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## **Small Things Matter. Research Foundations in a Multilateral World\***

Distinguished Colleagues,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Some fifty years ago, on a festive occasion at one of the most eminent Oxford colleges, Christ Church, which insiders simply call “The House”, Wystan Hugh Auden presented the following poem as a toast:

“What on earth does one say at a Gaudy,  
On such an occasion as this,  
O what, since I may not be a bawdy,  
Can I do except reminisce?

Middle-age with its glasses and dentures  
(There’s an opera about it by Strauss)  
Puts an end to romantic adventures,  
But not to my love of *The House*.  
(W.H.Auden: Collected Poems, London 1976, p. 565.)

In 2009, the year which we Germans – with reference to 09, but especially to 1929, 1939, 1949, and of course to the watershed events of 1989 - call the Super Commemoration Year (das “Super-Gedenkjahr”) it appears to me to be quite an appropriate starting point for my speech, last but not least because there is also an admittedly by any historical standards somewhat less important anniversary which I personally can reminisce, and that has got to do with the fact that it was exactly 25 years ago, in 1984, that I left Oxford after having taught here for four years in particular German, politics, and post-war German literature. Indeed, The House was among the six colleges which I had the privilege of working for, being involved in, and dining in. The other five were Jesus College, Lady Margaret Hall, New College, Oriel

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\* Speech on the occasion of the launch event of the Anglo-German ‘State of the State’-Fellowship Programme on 30 October 2009 at Oxford.

College, and St. Edmund Hall. After having completed my Ph.D. thesis at the University of Marburg in 1980, I felt deeply honoured and privileged to have the opportunity to work for such a distinguished set of Oxford Colleges. I had a wonderful time here and thoroughly enjoyed academic as well as social life at these distinguished institutions.

Since the mid-1980s, we have been witnessing dramatic changes in the political landscape and the economic map not only of Europe, but of the world at large. In ten days time we are going to commemorate the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall and with it the breakdown of many a communist regime across Central and Eastern Europe. These largely non-violent revolutionary events also implied the end of the Cold War period. Since then we have become part of a dynamic ongoing process only loosely characterized by the term 'globalization', a process that involves "the inexorable integration of markets, nation-states, and technologies to a degree never before witnessed, in a way that is enabling individuals, co-operations, and countries to reach around the world further, faster, deeper, and cheaper than ever before." (Dominique Moïsi: *The Geopolitics of Emotion. How Cultures of Fear, Humiliation, and Hope are Re-Shaping the World*. London 2009, p. 9.)

When we look back at the fundamentally new developments of the past 20 to 25 years, we cannot help but recognize that the speed as well as the impact of change has increased quite dramatically. This applies not only to the European political landscape and its re-structuring since 1990, but also to the public and private infrastructures that have such a deep impact on our daily lives. We live in a highly complex, largely science-, and technology-driven world, and it seems that the enormous changes we have been witnessing since then are merely a foretaste of the challenges ahead.

During the next 20 years, in particular Europe's economic paradigm will change fundamentally. While the manufacturing base will shrink continuously, future growth and social welfare will rely increasingly on knowledge-intensive products and services. We can also observe, particularly in view of the demographic development in Germany and most other European countries, that we are faced with the completely new challenge of how an ageing continent can actually maintain its

capacity to innovate. In this respect – as well as with respect to the overall financial situation – priority-setting and strategic decision-making will become even more important in the future.

Of course, the current economic and financial crisis has led many people to assume that we are experiencing a revival of the nation-state, in particular that of the regulatory scope and budgetary power of governments. Over the past two years the latter served quite often as a last resort when it came to avoiding bankruptcies of investment banks and insurance companies. But the billions of dollars or Euros spent on these operations added to the huge budgetary deficits already existing well before the crisis. It has by now become evident, and it will soon become even more obvious that the obligations resulting from this kind of deficit spending will impact quite severely on the limited range of options for future government interventions in almost all walks of life, in particular those with financial implications.

The limits and limitations of national policies become even more obvious when we take a look at the so-called ‘big picture’. A rapidly growing world population, among them more than one billion people suffering from malnutrition and starving to death; inefficient energy practices and the global environmental crisis; the decline of freedom and democratic governance in several countries situated in the least developed parts of the world. All of these and many other challenges make it imperative for us to re-think, and subsequently re-align our approaches as well as to develop a truly transnational perspective. If our globalized world is becoming increasingly “hot, flat, and crowded”, then it is time for us to develop a sense of urgency and to act accordingly, or as Thomas Friedman puts it: “We have been living for far too long on borrowed time and borrowed dimes. We need to get back to work on our country and on our planet. The hour is late, the stakes could not be higher, the project could not be harder, the pay-off could not be greater.” (Thomas L. Friedman: *Hot, Flat, and Crowded. Why the world needs a green revolution – And how we can renew our global future.* London 2008, p. 25.)

In view of the critical state of affairs it is by no means easy to maintain an optimistic approach to the challenges ahead. Turning them into opportunities will require all the intelligence, boldness, creativity, and persistence we human beings are capable of. If

we do not follow the path on which hope prevails, we will probably end up in some kind of globalized chaos, in particular in a climate of fear, misunderstandings, miscalculations, and misjudgements. In his latest book entitled “The Geopolitics of Emotion” the French intellectual and Harvard professor Dominique Moïsi outlines two quite extreme scenarios of “the world in 2025”, one of hope, and the other of fear. What he tries to make clear is the serious danger that we may well end up in some kind of “new Dark Ages” (Dominique Moïsi. *The Geopolitics of Emotion. How Cultures of Fear, Humiliation of Hope are Re-Shaping the World*. London 2009, p. 144.) if we do not live up proactively to the challenges ahead.

Moïsi stresses on the one hand the need for politicians to be attentive to the problems involved in globalization, but on the other hand he also makes us all aware of the need to learn more about the emotions of people living in other cultures and countries, and how crucial they will be for our future development. “The Other will increasingly become part of us in our multicultural societies. The emotional frontiers of the world have become as important as its geographical frontiers. And the two cannot be equated in a mechanical manner. With a process of time, the mapping of emotions will become as legitimate and compulsory an exercise as the mapping of geographical realities.” (Dominique Moïsi, *op.cit.*, p. 157 f.)

Preserving a sense of hope and optimism has always been at the forefront of strategically minded foundation leaders. One of my favourite sayings about the difference between a pessimist and an optimist goes like this: An optimist knows how bad the world is. A pessimist has to go through the experience of evil every day anew. Sometimes I even stick to the French writer Albert Camus who once said: “We must conceive of Sisyphos as a lucky man.” Probably the most important difference between the ancient Sisyphos who had to roll the same stone up hill over and over again and our current situation is that there are always new stones waiting for us at the bottom of the hill.

Given the enormous challenges just outlined, and the billions, if not trillions of Euros spent by public authorities and enterprises, one might ask what private research foundations can achieve in this respect. Measured in financial terms, they are in fact comparatively small actors. It is indeed not the overall amount of money spent but

rather the approach taken by foundations that makes the difference. Their autonomy, alertness, and flexibility enable them to operate effectively as facilitators of change, establish islands of success, and thereby to achieve considerable impact on policy-advisors and decision-makers alike. By fostering risky projects, encouraging networking across disciplinary, institutional, and national borders, and by helping some of the most creative researchers to break new ground, foundations are able to prove that even on a European scale small things matter. Let me at first illustrate this point by providing three examples from the 1990s and early this century:

- The first one has got to do with encouraging new ways of independent thinking in Central and Eastern Europe by setting up Institutes of Advanced Study. The first such institute, the Collegium Budapest, was established in 1991. It was soon to be followed by others, e.g. the New Europe College in Bukarest, established in 1994 as a private foundation under Rumanian law, and the Sofia Nexus Institute of Advanced Study in Bulgaria.

In view of the “wounded sensibility of small cultures” (Emil Cioran) it was particularly important that in each case the initiative was taken by local researchers, and then in an interculturally sensitive manner picked up by the heads of the Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin as well as a closely cooperating network of grant-makers. When the respective national governments were still reluctant (and some are hesitant even today) to support such apparently luxurious places of free thinking and intellectual debate, primarily Swedish, Swiss, and German foundations stepped in to facilitate the process of setting them up, and they have stayed committed to supporting these institutes ever since. Thus they have secured the institutes’ successful attempts at reaching the necessary levels of deep thinking, sophistication, and creativity.

This does, however, not imply that these institutes are in danger of becoming the new ivory towers in an otherwise still suffering research environment. On the contrary, the pause for thought provided by them is often being used by their fellows to rethink and reconfigure their own priorities and ultimately engage in social and political practice.

- Another breeding ground for future leaders (several former students have become members of parliament and ministers, or chief executive officers of large enterprises in their home countries) is the Central European University (CEU) in Budapest. Thanks to the generosity of the Hungarian born, American philanthropist George Soros, Budapest can be congratulated for hosting the first foundation-based, fully endowed private university in Europe, able to run its core operations on the basis of its own regular income resulting from the investments of some € 500 million.

Compared to our large publicly financed universities with tens of thousands of students, the CEU is still a relatively small institution with about 100 professors and some 1,500 students. And yet to establish such a stronghold of independent teaching and research provides many challenges, not only to the President and Rector as well as the members of the Central European University, but also to us all. Last, but not least because of the lessons we, and in particular our public universities will have to learn.

Due to the fact that almost everywhere in Europe citizens are used to carrying a high tax load, we still expect governments to fully cover the costs of our universities and research institutes. All too often this coincides with tight regulatory regimes of managerial accountability and quite disproportionate government control. Let me clearly say that this will have to come to an end. The global competition for the most talented young people can only be won if we change paradigms quickly. No doubt, in particular German universities must become more efficient, but in order to achieve that they must be given real autonomy and the freedom to establish optimal structures for the institution as such, and also for their staff. The latter really calls for opening up new opportunities to develop independent career paths early on in academic life. With it goes at each level of decision-making the readiness to personally take on the responsibility for the choices made. In full agreement with Yehuda Elkana, the former President and Rector of CEU, who emphasized this on many occasions, I would like to stress that we have to reinforce the need to exercise informed and independent judgement in our universities. In addition, university

leadership will also have to see to it that more private resources are tapped in order to adequately water the new seeds in hopefully fertile grounds.

- My third example is not focussing on any specific institution, but rather on individuals and the need for intellectual networking across Europe. It was and still is a joint funding initiative of the Italian foundation Compagnia di San Paolo, the Swedish Riksbankens Jubileumsfond, and the VolkswagenStiftung on “European Foreign and Security Policy Studies”.

The participating foundations are convinced that the national views which dominate academic and practical approaches towards a Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) of the European Union should recede in favour of a transnational perspective. The envisioned research and training programme aims at developing such a perspective by young researchers and practitioners in their further qualification. The programme also aims at mobility across borders and between the academic and practical spheres. The candidates can work at academic institutions of their own choice and appropriate European organizations engaged in CFSP. Each participant in the programme has been funded for one or two years. At least half of the time was to be spent abroad in an academic or practice organization. Individual activities should be combined with the active participation in conferences and summer schools involving the other researchers funded in this initiative. Events were and will be held every six months. Joint publications and internet presentations do serve as further instruments for supranational networking.

Candidates for funding were young researchers and practitioners who aimed at postgraduate or postdoctoral research in the field of CFSP. They were selected according to personal qualification and the expected quality of the proposed piece of research. Disciplines, nationality, or belonging to an EU member state were not essential. The about 100 candidates who have passed, or are currently engaged in the research and training programme should be able to work as university teachers, analysts for institutes or “think tanks”, in the media, civil service, or in political NGOs.

It is a crucial task not only for research and research funding institutions to open up these career perspectives to young researchers. Above all, innovation is created by brilliant minds and their ideas. A well set-up innovation process, on the other hand, will also result in the creation of ideas and, subsequently, of bright minds who pursue these ideas. Foundations should be striving to be part of such a “self-sustaining” innovation process – because we need these ideas in order to further develop our common cause.

Today, in our rapidly changing, increasingly globalized world, and confronted with problems ranging from local conflicts, migration, and terrorist attacks all the way through to pandemics and financial instabilities, it is of crucial importance that we become more knowledgeable about our own cultural, political, and social heritage and its impact on our daily lives as well as to raise our awareness of historical, social, and political differences among and between regions, countries, and continents. In this respect the humanities and social sciences have a pivotal role to play. They ought to be not just guardians of the past, or observers of the present, but more and more they will have to reconfigure themselves as proactive analysts and thinkers of our common future.

Living up to the many challenges involved in this process it not at all straightforward. European foundations such as the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation, the Compagnia di San Paolo, the Gulbenkian Foundation, the Leverhulme Trust, the Nuffield Foundation, and the Volkswagen Foundation are prepared to encourage and to support transnational and transdisciplinary research activities addressing relevant issues. They do not have to wait for political consensus. For them the objectives to be achieved are always more important than bureaucratic rules and regulations. They can help their partners in universities and other research institutions to act, not only to react, when it comes to tackling the challenges of change.

If you take a look at the current funding portfolio of the Volkswagen Foundation, you will see that at the forefront of our endeavours are objectives such as to

support communication and cooperation among researchers from different disciplines, as well as different countries and continents, to facilitate the creation of efficient and effective research collaborations, and to enable foreign researchers, in particular those from the less favoured parts of the world, to participate on an equal footing in internationally competitive research endeavours. There are basically three initiatives in our international focus that try to meet these objectives:

- Between Europe and the Orient – A Focus on Research and Higher Education in/on Central Asia and the Caucasus,
- The Documentation of Endangered Languages, and
- Knowledge for Tomorrow – Cooperative Research Projects (and Fellowships) in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Other funding opportunities include postdoctoral fellowships at the Humanities Center at Harvard, a call for research group proposals on “Europe and Global Challenges”, medium-, to long-term Schumpeter fellowships in the social sciences, as well as several activities addressing the linguistic challenges involved in the production, distribution, and absorption of new knowledge. Among them is also one that may be a surprise to you after all what I have just said about the need to meet the challenges involved in globalization, and that is an initiative launched in 2006 called “‘Deutsch Plus’ – A Programme for Multilingualism in Teaching and Research”. In view of the fact that the use of English has become common standard at international conferences, and to a large extent also for publications and other forms of scholarly exchange, we nevertheless felt the need to raise awareness for the many drawbacks and caveats this implies.

Means and ways of thinking are ever so often inextricably intertwined with the respective language in which they are expressed. It is via specific codes of expression and meaning that new concepts are developed, and patterns of cognition or interpretation come to the fore. Ultimately, the specificities of socially and linguistically determined cultures of creativity constitute the great wealth of nuanced modes of knowledge production and their results which often

can only be transferred partially into another language. Science and scholarship need diversity and multilingualism in order to be as creative and productive as possible.

Translations can help to bridge the gaps between various islands of local or regional knowledge, but it seems to be even more promising if one and the same researcher is in a position to express herself or himself in different languages, and thus can become an ambassador of her or his own ideas. This is exactly what the initiators of the 'State of the State' fellowship programme had in mind when they jointly with the Volkswagen Foundation developed the concept for this experiment.

In my view the fellowship programme fits very well into the framework of small things private foundations can do in the face of global challenges. Locally produced knowledge has to be exposed to international communication and competition. It must be challenged by new approaches and results from outside one's own turf. Private foundations can help to establish such trading zones in which universal and local knowledge can meet. These will not only contribute to avoiding too much local or national navel-gazing, but they will also help to keep the universal knowledge-base sufficiently diversified.

As I said at the beginning of my speech, I had a wonderful time here at Oxford and thoroughly enjoyed my stay. I sincerely wish our fellows a similarly fruitful and enjoyable period of hard work and pleasant festivities. In the end you will hopefully all be able to agree with Sebastian, one of the heroes in Evelyn Waugh's famous novel "Brideshead Revisited" when he characterises his time at Oxford as follows: "It's heaven with strawberries."