



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
on the occasion of the presentation of the Peace Prize
of the German Book Trade to Amartya Sen
in Frankfurt am Main
on 18 October 2020**

**The Federal President's address was delivered in the
Paulskirche by the actor Burghart Klaußner**

The book fair exhibition halls are empty, the Paulskirche is nearly deserted and the Peace Prize laureate is on another continent – these are truly unusual times. Times that make our hearts grow heavy.

These days, there is no such thing as normality. So it is good that we insist on having this ceremony. Today, we are honouring a person who like none other is associated with the idea of global justice. The quest for justice and freedom must never cease, especially in the tense times of the coronavirus pandemic.

And who is better suited to lead us on this expedition and quest than today's laureate? In Amartya Sen, we are honouring a cosmopolitan, a great public intellectual, a moral authority.

Dear Amartya Sen, we are reaching you at an unusually early hour – so despite this, or maybe because of it, a very good morning to you in Boston! How we would have liked to welcome you in person here in Frankfurt today. The coronavirus pandemic has made that impossible. So, today, you are both far away and very near. Far away because we are separated by six thousand kilometres and six time zones. And near because your ideas and visions overcome all distances – between different parts of the world, cultures and outlooks on life.

The digital world will never be a true substitute for meeting in person. But I have seldom been happier than today about the invention of video conferencing. We look forward to hearing your acceptance speech!

Amartya Sen once said about himself that he “was born in a university campus and seem[s] to have lived all [his] life in one campus or another.” Cambridge, Delhi, Harvard, Stanford, Yale. He

was awarded his first professorship in Kolkata at the very young age of 22. Back then, indignant students scrawled a graffiti image of a baby cradle on the institute's walls.

Although Amartya Sen is an academic through and through, his writings cannot be classified as such – at least not in the sense that they present overly intellectual, abstract concepts to an ivory tower audience. He wanted to be understood. And, as a scientist, he not only wanted to understand the world. He wanted to change it. Amartya Sen has changed it.

His writing spans six decades and ranges from economic theory to moral philosophy. His books are best sellers. Amartya Sen holds more than one hundred honorary doctorates, and in 1998 he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences.

And now, he has also been awarded the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade. Some observers have commented: Does a Nobel laureate even need this distinction? My reply is the same that was given by Carlo Schmid: The Nobel Prize for Economic Sciences may well be the expert's crown that is bestowed in the field of economics – but the Peace Prize is the "civil crown of humanity".

Today, we bestow this civil crown on a philosopher who himself does not wish to be a philosopher king. Sen would rather have those who govern become "true and circumspect philosophers" – that is, enlightened politicians of freedom. Freedom from hunger, violence and oppression. Freedom to become educated, knowledgeable and realise your full potential.

In his writing, Amartya Sen confronts the inequalities and injustices of this world. His Human Development Index looks not only at Gross National Product, but also at how happy people are. For a society, Sen insists, "can be Pareto-optimal and still be perfectly disgusting".

Who therefore is more deserving of this distinction than someone whose work, although intellectually brilliant, is characterised by one thing above all: humanity. Consequently, the Peace Prize honours the human Amartya Sen – and the human Amartya Sen honours the Peace Prize. And we, both here in the Paulskirche and in front of our televisions at home, are happy we can celebrate this moment together.

The right of every person to live a self-determined life, regardless of his or her origin, skin colour, gender or sexual orientation, the right to an education, to realise your full potential, and not least the responsibility of the state and its institutions to make precisely this possible: These are the beliefs of Amartya Sen. They are the core beliefs of a democrat – and ones that I, too, believe in deeply.

Amartya Sen has influenced generations of students, scientific colleagues and, indeed, his readers throughout the world. His works

have also broadened my perspective on economics. How do we measure the prosperity of a society? What exactly is good economic development? How can we achieve more global justice?

A call for more global justice rings hollow if we do not take a critical look at our own actions. Germany benefits greatly from the international division of labour. Our companies' value chains span the globe; our companies manufacture their products in all parts of the world. Our prosperity depends on free global trade. We, too, are responsible for fair global trade.

And our responsibility goes beyond that: Global justice between North and South and can only succeed if we become aware of imbalances, the asymmetry of power and the various interdependencies – and if we act accordingly. In the words of Amartya Sen: Global justice will only come about if we "share the world" with one another.

More than seventy million children around the world must still work to ward off hunger. They are exploited in mines and quarries, toil away in cotton fields and on banana plantations. They should be in school!

Clothes in our stores were manufactured in that very garment factory in Dhaka that forced thousands of people into crowded sweatshops where they operated sewing machines. A fire broke out. We will recall that the factory had no emergency exit. Well over one hundred women died in the blaze.

Dhaka is not an isolated case. Dhaka has come to symbolise what are often inhumane working conditions in thousands of garment factories in South Asia and Africa. Dhaka represents the throwaway mentality and carelessness that has taken hold in the metropolises of the North under which people in the metropolises of the South so often suffer.

In an interconnected world that so closely links us as producers and consumers, as contracting agents and purchasers – in this world, we need rules for globalisation. These rules are not God given. They are man-made. If we realise that these rules are unjust, are we not then also obligated to change them?

In the arts and culture pages of some newspapers, observers had the following to say about this year's Peace Prize laureate: Global justice and freedom – that is all fine and well. But in these turbulent times of the Black Lives Matter movement and climate protests, are other issues not more urgent?

I think that's a misunderstanding. Because Amartya Sen is focused on something fundamental and particularly urgent. When Sen speaks about social and ecological justice, then he is essentially concerned about one thing: democracy. For him, democracy is the

prerequisite for justice. And justice is an underlying prerequisite for democracy.

The fight against discrimination, or against the life-threatening climate crisis – these are, after all, burning questions related to justice, questions to which our democracies must find answers. So are these not also fundamental questions about justice, questions that democracy in particular can find answers to? What other form of government can constantly realign and renegotiate justice for all, under prevailing conditions that are constantly in flux?

Sen knows about the weaknesses of democracy. "Democracy," he says, "isn't an automatic remedy" for injustices. "Democracy is a way of enabling [people]" to stand up for justice. In his words, „Democracy isn't an automatic remedy of anything. It isn't like quinine to kill malaria. Democracy is a way of enabling."

Do not the hundreds of thousands of young people who took part in the climate protests – and the enormous power they brought to the ecological question, moving it to the centre of politics – show the extent to which democracy can enable people to fight for their convictions and drive politics forward?

Criticism, opposition and protest – outside of all institutionalised processes – are an important part of democracy. They drive social transformation. Through them, what began as minority opinions can become part of the mainstream. However, protest is no substitute for democratic majorities in the institutions that are responsible for decision-making. Reconciling various opposing interests in them remains a tiresome and often drawn-out process. Often enough, the outcome is a compromise and sometimes not satisfactory. Indeed, democracy is not perfect. Nor will it ever be. It is as imperfect as the people who live in it.

And herein lies the challenge for our democracy: In the competition of political systems, it must prove time and again it has better answers to the pressing issues of our time. It must prove it is the better system for ending discrimination. That it can do a better job of meeting the twofold challenge of the ecological transformation – that is, do the right thing for the planet and ensure social justice.

Democracy does not protect us from making wrong decisions. But it does allow us to correct mistakes. No other form of government has a built-in auto-correction tool. And this tool for adjustment is free, fair and equal elections by secret ballot.

We are called on to prove that democracy can prevail in this competition of political systems. So let us tackle this challenge!

The motto and slogan of Ferdinand I, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, was: *fiat iustitia, et pereat mundus*. Let justice be done, though the world perish?

Amartya Sen is a pragmatist when it comes to justice. He is not bent on fighting for a completely just world – even if there were agreement on what it would look like.

Amartya Sen is an admirer of the theoretical brilliance of John Rawls' philosophy of justice. Building a just world behind the "veil of ignorance" – that is to say independent of your own situation – is truly tempting. Sen, however, believes this is neither practical nor realistic. He wants to eliminate concrete and obvious injustices right here and now.

Whether this should be done through a state or market-based approach is something on which Sen takes a sober view, free of all ideology. He's focused on the result; he wants to know: in what areas does the state enable people to live a self-determined life? In what areas do justice and freedom emerge through individual responsibility? And in what areas is solidarity needed, also beyond the borders of one's own country?

These questions are never abstract; they become all the more compelling and real now, during times of great crisis. We know that crises have never been the great equaliser, as they were so often described. Crises deepen existing rifts. The coronavirus pandemic affects all people and countries, but it does not affect everyone equally. Places with a lack of healthcare infrastructure, or with food insecurity and great poverty, are disproportionately and more severely affected by the virus.

The coronavirus pandemic is an acid test for international solidarity and global cooperation in politics and research. Nowhere else does this become more apparent than regarding the question of fair distribution of a vaccine throughout the world. Fair, global distribution is two things: it serves our vested interests, and it is a categorical imperative. Let us do everything in our power to make sure that humankind passes this test of its humanity!

For Sen, there can also be no justice without political freedom and no political freedom without democracy. One cannot be had without the other. To him, democracy is therefore also not a luxury that only rich countries can afford, and it is also not just a normative project of the West. It is something that is longed for the world over and a universal promise. The people demonstrating on the streets of Caracas, Minsk and Hong Kong remind us of this, as well!

The universalism of democracy and fundamental human rights – these are the main pillars of Sen's philosophy. This is the essential and fundamental discovery that is coming under pressure again these days.

Sen's writing is a tapestry of sources written in Sanskrit and sources from the European history of ideas; he links John Stuart Mill to John Rawls and Bhagavad Gita to Jürgen Habermas. He wants to show

that many parts of the world have similar concepts of justice, democracy and freedom.

Fundamental human rights' claim to universality is not a western or eastern, European or Asian, German or Indian idea. Instead – and this is important to Sen – it is a human idea.

Seventy years ago, this hope was successfully laid down in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." Not only Europeans or North Americans can lay claim to this sentence. And it is not exclusive to the Judeo-Christian tradition. This sentence was co-authored and adopted by Africans, Asians, Buddhists, Muslims and Hindus. Even though this promise has never been perfect and has never been equally applied, it is still a tremendous achievement, despite all its imperfections.

But an achievement is not automatically guaranteed. Around the world, there are signs that the achievements of civilisation are being called into question, that obligations under international law are being violated. Even in our neighbourhood, fundamental democratic principles are being challenged. Personal freedoms are being eroded; the independence of the media and the judiciary is being co-opted by governments.

Where democracy erodes, there human rights do also erode. And where human rights erode, democracy erodes. Democracy does not die in darkness. If it dies, it does so in broad daylight and in plain sight. We see, after all, how the international order is under attack, how authoritarian tendencies and nationalism are on the march around the world. Is there still hope?

My answer is a clear yes – and it is up to us to decide where we go from here. Have we not seen during this pandemic that our democracy can respond to existential threats? And swiftly, efficiently and forcefully, at that. At the same time, it can safeguard freedom. Whether it can continue to strike a balance between safety and freedom is not a given. It's up to all of us to make sure it does.

Trust, rational thinking, diversity, solidarity – these are the strengths of our democracy. If we continue to stand by these strengths, then we have every reason to be hopeful. Today, 75 years after the end of the Second World War and in the thirtieth year of German unity, we Germans at least can say with full confidence that it was not democracy that was on the wrong side of history. It was the enemies of democracy that were on the wrong side of history. Let us draw courage and hope from this.

When opening the book fair, David Grossman referred to hope as an "anchor" of sorts: He said that "when the anchor is cast, it holds on to the future."

Believing in the future and having hope – that, too, is what the Peace Prize stands for. And for this we are honouring Amartya Sen today.

Amartya Sen writes prose – but he loves poetry. He often quotes the Bengali poet Ram Mohan Roy:

“Just imagine how terrible it will be on the day you die. /

Others will go on speaking, but you will not be able to respond.”

Amartya – that translates to “the immortal one”. Yes, his visions are immortal – and they will elicit answers! So let’s get to work.

I warmly congratulate you, dear Amartya Sen, on being awarded the 2020 Peace Prize of the German Book Trade!