



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at the conference “The Struggle for Democracy” on the
occasion of the opening of the Thomas Mann House
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Today, I would like to talk about democracy. It is time to do so – also on an occasion like this. It is time to ask ourselves once again the fundamental question of what unites us at heart on both sides of the Atlantic.

In this quest, I would like to talk about a prominent German figure who stands for our democratic ties in a special and indeed ambivalent way.

Thomas Mann was one of the greatest writers in the German language. And yet he was not a born democrat. During his lifetime, he underwent more than one political change of heart. He sought, found, and lost certainties. Commenting in 1958 on Thomas Mann as a political writer, a mere three years after the author’s death, Kurt Sontheimer wrote: “Hardly any other German author was as paradoxical.”

Thomas Mann’s meandering and contradictory path to democracy is in some respects symbolic of our own path to democracy in Germany. “Where I am, there is Germany.” Without making Mann’s self-confident words of defiance from exile our own, we could nevertheless say that Germany ultimately arrived at the place he set out for.

Where did this meandering path start? During the late years of the German Empire, we encounter Thomas Mann as an enlightened monarchist with liberal left-wing leanings. He celebrated freedom of expression; he railed against censorship; he vehemently opposed the bans on performances of Wedekind’s plays; he defended the anarchist Erich Mühsam; he published works in Eduard Bernstein’s social-democratic anthologies; and in his often overlooked second novel “Royal Highness”, he drafted a first vision of a welfare state, albeit a

vision that was still monarchistic, romantic and reminiscent of a fairy tale.

The year 1914 marked a watershed both in Europe and in Mann's political views. The war broke out – and nationalist, authoritarian, and openly racist sentiments broke out in Thomas Mann. "Away, then, with the alien and repulsive slogan, 'democratic'! Never will the mechanical-democratic state of the West be naturalised with us." In later years, these words would cause Thomas Mann to be appalled at himself and to struggle publicly with these earlier views.

During the early years of the Weimar Republic, Thomas Mann awakened from his intoxication with nationalism. In "The Magic Mountain", the enlightened, rational views of Settembrini engage in an imaginary clash with the nationalist, irrational views of Naphta over Hans Castorp's "German soul". But in the reality of the vulnerable Weimar Republic, Mann increasingly recognised the importance of political reason over the appeal of totalitarianism to Germans, who he said "maliciously idolise the irrational". And it was this phase of his political path that led him to the United States. He researched the founding fathers; he read intellectual greats from Emerson to Whitman; and he recognised in the United States a new type of nation in which belonging is defined by commitment to a shared constitution rather than by ethnicity.

The very title of his 1922 lecture, "The German Republic", was an affront to his former followers. The nationalist conservative journal "Das Gewissen" ("The Conscience") commented with the resigned headline, "Mann Overboard". The German right had lost its spokesperson. Thomas Mann became an admirer of the master saddler and German President Friedrich Ebert – a thorn in the flesh of those who viewed democracy with contempt. Looking back, Kurt Sontheimer wrote: "[In the early 1920s,] the German Weimar Republic was a very fragile state. It was much easier and more convenient to criticise it than to defend it." Ladies and gentlemen, in light of current events, I want to say that it is now up to us to make sure it does not become easier once again to defame democracy than to defend it!

But while Mann firmly placed himself on the side of democracy, Germany's road to disaster took its course. "O Germany, thou art undone! And I am mindful of thy hopes." This is how he brought the epic "Doctor Faustus" to a close, writing under the Californian sun. Extensive research has been conducted and much has been written about the Nazi seizure of power, Mann's despair at Germans' susceptibility to fascism, his fury at the Nazis, his hatred of Hitler, and his own and his family's suffering along the road leading to exile, first to Switzerland and eventually to the United States. Many people in this room could lecture on these topics with far greater authority than I can.

However, I would like to draw attention to one point. It seems to have been only in the United States that Thomas Mann changed from being a democrat motivated by reason to a democrat by conviction. And all his enthusiasm was focused on a single person: Franklin D. Roosevelt. Frido Mann, you gave us such a wonderfully vivid description of some of your childhood memories – how, at the breakfast table in San Remo Drive, your grandfather spoke with flashing eyes and great, dramatic gestures of the charismatic yet physically depleted President. Thomas Mann, for whom “real democracy [...] can never dispense with aristocratic attributes”, found in F.D.R. the embodiment of democratic authority. He even paid him a literary tribute in the political wisdom and zeal for social reform shown by Joseph the Provider. These sentiments were not lost on the “New York Times”, which entitled its review of this work “A New Deal Man in Egypt”.

Thomas Mann devoted himself to the war effort with Roosevelt and for Roosevelt and gave impassioned speeches denouncing Hitler’s Germany and advocating a vigilant democracy. During lecture tours across the country, he attempted to shake Americans out of their isolationism. He also broadcast a total of 55 now-famous radio addresses from San Remo Drive across the airwaves to his homeland. While Hitler’s war was still raging at its fiercest, he said: “The longer the war lasts, the more desperately the people become enmeshed in a web of guilt.” And yet at the same time, he hoped Germans would enjoy freedom in the future.

To sum up, here in the United States, Thomas Mann experienced the strength and mobilising force of democracy.

However, this was also where he was confronted with threats to democracy and its greatest vulnerabilities.

And this occurred within a short period of time in a way that is perhaps not entirely unfamiliar to us today. Only a few years lay between Roosevelt’s shining example and the descent into a toxic political climate of intolerance and polarisation, prejudices and conspiracy theories, and the state-led erosion of fundamental rights and an independent judiciary. While the Marshall Plan was enabling the ruined Germany to start afresh, economically and morally, in California Thomas Mann found that friends, exiles, artists, intellectuals, his own children Erika, Klaus and Golo, and eventually he himself had become the target of McCarthy’s zealous Communist hunters. Under the heading “Dupes and Fellow Travelers”, “Life Magazine” counted him among the illustrious ranks of suspects ranging from Charlie Chaplin and Leonard Bernstein to Arthur Miller and Albert Einstein. Reporting from Washington, the “Daily News” described Mann as a “literary giant”, but also an unwavering Stalinist whose loyalty had to be called into question. This pressure drove the Mann family to go into exile in

Switzerland for a second time. In early 1953, he noted in his diary: "What is happening is not exactly the *Machtergreifung*, but something very similar." We know how wrong he was in that respect, but it shows the depth of his bitterness and fears for his United States.

Never again would Thomas Mann see San Remo Drive, "that home which I have come to love", as he described it. But even in Switzerland he followed the Congressional elections, which overturned the Republican majority in November 1954. He witnessed the beginning of the end of the hated witch-hunt committee, as he called it, and saw McCarthy's star wane. As Federal President, I am not inclined to speculate. But from what you write in your memoirs, Frido Mann, it is not unrealistic to assume that after all the turbulence in his America, Thomas Mann would undoubtedly have been delighted by the young, electrifying renewal of US democracy that was soon to follow – the election of the 35th President, John F. Kennedy.

He did not live to see it. Thomas Mann died in 1955. Just a few weeks ago I was privileged to visit his grave in Kilchberg with the Swiss Federal President.

When I pay tribute to Thomas Mann today in my role as President of the Federal Republic of Germany, what I primarily learn from his experiences with democracy is humility. I said at the start of my speech that Germany ultimately arrived at the place Thomas Mann set out for. I would add the following. He owed that, and we owe that, to this country, the United States, more than to any other!

We Germans did not inherit democracy. After Germany allowed its first democracy to fail, with such fatal consequences, we relearned it from and with the United States.

The Americans were the first to entrust us with democracy again after 1945. We Germans should be the last to condescendingly give them lessons in democracy today.

I would like to remind all those in Germany who are currently shaking their heads in disgust every day over the end of US democracy, and even doing so with a certain cultural arrogance, of Thomas Mann's crystal clear words: "No, America needs no instruction in the things that concern democracy."

No other democracy in the world has proved to be as resilient and renewable as that of the United States. And that has been the case for 240 years. The democratic turbulence experienced by Thomas Mann was followed by new highs and lows. The proclamation of "the end of history" as the final victory of democracy a good 25 years ago was just as premature as the swan songs to democracy we are hearing today.

No, I am less concerned about the future of US democracy than I am about the future of our transatlantic partnership.

We have not always seen eye to eye. We are not the same and we have different interests. But the damage caused by the current upheavals could be deeper seated and longer lasting – and most importantly, it could be irreparable.

The forces driving us apart do not only have to do with a President Trump. They existed before the current US Administration and they will continue to exist after it.

First of all, Europe, unlike in Mann's day, is no longer the central geopolitical arena. The shift in focus towards Asia, and China in particular, is especially tangible here in California. Demographic changes also play a role. The percentage of Americans who greet us Germans with shining eyes and tell us their great-grandparents came from Palatinate, East Frisia or the Lower Rhine will decline. The dynamics of the global economy are also shifting the economic focus from Europe to other world regions. Isolationism is experiencing a renaissance in the United States – Andrew Jackson's portrait is hanging in the Oval Office again. And the European Union is still mainly preoccupied with itself as a result of its many internal crises.

In Thomas Mann's day, the transatlantic relationship was, so to speak, predestined. But many people no longer see it that way.

At this point in most every speech by an incumbent of high office in Germany, a commitment to transatlantic relations should be made. Despite all the differences of opinion and against all the trends, "we have to revitalise our friendship."

Yes, we do. But I am afraid that this commitment to transatlantic relations is no longer quite so straightforward. It would fall on deaf ears. The transatlantic reflex does not work anymore – incidentally, not just in the White House, or because of the shift in US interests, but also among many Germans.

The debate on how to proceed is thus marked by a wide range of opinions in Germany, too. There are those who say: "Europe must finally stand on its own two feet. America doesn't want to protect us any more and it cannot protect us any longer for the foreseeable future." Others say: "Let's look for new partners. We can protect free trade and the environment better with China than we can with the US Administration." And then there are those who say: "Germany needs to reach out to Russia again."

Dyed-in-the-wool transatlanticists will argue vehemently against all these views. And they may have good reasons. However, their good reasons cannot disguise the fact that this relationship, a constant in the past, cannot be taken for granted in the future, even if we will continue to need it, not least for our security. When the transatlantic reflex no longer works, then reflex responses no longer suffice. We have to find a new basis – one that holds on both sides. Neither

economic interests nor political necessity nor demographic links alone will hold us together in the future. So what will?

Let's forget for one minute everything that has traditionally connected us, everything that welds us together in social or economic terms. Even if we were not linked by necessity we, Germans and Americans, would still be democrats. That is what connects us, undoubtedly more than with any other region in the world, certainly more than with Russia or China. And that is what gives us more of a joint mission than we believed in the last few years.

After all, "throughout the world it has become precarious to take democracy for granted." This statement by – yes, you've guessed it – Thomas Mann is topical again today, 80 years later. It means two things for us in the West. While in the last few years we were overly self-confident in our belief that we had achieved liberal democracy in our own societies once and for all and that this model would gain ground in the rest of the world, we see today that even in our own countries this liberal democracy does not go unchallenged and is certainly not considered to be the measure of all things in the rest of the world.

The future of democracy thus starts with our defending and renewing it in our own countries, and not with our explaining it to others.

Three years ago, while serving as German Foreign Minister, I had the privilege of visiting Martin Luther King's grave in Atlanta with the great John Lewis. We spoke there about King's unfinished work and I asked John where he found the strength to continue it and how he reconciled his dissatisfaction, indeed his anger, with the deeply ingrained injustices in US society with his unshakeable belief in the goodness of the country, in its people and future. John Lewis replied that the constitutional mandate "to form a more perfect union" contains the admission that this democracy is always imperfect. It will always have shortcomings. What matters is movement towards this ideal, not the actual state of affairs. As Thomas Mann wrote in 1938, the crisis in liberal democracy is thus an opportunity for it to "put aside the habit of taking itself for granted, of self-forgetfulness. It should use [...] the fact that it has again become problematical to renew and rejuvenate itself by again becoming aware of itself."

I believe this awareness also means we should define democracy broadly and widen our outlook beyond the day-to-day spectacle of the capitals and the news-feed stories and news-agency reports flooding in every minute. We Germans in particular take an oversimplified view of transatlantic relations when our irritation with tweets from the White House leads us to ignore the deeper social divisions that also exist in our own country – the conflicts in our society of immigration, the downsides of globalisation, the divide between town and country, and

the gap between rich and poor. When we look at that, then we see that the current Administration is not only a root cause, but also a symptom of centrifugal forces in society. And such forces are at play on both sides of the Atlantic.

However, when we widen our view of society, we do not only see things that irritate us – we also perceive the forces of renewal. And they are found in many parts of this country – the students no longer prepared to accept rampant gun violence, the dedicated people breathing new life into Martin Luther King’s Poor People’s Campaign, the countless women standing for political office around the country in greater numbers than ever before. These forces of renewal are the transatlantic future – not mutual outrage.

That is what my visit is about – renewal, not nostalgia. The future of democracy cannot be won without an idea about the democracy of the future. This applies in particular to the technological developments we will be discussing in Silicon Valley. Technological developments test not only the regulatory power of the state, but also human thinking and action.

In the age of robots, algorithms, and artificial intelligence, questions about human autonomy, and thus the foundation of democracy, are raised in a completely new way. To very loosely paraphrase a maxim put forward by Kant during the Enlightenment, technological progress should make it easier for humankind to escape from its self-imposed nonage and not to enter freely into a new nonage. However, new technology can do both – enable and incapacitate. That is why I would like to talk in Silicon Valley about the ethics of digital transformation. These ethics are not primarily about the future of technology, but rather about our own future – as people and as a human society.

All of these issues affecting our future are taking us into uncharted territory and the great unknown. However, I believe there is an irreplaceable human quality that must be preserved, namely reason. Without reason, democracy will not be possible in the future.

“It is a terrible spectacle when irrationalism becomes popular,” Thomas Mann stated in the Library of Congress in 1943. I fear that we are currently witnessing new episodes of this spectacle in the political debate on both sides, in the United States and Europe.

Yes, we can complain about the brutalisation of language, especially on the internet and in social media; we can complain about the longing for absolutes, the temptation of enemy stereotypes and scapegoats, the contempt for objective facts, even for scientific expertise. Such laments were not unknown to Thomas Mann.

But the question is what conclusions we should draw from them. I personally believe that the battle cry against “the Establishment” is

the most dangerous enticement of populism. It is a battle cry that can be used against anyone at will – apart from the self-appointed opponents of the so-called “elites”, of course. It is thus all the more important that those who shoulder responsibility in society, the media, academia and the cultural sphere – all of those who feel vilified as “the Establishment” – stand their ground! The response of intellectuals and cultural professionals to irrationalism must not be a retreat from politics, and certainly not contempt. What Mann wrote about this during the Weimar Republic is of extraordinary relevance today: “Refusal on the part of the intellect to engage with politics is an error and a self-deception. One does not get clear of politics in that way. One only ends up on wrong side. A-political simply means anti-democratic!”

This is all the more reason why the house on San Remo Drive should not be a place of retreat. When it was still a place of exile, it was home to thinking, writing and discussion that would point the way forward when it came to developing our societies in Germany and the United States. I would ask the Thomas Mann Fellows to foster an intellectual climate in which democracy can thrive once more. Put briefly, I would ask them to give democracy a future. You can work on this intellectual change, regardless of how great the political differences may be between the administrations at the moment. May this house, the new Fellows and their US counterparts, the Deutschlandjahr USA, and the many good transatlantic initiatives constantly – and on both sides – find the will and the willingness to invest in this partnership! I for one will continue to do so.

In 1921, long before Pacific Palisades, Thomas Mann read Walt Whitman’s “Democratic Vistas”. He enthusiastically underlined the following sentence twice: “I shall use the words America and Democracy as convertible terms.” America and democracy are synonyms. Thus, when Thomas Mann became an American citizen in 1944, he never saw it as incompatible with being German. Rather, he simply regarded it as the culmination of being a democrat.

What his closest friends would not have believed possible is that even in the bitterness of his second exile, amidst his fear for the demise of American democracy, Thomas Mann never renounced his citizenship. He remained a US citizen for the rest of his life.

America and democracy as synonyms – it was not only Thomas Mann and other exiles who felt that way, but also generations from around the world who yearn for democracy. Just a few weeks ago, in a speech at Harvard University, the author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie described how she felt as a young woman in Nigeria by saying “America always felt aspirational.”

In the current crisis in the West, should we not look at this aspiration, this ideal bond, the other way round? Not only will

democrats around the world always look to America, but America can also look to democrats around the world as its partners!

I believe that the United States needs partners, too. And it needs these partners. However, America can only recognise such a partnership if it regards the "West" as more than a geographical term – and the world as more than a boxing ring in which everyone fights against everyone else.

The "great task" to which Abraham Lincoln committed his nation in the hour of its deepest division is one that goes far beyond the frontiers of this country. This task was "[...] that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth."

You will note that he did not say "from this country" but "from the earth". That is indeed a "great task". And I believe it is a task for which one needs partners.