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Keynote Speech
"Past and Present: European Legacies in today's conflicts"

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Good evening. There's a palpable sense of excitement in the room and that makes me very excited to be here with you. An additional excitement is that the two previous speakers in their excellent speeches have already anticipated a good bit of what I was planning to say. So, let me invite you instead of what I might have said to share with you a few ruminations of an historian looking back at 1914.

In my book 'The Vertigo Years', I looked at the years before 1914, the years before the great catastrophe, and my intention here was to make clear or at least to argue that these were not the good old times when everything was stable and golden and somehow intact that was then ruptured but that actually modernity swept over Europe in the years before. I wanted to argue instead that these were years of turmoil, years of explosive changes, and that the First World War also is better understood in a context of this. The narrative device of this book was the following: Imagine that a plaque of bookworms had devoured all information about the years between 1914 and 2008 when the book appeared. And imagine you could see this time not as the time before the First World War but a time full of chances and contradiction, a time uncertain of its own future as indeed we are uncertain of our own future.

Of course, we are looking back; we do know that this war happened and what we often hear about this and I think that is something very important is what you call in German the Augusterlebnis, the August experience. The August experience that was replicated in many countries in Europe, namely that young recruits rushed to the enlisting posts and were practically besides themselves with enthusiasm about being able to fight a war. One notable exception was Italy, while in Germany and England and France millions of young men volunteered for the war, in Italy during the whole duration of the war 9,000 men volunteered. The state and the army were not very popular in Italy at the time. The August experience has become a historical common place. It is also a historical truth but it is a rather difficult one because while we have the poems and the letters and the diaries with paeans of praise and great enthusiasm for the war, it would be very shoddy to forget that these things were written mostly by young academics, representing roughly five percent of the population.

What the other 95 percent thought was often very different. There were the farmers for whom the field of honour wasn't half as interesting in July as their own fields were where they had to bring in the harvest. There were the workers who regarded the war as a capitalist conspiracy against the working class. There were huge peace demonstrations all over Europe with hundreds of thousands of demonstrators in June and July of 1914. Most of these things haven't made it into our history books in quite the same way.

But there is still a very striking contrast in how war is remembered, and thought about. I had an opportunity to speak to two school classes in the same little town in Germany about a month ago. One was a Gymnasium, which is not a place where you get fit but of the highest form of secondary school in the German system and the other was a Realschule, a school where you would be mostly expected to leave with a vocational certificate. To kick off the discussion I asked both sets of young people: If tomorrow Angela Merkel decided to declare war on Vladimir Putin or on Russia because of what happens in Eastern Ukraine, who of you boys would volunteer? And the response of the Gymnasium pupils was silent, incredulous staring – they had no idea that such a thing might be possible.

At the other school of about a hundred boys four raised their arm; three of them were of migration backgrounds and the idea of war clearly raised different associations for them. Four of a hundred is not as it might have been a hundred years ago – ninety of a hundred. Things have changed. The question is: Have they changed because we have learned from the past?

In Europe, in our peaceful and wealthy Europe, we look at the past at 1914, at 1938, at 1945, and we ask ourselves: How could they? How could they have been so militaristic? How could they have run after Hitler and after Stalin? How could they? It seems incomprehensible to us, it seems foolish.

I happen to think that this is a very bad way of starting to look at the past and at history because of course when we write about history, we've heard already some, I thought, very thought-provoking remarks about different cultural memories even today, even about the First World War, which is so excellently well researched.

But at the same time historians are always writers for their own time. You can see that about Christopher Clark when you contrast him with the previous, shall we say, paradigm setter at least for Germany, a German historian named Fritz Fischer who in 1962 published a book in which he argued that the First World War had been not only Germany's responsibility but Germany was morally guilty for this war. And after a very fierce debate this was accepted more or less as the historical truth, which is very interesting because in 1962 Germany indeed did have to accept responsibility for a war, only it was not the first one. It was the second one. This was as it were a proxy discussion that was happening.

Today when you listen to Christopher Clark and you find the war displayed, the beginning of the war as a systemic failing of European politicians and European strategists, you'll get a very strong feeling from someone who is a self-confessed

ardent admirer of the European Union that we can only either go down together or make it together but there is no longer any possibility of making it on our own. No country is strong enough; no power is strong enough to make a significant difference or indeed to achieve its own policy objective and goals on its own. Europe is a systemic whole and both its success and its failure will be within this systemic context.

I think history is written not only from the present but very often also for the present. And this is something that I think is very important for historians because what historians are effectively doing is drawing maps of the past to allow us all to navigate through the past and perhaps also through the present. The past of course is not history but history is perhaps a map of the past. And we heard of mental maps earlier but it is very important to remember that a map is useful exactly because it does not portray the world as it is.

If you look at the London subway map, it is excellently useful to finding your way around the London subway. It is completely useless if you're above ground. And every map emphasises, stylises, and simplifies the real world to show you certain aspects of a reality that the map maker or the people who paid him or her found important.

Now that is two things that are important about that. First of all, it means that every map is a kind of fiction, a useful fiction that allows us to navigate a reality that is too complex to be taken in as it is. The second thing that this map does with us is that it encodes values that we bring to this reality. It is not something that shows us what is there objectively. It is something that shows us where we can find what we already value, what we already find important, be it a street or a petrol station or a geological formation. So, we cannot use maps to discover something that we didn't know about.

A map always shows us something that we already knew about. A map is always a useful fiction. And a historical map, history, is a useful fiction of the past. If we want to think about whether we can learn from history, we must understand how these fictions work. We must understand what we project into this past. We must understand our own values. Our values are different from those of the past and of course the past has contributed in the changing of these values.

Are our values objectively better? That is a very different question. It is a question that you can see from a German perspective, for instance in a little episode that I found hugely interesting and significant. The German president Joachim Gauck said about three months ago that Germany should take a more active role in its international engagements, even if they were military. Now if François Hollande had said that or David Cameron had said that, no journalist would have even found it worth noting down.

In Germany there was a storm of indignation and he was called a war monger, he was called someone who dragged Germany into new wars. And of course that is understandable in a country that is still under the trauma of the Second World War.

But it also gets Germany into a morally slightly awkward situation when in every international engagement in which military force has been judged to be required, the Germans have to say: Well, look, we're happy to give you logistical support, we're happy to pay you but why don't you let your soldiers be shot at? This is not a very easy moral situation either. But it is a very German situation out of the memory of the Second World War.

So, are these changed German values better values than before the war? In this particular case I would say they are but are they the values, which are equal to our present? Are there values, which are equal to the needs of the present? Well, Mr. Gauck appeared to differ.

Historians and we all have a tendency to look at the past as something that is settled from a position that is stable. We are here now and we look back and we can evaluate what happened then. This is a very difficult position to take because you all know Walter Benjamin's beautiful image of the Angelus Novus, the angel of history being blown into the future by the huge energy of the events of the past but being blown to this future with his face towards the past, so that he cannot see his own future.

Well, one important part of this image is that we're not in a stable place to judge anything by. We are amid tumultuous developments; we are ourselves, as the Americans so fondly say, in a fog of war. We are in a fog of impossible decisions and dilemmas. It is always easier to see this afterwards but we do not have a stable position from which we can judge our past.

If we ask ourselves „how could they?“, how could these people have acted as they did and thought as they did, I think it is very important to assume that the people who lived in the past were as rational as we are – or perhaps that we are as stupid as they were, only in a different way.

If a historian in 100 years will stand here, perhaps this network is still going, and addresses the audience, I have a terrible suspicion that he or she may ask: But how could they? And this is interesting because this puts us actually morally in a different position than people in the past. How could they have understood what they did to climate change? They had the scientific models, they knew the best case and the worst case scenarios and the best case scenarios were not very pretty and they continued. They went on consuming the fossil fuels; they went on polluting oceans with plastics, et cetera, et cetera. They knew what would happen. They knew that climate change would bring the diseases, the epidemics, the wars about primary resources that we have seen in the last 80 years; I'm speaking from a 100 years hence.

While the great dictators, our idea of evil incarnate, and the great catastrophes of the 20th century may have killed a hundred million people, that may look a relatively light menu from the position of a 100 years hence, after decades of droughts, floods, wars, forced migrations, and mass starvation.

'How could they?' is a very dangerous question to ask about the past. And I think a very necessary approach to history is to assume people back then were as rational as we are. They made decisions for very good reasons. If we had another 20 minutes, I'd be happy to lay you out why all sorts of countries thought it was a good idea to start a war in 1914, only there were very different wars that people wanted to fight but they were in themselves each one of them perfectly rational from a political point of view. Only the conflagration and the explosion of this catastrophe was not foreseen or not foreseen by people who had positions of power.

I would like to make one remark, which I'd like to set as it were, as a cat among the pigeons perhaps for you to discuss in the following days. Well, perhaps you allow me two more remarks. I'm beginning to work on another book, and one of my other interests is a philosophical interest, which is the legacy of the enlightenment. And I believe one of the ways in which the past touches the present and indeed the future has intimate relations with the First World War; a very strong relationship with the First World War because there is one enormous sea change that happens in the First World War, not so much in 1914 as if you want to give it a definite date, on the 1 July 1916, the beginning of the battle of the Somme.

The battle of the Somme was the first fully mechanised, technologized battle in human history. And the young soldiers and the not so young soldiers who had come to the front with a view to displaying courage, self-sacrifice, patriotism, being there for god, for king and country or for god and their emperor, they found themselves confronted not with other soldiers but with gigantic machines of death; machines that industrialised death much as Auschwitz would do it later.

This is the beginning of the breaking of the European and Western confidence in the enlightenment because these machines were the products of the enlightenment, of enlightened reason. These were the products of the technology, of the science that people had always believed could make the world and would make the world a better place. These machines, these technological creatures had all of a sudden turned against humanity.

We're living in a much more technological world but technology has not stopped being ambivalent to us. The legacy of the Enlightenment has not stopped being ambivalent for us, and I think this is a very important point. And the problem is that if we in Europe talk about now all our great discussions, be it climate change or migration or human rights or sexual rights, all of these discussions go back to the bedrock of the Enlightenment, to the great wonderful fiction of universal rights that Enlightenment philosophers invented because don't be mistaken: Universal human rights are a fiction. They are a fiction we all subscribe to but if you're living on a desert island, you have no human rights. Only other people grant them to you because you all agree to live in this fiction.

All our discussions go back to the Enlightenment but we no longer trust this Enlightenment. This is a footnote to this rumination about the First World War but I think it is an important one because it still colours all our discussions and it will colour our future.

But let me say in the end if learning from history is far from easy because we don't have a resting, stable point from which to look at history and we can only make fictions about history, we can never actually show you the whole complexity of everything that happened and how, some lessons may have been learned. I think personally the European Union deeply flawed, as it is, is such a lesson; the fact that people talk to each other as the people whom I'm seeing in this room and whom I'm privileged to be talking to is such a lesson.

But there is another lesson and I think that also applies to Europe today. In 1914, the European political elites tried to mitigate, slow down, if not prevent change, especially change in political participation and democratisation. Of course at least four of them were emperors, many others were still monarchies and the great groundswell of demands for political participation that was so important before the First World War were quashed sometimes violently but always in various ways.

The thing about change is, you can perhaps steer it and shape it but you cannot prevent it. If you try to prevent it long enough, it will finally wash over you and wash you away with it, take you away with it. Today's European Union is not great at change and incidentally it is not great at changes that allow greater political participation and transparency in Europe itself. We're living in a European Union in which we still vote for national parties, which must be one of the great absurdities. We're living in a European Union that leaves people feel disengaged.

If we look back at the beginning of the First World War, the fact that you can, perhaps if you're very lucky, steer change and shape it but you cannot prevent it, is something that we should all remember, not only about 1914 but also about 2014.

Thank you.