

UNIVERSITY COLLEGE DUBLIN
HONORARY CONFERRING
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TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY **PROFESSOR MAEVE COOKE**, Head of School, UCD School of Philosophy, University College Dublin on 16 June 2010, on the occasion of the presentation of the Ulysses Medal on **JÜRGEN HABERMAS**

I am honoured to welcome and to present to you Professor Jürgen Habermas. Jürgen Habermas was born in 1929 near Düsseldorf in Germany. In a rare autobiographical remark, he describes himself as having had the good fortune to have been born late: not quite 16 at the end of the Second World War, he was old enough to have experienced life under National Socialism and to have witnessed – at a morally impressionable age – the fundamental changes brought about by the end of the Third Reich; at the same time, he was too young to have been implicated directly in the evils of Nazism. This biographical fact may be the reason for his lifelong dedication to promoting democratic values and politics and for his unswerving commitment to challenging authoritarian politics and practices, not just in Germany but in the wider world. Following studies at the universities of Göttingen, Zürich and Bonn, he was awarded his doctoral degree in Bonn in 1954 for a thesis on the German idealist philosopher, Schelling. As a doctoral student he came to public attention for his provocative criticisms of Martin Heidegger's

engagement with National Socialism. He spent two years as a free lance journalist before joining Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer at the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt/Main. This marked the beginning of Professor Habermas' life as a critical social theorist in the Frankfurt School tradition. Since then he has consistently endeavoured to combine his intellectual and moral commitment to democratic ideals, and to the Enlightenment heritage of reason, with a commitment to the valid insights of Marxism and to leftist politics in general. In 1961 he was awarded his 'Habilitation' (post-doctoral thesis) from the University of Marburg for a work on the concept of the public sphere. This launched his reputation as one of the most brilliant young philosophers in Germany and awakened considerable interest internationally. A normative commitment to the public sphere as a space for reasoned communicative exchange has concerned him all his life: its three core concepts 'public space', 'discourse' and 'reason' have dominated his work as a scholar and public intellectual right up to his most recent writings on religion and democracy. In 1964 he was appointed Professor of Philosophy and Sociology at the University of Frankfurt/Main. Apart from an absence of 12 years, which he spent as co-director of the Max-Planck Institute in Starnberg, he taught at Frankfurt until his retirement in 1994.

Professor Habermas' extensive writings address topics in social and political theory, epistemology, theory of language, aesthetics and the philosophy of religion, among others, and he is read by scholars and students in a wide range of disciplines, for example, political theory, philosophy, history, sociology, linguistics, psychology, theology, legal theory, education studies, development studies and management studies. He has authored over forty books and has been the subject of thousands of scholarly articles and hundreds of monographs in many languages. Perhaps his greatest achievement, however, is to have combined the role of brilliant theoretician with that of the publicly vocal, engaged citizen. In the German context, one of his most important interventions was between 1986-89 in the 'Historians Dispute', which centred on public memory of National Socialism and of the Holocaust. He played a crucial part in reminding his fellow citizens of the moral dimension of memory and of the German commitment to acknowledging fully its responsibilities to the victims of Nazism. The same impulse is evident in his recent public criticisms of the narrow-minded, instrumentalist attitudes of the political elites in Germany and Europe and his call on them to remember the moral and political imperatives behind the process of European integration. Although officially professor emeritus from the University of Frankfurt, Jürgen Habermas has retired in name only. He remains extremely active,

as a teacher, as an academic and as a public intellectual. Since 1994 he has been a regular visitor to Northwestern University in the USA, teaching courses in collaboration with his good friend and colleague Professor Tom McCarthy, who, too, is being honoured at today's ceremony; more recently he has taught courses at Yale University and the State University of New York at Stony Brook. During these years of official retirement, he has published numerous essays on political topics, including several astute and hard-hitting analyses of the future of Europe within the new globalising world order, a thoughtful and provocative essay on the future of human nature and several important volumes of essays. He has remained an active and lively participant in public debates, contributing regularly to newspapers such as *Die Zeit* and *Le Monde* on controversial issues.

Jürgen Habermas is the recipient of numerous honorary doctorates from universities throughout the world and of some of the most prestigious international prizes, for example, the Kyoto prize (which he received in 2004). He is by far the most famous contemporary philosopher in Germany and probably one of the best known and most influential philosophers alive in the world today. He will certainly rank highly among the important philosophers and social theorists of the twentieth and twenty first centuries. As a public intellectual he is not only a

household name in Germany; his contributions are read by politicians and journalists in many countries throughout the world. We in Ireland can take particular pleasure in his admiration for James Joyce and his praise for *Ulysses* as one of the outstanding works of literature of the twentieth century. In a recent interview in the *Irish Times*, he describes the novel as a ‘declaration of love to the streets and pubs of Dublin and to the rich tradition and spirit of the country’. Jürgen Habermas is famous for his intellectual and personal modesty, which sometimes makes him reluctant to accept the honours that are due to him. It is a great tribute to Joyce that he has come to Dublin to accept, today, the award of the Ulysses medal, the highest academic honour that UCD can bestow.

Praehonorabilis Praeses, totaque Universitas,

Praesento vobis hunc meum filium, quem scio tam moribus quam doctrina habilem et idoneum esse qui recipiatur insigne ulixis; idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo, totique Academiae.