

Citizenship in a Global Age

Personal Reflections on a Political Conundrum

HORST KÖHLER

Former German President Horst Köhler visited the University of Notre Dame's Keough School of Global Affairs in September 2017. During his second visit to Notre Dame, at the invitation of the Nanovic Institute for European Studies and the Notre Dame Institute for Advanced Study, Koehler led a global policy seminar for Notre Dame global affairs graduate and undergraduate students and gave the following speech on what it means to be a citizen in a global age marked by geopolitical instability, climate change, and swift technological adoption and change.

I

If you look at the big picture of history, it is not a matter of course that I am speaking here today.

A few hundred years ago, it would have been unthinkable for a Protestant to speak at a Catholic university.

Seven decades ago – let's say, in the year I was born, 1943 – my country was the biggest enemy of the United States until it was, thankfully, defeated in a war which cost millions of lives.

And finally, as the son of simple farmers who became refugees twice within the first ten years of my life, I really wasn't predestined to be called »President Köhler« one day and give a speech at a prestigious American university.

And yet I am here, and none of you seems to want to go for my throat because I am protestant, or because I am German. None of you seems to question my legitimacy to speak because I wasn't born into a family of wealth or nobility or fame. All of this – if you look at the big picture of history! – is not a matter of course. None of it should be taken for granted.

Times have changed – and they have changed for the better. Humanity has made progress within the last few decades that would have been unimaginable for the grandparents of your grandparents. Statistically speaking, the species of

Speech by Former Federal President of Germany Horst Köhler at the University of Notre Dame, Indiana.

Homo sapiens lives healthier, longer, and more peaceful lives than ever before. The average life expectancy improved more over the last 50 years than over the entire 1000 years before. Over roughly the same period of time – from 1960 to 2015 – global child mortality rates were reduced by more than 70 %. In China alone, over half a billion people were able to lift themselves out of extreme poverty since 1990. And despite some horrendous conflicts raging today, the world has never in its history seen a lower rate of violent deaths than during the last 25 years.

All of this is the result of an unprecedented progress in science, technology, communications – but, perhaps most of all, it is the result of a global exchange of goods, ideas, knowledge and, yes, people. It is the result of an ever expanding web of economic and political connectivity which allowed our economies to thrive on the international division of labor, which allowed our scientists to learn from each other and our politicians to cooperate with each other. In short, most of humanity's progress during the last 50 years is an outcome of globalization.

And yet I am speaking to you at a moment in history when public discourse is marked not by content about what humanity has achieved by coming closer together, not by optimism about what there is still to attain, but rather by an acute sense of fragility, of disorientation and of tension. Many people all around the world seem to have lost faith in the most powerful creed of modernity: that my children will be better off than I am today.

We live in a time of crises: the refugee crisis, the chaos in the Middle East, the worries about the stability of the international financial system, the ongoing environmental disasters in many corners of the planet, North Korea, terrorism... What is especially worrisome about these crises is that there doesn't seem to be a basis for confidence about how to really get out of the several messes we are in. Maybe the biggest crisis of all is the crisis of confidence in the ability of politics to find lasting solutions. As a consequence, many are ready to blame their uneasiness about the future on the very phenomenon which made our current level of unprecedented well-being possible: globalization. In Europe, in America and many other parts of the world, a lot of people turn to leaders who preach not cooperation but confrontation, not openness, but retreat. This is the paradox of our time. At no point in history has it been clearer: our challenges are complex, our challenges are long-term, and our challenges are global. And yet those political forces are on the rise whose answers are simple, whose answers are short-term, and whose answers are national.

Tonight, I want to try to make some sense of this paradox, try to understand the ambivalence of living in a globalized time. What is the role of national politics in an ever more connected world? How do we as individuals – as voters, as consumers, as human beings, in short: as citizens – fit into this overwhelming web of interconnectedness?

In my speech tonight, I would like to offer one short answer and one long answer.

The first answer is about the downsides of globalization, about the destructive force of a world economy which, in its current form, is ruthless to the weak, brutal to our planet, and constantly trying to evade rules.

The second, longer answer will take us to the vision of a great transformation which is needed in our economies and societies. This answer will analyze our concept of politics, our understanding of national interest, which I believe have to be redefined in light of the realities of the 21st century. Finally, this second answer will be about responsibility and identity, which will help us understand what it means to be a citizen in a global age.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I couldn't think of any better place to search for these answers than at the University of Notre Dame. An *American* University founded by a *Frenchman*, calling its athletic teams the »fighting *Irish*«; a university which is part of the oldest and, by definition, most global institution of the world, the Catholic Church. Taking a global perspective is part of your DNA, which is why I am excited and honored to be able to have this conversation with you tonight.

II

»It was the best of times, it was the worst of times«. Those are the words with which Charles Dickens famously started his novel on the French Revolution, »A Tale of Two Cities«. Is this the motto of this new millennium, another age of gigantic, yet contradictory transition? After all, the balance sheet of our globalized present is not altogether rosy. The immense progress I have described earlier has come at a hefty price – and the invoice we are presented with now creates huge challenges for the future of this planet. Let me give you two pieces of evidence for that.

Exhibit A: Global warming. The current models of economic growth, which have brought the industrialized world extraordinary prosperity, are coming up against their limits. Nature does not allow us to grow the way we were used to. The warning signs can be breathed from New Delhi to Beijing; they can be felt from the Sahel zone to the Houston area; they can be seen on the mountain tops of the Alps and the glaciers of Antarctica. The unrelenting burning of fossil fuels, a major driver of growth in the past, has increased the concentration of green-house gases in our atmosphere to unprecedented levels. 15 of the 16 hottest years on record have been in this 21st century.

Most ecological consequences of global warming will be irreversible. The climate is not like an indoor plant – if the plant dries up, you just buy a new one; but there's no such thing as a store for replacement ecosystems. In many areas we are approaching dangerous 'tipping points' which, once crossed, may cause abrupt and irreversible changes to the earth's ecosystem. That is, by the

way, what makes fighting climate change unique. Politics and policies are confronted with a new quality of challenge: they need to meet concrete deadlines. You cannot ask the climate for an extension just because you failed to do your homework. You can't just make a deal with the climate. The method of buying time, which is so popular in politics, reaches its limits when it comes to global warming.

But the real reason why the global economy cannot continue to grow in the same way it has in the past becomes evident if we look at the global ecological question and the global social question at the same time. I am talking about global population growth, which will reach almost 10 billion people in 2050, I am talking about the more than 700 million people still living in extreme poverty and the growth of the global middle class. Decarbonizing the economies of industrialized countries would be difficult enough. But at the same time, we must enable massive growth in poor countries – where people need hospitals, schools, streets, and electricity, where they need education, jobs, and incomes. But which natural resources should feed this growth? After all we are *already* pushing our planet's boundaries! If everybody consumed like we do in the U.S. and in Europe, we would need several planets in reserve.

Before I get to an answer, let me present you exhibit B for the downside of globalization as we know it: inequality. The Serbian-American economist Branko Milanovic helps us to understand who have been the winners and losers of globalization since 1990. While inequality *between* countries has been reduced – mainly because in China and other parts of Asia, poverty was reduced and a new middle class has emerged –, inequality *within* countries has actually increased. The big losers of globalization, in relative terms, have been the poorer 50 % in industrialized countries, who saw no or only little increase in income. The big winners are to be found in a new class of »global plutocrats«, as Milanovic calls them, the super-rich who have seen increases in wealth which go beyond anything a normal brain can imagine.

Globalization as we know it has increased inequality. The international division of labor, the driving force of globalization, means structural change, as industries are dying in one country and are being reborn in another country, where they are more competitive. Digitalization and robotization are further accelerating structural change in industries and labor markets. This structural change is not bad *per se*. But it has to be managed. And in most industrialized countries, it hasn't been managed well. Too much time was lost clinging to the technologies and structures of the past instead of embracing those of the future. Furthermore, little attention has been paid to distributing the benefits of globalization within countries. But all of that is not an argument against globalization. That is an argument against *badly managed* globalization.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Our globalized modernity has created a strange concurrence of construction and destruction. The contradictions of globalization are felt by people all over

the world. Many are hurt by it. And many are rightfully angry, because often-times, those who are hurt the most have contributed the least to the problem: climate change affects already today millions of people, nomads in the Sahel, inhabitants of Pacific islands, or farmers in the Andes – these are certainly not the culprits for global warming. Inequality as a result of badly managed structural change in industrialized countries like the U. S. or France hits those the most who have the least influence in political decision-making. So, yes, I can understand that people are angry at globalization, that they are unsettled by its contradictions. The speed and profoundness of the changes in the last decades are overwhelming for many. It is a world where politics seems to have lost control in many areas, and people have the feeling that control over their own lives is slowly slipping away.

But you know what makes *me* angry? It makes me angry to see charlatans exploiting people's anxieties for their own political gain. They will make life harder for exactly those people they are pretending to defend. All the populists have in common that they do not offer real alternatives. After all it is no coincidence that the rising stars of the extreme right in Europe and the U. S. deny man-made climate change: When they are confronted with a problem which very obviously cannot be solved by a nation state alone, the problem is declared to be non-existent.

Summing up my first answer: No, globalization has not been all good. But it can be made better. And this leads me to my second answer: Taking the uneasiness of people seriously requires taking the challenges of globalization seriously, and the challenges which this planet as a whole is facing. Demonizing globalization altogether doesn't solve any problem, but instead creates a multitude of others. To make globalization work for all, we must not ignore its complexities and contradictions, but face them. To make it work for all, we must not ridicule international cooperation, but embrace it.

What does that mean for our understanding of politics, and for our understanding of citizenship?

III

Ladies and gentlemen,

You still remember the list of crises that I mentioned at the beginning of my speech. I believe that all these crises are manifestations of an ambivalent globalization. And they all have one thing in common: they cannot be solved by any nation state alone. Yet most of our national politics still fail to grasp that very fundamental reality of the 21st century, a reality which makes this century so different from all before: *interdependence*. The world is our neighbour, and most of our neighbour's problems will eventually become our own.

The world has witnessed this during the financial crisis, when the failing housing market of a single country caused a global recession of gigantic proportions. We have witnessed it in the Middle East, where a chain reaction triggered by illadvised interventions like in Iraq or in Lybia has led to a massive refugee crisis and 890,000 refugees flowing into Germany in the year 2015. We witnessed it during the Ebola crisis, where a deadly virus in West Africa put hospitals all over the world on high alert. And when a country like China thinks about a quota for electric mobility, car manufacturers from Germany to the U. S. frantically try to understand what that means for their business models. The list could go on and on. Policies pursued at one end of the globe have an effect on the other end. From that perspective, there is almost no policy, no political strategy which could correctly be described as purely national.

And yet many in politics, especially self-acclaimed realists, still have an understanding of *national interest* which has, in my view, little to do with reality. They see the world as an ocean on which every state rows its own boat, while international politics are charged with ensuring that everybody can row unhindered and that the boats do not collide.

Yet I believe: we are all in the same boat, and have been for some time. But so many people in the boat are so busy defending and taking care of their own oars that nobody can or wants to deal with the leak that is plain for all to see in the middle of the boat.

Two things, I believe, are important when talking about the notion of national interest: Firstly, conflicting interests along nationally defined lines are more often than not an illusion. The winners and losers in the wake of certain decisions are not entire states and entire populations, but specific groups or branches of industry within these states. A farmer in Minnesota might have more common interests with a fertilizer manufacturer in China than with a banker in New York. Any political actor blocking a cooperative global solution in the name of national interest is often acting against a great many interests within his own nation. Secondly: in the 21st century, most conflicting interests are not between ›us‹ and ›them‹, but between us and our grandchildren, between short-term and long-term interests. In the long term our fates are so inextricably linked that the further we look into the future, the more the interests of different countries converge. Climate change is the best example for this. No country, no matter how rich and powerful it may be, can maintain its prosperity in the long term if it fails to take into account the prospects and wellbeing of other countries.

Yes, there is such a thing as a global interest: There will be no security in Europe if its neighbour continent Africa, which will host over 2.5 billion inhabitants in 2050, cannot give a perspective to its huge youth population. There will be no protection of America's coastal cities if sea levels continue to rise due to global warming. There is no recipe for fighting climate change if the economies of the South continue to grow in the same polluting and resource-intensive way of today's industrialized countries.

Of course, the existence of such a thing as a global interest doesn't mean that humanity doesn't have enemies – there certainly is no common interest to be found with barbarians like the leaders of ISIS. Neither does global interest mean everyone agreeing on everything. There are always going to be divergent objectives and interests; they are one of the fundamental constants in politics. When I was Managing Director of the IMF, a truly global institution, we worked hard to solve a number of economic crises on all ends of the planet, from Brazil to Turkey to Ghana. We certainly didn't do it by simply singing Kumbayah. There were hard fights, tough negotiations, and oftentimes pressure from all kinds of sides pursuing their interests, pushing the institution to favour one path of resolution over another. To find a solution to a certain crisis, I had to get the Board of Directors to agree, representing different countries with diverging economic views, and I had to get the respective country on board, which was always mired in its own mess of conflicting internal interests. But for all differences, I always discovered that there is common ground. *There always is common ground.*

I learned that it is not the fact that conflicting objectives exist that is the problem, but the way we deal with them. And it would be a huge step forward if the trade-off between today and tomorrow was clearly stated when decisions are made, if we openly presented our own interests and perceived the concerns of others as *legitimate* interests, and if we dealt more openly with the question as to who are the winners and who are the losers of certain decisions – both in the short and in the long term, both in our own country and in other countries.

This could be a basis for a new understanding of the relationship between national politics and global solutions, where both levels feed into each other instead of hindering each other. Please don't get me wrong: This is not about the *emasculation* of the nation state. This is about its *emancipation*: The paradox of national politics in the 21st century could be that, by sharing certain tasks with other states, the nation state in fact retains its ability to act in the face of a globalized economy and a common ecosphere.

Such an understanding of national politics could be the basis for a new paradigm in international politics, a paradigm of global partnership, a new spirit of cooperation for mutual benefit, solidarity and mutual accountability.

Nothing else is needed if we want to solve humanity's biggest challenge.

IV

If you remember what I said earlier about climate change and population growth, about inequality and economic growth models, then it is evident what this biggest challenge is: giving every human being the chance to live a life in dignity, but doing so without destroying our planet.

Fighting extreme poverty and protecting our planet is deeply intertwined, we cannot do one without the other. Doing both is in the immediate interest of all of us.

And how do we do it? We need nothing less than a great transformation of our societies and economies. The transformation of developing economies, which is crucial to fight poverty, requires a transformation in industrialized countries. We, in the rich countries, in Germany, in Europe, in the U. S. need to change the way we produce and consume energy, how we travel and transport goods, how we eat and how we work. We have to prove that it is possible to decouple economic well-being from the overuse of resources and from carbon emissions. To overcome extreme poverty in Africa, Asia or Latin America, we have to push for a global enabling environment, for better trade regimes and fairer international tax rules which allow poor countries to process their own resources and profit from them instead of just exporting them.

Sounds like a naive vision? Well, despite all the bad news that we are used to, I believe we might be closer to realizing this vision than ever before. From today's point of view, it is almost a miracle what happened two years ago in New York and in Paris.

I am talking about the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, which both were agreed on in 2015 by all members of the United Nations. The core of the 2030 Agenda is a list of 17 goals which humanity wants to achieve by the year 2030. It brings together the economic, ecological and social dimensions of human development; a universal agenda that requires change in the North and the South, in the East and the West. Taken together, these two agreements present a powerful political orientation for the Great Transformation: we want to be the first generation to end extreme poverty and the last generation to be threatened by climate change. Both agreements show that it is possible for all countries on Earth to come together, to discuss and to define a way forward, despite different interests. They are the strategic antithesis to a world in disarray, a positive alternative to the storyline of decline. Both agreements are also a reminder how important the United Nations is in this interdependent world.

All of this makes me hopeful. And, if I may say so: The reaction of many American states, cities or businesses to the pulling out of the new U.S. administration from the Paris agreement – many of them have declared that they remain committed to the emission reduction goals – give me hope that at the end, the American people and its powerful economy will be part of this Great Transformation.

This underlines another feature of politics in an interdependent world: While nation states and supranational institutions are important, they are not the only important actors. It is time that we rediscover the smart principle of subsidiarity, which was first put forward by Catholic social teaching. There can and will never be a global master plan steering humanity towards a better future.

The great transformation gives direction, but in the end there will be countless decentralized, bottom-up transformations which will eventually come together to form a comprehensive whole. And as nobody has all the answers, there will be a learning process of ›trial and error‹. It is the cities and communities which are best positioned for that search process. They are much more flexible in experimenting and finding answers. They are also much closer to citizens, their needs and demands. As laboratories of change, cities could increase the public's ownership and support for the necessary changes. Globalization is not about diffusing responsibility to some ominous global force, but about anchoring awareness of the planet as a whole in local action.

Which finally brings me to the question of my title that I have yet to answer: What does it mean to be a citizen in a global age?

V

Ladies and gentlemen, dear students,

Humans are full of contradictions: we can love and hate at the same time; we often know what is right and still do the wrong thing. When it comes to globalization, we are just as contradictory as the world itself: We give to charities to help poor people in faraway countries, but when those people finally manage to find a decent income, we complain about jobs being shipped overseas. We are concerned by climate change, but not quite scared enough to make any changes to our own lifestyles contributing to it. We enjoy algorithms making our laptops faster, but not algorithms replacing our jobs. We love high interest rates on the money in our pension funds, but we hate the consequences of a financial sector spiraling out of control because it took too many risks.

Politics is a reflection of these inherent human paradoxes. Politics stands for all our conflicting needs, hopes, and fears. Democracy is an attempt to reconcile all those different interests co-existing within our societies.

What makes the great transformation so difficult is that we do not only need to balance and reconcile these different interests in our societies of the present, but also across time and space. Politics in an interdependent age needs to consider the interests not only of the citizens of a specific nation state, but also of those living in other parts of the world. How is this possible if those legitimizing political decisions are only the citizens of that specific nation state? Furthermore, our democracies think in terms of electoral cycles. Elections legitimize political decisions; this is the very foundation on which our system is built. The problem is, however, that policies are made and legitimized at a point in time when their long-term effects are not felt yet. This is why our systems encourage short-term solutions instead of long-term ones. So, every generation has to live

with the consequences of policies made before them, policies which they had no say in. What does this mean in times of irreversible climate change?

To make a long story short: Our democratic systems are bound by time and space and yet the solutions which our democracies produce must transcend exactly these boundaries. This is the core of the dilemma which makes politics in an interdependent age so challenging.

And this is why being a citizen in a global age is so challenging. Because there simply is no system, no democracy and no dictatorship, no socialism and no capitalism which would be able to automatically, inherently, magically produce the perfect solutions for the planet as a whole and for future generations. And there simply is no system which could make the painful contradictions of human existence go away.

There is only us. It's up to each and every one of us – as individual citizens, as voters, as consumers, as professionals, as friends – to make decisions, each and every day, which are responsible. Nobody is a saint, and we all have our share of contradictions, and yet we live in the best of times, with unprecedented physical comfort and health, and so we shouldn't shy away too easily from confronting the responsibilities that come from living in this global age. German-American philosopher Hans Jonas has described this responsibility already in 1979, when he wrote about the *Imperative of Responsibility*: »Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life on earth.«

What does that mean concretely in an age where the level of resource consumption in our Western societies could not, by the laws of nature, be adapted by all inhabitants of this earth? I'd like to quote another German-American philosopher: »Since universal applicability is the principle of modern ethics, the realization that our lifestyle is not universally applicable can, by modernity's own yardstick, mean nothing other than that it is immoral«. This is tough stuff! The philosopher who wrote this is my respected friend, your very own Professor Vittorio Hösle. By the way, Professor Hösle might be the smartest German alive, and I am honoured and grateful that he brought me back to Notre Dame.

Vittorio Hösle then reminds us of the inconvenient truth that there is a structural hypocrisy in the way we in the rich countries are living our lives (and, without going further, because I am no theologian, I have a hunch that the concept of structural sin could be a spiritual equivalent of that truth). This realization should not make us downtrodden and resigned, but should rather encourage us to reconsider some of our lifestyle choices.

Earlier this year, a team of scientists from four American universities calculated that if every American made just one straightforward change to their diet – namely substituting beans for beef – then the U.S. would immediately realize approximately 50 to 75 percent of its green-house gas emissions reduction targets for the year 2020. Notably, in this scenario, nothing else was assumed to change – they did not assume changes in our energy and transportation systems, and people would still eat and enjoy chicken, pork, eggs and cheese. Now,

before anybody gets the chance to write the headline: »Koehler says: eat beans, not beef!«, let me assure you that I don't want to take your beef away. But this example shows that meaningful action to tackle climate change or being respectful of the Brazilian rainforest (which is still brutally logged to make space for raising the beef we eat) does not need to be policy driven. Instead, our daily consumer choices, and as much as a single-dietary change, can go long ways and paint a clear path towards our global responsibility.

This doesn't mean living one's life as a kind of perpetual lent. More often than we think, the good choice is also the economic choice. I have read that 50% of Americans drink bottled water regularly – although tap water in most U. S. cities is about 500 times cheaper than bottled water... and 50 % of the bottled, expensive water comes actually from tap water! Maybe the barriers towards making responsible changes to our lifestyles are not so much in our wallets, but rather in our heads.

And in our hearts.

This leads me to the final issue I want to touch on tonight. There is a growing debate about the role of national identity, and there is a fear that globalization would lead to a gradual homogenization and the latent demise of distinct cultures. Not least that fear contributes to the rise of nationalism in many countries. There are three points I would like to make in that debate:

First, I have spoken earlier about the need for globalization to be anchored in local action – and, I might add now, local identity. Having an awareness of the global context in which I live does not mean to negate my culture, or my roots. Quite to the contrary: the better I know who I am, the more I can be open towards others. But the pride in my own culture and heritage must always lead to respect for the culture and heritage of others. Greatness is never achieved by making others small.

Second, we shouldn't assume that people are merely passive consumers of cultural influences. Instead, we must begin to understand culture as multilayered and organic, and we must trust people to be able to actively pick and choose from various cultural influences. Once we do so, we will also find that globalization has all the potential to expand and enrich our cultural identities.

And finally, identity is not a binary concept. We can be several things at once – I am German, I am a father, I am a Protestant, I am a European, I am an economist and so on. And none of these clash with my sense of belonging to humanity as a whole. Some of my Catholic friends have told me that they had some of the most spiritual moments when they were in a foreign country and attended Mass, not speaking the local language but still being able to follow and to answer the priest in their own language at the appropriate moments – a profound experience of shared tradition and communion which transcends any of our human notions of nationality. Couldn't such experiences be a starting point for growing our capacity for empathy and togetherness, a starting point

for discovering what we might have in common with people who don't share our language or culture or nationality or religion?

Some of you may ask me whether this is not a very elitist point of view. I would agree to the point that dealing with complexity – and living in a global age is extremely complex – gets easier for those with a good education. This is exactly why education is a key to coping with the challenges of this century.

But I don't believe that compassion is elitist, or the need for clean air, or the yearning for peace. I believe that all of these things are deeply human, they are sentiments accessible to all of us. Each of us, no matter our background, can grasp that everyone deserves to live a life in dignity. This is why I don't think that having awareness for humanity as a whole, that being a responsible citizen in a global age is something only for the elites.

Before you say »This is an easy thing to preach for someone belonging to the elites«, let me tell you a story about myself.

VI

My parents were simple farmers; members of an ethnic German minority in the Eastern European region of Bessarabia, today the Republic of Moldova. In 1940, they were lured by the Nazis to return to the Reich. Instead of a glorious new beginning on German soil, they had to spend two years in a transition camp in Austria and were then sent to Poland, as part of a sick plan to Germanize the region. They were put in a farmhouse; a house from which the Polish owners had been forced out at gunpoint just a few hours before my parents moved in. I was born half a year later. In the hard winter of 1944/45, when the Red Army was approaching, my family fled from Poland to East Germany. And in 1953, after having a row with a local communist party official, we fled again, in secrecy, to West Germany, where my parents hoped to live in freedom. We spent a few years in several refugee camps, before my family was given a small apartment when I was 13 years old, finally a place I could call »home«.

More than thirty years later, in 1990, I was sitting in Moscow in front of over a dozen Red Army generals. I had just become State Secretary in the Federal Ministry of Finance a few months earlier, and I was tasked with negotiating the withdrawal of the Soviet troops from Eastern Germany. A success in those negotiations would be crucial for the agreement of the major powers on German unification. I hadn't received much guidance for the talks; Chancellor Helmut Kohl had given me just one important direction: »Respect the Red Army, always«. I had to think of my late mother, who never was very fond of the Russians. There I was, negotiating with the Army my parents had once fled with me as a baby, negotiating for them to peacefully withdraw from the country my family escaped when I was a ten-year-old.

When we reached an agreement after several tough rounds of negotiations, I felt a peculiar mix of amazement and gratitude – amazement and gratitude about the ability of humans to overcome difference and adversity, to respect each other for both their sameness and their uniqueness, to listen to each other, to learn to trust each other – and to muster the courage to take a step into the unknown.

I have felt that mix of sentiments many times in my life, most of all when I met people from other countries. I felt it when I looked in the face of national leaders who had to make the difficult decision of accepting an IMF program or not. I felt it when I spoke as German President with Holocaust survivors in Israel. I felt it meeting African women who raised their children with unimaginable perseverance and dignity.

I am also feeling it today, amazement and gratitude, having spent several days at this great institution, meeting a lot of curious young people and some inspiring professors. All of you have shown a level of curiosity, of openness and of caring about the challenges of our times that has impressed me deeply. Meeting people like you always makes me feel hopeful for the future of the human race, hopeful that there is a way to overcome poverty and protect the planet, despite the systemic mess this world seems to be in.

In the past days here at Notre Dame, I often had to think about the powerful words Saint Augustine once wrote: »Bad times, hard times – this is what people keep saying; but let us live well, and times shall be good. We are the times: Such as we are, such are the times.«

Thank you.

