

## Final report Adam von Trott Study Bursary 2019

When in mid-March I received the phone call with the invitation to come to Oxford, I was somewhere in the middle of nowhere in the north-eastern part of Germany, spending a five-day seminar with other young and likeminded people. There could have literally been no place where I would have been less prepared for this phone call, or rather, I think I was not ready for it at all. I had just returned to Germany after eight months abroad, and I did not believe that the outline for my thesis in the master's degree programme in *Global Politics* – which I considered still a very basic one – would convince anybody. Apart from that, I had never thought about spending time at one of the world's oldest and most renowned universities in the world. It simply had not occurred to me that this could be the right place for a typical “small town girl” like me. Of course, I had heard about Oxford before, but in my mind, it was a far-away place for very intelligent and/or very rich people. Therefore, my first reaction to the invitation was somewhere between mild shock, astonishment and disbelief, paired with curiosity. During the next couple of weeks, I received a lot of support from different people in Göttingen and Oxford to organise my four-week stay from mid-May to mid-June, so that even finding accommodation in town was not a big challenge.

After a calm weekend of minor preparations and long walks through the historical city centre or along the river – where the university's teams practiced for this year's “Summer Eights” rowing competition – I received a warm welcome at Mansfield College on May 20. It then took a couple of days until some minor bureaucratic issues were solved and I was allowed to finally swear the *Bodleian reader's oath*, a pledge every visitor to the university's libraries has to make, promising that he or she will oblige to the rules of the library and handle the books with care. After working either in a café or at home (I lived in one of the college's shared apartments off campus with nine other students from all over the world) for the first week, I finally received my personal reader's card and thereby gained access to Oxford's holy halls. Apart from spending hours and hours in the university's various libraries that are spread across the city center, I also had the opportunity to meet researchers from Mansfield and Balliol Colleges – the two institutions where Adam von Trott himself had studied before. Apart from one scholar who did not reply to my e-mails, I again received a lot of support, including literature recommendations, comparative perspectives on environmental policies in Germany and the UK(\*), and regular updates about upcoming events in town.

(\*Maybe another word or two about my current research interests in political science: During the winter term 2018/19, I had to give a presentation about Environmental and Green Political Theory, just a few weeks after Greta Thunberg had become known to the international media for her *Skolstrejk för klimatet* or *Fridays for Future*. It became obvious then that what had long been anticipated as an intergenerational struggle in a far-distant future was happening right now. My thesis therefore focuses on what so-called “ordinary people” do in their everyday lives when they think that their democratically elected governments fail to effectively fight against the destructive effects of anthropogenic climate change. It is expected that terms like *responsibility* and *sustainability* are at the center of those people's daily discourses and practices. The thesis thereby intends to combine normative Political Theory with empirical data about the respective actors. The time in Oxford was particularly helpful to enrich my knowledge of debates on intergenerational accountability, different understandings of climate mitigation and/or adaption, as well as reconceptualizations of what is perceived as democracy from below.)

Over the course of my stay in Oxford, I visited various colleges and institutions in town (e.g., Pembroke and Queen's Colleges, the Oxford Martin School and the Blavatnik School of Government) to attend public lectures, book discussions and film screenings organised by students, civil groups, UN employees, junior researchers or world-famous scholars. They provided me with

so much material to think about that it sometimes seemed as if there was simply too little time to work through it all. I often felt like in a microcosm, surrounded by the historical buildings, other students and books for most of the time. Nevertheless, there were real-world events that kept the student of political science and anthropology inside me thinking, too: Brexit negotiations kept pending, Theresa May resigned as party leader of the Conservatives, the European Elections took place, Donald Trump visited the United Kingdom...

During the weekends and in the evenings, there was also time for sightseeing in the historical city centre. One of my highlights here was taking part in an *Uncomfortable Oxford Walking Tour*. Initiated by a group of students, the project informs about the dark chapters in the University of Oxford's long history: from facts and figures on its colonial legacy to aspects of race, class and gender discrimination, or the invitation of AfD politician Alice Weidel to the prestigious *Oxford Union* (one of the local debating societies, the event was later cancelled by Weidel herself). Apart from the riverside, *Blackwell's Bookshop* became one of my favourite places in town, supplying me with enough reading material to fill a good part of my suitcase.

Looking back, a minor point of critique is the relatively fixed timeframe of the programme: I received the invitation to Oxford in mid-March, but the study bursary had to be realised between March and June. Knowing that I would need a couple of weeks to arrange my stay there, I opted for the last weeks of the *Trinity term* from mid-May to mid-June. Students and lecturers at the university were then busy with preparations for the final exams, which might be one reason for why it was sometimes a bit difficult to get in touch with people. Another difficulty was to leave Göttingen in the middle of the term here, which meant that I had to miss classes and work through parts of the syllabuses on my own (maybe at least another argument against compulsory attendance at university?!).

With a couple of weeks having passed since my return to Göttingen, I feel like I just slowly start realising the impact of the four weeks in Oxford – on my master thesis, but also on me personally. I am grateful for all the support (in financial, administrative, research-related and personal terms) and would like to express special thanks to Pam Berry, Daniel Butt and Paul Flather, as well as to all those people who made this experience possible in the first place. Having one month's time to focus on my personal research interests – relatively independent from a student's usual responsibilities at home and backed up by generous financial support – gave me the unique opportunity to engage in depth with the topic of my master thesis. Being the first beneficiary of an *Adam von Trott Study Bursary* from the University of Göttingen, I felt sometimes slightly uncertain about the expectations I could be confronted with. The reality was much simpler: There were none, apart from those which I had myself. I wish all future beneficiaries of the study bursary to use this opportunity in the best way possible for themselves, but to enjoy the life in the beautiful city of Oxford, too!