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ARTISTIC FREEDOM AND ACADEMIC FREEDOM - REFLECTIONS ON CURRENT EVENTS

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Welcome Address

Artistic Freedom and Academic Freedom – I would like to welcome you all to the Leibniz Hall, our guests from near and far, but especially from Israel, to this event, which is part of the Berlin Science Week at the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities. I do not think there is any need to explain why we are discussing this highly topical subject with our guests today. In the next few days, the German Science Barometer 2024 will be published by “Science in Dialogue” (Wissenschaft im Dialog). The Science Barometer has been surveying the attitudes of citizens in Germany towards science and research every year since 2014. And one of the shocking results of this documentation of a representative survey is that never before have so many people believed that science is too dependent on politics, too dependent on the economy, not free.

This year, 62 percent more respondents than in previous years agree with the statement that scientists are not trustworthy due to their heavy dependence on donors. This is around the same proportion as in 2019, before agreement with this statement fell significantly in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic. The statement that scientists have to be mistrusted because they often adapt results to their own expectations was also agreed with by more people in 2024 than in the period from 2020 to 2023. In the Science Barometer 2024, people were also asked for the first time how they rate academic freedom in Germany. 45 per cent of respondents are of the opinion that academic freedom in Germany is fairly good or very good. An almost equal proportion (39 per cent) stated that academic freedom is only partly or partly given and eleven percent said that academic freedom in Germany is rather poor or very poor.

This perception certainly differs within different population groups. For example, 71 percent of 14 to 29-year-olds state that academic freedom is good, while only between 29 and 37 per cent of respondents aged 40 and over are of this opinion. In addition, 65 per cent of all respondents with a high level of formal education rate academic freedom as good, while only 36 per cent of respondents with a medium level of formal education and 27 per cent of respondents with a low level of formal education feel this way.

I have to be honest and say that these findings are shocking to me, because they make it clear that the academic freedom guaranteed in our Basic Law, which I at least considered to be an immovable pillar of our political order and our academic system, is perceived by quite a few as being under threat. Until now, I always thought that only others, those outside my own country, had problems with academic freedom: I was born in walled West Berlin in 1962 and grew up there until I left school. Even as a West Berlin schoolboy, it was clear that there were and had been problems with academic freedom in the neighbouring country to the east. At some point, my father, who had illegally transferred from an assistant position at Leipzig University, then named after Karl Marx, to West Berlin’s Free University in 1957, showed me a letter from the State Secretariat for Higher Education in the GDR addressed to him, which I remember as being from 1955. It stated that Hans Lothar Marksches was currently unable to complete his habilitation, as he had not yet familiarised himself sufficiently with progressive science.

By progressive science, of course, the authorities meant a literary science based on Marxism-Leninism, which was to be enforced at Leipzig University in the 1950s against a “bourgeois” science. Some of its exponents (such as Hans-Georg Gadamer in 1947) had already left Leipzig University, while others (such as Hermann August Korff, my father’s German studies teacher) bravely persevered. After reading this letter stating deficits in the familiarity with progressive science, my father immediately endeavoured to find an assistant position in the West and the opportunity to pursue his habilitation there.

One of my revered academic teachers in Tübingen, the Protestant theologian Eberhard Jüngel (1934–2021), liked to tell how he was expelled from Magdeburg Cathedral High School shortly before graduating in 1952, because he had worn a badge of the Junge Gemeinde (Young Parish Community), a cross on a globe, which was banned by the superiors of the GDR at the time. He was exposed as a reactionary “enemy of the republic” in front of the assembled student body and therefore had to take a kind of substitute ecclesiastical Abitur (at a so-called ecclesiastical sub-seminar), which only entitled him to study theology at an ecclesiastical university (which was not allowed to be called an “ecclesiastical university” and was also not state-licensed, but was coyly called an “ecclesiastical upper seminary”).

Every time I heard stories from my academic teachers and my father, I became very, very grateful. I grew up in a country where freedom of speech and academia never cost me anything. In my life so far, no one has ever asked me to study for a degree or a position in a different, supposedly more advanced science than the one I am studying. I can complain about ministers, tell a joke and nobody will withdraw my funding or even throw me in prison because of it. This was recently made clear once again both by employees of the relevant federal ministry and by the management in the so-called “funding affair”. Incidentally, I can also express my gratitude to ministers for funding and make jokes about myself – but that won’t give me any advantages when it comes to academic degrees, prizes and funding decisions. This is not to be taken for granted, as a glance at German history in the twentieth century shows. At the same time, all efforts to ensure that it remains taken for granted in our country are worthy of all honour.

In today’s heated debates, it is perhaps a good idea to remember that academic freedom is a gift, and to do so with a certain humility.

To a certain extent, I still benefit today from the great personal commitment, courage and willingness to take risks of people who fought for freedom for science and art in Central Europe in the 1980s; the freedom of science in our country fell into my lap undeservedly, so to speak. Yes, and hopefully I have been shaped by the courage of Hans Lothar Marksches, who at least tried to pass it on to his son. In today’s heated debates, it is perhaps a good idea to remember that academic freedom is a gift, and to do so with a certain humility. Yet just as important is the question of where academic freedom and artistic freedom are under threat today, perhaps even in our own country, and what we can do specifically to defend and expand them.

Now you might be wondering why I have only talked about academic freedom so far and not at all about artistic freedom. I could make it easy for myself and say that I am not an artist. Or say that we already talked about academic freedom during last year’s Berlin Science Week and that we did not want to repeat ourselves, so we added art. However, that would have been too short-sighted. Our Basic Law places freedom of art and freedom of science in a very close context in the catalogue of inalienable fundamental rights. And we thought it would be good to think about this in context – together with artists.

I do not need to emphasise that it is a particular pleasure for me that we are organising this discussion jointly with the Israel Academy. Meeting with you is always a special pleasure – and this, of course, all the more the case after the 7th of October. We are glad to be able to share in your experiences and express our support and solidarity. And that is why I am delighted to hand over to David Harel now.