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The Holberg Prize conferred upon Professor Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

(Bergen, Norway) – Today, the Holberg Prize was conferred upon Indian Professor Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, by HRH Crown Prince Haakon of Norway.

At a prestigious award ceremony today in the University Aula in Bergen, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak received the international research award from HRH Crown Prince Haakon of Norway. Spivak is University Professor in the Humanities at Columbia University.

The Holberg Prize is worth NOK 6 million (approx. USD 600,000) and is awarded annually for outstanding contributions to research in the humanities, social sciences, law or theology.

Expressing her deepest gratitude as well as her surprise on receiving the award, Spivak accepted the Holberg Prize “in the name of peace, in Palestine, in Ukraine, for the Rohingyas, for our battered world.”

Spivak also stressed how it is her responsibility to mention the “prizes of another kind” she has received through decades of grassroots educational work in rural Bengal. For over forty years, she has supported the creation of elementary schools in marginalized communities, often beginning with makeshift shelters built by locals. Spivak recounted how landless illiterate sharecroppers donated a bit of land between their adobe huts for building a small school. “Never in history has a so-called Untouchable donated land to a caste-Hindu and a white man and never since then”, Spivak said. “This is a prize that I cherish in another way from a grand prize such as the Holberg.”

Spivak is considered one of the most influential global intellectuals of our time. She receives the prize for her groundbreaking interdisciplinary research in comparative literature, translation, postcolonial studies, political philosophy, and feminist theory. Her main research focus has been on post-Hegelian philosophy, and the position of the *subaltern*, i.e. small social groups on the margins of history who cannot exercise their rights and whose perspectives cannot be included in generalizations about the nation state.

In her acceptance speech, Spivak emphasized the importance of the humanities in helping us recognize and respond to the unpredictable and accidental elements that exist outside of rigid systems—how the humanities foster the imagination and critical thinking needed to challenge orders that seek to control or explain everything. “Without this moment,” she said, “available to the imaginative activism of the humanities, we see totalitarianisms committed to preserving the system at all costs, all over the world—regardless of left and right.”

Spivak also highlighted how the humanities teach the practice of learning, not just the accumulation of knowledge. This is a practice that mirrors the ideals of democracy and ethical living, where understanding others is essential. Thus, a just society depends on changing how we think, not just what we know. “No hope of a just society if every generation is not persistently weaned from the basic human affects of greed, fear, and violence; disregarding race-class-gender apartheid”, said the Laureate. “Unless there is persistent, sustained, and worldwide epistemic change, democracy and ethics cannot be desired and knowledge is managed for greed, fear, and violence.”

The Nils Klim Prize conferred upon Daniela Alaattinoğlu

Also today, Norwegian Minister of Research and Higher Education Sigrun Aasland conferred the Nils Klim Prize

upon Daniela Alaattinoğlu from Finland. This prize is worth NOK 500,000 and is awarded annually to a young scholar, from or in a Nordic country, who has excelled in one of the research areas covered by the Holberg Prize.

Daniela Alaattinoğlu is Assistant Professor of Law at the University of Turku. She receives the award for her research into how laws and societies evolve together, how groups mobilise for change, and how law intersectionally includes and excludes individuals and groups.

The Nils Klim Laureate expressed her gratitude and how she was honoured to join the ranks of the Nils Klim Laureates. “As a lawyer,” she continued, “through the Nils Klim and Holberg Prizes platform, I would like to emphasise the importance of keeping the law engaged with questions of equality and social justice.”

“I receive this prize at a time of turmoil”, said Alaattinoğlu. “Globally, it has never been clearer that the countries and leaders who make up the rules are the ones who also most blatantly break and redefine them to serve their own interests”, she said, referring to rights issues such as “dehumanising attacks on Palestinians” and “attacks on human rights, gender and sexuality studies, as well as on efforts to promote diversity and inclusion.”

“Along my academic and personal journey, I have been lucky to find others who shared my initial discomfort with law as a supposedly complexity-reducing exercise”, the Laureate continued. “Ultimately, for me, it is also about asking how law might become more equal and just.”

About the Holberg Laureate

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has held the post of University Professor in the Humanities at Columbia University since 2007, where she is also a founding member of the Institute for Comparative Literature and Society. She was educated first at the University of Calcutta and then at Cornell University, where she completed her Ph.D. degree in 1967. She has since taught at more than 20 universities, including University of Ghana, Princeton University, University of California at Irvine, New School for Social Research, University of Pittsburgh, Brown University, University of Iowa, Northwestern University, and Cornell University.

Spivak is a Corresponding Fellow at the British Academy, a Guggenheim Fellow, and a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, as well as of the American Philosophical Society. She has received more than 50 faculty awards, and her many honours include the Kyoto Prize in Art and Philosophy (2012), the Padma Bhushan (2013), and the Modern Language Association Lifetime Scholarly Achievement Award (2018). She holds fifteen honorary doctorates from around the world.

About the Holberg Prize

Established by the Norwegian Parliament in 2003, the Holberg Prize is one of the largest annual international research prizes awarded to scholars who have made outstanding contributions to research in the humanities, social science, law or theology. The Prize is funded by the Norwegian Government through a direct allocation from the Ministry of Education and Research to the University of Bergen. Previous Laureates include Julia Kristeva, Jürgen Habermas, Manuel Castells, Onora O’Neill, Cass Sunstein, Paul Gilroy, Griselda Pollock, Martha Nussbaum, and Sheila Jasanoff. To learn more about the Holberg Prize and the call for nominations, visit: <https://holbergprize.org/en>.

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