



**Let's Open the Next Chapter of Franco-German Collaboration!**

Speech of the President of the Max Planck Society

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Ambassador, dear colleagues, mesdames et messieurs, chers amis,

It's great to be back to France! As some of you know, I have spent 3 ½ years in France: In the mid-1990s, I carried out PhD research in Grenoble – at EMBL, the European Molecular Biology Laboratory. This was the time when the European Synchrotron went online, the strongest source of X-rays, how exciting! And even more exciting: our first child was born! Actually, when you step outside EMBL, you see the beautiful mountains of the Vercors and the Chartreuse. But you also see our next-door neighbour, the ILL, the *Institute Laue-Langevin*, the world's strongest neutron source.

ILL has a special history: It was founded in 1967, just a few years after the *Traité d'Élysee*. Twenty-two years after the war, scientific collaboration between our countries was weak. But some colleagues had built trustful relationships and saw the opportunity – and the need – to work together. In 1973, the UK joined ILL, and others followed. By now, 1400 scientists from over 40 countries come to ILL to carry out around 1000 experiments – every year! Whether it is ILL or EMBL: These are successful *scientific* projects, but they are also *peace* projects. They bring scientists of different nationality together. Researchers who have different cultural backgrounds. People who speak the same language. And I do not mean English – although it is useful to know English. No, I mean the universal *language of reason*.

Traditionally, the collaboration between the Max Planck Society and France is very strong. By now, nine of our directors are French, and six of our group leaders. There are 430 collaborative projects. Actually, the CNRS is the one institution in the world with which we share most publications, followed by the Chinese Academy of Science and Harvard. Isn't this enough? Well, the world is changing rapidly. Look at the European Union, our transatlantic cooperation or our interactions with China:



We see substantial changes everywhere and it all influences science more than ever. In times like these, it is easy to be pessimist.

But remember the founders of the ILL in Grenoble. At the time, building a neutron source was a “moonshot project”. And together with other European partners, France and Germany took the lead and did something big, something disruptive, but also something sustainable. And today? What is our “moonshot project”? France and Germany – this should not just be a *marriage de raison*. The Franco-German cooperation has a critical mass – not only, but also in science. May I propose two things tonight?

First, we want to strengthen German-French scientific collaboration in several fields. We would be happy to establish one or more Max Planck Centers with institutions here in France, to create even more synergies. For this, we need to find matching funds. Second, let’s build on the summit on Artificial Intelligence that took place in Paris yesterday: Let’s join the efforts announced by Emmanuel Macron and Ursula von der Leyen and strengthen AI in Europe. We should not over-regulate, but rather seize our opportunities. ChatGPT or DeepSeek are incredible AI tools. But these must also be developed here, to make sure we remain in the game, that algorithms are transparent and the apps are safe.

One thing is clear: AI will not just lead to new applications. It will transform the way we do science. Some even say that theory-based science will vanish. We do not know yet, but what we know is that machine learning can solve scientific problems that we have been struggling with for decades. Just take the protein folding problem – its solution just led to a Nobel prize. To boost AI, we should establish more ELLIS laboratories in France. Whereas Germany has ten, and the UK and Italy both have five, there is only one ELLIS lab in France. And by the way: Computing power is important, it is a *conditio sine qua non*. However, it will be decisive to recruit the best talent. It is the people and their ideas that make a difference. This is why I wish to end by saying that we must stand up against nationalist forces in Europe. These forces work towards isolation and against international collaboration and the welcoming culture that we need to attract the best young researchers from around the world.

This brings me back to ILL, the Institute Laue-Langevin. Paul Langevin was an exceptional physicist. For example, he worked on the moderation of neutrons, which was important to build nuclear power plants that we may now use here in France for AI computing. However, Langevin was also very engaged politically. During the war, he was part of the *resistance* and was put under arrest by the Vichy regime. And after the war he spoke out for humanism and democracy. And so should we, also to protect academic freedom!



Mesdames, messieurs,

Let's join forces and strengthen the European research area, which includes not only the EU, but also our colleagues in the UK, Switzerland and Israel. For this, the independence of the ERC and doubling its budget is key.

Ce soir, j'espère d'avoir un échange d'idées. En fait, je ne suis pas venu à Paris juste pour parler, mais plutôt pour vous écouter. Je m'intéresse à vos perspectives ainsi que vos idées. Merci d'être venus et une bonne soirée à tous! Thank you and all the best!