

From talk of the town to global dialogue

**Speech by Horst Köhler, former German Federal President,
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I. Phantom Pain

Can something that does not even exist cause a feeling of pain? Yes – and doctors call this sensation “phantom pain”. Can something that may never have existed also cause a feeling of pain? Probably. There may never have been a dialogue of cultures in the way I would like, but I have often found it to be painfully lacking.

In my work as State Secretary in the Ministry of Finance, President of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund and as President of the Federal Republic of Germany, I was a kind of world traveller in international cooperation and sustainable development. I took part in innumerable projects, strategies, conflicts and negotiations, and constantly reflected on the reasons for their success or failure. Over the years, I learned that success was due to something more than just those factors which can be enumerated and measured. The mentality of those involved also played a crucial role, as did the way they treated each other, their local traditions, preconceptions and ways of life. I discovered there were no ready-made solutions and certainly no fast-track solutions – what was a proven success in one part of the world, in one cultural environment, might be totally inappropriate in another, and fail entirely. To take just one example, although an irrigation system of concrete pipes in one country might be the ‘non plus ultra’, it could destroy local communities in another country where solidarity was forged through the task of *jointly* maintaining irrigation canals – even though, from a modern perspective, these canals may seem very basic.

More than once, I sat at a conference table with people from different cultural spheres and thought – Actually, we should first spend several days talking about our lives, first tell each other about what we believe we know and our hopes, experiences and aspirations, about the things we are proud of, and the things that upset us. And only then should we actually start negotiations. Perhaps over the years this idea itself did play a part in helping to improve the way I conducted negotiations and the course of the ensuing discussions. Yet nonetheless, a faint phantom pain was always present.

The Humboldt Forum in the Berlin Palace also owes its existence to a phantom pain. Everyone who had Berlin’s interests at heart found it painful to have an architectural and conceptual void at the heart of the city centre. It certainly could not stay the way it was. And it should and could never again be the way it once had been. The Federal Parliament resolved

to give back the Berlin Palace to the city and, through the Humboldt Forum, to endow this architectural form with new meaning and life. I am both hopeful and confident that the days of our phantom pain are numbered.

II. Ice-breaker

In Germany, everyone knows the *Alexander von Humboldt* sailing ship – the impressive ship with green sails which has appeared for many years in a German TV advert for beer. I was once a guest on board the ship – though without advertising for beer! But I also know of a second *Alexander von Humboldt* – a virtual ship which functions as an ice-breaker.

I discovered this by chance when I was in South America as the Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund – the IMF. In that part of the world, “Working for the Yankee Dollar” is more than just a line from a song by the Andrew Sisters – a song, incidentally, which did not exactly evince great cultural sensitivity. South America has often enough found the “Yankee Dollar” as much as a curse as a blessing. When I held talks as the representative of the Washington-based International Monetary Fund, the atmosphere was sometimes icy. In many cases, not only could I offer the desired support only in exchange for a programme of uncomfortable reforms, but I found the IMF had also gained a reputation as having a patronising know-it-all attitude. However, when I once happened to mention that Alexander von Humboldt also travelled across South America, describing its beauty, flora and fauna, as well as the customs and habits of its peoples, and recording his various adventures here – suddenly the ice was broken. Humboldt took a profound interest in these South American homelands and peoples, approaching them without preconceptions, trying to understand them without seeking to dominate or exploit them. And I discovered that anyone who knew about Humboldt and recalled his voyages, and even came from Humboldt’s home town, was no longer just viewed as most likely some cold financial technocrat. Instead, such a person was seen as quite possibly offering more than just demands and restrictions, and was someone to be listened to with an open mind. So the atmosphere at our negotiations at least reached room temperature, and I was very grateful for this virtual ice-breaker. Moreover, this also gave me an insight into how close Humboldt must have come to the ideal of the world’s cultures mutually respecting one another, and learning from and with each other.

III. Thirst

Sailors know that thirst is worse than homesickness. Evidently, the same applies to a thirst for knowledge – and that thirst proved to be a major driving force in both the Humboldt brothers throughout their lives. In Alexander’s case, his thirst for knowledge even led to the opposite of homesickness – a yearning for distant lands. His wanderlust, though, had nothing to do with tourism. Instead, it was motivated by his scholarly interests and, above all, an interest in the *connection* between phenomena and the forces behind them. In his research, he *connected* disciplines at a time when academic subjects started to want to *separate*. He was also one of the last scholars attempting to present, in his multi-volume work entitled “Cosmos”, an overall view of the Earth and the universe written by *one* person. Today, such an overview is at least as desirable as it was then, though with the difference that now it is only possible as an

interdisciplinary and *transdisciplinary* achievement. This is why all the sciences and areas of scholarship participating at the Humboldt Forum ought to strive to bring together cultural phenomena and connections rather than separate them, and aim to build bridges between disciplines, experts and non-professionals, researchers and the general public. These are all the things I hope for.

On his journeys, Alexander von Humboldt regarded peoples and cultures as part of the natural world. Today, in contrast, the dialectic of relationships between people, nature and culture is not usually given the attention it deserves. Travelling across the New World, Alexander von Humboldt also engaged just as profoundly with the historical, social, and political developments there as with its specific geographical, biological and physical features. In this process, Humboldt also did not shrink from value judgements as is evident, for example, in his critique of slavery and his sympathy for liberating Latin America from colonialism. But he did not only criticise; he also sought to promote improvements, ranging from social reforms for miners in Franconia, southern Germany, to his support for Jewish civic emancipation in Germany, and his successful advocacy of Prussia enacting a law on the British model to immediately free any slave entering its territories. These too are all good reasons for naming the Forum after the Humboldt brothers. The dialogue of cultures must strive to be open and free from preconceptions. First and foremost, such a dialogue lives from an unbiased listening to one another, and looking at things more closely. But in my view, this dialogue also ultimately involves taking a stance on those traditions which should help shape the future of humankind – and those which rather should not.

IV. Tupi

Tupi, Lule and Massachusetts – they sound like answers in crossword puzzles. In fact, they are three extinct languages researched by Wilhelm von Humboldt – illustrating how even his thirst for knowledge was holistic in character. He was convinced that a people’s “intellectual distinctiveness” and their language configuration are intimately connected. In other words, in his opinion, all cultures ultimately testify to the diversity of languages, and this diversity itself expresses a universal human spirit in its infinite power of inventiveness.

Diversity from equality – and this is more than just a pleasant idea. If we really take this underlying notion of equality seriously, then fostering diversity becomes a necessity. Moreover, when cultures are essentially just as equal as the people and the languages they have produced, this becomes yet another argument for striving to create a global order where all living cultures can survive, learn and develop. At the same time, each culture also has to face the question of how far it is aligned with sustainability, and whether it is not actually consuming its own material and intellectual foundation – and possibly those of other cultures as well. These could be fascinating topics at the Humboldt Forum, though they may prove to be somewhat controversial at times. Yet when it comes to Wilhelm von Humboldt and his philosophy of language, I cannot imagine any better venue for a dialogue of cultures than Berlin. This is, after all, a city that also hosts, for example, wonderful sound archives – and in this area, I could well imagine a vibrant cooperation with such institutes as the *École du*

Patrimoine Africain in Benin, which collects, preserves and researches into African languages and dialects to gain a better insight into the roots of African cultural identity. It would be wonderful to experience how, here in Berlin, cultures could say to one another Socrates' words: "Speak, so that I may see you".

V. *Comprehendere*

The Rheinaue Leisure Park in Bonn has a Garden for the Blind. There, visitors can learn about the garden's plants and features from information panels in braille. The garden also contains a sculpture illustrating the human cognitive process. It shows a group of blind people clustered around an elephant – one of them is holding the elephant's trunk, another is gripping the elephant's leg, and yet another is tentatively touching the elephant's ear. Each of them will arrive at very different conclusions about the animal in front of them. Is it shaped like a snake? Or like a column? Or rather like a sail? Each of them knows something about reality, but only about one part of it. Ideally, they would talk to each other, explaining what they have discovered, feeling their way through their impressions, and comparing their insights. In this way, they would finally come closest to what we call truth.

Is humankind on the way there? I strongly believe so. Today, everyone can realise that we are not living in splendid isolation behind the borders marking off our part of the world. Instead, we are all living together in *one* world, in one indivisible ecosphere. We find different aspects of that ecosphere on the different continents, yet it forms one connected totality where each part can be influenced by any other – and we can be influenced with them. Moreover, we are living in a world where the Anthropocene era has dawned, the era when human beings are transforming the Earth in its entirety. Will this really be a new geological age, or just an episode? The answer does not lie in the hands of any single individual – but all of us, together. In Latin and the Latinate languages, the word for understanding derives from *comprehendere*, to take together. For humankind, this is true in two ways. We have to try to grasp the world as a *totality* to understand it, and avoid splitting it into individual elements; and, secondly, we have to try and grasp it *together*. After all, if only *some* countries and cultures recognise the right approach and put it into practice, it will most likely not be enough to secure a good future for *all* – and may not even be enough just for the "few".

All the world's cultures have developed from an attempt to understand, interpret and shape the world as a whole, and the place of people in it. Every culture is a centre for "interpretations of the world". Europe was always only one of these centres among many, even if in places it was particularly self-referential. Cultures may well tend naturally to regard themselves as more intelligent, richer and closer to god than others. Ideally, they ought to learn to see themselves as searchers together. For this reason, the multipolarity of our experience and interpretation of the world ought to be visible at the Humboldt Forum. In that process, we may well be in for the one or other surprise. Just to offer an example in lay terms – take the cargo cults in Melanesia which believed that one simply needed to construct mock-Second World War runways and planes from sand and straw, and put on a wooden model of air traffic controller headphones to bring Allied commodity goods raining down again from the skies. Yet even the cargo cults interpreted the world, hoping their symbolic redirection activities would lead to an

abundance of consumer goods, the return of their ancestral gods, and a good life. But – are not western industrial countries also followers of a cargo cult, expecting the continual money printing and growth of production to lead to salvation in the shape of consumption?

Be that as it may, all cultures deserve to have their responses to the world studied and compared; and all cultures are well-advised to look at other cultures as well. The Humboldt Forum in Berlin must aspire to become a place where cultures can exchange their own knowledge of the world and that of others; a place where cultures can understand how they became what they are, and what achievements they can build on together to protect and improve the world. In that sense, the Humboldt Forum could resemble a global common good – a store of saved and preserved cultural heritage, a heritage of humankind safeguarded for all and now open to all, expanding through the interest, research and dialogue of all. The Forum needs to offer a thousand opportunities to get to know each other better, and acquire the practice of peaceful and productive coexistence. For example, I have great hopes of a domination-free dialogue on how different cultures deal with such public goods as water, pastureland and legal certainty. And this may then open up new points of access to the question of how they can *jointly* preserve and increase such *global* public goods as the climate, biodiversity, drinking water, human rights and peace. *Comprehendere* can also mean tackling something together.

VI. Schloss Kurzweil – “Palace Liveliness”

When the Humboldt brothers were still young boys, the family lived in Berlin. On Sundays, they rode out to the family manor house near Tegel. Alexander called the house *Schloss Langweil* – “Palace Boredom”. One wish I have for the Humboldt Forum is that it should rather be known as “Palace Liveliness”!

In other words, the aim should not be museumification in the negative, outdated sense. Nor should cultural goods be aestheticized since, after all, these artefacts were not utilized and venerated for their decorative qualities, but were decorated because of their use and veneration. The Humboldt Forum must aspire to present cultures in as lively a way as possible, and show these cultures to be alive, since culture itself is life. The presentation ought to draw “Ahs” and “Ohs” from an enthralled audience, since emotions are an aid to learning, and amazement is the root of all abstract curiosity. I am not a specialist for issues in museum education, but here I feel like the English Lord Justice with the elephant (to return to this subject once again) who supposedly said: I cannot describe an elephant, but I know when one is in the room. I feel very much the same about displays and presentations - and believe me, I have experienced quite a few, simply because so many state and working visits come with a “cultural programme” tending to lead guests through exhibitions and sights. So although I cannot describe how to bring to life distant, old, foreign and familiar cultures – I would know only too well if it has been done successfully. And that is just the kind of success I would also like to see at the Humboldt Forum.

VII. Global Dialogue

For many years, the talk of the town in Berlin was whether to reconstruct the City Palace in the old heart of the city in its entirety or just partially recreate its historical façade, and how the new building should be used. This debate went on for so long and was so intensive that some voices half-jokingly suggested that it was no longer necessary to rebuild the City Palace at all, since the debate had taken the place of the building. Yet this was a serious debate on a major local issue. Although the subject also attracted attention beyond the city's borders, it primarily remained a matter for Germany's capital city, the federal state of Berlin, the Federal Government agencies located here, and the cultural affairs correspondents in Berlin's newspapers. In itself, that is no small thing – after all, as the French so rightly say, a small tiger is also a tiger.

But the time for this Berlin debate is over – and that's a good thing. Now, the aim should be to start a global dialogue, and Berlin should provide a resource and stage for cultural cooperation. I am sure this will result in an unprecedented increase in the vibrant dynamism of this city, and of Germany. I am sure this will offer an ideal counterweight to an access to the world primarily seeking to acquire power, money and influence – a temptation Berlin did indeed succumb to between the Berlin Conference (or: Congo Conference) in 1884/85 and liberation from National Socialism in 1945. Now, the heart of Berlin can produce a new well of inspiration, generating a stream of messages, impressions and insights. Here, treasures will be displayed which hold out the promise, through scholarly research, of new and undreamt-of insights into how people live and which place in the world is good for them. Here, our thirst for knowledge will be stimulated, and that encrusted ice, which has proved an obstacle to open dialogue and joint learning, can be broken open. Here, ideas and images will be circulated in the lively way needed in this global era to keep pace inwardly with this globality, yet not to become giddy its swirling vortex, but retain a firm grip on reality. After all, whether we like it or not, we have all been shaped by intercultural influences for a long time – a process that simply emerges everywhere with capitalism. However, there is a need for an intentional, considered, learning interculturality to catch up. Global added-value chains and global brand names with considerable recognition value have long existed the world over, but we are still lacking the global awareness of the value of cultures, their diversity and the shared global tasks they are facing – and such intellectual added-value chains are only just being created. The work in this area will change all those involved, yet as Mahatma Gandhi so rightly said: “No culture can live if it attempts to be exclusive”. We need the dialogue of cultures for a global transformation towards sustainability and to realise human rights for all – and without these, the Anthropocene era will be a destructive episode. We need a global dialogue of cultures to fill international relations with a spirit of *partnership*, since without partnership there can be no positive global development.

Over the last year, I was involved in an international working group appointed by the United Nations Secretary-General. Our remit was to propose bold and yet practical positive goals for

the world's development (Post-2015 Agenda). During our discussions, we became only too aware that “business as usual” is no longer enough. Instead, we need a paradigm shift in international politics. In our view, this entails a new spirit of solidarity, cooperation for mutual benefit, and mutual accountability. We have described this new spirit or new guideline in international politics as a “global partnership”. This is the logical consequence – the consequence *materially*, from all countries depending on the preservation of our ecosphere; *legally*, from the universal validity of human rights; *ethically*, from the global recognition of the Golden Rule of not treating others in a way one would not like to be treated oneself; and *culturally*, from the insight that the diversity of cultural expression itself expresses the unity of humanity and humankind. We could have also reasoned for all of this in the words of Wilhelm von Humboldt, which his brother Alexander approvingly repeated in his *Cosmos*: "If we would indicate an idea which, throughout the whole course of history, has ever more and more widely extended its empire, or which, more than any other, testifies to the much-contested and still more decidedly misunderstood perfectibility of the whole human race, it is that of establishing our common humanity — of striving to remove the barriers which prejudice and limited views of every kind have erected among men, and to treat all mankind, without reference to religion, nation, or colour, as one fraternity, one great community, fitted for the attainment of one object, the unrestrained development of the physical powers. This is the ultimate and highest aim of society, identical with the direction implanted by nature in the mind of man toward the indefinite extension of his existence." In these words, the Humboldt brothers describe the core idea of the *epochal transformation* which is necessary and viable to provide a fruitful future for everyone in the twenty-first century.

If I say that I hope the Humboldt Forum will contribute significantly to creating such a new and holistically human awareness, am I loading it with excessive expectations? Not in my view. I believe that Berlin can develop a third means of transport to join the ship with the green sails and my virtual icebreaker – a vehicle where culture can help to set the sails with the wonderful and inspiring insight that “we are all in the same boat”!