

Perry Anderson

## On the Eve



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To be in Berlin on the eve of a change of currency, of government and of capital was a rare privilege. Of these impending transformations, the last is of greatest interest to any European in Berlin, as to the Berliners themselves. To watch and even participate in the debates around the reconstruction of the city, as the political institutions in Bonn prepared for their move to Berlin, was an absorbing experience. In no other European city could one witness such passionate civic discussion of the future of an urban community – its buildings, streets, memorials, traditions. The remarkable figure of Hans Stimmann, coordinator extraordinary of the redesign of Berlin, presiding with white locks and ferruginous gaze over a public debate on History and Urban Planning in the Palace of the Republic of the former DDR, left an indelible impression. This was a tempestuous occasion, in which East and West Berliners, functionaries and citizens, old and young, confronted each other with uninhibited vehemence: not least the State Secretary himself. At issue, among other questions, was the preservation – indeed re-utilization – of former Nazi edifices such as the Reichsbank and Luftwaffe Headquarters as Ministries for the future government of the country, in the name of historical memory, as ‘texts’ not to be forgotten. To question such an equation of monuments with documents fell to the foreigner. My own view is that Europeans would have more reason to be grateful for a Berlin that could rival the best of our common cities – Paris, Rome, Barcelona – in beauty and sociability, than for one that, from the most respectable of motives, held mortification a value.

Berlin already offers much of the former, in its own style. Nowhere more so than in Grunewald itself, so vividly evoked in Nicolas Sombart’s memoir of his childhood, itself part of the history of the Wissenschaftskolleg. The villas, trees, lakes here have no equivalent in any other European

capital. In some ways they reminded me, strangely, of the distant city in which I work: recalling parts of Los Angeles – Los Feliz, Pasadena, even a hint of Bel Air – more than Neuilly or Holland Park. Elsewhere the low density of the city, its long avenues, the relation of the pedestrian to the car, all stir – perversely, but not disagreeably, out of place – Angeleno memories. But the Wissenschaftskolleg itself, in its proximity to the centre of a world city, has no New World equivalent. It would be difficult to imagine more convivial company than we enjoyed this year, in an institution which has discovered the secrets of intellectual hospitality. High-spiritedness seemed part of the *genius loci*.

In this setting, I finished a book on the origins of the idea of post-modernity, as an object of historical philology; developed some theses on the comparative fortunes of the concept of intellectuals in modern Europe; wrote a family memoir about an unusual institution of inter-war China; and – stimulated by the gaiety of our Italian contingent – published occasional provocations in the Roman press. A cosmopolitan year.

Reading Wolf Lepenies's work on Sainte-Beuve, which came out just before we arrived – a kind of promissory note of what we might expect to find – was a particular pleasure of this time. I have always felt a special admiration for scholarship that recovers for us thinkers who have fallen into partial neglect, or contemporary incomprehension, by casting the meaning of their lives into a suddenly sharp, new light. Lepenies's study of the founder of the genre of periodical literary criticism is rich in such revelations. It concludes with a set of memorable comparisons: of Sainte-Beuve with Linnaeus, with Saint-Simon, but also with his detractor Proust. Among the ideas that linger in the mind, residues of a time by the Koenigssee, is the paradox of a 'moral botany'.