



**Speech by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier  
at a reception for fellows of the Alexander von Humboldt  
Foundation  
at Schloss Bellevue  
on 28 June 2018**

It is quite a while since Alexander von Humboldt himself was a guest here in this palace, in the building you can see behind me. He was welcomed, not by a Federal President, but by Prince Ferdinand of Prussia, who had had a so called "pleasure palace" built for himself here on the Spree, surrounded by nature, encircled by greenhouses, garden salons and a dairy.

Unfortunately, I don't know what they talked about or whether Humboldt liked what he saw here in Bellevue. It is probably fairly safe to assume that Alexander didn't take a selfie with the Prince. And his enthusiasm for Berlin was not entirely unqualified: At various times he described his birthplace as a small, uncultured place with a passion for contempt, and as a "moral desert, adorned with acacia bushes and flowering potato fields".

But like I said, that was quite a while ago. Today, Berlin is a vibrant, creative city which attracts artists and academics from all over the world. Prussian princes can still be found, but not here in Bellevue, and as you can see, the dairy and the greenhouses have also disappeared.

Yet what does return with you every year to this place, dear research award winners and fellows, is the spirit of Alexander von Humboldt. The spirit of a researcher, humanist and man of the world, who more than most of his contemporaries had learned to think beyond disciplinary and national borders.

I am delighted to be able to welcome the international family of Humboldt fellows to this beautiful park for the second time during my term of office. Around 600 academics are here today, from all over the world and representing many different areas of expertise. I can see that many have brought their partners, and I am particularly delighted

that, like last year, there are plenty of children here. It is gratifying that you have all come to Germany, to our globally minded country, which is and will remain a country of science and research. A very warm welcome to you all!

Alexander von Humboldt, whose 250th birthday we will be celebrating next year, travelled to far-off countries, he wrote tens of thousands of letters and even then, when conditions were more difficult, forged and maintained contacts with researchers all over the world. He was a networker who shared his knowledge with others and who wanted to share in the knowledge that others had. And already he had recognised that progress is only possible when people work together on problems, when they adopt different perspectives and thereby keep making new connections.

In the words of Hans Magnus Enzenberger, Humboldt was a "man for the 21st century". For all of us here know that in a world in which states, economies, societies and cultures are inextricably intertwined, we can only solve the major problems of our day by working together. What we need in academia and politics is exchange and cooperation that transcends borders.

That is why I view with concern the growing support in many parts of the world today for the consummate simplifiers, those who would like to convince us that isolation and retreat are actually the right way to go. I view with concern how some once again regard the world as an arena in which everyone is fighting everyone else and where ultimately the law of the strong prevails.

In times like these, we need more than ever before institutions that promote exchange and global understanding. I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, and to all those who support international science, for their engagement. You all encourage us, and I am convinced that yours is the only path leading to a positive future. I want to thank you for that!

Alexander von Humboldt, like hardly any other, embodies an attitude of intellectual openness and questioning curiosity. He knew that science is constantly in flux. It does not provide ultimate truths but only provisional answers to specific questions. Science thrives on a culture of rational debate precisely because its findings and methods can and must constantly be evaluated and corrected – and that is precisely what connects it to democracy, rightly understood.

Today we are seeing how belief in reason and discourse is being exposed to a wide range of challenges. Wherever fanaticism, superstition and conspiracy theories are rampant, wherever facts are manipulated or lies presented as "alternative truths", wherever expertise is ridiculed or complexity simply denied, wherever the

freedom of science is restricted and scientists persecuted and threatened – we are now called to speak out in protest.

Professor Pape, at the start of your presidency you appealed to science to confront the challenges facing society more forcefully than it had done in the past. I believe that is the right attitude to adopt in these times, in which the foundations of science and democracy are under threat. It is good if you get involved, if you as citizens speak out in favour of openness, exchange and critical reasoning. Thank you very much for this engagement, too!

Alexander von Humboldt was convinced that ideas could be useful only "if they spring to life in many minds". He was a gifted teacher of science, someone who could enthral people and awaken their enthusiasm.

When he returned from Paris, he wanted the people in Berlin to share the cosmos of ideas in his head. His lectures at the Sing Akademie here in Berlin, just a few kilometres to the east, were heard by men and women from all classes, the lecture hall was bursting at the seams. Humboldt captivated his audience with his energy, the associations he made and his poetic language; and the spark from his "spirit of exploration and inquiry", as Neil MacGregor has described it – inspired not only the listeners in the hall, but set the entire city alight.

Fellows, I would like to encourage you to share with as many people as possible what you spend your time doing and why you do it. Even though it is undoubtedly no easy task to explain to a layperson like me something to do with molecular physics or computer linguistics, my hope would be that you talk about your work in the open air, in clubs and even pubs and discuss the role of science. Do some advertising for the cosmos of knowledge!

You all enrich our country as excellent scientists, as dedicated contemporaries and as personalities in your own right. And I hope that Germany is also an enrichment for you, that you take something with you and maintain your ties with us when you return to your home countries once your research stay is over. Humboldt alumni – as I know since I have met them all over the world – are great ambassadors for Germany, and not just in the sphere of science.

But now I would first like to wish you and your families a pleasant stay in Germany, together with the hope that you meet inspiring people and make friends. You will see that exploring our country is a worthwhile undertaking. And of course I also wish you every success for what you plan to achieve as scientists over the coming months.

Alexander von Humboldt wrote: "Everything I undertake, I do with enthusiasm." And I think that this enthusiasm, this passion for a cause is a hallmark of Humboldt fellows which can still be seen in all of

you, and that is what draws people to you. I look forward to mingling with you and say to you once again on this beautiful summer's day:

Welcome to Schloss Bellevue!