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German-American exchange on the responsibility of universities and science towards democracy

The political responsibility of universities and science towards democratic culture was the focus of a transatlantic online symposium jointly hosted last week by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation), the German Rectors' Conference and Thomas Mann House. The event is intended to be a prelude to deepen German-American exchange on the supporting role of universities in democratic systems.

There has been a noticeable shift in political culture in the United States and Germany in recent years. An upsurge in illiberal populism and growing scepticism towards democratic values and institutions in some layers of society mean that governments are being confronted with a gradual loss of trust. At the same time extreme movements are gaining ground. In connection with the COVID-19 pandemic, these trends have also opened up a discussion about the political responsibility of universities and science. What is the purpose of universities in the current political situation? What is the role of science in democratic systems? These questions were the subject of the virtual symposium, which followed on from a related event jointly hosted by Thomas Mann House, the DFG and the HRK at Thomas Mann House in Los Angeles in August 2019.

The American Academy of Arts and Sciences could be acquired as an additional partner for the current event. In June 2020, the American Academy published the report 'Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century.' This high-profile statement on possibilities for reforming US democracy involving society as a whole, including universities, was the starting point for the symposium's discussions.

The writer Thomas Mann was forced to witness German universities and science being willingly appropriated for undemocratic purposes during the National Socialist era, and he eventually went from being an 'apolitical' observer to an 'itinerant spokesperson for democracy.' Together with other intellectuals, Mann eloquently spoke out against the totalitarian regime while living in exile in the United States. As a residence of the Federal Republic of Germany, Thomas Mann House in Los Angeles is now a place of transatlantic debate.

HRK President Professor Dr Peter-André Alt remarked on the symposium today in Berlin: "Democracy is the foundation of our universities. The freedom of research and teaching is inconceivable without it. As places of open debate and autonomous science, universities in turn strengthen democracy."

Professor Dr Julika Griem, Vice-President of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation), said the following in Bonn: "Defending knowledge-driven research against the notion that the mission of science is an immediate "return on investment" is becoming increasingly difficult in the U.S. as well as in Germany. Nevertheless, it would not be sufficient to only consider a transatlantic perspective. Attacks on research freedom and the dismantling of democracy take place worldwide and are a global problem."

Steven D. Lavine, President Emeritus of the California Institute of the Arts and Chairman of the American Advisory Board of Thomas Mann House in Los Angeles, said the following: "Liberal democracy and the American university grew up side by side and depend on shared values. Faced with democratic regression in the United States, Europe and around the globe, it is vital to explore and to encourage the role of the university in restoring faith in and the functioning of democratic government."

Professor David W. Oxtoby, President of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, made the following remarks in Cambridge, Massachusetts: "The American Academy of Arts & Sciences is committed to collaborating with organizations around the world that share a commitment to effecting positive change and supporting democratic values. As part of our work to advance the recommendations in *Our Common Purpose*, we are proud to partner with three renowned German organizations to reflect on how higher education can advance democratic principles and foster engaged citizenship."

The following people will be available for discussions with the press: Professor Dr Peter-André Alt (President, German Rectors' Conference), Professor Dr Julika Griem (Vice-President, Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation)), Professor Steven D. Lavine (Chairman of the Advisory Board, Thomas Mann House, Los Angeles) and Professor David W. Oxtoby (President, American Academy of Arts and Sciences).