

Craig Calhoun

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On the Occasion of the Award of the  
Ludvig Holberg Prize to Jürgen Habermas

Professor Habermas, Frau Ute Habermas, Minister Djupedal,  
distinguished colleagues from universities in Norway and around the world,  
ladies and gentlemen:

It is an enormous pleasure to be here with you and to bring greetings on behalf of the international communities of social scientists, humanists, and indeed, social activists and critical theorists. The award of the Holberg Prize to Jürgen Habermas is an occasion for celebration in all these communities. All of us who have benefited from Professor Habermas's writings and lectures and teachings are glad to see this public recognition of the extraordinary importance of this work and of a person from whom we have learned so much. All of us who have had the pleasure of friendship with Jürgen Habermas are pleased that he may enjoy this honor. But there are more reasons to celebrate.

The creation of the Holberg Prize, awarded today for only the second time, is itself an enormous contribution from Norway to international social science and humanistic scholarship. It brings honor and attention not only to individuals but to whole fields of intellectual endeavor and accomplishment. Moreover, these are fields of vital importance today. They are important because citizenship and public life depend on the kind of understanding they

bring and the assistance they offer in a world faced with deep challenges. These are fields that help us value what it is properly to be human, that help us achieve solidarity at levels from the interpersonal to the civic community to the world as a whole. They are fields that offer practical, useful knowledge but that also remind us that building a better world is never only a matter of technical, instrumental intervention but also of communicative action and especially participation in public discourse.

There could be no better, more meaningful and more appropriate recipient of the Holberg Prize than Jürgen Habermas. I congratulate the Board and Selection Committee of the Ludvig Holberg Memorial Fund on their wise and perspicacious choice. The Holberg prize honors Jürgen Habermas, and having him as a laureate helps to establish the Prize with the eminence it deserves. I think we all are grateful to Professor Habermas for what he has contributed to our work as scientists and scholars and our lives as citizens and, indeed, simply as human beings. I will say only a little about these contributions, simply to remind us of their importance and why we value Jürgen Habermas so much.

It would be customary to begin with a list of titles of famous books. I will not do so, partly because there are so many that it would take too long, but partly because that does not seem to me the most important point about Jürgen Habermas or the primary reason to celebrate the award of the Holberg Prize.

The most important feature of Professor Habermas's intellectual contributions over the last half century is not their volume and not even their

specific contents but rather the intellectual and moral virtues they reveal. These start of course with the sheer brilliance of the thinking involved. The list of virtues continues with Professor Habermas's profound generosity—intellectual and personal. Perhaps most important are four virtues: honesty, courage, intellectual rigor, and commitment to the greater good.

From his earliest writings, Professor Habermas insisted on and exemplified these virtues. In Germany after World War II, he questioned the idea that culture, politics, and philosophy could simply return to normal without critical interrogation and moral consideration of what had happened. But at the same time that he rejected simple continuity, Habermas called for renewal and recovery of what was valuable in the rich German philosophical tradition. He disturbed the consensus of silence with probing public questions, but he also restored faith in core values of the Enlightenment with sustained philosophical and sociological inquiry into the historical transformations of the public sphere, the role of philosophy in informing human interests, and the nature of social life in an era of accelerating instrumental reason and technology. The combination of honesty, courage, rigor, and commitment made his work stand out—not only in relation to German thought generally, but in relationship to the critical theory of the Frankfurt School which had nourished and shaped Habermas but which was in retreat when he found it.

Throughout his career, these virtues have been evident in an ever broader range of intellectual projects spanning numerous fields and engaging scholarship from numerous nations. Habermas's approach has always been dialogical. Over and over again he has engaged the most powerful

interlocutors in pursuit of clarity and understanding, learning from those with whom he disagrees as well as those to whom he is close and discerning hitherto unrecognized resources in both. His dialogues with Niklas Luhmann and Hans-Georg Gadamer stand out in an earlier era just as dialogs with theologians and lawyers stand out in some of his recent work.

In the 1960s and 70s, Professor Habermas addressed issues central to an era of upheaval. He first influenced and then responded to the student movements of the era—inspiring them but when appropriate chastening them as well. He was sympathetic to their sources, but always committed to a deeper intellectual analysis and to sustaining public discourse not foreclosing it in more radical actions. He diagnosed a legitimation crisis in advanced welfare states. He addressed fundamental questions about how progress towards a more rational society might be made even while one-dimensional technological rationalism resisted. And he began the inquiries into the centrality of language and the possibility of cultural evolution that came to fulfillment with his great theory of communicative action.

In some of his early work, Habermas emphasized the idea of “knowledge-forming interests” and throughout his career his production of knowledge remained true to such basic and enduring interests as democracy, anamnesia or the refusal of forgetting, and the nurturing of the human capacity to guide action and achieve solidarity by means of communication oriented to understanding. He pursued these interests in works of fundamental importance for all the scholarly disciplines recognized by the Holberg Prize. He also pursued them in public communication that made his deep and sometimes difficult academic work the basis for clear, insightful

and timely contributions to broader public discourse. This was true in the 1960s. It was true in Germany's "historians' debate". It has been true throughout the enlargement of the European Union and the rethinking of European citizenship. It remains true today.

The clarity of Habermas's thinking has always been stunning. In the last twenty years it has been equally impressive to watch a thinker who had already produced one of history's great works of systematic social theory remain flexible, innovative, and alive to the demands for new understanding raised by new social circumstances. As Habermas receives the Holberg prize, it can reassure us that he has never been one to rest on his laurels. This award does not cap but only complement his continuing career. In the 1990s, Habermas kept advancing his theory in major works on the tension between facts and norms—and the possibility of working fruitfully in the space opened up by that tension. He addressed the relationship between justification and application; the problems of moving beyond ethnic nationalism with new forms of inclusion and integration and new approaches to justice and solidarity. And most recently he has tackled basic questions about what it is to be human as science and technology challenge the idea of a simple "nature" and explored the public prominence and intellectual significance of religion.

The work of Jürgen Habermas is, in short, of inestimable value. His example may be worth even more. And the recognition of both with the award of the Ludvig Holberg Memorial Prize is fitting and just and altogether welcome.