

Ian Buruma

## Too Much?



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Like most fellows of the Wissenschaftskolleg, I started my term full of grand ambitions. Books would be written, projects completed, great works contemplated, and so on and so forth. The problem was this, however: a certain amount of unhappiness is needed, in my case at any rate, to spur productivity, and the Kolleg went out of its way to keep me happy. Which is not to say that any writing I did manage to accomplish during my stay in Berlin should be read as a sign of failure in the Kolleg's efforts.

The other problem, which I know I shared with at least some of my colleagues, was the result of yet another embarrassment of riches: too much freedom. Being able to do anything you like can result in a kind of paralysis. You can end up doing nothing much at all. Or you can end up being an expert table-tennis player.

The basic choice I had was a hard one to make: should I write or should I use all my time learning, reading, talking, thinking, in short, doing all those things one has less time to do in less happy, less free circumstances. My strategy, in the end, was a compromise: I tried to do both, without ever shaking off the feeling that I was either doing too much of the one or of the other.

Too much happiness, too much freedom, too much good food, too many good conversations, too much fine music, too many friends. What a fine predicament to be in. And I shall be forever grateful for being subjected to it.

But I should be more specific about my own project, which was to fulfil an impossible task. I had embarked upon a book about two countries, of which I knew one very well, Japan, and one only vaguely, Germany. My subject was memories of World War II. Since I had spent many years in Japan, and very little time in Germany, the danger was to create something that would be an oddly unbalanced mixture of expertise and impressionism. What I badly needed, then, was time, and more time in Germany.

This was the most precious gift from the Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin. Whether I used my time wisely or not was of course entirely my own problem, not that of the Kolleg.

I like to think that I did, at least some of the time. I have rarely read so many books in so short a space of time. This could not have been done without the extraordinary services of the library staff, whose praise I would like to shout from the roofs.

I was also able to talk to a large number of people, young and old, Right and Left, stupid and clever. This, I hope, gave me some insight into the plurality of opinions in Germany. Finally, I was able to read a number of German newspapers and magazines every day in the course of nine months. This might seem a small thing, but it was of vital importance to my project, and it was something that could hardly have been done without the leisure — too much freedom — of being a fellow of the Kolleg. Nor could it have been done outside of Germany. For one of the great assets of being in Berlin, surrounded by congenial people, is that one does not just read the news, but one is caught up in the general discussion of local issues, which, during my time, happened to be Stasi, more Stasi, and Stasi yet again, but even that was useful. The echoes of history — my subject — kept reverberating from every wall.

Since I was engaged in a project directly related to Germany, it might have seemed a waste of time to listen to discussions about ancient Greek philosophy, European history of the Middle Ages, linguistics, the semiology of Hollywood films, the debates of rabbis, or the sexual life of German witches. But in fact the ideas generated by these discussions were often invaluable since they brought perspective and depth to what could have been a parochial experience. (There is, after all, only so much you can take of Stasis and Nazis.)

If there is one lesson to be learnt, then, from too much freedom and too much happiness at the Wissenschaftskolleg, it is that everything hangs together in one way or another. There are few subjects, or ideas, that cannot be applied, fruitfully, to any project at hand. This is how your own ideas and hunches are constantly tested. And it is the reason why I wish the Wissenschaftskolleg, as well as all future fellows, the best of luck.