

The Renewal of an Old Alliance

In his contribution to our essay series, Nikolai Blaumer (Thomas Mann House, Pacific Palisades) assesses the current changes in relations between Germany and the United States. And he outlines an approach to the challenges advocates of a just, decent, and open society are facing today. It is literature that has a crucial role to play in this context.

By Nikolai Blaumer

America, you are better off
Than our ancient continent.
You have no tumbledown castles
And no basalt deposits.
Your inner lives are not disturbed by
Useless memories and vain strife.

In this poem, Goethe captures the image of America that shaped the German perception of the New World for centuries. The United States stood for the possibility of the good, of a more human, liberal society. Hegel even ascribed to America the central role in world history: »America is therefore the land of the future, where, in the ages that lie before us, the burden of the World's History shall reveal itself.«

To this day, Germany and the United States are close allies and political friends. It is a relationship of a long, shared history, of personal connections and common values. 75 years after the end of World War II and 30 years after the reunification, Germans are still grateful for the American contribution to their democracy. Yet the hopeful, positive energies that Goethe and Hegel enthused about are in danger of being consumed today. This danger affects not only the situation in America, but also the relationship between the transatlantic partners.

Reinforced by the Corona Pandemic, we are currently experiencing a reorganization of the international order. A [study by the German Marshall Fund](#) has recently shown that a growing number of people on both sides of the Atlantic now view China as the most important actor in international relations. And already for years, a majority of Americans have been convinced that Asian countries such as China, South Korea and Japan are today [more important for the interests of the United States than European countries](#).

Thomas Mann anticipated some of these developments as early as 1942 in his lecture »The War and the Future« at the Library of Congress: »Little by little we begin to suspect that the age of national states and national cultures is passing,« he predicted. Mann questioned the Eurocentrism of his countrymen: »The term Europe is already a provincialism today.« But the transatlantic alliance is not only characterized by a declining interest in each other, it is also experiencing a crisis on a deeper level. The trust in common strength, in the value of long-term partnership is decreasing. Self-interest and the desire for more autonomy seem to be taking the place of cooperation in both America and Europe. A recent study by [the](#)

[Pew Research Center](#) has revealed the current threat to the transatlantic relationship. Only 26% of Germans today have a favorable view of the United States. It is the lowest level since the second Gulf War.

In view of this deplorable situation of the old alliance, what is the responsibility of art, academia and their supporters on both sides of the Atlantic? I would like to emphasize four key issues in this context.

First: Friendships that have fallen asleep need a wake-up call, a call that aims for fundamental renewal. This means revitalizing existing academic and cultural partnerships, but also opening the circle of partners and approaching people who have different perceptions, backgrounds and political mindsets. I am referring to a spectrum of partners as diverse as social rights activists in the social hotspot ›Skid Row‹ in downtown LA to conservative intellectuals, whose positions are often portrayed in European media only as caricatures. Even if it is exhausting at first glance, there is a special potential in encounters and conversations, which may initially seem awkward and strange. Awkwardness should not be seen as a threat to transatlantic understanding. It is the point where our work becomes exciting and relevant.

Second: Literature and literary studies give us deeper insights about each other, including the complex connections and histories that have shaped our societies. Also here, Thomas Mann was a shining example. Although Thomas Mann cultivated anti-American prejudices until the 1920s, he found great appreciation for American narrative art during his exile. Not only did the works of Whitman and Emerson play a crucial role in his literary work in exile but Mann was also willing to engage with young authors such as Peter Viereck, Gore Vidal or the sixteen-year-old Susan Sontag. And through authors like Joseph Conrad and T.S. Eliot, he has opened up a world that has detached itself from its Eurocentricity. Today, we can learn a lot from the curiosity and openness of this seventy-year-old author.

Third: Transatlantic relations have always been more comprehensive than bilateral relations between European nations and the USA. This understanding should be part of a renewal of the old alliance. [In his contribution to this blog](#), David Kim, from the University of California Los Angeles, opened the view across the ocean and pleaded for a geopolitical reorientation and the inclusion of transpacific perspectives. I would like to support this without reservation. Stefan Keppler-Tasaki and Chunjie Zhang recently underscored the potential of transpacific literary studies in a [conversation for the Thomas Mann House](#). They recalled, for example, the early travel reports and literary works of Adelbert von Chamisso and Georg Forster, and pointed out the extent to which an examination of these cultural entanglements could also revitalize one's own discipline.

Fourth: Academic and cultural institutions bear social responsibility. In his famous lecture series *Achieving our Country*, Richard Rorty described the political atmosphere among his academic colleagues as »principled, theorized, philosophical hopelessness.« His lectures go back more than twenty years, but if we are honest, this description still fits the atmosphere in many institutions today. However,

Rorty did not stop at this diagnosis. He reflected on the role intellectuals should play to reopen the horizon for a common political future. Rorty understood citizenship as a possibility to act, an offer to be taken. It is not a question of truth, not a question of fixed knowledge, but rather of the joint creation of a community that must necessarily remain unfinished.

Richard Rorty finds an ally in the African-American poet James Baldwin. Baldwin describes the injustice done to his ancestors as a crime that cannot be forgiven. Yet, on the other hand, he recalls the task of forming a common identity: »If we — and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks [...] do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country.«

It seems to me that today, too, our political responsibility in the transatlantic alliance is to clearly pinpoint injustices and face the task of jointly realizing the normative project of a decent, open society.

References

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Richard Rorty. *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth Century America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998.