

Ezra N. Suleiman

Berlin Days



I have lived in several different countries and attended a variety of academic institutions. Although I was born in Basra, Iraq, I spent ten years in an English boarding school. After my "A levels", I went to Harvard University, where I got my B.A. degree. This was followed by studies in Paris and London, and then at Columbia University, where I obtained my Ph.D. I then taught at UCLA and, since 1979, I have been teaching at Princeton University. My main intellectual interests revolve around the problems of leadership, bureaucracy, and decision-making, all studied within the context of Europe. My publications include *Politics, Power and Bureaucracy in France* (1974); *Elites in French Society* (1979); *Bureaucracy and Policy-Making: A Comparative Perspective* (1983); *The Recruitment of Elites in Europe* (1995). — Address: Department of Politics, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ 08544-1005, USA.

I was not predisposed to spending a year in Berlin. I had spent all my previous sabbaticals working in Los Angeles, Princeton or Paris; in other words, places that were familiar and where I would not need to find or to insert myself into a community. Coming to Berlin, therefore, was something of an adventure. I did not know the language, and the little familiarity I had with German society came from my collaborative work over the years; I was quite familiar with German history and politics. Nonetheless, accepting the offer to spend a year in Germany without much preparation came with a certain trepidation.

For one thing, I knew little about the Wissenschaftskolleg. For another, there was always the fear of finding early on that the commitment to spend a year in an institution and in a city that I did not know might have been foolhardy. And then, there is always the lingering fear of spending a year in a monastic setting, something I was keenly aware of from my ten-year stint in an English boarding school.

Luckily, my fears were quickly dispelled. The Kolleg is now a well-oiled mechanism. One is made to feel welcome right away. Everything is ready the moment you arrive — office, computer, apartment. Also, my boarding school years gave me a familiarity with close-knit institutional

settings and probably prepared me rather well for the requirements of coexisting with a diverse array of colleagues. Besides, my own personal history was essentially characterized by adaptations to different peoples and cultures. Nomadism, I discovered, had its advantages! These were simply to be my Berlin Days.

I am aware that the outside world has some difficulty comprehending the concept of an institution like the Kolleg. But the Fellows are all engaged in the enterprise of research and writing, regardless of their discipline. It is a provisional community held together by nothing else than shared respect, which does not mean that everyone admires and appreciates the work of his/her colleagues. But they do understand the enterprise that others are engaged in.

The Kolleg is an institution with a mission: it is dedicated to allowing scholars to work. To that end, it is staffed by a group of remarkable people who share the mission of respecting the fellows and facilitating their work. In all my studies of organizations and in my work in institutions, I have never come across a cohort of such dedicated, helpful, and efficient people. No problem was ever too big for Barbara Sanders, for Christine von Arnim, for Andrea Friedrich, for the entire library staff, for Hans-Georg Lindenberg — to cite just a few at random.

Clearly this does not occur haphazardly. The involvement of Wolf Lepenies and Joachim Nettelbeck in setting tones and objectives for the staff and for the Kolleg simply indicates an evident truth: the example comes from the "top". For someone like myself, who has studied both organizations and leadership, it now seems clear that organizations vary because they possess a set of different codes by which they operate. They also recruit people who will follow those codes (positive or negative). The Kolleg clearly attracts a staff that shares the mission and the ethics of the institution.

My year in Berlin was an intellectually enriching one, even if I did not succeed in accomplishing all the work I thought I would. Learning German (even a very modest amount) was part of what I took away, though I wish I had devoted some time to this task *before* coming to Berlin. Berlin was blissfully distracting, and I learned more about music than probably about anything else. And I will not go into the other attractions of Berlin that all the Fellows who come to the Kolleg sooner or later discover.

I came to the Kolleg with three projects. One, a sort of ethnographic (though the word may be too fancy) book on my twenty years of experience in and with *la France profonde*, remained unopened. I came to the Kolleg with a first draft of a manuscript that I hoped to re-do. I had hoped that when I was tired with my more serious projects, I would

distract myself in my "spare" moments by turning my attention to this project. This was my "fun" project, about which I was quite enthusiastic since I had never written or attempted anything that came close to being a combination of ethnography, cultural analysis, and even fiction. It was very different from my previous theoretical and empirical work, which had been largely based on interviews, surveys, archives. This is an empirical work but of a different sort, one that concentrates on detail and that seeks indications about a society through observed behavior and interactions. As I say, I never got around to opening this manuscript. I merely noticed it on my desk throughout the year. What "spare" time I had in Berlin was taken up by operas, concerts, museums.

The second project was to complete a book on public enterprises. I had for some time been engaged in a work on the more significant accomplishments (in rail and air transportation, and in telecommunications) of the French state. Now that we live in an era that manifests its disregard for all that emanates from or depends on the state, I try to redress the balance in this book. I suggest that while the positive side of state intervention, ownership and control may have run its course, this nonetheless does not justify us in seeing the post-war state's role with our contemporary lenses. There was, indeed, a "golden age" (the title of the book) of the state. The argument advanced in this book is not a nostalgic one harking back to a period held up as a model. Indeed, the book suggests that what was possible and positive at a particular juncture in history is neither possible today nor is it likely to produce the same positive results. The state no longer has consensual objectives. More importantly, it no longer has the means to carry out grandiose projects. Finally, operating in an open world economy calls for the kind of adaptations that a state enterprise is probably not capable of. Hence, a more rigorous distinction needs to be drawn between a public enterprise that probably needs to be a candidate for privatization and a public service that needs to be preserved. This book was completed at the Kolleg and appeared in Fall 1997.

The third project that I devoted time to during my stay at the Kolleg was a study of the relationship between bureaucracy and democracy in several democracies (U.S., Britain, France, Germany, Hungary, Poland). This project follows logically from my study of the "golden age" of the state. The important shift in ideology that has occurred in the world and that extols the market and private initiative has led to a denigration of the role of public service. Following Weber and Schumpeter in particular, I raise the question of whether it is possible for democracy to flourish in the absence of a competent, professional bureaucracy. Some societies have moved to weaken, or even to dismantle, their state

bureaucracies; others (particularly in Eastern Europe) have not sought to develop a professional bureaucratic apparatus. I try in this study to analyze the consequences of seeking to inject the norms of the market into public service and those of seeking to reduce the functions of the state by turning them over to private enterprise.

Whereas in my study on the "Golden Age of the State," I argue that the era of the state as an entrepreneur is essentially over, I turn my attention in this work to the enduring importance of a public service organization for a democratic polity. I try to separate the various functions that states perform and to analyze those that can be said to contribute to strengthening democracy. My work, in the end, is as much about democracy as it is about bureaucracy.

Working on this project, with the immense help of the library and with the cooperation of colleagues in Germany, enabled me to delve in some detail into the organization of German governmental structures. Many colleagues in Berlin and elsewhere in Germany were eager to discuss the project with me and to help me learn about Germany. Moreover, having spent my professional life working on Europe, I had always foolishly respected the turf of Americanists and not ventured onto their terrain. The year at the Kolleg gave me the opportunity to learn a great deal about the U.S. In fact, the few lectures I agreed to give in Germany (at the Einstein Forum and elsewhere) centered, as did my Tuesday seminar at the Kolleg, on the U.S.

In a way, I am now quite pleased that I did not accomplish all I set out to do upon arriving at the Kolleg. I would, at best, have deepened by knowledge about very familiar areas of knowledge. Instead I broadened my intellectual horizon immensely by letting myself get "distracted". One consequence of the year, therefore, is that it has given me a new enthusiasm about teaching, that other part of our *métier* that many of us often sacrifice for research.