GERMAN U15

WHO WE ARE

German U15 is an association of 15 traditional, medically leading and research-orientated universities with a comprehensive range of subjects, founded in 2012. Universities with a strong research base form the backbone of the German science system: they are of paramount importance for the education of young people and the qualifications of young scientists. Its broad range of subjects enables highly interdisciplinary research. They are in close contact with society and business. Internationally, they are highly visible and attractive to scientists from all over the world.

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The climate in western knowledge-based societies has changed drastically: in many places trust in the idea that increased knowledge can guarantee the future of the democratic state has dissipated. Migration and the challenges of integration, the strengthening of nationalist ideologies and the crisis of supranational structures, religious extremism and terrorism, cyber attacks, financial crises and climate change – all these have put the confidence of citizens in the future viability of our society to the test. This trust is especially important in 2017, an election year in Germany.

Trust in the future arises from a more distant reflection on disturbing events and developments. This is where the humanities, social sciences, and cultural sciences have a significant role to play. They situate current events in larger contexts and in this way foster objective, constructive, and future-oriented debate instead of fearful reactions. In this sense, the magazine "Knowledge Creates Trust" is intended to provide guidance and encouragement for the future - 15 academics from the humanities, social sciences, and cultural sciences put forward various views, each from the perspective of his or her own discipline – views that awaken our curiosity.

The U15 universities are among the most publicly visible institutions in the German academic system and have long proved themselves to be the places where the future is being shaped. As such, in this election year of 2017, this places them in a position of responsibility. They have a duty to help strengthen confidence in the future viability of our society. This makes for stimulating and rewarding reading: enjoy!
There is a long tradition of cultural exchange between the Orient and the Occident. As a philologist and a philosopher, I focus on these historical relationships between Christian-Latin, Arab, and Jewish philosophy, theology, and natural sciences. Ever since Alexander the Great connected up the Mediterranean area and the Middle East, right up as far as what is now Uzbekistan, knowledge has travelled from Portugal to Samarkand – and back again. An international knowledge space emerged that survived military conflicts: Even at the time of the crusades, scholars continued to translate texts written by colleagues of other religions. There was an awareness that all three monotheistic beliefs arose in the same Middle Eastern area. In the Ottoman Empire and in Andalusian Spain, Jews, Christians, and Muslims in large cities lived peacefully in different districts for a long time, despite the differences between their religions. Whether in Alexandria, Istanbul, or Cordoba, people interacted with each other with decency and respect, regardless of language and faith, accepting the rules of the city.

On the one hand, this scenario creates hope; on the other, it generates scepticism about multicultural utopias: perhaps it is too much to ask for a Christian to expect their religion to be understood by their Muslim neighbour. Perhaps it is all right for us to remain alien to each other.

It was not until 1800, when the idea of a modern state in Europe spread with Napoleon’s success, that the West began to look down on the politically backward Orient. Ultimately, it was ideas of nationalism that put an end to the centuries-long peaceful coexistence in the Mediterranean metropolises. The question remains: why shouldn’t we build on that style of co-existence subject to the condition of tolerance?

Without an interdisciplinary approach, I would not get far in exploring what societies such as the US define as being their own and what they see as being foreign. The combination of sociological and literary-analytical methods is indispensable if we want to reconstruct how the concept of being “black” was established, for instance, or whether the concept of being “indigenous” only emerged once human rights and indigenous rights started to become issues. In this approach, we also consult novels or autobiographies that influence legal and political discourses.

The objects of our research are not a given, but the result of social discourse, a social construct. Time and again, we analyze processes of social negotiation: in relation to ecological justice — in the negotiations about the construction of the Dakota Access pipeline, for instance — or with regard to dealing with foreigners. What criteria were applied — language, religion, or skin colour? The aim is to tease out the logic underlying each individual document and protocol in order to understand cultural mechanisms.

As far as the choice of methods is concerned, more and more research areas are opening up that seem to call for close cooperation between the humanities and the natural sciences. I am currently working together with colleagues from the field of medicine on a project that deals with the traumas experienced by refugees: the medical experts identify characteristics of trauma subjects; I analyze blogs written by Syrian migrants who document their experiences as refugees. Thanks to this cooperation, a tailor-made instrument has emerged that gives us profound insights into the fate of people who have to reorientate themselves to their new life in Germany. The prerequisite for this is that the dialogue is conducted on the same level — without any wrangling over the supremacy of a given interpretation.

This way, we link up with the kind of productive exchange between the disciplines that has somehow been forgotten, owing to their increasing differentiation in the past.
Only a handful of scholars in Germany work on classical Arabic literature. So even though I held a professorship at Yale, I was delighted when in 2014, after I had been working in the USA for 27 years, the opportunity came up for me to move to the Free University in Berlin. The great thing is that the generous support for collaborative research, which is only available at German universities, allows me to undertake teamwork with other cultural scientists.

I think it would be wonderful if basic Arabic were taught at schools, as is the case in France. This would raise awareness of how closely our culture – European literature, for instance – is interwoven with Arabic culture. There is hardly a scientific Greek work from antiquity that was not translated into Arabic.

The people on the other side of the Mediterranean share with us not only classical culture and philosophy, but also knowledge about the origins of the natural sciences and wisdom literature. This common heritage is also reflected in the language, although few people realize that words such as "cipher" and "zenith" are of Arabic origin. Of all textual genres, the poetry of the pre-modern period is particularly close to my heart: Arabic poetry, which carries its entire history within itself, does not give up its secrets easily.

A poem is like a rose that one gradually unfolds, petal by petal. Even a short verse seems to combine the centuries-long development of all previous verses on this subject. Only those who know the origins of such poetry can truly understand it in depth. It is a pleasure enjoyed by those in the know, because it is not effortless, but the joy is all the greater for that.

With one of my Arabic students, who is himself a poet, I am working on a new, contemporary translation of the pre-modern Arabic verses of al-Mutanabbi (915 - 965), the greatest poet of the Arabic tongue. His art of clear suggestive linguistic images is timeless.

DEBATING LIKE THE BRITONS

In policy matters regarding energy, the environment, and climate issues, we Germans are characterised by a remarkable tension: On the one hand, we are a technology-driven society whose economic strength is based on the spirit of invention and enormous know-how. On the other hand, in international comparison, we tend to be risk-averse: we shy away from innovations when they are associated with risks that are as yet unforeseeable.

Trust in science has been dwindling for some time; the plagiarism of recent years is only a cause and an expression of this. One example is genetic engineering, which is not socially viable because it is distrusted by the majority. Public debate on this subject is dominated by a vague sense of uncertainty and collective arguments simply bounce off it. This phenomenon is also evident in the culture of the debate itself: it always seems strange to me when talk shows are more about opinions and polarization, rather than about the actual subject matter.

As a scientist, I am committed to the ideal of future-orientated, non-judgemental research, for which the questions of method and data are fundamental. But even in the debates in the Bundestag that are often the subject of my analyses, it is rare for someone to use new scientific knowledge to underpin a political change of direction. Many of our European neighbours are more pragmatic and more research-oriented. Finland, for instance, was initially opposed to the introduction of biofuels and unwilling to implement the European Directive. However, once the Finns discovered that fuel could be produced sustainably from organic forestry waste, Finland was suddenly in favour. Public opinion also turned.

An open communication culture like this, one which makes a rethink possible, is something I also wish for Germany.
NOT ALL RELIGIOUS FREEDOMS ARE THE SAME

The way the state deals with religious diversity varies from country to country. If a Muslim teacher wears a headscarf in Germany, this falls under the religious freedom guaranteed in basic law. In France, school pupils with a headscarf can be excluded from the classroom in the name of secularism.

Constitutional regulations on religious freedom and non-discrimination are an important signal for the recognition of minorities. When it comes to the integration of migrants, for example, such regulations influence whether religion serves as a bridge or a barrier. Historically, these rules can be explained by the manner in which State and Church underwent secession on the path to the modern situation. Today, they are increasingly under the influence of international institutions such as the European Court of Human Rights. It is therefore interesting that constitutional rules differ from country to country. If a Muslim teacher wears a headscarf in Germany, it is explained differently than in France. In France, this falls under the religious freedom guaranteed in the constitution. In Germany, it is linked to a lack of religious freedom.

In my search for antecedents for the anchoring of religious freedom in international law, I have come across early national constitutions. From the early modern period, we can find early constitutional regulations on religious freedom and non-discrimination. These regulations influence whether religion serves as a bridge or a barrier. Historically, these rules can be explained by the manner in which State and Church underwent secession on the path to the modern situation. Today, they are increasingly under the influence of international institutions such as the European Court of Human Rights. It is therefore interesting that constitutional rules differ from country to country. If a Muslim teacher wears a headscarf in Germany, it is explained differently than in France. In France, this falls under the religious freedom guaranteed in the constitution. In Germany, it is linked to a lack of religious freedom.

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In Africa, it is not so important. The flying traders, who also call themselves "aventuriers" – adventurers – are very playful with words. And just as store owners make their shops attractive, the street traders want to create a pleasant linguistic background in order to build a bridge to the public outside world. For them, conversation is a useful tool in their day-to-day business. They are skilled at adapting their language to suit the occasion. In many African languages, the same word can have different meanings depending on the context. For example, in Krio, a language spoken in Sierra Leone and Liberia, the word "word" can mean "speech" or "idea" depending on how it is used. This flexibility allows the language to evolve and adapt to changing circumstances.

In the digital age, the ability to find good answers to such questions should be a part of general education, but is not yet understood politically.

How do digital media affect our society? What are the implications of the fact that everyone can broadcast, save, and publish 24 hours a day, and thus has all the instruments to maintain a constant state of high arousal? One of mytheses in the field of scandal research is that society is becoming increasingly restless and edgy. Networking means distraction, especially when pictures come into circulation that can destroy a previously revered model (or a private individual) in a flash and can pulverize reputation and authority at the speed of light.

In a transitional phase of the evolution of the media, we are not yet up to the task of responsibly managing the instruments and possibilities of barrier-free publishing. So what should we do? Frankly, we must all become editors in our own right. Because every day we are confronted with questions that good journalists also ask themselves. Which source is reliable? Is this piece of information relevant? What should not be published for the protection of those concerned? The ability to find good answers to such questions should be a part of general education, but is not yet understood politically.

We certainly need to rehearse, with children and young people, a considered manner of speaking in the public space. We need media literacy at the level demanded by our time – analysis of the change in the public outside world and the cognitive inner world. The vitality of the digital age places high demands on our value orientation and decisiveness: it is precisely because it can be a tremendous joy to lose oneself in the worlds of information that we need to retreat from time to time to maintain inner balance. After all, self-responsibility also entails the preservation of spaces of calm, low in stimuli and high in cultivation. But above all, our challenge today is to understand the power of the digital age and to use it responsibly.
Cultures of decision-making are at the centre of a special research area in which we engage with the question of how the practice of decision-making has changed. By decision-making, we do not mean an internal process, but a kind of social interaction: various possible courses of action are explored, in order to then explicitly fix upon one of them. Often, however, it is only retrospectively that a given action is interpreted as an act of decision-making.

Our thesis goes: decision-making is not simply a matter of course, but an imposition that incurs high social costs and which one therefore tends to avoid. Indeed, consequences are never foreseeable at the time the decision is made. This raises special legitimacy problems: one could always have decided differently and the discarded options are still out there. This contingency is often covered up, particularly in politics; people talk about "unavoidable decisions" – and inherent contradiction in terms.

People have approached the impossibility of decision-making in different ways at different times and in different social fields. We would like to know more about this and are searching for "cultures of decision-making" – in the plural. The question is: when, why, and how is social action shaped, staged, and perceived as decision-making?
 IMAGES OF NATURE

Since antiquity, artists have staged the appearance of liveliness: as play and as a joyful illusion, but always in such a way that a mysterious part that exceeds our imagination remains. This phenomenon of vivaciousness is perfectly embodied in an inscription on a famous altarpiece from the time of the High Renaissance. It shows the mourning of Christ – the Pietà. “As soon as the swollen (from weeping) eyes of the mourners (of the beholder), could erupt, the work of Giovanni Bellini could weep.” The grief-stricken expressions of Mary and John awaken precisely the same feeling in the observer – and thus seem to turn the entire picture into emotion. Despite rationality and enlightenment, people are still capable of such moments of magical transformation – and not just in art. Our tendency to fetishise also manifests itself in this manner in everyday life today. Just think of a car owner desperately concerned with a scratch in the paintwork.

OLIVER PRIMAVESI, Chair of Greek Philology I, University of Munich

TEXTUAL CRITICISM INSTEAD OF FAKE NEWS

The translations of Aristotle’s works that are available to us today often provide us with only an imprecise representation of the Greek philosopher’s ideas. This is because for many of his writings, modern translators still have to work from editions of the original ancient Greek versions that are based on completely inadequate sources. It is a bit like playing Chinese whispers: the initial concept is often no longer recognisable at the end because so many errors were made in the course of the manuscript transmission. This has led to such distortion of the context that it is like reading Aristotle through frosted glass.

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Accepting that we cultivate emotionally charged relationships with objects, in our research centre we ask ourselves: what has this empathetic, image-controlled relationship to objects got to do with our relationship with nature? What would it be like if artists, designers and landscape historians were involved in creative processes within the framework of so-called energy revolution? Too little consideration is given to this, despite movements such as Bauhaus, which revolutionised the form of everyday objects.

With our interest in historically changing natural images, we are looking for architects, artists, and town and landscape planners to generate public debate about the successful design of technology and landscape. Our aspiration is to call into question the alleged lack of alternatives – and this is, of course, the most important task of universities, which should brand themselves as laboratories of good living.

OLIVER PRIMAVESI, Chair of Greek Philology I, University of Munich

The teaching of classical languages in secondary schools has an important contribution to make in passing on these skills: for where else is the difference between conclusive argument and good humour but empty talk more evident than in Plato’s dialogues? The challenge of understanding and translating incisive texts, in order to make them accessible.

JOHANNES RABIN, Director of the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science in Berlin

This is a mammoth task, but it is important not least because it contributes to a societal change of perspective. Too often, Islam is incorrectly perceived only as a religion, not as a culture. In fact, Germany is also home to many atheist Muslims who grew up in secular families in the Middle East or North Africa, but who are not visible in the public arena.

JUDITH VON DER LINDEN, Assistant Professor at the University of Rostock

ON ATHEISM IN ISLAM

Being an Islamic scholar today, when debates about Islam are mostly conducted one-sidedly, entails a great responsibility. The media are dominated by ignorance: they skive over a full 1400 years of history to focus on the time of the Prophet Muhammad and warn against a Caliphate. Such simplifications follow arguments made by extremists. If an Islamic scientist were to judge German history on the basis of such a low level of knowledge, we would certainly judge this as outrageous presumption. In reality, the history and structure of Islamic societies are, of course, equally complex.

My focus is on the Middle East during the transitional period from the late Middle Ages to early modernity. So far, only about 10-15% of the primary sources from this period have been published: texts that give us an insight into the intellectual development of Islam at the time of the Renaissance, the European religious wars, and the Enlightenment. This fundamental research is about searching for and translating incisive texts, in order to make them accessible.

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JUDITH PFEIFFER, Institute of Oriental and Asian Studies, University of Bonn
Social inequality in income and wealth has increased in Western societies since the 1980s. It harms subjective well-being, collective health, and social trust. This inequality is a popular target for public criticism, but such criticism does not necessarily lead to political decisions that result in greater social equality. In reality, there is considerable tolerance for inequality in the population at large, especially among the middle classes. They benefit from the fiscal transfer services provided by the state, but at the same time they are committed to performance justice, and they invest in the market: not only as employees, but also by building up a private pension, or by investing on a small scale in the equity market or in property. As a result, they are sceptical about redistribution and are more likely to support investment in education and infrastructure.

We lack a convincing programme to deal with the widening social gap. And the social centrifugal forces continue to grow. The stagnation of the middle, the resentment of those who feel excluded, but also globalisation, technological change, and the pluralisation of ways of life undermine the formulas of social compromise. In some parts of society, the feeling of insecurity is eroding and fears about status are spreading. New demonstrations of solidarity are no longer based solely on the principles of fairness, but also on cultural identities and populist self-assertion. This is often accompanied by social exclusion and the devaluation of others.

Trust is then only given to those who are perceived as being equal and belonging. In this way, insecure, fearful societies lose their ability to cooperate across group boundaries. After all, it is these kinds of shared experiences and perspectives, as well as the ability to balance interests, that characterise modern societies and make them successful.