

A critical assessment of Habermas's vision of political integration of Europe and prospects of transnational social justice

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Abstract: This study seeks to contribute to an underexplored area of research: Habermas's vision of the EU's political integration, in relation to his discourse ethics, communicative norms, and public sphere, as a means of providing social justice and fostering transnational solidarity across the EU. It aims to assess the applicability of Habermas's theoretical framework to his vision of the EU's political integration in the face of challenges posed by global markets and the continuing influence of nationalism. It also examines the limitations of his theories of deliberative democracy, discourse ethics, and the public sphere amid the challenges posed by power dynamics, capitalism, and nationalism. It investigates the impact of the interplay between capitalism and nationalism on ethnic multiplicities, influence structures, and societal pathologies. It evaluates Habermas's aspiration to construct transnational cohesiveness amid adamant, strong nationalist consciousness. It analyzes Habermas's communicative action (a cornerstone of his deliberative democracy) and its requisites from the perspective of Foucault's philosophy of power, and indicates that Habermas's vision does not adequately address threats to communicative norms. Thus, Habermas's theoretical framework does not seem to provide a fitting response to the practical challenges posed to the vision of transnational political integration.

Keywords: transnational solidarity, nationalism, constitutional patriotism, public sphere, political integration

Introduction

This paper critically analyzes Habermas's response to the problems caused by the phenomenon of markets going global while the state remains national. It evaluates his vision of the political integration of the European Union and of transnational solidarity, with a view to providing social justice at the continental level. For Habermas, solidarity is the other side of justice, and communicative norms are the cornerstone of a well-functioning civil society and of maintaining solidarity. Fostering solidarity and integration is essential for achieving justice and reducing

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social and economic disparities, a process that is already progressing within the EU. This “unification process could signal a decisive step towards a post-national world order, one which is also indispensable if unbridled global capitalism is to be steered into socially acceptable channels” (Habermas, 2015). Thus, Habermas envisions an emerging world order with transnational solidarities and with a supranational world organization as a governance body rooted in deliberative democracy. The proposed political integration of the EU aims to resolve the disjuncture between bureaucratic and technocratic decision-making processes in the EU and to construct a European public sphere rooted in critical-rational discourse, to be translated into legislation (Grewal, 2012). The aspiration and vision of an all-inclusive discursive public sphere is contrasted with the practical reality where the troika of the “European Central Bank, the Commission, and the European Court of Justice have intervened most profoundly in the everyday lives of European citizens over the decades, even though these institutions are least subject to democratic control” (Habermas, 2013, p.4). It is in this spirit that Habermas criticizes Kantian monologic universalizability and Rawlsian monologic original position. Habermas captures the struggle between techno-bureaucratic practices and the aspiration to create wider social solidarity and to provide distributive justice through the concepts of lifeworld and system.

The capitalist social order is two-tiered: social integration in the lifeworld and systemic integration in the system, i.e., money and power. For Habermas, the sustainability of systemic integration depends on social integration. Social integration is sustained by communicative norms, and systemic integration works through the non-discursive steering media of money and power (Fultner, 2011). In contemporary capitalism, money and power tend to colonize the lifeworld, thus undermining the source of social solidarity on which systemic integration is based. The system tends to colonize the lifeworld by imbuing it with economic rationality. System, to Habermas, is the legitimate domain of economic rationality; if it prevails in the lifeworld, it would be self-defeating for the system because it undermines the system, which cannot work without social solidarity. The colonization of the lifeworld “does not involve the destruction of reason in its entirety but the destruction of communicative rationality within the social lifeworld” (Brunkhorst et al., 2017, p.621). The political integration of the EU and the provision of justice at the continental level are mutually exclusive with the colonization of the lifeworld. A public sphere rooted in critical-rational discourse can foster transnational solidarity, thereby enabling the political integration of the EU required to deliver justice at the EU level.

This paper argues that Habermas's vision of creating transnational solidarity and politically integrating the European Union faces formidable challenges, especially from the inextricable interconnection of nationalism and capitalism and the power-money nexus that inexorably undermines the lifeworld. The objective of this research paper is to critically assess the theoretical strength of Habermas's model of the EU's political integration amid the practical challenges posed by the

inseparable intertwinement of capitalism and persistent disparities within and across EU nation-states, and the subsequent undermining of social integration because of the colonization of the lifeworld by money and power. The research question is: What are they, how serious are they, what are the key challenges, and what are the major limitations in putting into practice Habermas's vision of the democratically constitutional political integration of the EU in connection with power relations and amid the forces of capitalism and nationalism. This study fills a research gap by identifying the obstacles and constraints to Habermas's concept of transnational solidarity and the political integration of the EU. It considers the EU's social and political context, defined by a dual dynamic: ongoing nationalist cohesion and the influence of globalized multinational markets. This research article attempts to contribute to filling this gap by analysing the influence of the conjunction of capitalism and nationalism on nationalism's resistance to fostering a transnational public sphere and to the provision of social justice across the EU. It also examines Habermas's conceptual framework to harness the economic power of the wealthy elite and the continuation of the money-power nexus through a Foucauldian lens.

1. Methodology

This research article employed textual analysis and critical theory to examine the key texts of Jurgen Habermas in the domains of constitutional patriotism, the public sphere, discourse ethics, democracy, solidarity, and human rights in relation to distributive justice. Together, these approaches analyse the potential non-neutrality and the embeddedness of texts within power dynamics and social structures. The use of critical theory as a tool for interpreting texts reveals the underlying social realities and power structure. This combination was employed to investigate the potential of successfulness in Habermas, taking great pains to decolonize the lifeworld from the system, which may be understood as a money-power nexus. This methodology, as a subset of the combination of textual analysis and critical analysis, combines normative analysis and interpretative critique. A key problem of this research is to identify and evaluate the major challenges to Habermas's project for the political integration of the European Union, aimed at providing solidarity and social justice at the transnational level, on the basis of his discourse ethics and communicative action. Textual analysis enables the researcher to narrow the study and zoom in on a given problem. "Textual analysis is inevitably selective: in any analysis, we choose to ask certain questions about social events and texts, rather than other possible questions" (Fairclough, 2003, p.15). Critical theory is "characterized by an interpretive approach combined with a pronounced interest in critically disputing actual social realities...The aim...is to serve the emancipatory project" (Howell, 2013, p.76).

Habermas is a political philosopher who wrote prolifically. Certain texts reflecting Habermas's key ideas have been selected for the critical analysis of his

views and the possibility of realizing his vision. Critical and comparative approaches have been employed to analyse key texts. It compares Habermas's engagement with power dynamics with Foucault's view of power/knowledge. It evaluates Habermas's views from a Foucauldian lens to assess the challenges from the power dynamics to Habermas's vision of the political integration of the EU. A primary question in this research is whether capitalism, as a political principle, can be decoupled from nationalism, and, in turn, whether this can lead to the development of a transnational continental state. Because capitalist business is multinational, capitalism as a market principle has been freed from nationalism. A fundamental tension is that capitalist businesses, especially in the contemporary neoliberal context, seek minimal state intervention, whereas the state is obliged to harness capitalism to build solidarity and provide justice. This paper offers a critical analysis of these problems. Textual analysis, coupled with critical theory, appears well-suited to investigating the commitment to and practical usefulness of Habermas's ideal of promoting liberty, inclusive discourse, and equality by activating politics in relation to neoliberal economics in the European Union.

2. Political integration of the EU and Habermas's approach to distributive justice

Habermas does not offer a distinct and systematic theory of distributive justice in the way John Rawls or Robert Nozick do, but rather his theory may be derived from his ideas of discourse ethics, communicative rationality, and liberal and social rights. The identification of a solution to the problem of social justice in Habermas's body of work "is not set forward in a single volume; it forms a normative leitmotif that recurs throughout his theoretical writings" (Kreide, 2017, p.162). The subsystems of money and power are the non-discursive steering media rooted in instrumental and economic rationality. Instrumental and economic rationality of the system threatens the functioning and existence of the lifeworld (Outhwaite, 2009). The inclusive discursive practices and their translation into legislation play a pivotal role in Habermas's approach to justice. Justice consists of human rights and solidarity, where human rights are liberal or negative rights, whereas solidarity concerns the public good and social rights (Habermas, 1990, p.224). For Habermas, one dimension of justice is the provision of human rights aiming to safeguard individual freedom, while the other dimension is "justice conceived deontologically [which] required solidarity as its reverse side" (Habermas, 1990, p.224). Habermas does not formulate fixed principles of justice but rather emphasizes procedural systems to reach rational consensus. Habermas does not turn to Kant's universalizability criterion to propose his theory of justice, but, for him, it provides a device that helps participants formulate a basic-rights framework that plays a key role in consensus-building for the provision of justice (Deranty et al., 2006). Habermas uses Kant's monologic universalizability test dialogically, in that each

interlocutor is required to judge whether a norm can be embraced as a universal principle; thus, norms are accepted or rejected by the affected parties in a discursive setting (White, 1995). Thus, distributive outcomes need to result from the legitimacy of democratic procedures rather than from predefined rules formulated in a monologic way. That is, for Habermas, substance is fair and equitable if procedures are legitimate. Furthermore, Habermas's discourse principle, while not a principle of justice, aims to guarantee the impartial and rational formulation of norms. According to the discourse principle, "only those norms are valid to which all affected persons could agree as participants in rational discourses" (Habermas, 1996). It aims to encourage rational accountability among interlocutors, allowing them to freely choose whether to accept or reject a norm with a yes or no (Ingram, 2010).

For Habermas, each individual, in the context of public and private autonomy, is not merely a subject of law but also a legislator (Habermas, 1996). Having human rights and individual freedom implies that individuals are subject to law and have private autonomy, whereas public autonomy implies active participation in the law-making process. Private autonomy ensures that an individual is free to choose, whereas public autonomy aims to ensure that the authorship of law results from rational and impartial self-legislation by citizens (Habermas, 1996). For Habermas, human rights (i.e., formal rights) have priority over social rights. Human rights and individual freedoms are understood as universal, whereas social rights are contextual and conditional, which ultimately serve as means to the realization of formal rights. Justice, both retributive and distributive, depends primarily on the protection of both liberal, formal, or negative rights and social rights.

The political and security challenges the EU faces amid global financial integration demand deeper political integration. A disjuncture exists between the political and the economic power. Thus, the EU possesses "considerable economic power, but political power rests chiefly with the member states" (Zielonka, 2014, p.40). To a group of reporters, the former Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mark Eyskens, said in 1991 that the EU is "an economic giant, a political dwarf, and a military worm" (Zielonka, 2014). Habermas contends that the regulatory capacities and sovereignty of nation-states have been diminished, and that, with the rise of a post-national constellation, nation-states are unable to safeguard the economic destinies of their citizens. State boundaries no longer confine the spread of businesses amid global market integration. Rather, "it is states that are embedded within markets rather than national economies embedded within the boundaries of states" (Habermas, 2002, p.219). To address pressing problems, such as the provision of social rights to citizens across all EU member states, environmental degradation, and the wide gulf between the rich and the poor, Habermas proposes the framework of constitutional patriotism. A nation-state is not large enough to have the governance capacity to resolve these problems. Social and economic are intertwined, in that maintaining economic efficiency demands strengthening social

integration. Social integration is necessary for both long-term efficiency and providing social justice. A European political federation is a rational response to a situation in which a nation-state lacks the apparatus and legitimacy to regulate multinational businesses. Transnational political mechanisms legitimized within the context of rational-critical discourse are required to check the market's dominance over civil society.

3. Habermas's proposal for the political integration of the European Union: addressing market dominance and democratic legitimacy

A basic paradox is that political integration is threatened by inadequate social cohesiveness, while adequate social cohesiveness requires political integration. Thus, fair transnational policymaking that adequately represents the interests of less powerful states in the EU is unlikely unless the more powerful and wealthier nation-states reciprocally moderate their national interests in favor of the former. Thus, a tension exists between a desired political alignment and fragmentation within the Union, caused by uneven market influence. Habermas (Habermas, 2001) is concerned with the social rights of the elderly unemployed and of employees and workers. He advocates regulating the labor market and, in the same spirit, contends that the state should play a significant role in providing healthcare. He is deeply critical of the neoliberal policy of deregulated markets. He is critical of them for being "not equipped with any moral sense of social obligation" (Habermas, 2001, p.94). Neoliberalism's problem is that although it demands respect for private liberties, it neglects the need for equal respect for each person's human worth (Habermas, 2001).

Whereas politics operates on the principle of the common good, the market operates on the principle of self-interest. Habermas is keenly aware that "the market and politics rest on conflicting principles" (Habermas, 2012, p.190). The Great Recession, according to Habermas, was not an outcome of market failure but of politics, which should have promoted the common good rather than merely moralizing (Habermas, 2012). In relation to the interplay of the social power of the wealthy elite and the communicative power of public opinion, Habermas observes that the state must be big and equipped enough to harness the former and properly respond to the latter to promote liberal and social rights of all citizens, thus providing distributive justice and social integration. In this way, Habermas envisions safeguarding the legitimacy of legislation against both the social power of the wealthy elite and the administrative power of the state, thus upholding the rule of law. It is Habermas's contention that "the laws that the government enforces must be seen as the outcome of unconstrained and inclusive discussion, both at the informal level of public debate and at the formal level of parliamentary deliberation" (Ingram, 2010, p.198). Mere separation of the legislature, judiciary, and executive on horizontal grounds is inadequate, as it does not address the social power of the

wealthy elite but only places checks on the state's administrative power (Ingram, 2010). The central point is that "all political power [should] derive from the communicative power of the citizens" (Habermas, 1996, p.170). Provided that the legislature is legitimately elected, Habermas supports the sovereignty of both the judiciary and the legislature over the executive and the legislature over the judiciary (Ingram, 2010). For Habermas, the desirable relationship between the public's communicative power and the state's administrative power is that the law should serve "as the proper vehicle for translating communicative into administrative power" (Benhabib et al., 2007). In shaping legitimate and accountable governance procedures and structures, Habermas's approach underscores the importance of rational-critical, inclusive discourse.

Maintaining Habermas's specifications for an ideal speech situation is necessary for rational discourse, in which only one force is at work, namely the force of the better argument (Jürgen Habermas, 1998). Freedom from internal and external coercion, inclusion, intention, and equal opportunity are the key elements of Habermas's ideal speech situation. Freedom from coercion implies that the interlocutors are not subject to any legal or organizational threats; inclusion requires the participation of all who will be affected by the deliberation's outcome; intention means harmony between speech and thought; equal opportunity requires that each member be given equal time and opportunity. This protection of deliberation from undue influences and pressures aims to foster inclusive, open dialogue and legitimate and impartial laws and decision-making. Laws are not legitimate unless they fulfil the principle of democracy, according to which only those statutes are legitimate which are the outcome of "the assent of all citizens in a discursive process of legislation that in turn has been legally constituted" (Habermas, 1996, p.110). Resolving continental and global issues of equitable distribution and environmental degradation demands supranational political frameworks, not partially desovereignized nation-states.

The nation-state, which is not equipped to harness unbridled multinational business, represents a new version of Clausewitz's formula: "state politics is now merely the continuation of capital accumulation by other means" (Holland, 2008, p.81). The continued operation of global trade, unregulated by politics and regulated only for private, corporate, and national interests at the expense of transnational social and economic pathologies, produces "asymmetrical advantages for one side and to ruin whole economies" (Habermas, 2007, p.56). To ensure distributive justice at the continental or regional level, the state must be consensually authorized and possess sufficient power in both legitimacy and capacity. After the desovereignization and obsolescence of the nation-state, its re-sovereignization is possible through political integration, alongside the already achieved economic integration at the regional level. Thus, "politics must build up its capacities at the supranational level" (Habermas, 2012, p.190) to effectively regulate multinational business and the globally integrated market. It is politics and markets that are

responsible for addressing economic, financial, and ecological challenges, “all of which involve the issue of equitable distribution” (Habermas, 2012, p.114). Habermas's dualist framework of capitalist social order, consisting of lifeworld and system, rejects Marx's approach to capitalism (his economism and reductionism) according to which the economic base determines the social superstructure, thus deeply influencing politics, law, philosophy, art, and literature, etc. (Thomassen, 2010, p.74). In *Legitimation Crisis* as well in *Toward a Rational Society* Habermas contends that the interventionist state through political intervention activated economic dynamism and growth in the wake of the Great Depression which implies that politics is not merely a part of social superstructure determined by economic base (Sitton, 2003, p.34). The empowerment of political action, together with transnational inclusion, in the context of rational-critical discursive will-formation, continentally and globally, is the response Habermas recommends to the colonization of the lifeworld and the unhindered functioning of instrumental and economic rationality, so that social justice is achieved at the transnational level.

4. Analysing the challenges to promote regional social solidarity in the european union

Habermas observes that economic and political cooperation among EU members is only superficial and criticizes the lack of a feasible theoretical framework to foster authentic solidarity. With a view to overcoming the subject-object dichotomy, Habermas proposes communicative action, which is intersubjective and seeks to foster both negative and social rights, as well as to eliminate the tension between individual welfare and the public good. Following Kant's footsteps in disregarding compassion in favour of rational morality, Habermas contends that solidarity is distinct from benevolence and sympathy and formulates the obverse of justice (Pensky, 2008). However, this view is partially influenced by Carol Gilligan's insights (Brunkhorst et al., 2017). Habermas favours solidarity over benevolence in conflicts between justice and benevolence, as this promotes cohesion among strangers and enhances continental connectedness among different cultural groups (Pensky, 2008). Amid diverse views of the good and multiple plans and interests, moral solidarity promotes the welfare of others and inclusion (Pensky, 2008). The members of the EU, although they have multiple ethnicities, share a constitutional and political culture, and it is this culture that, to Habermas, can provide an umbrella of political integration for all member states. The development of transnational political institutions is necessary to foster a European civil society and ensure distributive justice throughout Europe.

To unify the diverse, multicultural solidarities through constitutional patriotism, Habermas proposes a participatory, democratically legitimate alternative to free the political and social spheres of the EU from technocratic governance. In the context of the ideal speech situation and the shared norms of human rights and

popular sovereignty across Europe, constitutional patriotism “can take the place originally occupied by nationalism” (Cronin & Greiff, 1998, p.118). Nationalism corresponds to the family-oriented stage of Lawrence Kohlberg’s stages of moral development. For Habermas, the obsolescence of the nation-state and the moral maturity of Europeans should now translate into the emergence of a transnational political federation of Europe that corresponds to Kohlberg’s sixth stage (Edgar, 2006, p.109). Habermas’s constitutional patriotism aims to integrate pluralist multicultural societies into a political unity on the basis of rational discourse and shared communicative norms. Thus, constitutional patriotism is “a form of post-traditional political culture that combines unique identitarian aspects of one’s own culture with more generalized norms that reflect the quiet, functional needs of public argumentation” (Fultner, 2011, p.151). Because the EU lacks a shared memory of, for example, victories and defeats, humiliation and pride, its solidarity as a “post-national constellation” is founded on the principles of popular sovereignty, legal equality, human rights in the context of inclusive deliberation for the authorship of legislation. However, despite its aspirational fervour and theoretical rigor, Habermas’s project faces diverse challenges.

The lifeworld and the system constitute the two fundamental apparatuses of the social order, as conceived by Habermas (Heath, 2011). The system consists of subsystems that Habermas calls non-discursive steering media of money and power/state/administration, and is responsible for systemic integration, whereas the lifeworld, which indicates social integration, is rooted in communicative norms and rational-critical discourse (Calhoun, 1993). Systemic integration depends on social integration, and both, according to Habermas, should work within their respective domains. However, the system tends to colonize the lifeworld, thus undermining not only the legitimacy of decision-making and legislation, but also the very foundations of society and economy. “Habermas thinks of the law as a ‘transmission belt’ that interacts with both system and lifeworld, connecting communicative and functional forms of social integration (solidarity, money, power)” (Fultner, 2011, p.11). Both the lifeworld and the subsystems of money and power provide integration into the social order, although the latter depends on the former. The lifeworld is communicative and discursive, whereas money and power are non-discursive. However, the system also provides integration, which facilitates market and organizational interactions among individuals. The connections and interactions in the lifeworld should converge into a public sphere that transforms aspirations and group interests established through rational-critical discourse into legislation and actionable strategies.

The construction of an inclusive European public sphere is a much needed and formidable task for legitimizing the democratic process and integrating the EU politically. “The public sphere forms a space of reasoned communicative interaction—the principal means of arriving at collective understanding” (Nanz, 2018, p.605). The extent of inclusiveness and participation, and the discursive

quality, demonstrate the impact of a public sphere (Calhoun, 1993). The public sphere needs to incorporate pluralistic and multicultural voices, including social movements, in a rational-critical dialogue “in order to make the abstract ideal of deliberative democracy an empirical reality” (Fultner, 2011, p.177). Habermas, (2012) emphasizes the connection between the social influence exerted by the wealthy elite and the media—which ought to be independent but is not—and articulates concerns about possible distortions in the public sphere, which undermine the legitimacy of the democratic process. Moreover, “there is not yet a global public sphere, nor even the urgently needed European public sphere” (Habermas, 1998, p.177). However, the emergence of global civil society indicates only slight prospects for an emerging global public sphere (Nanz, 2018: 608; FIVE). The state acts as a vital link that turns public opinion, which develops within the public sphere, into laws and policies, even though the state itself is not part of that public sphere. (Goodin & Pettit, 2019). Thus, a European public sphere, in the context of Europe-wide solidarity, must be coupled with the emergence of the EU as a political federation to provide legitimate laws that lead to justice and the fulfillment of liberal and social rights.

The 2008 Eurozone crisis highlighted underlying nationalist sentiments across the EU that oppose Habermas's idea of constitutional patriotism. Germany (which the Greek public called Germoney) and Greece represented two extremes on the spectrum of rich and poor countries in the EU, with Germany conceived as a beneficiary of the economic order through its nationalist fiscal policies. Nationalism, rather than being eclipsed, seems to be gaining strength. While prominent social theorists like Zygmunt Bauman, Ulrich Beck, and Anthony Giddens predicted that nationalism would decline due to economic globalization that continued in the early twenty-first century, the upsurge of nativist, populist, anti-immigrant, protectionist, and ethnicist movements—many of which have gained political influence in Europe—demonstrates a resurgence of nationalism (Malešević, 2025). In the EU, surveys conducted in the last half century show that “the sense of national attachment and pride in one's nation has been very high for nearly all European countries” (Malešević, 2025). To “preserve the monetary union, it is no longer enough...to provide loans to over-indebted states,” Habermas suggests that Germany should set an example by accepting “short- and medium-term negative redistributive effects in its longer-term self-interest” (Habermas, 2015, p.28). It is necessary to develop Europe-wide solidarity, but providing a practical and comprehensive framework that can serve as a systematic criterion remains a goal yet to be achieved (Saracino, 2024).

5. Challenge of economic nationalism to Habermas's constitutional patriotism

Despite the ethnocultural diversity within Europe, to Habermas, the continent's shared political culture, centered on human rights and popular sovereignty and founded on ‘constitutional patriotism’, can replace nationalism. Under the influences of

globalization and multinational enterprises, the nation-state has experienced partial desovereignization. Consequently, it is insufficiently large and powerful to accrue the necessary tax revenues to uphold social rights and advance the public good, which serve as the foundation for transnational integration (Habermas, 2012). Habermas grounds his view of constructing a multinational consciousness on Gellner's argument that national consciousness is not natural or innate but fabricated by the print media and state machinery (Greiff & Cronin, 2002). Habermas views the cultural shift in Europe from a dynastic and Christian worldview to a nationalist consciousness as a qualitative leap and suggests that it is time for national consciousness to be transformed into a multinational European identity. Habermas criticizes political defeatism and advocates that a multinational European identity and consciousness can be developed, analogous to the historical formation of national consciousness through national historiography (Greiff & Cronin, 2002). Habermas's constitutional patriotism aims to "to combat the centripetal forces of the EU" (Imre, 2018, p. 55), thereby transforming Italians, Germans, Greeks, French, and citizens of other member countries into constitutional patriots.

Although capitalism can exist without democracy, as in contemporary China, and democracy can exist without capitalism, as in ancient Greece, capitalism has always functioned in conjunction with nationalism. Nationalism demands closed borders, controls the inflow and outflow of capital, is driven by economic rationality, and has been a major catalyst of wealth accumulation and economic growth (Greenfeld, 2003). It may be safely argued that "it is nationalism that made capitalism possible" (Basta, 2024a). Liah Greenfeld, influenced by the works of Max Weber and Ernest Gellner, contends that nationalism is the "spirit of capitalism" (Greenfeld, 2003). The conjunction of nationalism and capitalism, for example, as expressed in protectionism and nationalist subsidies, poses a challenge to Habermas's proposed constitutional patriotism (Scicluna, 2015). In Dutch and French referenda, the rejection of the European Constitution showed that further political integration in the EU is neither desirable nor inevitable (Scicluna, 2015). Thus, constitutional patriotism faces formidable challenges. Egalitarianism and popular sovereignty are the fundamental principles of nationalist consciousness, in which the former addresses social organization, inclusion, and cohesion, while the latter concerns political engagement (Greenfeld, 2006). Multiple interpretations of the egalitarian principle exist across Europe, but they share a commitment to equality and inclusiveness within national boundaries and do not regard constitutional patriotism as desirable. Popular sovereignty is also commonly interpreted on nationalist grounds, without giving significance to transnational regional political integration. Capitalism is imbued with an acquisitive drive at the personal and corporate levels, whereas nationalism and the nation-state harness this drive for capital accumulation at the national level and for national economic growth. The dynamic relationship between economic interests and national identity collectively upholds and protects the sovereignty and territorial boundaries of wealthy nation-states (Greenfeld, 2003). Thus, when capitalism and

nationalism are conjoined, the nation-state is responsible for providing justice at the national level, without concern for transnational cohesiveness.

A transnational state would be obliged to eliminate poverty and promote liberty and equality across the EU, a goal that wealthy individual nation-states do not approve of. Cooperation and competition among nation-states can be compared to the soccer World Cup, in which a team competes externally against other teams while all team members cooperate internally. Consciousness among citizens of various nation-states is deeply rooted in territorial and ethnic identities; transforming these into a post-national, constitutionally patriotic, Europeanist consciousness is a highly challenging project, and the traces of its success are not yet visible. The inevitable and inextricable interplay of nationalism and capitalism poses a serious challenge to the resovereignization of the state at the regional level. Capitalism's acquisitiveness and self-interested pursuit of capital accumulation have been organized by the nation-state in the national interest, in competition with other nation-states that pursue capitalism for similar goals. Habermas's vision of the provision of justice at the transnational level seems highly improbable when it is observed that even at the national level, "capitalist societies are deeply unequal, and those inequalities have worsened over the past four decades" (Basta, 2024b). An interconnected challenge that springs from the conjunction of capitalism and nationalism is that the former resists being harnessed by politics, while the latter is indifferent to public welfare outside national borders. The persistence of nationalism in the EU that it continues to shape and influence social and political landscapes across Europe. A new form of economic nationalism is surging in the USA, China, and the European Union (with the dominance of France and Germany), integrating national security strategy with industrial policy and "collectively reshaping the international economic order toward a paradigm clearly marked by more economic nationalism" despite procedural diversity in these countries (Hauge et al., 2025).

6. Challenges to Habermas's communicative norms and the public sphere and implications for the EU's political integration

Habermas tends to underestimate that the lifeworld does not necessarily produce consensus but is an arena of rival views rooted in conflicting cultural beliefs, where multiple interests often collide. Inclusion does not necessarily lead to consensus. For example, Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs do not seem to share consensual views on legislation in the Indian lifeworld. Moreover, Habermas's communicative norms of the ideal speech situation are challenged by Foucault's perspective on power. The Foucauldian viewpoint emphasizes that power relations among individuals are unavoidable and that power is always present. Habermas's view of rationality is challenged by Foucault's relational view of power, which replaces the unidirectional/vertical view. Thus, Foucault contends that power is "everywhere and always alert" (Foucault, 1977, p.177). Considering how power is pervasive in real life,

Habermas's ideals of equal participation between the weak and the powerful, harmony between their intentions and speech, freedom from coercion, and inclusive participation regardless of social status seem idealistic and abstract. The prevalence of the Habermasian ideal of uncoerced force of better argument in the presence of pervasive power relations appears implausible. Consequently, it appears challenging for inclusive, democratic, and participatory processes to develop at the regional level, facilitating rational-critical discourse that results in consensual law-making. Furthermore, these challenges remind us of the gap between our ideal ideas of everyone having a say and the real-world struggles with power and commercial interests in today's society.

Modern digital platforms have become central to how society functions and interacts, and the public sphere is subtly affected by them. Platforms driven by algorithms, such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter, tend to prioritize profit maximization. As some of the world's most valuable companies, they continually integrate more into our daily lives, prompting us to consider how their strategic goals influence our social and cultural experiences. Philosophers like Habermas highlight core values such as truth, justice, and authenticity, but these become more fragile amid current crises—climate change, growing inequality, and datafication—that threaten the very fabric of our social world and challenge our ability to come together as a community.

Habermas tends to disregard the deep embeddedness of power relations in public interactions and discourse. Despite the meaningful role of citizens in Western Europe in the authorship of laws, the legislative process is not free from the influence of public debate, which is vulnerable to majority preferences and may thus be considered partially illiberal. Meanwhile, in Central Europe, illiberal regimes are experienced through heavily monitored public debates and a media environment—spanning both traditional outlets and digital platforms—that feels very centralized, creating an overall sense of surveillance and control (Verovšek, 2025). Thus, building a genuinely integrated political community within an interventionist continental constitutional state across the European Union is a daunting task, and the goals of enabling every individual to be a legislator, providing equal social rights to all across Europe, and promoting justice and transnational solidarity remain blurred dreams, not visible realities of the near future.

6.1 Theoretical contribution:

This research article critically evaluates Habermas's concept of the EU's political integration aimed at providing public goods and tackling globalization and multinational corporate pressures. It highlights the limitations of Habermas's perspective on the ubiquity of power relations and the challenges posed by the interaction between capitalism and nationalism. The article identifies obstacles to the EU's proposed political integration. It incorporates and examines key Habermas

concepts such as discourse ethics, constitutional patriotism, communicative action, deliberative democracy, and the colonization thesis, in relation to the main challenges to his vision. Additionally, it analyzes how capitalism and nationalism jointly shape the development of transnational identity and solidarity, aiming to achieve social justice at the regional level. Finally, it evaluates the potential of the public sphere as a Europe-wide space for critical-rational discourse.

6.2 Practical contribution

This research identifies the limitations of Habermas's link between his vision of the EU's political integration and his ideas on discourse ethics, communicative action, the public sphere, and social justice. It helps policymakers and scholars identify gaps in Habermas's framework and appreciate the problems posed by the conjunction of capitalism and nationalism for the EU's aspired political integration. In the apparently interconnected troika of capitalism, nationalism, and deliberative democracy, deliberative democracy is an unnecessary link. Transnational political aspirations must address how to harness the intrinsic forces of capitalism and nationalism to make Habermas's transnational vision feasible. Researchers should be mindful that communities rooted in ethnic identities are not yet willing to embrace Lawrence Kohlberg's fifth and sixth stages to break the shackles of nationalist loyalties and promote transnational consciousness.

Conclusion

This research article assesses Habermas's vision of the EU's political integration as a means to counter the economic pressures of globalization and the neoliberal emphasis on the primacy of the market, thereby resisting political regulation of business. In light of nationalism's history and its current resurgence, it argues that transcending national interest and developing a post-national consciousness is a hard nut to crack. His assumptions about communicative action and the ideal speech situation do not seem to withstand the realities of the practical world, including ubiquitous relations of power that undermine the ideal speech situation and tarnish the quality of the public sphere in terms of the aspired rational-critical discourse.

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