

**A Critical Theory of Political Institutions:
Charting the Frankfurt School's Shift from Social to Political Categories**

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ABSTRACT Many commentators reject Jürgen Habermas’s shifting of the Frankfurt School’s theoretical focus from social to political categories, arguing that it turns critical theory into a form of traditional theory. By examining both Habermas’s academic work and his underappreciated activities as a public intellectual, I argue that this interpretation is mistaken. In contrast to the first generation’s political and philosophical quietism, which is visible in its lack of political activism, its methodological focus on psychoanalysis and its approach to theory as a “message in a bottle” (*Flaschenpost*), Habermas’s critical theory of political institutions provides a firmer foundation for critique as well as a theoretically consistent approach to spur real world transformation. I defend this basic thesis using Habermas’s writings on the European Union as an illustrative example.