



British Chamber of Commerce Foundation

Report from:

Moritz von Brescius - Scholarship 2009



Report on my studies and life in Great Britain

I'd like to begin my report by thanking the members of the British Chamber of Commerce in Germany for their generosity in supporting my studies at the University of Oxford. It has been a very challenging experience for me to read for a masters programme at one of the best universities in the world. The title of my Master programme is 'Modern British and European History' – which I find very instructive since there is still the notion of English historical isolationism, a separation of England's history from the continent that young scholars like me are trying to overcome.

I have started my year by attending an intense language course that provided me both with essential language skills and – equally important – with friends from literally around the globe. I was happy to pass some wonderful weeks before the first term, getting to know the marvellous city and some beautiful country houses in Oxfordshire and Warwickshire. Having grown up in the city of Berlin, I was fascinated by the beauty and uniqueness of the English countryside.

At the beginning of Michaelmas (thus the first) term, I had to find out that my intended supervisor – and expert for the Age of Enlightenment – would be on leave this year. This took me by surprise, since I had chosen Oxford over other offers from good universities to study with that particular scholar. In fact, it took me some weeks to get over this 'loss' (personal relationships matter!). His 'replacement', however, is also a very knowledgeable fellow of Christ Church College (where 13 Prime Ministers were educated, by the way). During the first term, I have attended a course on historiographical methods and theories. It was very inspiring to discuss whether, e.g., soldiers' letters from the Great War should be analyzed with Freud's work on psychoanalysis; or how 'space' can be used as an analytic category in historical scholarship. Linked to this method course, I have written my first marked essay, dealing with the question: 'Is it the task of global history to deconstruct the histories of modern nation states?'

Building on recent scholarship that situates Imperial Germany in a global context, I have sought to show how the dynamics of German nationalism cannot be satisfactorily explained within the confines of a national history. The political developments of the Kaiserreich were deeply affected by and can be partly regarded as a reaction to developments outside its political boundaries. This particular relationship forms the object of study of global history, a field of scholarship that focuses on the interdependence of states and societies. One striking feature of global history is that it depersonalizes historical narratives in which 'great men make history' by looking at broader figurations – such as global intellectual movements as well as flows of migration and goods – and to analyse their impact on societies. Global history thus challenges the assumption of national peculiarities because it shows how similar social and political developments took place simultaneously on various continents and how they were in fact intertwined with one another – like the process of national enclosure during the closing decades of the nineteenth century as a national reaction to global migration movements.

I gave the good fortune to live and study with my partner, who is reading for a masters degree at the University of Warwick. We are living in a small and lovely flat at some distance from the city centre. The flat is, however, close to my college. I am a student of St Hugh's College that was founded in 1886 by Elizabeth Wordsworth – who was the great niece of the Romantic poet. It is a rather young college and it has one of the most splendid gardens of the 39 colleges the University of Oxford consists of. I have made good friends among the students and we are slowly becoming what I am so longing for: a scholarly community of friends. One striking feature of Oxford is the countless number of academic societies. During my first term, I have attended the Stubbs Society, a historical club that invites world-famous professors as guest speakers. It is very interesting to be part of these events, and it broadens my historical knowledge to hear experts on a range of topics and periods. Next term, I am determined to join the University choir – at the end of the term, we are going to perform in the central University cathedral.

Though life is very exciting in Oxford, I already have to be focused on my masters dissertation which I will write during the next five months. The objective of this research is to explore the ambivalent perceptions of the 'Two Americas' in the Prussian scientist Alexander von Humboldt's account of his expedition to the New World 1799-1804. In particular, I am interested in the way that Humboldt juxtaposed the 'two worlds' of the American continent. Firstly, the colonized and supposedly 'primitive' indigenous peoples in South America amongst whom Humboldt only perceived the 'dawn of civilization'. As will be shown, his views on indigenous tribes were largely influenced by Enlightenment theories of social evolution. Secondly, however, Humboldt travelled to the newly

independent United States, in which he perceived a liberal republic of great progress and the 'future of mankind'. This often neglected view challenged the alleged confrontation between the 'civilized Old' and the 'primitive New World' in Alexander von Humboldt's writing. I will address, for instance, the following questions: How did Humboldt place Europe in relation to the 'Two Americas'? Was it regarded as the source of all human Kultur, brought to the New World only by the Spanish, British and French colonizers and missionaries? Why were, in his perception, the European state system and cultures in a civilisational decline, so that the United States of America would take up the lead of progress?

These are some of the questions I am interested in, and I hope that I can build on this work for my doctoral thesis, which I am hoping to start after the very interesting and challenging year I am having in Oxford.

Again, I am very grateful for the support I receive from the BCCG, and I hope that the results of my work will meet the high expectations that the members place in my academic progress.

Moritz von Brescius