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WORLD VIEW: Habermas continues his broadsides against the trajectory of the European project, writes PAUL GILLESPIE

ASKED ABOUT his position as a public intellectual following his lecture at University College Dublin this week, Jurgen Habermas made a distinction between the intellectual and the expert. In their public role intellectuals "don't know better and are not infallible", even though as experts in their fields they can command respect - "and that's enough".

The question itself drew applause from a packed hall, as it touched on the absence from our public life of critical figures like Habermas, who has always been willing to engage in political controversy. Indeed that is at the heart of his philosophical work, since, as he has put it, "the public sphere as the space for reasoned communicative exchange is the issue that has concerned me all my life". The extraordinary range and quality of this work across ethics, epistemology, hermeneutics, sociology, history, law, communications, linguistics, religion, media and politics helps to explain why he is considered one of the world's leading philosophers.

He was somewhat uneasy about the balance of the questions between philosophical and political issues asked at a seminar he held in UCD. His philosophical expertise does not extend to current issues such as European integration, he explained, where his concerns are those of an engaged citizen.

Nevertheless it is surely only natural that a philosopher who has concentrated so much on understanding the normative conditions for democratic citizenship in both national and post-national settings, and is so passionately engaged in the public sphere, should be questioned across that whole spectrum.

In recent interviews with this and other newspapers, and in an article in Die Zeit, he has been scathing about contemporary German political leaders. They seem unaware of their interest in preserving and developing the scaffolding which anchored postwar Germany in Europe and, through the euro zone, has provided it with a vast continental market for its goods and capital. There is a misfit between market, social and political integration such that citizens have lost the ability to relate to them democratically. Unless that balance is addressed he is pessimistic about the legitimacy of the whole project and fearful that the neoliberal orthodoxy about its future, identified most clearly with British Euro-scepticism, will triumph.

There has been a sharp and predominantly hostile response in Die Zeit to his article. But since the main function of his account of public communication is to substitute the force of argument for the argument of force, the exchange is a good thing if it helps raise awareness of the issues at stake.

The intellectual's sole remaining ability in an age when television has reinforced an iconic turn from word to image is an "avantgardistic instinct for relevances", he writes in a book of recent essays published last year, Europe, The Faltering Project. "They have to be able to get worked up about critical developments while others are still absorbed in business as usual". That includes a mistrustful sensitivity about any damage to the normative foundations of politics, or threats to its mental resources. More positively it requires "the sense for what is lacking and 'could be otherwise' ", including "a spark of imagination in conceiving of alternatives" and "a modicum of the courage required for polarising, provoking, and pamphleteering".

That includes a good deal of the critical theory agenda for which Habermas is renowned. It was laid down by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in the Frankfurt School of Marxism, with whom Habermas studied in the 1950s. It is devoted to criticising and changing society as a whole, rather than only understanding or explaining it. It draws on Marx's famous 11th thesis on Feuerbach: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in different ways; the point is to change it."

While Habermas moved in the 1960s from Hegelian Marxism to a form of Kantian pragmatism and since then to an intense engagement with US pragmatic and liberal philosophers such as Richard Rorty and John Rawls, he has never abandoned the objective of criticising and changing the world. That explains the vast range and depth of his theorising as well as its extension to the communicative conditions for democratic participation. Hence its appeal to students in an era of such arcane specialisation in philosophy and other disciplines that renders their subjects incomprehensible to other students and researchers, not to mention ordinary citizens.

In UCD he emphasised that philosophers have no necessary monopoly of this role and that economists such as Joseph Stiglitz are crucial in extending their expertise to all citizens. The collapse of the Celtic Tiger has surely alerted us precisely to the importance of avantgardist reasoning while everybody - including media - remained absorbed in business as usual.

Habermas's personal powers of communication were illustrated when he explained his core beliefs about communicative reasoning to a rapt audience: "Mutual perspective-taking expands horizons and leads to an intersection of symmetrical understanding in an interpersonal dialogue". As

he puts it elsewhere: "We always find ourselves existing in the element of language. Only those who talk can be silent. Only because we are by our nature linked to one another can we feel lonely or isolated."