

EDITORIAL



The labour of hope: Sociological practice and the public sphere in an age of democratic incommunicability

On 14 March 2026, Jürgen Habermas died at the age of 96. The same week, the V-Dem Institute confirmed that global democracy has receded to levels last seen in 1978—a reality in which 92 autocracies outnumber 87 democracies, and 41% of the global population live in autocratizing countries (Nord et al., 2026). The man whom John Rawls once called ‘the greatest thinker about democracy’ departed a world that he himself described, in his final writings, as marked by ‘the uncanniness of the times’.

Yet resisting an elegiac reading and highlighting democratic theorizing may be the most productive tribute we can offer him. Habermas was the incurable optimist of the Frankfurt School—the one who, where Adorno and Horkheimer had grown pessimistic about modernity’s emancipatory potential, insisted that the Enlightenment project was not exhausted but unfinished. Often referred to as ‘the last European’, Habermas believed in the European project almost until the end, even when few others did. His relentless hopefulness about the possibility of human society to talk its way into stable democracy was, as the philosopher Thomas Nagel observed, ‘particularly striking coming from a man whose teenage years were spent in the Hitler Youth’. He was, Nagel said, ‘a figure of hope, emerging from the background of a dark history’.

That hope was never naïve. It was built, purposely and thoroughly, from disaster. It took shape in the shadow of fascism and a war that forced societies to confront what Habermas later described as ‘collectively realized inhumanity’. As Verovšek (2026, p. 20) notes, a ‘perpetual fear of political relapse’ came to fundamentally shape both his public interventions and his academic work, grounding his lifelong conviction that moral argument, not brute power, must remain the gravitational force of democratic life.

Habermas offered the world the concept of the ‘public sphere’—a normative ideal of a space of rational debate and deliberation, where arguments are exchanged among equals (Habermas, 1989). Forged in the coffee houses of 17th- and 18th-century bourgeois France and Britain, this ideal has been the object of critiques on multiple fronts, including its overt reliance on rational and verbal

forms of communicative action and underplaying of the structural dynamics that determine who gets to appear and speak out in such a space, and on what terms (Habermas, 1984). Yet—as one of the recent obituaries of Habermas put it—it may be precisely now that we most need to recover ‘the dream of a space free from bullying by the state, and corruption by the values of the market’ (The Guardian, 2026).

That dream was never meant to be comfortable. Even if the Habermasian notion of the public sphere is frequently problematized—and is often mischaracterised as inherently consensual—Steven Klein reminds us of Jürgen Habermas’s belief in the political power of a ‘wild public sphere’ (Klein, 2021). It is precisely such a conflictual dimension that is important in order for institutions to take public discourse seriously. Yet the communicative infrastructures that sustain this space are fragile and, unfortunately, contemporary life offers no shortage of worrisome examples of their erosion. The contributions to this issue encompass one of the most disturbing contemporary phenomena: the incel community. Such formations can be read as a kind of stress test of the Habermasian framework—of how much ‘wildness’ a democratic public sphere can bear before it cracks.

Paradoxically, it was the promise of an anonymous virtual space, untethered from the strings of offline identity, that first allowed this social formation to emerge. What began, in 1997, as a ‘lively forum’ animated by a ‘supportive spirit’, an avowedly empowering queer experiment bearing many of the hallmarks of a democratic community (Forestal, 2023, p. 69), has since hardened into its near-antithesis: a closed affective economy structured by resentment, pseudo-scientific dogma, and the systematic dehumanisation of women, reinforced, though not determined, by algorithmic architectures. Habermas was acutely aware of the emergence of such ‘semi-public spheres’—online spaces that ‘acquire a peculiar anonymous intimacy’ (2022, p. 166). He alerted us to pay particular attention to how they seem to change the participants’ perception of the distinction between ‘the public’ and ‘the private’, and the inclusive meaning of the public sphere (2022, p. 165). ‘In certain subcultures’, he noted, ‘the public sphere is no longer perceived as being inclusive, and the political public sphere is no longer seen as a space of communication for a generalisation of interests that includes all citizens. . . . they [echo chambers] differ from the fundamentally inclusive character of the public sphere—and the contrast to the private sphere—through their rejection of dissonant and the inclusion of consonant voices into their own limited, identity-preserving horizon of supposed, yet professionally unfiltered, “knowledge”’ (2022, p. 166).

Constituting what Mark Davis (2021) theorises as an ‘online anti-public sphere’ and what Olivia Copeland (2024) describes as an ‘ultra altern’ or ‘ultern

counterpublic', incels form a community organised not around alternative political claims but around the active subversion of the conditions that make a democratic public sphere possible. In this sense, they pose a challenge not only to the Habermasian theoretical legacy but to sociological research practice itself. We face this tension at every stage of inquiry: in the fieldwork encounter, in the analytical labour of making sense of what we find, and in the methodological and ethical decisions that shape how research is publicly disseminated.

This tension became particularly palpable in the editorial process for this issue. The question of whether, and how, to reproduce direct quotations from incel forums confronted us with a methodological impasse. On the one hand, we did not want to amplify misogynistic voices and the harm they produce, nor to sanitise and normalise the rhetorics they deploy. On the other hand, we—as sociologists—were trying to understand: to make sense of the phenomenon, what causes it, and what effects it might have. Between the risk of amplifying misogynistic discourse and the imperative to produce sociologically enabled intelligibility, there is no stable or comfortable position. What emerges instead is the need for what we might call 'mediated understanding': a reflexive, ethically vigilant effort not to sympathize or legitimize the phenomenon but to render it legible. This is not Habermasian dialogue. Yet it may constitute one of its pre-conditions: the prior epistemological and methodological labour of making the other intelligible enough for dialogue to be imaginable at all. This is precisely where sociology intervenes: not to substitute for the dialogue that is impossible but to provide the tools of intelligibility that such dialogue would require.

There surely is a utopian dimension to this sociologically enabled intelligibility and dialogue, one that goes hand in hand with Habermas's own view of democracy: 'If there is any small remnant of utopia that I've preserved, then it is the idea that democracy is capable of hacking through the Gordian knot of otherwise insoluble problems. I'm not saying we're going to succeed in this; we don't even know whether success is possible. But because we don't know, we still have to try' (Jeffries, 2026). This is the labour of hope in an age of incommunicability: to keep the space for dialogue open, even when the terms of that dialogue are yet to be imagined.

Putting this issue together confronted us, as editors, with the tension between discerning and echoing the voices of those whose worldviews are destructive to the social fabric, rendering mutual understanding nearly impossible. This methodological and ethical challenge is the focus of Luciano Santander and Nina Lotze's contribution, which draws on their experiences interviewing far-right and neoliberal elites. In *'Positionalities of elitist complicity: Building rapport and reducing asymmetries in interviewing the neoliberal right in Chile, Germany, and the UK'*, the authors develop the concept of 'positionalities of elitist complicity',

showing how co-constructed interactional dynamics—academic hierarchies, heteropatriarchy, Eurocentrism—can be the backdrop against which researchers and interviewees engage with shared social positions. This enables the strategic navigation of shared identities to build rapport across profound ideological asymmetries. The article argues that it is precisely through sustained reflexivity about one's own positionality—rather than through claims to neutrality—that researchers can humanise informants without legitimising their worldview. It is, we would suggest, precisely the kind of sociology that this moment demands.

In *'Unravelling disengagement: Communal reactions, emotional echo chambers, and political masculinity in the incel anti-public sphere'*, Ozan Félix Sousbois examines how incel communities respond to acts of disengagement, taking as their focal analytical point the public departure of Komesarj—a prominent member of the incel.is online forum—in April 2023. Drawing on Davis's concept of the 'online anti-public sphere' and the framework of emotional echo chambers, the article examines approximately 200 tweets directed at Komesarj and 100 forum posts from incel.is. Using the lens of political masculinity theory, the author shows that when a symbolic figure exits, the rupture is experienced not merely as ideological defection but as an ontological threat to the community's emotional structure—managed through intensified misogyny and the reassertion of black-pill rhetoric. The article makes a compelling case that efforts to counter incel radicalisation must attend not only to changing beliefs but also to the emotional ties and structures of belonging that make exit so costly.

In *'Hierarchized masculinity, appearance, and radicalization—the role of physical appearance in the incel movement'*, Kirsti Sippel continues to disentangle the internal 'logic' of the incel subculture. Starting with a theme that seems central to the analysed community, Sippel adopts the concept of 'aesthetic capital' to understand the importance and uses of physical appearance in incel discourse. By analysing 60 targeted threads from incel.is, Sippel interestingly concludes that while the incel community claims to reject the pursuit of hegemonic masculinity, members of the community nonetheless subscribe to it by regarding appearance as the key determinant of status. Misogynistic incels, the article shows, overemphasize the importance of aesthetic capital in ways that serve their ideological ends and enable them to assume the position of victims. Sippel calls this 'performative marginalization', whereby subcultural masculinities selectively adopt and distort societal norms.

Arttu Siltala's *'Focus-steering: Extending scene style theory to account for scene negotiation in semi-synchronous political online discussions'* addresses the methodological challenges of analyzing semi-synchronous online publics. Through a case study of an incel subculture discussion thread on gendered loneliness from the anonymous Finnish-language forum *Ylilauta*, Siltala introduces the concept

of ‘focus-steering’ to complement the notion of ‘scene style’ in interactionist sociology. His detailed analysis reveals how anonymous interactions dynamically shift the focus within a culturally shared scene—without disrupting the overarching framework. Crucially, this approach uncovers counter-speech operating *within* the dominant framework, exposing hidden diversity in what might otherwise appear to be an ideologically coherent space. By illustrating how participants ‘do society’ through the platform’s cultural tools and stylistic affordances, Siltala’s work offers a somewhat hopeful perspective: even within seemingly homogeneous online communities, internal negotiation and disagreement persist.

The book review in this issue addresses how we make meaning from and through our bodies. Tomáš Paul examines *Interpreting the body: Between meaning and matter* (2023), a curated collection of essays edited by Anne Marie Champagne and Asia Friedman. The book brings together a range of sociological perspectives on bodies and embodiment, using the body as a space to understand ‘how individuals and communities attribute meaning to their experiences and identities and how social forces shape these meaning-making processes’. Paul offers a rigorous appraisal of each of the 10 chapters in the book, emphatically highlighting the worthwhile contributions of some in particular, such as the book’s final chapter, which focuses on how researchers are constituted by our bodies and what this means for our research.

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