



Man of the moment: Timothy Garton Ash in Aachen where he will receive the Charlemagne Prize 2017

The history man

Am 25. Mai erhält der britische Historiker Timothy Garton Ash den Karlspreis. LORRAINE MALLINDER hat sich mit ihm über den Brexit, über Europa und sein deutsches Lieblingsgericht unterhalten.

ADVANCED

Timothy Garton Ash remembers with “razor clarity” when he decided to become a historian. He was 15 or 16 years old when his history teacher, Mr Stephenson, compared the headmaster to Adolf Hitler. “Of course, this was utterly irresistible to English schoolchildren,” he says. The spark had been lit. Garton Ash went on to read Modern History at Oxford University.

We speak while Garton Ash is driving to his alma mater, where he now teaches European Studies. He is also, among other things, a columnist at *The Guardian*, casting his shrewd historian’s eye on the issues of the day. His work has now won him the Charlemagne Prize for services to European unification, bringing him into the company of leading lights such as Jean Monnet and Winston Churchill.

The timing is bittersweet. In his *Guardian* column, the self-confessed English European called last year’s Brexit vote “the biggest defeat of my political life”.

“I take it as an obligation in a way to go on doing what I’ve tried to do for some time, to contribute to making and defending and developing Europe,” he says.

Garton Ash, who specializes in what he calls the “history of the present”, is

not one for speculation. When asked to jump 100 years into the future to predict how we might one day view Brexit, he sidesteps the question diplomatically. A wise person once said history is lived forwards but understood backwards, he says, paraphrasing Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard.

“What we face at the moment is the question of whether the wave of populism that gave us Brexit and Trump and others is still crashing onto Europe’s beaches,” he says. “Is this the beginning of the end of the EU? Or does it pull itself together from the shock, like somebody who has a near miss with a heart attack and gets much fitter?”

Being European is so much more than the “electrical wiring and the plumbing” of Brussels. “We talk too much about the institutions,” he says. “The important thing is what it’s like to live in it.” As one of his colleagues at Oxford recently put it, being European is feeling at home abroad. “Yes, we’re still very different countries, with different languages, cuisines, customs and habits of mind, but we all get along together.”

In any case, he says, Britain cannot leave Europe any more than Piccadilly Circus can leave London. “We’ve been in Europe for thousands of years,” he says.

It was following his studies at Oxford that Garton Ash began a lifelong love affair with Germany. He arrived in West Berlin in the late 1970s with the intention of studying what people’s behaviour had been like under Hitler. But he ended up on the other side of the Berlin Wall, where he lived among the dissidents and collaborators of a different dictatorship, the communist regime of Erich Honecker.

In the 1990s, he would go back and examine the 325-page file the Stasi had secretly compiled on him, interviewing those who informed on him in an attempt to understand why they had chosen to collaborate with the regime. The resulting book, *The File*, is as much about human nature as it is about the political

cast [kɑːst]
• werfen

compile
[kəmˈpaɪl]
• zusammenstellen

irresistible
[ˌɪrɪˈzɪstəbəl]
• unwiderstehlich

paraphrase
[ˈpærəˈfrɛɪz]
• mit anderen Worten ausdrücken

plumbing
[ˈplʌmɪŋ]
• Klempnerarbeiten

razor clarity
[ˈreɪzəˌklærəti]
• rasiermesser-scharfe Klarheit

read sth. [riːd]
• hier: etw. studieren

self-confessed
[ˌself kənˈfɛst]
• bekennend

shrewd [ʃruːd]
• scharfsinnig

sidestep sth.
[ˈsaɪdstep]
• etw. umgehen

spark [spɑːk]
• Funke

utterly [ˈʌtəli]
• absolut, völlig

system. It is also a search for a “lost self”. The code name he was given, Romeo, probably derived from the Alfa Romeo car he drove through Checkpoint Charlie, was “curiously apt”, he says towards the end of the book. “For romantic I was, and not just about love.”

The book may examine a lost self from a lost time, but the early 1920s Baedeker guide he used to navigate the divided city is relevant once more in today’s world, he says. “The embassies are back where they were. You can use it now.”

It is clear that Germany is still close to his heart, one of his homelands, as he puts it. When he first visited, he was drawn to the question of the ancient Goethe Oak on the site of the former concentration camp of Buchenwald. A powerful symbol for the prisoners, it was supposed to be where Goethe composed some of his poems, leaning against the tree. “For me, it’s a metaphor for the coexistence of the highest in culture and the most barbaric. How could these two things be somehow cheek by jowl?”

Present-day Germany is still compelling in his eyes. “It’s the last best hope of liberalism and centrist politics and tolerance and reason and pro-EU commitment in Europe,” he says. “Now it is the promised land for refugees. It’s very moving, very inspiring.”

He’s in the middle of talking about the German language, which he speaks fluently, when I attempt to move back to the subject of Brexit. “Wait!” he says. “I haven’t told you my favourite food.” Incidentally, it’s *Leber Berliner Art*.

Back to the harsh reality of Brexit, which has been, in Garton Ash’s estimation, “profoundly unrealistic and confused” so far. “The BoJo doctrine on cake is one thing we’re not going to get,” he says. BoJo, or Boris Johnson, the UK Foreign Secretary, who led the Brexit campaign, is known for his glib remarks on being “pro having my cake and pro eating it”.

“The sadness of Brexit is that, just as a necessary reform agenda is becoming realistic, we leave the table,” says Garton Ash. In a “non-ideal world” in which Brexit is now a reality, he would like to see Britain continuing to be involved in EU

“Germany is the promised land for refugees. It’s very moving, very inspiring.”

foreign and security policy. “Putin wants to weaken Europe through division,” he says. “We need to make absolutely clear where the lines are. We have to do that ourselves, working closely with Germany,” he says.

On the upcoming German election, he is confident that Germany will continue to pursue a “sensible and balanced policy”, whether with Angela Merkel (CDU) or Martin Schulz (SDP). Would Schulz, himself a Charlemagne laureate, be good for the country? It’s the famous *jein*, says Garton Ash. On the one hand, “Schulz is more realistic on the need for debt forgiveness for Greece”. On the other, he has “laid out popular, but almost populist left-wing policies”. Schulz is currently targeting Gerhard Schröder’s Agenda 2010 reforms, which overhauled the labour market and welfare system in the 2000s.

Right now, Garton Ash is reading Stefan Zweig’s *The World of Yesterday*, in which the latter looks back from the horrors of the 1930s and 1940s to the golden days of his childhood in Vienna. Forced from Austria by the Nazis, Zweig lived in exile in Brazil, where he and his young wife committed suicide. With populists on the march in Europe, his books have

apt [æpt] ➔ passend

cake: have one’s ~ and eating it [keɪk]
➔ alles gleichzeitig haben wollen

cheek by jowl
[ˌtʃiːk baɪ ˈdʒəʊl]
➔ dicht beieinander, Seite an Seite

compelling [kəmˈpeliŋ]
➔ fesselnd, unwiderstehlich

derive from sth.
[diˈraɪv frəm]
➔ sich von etw. ableiten

glib [glɪb]
➔ schlagfertig

harsh [hɑːʃ]
➔ rau, unfreundlich

incidentally [ˌɪnsɪˈdentʃəli]
➔ nebenbei bemerkt

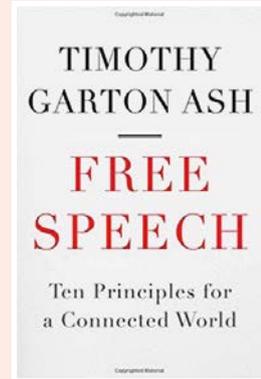
latter [ˈlætə]
➔ Letzterer

overhaul [ˌəʊvəˈhɔːl]
➔ überarbeiten, überholen

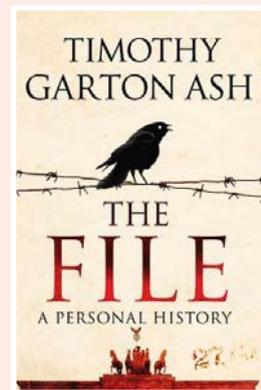
pursue [pəˈsjuː]
➔ verfolgen

upcoming [ˈʌpˌkʌmɪŋ]
➔ bevorstehend

READING TIMOTHY GARTON ASH



Free Speech: Ten Principles for a Connected World is Timothy Garton Ash’s latest book. Drawing on a lifetime of writing about dictatorships and dissidents, Garton Ash argues that in this connected world he calls “cosmopolis”, the way to combine freedom and diversity is to have more but also better free speech. Published by Atlantic Books and available from Sprachenshop.de and Amazon in English and in German (*Redefreiheit: Prinzipien für eine vernetzte Welt*).



The File: A Personal History is about Garton Ash’s time in Germany. In 1978 the historian went to live in Berlin to see what that divided city could teach him about tyranny and freedom. Fifteen years later, by then internationally famous for his reportage of the downfall of communism in Central Europe, he returned to look at the file the Stasi had kept on him. Published by Atlantic Books and available from Amazon. For a complete list of his books, see timothygartonash.com/books.html

diversity [daɪˈvɜːsəti]
➔ Verschiedenartigkeit

downfall [ˈdaʊnfɔːl]
➔ Niedergang, Untergang



A tear in the fabric of Europe: Garton Ash was saddened by Britain's decision to Brexit

TIMOTHY GARTON ASH IN QUOTES

On the Brexit campaign:

“Vote Leave campaigners repeated their slogan “take back control” more often than Daleks metallicly intone ‘exterminate’ — but that’s because it was deadly effective.”

The Guardian, 24 June 2016

On a disintegrating Europe:

“Had I been cryogenically frozen in January 2005, I would have gone to my provisional rest as a happy European [...] Cryogenically reanimated in January 2017, I would immediately have died again from shock.”

The New York Review of Books, January 2017

On Donald Trump:

“There’s a great debate raging here about how the American media should cover this narcissistic, bragging, mendacious, ignorant, dangerous demagogue.”

But what’s happening to the media themselves is part of the problem.”

The Guardian, 29 September 2016

On China:

“Thirty years ago we would have said that Leninist capitalism was a contradiction in terms, like fried snowballs. Well, here it is, right in front of our eyes. After another 30 years of Chinese-style incremental reform, ‘crossing the river by feeling the stones’ as Deng Xiaoping put it, who knows what new political riverbank they will have reached?”

The Guardian, 4 December 2008

On identity:

“What we call ‘my life’ is but a constantly rewritten version of our own past. ‘My life’ is the mental autobiography with which and by which we all live.”

The File: A Personal History, 1997

bragging [ˈbræɡɪŋ]
▶ prahlend

contradiction
[ˌkɒntrəˈdɪkʃən]
▶ Widerspruch

cryogenically
[ˌkraɪəʊˈdʒenɪkəli]
▶ kryogen, tiefgekühlt

demagogue [ˈdeməɡɒɡ]
▶ Volksverhetzer(in)

exterminate
[ɪkˈstɜːmɪneɪt]
▶ vernichten

incremental
[ˌɪŋkrɪˈmentəl]
▶ schrittweise, stufenweise

intone [ɪnˈtəʊn]
▶ anstimmen

mendacious [menˈdeɪʃəs]
▶ verlogen

rage [reɪdʒ]
▶ wüten

riverbank [ˈrɪvəbæŋk]
▶ Flussufer

become essential reading again. Garton Ash confesses to a “sinking feeling” that we will look back on the optimism of the 1990s and the 2000s with the same nostalgia Zweig expressed for fin-de-siècle Vienna.

Paraphrasing Churchill, he says that Europe, the EU with all its faults, is “the worst possible Europe, apart from all the other Europes that have been tried from time to time. Younger people take it for granted. They don’t realize how exceptional it is to have this degree of freedom and prosperity and security.”

While Europe is a central interest for Garton Ash, he is far from eurocentric. A few days after this interview, he will be in China, which he considers to be the most interesting country in the world right now in terms of political developments.

“When I was in 20, I went to Berlin, which was the epicentre of world history.

Now Beijing is the emerging superpower, with an unprecedented system of Leninist capitalism. From a historian’s perspective, relations between China and the West are the big question.”

The term “history of the present” was coined by former US diplomat George F. Kennan in 1990, while reviewing *The Uses of Adversity: Essays on the Fate of Central Europe*, Garton Ash’s book on Central Europe. It describes his blending of history and journalism, two disciplines which, he believes, are “cut from the same cloth”.

From the time of [Athenian historian] Thucydides to the 18th century, it was generally thought that the best history was contemporary, the history you’d witnessed, he says. “It’s best to address what’s happening in your own time with the same critical apparatus a historian might use when writing about the 14th century.”

So, between writing books and columns, lecturing at Oxford, spending summers at Stanford University in California and generally being a globetrotter, does he have a life? “My wife would say: ‘not necessarily’. It’s always a balancing act,” he says. Danuta is from Poland, which he also counts as a homeland. She’s a clinical psychologist. I’m about to ask the obvious question, but he answers before I get the chance: “She thinks the psychology of the English is so hard to understand.”

blending [ˈblendɪŋ]
▶ Vermischen

confess to sth.
[kənˈfes tə]
▶ sich zu etw. bekennen

emerging [ɪˈmɜːdʒɪŋ]
▶ aufstrebend

granted: take sth. for ~
[ˈgrɑːntɪd]
▶ etw. als selbstverständlich ansehen

lecture [ˈlektʃə]
▶ Vorlesungen halten

prosperity [prɒˈsperəti]
▶ Wohlstand, Reichum

unprecedented
[ʌnˈpresɪdntɪd]
▶ beispiellos, noch nie dagewesen