

New Year's Address

by the President of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft
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Berlin, 16. January 2017

- Check against delivery! -



The Society of Science — and Why We Must Argue for It

1.

Together with our European neighbours, we live in the richest, freest and most peaceful society that is likely to have existed in the history of human civilisations. But you wouldn't know it from the recent end-of-year reviews and outlooks. Journalists are resorting to a category from crime fiction: "The suspense continues," they say. However, the wish that the new year may bring as little as possible of what has characterised 2016 is unmistakable.

This certainly includes the European Union's sovereign debt problem and legitimisation crisis, migration and Islamic terrorism. But what has been particularly characteristic is the fact that these difficulties — along with others, such as global warming, wars, geopolitical power shifts — have condensed under the conditions of globalisation and digitisation into a social climate change all of its own. The temperature of our society has gone up. Fuelled by the — it must be said: asocial — media, a vulgarisation of the social sphere is gaining ground, threatening the sober pluralism of liberal society and its integration into public discourse and rational debate culture. The boundaries between the sayable and the unspeakable are shifting. The functioning of the distinction between truth and falsehood is in danger of changing.

And this involves a risky tribalisation, a segregation of societies into agitated communities that no longer feel obligated to perceive each other with nuance and thereby to acknowledge the complex pluralism of cool modernity. We can observe this in language. For many, the “people” is no longer a term for the integrative pluralism of civil society. Rather, it serves as the catchphrase of an identity-based ethnicism that understands, against all evidence, the social sphere as a homogeneous community and wants to enforce this anti-pluralistic concept with the — if necessary, violent — exclusion of anything perceived as vexing, unfamiliar, alien.

And as goes society, so goes the state. Even in our republic, people are talking about a “referendum” — not to bring additional legitimacy to representative democracy, but to denounce it as a “system” of “elites”. Not only the so-called Alternative for Germany is heralding in its rhetoric a threat to democratic constitutionality by autocratic Caesarism and a national-populist will to power. This threat has been palpable for some time now and with dangerous frequency — in Poland and the Netherlands, in Hungary, the United Kingdom and the United States, in Russia, Turkey and the Philippines. Events such as the Brexit referendum and the US election campaign have highlighted political and social threats that will not spare the sciences and humanities — and that will hold them accountable. What the public must do to support free and productive research and scholarship is often discussed. The sciences’ and humanities’ complementary responsibility for society and the state is much too often reduced to slogans like “growth innovation” and “grand challenges”.

2.

Pluralistic society and constitutional democracy rely on the public examination of argument and counterargument. Historically, they were associated with the emergence of modern science. And in systematic terms, they are its prerequisites. But these conditions can no longer be taken for granted at this turn of the year.

On the one hand, the canon of shared knowledge is eroding. At least that’s what is happening in the echo chambers, excitation waves and conspiracy scenarios into which public discourses are being transformed by the mechanisms of networked communication. Not without justification has “a serious crisis of truth” (Bernhard Pörksen) been diagnosed. At the same time, there are, on the political side, forms of struggle — reminiscent, at least rhetorically, of the Weimar Republic — that frame social conflicts as the “self-defence” of a national community against the “system”, its “old parties” and “elites” and their “lying press”. The crisis of truth and the aggravation of social conflict stoke each other up in the slur “expert”. The expert’s knowledge

seems to be discredited simply by virtue of coming from an “elite”. The “people”, according to the populists, therefore have had enough of the “experts”.

This latest version of “the dialectic of enlightenment, which is that good arguments by educated people lead to resentment against education and good arguments” (Karsten Fischer) also characterises the situation of the sciences and humanities. They must therefore fight for an enlightened society and the democratic constitutional state, if only for their own sake. But how can they do this if being educated, arguing, and scientific expertise themselves become the objects of contempt? The usual demands for more expertise, and for more money for even more expertise, won’t help. But what will?

No matter how we try to answer this question, science can’t make a difference without society’s trust in it — in the legitimacy of science, in the responsibility of scientists and scholars.

That’s easy to say. But trust is a complex issue. It can emerge only gradually; it takes time and remains fragile. We must, therefore, not overlook the fact that science is increasingly involved in the transformation of the world, and that this transformation can no longer be described, simply and unequivocally, as progress. Modern technologies can be powerful instruments of a radical redistribution of power and life opportunities. This will also involve losers. What should make them put their trust in science? And are we able to answer this question, other than to say that the scientification of the world is irreversible?

3.

Science and research don’t always make it easy for society to trust them. And such obstacles to trust occur not only where scientific laxity or misconduct are noticed by the public. This is also, perhaps especially, worth mentioning at a New Year’s reception focused on research policy. I’m doing so under three keywords: promises, power, and contradictions.

First, the promises. Society’s expectations of science and research are increasing rapidly; the trust it puts in them is not. And this has consequences. Science, especially when it is publicly supported, must be socially justifiable — and politically defensible in the battle over financial resources. Thus, the pressure grows to prove the direct and short-term societal impact of invested funds. And it’s only natural that science responds with promises of immediate practical benefits — from the creation of jobs, to the defeat of major widespread diseases, to the salva-

tion of the world at large. But this leads into a spiral of one-upmanship between impact requirements and impact promises, which does not strengthen social trust in research as much as it threatens to ruin it. The sciences can only disappoint the hope of deliverance from all evil and of eternal life.

And trust brings us to power. On the one hand, modern research is tempted to aggrandise itself over other forms of knowledge, such as common sense, the creation of a sense of meaning, politics, or normativity, even though it can't replace them. On the other hand, scholarly knowledge in various fields — such as digital algorithms or data capitalism, synthetic biology or genome editing — enables private accumulations of power of such enormity that democratic policymaking is only able to control them partially at best. Thus, the “compatibility of technologies with democracy” (Klaus Töpfer) is also in question — and without an answer to it, societal trust in science remains unlikely.

And third, we should also admit the inconsistencies, even contradictions, that often entangle our discourses on research policy and compromise the trustworthiness of science. For instance: We maintain simultaneously the reliability of scholarly knowledge and its falsification by future knowledge. We declare such knowledge to be the most important factor of economic prosperity, but decline jurisdiction over the injustices of the capitalist economy. We emphasise the constitutive internationality of science for the purpose of national competitiveness. And so on.

Such obstacles to trust play a role in the relationship of the sciences and humanities to society and politics. There are credibility problems as a result of reversible misdevelopments, and they could be corrected. Other obstacles have always existed and are downright necessary. The distance between a practical attitude towards the world and one of methodical investigation, between common sense and the frontiers of research, is as enormous as the abstraction and complexity of new scholarly findings. And so it will probably remain the case that modern science must ask for society's trust. Which, of course, is paradoxical: Trust here means faith in the knowledge, and in the capacity for knowledge, of precisely those sciences that wanted to lead the way out of mere faith. As far as this goes, nothing has changed.

What's new and worrisome, on the other hand, is the fact that the rampant populisms are taking advantage of such constellations. In their shadow, they blur the lines between facts and fakes. The populist dichotomy of the “people” versus the “elites” gets embellished with the credibility problems of science. Open hostility towards science and public contempt of reflexivity use it

as a crutch — an anti-intellectualism focused on the differentiated quality of public discourse and rational dispute as embodied in the sciences and humanities, but ultimately aimed at pluralistic society and its republican constitution as a liberal democracy.

4.

For this society and its government, I said earlier, the sciences and humanities will at best be able to put up a feeble argument if they don't enjoy social trust. So what is their responsibility in this controversy, which has shaped this past year in many countries in a most disturbing way, and which is going to continue to be fought fiercely in 2017? What is the responsibility of science and how can it live up to it?

It's a difficult question. Because it won't help if we as "protagonists of an interpretive elite merely point fingers in disgust at the grubby urchins of discourse" (Bernhard Pörksen); if we fuel social polarisation further with the false slogan of a "post-truth era" instead of continuing to demand precise argumentation. There's also no point in stomping our feet, so to speak, and insisting angrily: Our expertise is needed! There are facts! This would hardly curb the political use of lies and denunciation.

So we need a different approach. If we knew exactly which one, the situation would be less disturbing. At the same time, it's probably naive to expect simple remedies and definitive solutions. Conflict situations like the populist incitement of social processes are far too complex. Nevertheless, they can be handled. And this also involves opportunities for research and research policy to make a difference.

Such opportunities emerge wherever the sciences and humanities can confidently assume that they cultivate a specific indirectness in relating to the world. Research distances itself from its objects, precisely in order to be able to recognise them. It requires a willingness — which must be cultivated in academic studies — to be productively irritated by the world and by what others know about the world. It is for this reason that the sciences and humanities can and must argue for a pluralistic society and its democratic, representative, constitutional government. For they, too, are not possible without the "values of indirectness" and a "right to distance" (Helmuth Plessner).

To argue here means, more than anything, that those who make research happen understand, and make it understood, that it's not enough simply to provide scholarly knowledge. Rather,

we must demonstrate the methodological genesis of this knowledge also outside of the research system. The sciences, to quote the Tübingen media scholar Bernhard Pörksen, are, in a sense, committed to a “second-order enlightenment”. The social communication of scholarly knowledge, whether in public or among experts, must always convey the perspectivity and selectivity of this knowledge as well. Then it can also reduce the credibility problems mentioned earlier and remove them from the arsenal of populist denunciation. Researchers’ expertise is always particular, and it is trustworthy only when it admits as much — when it reveals itself as an element of the pluralistic diversity of science and scholarship, which helps to support the pluralism of modern societies and makes it bearable.

We can break down what this would mean specifically. For one, it means being earnest and modest when promising benefits, even where research requires societal justification. It also means making a precise distinction between scholarly knowledge of that which is the case versus social discourse about what should be the case. And it means that researchers are not allowed to treat politicians as administrative executors of seemingly indisputable scientific guidelines. Politics is more than executive power. And the trustworthiness of science depends not least on its maintaining a distance to technocracy with its alleged constraints, which — as Hannah Arendt made very clear — “seen from the viewpoint of politics [...] has a despotic character.” Pluralistic society and the democratic constitutional state presuppose that the political is understood as the binding reconciliation of disputed interests and interpretations. Research can contribute to this reconciliation by describing reasonable alternatives of action. By no means, however, can it decide between such alternatives and make this reconciliation on its own. It has no democratic mandate.

5.

If we take all of this seriously, we arrive at quite drastic consequences for science and scholarly communication — and also for the way in which research organisations promote science and scholarship, publicly and politically. We should discuss this. Our New Year’s reception is a great opportunity to do so, and the DFG is honoured that you — distinguished parliamentarians, ministers, senators and state secretaries, honourable excellencies, chancellors and presidents, dear colleagues — have accepted our invitation to this conversation and reception.

So we should discuss. Indeed, we must discuss the problems that I’ve tried to outline this evening, because research must not only campaign for its own funding and freedom, but it

must also argue for the pluralistic society and the democratic constitutional state, which it serves and which support it.

And we can do so with optimism. Because what researchers can bring to the table is their practiced familiarity with systematic, enlightened thinking and an adept approach to the unfamiliar, the uncertain, the complex. They are needed as an authority that insists on the criterion of truth, on critical examination of knowledge claims, on challenging alleged constraints, and on exploring alternative actions. And we must — and can — argue for a pluralistic society and constitutional democracy because civilised argumentation, which reasons coolly and acknowledges alternatives, is one of the most important antidotes to the populist incitement of the social climate. This ability to argue is the inevitable and encouraging imposition of modern science, of free societies and legitimate politics.

For the new year, I wish you, and I wish all of us, the ability to handle this imposition with confident reflexivity and with success.

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