international politics which, at a cursory glance, may also be called pacifist. After all, Galtung (1959) defines pacifism as acting in a way that makes conflict-solutions acceptable to all parties, and in a way that reduces the short- and long-term likelihood of violence. An additional clause would forbid the use of violence in general—how strictly this last rule is applied would distinguish an absolute from a relative pacifist. Since he supports cautious arms-deliveries, Habermas does not abide by the last norm and can thus be described as a relative pacifist.

Be that as it may, most critics of Habermas also want to decrease the long-term chances of violence. Those who call for victory over Russia, such as Anheier (2023) and Cohn-Bendit and Leggewie (2023) do this because, for them, it makes future conflicts less likely. Similarly, someone who generally urges restraint by national leaders will do so for the sake of peace. But someone who urges restraint or demands victory over Russia cannot be called a political pacifist. The reason is that while restraint or victory may lead to peace, such accounts do not analyze the systemic causes of war. Urging restraint affirms, instead of questions, the system in which powerful leaders conduct international affairs and where sovereign nations navigate an “anarchic”²³ world. In such a system, war may be avoided for a while, but it usually breaks out again sooner or later. By contrast, for political pacifists, war is more complicated than an individual decision to fight. Behind every war is a system that allows and encourages it and the main task

²² Of course, Habermas's pacifism connects to his wider approach to international politics, such as the emphasis on communication. Some works already analyzed the “communicative turn” in international relations (Albert, Kessler, and Stetter 2008), and looked at Habermas's influence on the field (Diez and Steans 2005).

²³ The international arena is often called “anarchic” because there is no power above nation-states which could control their behavior.

is not gambling this system to avoid conflicts, but to abolish it altogether (see Alexandra 2003; Ryan 2013; Jackson 2018; Hutchings 2018).²⁴ Political pacifists then pursue institutional solutions which address the ultimate cause of war—not just the symptoms.²⁵

Political pacifism not only distinguishes Habermas from broadly defined “pacifist” accounts, but also from Just War Theory, which argues that declaring war can sometimes be the morally correct decision—and thus, it cares little about dismantling the institutions behind it (Ryan 2013). While Habermas defends military action, it is not because it is noble or correct. Rather, he frames it as a last resort until non-violent solutions prevail.²⁶ In addition, Just War Theory tends to ignore the devastating effects of warfare (Thaler 2019), while Habermas discusses the constant devastation that the Ukraine war causes (Habermas 2022, 2023).

These are some early arguments for why Habermas can plausibly be called a political pacifist. To strengthen this interpretation, I will now trace the history of his views and outline how he crafted a novel pacifist vision. Next, I show the EU’s importance for Habermas, which will ultimately allow us to discern some of his pacifism’s defining features.

Habermas being a political pacifist means that he seeks institutional solutions to prevent war from occurring, and to achieve this, his approach is the “constitutionalization of international law.” Under this proposal, international law becomes enforced by an international institution, which forms a middle ground between a federation of sovereign states and a world state. This organization

would employ force in emergencies and would draw upon the sanctioning capacities ‘lent’ to it by the able and willing members. According to the well-known logic of security systems—and within the framework of a suitably reformed world organization—such a practice can become established in so far as the sovereign states learn to understand themselves also as solidary members of the international community. (Habermas 2008, 450f.)

In his occupation with global peace, as well as his methods, Habermas is inspired by Immanuel Kant. The latter sought to establish “perpetual peace” through a federation of states, composed of states with a republican constitution, which are also economically interdependent and feature an active public (see Carson 1988; Smith and Fine 2004; Delahunty and

²⁴ Political pacifists may deplore the Vietnam War not only because it killed thousands of people, but also because it affirmed the imperialist institutions which were its ultimate cause (Hutchings 2018).

²⁵ For example, nationalizing defense industries (Ryan 2013).

²⁶ Pacifism is sometimes called “tragic” because it acknowledges that refusing to employ violence may also cause great harm, such as when one does not stop a genocide. Thus, refusing to act violently may be as abhorrent as doing so. Unfortunately, then, pacifists may have no desirable course of action (Neu 2011, Parkin 2019).

Yoo 2010). However, Habermas's ideas go beyond his predecessor's.²⁷ In fact, Habermas (1995) argued that Kant's ideas for perpetual peace are not sufficient for a pacifist world order. Habermas's "legal pacifism"²⁸ not only unites states in a federation, but takes away their powers to declare war (Habermas 1999, 2008). Where Kant was narrowly occupied with the abolition of war between nations, Habermas has democratic and social concerns as well (Hedrick 2007).²⁹ His world organization would also, for instance, intervene against human rights violations.³⁰ Naturally, Habermas rejects the idea of imposing the supremacy of international law by purely repressive means (Delahunty and Yoo 2010),³¹ and thus, to legitimize these new procedures, he wants to divide the UN General Assembly into two chambers, one in which states are represented and another which fulfills this role for the world's citizens (Mikalsen 2013).

Habermas's pacifism is also tied to his cosmopolitanism. He questions the idea of national identities, such as when he asks why the solidarity that the nation created should "come to a final halt just at the borders of our classical nation-states?" (Habermas 2001, 16). Furthermore, Habermas is wary of national identities based on homogeneous populations.³² Instead, he favors civil nationalism, where citizens are loyal to a democratic constitution, not ethnicity, religion or language, and derive their identity from being part of a self-governing institution (Mertens 1996). This is also visible in his criticism of German society downplaying the Nazi crimes for the sake of national unity—and his fierce rebuttal of claims that national socialism developed in response to Bolshevism led to the German Historians' Dispute³³ (see Habermas 1988; see Leaman 1988 for a discussion).³⁴ As a

²⁷ Smith (2021) argues this as well.

²⁸ "Legal pacifism," for Habermas, "not only wants to fence in the specter of war between sovereign states, but also strives to supersede it by means of a thoroughly legalized [*verrechtlicht*] cosmopolitan order" (Habermas 1999, 263). However, to better locate Habermas in the literature on pacifism and international relations, I will refer to his view as "political pacifism."

²⁹ For example, Habermas saw Kant's concept of autonomy as tainted by a defense of unregulated capitalism. People can be autonomous, for him, only when they have a material basis for living independently—which means that they need a welfare state (Smith 2021).

³⁰ An interesting discussion inside the pacifist literature explores if pacifism only entails a narrow commitment to avoid war and direct violence, or if pacifists necessarily must also occupy themselves with structural violence inherent in racism, sexism or even exploitative economic arrangements (Ryan 2013).

³¹ Nonetheless, Roele (2014) argues that Habermas takes too little notice of local practices that could interfere with the supremacy of international law, and thus, his plea could justify repression.

³² Even though the nation state succeeded in steering modernity and introducing democracy, it has often been gripped by xenophobia or ethnic policies aimed at oppressing minorities (Habermas 1996).

³³ *Historikerstreit* in German.

³⁴ Smith (2021) claims that Habermas developed his conception of constitutional patriotism during the *Historikerstreit*.

response to the crimes of the twentieth century, fueled by nationalism,³⁵ he welcomes the fact that international law has started to restrict the sovereignty of states (Habermas 2008, 2014b).³⁶

While Habermas repeatedly stresses the UN's importance (Delahunty and Yoo 2010), I view it as plausible that the EU is actually the most promising vehicle for his political pacifism.³⁷ This is despite the fact that Habermas was hesitant to endorse the EU at first, fearing that it would be solely a capitalist project. Only in the 1980s did he become a pro-EU writer (Müller-Doohm 2010). During that time, and especially after the end of the Cold War, he examined the world's unfolding transformation and explored opportunities for supranational democracy (Schmid 2018). Today, he looks back at an enduring commitment to European integration (see Habermas 2001, 2003b, 2012, 2015).³⁸

The EU likely is the key vehicle for Habermas's political pacifism—after all, he himself calls it “an important step on the path towards a politically constituted world society” (Habermas 2012, 336).³⁹ Others noted as well how, for Habermas, the European Union could initiate a decisive step toward supranational democracy (Rasmussen 2014) and a world society

³⁵ Many political pacifists also reject national self-defense and national sovereignty (Ryan 2013). However, Auer (2010) argues that Habermas is narrowly focused on Western experiences when he condemns nationalism. For Eastern Europeans, it was not nationalism that led to the catastrophes of World War II, but a clash between two supranational ideologies—National Socialism and Soviet Communism. And after decades of communist oppression, nationalism actually helped Eastern Europe regain its freedom.

³⁶ Habermas believes that greater interdependence between states, which the EU promotes, makes it more likely that conflicts can be resolved non-violently (Müller-Doohm 2010), but thinks that this is not sufficient for lasting peace between nations (Habermas 1995). Still, critics note that guaranteeing human rights or securing peace do not necessarily require a cosmopolitan world order (see De Greiff 2002). Similarly, Delahunty and Yoo (2010) argue that democracy promotion would be more effective in securing global peace than supranational structures.

³⁷ German Chancellor Scholz also listed the EU's benefits for peace (Scholz 2023). Furthermore, Fry (2012) shows how the EU instantiates characteristics of a “peace community,” such as supranational governance, interdependence between members, and the construction of a supranational identity. The EU even received the Nobel peace prize in 2012 for uniting France and Germany after World War II, consolidating democracy inside its borders and promoting it beyond them, as well as supporting reconciliation after the 1990s Balkan wars (Harding 2012).

³⁸ There are many reasons Habermas endorses the EU. For example, he claims that the nation-state today is unable to control the adverse effects of capitalism, losing its power to market forces, international trade, financial markets and multinational corporations (Habermas 1998). But the European Union can give some powers back to states and grant citizens democratic control over the economy (Habermas 2003b, 2012, 2015). In addition, a united Europe would allow for other economic interventions, such as transnational redistribution in favor of its weaker members (Habermas 2015).

³⁹ Delahunty and Yoo (2010) also argue that for Habermas, the EU provides a local model for a cosmopolitan society.

without a world government (Diez 2011; Schmid 2018).⁴⁰ Since the goal of Habermas's pacifism is such a world society governed by international law, the fact that the EU could spearhead a development toward it means that the bloc is important for his pacifism.

The EU's value has multiple reasons, the first being its core functions. Habermas describes the European Union as a political project that should prevent war between its members and create a global civil society (Habermas 2003b, 2012, 2015). But not only does it limit the freedom of states, it alters our ideas of national sovereignty. At least it should and thus, when talking about Germany's role in European unification, Habermas writes that "Germany itself must have the greatest interest in leading the EU beyond a stage of development in which it is both possible and necessary for a leading power to take pioneering initiatives" (Habermas 2015, 549).⁴¹

The second reason is that, according to Habermas, Europeans have internalized the mentality required for a global legal order more than people in other parts of the world.⁴² For example, when discussing NATO's intervention in Kosovo, Continental Europeans argued that it should promote the creation of an enforceable human rights regime and a cosmopolitan world order. By contrast, U.S. and British advocates remained stuck in a liberal nationalism, content to solely enforce their own values and trying to define for themselves a right to do so whenever they wanted (Habermas 2001, 2002). As he wrote earlier, "The USA conceives the global enforcement of human rights as the national mission of a world power which pursues this goal according to the premises of power politics. Most of the EU governments see the politics of human rights as a project committed to the systematic legalization of international relations, a project already altering the parameters of power politics" (Habermas 1999, 269).⁴³

⁴⁰ Similar to Habermas, Derpmann (2009) notes that the EU may form a decisive step toward a world government.

⁴¹ Habermas argues that for centuries, Germany suffered from an unstable position, not strong enough to become Europe's hegemon, but too strong to submit to others, and that this paved the way for the disasters of the twentieth century. Because of European unification, the country avoided repeating the same mistakes (Habermas 2014a). This seems to address a central criticism by Snyder (2022), who claims that in Habermas's view, Europeans learned that conflicts must be resolved peacefully after World War II. Snyder points out that they did not, since even after World War II, Europeans still fought colonial wars. However, the fact that Habermas applauds Germany binding itself into the EU so that it can no longer take leading initiatives shows an awareness that nationalist impulses can emerge again. Europeans did not learn how to resolve their conflicts, but crafted institutions that left them no other option—at least between the EU members.

⁴² Europe also puts a stronger emphasis on human rights. For example, the United States could not join the Council of Europe, even if it wanted, because one condition is abolishing the death penalty (Heffernan 2005).

⁴³ In the same article, Habermas notes that politicians who are left with fewer options domestically (due to globalization) may try to appear tough in foreign policy. This shows why Habermas does not believe that liberal nationalism can establish peace. Even liberal leaders who are besieged by global market forces may sooner or later lash out against others in order to boost domestic appeal.

In a letter to the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Habermas and Derrida (2003)⁴⁴ even argued that the Iraq War showed that Europe must promote alternatives to the militaristic ways of their American allies. Unilateral action without legal backing, even with noble goals, should be regarded with skepticism.⁴⁵ Europe should counterbalance the United States⁴⁶ and work toward a global society based on international law, and it is suited for this precisely because it had to learn the importance of dialogue after centuries of conflict. Later, Habermas again emphasized that Europe should balance the military power of the United States⁴⁷ and become the voice of post-heroic societies (Habermas 2015).

The fact that the EU is our best way to establish a cosmopolitan society based on international law and governed by post-heroic identities allows us to classify the EU as a pacifist project. Furthermore, Habermas's writings on the EU provide indications of how we can characterize his pacifism.⁴⁸ Such a classification will likely not be exhaustive. However, I believe that the elements I discuss in the next section make Habermas's political pacifism unique. Clarifying them can establish a foundation to better discuss his Ukraine articles—and his work on international relations in general.

3 The Elements of Habermas's Political Pacifism

There are three key elements to Habermas's pacifism. The first is the “reflexive” dimension, which can also be described as what Hutchings (2018, 2019) calls “ethico-political pacifism.” It outlines a pacifism which is “reflexively embedded in the world of war that it seeks to transform” (Hutchings 2018, 177). In other words, it acknowledges the complex relationships through which our social practices uphold the system of war, and seeks alternatives to it. Being close to lived practice, reflexive pacifism highlights that our best efforts to change the war-system may not always prevent conflict. Sometimes, they may even cause it—for instance when one must fight a colonial oppressor (Hutchings 2018). The reflexive dimension sees war as not reducible to any particular conflict, nor to a combination of individual decisions, but as embedded in existing structures (Hutchings 2019).

⁴⁴ This text seems to have been written by Habermas and only endorsed by Derrida. It was a response to a letter signed by different European political leaders supporting the U.S.-led invasion (Heffernan 2005).

⁴⁵ Habermas was disappointed that the nation which initiated the revolution of international law after World War II now defied the progress it made (Habermas 2002).

⁴⁶ Lacroix (2009) argues that one may find a dose of anti-Americanism in such a declaration.

⁴⁷ Habermas limits his perspective to Europe's Western part. After all, he does not consider that the EU's Eastern members joined precisely because they wanted to come under American influence, not to balance it (Lacroix 2009).

⁴⁸ Habermas's writings on Europe and cosmopolitanism also received their share of criticism. He has been attacked for a narrow insistence on European values, which neglects their variety of interpretations (Lacroix 2009) and for focusing too much on German historical experiences (Turner 2004, Auer 2010). These criticisms deserve closer inspection, but doing so would be beyond the scope of this discussion.

This reflexive dimension relies on “grounded utopias.” According to Thaler (2019) grounded pacifist visions do not require a complete and visionary restructuring of society, but note that a world without war has to emerge out of current social arrangements—and thus will be tainted by them. A pacifist world will not be perfect, but grounded utopias show how it can emerge out of existing social relations. Thus, “far from being figments of the imagination, grounded utopias . . . strive to actualize the utopian desire for change in the here and now” (Thaler 2019, 1008).

The reflexive (or “ethico-political” or “grounded”)⁴⁹ dimension is clearly present in Habermas’s writings on legal pacifism and the European Union. Habermas acknowledges how the constitutionalization of international law is progressing in a world that is far from pacifist. As a result, while striving for a pacifist world, we may have to engage in violent acts, because current power-relations give us no other choice—which, for example, is why the EU has to work in tandem with U.S. military power while trying to offer alternatives to it (Habermas and Derrida 2003). Similarly, Habermas defended NATO’s intervention in Kosovo in the 1990s, despite the lack of legitimization by international law, because it could at least prevent ethnic cleansing (Habermas 2002, 2003a).⁵⁰

In short, we cannot rely on the power of international law (for now), because the UN cannot enforce it—the product of political realities, such as vetoes in the Security Council (Habermas 2003a, 2014b). Thus, he writes, “With a view to the future of a highly stratified world society, we Europeans have a legitimate interest in getting our voice heard in an international concert that is at present dominated by a vision quite different from ours” (Habermas 2001, 12). His pleas for a stronger international law seek to change international relations, while remaining aware of the obstacles. This recognition of how imperfect the world is also means that Habermas is worried how the legitimization of war can shape our practices for the worse. For example, he notes the wider social ramifications of militarization in the United States, where the Iraq War undermined the rule of law (Habermas 2003a).

For Habermas, overcoming war includes transcending nation-states as well as national identities, which we do by taking a critical stance toward them without ignoring their existence (Habermas 1988, 2001, 2019; see also Leaman 1988). In other words, he acknowledges that national identities exist and will continue to shape us, but “one has to face them consciously and work through them. Otherwise the past will unconsciously

⁴⁹ I use concepts from different authors to describe this dimension, but for the sake of consistency, I keep calling it “reflexive.”

⁵⁰ Despite defending the Kosovo intervention, Habermas remained skeptical of how NATO acted without support from the UN Security Council. However, his skepticism was focused on NATO, rather than on the UN. This leaves a gap in his examination, as Habermas should have also considered how the UN failed to protect the Kosovar Albanians (Delahunty and Yoo 2010).

persist. The past loses its compulsory reign over the present only through the work of a truly faithful memory” (Habermas 2019, 364).

These words reveal a position that is reflexively embedded in current conditions, while trying to change them. Reflexive pacifism, however, also takes note of the material conditions that allow it to prosper in the first place. While Habermas argues that the destruction of war and the loss of colonial empires made Europeans take a reflexive position towards their past (Habermas and Derrida 2003), Europe could only develop its post-national identity under American protection during the Cold War (Habermas 1996).

As a result of the reflexive dimension, Habermas does not fall into the same trap as Kant, who claimed that history would inevitably bring about a cosmopolitan order, because the horrors of war would show states the need for a global federation (Carson 1988). Habermas argued that instead “politics had to push its way there” (Smith 2021). The dimension also sustains a clear-eyed analysis of the conditions that foster war, leading to a more detailed account on how to change them, compared to Kant’s federation.

Second is the Constructivist dimension. Constructivism is a theory of international relations that emphasizes the transformative power of norms, values and identities (Walt 1998; Finnemore and Sikkink 2001).⁵¹ It argues that structures and actors in politics are mutually constructed. For example, material conditions define which states are great powers, and great powers use their material capabilities to affirm this identity. The United States could wage a costly war in Vietnam because of its material capabilities, and by waging such a war, it showed the world that it is a great power (Hopf 1998).⁵² One may summarize Constructivism by the title of Wendt’s (1992) paper “anarchy is what states make of it.” In short, international politics is primarily defined by how a state sees itself, how it sees others, and how it thinks others see it. The Cold War persisted because the United States saw itself as defender of liberal democracy against communism, saw the Soviet Union as the enemy of liberal democracy, and thought that the Soviet Union saw it as an enemy in turn. The conflict ended because the Soviet Union and the United States changed these perceptions of themselves and their counterpart (see also Hopf 1998). In short, for Constructivists, studying international politics means examining how social and material structures shape identities and interests (Wendt 1995).

⁵¹ Even though Constructivism stresses norms, it is an empirical theory. It studies how values and identities change international affairs, not how they should (Barkin 2010, 79).

⁵² This is not to suggest that actors have free reign in shaping structures. Clearly, they are constrained, for example through other nations’ views. If a state is viewed as a great power by its allies, they put certain expectations on it, which require acting a certain way that affirms this status (see Hopf 1998 for a longer discussion).

From all approaches toward international politics, this one best captures Habermas's stress on identity, norms, and communication.⁵³ By contrast, Realism in international relations starts by presuming a certain human nature (that we always seek power) and from this assumption it deduces that war is going to regularly occur.⁵⁴ It has pacifist streaks, which argue that a world state must control humanity's dangerous impulses (Scheuerman 2011), but to achieve this, Realism does not rely on changing our identities.⁵⁵ Another theory, Liberalism,⁵⁶ also assumes certain facts about humans—in this case that we have rational, predictable preferences—and argues that peace can emerge once we establish institutions where people pursue their interests without violating those of others (Barkin 2010, 73; see also Moravcsik 1997).⁵⁷

Kant relies on both Realist and Liberal theories. He argues for institutional changes to contain the chances of war, which he believes is inherent in international politics, and relies on self-interest to achieve this (Oneal and Russett 1999). What he ignored is the question of new norms and cosmopolitan identities—and thus, by adding the Constructivist dimension, Habermas expands on Kant's proposal. One can still find Realist and Liberal elements in Habermas's work—the borders between the different theories in international politics are not exactly defined and regularly overlap (Walt 1998). A Realist likely agrees with how Habermas emphasizes power and the tragic ways we may have to use it—such as in his defense of the Kosovo intervention. In addition, he expresses various Liberal elements since he, like Kant, believes in the power of international institutions—but adds that they will need to rely on more than self-interest.

While Habermas is not solely a Constructivist, this dimension separates him from Kant, and connects his pacifism to his decades-long work on communication and identity-formation. Constructivism aims to show how

⁵³ Constructivists have in turn been inspired by Habermas's work on communicative action (Finnemore and Sikkink 2001). Also, Constructivism has a "critical" element to it, which is connected to Critical Theory (Hopf 1998).

⁵⁴ More precisely, this is done by "Classical Realism." By contrast, "Neorealism" or "Structural Realism" rejects theorizing about human nature. It argues that since anarchy reigns in international politics, all states have to compete with each other—and sometimes fight wars. However, this also rests on certain assumptions about human nature, even though Neorealists do not make them explicit (see Schuett 2010). For an extensive portrait of Realism, see Donnelly 2000.

⁵⁵ Realists acknowledge that for a world state to be stable, humans would need to adopt a cosmopolitan identity, but they are generally pessimistic about the likelihood of this ever happening (see Scheuerman 2011, 53).

⁵⁶ As with Constructivism, I capitalize Realism and Liberalism when I refer to the theories of international relations.

⁵⁷ Liberals also argue that democracies do not wage war against each other, because voters know they will bear the costs of it, and are thus reluctant to support politicians who call for war. In addition, economic interdependence causes peace, because it raises war's economic costs (see Moravcsik 1997 for an overview). In both cases, rational self-interest keeps us peaceful.

many institutions, practices, and identities we view as normal are socially constructed and open to change (Hopf 1998). Not only does Habermas seek to abolish nationalistic ideas of identity and sovereignty, arguing that we can create a cosmopolitan identity (Habermas 2003b), but he also precisely relies on the fact that national identities have been fabricated by writers and historians, and spread through mass media. They are not a rigid sentiment, but can be changed and manipulated (Habermas 1996). In Europe, national identities may change through the process of European integration itself (Habermas 2012). Thus, it is no insurmountable obstacle that currently no European identity exists. European identity can emerge from existing infrastructures, such as national media, if they make clear that European issues affect all citizens (Habermas 2015, 2018).⁵⁸

For Constructivists, discursive power matters as much as material power, because it defines identities—which then determine how power is used. Material conditions grant a state the capabilities to become a great power, but by taking certain actions—such as waging wars or refraining from doing so—states define what being a great power means (Hopf 1998). Thus, contrary to Realists and Liberals, Habermas's work examines how practices can undermine or affirm identities. This explains his refusal to endorse the Iraq War and his cautious justification of the Kosovo intervention. Clearly, Habermas worries how the former affirms American identities of liberal nationalism, of a superpower that has the right to enforce its values with no regard for international law. The intervention in Kosovo at least had Europeans argue that it was a step toward a future cosmopolitan society—thereby not affirming the current national identity of liberal superpowers, but questioning it. Someone not ascribing to Constructivism would worry less about these things. For a Liberal, it may not matter how the United States enforces democracy in Iraq, as long as it achieves this result—preferably with minimal casualties. Habermas, by contrast, considers the discourse too, because how the West justifies an invasion changes our perception of what Western power should be.⁵⁹

Habermas seeks changes in our discourse and thus in our identities, norms, and values. His constitutionalization of international law not only requires legal power to reign in the excesses of nationalism. It should, in the long run, abolish nationalism altogether. International law should not be a guardrail that keeps bellicose impulses in check, but a way to construct an identity which accepts international law as readily as many accept domestic laws. Such a proposal relies on Constructivist ideals. Kant,

⁵⁸ Habermas also takes note of smaller changes in identities. For example, he argued that the abolition of conscription weakened the idea that one has to sacrifice one's life for the nation (Habermas 2012).

⁵⁹ It is such a preoccupation with Constructivism that could answer Roele's (2014) criticism of Habermas. Roele argues that Habermas's writings could justify the violent enforcement of human rights, but if one considers the Constructivist roots of Habermas's pacifism and cosmopolitan politics, violent enforcement of Western values would change how we see the West as a global actor. It would affirm a more bellicose Western identity.

by contrast, mostly cares about the federation reigning in states, without really changing them—and so would “Progressive Realists” who hope that a world state can control humanity’s destructive side (Scheuerman 2011).

Lastly, Habermas’s pacifism is complex, by which I mean it views international politics as a dynamic process where radical change is always possible—this is connected to Constructivism, but Constructivist approaches must not automatically be complex. Traditional theories of international relations often favor stability, with notions such as “balance of power”⁶⁰ assuming that there is a stable state of international relations—in this case a roughly equal amount of power between states—that it returns to after a disruption.⁶¹ The international system, under this assumption, contains negative feedback loops, which counter developments that upset the balance. For instance, after Napoleon conquered much of Europe, the other nations on the continent banded together to defeat him, later restoring a European balance at the Congress of Vienna (Kissinger 2015, 23–32).

These conceptions do not grasp the complexity of international politics, and thus, newer approaches rely on complexity theory to better study it (Kavalski 2007). Under this lens, international politics is not only an interplay between stable and disruptive periods—as “balance of power” would suggest—but can see wholly new constellations emerge. For instance, positive feedback may escalate changes, and these are then very difficult to reverse. When the United States supported Islamic fundamentalists in the Middle East in the 1980s, in order to counter the Soviet Union, the system did not return to the previous state after the Cold War. Instead, the changes escalated, with radicals taking over entire countries (Cudworth and Hobden 2010, 2012; see also Cairney 2012).⁶² In addition, complexity theory perceives states as networked, open systems, which are open to external processes and adapt together with their environment⁶³—not as the self-contained units that traditional theories would define them as (Bousquet and Curtis 2011). In reality, states not only change the balance of power—the balance of power also changes them (Orsini et al. 2019).

We can spot a complex element in Habermas’s writings on Europe, and his pleas for a constitutionalization of international law. It seems that for him, the European Union has changed international relations, and can develop further through positive feedback—Habermas argued that EU integration could lead to the constitutionalization of international law (Habermas 1999, see also Habermas 2005).⁶⁴ Additionally, Habermas’s

⁶⁰ A notion derived from Newtonian physics (Craig 2003, 3).

⁶¹ Balance of power is one of Realism’s key notions.

⁶² Complexity theory would suggest that these changes cannot be studied by breaking down the system into its composite parts, but only by studying the system as a whole (Cairney 2012).

⁶³ The international environment that states interact with also contains other states, and thus is again constituted by other open systems (Bousquet and Curtis 2011).

⁶⁴ Habermas’s deliberative understanding of democracy means that a constitution is an ongoing project in which all affected citizens should participate (Kreide 2009, see, for example, Habermas 1997).

constitutionalization of international law “would entail a fundamental change, not only in the relations between states and rights-bearing individuals, but also between states and other states” (Delahunty and Yoo 2010, 453). He seems to desire a total transformation in the way international politics is conducted.⁶⁵

Interestingly, one may also find a complex dimension in Kant when he imagines the evolution toward a world federation—although we could also dispute this, since Kant’s voluntary federation may break up and revert to the old equilibrium (Carson 1988). Even if we grant it, Kant’s complexity is one-sided. His idea of inevitable progress toward a world federation implies that positive feedback works only in one way—and that negative feedback loops prevent developments away from the world federation. By contrast, Habermas’s complexity goes both ways. For instance, we can create a world order based on international law, but at the same time, democratization and European integration could reverse and if they do, turning the tide again can take a long time (Diez 2011).

Put simply, Habermas’s political pacifism is complex because it relies on a constitutionalization of international law that not only manages states and enforces balance. Rather, it should establish a new constellation which has little to do with current practices in international politics.⁶⁶ This change, then, is solidified through positive feedback—while at the same time, failure to establish it could also escalate, making its creation increasingly harder.

In sum, Habermas’s pacifism is reflexive, Constructivist, and complex. To establish a new world order based on international law, we must act in the current system and may not implement our goals the way we want (reflexive). In addition, what separates him from his predecessors is the stress on how our norms and identities can and should change in the process (Constructivist). Lastly, these changes may endure and even escalate further through positive feedback loops—but at the same time, an error could haunt us for a long time (complex).

We can read Habermas’s engagement with the war in Ukraine from this perspective. Keeping in mind that he seeks a cosmopolitan society based on international law, for which the EU is a local example, helps us understand his contributions as an expression of political pacifism. Furthermore, its three central elements show that Habermas worries how the war will shape Western attitudes toward armed conflict. The Russian invasion could change Europe’s post-heroic values, with effects far into the future.

⁶⁵ The way Habermas talks about how states are less and less able to control their own affairs and at the whims of outside forces (Habermas 1998) also shows that he views states as open systems.

⁶⁶ By contrast, an account that ignores complexity would argue that new constellations in international politics sooner or later return the old equilibrium. One example is Waltz’s (1993) argument that NATO would dissolve after the Cold War, since it no longer had a Soviet Union to counter.

Habermas's pacifism highlights a concern for how the chances of a pacifist world order diminish if Europe forgets the virtues of dialogue and compromise—amplified by the disappointment over how the United States already gave up these ideals with the Iraq invasion.⁶⁷ Lastly, this perspective shows us that Habermas, despite not directly saying it in his articles, is mainly worried about the ultimate causes of war. Viewing his articles this way can initiate a reasonable debate about their merits.

4 A Path toward Meaningful Discussion

To view Habermas's articles as works of political pacifism stresses that Ukraine's resistance is warranted and necessary, but that ultimately, we must create a world where it is no longer required.⁶⁸ Ukraine may have its heroes now, but sadly, this means that the country is still in a situation where it needs them. Habermas's goal is to ensure that as soon as possible, it can leave such situations behind. This is, as shown above, a key commitment of political pacifism—and one that sets it apart from other only ostensibly pacifist approaches.

Habermas urges us to not risk the progress we have made toward a world in which international relations are governed by law, not the whim of nations. To preserve past achievements, the West must ensure that Ukraine does not lose, but also see that a solution to the conflict supports norms of non-violence. If it does not, Habermas fears that the values and self-understandings that made war normal will return, dragging us back into a more violent time.

Framing his articles this way can create grounds for a reasonable discussion between Habermas and his critics. Habermas's critics likely agree that the end of the conflict should create a world that is now safer, in which another invasion has become less likely. But by invoking the three dimensions of Habermas's pacifism, we can see the fault-lines between the two camps emerge—but can also spot where we may reach an understanding. At least, they allow us to focus on some specific open questions.

First, does Habermas adequately analyze the preconditions of the Russian invasion and the conditions that peace should emerge from? A reflexive pacifism would require this. However, Habermas was criticized by Behrends (2023) and Schmelze (2022) for not doing that. One could argue that Habermas ignores the proximate causes,⁶⁹ but analyzes the conflict's

⁶⁷ In general, Habermas's cosmopolitan attitude became more skeptical of the U.S. after the Iraq war (Verovšek 2012).

⁶⁸ Habermas was so skeptical of heroic values that he even criticized Americans calling the first responders of the 9/11 attacks heroes, stating that countries are in a bad place if they need heroes (Smith 2021).

⁶⁹ A proximate cause for the invasion could for example be that the West was cautious not to approach Ukraine too much (Motyl 2015), and refused to accept the country into NATO, because it feared angering Russia (Treisman 2016). It is possible that Russia may have not started its invasion had it faced strong reactions from the West after the invasion of Crimea. Of course, determining causality is difficult in international politics and it is possible that no matter how the West reacted in 2014, Russia would have launched its full-scale invasion.

ultimate causes—such as nationalism and heroic values—and that tackling them is more useful. For example, we should keep in mind that a settlement that Ukraine unilaterally forces upon Russia could, despite the former being the victim, cause more tension in the long run. As Norman (1988) noted, wars cause more wars through settlements that breed resentment. How can we be sure that Russia will not amass forces for another assault should it be defeated? Those who insist on Ukrainian victory must also specify what comes next, so that we do not return to the same situation a few years down the line.⁷⁰

Still, one should address proximate causes as well. However, Habermas's articles on Ukraine contain little analysis of them. Kister (2023b) suggests that someone who calls for a settlement must not necessarily determine all the steps toward it. But if Habermas criticizes Western governments for delivering weapons without a clear plan, should he not offer an alternative? While nobody can demand a detailed plan, some indications of how peace is to be sustained would be welcome.

The focus on reflexive political pacifism could highlight that Habermas and his critics should agree that proximate and ultimate causes of war matter. For example, would Ukrainians even stop fighting if the West brokered a settlement for them? And are we not making the problem worse by not punishing Russia's bellicosity? We should not get lost in the details and forget the ultimate causes, but that does not mean we can neglect the proximate causes of war.

Second, as a Constructivist, Habermas is sensitive to how our practices change our identities. He correctly analyzes how Western bellicosity may erode our post-heroic values. He and his critics could agree that affirmations and criticisms of identity matter. But where Habermas may lament a lack of analysis of Western bellicosity, his critics could demand a more detailed exploration of how a lack of strength against the Russian threat would affect the European Union. What good is a peace project that negotiates its non-violent values when threatened by an autocrat? How could it accelerate its pacifist vision while living in fear of an expansionist power?

The EU can be a pacifist project because it has the right material conditions (like American protection) and because it affirms this status through its actions. But its actions can also change how we understand a pacifist project. This is why Habermas is worried about Europe's role in Ukraine. If the EU only sends weapons without a clear plan to solve the conflict peacefully, then this could define how we see the European pacifist project. However, his critics and he should debate how a settlement would change Europe's identity as a peace project.

⁷⁰ Of course, Habermas's critics could attack him in a similar way. He could retort that he wants to abolish the ultimate causes of war and thus has a vision for how to improve international relations after the conflict ends. Those who only see Russian defeat lack such a vision or at least do not spell it out.

Lastly, Habermas's complex pacifism seeks compromise to facilitate a radical change in international politics, not to return to a previous balance. And yes, Habermas does not see a settlement as the final destination. Negotiations should first and foremost stop the killing and buy time for a diplomatic solution. But a complex approach to the conflict should be aware that positive feedback can escalate in an undesirable direction. Especially, it highlights an important question: If Russia and Ukraine return to the 2022 borders through a settlement, how much would this solidify the occupation of Crimea and the Donbas? Does Habermas consider how returning them back to the liberal world order becomes more difficult the longer the occupation persists?

These are some questions that Habermas left open in his articles. Me pointing them out is less of a critique, but an invitation for critics, supporters, and himself to further explore the practical applications of his political pacifism. After all, his pleas are not useless, uninformed or naive. Habermas reminds us that the war should end in a way that promotes pacifist values, and that we must think of what to do afterwards. Isolate Russia forever? Or, preferably, incorporate it into a sphere of peace so that a war becomes impossible in the future? While one may argue that total victory over Russia can secure peace in Europe, pacifists note that many past wars were also legitimized as a "war to end all wars" (Ryan 2013, 2023). But Habermas is not only worried about this conflict. He wants us to consider how our attitudes toward the Russian invasion will shape how we approach other conflicts in the future. This is a question all interested in a more peaceful world should think about.

5 Conclusion

I have argued that Jürgen Habermas is a political pacifist. More precisely, Habermas's pacifism can be described as reflexive, Constructivist, and complex. With such a framework for engaging with Habermas's pacifism, we can now fine-tune his approach. This is certainly important—for Europe and the world. With Ukraine, as with every war, we must think about what comes after. How do we ensure lasting peace? How do we prevent the same situation from emerging somewhere else?

As I have argued, Habermas thought about these questions for decades. When he criticized and improved on Kant, when he criticized nationalism and promoted cosmopolitanism, when he praised the EU's achievements and outlined paths for it to develop further, Habermas was constructing a political pacifist vision. After surveying his past writings, it seems reasonable that this vision also prompted him to write his articles on Ukraine.

The task of his readers now is to explore his pacifist vision and to refine it. How much can Habermas guide us toward a world without war, in theory and practice? Which insights of his can we apply not just to the case of Ukraine, but to how we conduct international politics broadly? In short, how can we create a world where a plea for negotiations is no longer neces-

sary, since they have become the default approach to international politics, while war has been ostracized?

This task is becoming more important as some scholars foresee even more destructive wars in the near future (Ryan 2023). Habermas's pleas are pressing when we consider a future where the international sphere may become more unstable. We will need pacifist visions in a world where arms spending increases, where nuclear weapons are still spread across the globe, and where climate change, radical populism and new technologies further destabilize international relations. Habermas has already given us tools with which we can craft a more peaceful world in practice. It is time that we recognize this. Once we do, we can try our best to improve on his vision.

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