

Final Report: Student Research & Study Stays at University of British Columbia

Ann-Cathrin Beermann

Environmental Policy Research Centre  
Freie Universität Berlin

Winter Term 2016 – Political Science

Overproduction and Food Waste Management

01.09.2016 – 31.12.2016

As part of the University Alliance for Sustainability's exchange programme, I had the opportunity to stay at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada from September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017 to December 31<sup>st</sup>.

To connect with local students and teachers, I attended 4 classes per week. Since the workload is quite high, compared to courses in Germany, it is almost a fulltime job to deal with the amount of mandatory readings per week and the number of presentations to hold and papers and essays to write. Three out of my four classes were great. The atmosphere was pleasant, the lecturers consider master degree students to be more of a young colleague than a student that enabled us to have fruitful discussions and develop new ideas. The professors invited us foreign students, to add our very own German, British, Australian, etc. perspective to the discussion, so that we could all profit from an exchange of ideas, cultures, experiences and knowledge. Only one class, one about American Foreign Policy did not live up to my expectations. Roughly 2/3 of the students were BA-students, and therefore the quality of the discussions wasn't too good.

My main goal during the research stay in Vancouver was to narrow down the research question of my MA-thesis. Before I left, I only knew I wanted to do something about food overproduction and food waste management, since roughly 50% of the produced food is thrown away in industrialized countries, going along with a huge negative impact on the environment, but did not have a particular case or question. After conducting some literature studies on different branches of the food industry,

I read about the US dairy industry and its influence on the national food policy<sup>1</sup>. I was wondering if a similar impact could be seen in Europe and decided to make this the center of my research. In the long run, I want to figure out what impact the agricultural and dairy industry has on (over) production, food waste and the consumers eating habits and health.

The dairy industry's impact on the environment is in many aspects relevant to observe. It starts with the deforestation of forests in Latin America, to make space for soy plantations, to produce the concentrated feed stuff given to cows, the emissions produced by cows, the slurry that pollutes the soil and ground water, etc. Therefore a reduction of the production of milk and milk-products to its necessary amount and the minimization of over production is more than important. But currently different lobby groups work hard to prevent measures to reduce overproduction and I hope to be able to show impact of agro-lobby-groups on EU food policy in comparison to the US.

Additionally, in the Western Society, overconsumption of high-fat products is one of the several reasons why we see more and more people struggling with overweight and even obesity, resulting in negative effects in the health sector. But that just as a side note.

Next to the progress I could achieve in regards to my MA-thesis, I also appreciate that I had the chance to observe differences in the everyday treatment of the environment in general and resources in particular between Germany and Canada. On the one hand, Vancouver has implemented in some areas a very progressive environmental policy (for example a very strict waste sorting system, with high penalties, for those not following the regulations) on the other hand, typically for Northern America, in other areas, wasting of resources can be seen at every corner. Solid lines of pick-up trucks on the streets, most of the time with empty loading space and only one passenger, SUVs, more Porsche and Ferrari cars than I have seen in my entire life. Additionally a take-out culture. Huge amounts of plastic waste, to-go coffee cups, etc. An only limited understanding of the negative impacts of everyday behaviour on the environment, barely isolated houses in a region where the winter is actually getting cold. A hypothetical question for future research could be the public discourse on everyday resource use and its impact on people's behaviour in Northern America and Europe.

---

<sup>1</sup> One of the maybe weirdest examples is the dairy industry's impact on the US health guidelines. When it became more and more popular to consume skimmed milk and the dairy industry heavily promoted cheese as a healthy product, to get rid of their surplus milk fat, resulting in the long run in the fact, that almost every school cafeteria today offers pizza for lunch, with negative impacts on the environment as well as the children's health.

As a bonus to the time in Canada, I had the chance to stay in California in the week of the 2016 Presidential Elections. For environmentalists, the election of Donald Trump is quite scary. His denial of Climate Change and ignorance of environmental issues is frightening to all people who care about it. I had the chance to talk to Clinton-supporters in L.A. and learn more about the American liberal perspective on the topics mentioned above.