

Florian Coulmas

Ties, or: The Second Coming



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When I first came to Berlin, it took me barely three weeks to get to know one of the darker sides of state authority. I was given the opportunity, not entirely on my own initiative, to study for the length of one night the inside of a prison cell.

I was nineteen years old and had no ties in Berlin. According to the law I was still a minor, which is why the local tabloids initialized my last name when reporting about the event the next day. This did much to foster my trust in the press as a source of information. "Florian C." was made known to the public as a student leader who had instigated a riot and therefore been arrested. In actual fact, my only offence was that I was ignorant of the dress code for the occasion. Nothing to be belittled, it must be admitted.

The occasion was a demonstration, one of the activities one indulged in at the time, if only to familiarize oneself with the scene. Especially when it was for a noble cause such as defending the right of a respectable solicitor to practice law. Water cannons were then a standard concomitant of political rallies. My answer to that was to put on my oilskin, bright and yellow and absolutely watertight. This was a mistake. When the action began, the guy with the yellow jacket, evidently a student

leader, was picked up before he knew why. I had missed a chance to be arrested for something.

The dress code of which I was not aware required an extremely ugly olive-green hooded coat, called "parka". This apparel had somehow found its way from US Army depots to the wardrobe of students who on a weekly or bi-weekly basis took to the streets to protest the presence of those who had worn these coats before them.

Whatever, what I learned was that dress is something of considerable importance. As I said, I had no ties when I first came to Berlin, and I had none when I left a short while after this lesson to move on to Paris.

Then I came back, twenty-five years later, having picked up a few ties along the way.

There was the rector, sure enough wearing a tie. He never wore one when he came to class in the Sociology Department of the FU, driven by the illusion that he could make us students recognize the virtue of Dilthey's hermeneutics of *Verstehen*. I had no clue then what he was trying to do, and to this day I fail to see how our knowledge about society can be advanced by reducing everything to psychology. But upon my second coming to Berlin I was able to camouflage my ignorance as a "position". Ties lend it further credibility.

"What's the occasion?"

"Nothing particular. Just a way of showing appreciation for today's speaker."

My friend and I had this dialogue repeatedly, I don't quite remember how many times. Usually on Tuesdays, *Dikol*, short for "Discover incomparable keynoters on leave". Incomparable or not, I put on a tie indiscriminately lest I should be suspected of politically incorrect behaviour by discriminating against vegetarians, the short-sighted, bisexuals, over-fifty-fivers, tie-haters, etc. To myself, of course, I thought, as anyone in my position would, that not everyone was really deserving of a tie being worn, nor indeed did I care whether or not ties were worn by anyone. The range was considerable, not only in topics, but also in style, and in the extent to which the speakers considered their audience worthy of their efforts. Some thought it was an honour for us to listen, others that it was an honour for them to speak. Some lectured, others learned. To me all this was an edifying diversion, despite the variation. Putting on a tie was the least I could do.

Also, ties have their subtle advantages in high society. Far from being thrown in jail for no reason, this time around I was met at the airport by a limousine, a genuine Benz, as my knowledgeable son remarked appreciatingly. I even had a word with the President. Herr von Weizsäcker asked me whether he should accept an invitation by the governor of

Okinawa who wanted him as a speaker to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II because he liked a speech von Weizsäcker had delivered on a similar occasion in Germany a few years back. The President even seemed to listen when I said in response that he would be a fool to accept the invitation, which only could get him into hot water. Can there be any room for doubt that this was because of my ties?

We arrived early when the summer was still hot and people were swimming in the lake across the street. We also left early, but ich habe mal wo gelesen, daß es immer das geratenste sei, das Schönste nicht auszukosten, sondern mitten im Genusse dem Genuß Valet zu sagen. We did just that, even though es besteht kein Zweifel, daß dieser Fleck Erde mit zu dem Schönsten zählt, was die Norddeutsche Tiefebene vorzuweisen hat. What is more, ein Nachmittag in Halensee ist fast so inspirierend wie vier Wochen auf Capri, as someone once misquoted the Rector. Ad fontes! Extrapolating from this, the time I was allowed to spend in Halensee has been enough to inspire me for a decade or two. In the meantime, I hope that some other source of inspiration will come my way before this supply is up and that some of the ties I took away from my second coming to Berlin will be of durable fabric.