

The Blind Empire: Why the West Can't See it's Failing so Hard | Prof. Dr. Irfan Ahmad

This conversation is a direct challenge to the moral claims of Western philosophy in the face of Gaza. I speak with Professor Dr. Irfan Ahmad, professor of anthropology and sociology at Ibn Haldun University in Istanbul. The discussion looks at Habermas as a major German public intellectual, then moves into Western Marxism, colonial blind spots, and the way Palestine is pushed out of the moral frame. I also press the question of universalism, and the exchange shows how claims of reason, consensus, and humanism can turn into cover for power, war, and selective silence. In the end, the episode is both a critique of Habermas and a wider critique of the West's refusal to face colonialism as a living structure. Links: DOI of Irfan's article on Habermas: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2025.2466001> Website: <https://www.irfanahmad.org/> Academia page: <https://ibnhaldun.academia.edu/ProfIrfanAhmad> ResearchGate profile: <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Irfan-Ahmad-24> Neutrality Studies substack: <https://pascallottaz.substack.com> Opt in for Academic Section from your profile settings: <https://pascallottaz.substack.com/s/academic> Merch & Donations: <https://neutralitystudies-shop.fourthwall.com> Timestamps: 00:00:00 Introduction 00:01:22 Habermas and German public life 00:06:22 Western Marxism and imperial blind spots 00:11:14 Gaza and the erasure of history 00:18:54 Colonialism missing from Western thought 00:32:06 Habermas as an ethnic thinker 00:42:06 Consensus talk and support for war 00:58:35 Final reflections and guest links

#Pascal

Welcome back, everybody, to *Neutrality Studies*. Today I'm joined by Professor Dr. Irfan Ahmad, a professor of anthropology and sociology at Ibn Khaldun University in Istanbul. Professor Ahmad also spent five years at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity in Göttingen. He recently wrote a very interesting paper on Habermas as an "ethnic thinker par excellence," focusing on critique, Palestine, and the role of intellectuals. In this paper, he discusses Habermas' philosophy. Mr. Habermas, of course, passed away recently, on the 14th of March this year. He was one of Germany's foremost intellectuals of our time. But there were very serious problems when it comes to his approach to other religions, and especially to the Gaza genocide. And this is what we want to discuss today. So, Professor Ahmad, welcome.

#Irfan Ahmad

Thank you, Pascal. It's lovely to be in conversation with you, and I'm glad we'll have an interesting discussion about Habermas—his role as a public intellectual, but also his relevance for our time, especially in this time of war, and so on and so forth.

#Pascal

Can we start with that? Could you give us your interpretation of Habermas as a philosopher and as a public intellectual in Germany? And how important is he there?

#Irfan Ahmad

Well, as you know, the Chancellor of Germany tweeted about his death, describing how important he was. It's true that in Germany—where I worked as a senior research fellow at the Max Planck Institute for almost five years—when Habermas spoke in an auditorium, the whole place used to be full. So people, not simply intellectuals, came to listen. As you know, Habermas was also initially a journalist, so he used to write for newspapers and comment on political and public issues. He wasn't an ivory-tower type of intellectual; he also intervened in public debates. He was very crucial for Germany, but not only for Germany—also beyond. For example, the Spanish newspaper **El País** described Habermas in 2023, and I have this written down, as "the most famous living philosopher in the world."

#Pascal

Right.

#Irfan Ahmad

Okay. And also Europe's greatest intellectual. So this is just one of the many descriptions—various people have described him and his work differently. Some see him as a cosmopolitan philosopher, and so on and so forth. In Germany, of course, he's very important in terms of teaching, research, public debate, and so on. People write about him and discuss him, whether in agreement or disagreement. In that sense, some even say he's the last great rationalist philosopher.

#Pascal

Okay.

#Irfan Ahmad

Okay.

#Pascal

And the important thing about him is that he achieved that level of fame—within the hall of fame of German philosophers—while still alive, right? Habermas was born in 1929 and died, I think, at the age of 96. He wrote a tremendous number of works and spoke publicly. So his impact on today's

Germany, on Germany's understanding of itself as a state that still produces great intellectuals—Habermas is very important to that, isn't he?

#Irfan Ahmad

True. But then one also has to see—because, as you know, there are many ways to read Habermas. One reading is, and this is not simply among intellectuals or activists within Germany but also well beyond Germany, in Europe and North America—to see his writing and thinking in the tradition of leftist scholarship or left thinking. That's true, but we have to make a distinction: this is a form of Western Marxism. And this Western Marxism is not the same as the forms of thinking or Marxism in other parts of the world—how Marxism operates in Latin America, in Europe, in Asia, Southeast Asia, and in the Middle East.

So he's surely placed in that left tradition, but it's a Western Marxism. The Frankfurt School itself, as you know, was established in 1923, in response to the Russian Revolution of 1917—a few years after the Bolshevik Revolution. That was how German intellectuals at the time responded. The point isn't that it had nothing to do with Marxism elsewhere—of course it did—but its core concern was Europe, an understanding of Marxism from a European or Western perspective.

#Pascal

Hey, very brief intermission because I was recently banned from YouTube. And although I'm back, this could happen again at any time. So please consider subscribing not only here but also to my mailing list on Substack—that's pascallottaz.substack.com. The link will be in the description below. And now, back to the video. What's the big difference between the Western and the Eastern—or the rest, the other—interpretations of Marxism, just in a nutshell?

#Irfan Ahmad

Yeah, so, for example, in the 80s and 90s, if you talked to a left activist in India and brought up ecological problems or hygiene in the city and so on, most likely a Marxist in Delhi or Bombay would tell you that this is a very bourgeois concern—because they were concerned about bread and butter. There were people who couldn't afford a meal a day, and you're talking about ecological issues. Which is not to say they were opposed to it, but it was a question of priority. From their perspective, unless this hardcore economic imbalance—or the question of imperialism—is addressed first, those other issues come later.

This is very interesting because, you see, the first-generation Frankfurt School theorist Horkheimer—his response to the question of imperialism was not how Marxists in other parts of the world saw it. And what I want to say here is this: in 1956, when Gamal Abdel Nasser was one of the leaders of

the Non-Aligned Movement, he nationalized the Suez Canal. That move was greeted by left or left-oriented intellectuals in the non-Western world very differently. The Western press described Nasser as a Hitler, a new Mussolini.

#Pascal

Yeah.

#Irfan Ahmad

Okay. And I want to say this: this is a joint statement by Adorno and Horkheimer on the 1956 nationalization of the Suez Canal. Okay.

#Irfan Ahmad

By the way, Horkheimer and Adorno—these were the two leading intellectuals of the first generation. They weren't necessarily on the same page; they also had internal differences. Horkheimer was considered more orthodox. But this is the statement they jointly issued, and it reads as follows: "These Arab robber estates have been on the lookout for years for an opportunity to fall upon Israel and slaughter the Jews who have found refuge there." This is a statement from 1956.

#Pascal

Of the Frankfurt School—the first generation of people who were generally considered left in the intellectual discourse in Europe.

#Irfan Ahmad

Exactly. Now, you might also...

#Pascal

Should we call them the Zionist left? Does Zionism have something to do with it? Or why did they write something like that?

#Irfan Ahmad

But, Pascal, you might be surprised that Horkheimer later on—if this is the left—there's another quote where he says, "I believe that Europe and America are probably the best civilizations that history has produced up to now, as far as prosperity and justice are concerned." So this is Horkheimer, okay? Now, the question is, many scholars and intellectuals after Habermas's death say that Habermas made some deviation from Marxism. And the assumption is that the early generation—like Horkheimer and Adorno—were truly left, and Habermas was making some kind of

departure. But the point is, it's not really a departure if you read it this way. If Horkheimer thinks that Europe and America are probably the best civilizations, then... no. So the assumption that Horkheimer was more radical and Habermas became less so doesn't quite hold.

#Pascal

Yeah.

#Irfan Ahmad

But that's not how it is.

#Pascal

And, you know, sorry to the audience listening, because we probably should have prefaced this with some information about how Habermas was vocal in the last two years about the genocide in Gaza—I mean, how he framed everything that was happening around Israel and Palestine. Could you maybe explain that to us, Irfan? Like, what did he say in the last years of his life about Israel and Palestine?

#Irfan Ahmad

Yeah, so, you see, the event happened on October 7th. I think about five weeks later, he issued a statement with three other scholars—most of them were his friends or people he had worked with. The statement was called **Principles of Solidarity.**

#Pascal

Solidarity with Israel.

#Irfan Ahmad

The title is simply **Principles of Solidarity.** It doesn't mention Israel or Palestine. But within the statement, what's important is that he says people who call it a genocidal war are in error. So for him, it was not a genocide. That's one point. The second point is that he was concerned about—and this is very important for your listeners and viewers to note—that much like Immanuel Kant, Habermas's thinking is state-oriented. In Germany, it's called **Staatsräson.** After World War II, it became the official policy of the German state that the viability and integrity of Germany are predicated on the safety and integrity of Israel as a new state. So whatever he's saying, he's connecting it to that, because in making that statement, he takes it as his responsibility to also defend the state of Israel.

And my question was, as an intellectual, should you be concerned about defending another state? And this in itself is very interesting—because as a German citizen, and given your field is international relations and so on, we talk about national sovereignty and so forth. So to what extent is it an exercise of Germany's national sovereignty when you're making a statement not about your own sovereignty, but about the integrity and sovereignty of another nation-state? And then, in the statement, he says there is rising anti-Semitism—which is true—but he says nothing about Islamophobia. Because, as we know, after 9/11, the whole world has seen a massive rise in Islamophobia, including in Germany.

#Pascal

Yeah.

#Irfan Ahmad

When I lived there, it was a very selective statement. In that statement, he talks about Jews in terms of Jewish life. Palestinians are mentioned, but he uses the word "population."

#Pascal

Palestinian population versus Jewish life.

#Irfan Ahmad

Jewish life. And we can go into the semantic and lexical aspects. "Population" is also used to describe the non-human world—the animal world. Okay. So there is no concern about Palestine. But more importantly, what was baffling to me is that he takes the October 7th incident as if nothing had happened before.

#Pascal

Yeah. That's what we experienced all over the West—that basically our media, our politicians, everybody started focusing on October 7th. I remember, and I'm sorry for interjecting here, I just remember reading in the New York Times on October 8th or 9th, when they recounted what happened, that they used the sentence: "The Israelis thought it was live and let live, but they were wrong. The terrorists want to get them." It's like, you know, this "live and let live," as if that had been the case before. But we were all told the world started on October 7th. And Habermas, in his statement and so on, he directly played into that understanding of October 7th, didn't he?

#Irfan Ahmad

Right. And this is baffling, simply because, as a philosopher, it would be wrong to assume he's unaware of the history.

#Pascal

Yeah. And as a person who was, at the time, 93 years old, he's seen all of it with his own eyes—or lived through it, right? But okay, please continue.

#Irfan Ahmad

So if our assumption is correct that he's not unaware of it, then not mentioning it, or not going into the historical facts, looks like a choice not to talk about history. And this itself—well, in his own words—if his project, as he's described in many places, is that modernity is an unfinished project and we have to conduct our debate in a rational, argumentative mode, then the question is: what kind of enlightened, rational debate is it when you simply wipe history out, okay?

So it's a completely de-historicized, de-contextualized way of making that statement. But I think it's not simply a question of omission, I would say. And this is something that connects to the whole issue of Western Marxism that we talked about at the beginning. But let me make a qualification: I've read Habermas in English, because in Germany you'll often find that if German intellectuals disagree with you, the first thing they'll point out is, "But you haven't read him in the original." And that's true.

#Pascal

Mm-hmm.

#Irfan Ahmad

Because I've read him in translation. And then there's the question of interpretation—comma, full stop, semicolon, you know.

#Pascal

This is very, very typical of German-language philosophy, which is very much concerned with making sentences as complicated as possible and then priding themselves on being among the few who actually understand them. I mean, Immanuel Kant is the epitome of that, but yes. But let's put that aside. I mean, good translations—a good philosopher should be translatable. But let's please continue.

#Irfan Ahmad

So the point is that he didn't mention history. But then we're not simply talking about history—we're talking about a particular kind of history, the history of settler colonialism. And in the entire body of Habermas's philosophy, colonialism and imperialism are not central categories. So I also wonder how you can write a philosophy of the modern period in which imperialism and colonization are not central.

#Pascal

How about the Frankfurt School itself? Because I'm not familiar with all of their writings. Like, is colonialism, settler colonialism, and imperialism actually a construct that they use, or are these concepts they use to make sense of the modern world? Or are they, as a group of researchers, kind of just turning a blind eye to this?

#Irfan Ahmad

I mean, to answer your question, I think a more precise approach would be to investigate the writings of all these philosophers individually as well as collectively. But my larger point is, as I mentioned, the joint statement by Adorno and Horkheimer around 1956, about the nationalization of the Suez Canal by Gamal Abdel Nasser—no, I don't think so. I mean, one fundamental text, as you know, was written when World War II was still ongoing. One of the central texts of the Frankfurt School is **Dialectic of Enlightenment**, jointly written by Adorno and Horkheimer. And given the nature of that time, it wasn't published in Germany; it was published in Holland. By the way, that's the country where I did my PhD in anthropology. That text is considered a monumental work of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory.

It's a very critical book in which they say, "Look, enlightenment has turned into a mythology." It was supposed to demythologize the world, but it becomes a strong critique of Western reason. Later on, what becomes central to the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory is culture, industry, and instrumental reason. So, against the normative assumption of enlightenment being reason-oriented and leading to the betterment of humanity, what we actually see is a catastrophe. But even in that book, what's surprising is that they don't mention the past or present colonization of the world. They set up reason as the opposite of mythology, and then they go back to ancient Greek myth, from where they take this opposition.

So I think that move is not necessarily bad. It's one way to look at it, but they could have also, along with that move, talked about the colonization of Africa and the colonization of America. Because the whole point of reason and rationality—how did this play out in the realm of colonization and imperialism? So this is not a... In my view, in Habermas's thinking, colonization and settler colonialism are not major concerns. It's not a concern at all. But also, very quickly—because if he talks about the establishment of Israel as a secular colonial project, that would go against German national policy. After World War II, the German state's policy has been to support, work with, and defend the state of Israel, and not talk about how it came into being.

#Pascal

Yeah, yeah. And, you know, you're putting your finger on a very, very important issue—that the Europeans and the Americans, the political West, as Richard Sarkozy calls it, are, even within civil society, on all levels, absolutely colonialism-blind, right? Colonialism doesn't figure as an important explanatory variable for the current world. And this is true in the media, it's true in public education, and, as you're now pointing out, even among the top philosophers on the left side of the spectrum, who do not use colonialism as a prism through which to understand world politics. Completely—it's out for most people. Colonialism, to most people in Europe, is akin to, you know, feudalism. We know it was bad, we know it was how the world used to work, but we stopped that a long time ago.

There was a war in the United States to abolish slavery, and luckily the forces of good won over the forces of evil. Slavery was abolished, and we never did that again, right? And we are clean of sin, and, as Mr. Borrell would say, we are now a garden, right? We have a garden that needs to be protected. And this prism—this absolute forgetting about colonialism, or rather active ignoring—I think it's actually hard for a good part of the rest of the world, for the Global South, for people in Asia, Africa, and South America, to understand just to what extent Europeans and Americans simply do not use colonialism as a way to understand where we are in world politics today. Which is why there's such a huge divide in understanding what the Israeli project is about. But sorry, that's just a parenthesis to underline how important this observation of yours is.

#Irfan Ahmad

Sure. So I think the two broad trends are: either you don't talk about it—you erase it—or, when you do talk about it, you talk about it as if it were something that happened a long time ago. But my point is, the question of secular colonialism is not something that happened in the past; it's also a question of the present. Yes.

#Pascal

Okay.

#Irfan Ahmad

So, in the Western public sphere—remember Jacques Chirac? I'd have to check the year, but it was probably the mid-1990s. He extolled the role of French imperialism by saying that the good work the French did was in Algeria.

#Pascal

Yeah.

#Irfan Ahmad

And after 9/11, you also have this British historian called Niall Ferguson, who has now moved to the U.S. He used to write, I think, a column for **Newsweek** or **Time**. And there he says that we should not be talking about colonialism as a question of subordination. He says we should be talking about colonialism as collaboration between Europeans and non-Europeans. And then he also says—imagine this—I think you're probably fluent in German, French, and Italian as well, or Spanish?

#Pascal

A little bit.

#Irfan Ahmad

So in French—and you'll have to forgive me for my excellent French pronunciation—it's called **colonialisme positif**.

#Pascal

So, positive—yeah, positive colonialism.

#Irfan Ahmad

Yeah. So Niall Ferguson also says that—this is aimed at those people who are critical of colonialism—saying that, no, you shouldn't be, because in his view, what would the world look like if there were no English? It's because of the English language. As you know, I'm a citizen of India, so English is the language, and it's also the language of democracy for them—education and so on and so forth. So, without colonialism, this would not have been possible. And colonialism, he says, is not a relation of subordination but of collaboration between the British and the natives. So this is one way in which they talk about colonialism: either you erase it, or, when you talk about it, you minimize the havoc it has created or inflicted the world over. And my point, by the way—as an anthropologist, I'm very aware of this—is that, of course, it has inflicted havoc on the non-West, but we should not forget that it has also devastated society, culture, and human subjectivity within the West as well.

#Pascal

For example, what are you thinking of?

#Irfan Ahmad

So, I mean, to the extent that—you know, if you take the question of Ireland.

#Pascal

Ah, yeah, yeah, yeah. I mean, inner-European colonialism, or inner-European—like, dominance, relationships of abusive dominance, right? The way that also Poland was colonized, and other states, or the way that Europe at the moment is absolutely exploiting Ukraine to fight a war for it—like, that kind of devastation, right?

#Irfan Ahmad

Definitely. But I also want to add that, for example, there was a British colonial officer named General Reginald Dyer, who was involved in a very brutal massacre in India.

#Pascal

Yeah.

#Irfan Ahmad

Okay. And then you deploy them outside. Now, I think, unlike Hobbes, I don't begin with the assumption that human nature is necessarily evil. So if I begin with the assumption that, you know, General Dyer is not necessarily a bad person by birth, then you misinform him—you change his subjectivity—so that he begins to treat people, humans who are like him, differently. You start demonizing these people, either through the language of “civilized” or “uncivilized,” or whatever. There was also another term used—“Gentoo” versus “civilized.”

So my point is that these colonial officers who were taken from Western society are also brainwashed—or, if you want to use another word, they're robbed of their own humanity in a way that they can no longer identify with the humans in the non-Western world or see the points of connection. They begin to treat them as “other,” as enemies, as something undesirable, as outsiders. And in that sense, colonization is not simply bad for the colonized; I would say it's also bad, even catastrophic, for the colonizers themselves, because it robs you of your own humanity. You start to lose your sense of empathy and sympathy.

#Pascal

Yes, I mean, if you do this, you end up—yeah, we saw what the Nazis did. We saw how that part of German society, in the end, was forced to regret the kind of inhumanity they themselves inflicted on others, right? And this happens time and time again within these colonial empires. The question is whether they learned a lesson or not. But can we maybe focus a little bit again on your critique of Habermas as an ethnic thinker? Can you tell me how you understand him? You know, he, in this

sense, stands as an example of how Europe likes to think of itself as enlightened. But I think the underlying critique could be: no, if this is enlightenment, then it's not a very bright light—if this is what it is. And this "ethnic thinker" aspect—can you explain that a bit?

#Irfan Ahmad

Right. So the way I use the word "ethnic" is in relation to the claims about the universal. It's not simply about the individual philosophy or writings of Habermas, but about Enlightenment thought itself, which is considered by many to be universal. Now, I was interested in what the meaning of "universal" actually is. When we say something is universal, what exactly does that mean? One interpretation is that it's something open or applicable to everyone—and that's the Western meaning of "universal." What it misses is this: something you think is open to everyone—does it also come from everyone?

Good point. So my point is this: the Western way of theorizing and philosophizing is not the only way humanity, in its diversity, has thought about what it means to have a good life or to be a good person, because these are the philosophical questions. People outside the West—in Africa, in the Buddhist world, in the Islamic world—have also thought about what it means to be human. What is the idea of a good society, for example? Of course, in Greek philosophy, you have the philosopher-king concept. In the Islamic tradition, Farabi wrote about the virtuous city, and so on and so forth.

So my point is this: if universalism—or, in the case of either Habermas or Immanuel Kant, and by extension the whole of Western modern philosophy—means something that is typically Western or Christian, something open to everyone but without asking whether what you're presenting to the world has also come from different parts of the world, then you're missing something. If you don't take "universal" to mean "from everyone" as well, the necessary consequence is that it becomes a kind of missionary project—in the sense that you want to convert, and I use "convert" not necessarily in a religious sense, but to make the rest of the world, which is not European or Western, into your own image. So the true meaning of universalism would be not simply that whatever I'm giving is available to everyone, but that it should also come from everyone.

#Pascal

Yep.

#Irfan Ahmad

And we do not have that. That requires that, okay, for my critique of universalism—not simply "to all" but "from all"—people like Habermas would have to read not only Immanuel Kant, Voltaire, Hobbes, and Locke. They also need to read the philosophy of Africa, the philosophy of the Islamic world, the philosophy of the Buddhist world, or the Hindu world, which he has not done. Because true universalism would be possible only when we have a conversation among them, and then we

bring something—or put it on the table—that says, okay, the world is not homogeneous. We know it. It's so obvious.

So in that sense, I say that people—or philosophies like Habermas's—are ethnic, because they represent a particular viewpoint on the world, on human nature, or on the individual and human subjectivity. It's not universal in that sense, because I don't think the way Max Weber wrote about human beings or modern civilization is the only way of being in the world, or the way Habermas thinks about rationality and so on. There are also other ways of thinking about humans and human subjectivity, including what kind of world we want to live in. And therefore, my point is that it's not universal, but an ethnic way of philosophizing or thinking.

#Pascal

I like that, because usually the term "ethnic" is something Europeans and Americans apply to others, right? Like "ethnic food," or even the study of anthropology itself always has this issue of how to approach the fact that it's usually done from the perspective of the white population—the Europeans—going out and studying the others, right? You create this problem between you and the other. But if we try to understand Habermas and the Europeans—I mean, a certain group of thinkers—as ethnically rooted within their own ethnic understanding of the world, I think that's quite valuable. Yeah.

And could you, in the end, make sense of Habermas and how he approached Palestine and Israel? In a sense, I think if, in 20 or 30 years, we look back at these statements, they'll seem completely out of touch with reality. I mean, even now they already feel out of touch, but they'll look even more so in the near future. Is it this element—this absolute kind of rejection, even among a large part of European intellectuals, to engage with some of the most fundamental issues of the Global South or the rest of the world, and something as basic as colonialism? Is that the issue?

#Irfan Ahmad

Right. So let me say this. Your observation about how people think of the term "ethnic" — it's about ethnic food and so on — that's quite true. I used to teach at Monash University in Australia, and with local Australian friends, we'd say, "Let's go have ethnic food today." That meant going to an area called Dandenong, where there were a lot of Afghans. So it meant Afghani naan and kebab. You know, what's the national food of Australia? Chips and potatoes or whatever. So "ethnic food" means, like, OK, we're thinking about Vietnamese food or Afghani food as ethnic. And my point was, no, we probably need to reverse that. Because when we describe Vietnamese or Afghani food as ethnic, we're assuming that whatever white Australian people eat is the universal — that that's the norm, right?

#Pascal

Yeah, and a norm in Australia which, funnily enough, I'm pretty sure the Aboriginal people five or six hundred years ago wouldn't have thought of as local Australian food—fish and chips, I mean. I'm pretty sure about that. But OK, please continue.

#Irfan Ahmad

Yeah, absolutely. So now, back to the second part of the question — about 20 years down the line, what would we make of Habermas, right? Now, of course, as you know, I'm also someone interested in what's known as intellectual history. Some people also use the term "history of ideas." If we look at the past, it's possible that a figure is interpreted and reinterpreted again and again. And sometimes that interpretation or reinterpretation can be quite the opposite. So if someone is seen as a defender of something, it's quite possible that later on his thinking or his image, through an act of free interpretation, can be reversed. So anyway, we'll have to see how that happens 20 or 30 years from now.

But I want to make one point, which is to see whether our present or past can in any way serve as a pointer to the future that's about to come. Now, there are a few elements here, and I want to make this point very clearly. Many people in America or Europe think of Habermas as a philosopher of consensus. He's the one who talked about discourse ethics. He's also known as a philosopher of consensus — debate and so on. He's often presented as someone who revived the Kantian idea of a cosmopolitan world. You know, Kant's famous essay called **Perpetual Peace**. By the way, according to a German scholar, the exact translation shouldn't actually be **Perpetual Peace**; it should be **Eternal Peace**, because it also has a theological element to it. So anyway, Habermas is seen as an advocate of cosmopolitanism, a global civil society, and so forth.

My take is, I'm not saying that all of them are wrong, but I think there's a powerful element—or a counter-reading—of Habermas, which is that he has also been a philosopher not of consensus, but of what's called a "combat concept." And also, a philosopher who has supported war. "Combat concept" is a term given by the German philosopher Reinhart Koselleck. What it means—well, Jacques Derrida also described Habermas as a philosopher of consensus, so that's one way of reading him—but the idea of a combat concept is that there are many kinds of concepts we, as intellectuals or historians, use. A combat concept is one that, instead of generating understanding, establishes enmity. For example, Koselleck gives the example that in European history, the term "heathen"...

#Pascal

OK, even the hidden—yeah.

#Irfan Ahmad

It is not a neutral term. It's a combat concept because the assumption is that "heathen" is something that's not a desirable category or entity—it needs to be converted.

#Pascal

Yes.

#Irfan Ahmad

Okay, so, for example, terrorism is not a neutral concept. It's a combat term, because the moment you use it— and I've said in the article you mentioned—if you analyze Habermas's statements on Israel-Palestine, he's far from a philosopher of consensus. His whole approach, as we've already talked about, dehistoricizes the issue. And if he's really a philosopher of democracy and public debate, then nowhere does he acknowledge that Hamas and others—Hamas, by the way, came to power through a democratic election. It had won. And even Western observers found that election very fair.

So in his statement, you don't see so much consensus as a theory or enactment of enmity. And this, by the way, is interesting because in his formal writings, Habermas says he has been opposed to Carl Schmitt, who was, of course, a Nazi philosopher. Schmitt's politics was about enmity—he said that in the concept of the political, politics is about distinguishing friends from enemies. So Habermas claims that his version of politics is opposed to Carl Schmitt's notion of politics, but in practice, in his statements on Israel and Palestine, you see the same kind of enmity politics being enacted. That's one point. Also, just to recall, in 1991 he justified the Gulf War.

#Pascal

Habermas.

#Irfan Ahmad

Habermas, in 1991.

#Pascal

I didn't know. Okay. Well, it does make sense for people in that school of thought.

#Irfan Ahmad

And he—I mean, of course, Saddam Hussein—he did all kinds of nasty things, okay. But he's describing Saddam Hussein as the new face of fascism. So my point is, this is like exporting German history. I mean, of course, we can debate to what extent, and this is in no way to defend Saddam

Hussein. Of course, he was brutal and so on and so forth. But the manner in which he's reading it—"new face of fascism." Even we talked about how Nasser was described as a new Hitler or a new Mussolini, right? So, of course, these were brutal regimes—I mean, Saddam's state was brutal—but let's not forget that it was also supported by the West. Yes, thank you. So in 1991, he supported the Gulf War. And he also justified the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, after 9/11. No surprise.

#Irfan Ahmad

And then, something we should note, because this will finally lead to the question of universalism. When Iraq was invaded in 2003—I was in Amsterdam then, doing my PhD—you remember there were massive demonstrations across Europe, right? In New York, in Amsterdam, and so on. I think it was Habermas, Jacques Derrida, and that Italian philosopher who died, Calvino. These three people were supposed to have published one joint statement. It was published in German, Spanish, French, and so on. I've written about it. Some people say that although Derrida's name appears there, the text doesn't really show any trace of Derrida's ideas.

Anyway, the point is that he did oppose it, but then we have to see what the basis was for Habermas's opposition to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. You know, Iris Young, the famous political scientist based in Chicago, wrote a critique of that. Because there, Habermas is saying, look—as you know, after World War II, Habermas himself, like many people, had a youth shaped by fascism; he was part of the Hitler Youth. But after 1945, he became very much oriented toward America, both politically and philosophically—his reliance on Talcott Parsons, Richard Rorty, and so on. But in this case, he says that Europe has to position itself against America. This is about the 2003 invasion of Iraq, okay.

#Irfan Ahmad

So he presents the whole drama as if there are only two actors in the world. On the one hand, there is America, and then there is Europe. Now, what he says in that statement is that Europe has to come together. This is also part of the European Union idea—that there are existing members and others aspiring to join. He says that Europe is based on this Judeo-Christian identity.

#Pascal

A very loaded term, yeah.

#Irfan Ahmad

Right. And by the way, the term—the description of Western civilization as "Judeo-Christian civilization"—did not exist before World War II. It's only after World War II that it becomes hyphenated as "Judeo-Christian." Before that, it was simply called Western civilization, or just civilization, or Christian civilization. It's only after World War II that this addition appears.

#Pascal

And the history of that term itself would be worth an entire episode, because I'm pretty sure it has very much to do with the Zionist project. But let's leave that aside for now. Please, finish your point.

#Irfan Ahmad

Yeah, so the point is, many defenders of Habermas say that, of course, he opposed the invasion of Iraq in 2003—which is true. But then the grounds of his opposition aren't really explained. And if we're really talking about a cosmopolitan democracy, a new world based on reason and discussion, then his opposition is simply framed like, "Okay, America's action is not good, so Europe has to be mobilized and presented as the leader of the world." But then the question is, what is the role and place of the entire non-Western world? Yeah.

#Pascal

Of course, it just doesn't figure. It's simply not part of the thinking of people like Habermas.

#Irfan Ahmad

Right. And as you know, as an anthropologist, I'm also very curious about the fact that when the phrase "international community" is used—when we say "international community"—I always wonder, do we think about what people in Chile think, or what people in Kenya think, or in Papua New Guinea?

#Pascal

No.

#Irfan Ahmad

I mean, technically—

#Pascal

The West understands itself as the world. Whenever they talk about "the world," they're really talking about themselves—Europe and North America. That's how they see it. Plus the leftover colonies: Australia, New Zealand. Maybe the "honorary whites," the Japanese, right? That's still the mentality. And I'm sorry, I'm being a bit polemical here, but you find such statements so often, and you find the people who are left out of the thinking—you find that everywhere. You find it in Habermas, or rather, you don't find it in Habermas, and that's the whole problem.

#Irfan Ahmad

Right. So, back to your question—I think, looking 30 years down the line, how he'll be remembered, or how people will interpret him, and so on. But these points about how he has also been supportive of war—about Afghanistan—if you look at his statements, they're deeply orientalist. You know, the same thing: "women don't have freedom," and so on. Okay, that's fine, but is it possible only through invasion? You know? Yeah. And if you're really concerned about women's freedom, why didn't you speak about it five years ago?

#Pascal

And why did you never mention it in connection with the absolute monarchy we know as Saudi Arabia? Why is it that only one group of countries gets that treatment while the other gets a pass? Again, we don't talk about them. That's agenda setting—whether it's explicit or implicit, conscious or not. The Western world is a master at this kind of exercise, trying to set the agenda. And Habermas was definitely part and parcel of that.

#Irfan Ahmad

Well, you mentioned Saudi Arabia. That might be useful. Two or three years ago, the UAE gave him a prize—it was called the Zayed Medal or something like that. It was from the UAE. And you know what the amount was? It was 100,000 dirhams in the local currency, which I think comes to about 30,000 American dollars or something like that.

#Pascal

Wow.

#Irfan Ahmad

Now, this is very interesting. It's called the Zayed Award, and it's not just for one particular kind of work but for his lifelong contribution, right? Now, the story is that he was nominated, and this is something usually done after prior consultation. In this case, his publisher was also involved. So he had indirectly accepted it, but two or three days before receiving the award, he issued a statement saying he was going to refuse it. And then the question is: what was the reason? He said that the UAE government is not in favor of human rights.

But then the point is, as a philosopher who talks about universalism, didn't you know this before? OK, so in the German press there were some reports saying that Habermas was very greedy—that he accepted it because it was one million dirhams in the local currency. So when that news came out, one interpretation was that it forced him to decline it at the last minute. OK, so then it also raises the question: what kind of commitment do you have? I mean, what kind of rational debate

and openness exist within your own framework, in the society or the polity from which you receive this prize, right?

#Pascal

No, the Habermas and Western philosophy, I think, is something we still need to talk about quite a bit, because I do think it helps us understand some of the very, very deeply ingrained thought processes in the West that we need to somehow grapple with in this multipolar world. I knew this would be a difficult discussion, because whenever you go into philosophy, you have to branch out into a lot of things. But we need to come to an end. Is there something we haven't mentioned yet that you think is really important, or did we more or less do justice to the criticism you wanted to convey?

#Irfan Ahmad

Right. Yeah. So, I mean, just to clarify the kind of critical discussion we had from this—it shouldn't be concluded that we're not appreciative of the worth of his intellect or philosophy. The point is not that his contribution is insignificant. Of course, he wrote extensively; his contribution as a public intellectual is tremendous. And as I already mentioned, this was something that really impressed me when I was working as a senior research fellow at Max Planck in Germany. The kind of aura—if you want to use that word—when he spoke, people would come to listen to him. You know, there's also something very interesting about Germany: the names of the streets are often after philosophers, like Goethe Street, Immanuel Kant Street, you know.

So this is a good thing of which, you know, Habermas was a product. I mean, by the way, he also studied in Göttingen, so I have some memory of being in the same town. His daughter, Rebecca, was also teaching at the University of Göttingen. Anyway, this is not to dismiss him entirely. The whole point is that, of course, he made a tremendous contribution, especially to the debate on the public sphere and so on and so forth, but also by giving a philosophical orientation to public discussion. In many ways, he was critical of positivism—like, you know, this “data as deity” kind of approach, this statisticalization of reasoning.

These are important things he contributed to. The point of this conversation is that while we should definitely be attentive to the tremendous contribution he has made, we also have to read him critically. And this is important because without a critical reading, our knowledge will not advance. So many people talk about, for example—and this is a good point—the colonization of the lifeworld: how, in Habermas's terms, the market and the state are infringing on our autonomous life. OK, so the colonization of the lifeworld by the system—this is Habermas's thought. The point is, we have to be appreciative of the contribution that Habermas has made, you know.

So the purpose of this critical conversation is not to dismiss his contribution, including the very useful concept of the colonization of the lifeworld by the system. But—and this is a big but—we

cannot talk about the colonization of the lifeworld by the system, and Habermas's focus is, by the way, on the rich Western countries. We cannot be fully appreciative of this concept unless we also relate it to real colonization, which is not something that happened three centuries ago. In the case of the Palestinians, there is real colonization. If you're talking about the colonization of the lifeworld by the system and you keep silent—if you maintain an eerie silence—about real colonization, then I have to ask: what kind of philosophy are you promoting?

#Pascal

And I think this is a very, very important point to make. And I thank you also for this recommendation to basically read Habermas as an ethnocentric thinker, in order to kind of understand that ethnic group—which I think is something that, also from the Global South, might be valuable—to understand how the Europeans understand themselves, although we impose that, of course, a lot. Thank you very much. This was most interesting. For people who want to read your work, where should they go to find you?

#Irfan Ahmad

Well, I have a website called ifanamar.org, and most of my writings are also available there. I've also put them on academia.edu. Maybe I can send you the links later on, including the link to the essay we discussed.

#Pascal

Please send me all of this. The links will be in the description box below. Professor Irfan Ahmad, thank you very much for your time today.

#Irfan Ahmad

Thank you, Pascal. It was lovely having this conversation.