


New Year Address

of the President of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft,
Professor Peter Strohschneider,
on 14th January 2013 in Berlin

– The spoken word is final –



Ministers and Senators,
State Secretaries,
Honorable Members of the German Bundestag,
Excellencies and esteemed members of the diplomatic Corps,
Presidents and Chancellors,
Dear Colleagues,
Ladies and gentlemen,

1.

It is a great honour to welcome you to the New Year reception of the German Research Foundation (DFG). That, having recently taken office, I am in the privileged position of greeting you on behalf of the DFG is naturally also a great personal pleasure. I wish you all the best for the still very young year, and hope that you enjoyed a happy Christmas and entered the new year looking forward confidently to what lies ahead. Let us celebrate the New Year in appropriate fashion, that it may be happy and successful for you all! Let us engage in conversation (or continue on-going conversations) – we certainly don't lack material for discussion and if the congenial atmosphere serves as encouragement for lively exchange, so much the better.

Before I go any further, please allow me also to extend a very warm welcome at this point to our guests from abroad and to wish you a very happy New Year. Your presence here is truly appreciated by the DFG as evidence of the international nature of academic research, and of our own work in supporting it in Germany and abroad. For the DFG, international cooperation and international networks will continue to play a central role as a core pillar of our activities. In order to achieve our goals, and to facilitate excellent research that crosses national boundaries, we rely strongly on the goodwill and support of our friends and partners abroad. For this I would like to take the opportunity to thank you very much.

2.

Ladies and gentlemen, even if the flow of time itself remains uninterrupted, the end of the old year and the start of the new provide an opportunity to pause and take stock, and to make good resolutions. It could be said that this is the season for programmatic plans; and all the more so when – as in our case – the transition between the years is accompanied by a change in office. How can I, therefore, ignore the expectation that, at the New Year reception of the DFG, the new President will deliver a *programmatic* statement on questions of funding activities and academic policy? And yet, if I were to attempt to negotiate my way safely around the obstacles ahead – from the federal distribution of finances and responsibilities to the European Research Area; from the conclusion of the Excellence Initiative to the role of non-university research institutions – I would no doubt leave you with the mistaken impression that the DFG intends to pursue a wavering course in the future.

I cannot escape programmatic expectations; at the same time, however, I am unable to meet them. The DFG belongs among those organisations that can measure their institutional quality, among other things, by the degree of continuity that exists in the face of changes in personnel. And this is necessarily the case: The DFG would not function if it did not enjoy the confidence of its members, of those who seek funding and of all those who contribute to the self-administration of science through the DFG, most of whom do so voluntarily, out of a fundamental commitment to the self-administrative principle itself.

At the same time, the current situation calls for a certain reserve with regard to large programmatic gestures. For one thing, I have only been in office a few days (although it would perhaps appear disingenuous if I were to present myself as entirely new to academic politics). Above all, though, the DFG operates in a differentiated academic system. This is experiencing significant change that is likely to see a fundamental reconfiguration in the distribution of functions and financial resources. The Excellence Initiative, the Higher Education Pact and the Pact for Research and Innovation are, after all, finite programmes: what they regulate, and the way in which they do so – these are questions that are going to require new answers. Academic federalism, the relationship between research and teaching, teaching capacities and quality, university and non-university research, the organisation of research and research funding, the proportional relationship between basic and third-party funding and between research carried out on a project basis and that pursued as an on-going task: these are all questions open to discussion, with far-reaching institutional and intellectual implications. And they will all be decided in a world that relies on the formative potential of modern research and the dynamics of the *Wissenschaftsgesellschaft*, but also by the intrinsic logic of the debt crisis and the federal election campaign.

We have no masterplan for finding the answers to these questions; it would probably be unwise even to seek one. Instead we are going to have to engage in a very intensive and differentiated debate of the issues. The DFG – like other academic organisations – has considerable weight to bring to these discussions. Nonetheless, an “architect role” would be as inappropriate for the DFG as for anyone else: modern science is far too complex to be directed hierarchically from a single perspective.

3.

In place of a programmatic declaration outlining the intentions of the new President, allow me, therefore, to stimulate discussion – and perhaps also to provoke debate – with a few general considerations. These do not aim at a masterplan for German academia in all its diverse international intricacies. Instead, criteria can be extrapolated which may be useful in evaluating policy concepts put forward in the future – Such concepts should not only be financially realistic and politically feasible; they should, above all, also lead to further development of the organisational frameworks in academia, ensuring utmost productivity in this sphere.

The purpose of science and research, and in particular the specific role of the universities: these are the guiding questions around which my thoughts today are oriented. The fact that, in the end, they also have implications for the DFG will probably not come as a surprise.

Modern science and the humanities are always concerned with how the new comes into the world – not only the new in terms of the previously un-thought, but above all in terms of the previously unthinkable. Putting it paradoxically: Research, and most certainly fundamental research, is not simply concerned with the “old” new that, in one way or another, can be extrapolated from existing problems and solutions. At its core, research in science and the humanities is concerned with the “new” new, by which I mean the fundamental expansion of possibilities for explaining the world scientifically – both in its natural and its cultural dimensions.

This starting hypothesis is by no means as trivial as it may at first appear. It presents research primarily as the discovery of new ways to comprehend phenomena in the world (and as the implementation of such discovery). This does not, however, occur according to a simple problem-solution formula. Although it is clear that scientific discoveries can contribute to the solution of many problems, it seems to me that we need to realign our thinking: A problem-solution formula can, at best, only partially describe scientific or scholarly research, for science not only solves problems, it also creates them (for example in bio-ethics or questions of financial policy). There are also problems research is unable to solve (for example our limited social commodities, or my mortality). And some challenges hardly fit the problem-solution paradigm at all.

The last can be illustrated using the example of the so-called *grand challenges*, challenges like climate change, widespread diseases or demographic change. What actually makes these challenges “grand”? It is hardly their global dimension alone. These challenges are, above all, so substantial that they cannot be subjects of research as such. They, a priori, transcend disciplinary boundaries. Climate change can only be a subject of research in so far that it is broken down into innumerable questions in the natural and social sciences, as well as economic and cultural research. These questions are often highly specialised. Thus climate change is much too complex to be addressed according to a problem-solution formula – contrary to the prevailing political discourse on the subject.

I would conclude, therefore, that the greater and more pressing social challenges become, the more important it is in research not to focus solely on the “old” new – the importance of the targeted search for solutions derived from previously identified problems notwithstanding. Instead, there must also be an emphasis on the “new” new: on the extension of the boundaries of the thinkable, on the emphatically innovative, on answers that cannot be predicted from the questions that have already been asked.

The American sociologist of science, Robert K. Merton, has spoken of *serendipity*, of finding that which was not sought, although one was already engaged in a search. The significance of this principle of discovery for world history is nowhere more clearly illustrated than in the case of Columbus: America was in no way a solution to the problem of finding a sea-route to India – and yet, retrospectively, it can be said to have been relevant, to say the least.

In German we tend to speak in this context less of *Serendipität* (although the word certainly exists), and more in terms of *blue sky research*, of research driven by curiosity and discovery, or more generally of fundamental research. Scientists and scholars need to bear in mind that it can at times be difficult to communicate the significance of probing the foundations of scientific knowledge for decisive social or political situations. Its actual and temporal relationship to the immediate problem demanding an urgent and direct solution is often hidden.

On the other hand, society and politics cannot get around the fact that science and research must deliver more than is expected of them, in order to deliver what society and politics can rightly expect of them. This applies also to concrete solutions to direct problems. In order to find America, it is also necessary to search for India. The contribution of science and the humanities to society builds on just that; it not only follows the immediate definition of social and political problems, but, at the same time, acts according to its intrinsic character: research is more than a simple instrument for defined purposes; it is, namely – and to put it emphatically – also a cultural commodity.

4.

This brings me back to the university, to the DFG, and to the political questions concerning the on-going development of the academic system, upon which I touched at the outset. The university is, namely, the most important institution at society's disposal for the productive marriage of society's expectations of academia with the intrinsic nature of research itself – thus, education *and* learning, concrete problem-solving and fundamental, theoretical approaches to understanding the world, practical comprehension *and* reflexive reason. And this applies in all branches of science and the humanities and at all levels, from undergraduate studies to cutting-edge research.

These are the distinctive features that differentiate the university from other institutions in the academic system. They are what make non-university research institutions and higher-education colleges, scientific collections or institutions for strategic research all dependent on the specific contribution of the universities. And for this highly pragmatic reason – and not as a result of old traditions or symbolic decorations – it is possible to say that the universities are the heart of the academic system. Their potential contribution is functionally constitutive for its effective overall performance.

This must be taken into consideration when discussing the further development of the academic system. For the sake of its own future perspectives, the *Wissenschaftsgesellschaft* must provide for it politically, financially and legally. This must, moreover, also be the guiding principle for the actions of the scientific organisations themselves (for example, in the Alliance of Academic Organisations): The functions and performance of individual institutions and organisations are of the utmost importance. Even more important, however, are those of the system as a whole. This constitutes an intricate arrangement of universities, non-university research institutions and research-funding agencies. The instruments used by politicians to shape the arrangement of these institutions will be effective in proportion to the extent to which they enable the maintenance of balance: balance between the different functions and qualitative levels of scientific activity (cutting edge research is, after all, impossible without a solid basis of regular research), but also an institutional balance between the universities and non-university research organisations.

With regard to the latter, it is important that their respective influence and financial resources do not become unequal so that the relationship between university and non-university research is marked by *one-sided dependencies*. Instead, it is necessary to adhere to a principle of intensive cooperation. Even leaving aside for a moment the role of the DFG, in maintaining this principle the organisational separation of research organisations and funding organisations is important. Otherwise there is a danger that the universities will become dependent for third-party funding on the very institutions with which they simultaneously cooperate and compete in research. In addition, this separation makes it easier to avoid a *mainstreaming* of research that is antipathetic to innovation and to allow the great richness of ideas in the system to emerge. In order for this to occur, freely-initiated fundamental research and programmatically oriented research must similarly exist in a balanced relationship to each other, as must the various project formats themselves. Naturally, in research as elsewhere, the largescale and expensive tend to draw the most attention; that these are always the most fruitful intellectually is in no way a foregone conclusion.

And, to raise one final point: It is precisely because of the potential of science and research to contribute to society that, on the one hand, the resources and competition for third-party funding and, on the other, the intellectual contest of ideas must be held in balance. The one should not be mistaken for the other. In science and the humanities, because they deal both with that which has not yet been thought and with the previously unthinkable, there is a critical boundary in the competition for scarce material resources, beyond which undesirable side-effects start threatening to overshadow the benefits. In the contest for ideas and knowledge, by contrast, we cannot have too much of either.

5.

Modern academia, ladies and gentlemen, is a highly differentiated, pluralistic and decentralised entity, both in its knowledge orders and in its organisational forms. On this depends its ability to fulfil its prominent role in contributing to our understanding and formation of the world. The ways in which the considerations I have raised here – providing they stand up to criticism – can contribute productively to the concrete configuration of the organisational and political initiatives for academia in Germany is something we need to discuss with each other. There will certainly be – I venture in conclusion a risk-free prognosis – differences of opinion. But these will ensure that the discussions, in which I now warmly invite you to engage, are lively. And differences of opinion will contribute to securing the quality of the eventual decisions that must result from our discussions.

I wish all of us, in politics and academia alike, every success in this pursuit, making this new year a good one for science and research in Germany.

Thank you very much for your attention. And happy New Year!