



The President's New Year's Address 2022

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“However, this tolerance cannot be indiscriminate and equal with respect to the contents of expression, neither in word nor in deed; it cannot protect false words and wrong deeds which demonstrate that they contradict and counteract the possibilities of liberation. Such indiscriminate tolerance is justified in harmless debates, in conversation, in academic discussion; it is indispensable in the scientific enterprise, in private religion. But society cannot be indiscriminate where the pacification of existence, where freedom and happiness themselves are at stake: here, certain things cannot be said, certain ideas cannot be expressed, certain policies cannot be proposed, certain behavior cannot be permitted without making tolerance an instrument for the continuation of servitude.”

This quote, ladies and gentlemen, dear guests, could well be quite recent, but it is not. It is by Herbert Marcuse, from his famous 1965 essay “Repressive Tolerance.” Proceeding from a fundamental appreciation of tolerance as a precondition for a humane society, he immediately narrows down the applicability of the construct. This is because “pure” tolerance in the sense of equal coexistence of different opinions could easily lead to abuse, and could cement existing repressive social structures in particular.

Empirical research over the past 57 years has refuted many of Marcuse’s points. Repressive social structures seem to be concomitant with a lack of tolerance rather than too much of it. It is also anything but easy to make a distinction between “true” and “false” tolerance. In any case, it can only rarely – as Marcuse said – “be made rationally on empirical grounds.”

And that brings us to where we are today. Because tolerance in our free society continues to confront us with difficult dilemmas. As early as 2008, Potsdam citizens issued the “New Potsdam Edict of Tolerance” in the spirit of the historic “Edict of Potsdam” of 1685. It describes the new democratic self-conception of Potsdam’s citizens and is a commitment to open-mindedness and tolerance. In this text, the question of what is tolerable and what is not tolerable (anymore) also plays a central role.

For some time now, there have also been more intense discussions about tolerance towards people with different opinions on academic campuses around the world. On the one hand, such tolerance remains a mandatory precondition for a free society in general and academic discourse in particular. On the other hand, tolerance cannot be without limits. The fact that it may not be extended to personal insults and anti-constitutional statements is a widely held social consensus. The gray area between loyalty to the constitution and left-wing and right-wing extremist statements is proving more difficult. As is the contextualization of literature and scholarship in relation to our contemporary ethical and normative frameworks.

A quote that is attributed to Voltaire, who is closely associated with Potsdam, states: “I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.” Following this guideline, although not expressed in quite such martial terms, the principle “in dubio pro tolerantia,” or “when in doubt, for tolerance,” is applied at the University of Potsdam, knowing full well that this leads to controversy time and again. Let me give you a few examples to illustrate this.

First, the question of whether right-wing or left-wing populists should have access to or even be allowed to speak on campus. My opinion is: Yes, of course, as long as they make no anti-constitutional statements and are not considered “proven extremists” – to quote a technical term used by homeland security. It is in the nature of things that this tolerance towards those who think quite differently hurts, but it is an unavoidable consequence of the openness that is required, especially on our academic campuses.

Second, a recurring topic of discussion is whether we should warn or even protect our students from potentially traumatizing educational content. In a free academic system, protection cannot result in a “cancel culture” where certain content is made inaccessible. Contextualizing possibly distressing passages, on the other hand, is indeed a core task of the modern university in the spirit of the Enlightenment – and it is something that many of our faculty members also do as a matter of course. The same should also apply to our schools by the way.

A third question that arises concerns the topics that should or may still be addressed in research at all. “Research and teaching shall be free,” according to the German Basic Law. So why even ask this question? Well, as a new Allensbach study shows, the question is quite justified. While almost all of the interviewed faculty members in higher education conceded that it is permissible to do research on the GDR as a West German, for example – or on the Catholic Church as an atheist – things turned out to be more difficult when it came to more controversial content. As many as half of the respondents would like to forbid the denial of climate change on campus. Two-thirds consider it illegitimate to publicly reject Islam as a religion, and 4 out of 5 respondents say no to embryo cloning.

Fourth and finally, the difficult question of how to deal with scientifically questionable statements and their proponents. In this context, the issue of contextualization also arises again and again. I would not mind having a representative of the “Flat Earth Society” invited to one of our seminars, as long as his opinions served as a clear example of scientifically refuted nonsense. Minority opinions in ongoing social debates, such as climate change or the COVID crisis, also have their place on our campuses and in talk shows, of course. Consequently, we also welcomed any criticism of our decision to proceed according to the so-called 2G principle of only allowing vaccinated or recovered individuals on our Potsdam campuses as of January of this year. A decision that a large majority of our students was also in favor of, but which led to vocal and aggressive feedback from the non-vaccinated minority. In such tense debates, it is all the more important to communicate clearly to the students – or to a television audience – what the majority opinion of the scientific community is, how large the respective majorities are, and what viewpoints are *not* backed by the majority of the scientific community.

And so we find ourselves looking at COVID again – a topic that is ubiquitously present in academic life precisely because COVID makes academic life extremely difficult and, in many areas, impossible. So far, we have gotten through the crisis reasonably well with a 3G model where everyone must be vaccinated, recovered, or tested. A few weeks ago, we switched to a 2G solution in Potsdam, as I said, because we want to maximize face-to-face teaching and at the same time reduce the risk of infection for our students and faculty members as much as possible. The current state of research in this regard is that 2G is the right way to go. Also – but not solely – because it will hopefully motivate more students and faculty to get vaccinated and thus make their overdue contribution to the common good.

We also made the best of the situation in other ways at the University of Potsdam. Our two Collaborative Research Centers were evaluated favorably in the spring, so that both will receive funding from the German Research Foundation for another four years. On August 18, with the German President in attendance, our European Center for Jewish Scholarship was inaugurated in the newly renovated North Gate Building at the New Palace. Throughout the year, we worked on the expansion of our digital teaching infrastructure with freshly acquired third-party funding from the federal and state governments. Finally, the next round of the federal government’s Excellence Strategy is also on the horizon; among other things, we

plan to submit an application on our key topics in Potsdam: environment, climate, and sustainability. One bitter pill we had to swallow should also not go unmentioned. It is simply unfathomable that in COVID times, massive budget cuts were imposed on our Faculty of Health Sciences, of all things, which is jointly funded with the Brandenburg University of Technology (BTU) and the Brandenburg Medical School (MHB). We have presented the state government with a sound concept for bridge financing that will enable the faculty to continue its work as an important preparatory step for university medicine in Cottbus, on the one hand, and a stronger and accredited MHB on the other. It would not be good for Brandenburg if this faculty were to go under because of a still disputed amount of just EUR 1.5m annually.

This, ladies and gentlemen, is all I want to say about academic life at the University of Potsdam in COVID times. None of this would be possible without tolerance. Tolerance is the essence of all academic life, by no means only in Potsdam, a cradle of the Enlightenment. Of course, this tolerance applies especially – in keeping with Voltaire – to representatives of minority opinions, even in politically controversial areas such as COVID and the climate crisis. The decisive factor in such contexts is, of course, a contextualization of such opinions based not on passion, but on reason, in accordance with the current state of research. Our duty as scholars is, to quote Dieter Imboden, “to dare to make statements about important societal issues based on the best available information, despite limited and often only preliminary knowledge, for example about limits for the harmfulness of chemical compounds in drinking water, about radioactivity, [...] and – most relevant today – about climate change and its effects.” Even more relevant today, I would add “... and about the chances and risks of vaccination against the coronavirus.” Such proven scientific knowledge must be the basis for any policies that benefit the whole of humanity. And vaccination boycotters and climate deniers are doing very badly in this respect.

Let me conclude by thanking all of you – our staff, our professors, our students for your exceptional commitment and dedication in difficult times, and our alumni and friends for your solidarity and willingness to support us and stand by us despite difficult decisions we had to make. I wish you all a good year 2022 and hope to see you in person again soon!