

Robert Harms

Reflections on my Year at the Wissenschaftskolleg



Born in 1946. Ph.D. in African History and Comparative World History from the University of Wisconsin in 1978. Taught at the University of California at Berkeley (1979), and Yale (1979-present) where he is Professor of African History. Interested in the relationship between local dynamics of social change and the larger political, economic, and ecological systems in which they are enmeshed. Fieldwork in Zaïre (1975-76, 1981) and Guinea (1991-92). Publications include *River of Wealth, River of Sorrow: The Central Zaïre Basin in the Era of the Slave and Ivory Trade, 1500-1891* (1981), and *Games Against Nature: An Eco-Cultural History of the Nunu of Equatorial Africa* (1987). At Yale he has directed the African Studies Program (1989-91), the Southern African Research Program (1988-89), and the Program for the Study of Agrarian Societies (1994-95). — Address: Department of History, Yale University, P.O. Box 208324, New Haven, CT 06520-8324, USA.

The first thought that came to my mind when I sat down to evaluate my year at the Wissenschaftskolleg was that I had done less than I had planned to do. The book that I had naively hoped to research and write in one year is still far from finished. But as I continue to reflect on my year, I am gradually coming around to the opposite conclusion: that during my year in the Wissenschaftskolleg I did much more than I had ever dreamed of doing.

One of the first things I learned to do here was to eat breakfast. Normally I can gobble down some breakfast in a few minutes, but here breakfast usually took a full hour. This was partly because of the wonderfully varied and abundant buffet that greeted me every morning, but it was also because of the conversations. I soon discovered that I was part of a group that regularly arrived at breakfast at eight a.m. or shortly thereafter. This continuity allowed us to maintain ongoing conversations on such varied issues as the mysteries of driving in Berlin, the

bureaucracy of the Oskar-Helene-Heim Hospital, the architecture of Berlin, the unresolved legacy of the Third Reich, and why we were feeling guilty all the time.

The lunches and the Thursday evening dinners were a different kind of experience. I usually picked a table more or less at random, and thus I had a different set of companions at each meal. Through these meals I gained an appreciation of the variety of disciplines, approaches, nationalities, and personalities that made up the fellowship. I can't say that I came to understand selfish genes or strange attractors, or to fathom the strange science of antics. But I can say that I developed an appreciation for the knowledge and insights of my meal-mates, and I gained a whole new repertory of big words that relate to concepts I will never understand.

The colloquia were a time of wonderment, where I was introduced to all sorts of concepts, problems, and ideas that I had never thought about before. There were two things that I appreciated most about the colloquia. One was that the comments and questions in the discussion were designed to further our understanding of the subject, to explore the implication of the ideas that had been presented, and to search for a synthesis of different views. There were clashes of ideas and interpretations, but not clashes of egos. The second thing I appreciated was that the speakers made great efforts to present their material in accessible and interesting ways. In this they were greatly aided by Dr. Lindenberg and Frau von Arnim, who understand that the medium is indeed a large part of the message.

I learned to revel in the many fascinations of Berlin and treasure the silence of the Grunewald. If I was bored by the sight of my own words on the computer screen, I could get re-energized by the many activities of the city. If I had writer's block and couldn't put any words on the computer screen, I could gain peace and perspective by walking through the Grunewald. I came to love those woods, and I wonder how I will survive without them.

And yes, I also worked on my project to reconstruct a single voyage of a slave ship. The reason the book is far from finished is not because I didn't write a lot of pages, but because the book kept expanding faster than I could write it. My discussions with my colleagues gave me ideas about new questions to ask, new directions to explore. My colloquium here at the Wissenschaftskolleg and the talks I gave in Germany, Holland, and France led to discussions that challenged me to rethink and expand my ideas. The library staff is partly responsible as well. They were so efficient at finding rare and unusual sources for me that my documentation ballooned out of control.

My conception of the project changed in two major ways. I had originally planned to write the book as a rather standard historical narrative. But in my discussions with my colleagues, I found that they were far more interested in the characters, images, and events that I used to illustrate my historical points than they were in the points themselves. This experience gave me the idea of organizing the narrative around significant characters, images, and events, and using the broader historical points as a way of linking them together. In practical terms this means short chapters that move back and forth between different characters, images, and events, but do so in a way that eventually builds up a coherent mosaic.

The second shift in my thinking was related to the issue of how we understand world-systems. I had hoped that in reconstructing a single slaving voyage, I might gain some insight into the nature of world-systems as viewed from the perspective of the practitioners themselves. During the year I learned a great deal from the biologists who were discussing "self-organizing systems." Although the concept is not directly applicable to my work, those discussions taught me that a system can be organized in a variety of ways, and that I need not be limited to the center-periphery model commonly applied to world-systems. My vague thoughts in this direction became more focused as a result of my discussions with the participants in the models group. They raised the possibility that perhaps one voyage could in some sense serve as a model for the system as a whole. I am still pondering the implications of that one.

The book that exists in my fantasies as I leave this place is very different from the one I had in my head when I came. It is also far more interesting to me. I see this reorientation of my thinking as the most valuable gift that I take away from my year at the Wissenschaftskolleg.

I also made a great deal of progress on a related project that I had not planned to work on this year. This was to produce a critical edition of the ship's log that is at the heart of my project. I began spending more and more time on this project after I discovered that Frau Köbele has a real talent for deciphering French words not found in standard dictionaries and written in illegible handwriting. Inspired by her talent, rigor, and enthusiasm, we went over that 160-page document word by word and letter by letter. The typescript we thus produced is an unexpected bonus that would not have been possible without the help provided by the Wissenschaftskolleg.

Throughout the year I benefited in innumerable ways from the help of the directors and staff. I remember the valuable and stimulating discussions I had with Dr. Joachim Nettelbeck and Dr. Reinhart Meyer-Kalkus. I appreciate the helpful and efficient work of the house-clean-

ing staff, the kitchen staff, the technical staff, the computer experts, the secretarial staff, the librarians, and the administrative staff. They were unfailingly helpful and friendly, even when my requests went beyond their normal duties. It was truly a pleasure to work with them. As I contemplate returning to normal life, I start to wonder how I will ever get along without them.

As I pack up my books, documents, and unfinished manuscript, I still cannot escape the thought that I did less than I had hoped to do, but I am comforted by the thought that I also did so much more.