

OTHER NATIONS

## China's 'Political Lunatics'

"Judicial Psychiatry in China and Its Political Abuses" by Robin Munro, in *Columbia Journal of Asian Law* (Spring 2000), Columbia Law School, Rm. 116, 435 W. 116th St., New York, N.Y. 10027. Available online at [www.law.washington.edu/clnet/features/articles/judicialpsychiatry2001.pdf](http://www.law.washington.edu/clnet/features/articles/judicialpsychiatry2001.pdf)

Beijing's two-year-old campaign to crush the Falun Gong spiritual movement has focused fresh attention on the Chinese regime's misuse of forensic psychiatry to suppress dissent. The abusive practice has been going on for decades in China, perhaps even to a greater extent than it did in



A policeman blocks a protester holding a banner of the banned sect Falun Gong at Beijing's Tiananmen Gate last January.

the Soviet Union, writes Munro, a senior research fellow at the University of London.

Soon after the Communist regime was established in 1949, at a time when political and religious dissent in the Soviet Union was beginning to be blamed on mental illness, Soviet-style forensic-psychiatric assessment centers were set up in Beijing, Shanghai, and other cities. By the early 1960s, if not before, Chinese leaders were aware of how the Soviets conducted political psychiatry, and very similar cases in China from that period later came to light.

As the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) unfolded, Munro says, “the distinction between political crime and mental illness—one that had apparently been tenuous even at the best of times—was effectively abandoned.” Until about 1978, two years after dictator Mao Zedong's death, the situation in China, he notes, was much like that in Europe in the Middle Ages: “The political or religious dissenter was viewed as being possessed by a deeply wicked, or ‘counterrevolutionary,’ form of madness, [while] the genuinely mentally ill were all too often condemned and punished as dangerous political subversives.” A limited-circulation official Chinese report in 1981 stated that “numerous cases have been discovered of people who were obviously mentally ill but who were wrongfully imprisoned or even executed as ‘political lunatics.’” But many Chinese who were arrested after shouting banned political slogans were suspected of mental illness—and then feigned the symptoms to avoid being

executed, according to a former political prisoner who spent more than 16 years in various labor camps, detention centers, and prisons for the “mentally disordered.” He himself, after his arrest in 1969, declared that he was quite sane—and just because he did *not* feign mental illness, his warders, using Catch-22 logic, regarded him as indisputably insane.

In 1979, “in the interests of revolutionary humanism,” 4,600 mentally ill prisoners (by official count) were released. Many of them were older than 80, and one-third had spent 10 years or more in prison. The Chinese authorities, says

Munro, concluded that henceforth such “political lunatics” should be “placed in police-run psychiatric custody, rather than in regular prisons as before.”

The abuse of forensic psychiatry has continued, albeit, official accounts indicate, at a much reduced level. A 1987 study at one mental hospital—the same one where a Falun Gong adherent recently died, reportedly from ill treatment—found that seven percent of the “patients” had been institutionalized for “antisocial

political speech and action,” down from 54 percent in 1977. Still, Munro conservatively estimates that Chinese forensic psychiatric examiners have seen more than 3,000 “political” cases over the past two decades, with the great majority of the individuals then being put in some form of forced psychiatric custody and treatment. That total is well over the several hundred confirmed (and highly publicized) cases of such abuse in the Soviet Union during the 1970s and 1980s.

## *The Court Philosopher of Berlin*

“Portrait: Jürgen Habermas” by Jan-Werner Müller, in *Prospect* (Mar. 2001),  
4 Bedford Sq., London WC 1B 3RD, U.K.

Like Joschka Fischer, the erstwhile rock-throwing activist who is now German foreign minister, the world-renowned German philosopher Jürgen Habermas has moved away from radicalism in recent years and helped the Left to reconcile itself to liberal democracy and the German state. Indeed, Habermas is the unofficial court philosopher to Fischer and the Social Democrat-Green government in Berlin, writes Müller, author of *Another Country* (2000).

Heir to the Frankfurt school and its Marxist-Freudian “critical theory” about society, Habermas was intent during the 1950s on ridding German academic life of persistent Nazi influence. He vigorously opposed Martin Heidegger and other right-wing thinkers whom he deemed dangerous to the then-young West German democracy. “Habermas found an ideological antidote,” Müller says, “in a mixture of Marxism and an idealized version of British and U.S. democracy.”

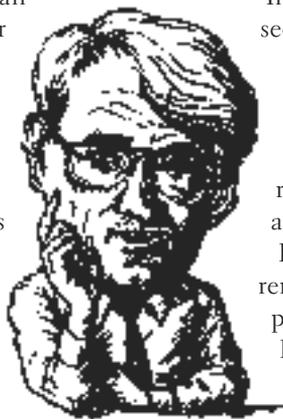
His first major work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962), says Müller, “already contained his master idea—the connection between undistorted, domination-free communication and democracy.” Student radicals of the 1960s took up his criticisms of the way in which free debate

was distorted by private or sectional interests. “He was sympathetic to the student revolt,” says Müller, “yet he also warned the rebels” against trying to achieve social change through violence.

In *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1968), Habermas argued that, contrary to Marx, communication was as vital as labor in the evolution of society. The book, which thus gave social scientists a significant “progressive” role to play, “caused great excitement on both sides of the Atlantic,” Müller says. Habermas next “made critical theory absorb the ‘linguistic turn’ in philosophy, and synthesized huge areas of contemporary thought.” As he accomplished this, Müller notes, his writings became “even harder to understand”—which may have helped to make him a cult hero among academic Marxists in America.

In recent years, Habermas has seemed “to abandon any theoretical criticism of capitalism,” Müller says, “instead focusing on the importance of law in modern societies and on the relationship between liberalism and democracy.”

Patriotism, with its inevitable reminder of the Nazi era, has long posed a problem for Germans. Here, too, Habermas has found a middle way. During the 1980s, he strongly opposed “what he saw as an attempt to ‘sanitize’



*Jürgen Habermas*