

New Year's Address

by the President of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft

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- Check against delivery! –

[Address]

1.

The year has only just begun, and any fresh insights it can offer us are naturally quite limited. So it seems appropriate to begin 2019 by revisiting a somewhat older reflection. It comes from an article that appeared in a Hamburg weekly newspaper some 20 years ago by Ralf Dahrendorf, a German-British sociologist, philosopher and political scientist. In that article, Dahrendorf, – whose many roles included that of European Commissioner for Research, Science and Education and Sciences from 1972 to 1974 and whose memory is being commemorated this year by the BMBF with the introduction of a prize in his name honouring outstanding achievements in European research projects – pondered the “secondary effects of globalisation” on “the politics of freedom”.¹ The most threatening of such effects, in his view, were an “endangerment to social cohesion”; a shift from “solidarity” to “competition”; and an undermining of the “institutions of democracy through inconsequential communication between atomised individuals” under the conditions of the “anarchy of the internet,” which might promote “authoritarian rather than democratic constitutions”.

¹ Ralf Dahrendorf, Die Globalisierung und ihre sozialen Folgen werden zur nächsten Herausforderung einer Politik der Freiheit. An der Schwelle zum autoritären Jahrhundert. (Globalisation and its social consequences will be the next challenge to the politics of liberty. On the threshold of the authoritarian century) In: DIE ZEIT No. 47, 14 November 1997.

Today, this observation dating from 1997, from – as Dahrendorf put it – “the threshold of an authoritarian century”, appears remarkably prescient. After all, western industrialised and scientific knowledge societies are all confronted with the development of massive social divisions; schismatic outrage and denial of facts by certain parts of society; and populist nationalist models of interpretation, frequently immunised by conspiracy theory, and autocratic Caesarist claims to power.

But what do Dahrendorf’s reflections have to say about international research cooperation in a research system that is itself becoming increasingly global? Must the freedom and social responsibility of research also be rethought globally? Or, to put the question more directly: What is the relationship between the regulation of research conditions by individual states and global research networking? Or between the claim of the sciences to autonomy on the one hand, and increasing uninhibitedness on the other, as recently seen by He Jiankui’s claim to have created the first genetically edited babies?

2.

Let us take a step back for a moment and call to mind that internationality in the sciences and humanities is not a descriptive category, but rather a valued principle: Good research is international.

And not simply in the sense that scientific knowledge is not tied to one national culture; the times of so-called German physics or Lysenkoism are – hopefully – gone forever. Internationality is also a positive value in relation to the social aspect of research: International research cooperation is good.

That is why its funding is anchored in the DFG’s statutes and why we are active in international organisations such as the Global Research Council. Indeed, internationality is regarded so positively that when it comes to designing and promoting science and research policy, we often treat it not as a *means* to an end, but as the desired result itself. Examples include cooperation across national borders and on cross-border research topics such as migration or the loss of biodiversity; cooperation between the best experts in a particular field of research; the transnational operation of major research infrastructure; the diversity of cultures represented in a student cohort or a research working group.

Internationality is such a positive value in research that it is easy to overlook the complex ambivalences and risks associated with it in the era of globalisation. But we also need to talk about these risks if we are to take Internationality seriously. Because the notion that our type of liberal open society, constituted under the rule of law, represents the “end of history” (F. Fukuyama) is

something we refute today, unlike a quarter of a century ago. Authoritarian forms of government appear to be on the rise across the world, and the realignment of global spheres of influence is well under way. Research and technology are also being used as political tools in this process.

And science diplomacy is merely one side, the positive side of the coin; international research collaboration *can* promote solidarity between nations. But at the same time, international science is, to employ Dahrendorf's opposites, a means of competing for power, influence and location advantages. And this is not merely a matter of symbolic demonstrations of power (such as two weeks ago perhaps, when a Chinese satellite landed on the far side of the moon) or scientific competition of ideas.

It is clear that international competition between research locations is also decided by research funding and technical infrastructure, by salary amounts (publicly funded research systems are quickly at a disadvantage compared to privately funded systems), or by the particular regulation of research freedom, research objectives and scientific responsibility.

And this can give rise to *a competition in outbidding one another*, for example in relation to computing capacities or salaries, which may also be combined with *undercutting each other*, for example in relation to ethical research standards.

And, let me add, this is the portent of the genetically manipulated Chinese twins: reckless, globally unrestricted research competition, in which the winners are those who practise the most irresponsible ethics dumping. And this threat is present not only at the international level, but also at the European and national level: there is also a clear decline in research ethics frameworks² within the member states of the European Union, for example in the area of embryo research. But this is merely one of many aspects. I am referring to global changes in functions and shifting boundaries in research that give rise to complex grey areas.

It is not always easy to differentiate between the justified, productive overstepping of boundaries of knowledge and national research systems and overstepped ethical and political risk-taking. We may echo Vannevar Bush in speaking of "endless frontiers", of science without borders, but research does not just overcome boundaries. Responsible research is also subject to boundaries that it must not overstep. And research can, in turn, be put to use as a means to establish and impose political, technical and economic boundaries.

² Cf. Bettina Schöne-Seifert / Bärbel Friedrich / Ernst-Ludwig Winnacker, Wir nennen es unverantwortlich (We call it irresponsible). In: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung No. 281, 3.12.2018.

3.

Nevertheless, it remains our conviction that there must also be a place for research that is not immediately tied to the wielding of political, social and economic power, but first and foremost to theoretical curiosity and human knowledge of the world. And it is the task of the DFG to secure such a place. The sciences and humanities in general, and research in particular, are a category of distance. In order to perform effectively, they require cultural and intellectual distance, or difference. They are interested in the unknown, the unfamiliar, that which they find bewildering. And the pursuit of knowledge does not stop at national borders. Thus, we can safely say that international science, as a matter of principle, is “foreign-friendly”.

And this is due to its inner logic, as a prerequisite for its ability to operate. That is why the internationalisation of research must also concern itself with the foreign and the unfamiliar; with differences in intellectual styles, questions and problems, traditions of knowledge, histories of institutions and research practices; and, to sum it up in one word, with otherness.

Such “foreign-friendliness” presupposes a globally oriented open-mindedness that is willing to be irritated, that actively seeks productive irritation – this is the year of Alexander von Humboldt, after all – is fundamental to research. This open-mindedness is what is behind the notion of *international science*.

4.

Thus understood, internationality is more than the collaborative sharing of tasks across the boundaries of legal, power or financial systems. Responsibility and freedom are required to provide a stable basis for scientific inquiry.

Without freedom, the intellectual capabilities of science and academia are inconceivable, nor are they conceivable without the knowledge that is truly new in the sense that it does not confirm our expectations, but disrupts them. Without freedom, there could be no question of the diverse functions of impacts, be they direct and indirect, manifest and latent, short-, medium- or long-term – impacts that we owe to modern science’s power of cognition, without which we could not navigate the hypercomplexity of our world. Without the sciences and humanities, what would we know about the probability of extreme summers, the incidence of congenital diseases, the history of our planet or the functioning of echo chambers? And impacts that surpass their functions as social, economic and political power.

Academic freedom is of such fundamental importance that one could be inclined to take it for granted. However, to do so would be imprudent. For this freedom rests on a normative foundation

that is by no means universally acknowledged; instead, it must be striven for or defended and its practical applications adapted and affirmed.

This year, we have special cause to remember that foundation. On 23 May, Germany's constitution, which includes the all-important section Article 5 Paragraph 3, will celebrate its 70th birthday: "Arts and sciences, research and teaching shall be free. The freedom of teaching shall not release any person from allegiance to the constitution."

This privilege of freedom does not conceive of research as a tool, as a means to other ends, but as an expression of the *human condition*, and it is bound by the constitution: Academic and scientific freedom must also fulfil ethical standards.

Not only is it important to call this to mind on commemorative occasions – in fact, we *must* remember this for reasons that are regrettably very relevant today. Because we cannot ignore or remain indifferent to the fact that the freedom, open-mindedness and responsibility of the sciences and humanities are under increasing pressure throughout the world.

That is because they constitute a challenge to anti-pluralistic, populist nationalist, authoritarian or autocratic claims to power and truth that are gaining influence in many places in the world. The power of inquiry and questioning, critical reflection, disruption and expansion of established knowledge and epistemics typical of the sciences and humanities endangers those hermetic social and knowledge regimes on which populists and autocrats rely for their success.

The threat to the freedom, responsibility and open-mindedness of academic research (and its productive power) is almost as great where – sometimes in combination with populism and autocracy – research is increasingly viewed merely as an instrument, at best a predictable solution to problems which have long been known, a view that on occasion merely conceals itself behind the constraints of fiscal policy. But when has there not been pressure from tight budgets?

The research policies of many nations, not just, say, the US, the new Brazilian administration or Japan, give rise to such criticism, and therefore influence our international cooperation options. Even with respect to the European Union, and despite the positive developments in the European Research Area, it is necessary to point out that strong, effective research systems are not structured as a centralist hierarchy, but as a pluralistic heterarchy. They eliminate monocultures, whether they are structural or thematic. They avoid the reduction of their research-driven impacts to delivering solutions that we already expect. They enable flexibility, not according to budgets, but as a constitutionally guaranteed freedom.

5.

To summarise my comments up to now, shaping Europeanisation, internationalisation and globalisation means standing up for the freedom of science and research, ensuring their ethical accountability, and rendering the diversity of knowledge cultures, research styles and funding systems productive.

The flexibility of funding and funding policy necessary to do so is greater in Germany than in most nations in the world and more reliable than in many scientific institutions with which we successfully cooperate internationally. Nevertheless, we are not immune to frustrations or setbacks to our collaborations on every continent. Sometimes we struggle with the sheer impenetrability of red tape, occasionally political interests stand in our way, and sometimes we may have encountered difficulties with new authoritarian claims of imperialism.

Be that as it may, throughout the world, research freedom that takes its responsibility seriously is suffering from the upturn in populist or autocratic power plays, from narrow, purely economically motivated research policies, and from globalisation effects such as the competition in undercutting others that I mentioned at the outset using the example of ethics dumping.

How we should deal with this social and political, intellectual and ethical venture of responsible-minded freedom in a global scientific world that is becoming polycentric; how the harmful “secondary effects of globalisation” on an international (research) “policy of freedom” can be contained; and how Dahrendorf’s prognosis of an “authoritarian century” can be proven false are questions that require rigorous discussion. And they will be hard to answer definitively.

Our New Year’s reception offers the opportunity to continue or begin this discussion. Please accept my gratitude for joining us here this evening, and my best wishes for a friendly and peaceful New Year, your personal well-being, and for successful and fulfilling work in and for the sciences and humanities in an open, free and democratic society.

[Thanks]