



## **Democracy in Crisis? Moral and Spiritual Resistance**

**Keynote address: Charlotte Knobloch**

### **Dying Democracy? Defending Our Freedom in the Face of Corrosive Hatred**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you very much for your invitation, and for the opportunity to speak to you today.

In my capacity as head of the Jewish Community of Munich, I get to travel all over Germany and Europe. I have been to England a number of times, and seen much of this country. However, today is my first time at Cumberland Lodge, and I have to say: I am very impressed.

One of the biggest challenges of this journey was the infamous London rush-hour traffic this morning.

But coming here from the capital also meant watching the city and its landmarks disappear. Its bustling and hectic ways, even politics itself – they all seem to stay behind when driving out here to Windsor.

It is easy to feel fully detached in the Park. Only the occasional push notification on your phone reminds you that, in spite of everything, the Earth has *not* stopped turning.

In this sense, no better venue could have been chosen. Here, we can debate and discuss in peace and, more importantly even, we are removed enough from the current news cycle to take a much-needed step back.

Only with this distance can we then venture to take a look at the bigger picture – and finally get a clearer look at the forest we have become used to not seeing for its trees.

All the while, the problems of our respective societies stay right with us, even out here at Cumberland Lodge. As a matter of fact, one would not be wrong to consider this gathering an emergency meeting, called with the purpose of assessing the scope of the challenges we face. And make no mistake, we *do* face them – whether we live in England, California or Bavaria.

And let me be honest with you. From my point of view, we are confronted with a problem that is not merely enormous – but existential. Western democracy faces a threat of massive proportions.

This situation is not entirely new. During the Cold War, we spent decades living in a state of perpetual fear, dreading, as it were, the ominous mushroom cloud rising over our capital cities and the onset of a cataclysmic war between the superpowers.

Back then, we ultimately prevailed. In the clash of systems, we succeeded in defending our liberal democracies against their enemies.

Today, our situation is entirely different. Back then, the threat was exclusively external. The leaders of the Soviet Union and other Eastern Bloc states maintained this threat, sometimes implicitly, but more often than not explicitly. There was no ambiguity about the front lines between democracy and despotism, and everyone in the democratic world was aware of that.

Today, there no longer are two large, monolithic blocs vying for control and refraining from striking each other only out of fear of the inevitable – and equally destructive – retribution. Today's conflicts have grown much more complex and unclear, and more state- as well as non-state actors now have a hand in them.

One thing, however, has not changed at all: democracy still has many enemies.

Islamist terrorist groups like al-Qaida and ISIS demonstrate that we are still faced with opponents who have made their hostility to our way of life abundantly clear.

Moreover, fringe groups from the far-left and, particularly, the far-right spread violence. In Germany, we were shocked to learn of the 'National Socialist Underground' militia, which murdered Germans with foreign roots before it was discovered in 2011.

And yet: no matter how gruesome and despicable the acts committed by these groups, they could never hope to have enough power to mount a serious challenge to Western countries vastly superior to them economically as well as technologically. Their direct confrontation did hurt us; however, luckily, it did not pose an existential threat.

Today, democracy's enemies have mostly realised that they cannot achieve victory through strength of arms alone.

*Indirect* confrontations, on the other hand, are a different story. Democracies, after all, can only defeat themselves – through self-erosion, liberal democratic societies can

hollow out from within. Against this backdrop, it is clear that, in order to inflict the most damage on a democratic society, one needs to turn democracy's most powerful weapon against itself: the freedom of speech and thought.

This might seem paradoxical at first. After all, it is precisely the liberties we enjoy today, and the freedom that was won only after centuries of fighting with blood, sweat, toil and tears, which make life in a democracy as liveable as it is.

This freedom motivates hundreds of thousands of people to leave their homes and defy the odds to make their way to us. Also: this freedom has also been the foundation of our wealth and prosperity.

One should keep in mind, however, that this foundation can support different buildings. We can either build them high and stable together – or bicker in deadlock.

The palaces of democracy erected after 1945 are built on a foundation of freedom. What keeps them in place, however, is trust. Trust was and continues to be the cornerstone of the kind of public and private life without which no democracy can endure. Like mortar in a building, trust is what keeps a democracy together.

This begins with the trust citizens must have in each other. They must have trust in the integrity of their representatives and in state institutions – from the police officer to civil administrators, and all the way up to government secretaries and ministers.

Both government and the opposition must be able to trust that no one government abuses its temporary power. Citizens must have trust in the press and media, just as the press and media must, in turn, have trust in their readers.

Lastly and most importantly, all citizens must have trust in the trust of their fellow citizens.

This interplay has worked successfully for decades, as a result of both formal and informal routines. Every democracy relies on a set of written and unwritten rules, both of which need to be enforced not only out of fear of social or legal sanctions, but also because of a deeper and personal conviction of their necessity.

All of this long seemed self-evident to us. We came to take for granted the mortar in the brickwork, assuming that the permanence of our democratic body politic was written in the law of nature.

Today it appears that this assumption has been naïve. Over the course of the past few years, we have seen how quickly the trust that had taken years to build can be damaged or destroyed. And we have witnessed the kind of damage this can do.

The rise of leftist and nationalist populists in Europe and the US is at the same time the symptom and the consequence of a more profound crisis.

The political business model of all of these new parties is to undermine the trust in a class they have taken to deride as 'elite' or 'establishment. In Germany, populists talk about the 'cartel of old system parties'.

We have witnessed the emergence of a disastrous feedback loop between these new political movements and social media, a phenomenon that is decidedly transnational.

One example of this is the so-called 'Alternative for Germany', AfD, which entered the German Parliament in 2017. Conspiracy theories and victimhood myths are fixtures of the political culture among its members and supporters.

It is only against this backdrop that AfD politicians, who demand an end to Germany's culture of remembrance, while tolerating revisionists and anti-Semites, can claim that the politicians and civil society actors that oppose the AfD pursue a leftwing-liberal plot. They cannot – and would not – view such inevitable opposition as anything but malicious attacks.

Whenever, in my capacity as the chair of Germany's second-largest Jewish community, I point out these contradictions, I am swamped with hate letters and other forms of written or verbal abuse.

Such letters generally lack self-reflection. I regularly receive anti-Semitic insults from AfD supporters, who insist angrily that I am wrong to accuse their party of anti-Semitism!

Even if they are democratically elected, movements like the AfD eventually serve to erode a democracy from within.

Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt aptly described this development in their groundbreaking book *How Democracies Die*. In their words, 'democratic backsliding begins at the ballot box'.

Today, we see this in a number of countries in the Western world.

The current Italian government of populists from the left and right seems united only in its hatred of the European Union, a structure they view as a sinister and oppressive juggernaut. The media-savvy Interior Minister makes headlines primarily through his proximity to neo-fascist groups.

In the United States, Donald Trump used a similar campaign slogan, when he promised to 'drain the swamp', by which he referred to the established democratic structures of his country, especially in Washington DC.

Trump's attacks against these institutions have only intensified since he took office two years ago. They constitute a serious test for the resilience of American democracy.

The President has also repeatedly branded the media and press as ‘enemies of the people’. In German, the term conjures associations with the language of National Socialism.

As a consequence and expression of these political developments, more people around the world lose trust in established democratic institutions. We witnessed this in France only a few weeks ago, when the ‘yellow vests’ protestors interrupted public life not just in Paris.

Those who believe that the ‘yellow vests’ actions were simply a protest of peaceful means against a democratically-elected head of state ignore an important fact. Violent lootings and anti-Semitic slogans accompanied the protests. This illustrates that the demonstrations were not just a democratic expression of discontent – rather, the protestors had lost all trust in their state and society.

Importantly, the protests were directed both against the French government and the European project. European integration has provided freedom, prosperity and peace – all of which to an extent that would have been unthinkable for centuries.

These populist groups and politicians are united by the desire to transform liberal Western democracies profoundly – and perhaps to abolish them. These democracies are often rejected as unfair, illegitimate – or even as undemocratic. The professed aim is the ‘reconstitution’ of ‘real’ democracy, in which the populist set the agenda.

Such a society would no longer be a democracy, but an unchained dictatorship, in which the majority can trample on the rights of minorities. But the populists and their supporters no longer recognise this.

Populists portray themselves as brave taboo-breaking underdogs, seeking to gain credibility at the expense of established political forces. This furthers the estrangement from the political process among supporters, and fuels ideological radicalisation.

Caught up in the mission frenzy to remake ‘real’ democracy’, many no longer can or want to understand that it is their populist agitation that threatens existing democracy. It is, however, the populist posturing that erodes trust in democratic institutions, and invites real demagogues to seize power.

We are struggling to face up to these challenges through undemocratic movements in Europe and beyond. The fight against the march of anti-democratic forces will be one of the dominant themes of 2019.

One reason for the success of these group is their decentralised organisation via the internet and other online platforms. Comparable protests, including the French ‘yellow vests’, have used social media to coordinate activities and meetings.

Participants in such protests prefer the parallel world of the internet to proper participation in the formal political process.

At first sight, this is more comfortable. Life within the filter bubbles of Facebook and other social media is pleasant. Only views and ideas that radicalise one's existing opinion can enter.

Social media enable a superficial political discourse. The fact that this kind of participation reduces the diversity of opinions and erodes constructive debate is something many people do not know or choose to ignore.

This is why a higher turnout at elections, which we could see over the past years, does not necessarily translate into a more robust democracy.

Online, tolerance for other opinions is low. When you do not agree with it, click it away. One's own view of the world becomes more entrenched. At the same time, the feeling that different opinions can turn someone into an opponent, but not into an enemy, is lost.

This poisons social cohesion and the democratic awareness of society.

One might find solace in the apparent lack of real-world awareness of the antidemocratic movement. Since its inception, the internet has also been the stomping ground of outcasts and people with a dysfunctional relationship to reality.

But we must not embrace this fantasy – that the hatred online does not also have offline consequences.

We have learned this lesson in Germany. For some time, people who call themselves 'Reichsbuerger' – citizens of the Reich – have created social media networks to exchange their views.

Their movement combines hatred directed at politicians with superficial legal knowledge. Its supporters reject the postwar German Federal Republic, and claim that the German Reich continues to exist.

Such groups may appear laughable. In 2017, however, a fanatical Reichsbuerger killed a German Police Officer and wounded others – and Germans stopped laughing.

This incident was a wake-up call: a lack of trust in democracy can kill. In the meanwhile, the atomisation of society continues, and inhibition thresholds are lowered further.

The Jewish community experiences this through growing anti-Semitism. Since many populist parties and their partner organisations are located at the far-right end of the political spectrum, we are especially threatened in the current situation.

Anti-Jewish tendencies are a shared element of the international far-right. Examples include AfD conspiracy theories regarding the Rothschild family, the events of Charlottesville in 2017, and the never-ending hate campaigns against the American-Hungarian billionaire and philanthropist George Soros.

Ladies and Gentlemen – without wanting to sound too pessimistic, I need to repeat: in 2019, we are facing existential challenges.

On the one side, we look at the challenges of European solidarity, the consolidation of economic prosperity, the growing gap between political reason and societal sentiment, and the fight against crises from Syria to Ukraine. On the other side, however, the anti-democratic attacks from within our societies are at least as dangerous.

There is a need for urgent action. The future and success of our shared democratic lives depends on our ability to stop the further erosion of trust in democracy.

This new Cold War is especially dangerous. We are only beginning to realise that we have been fighting it for years.

We have stepped into a confidence trap. We have grown comfortable with the smug assumption that democracy will naturally prevail indefinitely.

I was born into a democracy in 1932 – and grew up in a totalitarian dictatorship. The weakness of the Weimar Republic cleared a path for the success of the National Socialists, and for the singular crime of humanity: the Holocaust.

Democracies are fragile. They must be permanently protected and defended, or they falter.

A German Supreme Court judge encapsulated this central thought already in 1976. Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde coined a well-known phrase: ‘the free and secular state is the product of conditions that it cannot itself guarantee’.

Böckenförde thus captured the dilemma of democracy. Formal and informal rules must interconnect into a harmonious whole, through the power of a shared general will, in order to maintain a state’s democratic character. But no one can enforce this will.

So, how can we guarantee and safeguard the conditions Böckenförde described? How can one secure trust, if trust can only be given, but not enforced?

Political parties and the state share responsibilities. A watchful democracy must not concede too much leeway to its enemies. Instead, it must confront the enemies of freedom with all its democratic power – before it becomes too late.

In Germany, the authorities will soon decide whether the national intelligence services ought to monitor the AfD in order to prove that the party seeks to undermine the German Constitution. I hope that this will happen.

Political parties also bear some responsibility to keep anti-democratic demagogues away from power. Levitsky und Ziblatt call this ‘gatekeeping’.

These formal measures are effective, but they cannot solve the fundamental problem: the lack of trust, as the glue that keeps democracies together. The key to this lies with informal rules.

Böckenförde talked about the 'moral substance', from which social freedom arises. Of course, the content and nature of this moral substance, and how it can be strengthened, is very much the subject of debate.

I believe this: religions and religious organisations are central to safeguarding the future of Western democracies.

Some might find this an odd claim, especially since Böckenförde also spoke about 'the free and secular state'.

We all can imagine the counter-argument: today, as the number of people without religion grows, and Islamist terrorism has tainted religiosity, religion ought to be the solution and promote peace?

Yes – religions ought to accept this responsibility. And they are capable. We must not be misguided by short-term social trends. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, people continue to seek a purpose in life.

Even though some religious groups lose members, they continue to offer two important advantages in this difficult time: continuity and community.

Some will say that neither continuity nor community are still relevant today. They will point to digitisation and increasingly hectic lifestyles, which enable everyone to become a king within their own lives.

But modern hyper-individualisation is no universal guide.

People continue to seek solidarity, and aspire to have values and morality – which have always been the cornerstone of human conviviality.

Paradoxically, we see today how a misleading desire for community actually furthers social fragmentation.

As they seek groups that fit their ego perfectly, modern people lose sight of the bigger picture. Those who seek their friendships in Facebook networks might be part of a group, but not of a community.

Our society cannot exist in this way forever. Continuity and community must be constructed and maintained in tandem. Within society, a shared, value-based sense of purpose is needed.

Even modern enlightened humans, who see themselves as the purpose of their world, know that there is something greater.

This does not mean that the secular state ought to be abolished. It does mean, rather, that our societies recognise the role which religions have played in the development of the social and moral culture of the West – and which they continue to play today. In my opinion, this fact is too often ignored.

Out of this realisation come political consequences. This feeling of being collectively responsible for a shared greater good creates social cohesion, and, ultimately, trust.

This is not a simple blueprint, and no quick fix. Further state intervention, as I described earlier, is necessary, in order to fend off the most pressing threats. I do, however, see this as a long-term solution that can reduce the scale of the problem.

Religious communities must continue to grow as they accept their responsibilities.

Their difficult task is the development of a model of religiosity that offers continuity and community, without restricting people too much. This model must fit into a democratic state and the rule of law, and not pursue parallel structures. And this model must be able to create a form of solidarity that connects people across social milieus.

This is a significant challenge. And even if we are successful, we should not think that churches, synagogues and mosques will be full every week. It is not that easy.

We must also not harbour the illusion that all groups can be integrated by this model. Those who believe that ‘the Christian Occident’ must be protected through hatred, borders and intolerance cannot be reached. Those who learn in Arabic-speaking television that the state of Israel is a cancer in the Middle East will also be hard to save.

However, many others can be reached. These people can, and must, constitute the counter-weight to a culture of coarsening debate, loneliness and fear, which is both the cause and the consequence of our problems today.

Shared values, such as solidarity and responsibility, can connect people positively.

Religion can achieve what western democracies struggle with: to create community and trust.

Let me repeat: religion can only be one aspect of this fight against the crisis of trust in democracy.

We must welcome everything that connects people and emphasises what they share, but without covering up difference. On this continent, this can be a shared national identity that exists alongside a European identity. Enlightened patriotism must be the ambition of our time.

Ladies and gentlemen, the prospects for this new year are not bright. The political situation in Europe, but also in America, is volatile.

As the Jewish community in Germany and Europe, we watch with concern the fragmentation of society and growing anti-Semitism in East and West. Hatred against Jews is resurging, and has been a reliable indicator of the extent of societal freedom.

The more threatened the Jewish community is, the worse society as a whole is faring. We must confront this development.

And we are doing this. We have come together today in order to find solutions for our most pressing problems.

As I said: the nature of this crisis is that many are still not aware of its existence. The loss of trust is slow and incremental – like the crack that eventually breaks a dam.

We are facing many such cracks today, but the dam still holds. We must hope and trust that it will continue to hold. But we also must do more to guarantee this.

Thank you very much.