



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at a dinner for members of the Order Pour le Mérite
for Sciences and the Arts
at Schloss Bellevue on 9 June 2024**

All of you have spent a large part of today at the Konzerthaus Berlin on the Gendarmenmarkt, at the annual spring meeting of the Order Pour le Mérite. What is more, it is traditional for the Federal President as Protector of the Order to attend this meeting, and indeed it has not often happened that the Protector's chair has remained empty.

Today, however, such a rare case has come to pass – against, unfortunately, a serious and sad backdrop. I came back from Mannheim only on Friday, following meetings with the families of the murdered police officer and a memorial ceremony; last Sunday, I attended a major event in Kassel in memory of the murdered politician Walter Lübcke; and now I have returned from Cologne one hour ago, where I was at a ceremony to remember the victims of a right-wing extremist attack in Keupstraße. It is already 20 years since that attack happened. In the middle of a shopping street with many Turkish shops, a nail bomb was detonated by terrorists from the self-proclaimed "National Socialist Underground" outside a hairdresser. Twenty-two people were wounded at the time, many of them seriously. All of them, and also their loved ones and neighbours, and that was apparent from our discussions today, are suffering from the consequences of the attack to this day – just like, of course, all those who mourn the ten people murdered by the NSU terrorists throughout Germany.

It was right, or indeed it was necessary, to be in Cologne today, not only to express sympathy for the victims of the attack and the relatives of the victims; and also not only to show the inhabitants of the district that they are not alone in their grief and their pain; but also to send a message, especially in these times, that we must stand up to the increasing brutality of the political tone in our country, that we must never under any circumstances get used to violence in the political debate. I firmly believe that violence destroys democracy. And that is why we must, especially on such occasions, at such ceremonies of remembrance and commemoration, try to say clearly that we must

condemn violence, regardless of the political motivation behind it – whether we are talking about right-wing or left-wing extremism or religious fundamentalism, at the end of the day, it does not matter. If violence dominates the political debate, then democracy will degenerate.

It is only necessary to start by saying this because my two appointments today could hardly have been any more different: remembering inhumane terror earlier on and now paying tribute to the sciences and arts. And this is – if you will allow me to put it somewhat melodramatically – the stark contrast between violence and culture, between barbarism and civilisation, that has been a hallmark of my day today.

It is, of course, only a coincidence that the memorial ceremony in the early afternoon today and this dinner are taking place on one and the same day. But I believe nonetheless that this coincidence tells us something perhaps fundamentally important about our age. After all, we are able to observe the simultaneity, the coexistence, and perhaps even the juxtaposition between destructive violence and creative culture in many places, and not only in Germany.

Unsettling outbreaks of violence are becoming a defining feature of our present day right now. And I am not just thinking of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, not only of Hamas' terrorist attack against Israel and not only of the war in the Middle East. Rather, I am also thinking of right-wing extremist or Islamist-motivated terror. I am thinking of the almost daily violence that permeates our society, in the digital domain in any case, and also, to an increasing extent, on the streets and squares of our towns and cities. And I am thinking of insults and abuse, of physical attacks on those who think differently, who believe differently, who live differently, but increasingly also on representatives of the democratic state, but – and I hope you have not experienced this yourself – also attacks on science and culture. In a nutshell, attacks on all those who embody and defend what we call civilisation.

The fascination with violence, the desire to throw inhibitions to the winds and to cross red lines, which we are observing in so many places around the world today – all of this sometimes seems to me almost like a rebellion against the civilising principle that there are any rules whatsoever for our coexistence. This almost omnipresent violence right now is once again making us keenly aware that civilisation, as Bärbel Bohley put it long ago, is a thin skin that can tear at any time.

And once again, we are faced with the big question as to how we can protect and nurture this thin skin and what we can do to preserve and strengthen civilisation. Enforcing the prohibition of the use of force and bringing perpetrators of violence to justice is a task for our constitutional democracy. But that alone, as you all know, is not enough.

I say this here because I firmly believe that it is not least the sciences and arts that lay the groundwork for civilisation to grow and flourish.

You just passed the Salon Voltaire on the ground floor on your way here. The salon has not been there for a long time. I had this room rededicated and renamed almost three years ago in order to flag up the Age of Enlightenment, including the Prussian Enlightenment, also at the Federal President's official residence. For the past few weeks now, we have been exhibiting a precious manuscript penned by Immanuel Kant, whose 300th birthday we have just celebrated. On display are the first pages of his essay "Toward Perpetual Peace", in which Kant, as you know, formulated a central goal, namely that the constitution of every state should be republican¹ and that states should join together to form a global federal union².

Even if we are not aware of this every day, the European Union comes closest to this ideal – as a joint project of European democratic countries that has safeguarded peace and growing prosperity for millions of people for a number of generations now. And even if this EU is certainly not perfect – the closer you come into contact with it, the more you realise this – even if we know that it needs to be developed further, we must not allow it to die, and President Macron made a very, very strong case for this during his most recent state visit to Germany. We will find out later on this evening, when all the polling stations across Europe have closed and we know the results, whether the hope that voters will decide in favour of a Europe of peace, freedom and democracy by a majority today has been fulfilled.

Today, we are, at any rate, further away from a global peace order of the kind envisioned by Kant than most of us, myself included, could have imagined after the end of the Cold War. But especially now, in times of war, we must not lose sight of great guiding principles such as those expressed by Kant. A world order that effectively outlaws war, that protects universal human rights, an international community that drives forward the fight against the climate crisis with resolve – this must remain our goal, in spite of the difficulties. This must remain our goal if people, flora and fauna are to have a future on this planet.

If we want to preserve civilisation and help shape a more peaceful, just and better future, then we should also keep on turning our attention to the famous Kantian questions: what can I know? What ought I to do? For what may I hope? What is the human being?³ And it is you, the sciences and the arts, in particular, on whom the hope for viable answers to these questions is founded. It is you, all of you together, who remind us what humans are capable of – and what is needed to ensure

¹ source: <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/50922/pg50922-images.html>

² source: <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/50922/pg50922-images.html>

³ source: <https://maylynno.wordpress.com/2020/05/30/the-four-questions-of-kant-and-their-eventual-answers-today/#:~:text=The%20questions%20are%20the%20following,What%20may%20I%20hope%20for%3F>

harmonious coexistence. It is you who help us to see the world through different eyes, who teach us the value of empathy and show us that we all need each other.

It is also you, however, who lay bare the contradictory relationship between humans and nature – and furnish us with ideas and solutions for living in a more climate-friendly way. It is you who make us think, encourage us to change course – and get us to stand up to hatred, injustice and violence. And it is you who get different people talking to each other, in our society and beyond.

And, last but not least, and I want to say this without exaggerating: it is you, the sciences and the arts, whose work provides support and encouragement. And this is also because you keep on reminding us what Kant said: "From such crooked wood as that which man is made of, nothing straight can be fashioned."⁴ I think this is perhaps one of Kant's most beautiful sentences, because it reminds us that we must always critically examine everything that is human and man-made, including ourselves, and because, at the same time, it releases us from the paralysis of perfectionism and thus encourages us to act.

The two new members of the *Order Pour le Mérite* also stand for the humane power of art and science – in their very own, exceptional way, of course. John Neumeier, Heinrich Detering, we are most delighted to be able to welcome you here this evening – it is great that you are here with us!

Today, with the events that I have described to you briefly, lies behind me and also behind us. In any case, I am looking forward to an exciting dinner with you all, and I promise that I will be back at the next spring conference.

⁴ source: <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/1250366-from-such-crooked-wood-as-that-which-man-is-made>