On the 16th of October 2011, an assembly of Social Science students from all four corners of Pakistan touched down at Munchen Airport for a study trip fully funded by DAAD - the German Academic Exchange Service. For most of us, it was our first trip outside of Pakistan, and armed with pre-conceived notions and life-long impressions of what this ‘other’ was going to have in store for us, we began our journey into the cultural and political history of one of Europe’s most exciting and successful countries.

What, however, defines success as a country? I believe our trip gave us ample insight into this question, and gave us subtle tools to intellectualize the heightened emotions that we were to experience over the next two weeks. Our trip was not only an education in terms of cold, historical or geo-political facts. It was also a cultural education, an education of the heart. At the very core of this experience lay our interactions with the German people whose overwhelming charm and inquisitiveness warmed us in the thrashing cold of their cities.

From observing the plants of some of Germany’s proudest exports; visiting museums that displayed the works of genius that this country so vehemently supports; confirming the surreal and mind-numbing beauty of the state through its many gardens, cathedrals and palaces; and finally meeting German students who, like us, were both amazed and amused at our many differences and what I think were even greater similarities - my trip to Germany was undoubtedly the most evocative and intellectually stimulating two weeks of my life. I will try to detail my experiences by employing the cities as a conduit to understanding different aspects of German life.
INDUSTRY - Munich:
Munich is a thriving, bustling city full of people who characterize a kind of relaxed urgency that was very foreign to me. The visit to the BMW plant and the German Museum of Science and Technology opened my eyes to Germany’s vigorous endorsement of industry and engineering. The respect given to these pursuits was heartening. I came to admire both the state support for such endeavors, and the way the people of Munich celebrated these achievements.

BEAUTY - Heidelberg:
Heidelberg is a quaint town - characterized by picturesque architecture and an almost dignified beauty. We saw awe-inspiring palaces, each turret and dome colored by the unique history of German influence and enterprise. This was a time of quiet reflection, of wondering what it is that makes Germany so strong and resilient. I asked a resident if she ever got desensitized of the beauty that surrounded them everywhere. She told me she never would; that beautiful surroundings create beautiful ideas. And the next two weeks were ample proof of this claim.

PEOPLE - Bonn:
What I noticed instantly about Bonn was the openness of its people. We found that we were never starved of social interaction; strangers helped us find places on a map, asked us where we came from and wanted to know more, and helped us work out the highly-automated services that were entirely new to us. For the people of Germany, a smile and a kind word is never too much work, and our occasional bouts of homesickness quickly dissipated every time we came into contact with them.

ART - Cologne:
We visited Cologne’s many museums, and I particularly enjoyed Museum Ludwig, with its many classic and modern installations. Being a huge fan of Expressionist cinema, I found the
works of great painters like August Macke truly fascinating. This, to me, was cultural instruction of the highest order. Art, beauty, and Germany are all intertwined in my consciousness. To think of one without the other is almost impossible.

POLITICS - Berlin: Berlin is a microcosm of all of Germany. Walking through its streets is like experiencing a kind of historical poetry. The city is a testament to the will of its residents - it symbolizes their determination to turn the hardships of yesteryear into the successes of today. The way in which Berliners have reclaimed their political history and changed it into a thriving positive gives me hope for Pakistan as well. It speaks to the patriot in all of us, and shows us the way to true democratic freedom.

I will now speak more directly about some of my personal observations during this trip. One of the biggest revelations to me was the fact that the universalism of student-life transcends any and all kinds of social, cultural and religious barriers. Being with the German students was a truly eye-opening experience. We were all amazed at how a lot of our anxieties and future plans were about the same things - credit hours, university applications, relationships, etc. Being a student informed and constructed our social outlook, the way we related to each other, and the very identities we had. Even though we had different views on spirituality, family life and the like, I felt that our differences colored our ambitions rather than generated them. The way that education can surpass these socio-political boundaries not only through an intellectual and moral transformation of students, but even as a result of superficial features such as term papers and evening classes, was, to me, astounding.
I now move on to the research itself. One aspect of our research that somewhat troubled us all was the questionnaire we drew up. In retrospect, we all felt that the questions were fairly absolutist, and not only could the German students not understand them because of the ambiguous nature of the statements, but even most of the Pakistani students (who, after all, helped generate the questions) had trouble answering them. I felt that this somewhat tainted our experience with quantitative methods of inquiry. It did not account for the religious or ethnic diversity of German students, and some questions, especially those on faith and spirituality, were incredibly misleading. I regret that we made use of those questionnaires, but some good did come out of them. The absurdity of the questions opened the room up for debate. We had an impassioned dialogue about those issues that perhaps would be considered too sensitive to talk about with strangers we had just met. Therefore, in a convoluted sense, perhaps the questionnaire was actually helpful. We were able to talk about topics such as female repression, religious fanaticism, and the agency accorded to youth in our respective countries. The students were extremely forthcoming about their opinions on extremism, the constraints of institutionalized religion, and the importance of political reform. What struck me the most was the kind of diversity of thought and opinion amongst the German students. Although they had been nurtured in roughly the same kind of social and cerebral environment, they all had drastically different opinions on issues such as government-sponsored education, the efficacy of the UN, and the economic policies of the government. Students in Germany have the intellectual tools to critically analyze abstract ideas, and to discuss such ideas in various forums with their peers, regardless of who is wrong or right.

Perhaps this leads me to my initial question. What defines success as a country? For me, it is the people that make up the country. Even more important than that is the way a country treats its
youth. German students have wildly differing ideas on what makes their country work. Some support government intervention, other do not. Some endorse secularity in all fields of life, others would like to see faith celebrated a bit more. Therefore, these students have been taught that, regardless of the veracity of their opinions, they are entitled to have a point of view even if it contrasts with that of senior authority figures like professors, parents, or even the state. It is this intellectual freedom that makes Germany successful and in turn breeds civil and democratic freedom. All opinions are valid. People are encouraged to think and change. This, in a nutshell, is what I have taken away from Germany. The fact that some factions in Pakistan censor the media and any and all counter-opinions is besides the point. The fact that a small knot of powerful Pakistanis are trying to install the masses into a repressive hegemonic system is, also, besides the point. What is important, however, is that even at the grass-roots level, at certain schools and at the behest of certain parents, children are being forced to stop thinking. Opinions are not encouraged. If children speak up, it is admonished, because what do children know? Pakistani students, I feel, do not have the tools to deal with issues of an abstract nature. And this, I think, is because of a miscalculated effort by the primary and secondary educators to make their students conform to a set of beliefs and values that they were in turn made to ascribe to as children themselves. It is a vicious cycle which needs to put to an end. Therefore, my trip to Germany showed me the urgent need in third-world countries to refine the processes that help inform the youth, and to give merit to all shades of opinions, whether viable or not. It is only when all citizens are treated as first-class citizens that a country has a running chance at success. I believe this to be the fundamental difference between Pakistan and Germany, and also the greatest lesson we can learn from within this distinction.
In the end, I would like to thank DAAD for a truly incredible experience, and to hope that our journey together can resume again someday.

Thank you,

Momina Sohail.