

A tribute to two teachers, why Uganda needs Habermas now

When a thinker of Jürgen Habermas's stature dies, the temptation is to retreat into abstractions about legacy and influence. Yet Habermas matters not because he belongs to the museum of European philosophy, but because he wrestled with one of the hardest political questions of modern life: how human beings can live together under conditions of difference, power, and conflict without surrendering truth, dignity, and democracy.

Habermas, a social theorist in the tradition of critical theory and pragmatism, belonged to the second generation of the Frankfurt School. The first generation, led by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, was forced into exile in the early 1930s as Nazism dismantled democratic life in Germany. They relocated to the United States, where, across the 1930s and 1940s, they rebuilt their intellectual project in response to fascism, mass culture, and modern capitalism. It is from this fractured inheritance that Habermas, writing from the 1950s onward, emerged as the most prominent post-war voice, extending critical theory toward a reconstruction of democracy grounded in communication and reason.

Born in June 1929 and dying in March 2026 at the age of 96, Habermas's life spanned the full arc of modern Europe's crisis and recovery. He came of age in the shadow of fascism and genocide, inheriting a tradition marked by exile, rupture, and deep self-critique. The lesson of that tradition was that societies could be technologically advanced yet morally broken, administratively efficient yet politically barbaric. Habermas refused to stop at critique. He argued that emancipation required reconstruction, that society must not only be unmasked but made answerable to reason.

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late mentor at Makerere University, Dr Brian Semujju, born in October 1980 and passing in August 2025 at 44. His birth year sits within a decisive moment in Uganda's history, as a contested election cycle gave way to a guerrilla war that would reshape the state by 1986. That political inheritance formed the environment within which many of us came of age. Semujju introduced me to Habermas and the Frankfurt School not as abstract theory, but as a method for reading power, culture, and public life in precisely such contexts.

Habermas's central insight is that democracy depends not only on institutions or elections, but on the quality of communication in public life. His idea of the public sphere names the space where citizens meet as equals, exchange reasons, test truth claims, challenge authority, and give legitimacy to power. Public life, in this sense, is not a theatre for noise or a marketplace for manipulation. It is where power must justify itself, and where citizens become more than subjects, clients or spectators.

Measured against this standard, Uganda's public life reveals a troubling gap. We have institutions, legal frameworks, and electoral processes, yet our public discourse is often shaped by fear, patronage, spectacle, and

managed silence. Power too often speaks downward rather than outward. Decisions are announced rather than justified. Citizens respond, but do not always deliberate as equals. Media spaces inform, yet they can also inflame. Digital platforms amplify voice, but voice alone does not constitute a public sphere.

The problem, as Habermas helps us see, is not disagreement. No serious critical tradition imagines politics without conflict. The danger lies in the erosion of the conditions under which disagreement remains democratic. When criticism is recast as hostility, when dissent is treated as disorder, when argument is displaced by propaganda, money or coercion, democracy becomes procedural at best and hollow at worst. What remains is not a public sphere, but a managed arena where speech circulates without consequence.

Semujju understood this with quiet clarity. He taught critical theory as a discipline rather than a posture, as a way of seeing how power operates through language, culture, and consent. Through him, Habermas became legible to me as more than a European thinker. He became a guide to understanding the unfinished project of democracy in a postcolonial society.

To honour Habermas, and in a more personal sense, Semujju, is to defend the conditions of meaningful public life. Uganda needs media that can question without fear, universities that can think without instruction, citizens who can disagree without dehumanising one another, and leaders who understand that legitimacy must be earned through public reasoning.

Habermas leaves a demanding lesson. Democracy survives not only when people vote, but when public discourse remains open, rational, inclusive, and morally serious. That lesson speaks directly to Uganda's present and to the unfinished argument over what its democratic future should be.

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