

Humboldt Colloquium: “The Power of Excellence in Science – Enhancing Academic Capacities in Africa”

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Think differently! Thoughts on the role of excellence in societies.

Ladies and Gentlemen, distinguished guests, Excellencies, President of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation,

It is a **great pleasure** for me to have this opportunity to share some thoughts about scientific excellence with you at the end of this colloquium. I am sorry that I was not able to come to Nairobi to speak at the beginning of this event and that I could not take part in your talks and discussions the past days.

First of all, I wish to convey **best wishes from the German Chancellor Angela Merkel**. Africa is far more important to her than time constraints allow her to show. By the way, she studied physics as I did at Leipzig University and she is very convinced that **education at all levels** is essential for all parts of every society. That means it is a key factor for Africa’s development as well, and that includes supporting those women and men who strive for the highest excellence in science and the humanities.

The colloquium documents list the title of my speech as: “**Think differently! Thoughts on the role of excellence in societies.**” About 15 years ago one of my daughters hung a small poster with a picture of Albert Einstein on the bathroom cabinet. Einstein discovered the theory of relativity and is the best known German in the world, not counting Adolf Hitler. That small poster is still hanging there and it was part of an **advertising campaign for the computer company Apple** with that exact message “**Think different.**”

In German we could translate that two ways: “Anders denken” or “das Andere denken”, in the sense of “**Denke das Andere**”. Think differently but also think that which is different, dare to think something different.

The video for the Apple advertising campaign showed not just Albert Einstein, but also Bob Dylan, Martin Luther King, Joan Baez, John Lennon, Yoko Ono, Muhammad Ali, Mahatma Gandhi, Alfred Hitchcock and Pablo Picasso, among others. The spoken text that goes with the Apple video is a homage to all those special people:

“Here’s to the crazy ones.

The misfits.

The rebels.

The troublemakers.

The round pegs in the square holes.

The ones who see things differently.

They’re not fond of rules.

And they have no respect for the status quo.

You can quote them, disagree with them, glorify or vilify them.

About the only thing you can’t do is ignore them.

Because they change things.

They push the human race forward.

And while some may see them as the crazy ones,

We see genius.

Because the people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world,

Are the ones who do.

Don’t worry, I don’t want to start a revolution! But the message is important to me: Excellence does **not refer to the ordinary, but to the extraordinary**, not what everyone has, but what makes some individuals stand out from the crowd.

And that is my **first message: Excellence is characterised by thinking something different**, believing that the supposedly impossible is possible, thinking differently and thinking that which is different.

If “think different” can lead to different actions, then although the power is currently in the hands of those governing the people or country, the potential power is in the hands of those who are able, at least in their heads, to free themselves from conventions and habits.

Thinking differently and thinking that which is different - both are, in my view, **extremely important, in politics, and particularly in science.**

Why? Because extraordinary achievements do not come about when everyone thinks and acts the same way, they come about when individuals **move off the well-worn paths of science**. This applies in all areas of society, but it is particularly important for scientific and technological innovations. It would be absurd to expect progress from those who always think the same and never think different.

In the world of science, as in politics, you need **courage** to **swim against the tide**, to question the zeitgeist or the common doctrine. It can cost you your career.

I believe that we all encourage each other too often to do and say what everyone does. But we should encourage one another, at least **occasionally**, to **dare to do that which is different, or at least something different**. Yes, we should **encourage one another to be different**.

It should go without saying that we are willing to acknowledge differences, also to **acknowledge that people are different and yet can still have the same rights**.

That is not universally accepted, not in Germany and not in the African countries. Raising awareness for both of these – **acknowledging differences and respecting equality before the law** – brings me to my **second thought**:

I was reminded of my daughter's Einstein poster once again in 2011, when a German colleague in Washington drew my attention to the headline for another advertising campaign. This time it was a campaign launched by the **World Bank**: It read "**Think EQUAL**". I didn't find it very innovative. But perhaps it was even meant as a statement against Apple's "Think different"?

What was meant was: "Think Equal for Women and Girls." The people at the World Bank wanted to draw attention to the lack of **gender equality** and campaign for female empowerment.

Female empowerment is a cause that I consider to be extremely important. You know today is International Women's Day. Unfortunately, drawing attention to the lack of gender equality is still justified and often even necessary all over the world. I am very aware of that.

It is crucial that opinion leaders, people who have a say in society and have the attention of their fellow citizens, not just politicians but also academics, make their **commitment to gender equality** very clear, including equal access to education for girls and women, not just primary education but also further education. Campaigning

for equal access is without a doubt part of the role that centres of excellence and elites need to play in society.

Elementary **human rights** have a special role in this context. In this matter I am a convinced universalist. **That is my second message:** in the words of the German judge Udo Di Fabio, a former member of the Federal Constitutional Court of Germany: “**Either human rights are universal or they don’t exist**”.

That does not mean that all people are therefore the same. It is quite obvious that they are not all the same. Human rights apply to all people, including those who are not so clever and those who are not a part of excellence in science.

But all people must be treated in the same way and must be equal before the law. And that is exactly what is meant by legal positivism, translating the human rights canon of values into written, statutory law, under international law as human rights conventions, and as fundamental rights in the form of a constitution.

Anyone who is familiar with the **debate about human rights** will, like me, perhaps have the feeling that the western mainstream does not adequately reflect the diversity of the world’s cultures. This concern is justified; however, it should not lead us to qualify and thus reject the idea of universal human rights. What matters is a core of elementary human rights for all, minimum standards for a decent life. This is what human rights are about, not doing good or being politically correct, as some people in Germany imagine.

People in so-called clusters of excellence in universities in Germany are also thinking about human rights issues, but unfortunately their thought patterns are all too often wrong.

No government is in a position to ban thinking. And yet **many governments have tried to control** and enslave **free thinking**, bringing everyone into line and making independent thought impossible. That is what happened in Germany during the Nazi reign of terror and also after 1945 in East Germany under the dictatorship of the Communist party.

Anyone today who does not agree with what is happening in their country and wants to do something about it will surely ask themselves, as I did back then in East Germany before the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989: What can be done? A good answer is: think first. Georg Picht, a German religious philosopher and Greek and

Latin scholar, once said: **“We do the wrong thing because our thinking is wrong.”**

That statement is a universal truth. It is also true in open, free societies where no one notices any longer how politics, the media, the churches and academia all fall back voluntarily and unconsciously into the same thought patterns.

That is my **third message** when we ask ourselves about the role of excellence in societies: although, ultimately, action is always important, **the right action begins with the right thinking!**

The good thing is: **Die Gedanken sind frei! [Thoughts are free]** Even in societies that are not free. Excellence does not manifest itself in fighting on the side of the powerful, the zeitgeist or the prevailing political or academic opinion.

Neither does excellence manifest itself in just being “anti”. Because, as the German scientist, satirist and anglophile Georg Christoph Lichtenberg said: “Doing the opposite is also a kind of imitation.” By excellence I mean those who belong or want to belong to the best of the best, not the elites who only want to protect their vested rights. People who themselves are different in a certain way so that many people look up to them, admire or envy them. These people also have a **special responsibility**.

First of all, of course, a special responsibility for one’s own thinking, but it also means responsibility for how we behave towards others. Communication with society and in society is important: How do we ask for the floor? Do we really have something to say? Or do we just want to say something, even on topics we know nothing about?

Excellence in science is also about knowing our own limitations, being **humble not superior**, for even the best of us have not understood most things.

I have to admit that I fear I wouldn’t have understood a lot what you talked about in the last few days!

Other questions to be asked are: What role must an excellent scientist play in order to be taken seriously? How much material security or, here in Africa, how much wealth does excellence require?

The question that Germans would ask people in Kenya at this point is: Can a man or even a woman have any standing, be respected, if he or she does not also demonstrate wealth? How strong is the idea in African thinking – if there is such a

thing – that **success equals wealth and is thus a prerequisite** for actually being taken seriously as a scientist and for **being respected**?

My question is meant seriously, even though it can be understood as a critical or rhetorical remark.

I would like to finish with a **wish** for today:

Let us also reflect and talk together about what **role excellence in science** plays when you compare our two continents, **Africa and Europe**, so that Africans and Europeans **can learn to understand one another better**.

To be honest, we Europeans don't really understand Africa. At least our understanding of Africa is much worse than the Africans' understanding of Europe. Only then our societies will be able to work together better, and we can stop the mutual misunderstandings and accusations.

I hope and I also know that Humboldt alumni see just that as their task in life – and you are part of that group. And I am thankful that the **Alexander von Humboldt Foundation** has been doing such excellent work for over 60 years now.

The Foundation has built up a huge network, which now covers 130 countries. It links 26,000 academics and scientists from all over the world and all disciplines closely with Germany, now and into the future. **Germany** has made a name for itself as an **excellent location for study and research** thanks to the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation.

The funding for the **Alexander von Humboldt Foundation** comes from various German government ministries: the research ministry, the foreign office and the development ministry.

There are several other **exchange programmes** organised by the Federal Foreign Office that are trying to achieve something similar. The Goethe Institute and the Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations are known and play an important role in our international cultural relations and educational policy.

The support programmes of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) are important too, not only in quantitative terms. The DAAD also implements the **Welcome to Africa** programme. The aim of this programme, which the Federal Ministry of Education and Research has been funding since 2012, is to promote cooperation between African and German research institutions and academics. The

exchanges go in both directions, which means that German students also study at African universities. Since 1997, the BMZ has been supporting the **Georg Forster Research Fellowship Programme** for development-relevant research projects in Germany.

Ladies and Gentlemen, as you can see, **Germany**, German taxpayers, via the German Bundestag and the German government, is in an **excellent position**. You have the chance to make use of this range of opportunities to your advantage and to the best advantage of your home countries, for example, Kenya.

“Think different.” The video for the Apple advertising campaign showed only one scientist: Albert Einstein. There are not that many scientists who are known all over the world. So I would suggest: Let’s add some to that list!

The idea comes from Steven Hawking the most famous living physicist. He created for the network of so called African Institutes for Mathematical Sciences, also supported by the German Government, the claim: Next Einstein Initiative. The next Einstein has to come from Africa.

If anyone wants to learn more about German geniuses, I recommend a book by a Briton, Peter Watson. Germans are far too modest and uptight to ever write such a book. The title of the book is: The German Genius. It is an intellectual and cultural history of Germany from Bach to Benedict XVI.

Ladies and Gentlemen, it is good that there has always been and always will be excellence, and that it can even be nurtured.

Thank you for your attention.