

“Science and the Humanities in the Crosshairs”

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Much is said these days about hostility toward science and the humanities. About attacks on scientific research. And often, it all sounds rather abstract and distant — like a spectre drifting over from some grey autocratic or imperial past. A spectre we believed ourselves immune to, here in our Europe founded on constitutional principles.

And yet: “Throughout the world, it has become precarious to take democracy for granted [...]”¹ It is hard to imagine a more fitting diagnosis for the current moment. But those words are not mine – and they are not even from this century. It was Thomas Mann who voiced that insight, in a speech he gave in 1938.

Democracy, and science and the humanities are once again in the crosshairs – and we as researchers are right in the thick of it. Like the much-cited sleepwalkers, we have drifted into this situation – yet again and for far too long. And what we are seeing is this: where democracy is harmed, science and the humanities are also affected – and vice versa. And whatever happens to science and the humanities in one place affects it – and consequently also the economy and society – not only there, but worldwide.

When researchers and their institutions become targets of military attacks, it is nothing short of outrageous. But right now, we are also witnessing something of a witch hunt within democratic societies themselves – ranging from the discrediting of scientific findings, to the defamation and discrimination of researchers, and even to open threats and worse.

These targeted attacks can currently be observed in numerous countries across the globe. We must be clear that, alongside assaults on the judiciary and the free press, these attacks are a means of building power by autocratic methods.

¹ Thomas Mann, *On the Coming Victory of Democracy*, Secker & Warburg: London 1938, p. 9.

America (or: the Orwellian erasure)

To return to the above quotation, Thomas Mann adds a telling remark: “– even in America.” He goes on: “Even America feels today that democracy is not an assured possession, that it has enemies, that it is threatened from within and from without, that it has once more become a problem.”²

Since the beginning of the year, barely a day has passed without new forms of repression being levelled at science and the humanities in the United States. All of us – the research community here in Germany and around the world – are watching this development with horror. We are appalled at the unimaginable extent to which freedom of research and academic independence are being curtailed – all for the sake of political gain. How research is being obstructed – indeed, destroyed – and scientific findings are being censored, distorted and manipulated.

As you all know, institutions and projects are losing their funding and countless researchers are losing their jobs, while international scholars and students are being stripped of their residence permits. The Orwellian erasure of key terms and the apparently arbitrary withdrawal of funding have become instruments of political power. Scientific independence is being systematically restricted, its integrity deliberately undermined and its principles exploited for political ends. As a result of enforced isolation, the once world-leading US research system is now being forced into growing isolation. Independent research is being severely restricted – one is tempted to say: driven out and persecuted.

What we are witnessing is not merely a new right-wing research policy. It is a war on science – more severe even than the one foreseen by journalist and Pulitzer Prize-winner Chris Mooney twenty years ago.³ A war in which defunded programmes, manipulated law and imposed ideology are systematically deployed to bring independent, free-thinking people to their knees.

We cannot simply stand by and watch all this unfold. This is the moment to take a stand and send out a clear message. Because all of this is happening – of all places – in one of our closest partner countries, in a country where we would never have believed such things possible. A partner country that, until now, has been nothing less than the guiding star of the free world – a beacon of excellent, independent research and, not least, “the Land of the Free” – the very epitome of independence and a cherished ideal among free-thinking minds.

The imperative of the moment

Solidarity – this is the imperative of the moment. The German Research Foundation (DFG) stands firmly with researchers who are threatened or persecuted – and we advocate worldwide for freedom of research, international openness and, of course, equal opportunity.

² Thomas Mann, *On the Coming Victory of Democracy*, Secker & Warburg: London 1938, p. 10.

³ Chris Mooney, *The Republican War on Science*, Basic Books: New York 2005.

Our solidarity extends to research institutions and partner organisations in the United States. We are united by decades of highly successful transatlantic research partnership that has yielded outstanding results. We continue to maintain these partnerships while at the same time exploring new paths of research collaboration, both through bilateral cooperation and through global exchange.

We also have the greatest respect for all those colleagues and institutions who are raising their voices and taking legal action to defend themselves. Together with them, we place our trust in the strength of the American rule of law and its independent courts to uphold the freedom of research and teaching.

Now more than ever, it is vital to strengthen research communities and their global networks through international cooperation. And we are providing concrete support for this, too: through new research agreements, through joint publications, through invitations to conferences, through the exchange and safeguarding of research data.

Because what is happening in the USA has long since had consequences for research around the world. All disciplines are affected. Allow me to share an example from the perspective of an infectious disease researcher: many colleagues in the United States are no longer able to think and work freely – that is assuming they have not already been dismissed. They only have limited access to relevant databases, they can no longer travel freely and they have been cut off from scholarly exchange at conferences. If their research is funded by the Department of Health, their ability to publish in highly respected international journals is curtailed. Instead they are expected to use new, ministry-run outlets.

Established vaccination programmes are being shut down, and the entire Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) has been dismissed. Global research networks in the field of infectious diseases are being dismantled, and preparations for potential new waves of infection have been halted. Moreover, researchers in Africa and other regions – indispensable partners for infection research – have abruptly lost their funding.

The medium- and long-term consequences of this deliberate dismantling are barely foreseeable. The lack of research – and the many findings that will not be gained until much later, if at all – will inflict cross-border harm on society and the economy. Within the field of healthcare alone, we are already seeing not just a significant loss of scientific progress: as a result of drastic funding cuts to health programmes, millions of additional and avoidable deaths are looming in the fight against HIV, tuberculosis and other diseases.

We face a twofold historic responsibility, so to speak: firstly, concerning the future of research, society and global coexistence – and secondly, concerning our own past. After all, the United States is the country where so many intellectuals and writers sought and found refuge when Germany no longer offered them a home. “When the dispersal of German scholars began in 1933,” as Walter Benjamin observed in 1938, “the scholarly world's solidarity in major democracies, particularly France and the

United States, has provided these German researchers with more than just sanctuary.”⁴

Germany as a research hub does indeed bear a particular responsibility at this moment, and also from a European perspective. For this reason, the DFG expressly welcomes the federal government’s Global Minds Initiative Germany. It comes at exactly the right time, enabling leading international researchers to continue their work under excellent conditions while freely choosing their topics and methods. At the same time, it supports the principle of global brain circulation, something that has been actively embraced and promoted by the German research system for many years.

And yes – Germany’s research and innovation system stands to benefit, too. But above all, the initiative strengthens the global research community and its chances of success in confronting climate change, forced migration, energy crises, pandemics and much more besides. Through this programme, we are taking a strong and united stand – for freedom, for openness and for the future not only of science and the humanities but of our coexistence and survival.

Where Trust (Still) Prevails

Fortunately, we still have very favourable conditions in Germany, of course. In addition to the fact that freedom of research is guaranteed under the constitution, public trust in science and research remains strong. And policymakers continue to rely on the innovative power of scientific knowledge. This is particularly evident in the coalition agreement, in which the new German federal government clearly committed itself this spring to freedom of research and to Germany as a strong research and innovation hub.

Nowhere have the strength and trust underlying this interplay been more strikingly demonstrated than at the recent meeting of the Excellence Commission in Bonn at the end of May. It was indeed a remarkable coincidence: on the very same day that Harvard University was banned from admitting international students, funding decisions were announced in Germany for the ‘Clusters of Excellence’ funding line of the Excellence Strategy launched by the federal and state governments. The contrast could hardly have been starker: on one side, forward-looking research being funded through decisions reached in mutual trust and agreement between academia and politics, on the other, science and the humanities in the crosshairs and in acute danger of suffering lasting harm.

⁴ Walter Benjamin, *Ein deutsches Institut freier Forschung*, in: Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 3: *Kritiken und Rezensionen*, edited by Hella Tiedemann-Bartels, Suhrkamp: Frankfurt a.M. 1991, p. 518f (translated by the author).

It was a moment that revealed with striking clarity what can be achieved when politics and academia listen to one another with the utmost respect, engage in open dialogue and take joint decisions based on scientific quality.

In personal conversations with members of the Committee of Experts and again during my subsequent visit to DFG partner organisations in Latin America, one thing became crystal clear: if we are to act in solidarity and if we are to strengthen our competitiveness, we must make our research systems in Europe, and here in Germany, even more resilient.

Getting Out of the Firing Line

Unfortunately, we are also witnessing a growing hostility to science and the humanities here in Germany. We hear this from colleagues across all disciplines and from members of the DFG. Climate and biodiversity research are affected, as are many areas of the humanities, social sciences and cultural studies – even medicine. These attacks go far beyond social media – they're happening here and now, in our daily lives.

A few years ago, even right in the heart of the EU we had to witness — how, for ideological reasons and despite all protest, funding for universities was slashed, regime-critical professors were dismissed, academic committees were reappointed with political loyalists and an entire university was forced out.

So, the question is: how can we protect our own research system, safeguard knowledge and develop strategies to guard against potential systematic interference in the independence of science and the humanities, beyond showing solidarity with those affected?

We can certainly no longer rely on continued access to databases, publication platforms, research software or research infrastructure hosted abroad. What we need are European solutions – solutions that make data usable for research while keeping costs and the administrative burden within reasonable limits. We also need to find ways of responding to the arbitrary withdrawal of funding, the abolition of or failure to fill critical professorships, and the targeted harassment of individual researchers.

It was for this reasons that the DFG Senate established a new working group earlier this year. Its goal is to develop measures to protect academic freedom and institutional autonomy in Germany in the long term. Indeed, the spontaneous initiative that led to its formation is itself a powerful demonstration of the resilience of academic self-governance.

Sharing Responsibility

At the same time, we all know that we can only safeguard the freedom and independence of science and the humanities by means of collaborative efforts. And I would now like to outline three specific starting points for this shared task.

Firstly, academia and politics should work together to close off potential avenues for undue influence on the content and funding of research. This includes carefully weighing the risks posed by actors hostile to science and the humanities having blocking minorities, participating in coalitions and being appointed to public offices. Also, suitable measures must be taken to protect freedom of research. These should also make it more difficult to interfere with the financial independence and long-term planning security of the research system, as guaranteed through the Pact for Research and Innovation and the Excellence Strategy.

Secondly, the organisations and institutions within the research system must stand together even more closely – as is already the case within the Alliance of Science Organisations. Together they must take preventive measures at the institutional level to combat anti-democratic and unconstitutional encroachments on freedom of research and also the instrumentalisation of academic self-governance at an early stage. This includes ideologically motivated attempts to influence the choice of research topics and methods, as well as attempts to interfere with funding decisions. In order to counter such moves, we must not only uphold the standards of good research practice, but also examine the internal mechanisms of academic self-governance, in particular the electoral rules, procedural regulations and statutes of their committees. In this way, we can ensure that they are resilient in times of crisis and strengthen them where needed. If we want to avoid these efforts being undermined, it is essential for the statutory bodies themselves to develop and implement these protection and prevention strategies independently.

Thirdly, we must also strengthen our own individual resilience as researchers. After all, hostility to science and the humanities can affect us on a personal level, in the form of destructive criticism, denigration of research findings, insults and threats, and even physical violence. For this reason, we must develop concrete protection strategies and embed them structurally with clear responsibilities, whether in the form of emergency support for targeted individuals and institutions, assistance during lengthy legal proceedings, or resources to help build inner resilience on a personal level.

In all of this, we can remain certain of one thing: scientific knowledge cannot be banned. Throughout history, knowledge and understanding have always prevailed – despite every attempt at repression. One need only think of the failed efforts to suppress the Socratic reorientation of philosophy, the Copernican revolution, or the ongoing development of disciplines that were stifled under the Third Reich and in the Soviet Union. Scientifically grounded knowledge cannot be tamed and it cannot be controlled. Even if it is driven out of a country, it can only ever be silenced temporarily.

As Hannah Arendt once aptly put it – borrowing the words of Kant: Such knowledge “will never be forgotten”.⁵

⁵ Hannah Arendt, *The Freedom to Be Free*. New England Review, Vol. 38, No. 2 (2017), pp. 56-69.