

23rd Karlsruhe Dialogues 2019
The Responsible Society: Between Challenge and Overload?

Opening Address on Friday, 22 February 2019
Prof. Dr. Caroline Y. Robertson-von Trotha

– original speech held in German; check against delivery –

Introduction

Ladies and gentlemen, dear friends of ZAK and of the Karlsruhe Dialogues, dear Mr. Mayor, dear Dr. Mentrup, dear President Professor Hanselka.

Once again I warmly greet all those who have already been greeted.

Moreover, I greet the members of our Board of Trustees: Professors Hartmut Lüdtke, Peter Weibel and Marion Weissenberger-Eibl. It's a particular pleasure for me to have Professor Olaf Schwencke here as guest, with whom I worked together very closely during the first years of the Karlsruhe Dialogues.

A special welcome to our opening keynote speaker Professor Timothy Snyder. Dear Mr. Snyder, in your opening keynote speech you will powerfully highlight and explain to us the following: without robust and reliable constitutional frameworks, democracy and freedom cannot succeed. Here in Karlsruhe, the city that is the home of Germany's highest court, we understand this. But do we do enough to promote this? From the essential value of freedom of opinion, freedom of science and the arts through to democratic disputes about strategic goals and priorities – all this depends on the perception and appreciation of a normative constitutional framework, which is now coming under pressure. If we lose sight of international and transnational correlations and of developments in the major geopolitical arena, then we risk not recognising erosions of democracy in our own environment early enough.

*Die große Regression*¹ – The Great Regression – is the title of a book published in 2017. It addresses the international debate about the current intellectual and spiritual situation and it renders visible many of the key problems of our time – including many themes that are familiar to us from previous Karlsruhe Dialogues. It cites 'democracy fatigue' or the widespread discontent with formal democracy (Arjun Appadurai) – even the possibility of our civilisation sliding back to a lower level which one thought mankind would not fall back into again. From climate change to the predicted developments and consequences of artificial intelligence; from asymmetrical regional developments to north-south and south-north expectations and perspectives; from security issues to the growing gulf between rich and poor: the society of responsibility sees itself increasingly confronted with unusually complex and simultaneously arising challenges. Challenges that make clear to us the dangers of individual and systemic overload.

What elements of this are hysteria or even intentional fear-mongering? When does equanimity lead to a sense of resignation? When do trust or distrust themselves become a problem? A lack of knowledge about key societal themes and developments is, at the least, negligent with respect to

¹ Heinrich Geiselberger (Hrsg.): *Die große Regression. Eine internationale Debatte über die geistige Situation der Zeit*, Berlin 2017.

decision-making in a democracy. The current debate about the 40-micrograms level of nitrogen dioxide is an instructive example of this. But on the other hand, the aim of individually keeping oneself out of everything, not risking any trouble or even a shitstorm, not clearly and boldly adopting a standpoint, is an ineffectual attempt to avoid taking any responsibility.

With justification one can and must raise the objection: doing this is far from easy when you consider the endless, contradictory developments. Here we might possibly recognise deeper discrepancies: between newer forms and aspirations of civic engagement, the institutional organisation of civic community spirit, and finally a voluntary, self-imposed obligation to take on responsibility.

In the final report on a multi-year research project by the Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities in Essen, the changes in attitude toward the operational principles of freedom and responsibility were remarked upon as early as 2007. One conclusion: the importance of a close interrelationship between freedom and responsibility, due to the diverse transformative processes of globalisation, was being perceived less and less in Western society over the course of time.

Even back at the end of the 1990s, frequent discussions were being held about the possible positive and negative effects of globalisation. On the one hand, people pointed to the advantages of a free global economy, the utopia of an approaching world society. On the other hand, the loss of taxation possibilities was becoming ever clearer, as well as the dominance of capital, the increasing inequality in distribution of power, the expected growing gulf between winners and losers. This raises the question of whether we could have taken better precautionary measures? Would it have been easier to recognise intended and unintended effects? And finally, how can one actually define questions of responsibility in large and complex processes of transformation?

Ladies and gentlemen, in response to this let me say a few words about the concept of responsibility. There have been many attempts at a serviceable definition of the principle of responsibility. I'll just remind you of Max Weber's fundamental distinction between axioms of action based on an ethic of ultimate ends or on an ethic of responsibility. These are ideal types that cannot always be clearly distinguished in complex systems. Something that Max Weber himself was aware of. For our topic of responsibility in times of globalization, however, we can build on the ethic of responsibility as principle and at the same time point to the permanent problem of accountability.

Decisions are almost always made under conditions where the consequences can be imperfectly predicted. Of course, this also applies to information about attitudes, intentions, interests and power maxims. In globalised times, therefore, we are at least latently in a constant state of overload. Responding better to this situation is one of the biggest challenges for our society's development and cohesion.

For the scientific and academic world this means, besides the core task of producing new scientific knowledge, the constant examination of previous knowledge that had been regarded as secure in the sense of Karl Popper. This is why we need to develop scientifically underpinned future scenarios. Unforeseen and thus unintended effects, for instance resulting from the use of big data technologies, need to be analysed and possibly re-evaluated. One hugely important issue here is the exchange between disciplines and specialist circles, and between science and society. The challenge remains: knowledge is becoming ever more specialised – and this is indeed something we need. Precisely for this reason, it is the responsibility of the universities to ensure the complementarity of all this highly specialised and contextual knowledge. So General Studies for all! – An offer that we have consistently expanded.

Taking on responsibility and corporate social responsibility also poses major problems for the business sector. We are currently seeing this in the automotive and energy sectors. Even before Brexit, which we may well now be facing, we have discovered how closely intermeshed the dependencies in the logistical supply chains are, and how these interdependencies can have barely controllable

local social impacts. Moreover, the question of whether the international organisation and division of work makes sense, is effective and equitable is also related to fundamental ethical issues: from migration dynamics to the exploitation of resources, from brain drain to the sustainability debate, from start-ups to innovation risks and the resulting consequences for our pluralistic culture.

All of us, the community of citizens, often find it far from easy to form qualified judgments and to act responsibly. Which interest-driven constellations are currently changing our globalised playing field? Where are decisions being taken that change our daily shared lives directly or indirectly, and above all in a subtle, creeping manner? How can transparency be created in complex systems? In times of fake news and manipulated networks, what information is trustworthy? What social and cultural group dynamics are changing our communities, and how do things stand with the cohesion of our societies? In recent years we have seen how deep-seated polarisation in many societies is playing an increasingly important role.

Discourse is not sufficient to bring about changes, or indeed to prevent them if necessary. Majorities that do not articulate themselves, or remain predominantly silent, are – as we know from history – often much more dangerous. We need to keep in mind the images of the Night of Broken Glass, the November 1938 pogroms, especially now that we are experiencing a resurgence of anti-Semitism.

We are even seeing certain quarters calling for denunciation. Sometimes from outside Germany, by manipulating and instrumentalising parts of the diaspora communities (Erdogan and Putin are quite good at using this method). Or in our own pluralistic society where elements of a democratically elected party, as is the case with the AfD, attempt to use so-called “neutrality portals” to encourage students and parents to denounce teachers who express negative attitudes toward the party. This involves tactics of induced insecurity and intimidation, also dangerous because they are difficult to prosecute on legal grounds.

Opposition and dissent are key elements in our society of responsibility, now being challenged in a new way by the social media. It is hard work to act on one’s own responsibility in a qualified, differentiated, reflected and sustainable manner! Particularly here in Germany, where such action is possible, it is our responsibility to take our time and think in a mode that transcends daily life, considering how we want to live in the present and in the foreseeable future. In such moments, giving regard to other cultures and regions and looking back on our own history can give us an orientation framework and enable a careful look ahead.

In view of the wide range of real and, as we say in science, evidence-based issues, in our open society we should more openly and competently discuss necessary changes, adjustments and precautions. This is all the more urgent considering the need to oppose populists and demagogues who present a supposed new order, achieved under a regimen of local actions, as a simple solution to many – even global – problems. ‘Taking back control’, closely intertwined with the growing ‘nation-first rhetoric’, obviously seem to be seductive slogans.

The highly diverse globalisation processes are unstoppable. If we are to guide citizens who are beset by feelings of insecurity, then we need to rethink the role of national sovereignty and its integration into larger units. But then, more than ever before, this requires people who understand this as part of their personal existence, their community involvement and their individual responsibility – and who will act accordingly. This has always been something to which the Karlsruhe Dialogues wished to contribute.

With today's opening evening, tomorrow's intensive public science symposium and the ARTE Film Night, with the panel discussion on Sunday, the lecture and the play in the Badisches Staatstheater (State Theatre of Baden), we will turn the spotlight on very different aspects of the society of responsibility. By means of the subjects and disciplines, the cultures and the methodological approaches to the subject, we aim in the customary manner to offer something useful to as many people as

possible, something that is otherwise not to be found in these tried-and-tested contexts. This includes alternative perspectives, intellectual claims, emotional expectations, artistic explications and, this too is important: points of view that are not always certain of majority support. I am very happy that this is once again possible in 2019!

I am also happy that Professor Marlis Prinzing will be introducing the new charter “Communication Studies as Public Science in the Digital Media Society” at this year’s Karlsruhe Dialogues. This builds on the concept of public science introduced at the first Karlsruhe Dialogues.

Acknowledgements

Dear audience, ladies and gentlemen, there are many here this evening whom I have to thank. Long-time supporters and cooperation partners who made the Karlsruhe Dialogues and their interlinked elements possible in the first place. Thank you to Lord Mayor Dr. Frank Mentrup for the long-term support of the city. I would like to thank Thomas Schmid, who with ARTE Germany has been a reliable partner to us for many years, working intensively and with great competence. The Badisches Staatstheater (State Theatre of Baden) has supported us for 23 years. My very great thanks go to Johannes Graf-Hauber on behalf of the Badisches Staatstheater. For the fourth time our regional newspaper, Badische Neueste Nachrichten, has produced a special supplement for the Karlsruhe Dialogues. I would like to thank Mr. Udo Kamilli and especially Holger Keller for the fantastic editorial support. This supplement is much, much more than a vehicle for advertising. In the sense of public science, it enables an in-depth exchange of different positions on the respective topic.

All this would not have been possible without the support of two banking houses. Twenty-three years ago Dietmar Sauer, at that time chairman of L-Bank (development bank of the German federal state of Baden-Württemberg), made a decisive contribution to facilitating the Karlsruhe Dialogues by setting up an endowed guest professorship. Back then in the Garden Hall of Karlsruhe Palace, we were really happy if the audience didn’t fall below our ‘target level’ of 50 guests. Since last year L-Bank has once again been of great assistance to us. I greet Ms Cordula Bräuninger and Dr. Benjamin Quinten as representatives of the team at the bank and say thank you! In all the intervening years, Sparda Bank Baden-Württemberg has supported us with great reliability and generosity, while never linking this commitment to any conditions. I thank the KIT for the unusual privilege of being able to host the Karlsruhe Dialogues for 23 years, and also for the complete creative freedom that I have been granted in this task. During this time, I have always been able to rely on the ZAK team, and this year I would especially single out the superb reliability and experience of Christine Melcher, and in public relations also Anna Moosmueller.

Finally, I would like to say to you all: We have always produced the Karlsruhe Dialogues with great pleasure. Without you – our wonderful and loyal audience – all this would not have been possible. Thank you very much indeed, merci!