

Sahotra Sarkar

Berlin Nights and Days, 1996-1997



Born 22 October 1961, in Calcutta, India. Attended Columbia University (1977-82, BA 1981) and the University of Chicago (1981-89, PhD 1989). In spite of that, managed to get some education. Taught at Boston University (1988-93) and McGill University (1994 — present). Senior Fellow, Sidney Edelstein Center, Hebrew University of Jerusalem (1993), and Fellow, Dibner Institute at MIT (1993-94). Specialties: history and philosophy of science and theoretical population genetics. — Address: Department of Philosophy, McGill University, 745 Sherbrooke St. W., Montréal, Québec H3A 2T7, Canada.

There is something pleasant about a place in which riots are run on a schedule and advertised widely. On the other hand, there weren't enough of them, only one in Kreuzberg on May Day — a rather tame affair. Meanwhile Kollwitzplatz in Prenzlauer Berg was cordoned off by the *Polizei*, who should have known better. The *Tageszeitung* had announced that there would be no riot here. Besides the *Polizei*, the only people there were two or three desperate journalists and a few foreigners who did not read German. The *Polizei* refused to drive me, and the other foreigners, to the actual riot — Berlin still has much to learn about tourism. But, generally, the *Polizei* were very friendly. They stopped me six times during the year, each time because it was "routine." With all this official attention, it felt like being a dignitary.

The festivals were not nearly as pleasant or well-organized as the riots. The jazz festival was largely a very well-kept secret. There was a film festival, allegedly one of the largest in Europe, but the published schedules were often works of inspired fiction. The "Love Parade" created more disorder — and more litter — than the Kreuzberg riot on May Day. At least, *Oktoberfest* was celebrated in October unlike in Munich.

Most of the time, there were neither riots nor festivals. What prevented those periods from becoming dull was the insatiable intellectual curiosity of the Berliners. I had to describe my research in excruciating detail to a towering woman in the *Dampfbad* of a health club at Olivaer Platz. It took at least an hour to explain why I preferred Carnap to Popper, and why a philosopher looks at science. I did not sweat as much

during my doctoral dissertation defense, even though I was clothed on that occasion. There were genetics lessons to give at the *Schwarzes Cafe* on Kantstrasse at about 4 a. m. (This was an important public service: members of the audience often displayed a marked tendency towards random mating.) The bartender at the *Kneipe* next to the Freie Universität library wanted to know about bar-fights in the US. He was nostalgic for the departed US soldiers who had formed his most reliable clientele. Near the *Kulturbrauerei* in Prenzlauer Berg, a very well-schooled skinhead somewhat apologetically got through the required racist remarks and settled down for a long discussion of Indian views on the Turkish question.

Like the riots, the buses were generally on time and often went where they were supposed to go. A few even took you out of the Grunewald, though none brought you back if your evening ran even a little bit late. This was unfortunate because Berlin only became a city at night. During the day — all five hours of daylight, most of the year — it was a medley of suburbs strung around a giant construction site. There might eventually be a day-time city here — if they ever finish building it. Once darkness obliterated the cranes, Berlin emerged. On Savigny Platz people wore black: men, women, and possible others were all dressed alike. In this uniform, they thronged to exclusive nightclubs to listen to an indescribable hybrid music that they called "jazz." They cultivated the art of watching each other, the haircuts, the jewelry, and the shades of black that distinguished 500 DM from 50. Almost at the other end of town, the bar-flies of Kreuzberg retained some of the construction worker look from the 1980's. At the *Flammenden Herzen*, a bottle tossed at you was still a sign of friendship though, perhaps, the aging anarchists were only staying in shape for the next round of Molotov cocktails. Outside, graffiti warned the Turks of an impending Kurdish revolution. Unlike the anarchist memorabilia, this was not entirely a joke.

For sartorial and other variety, the Scheunenviertel was hard to beat. The little — and apparently illegal — open-air bar behind the Tacheles building usually boasted a wider spectrum of dress than a Halloween party in Chicago. Pierced eyebrows competed with studded tongues as erotic embellishments. Exposed skin bereft of stigmata looked decidedly out of place. A garish four-story mural provided a counterpoint. This was Susanna Elm's field site, though she kept a low profile. It was a pleasant place to work. Unfortunately it closed for a few months in the middle of winter, and I never started my book. Upstairs, in the bar outside the movie theater, satin was the order of the night. The satin graced furniture that must have been made broken. Across Oranienburger Strasse, a *Kneipe* boasted the cheapest *Kristall* in Berlin and walls that

were plastered with DDR newspapers. In the middle of all this was an exquisite Thai restaurant. Down the street was the pompous and venerable *Silberstein's*, with cast-iron furniture designed for ample bottoms. In keeping with the times, it served *sushi* during the day. In between was the *Neue Synagoge*. And memories of *Kristallnacht*.

I heard persistent rumors that life could also be found in Berlin during the day. There was some evidence for that. Ludger Derenthal insisted that there were art and photography galleries in Berlin. He seemed sincere. Bettina Dennerlein could be found in her office in the morning, even after she had conducted an insider's tour of Berlin the night before. Stephen Greenblatt went out during the day, but only in disguise: head covered, eyes behind dark glasses, shirts and shorts so colorful as to qualify as traffic hazards, and riding something that may have once been a bicycle. This was the new historicist uniform of Shakespeare scholars in purgatory. Several Fellows developed the charming habit of a "walkaround" at day-break. They usually returned to report a sighting of the naked man. The naked man was just a pleasant Grunewald resident who thought it was healthy to be naked. He may have had a point: he seemed to be in perfect health. (As he also emphasized, he was born naked.)

On Tuesdays Fellows of the Wissenschaftskolleg assembled at 11 a. m. for the *Dienstagskolloquium*. Most of the year, there was daylight by that hour. However, these colloquia hardly qualified as evidence for life. The Staff wistfully recounted years when these were weekly crucifixions. In 1996-97, they were as lively as tea at an English college. The year did begin with promise. Susanna Elm announced herself to be an unmarked woman. Lars Clausen prepared us for disasters. Renate Lachmann held out the hope of the fantastic. Valentin Groebner encouraged bribery (preferably in liquid form). Heinrich von Stietencron tried to convince some very skeptical Indians that Hinduism was peaceful. Several Fellows tried to look like insects.

Then depression set in with the Berlin winter. Humanists found multiple layers of meaning in each others' discourse. The evolutionists insisted that it was all a matter of reproduction. Every talk became "rich" and "interesting," even if incomprehensible. The only innovation was a practice worth turning into a tradition: there was no correlation between questions asked and the subject of a presentation. (This has great promise: for instance, future Fellows could be asked to prepare their questions before their arrival.) Some colloquia were confessional. (Names are being withheld for reasons of privacy — and copyright and royalties. And, of course, libel.) One Fellow discovered that Mahler was Jewish. Another displayed a morbid fascination with Lenin's pickled

brain. The best effort was from a Fellow who spoke earnestly and yearningly on the importance of having a long tail.

The Kolleg, of course, was unique, even for Berlin. In 1996-97, it was unique in exactly three ways: (i) it had the only ill-bred dog in the city; (ii) it was the only institution where German was not understood by a clear majority of inmates; and (iii) it was the only venue where you could watch an awful Hindi movie almost every week, or hear worse Hindi music any time of day or night. The Secretary of the Kolleg attempted to counter the last dangerous trend by urging Fellows to adopt Tic Tac Toe instead. Dominique Jameux offered Schoenberg. These efforts failed largely due to the staid and stable constitution of this year's Fellows. There were no scandals, few disputes, and even fewer affairs. The general disappointment of the Fellows and the Staff was summed up by Fritz Kramer in his parting aphorism: "This is a respectable institution, after all."