

Chris Hann

Time's Catapult or Besonders schwerer Fall der geistigen Überfüllung



Born in South Wales, 1953; educated at Oxford (B.A. Politics, Philosophy and Economics, 1974) and Cambridge (Ph.D. Social Anthropology, 1979); has carried out fieldwork in Hungary and Poland, and (with Ildikó Bellér-Hann) more recently in Turkey and Xinjiang. He was Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Kent at Canterbury from 1992 to 1999, having previously taught for many years at Cambridge. In 1999 he became a Founding Director of the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, where he will organize comparative research into changing property relationships, especially in ex-socialist Eurasia. – Address: Max-Planck-Institut für Ethnologische Forschung, Postfach 110351, 06017 Halle.

It has been my very considerable good fortune to spend a second year at the Wissenschaftskolleg. I owe this first to the relative slowness of the Max-Planck-Gesellschaft in 1997–98 as it set about creating a new Institute for Social Anthropology, with myself as one of the designated Directors, and second to the speed and generosity with which the Kolleg reacted to these delays elsewhere. The prospect by the time this second year began was that a Max-Planck-Institut für ethnologische Forschung would begin operations at some point in 1999. Following September visits to Rostock and Halle, the location decision was quickly decided in favour of the latter. All that remained was for me to make a final commitment.

The truth is that this decision was effectively taken when we decided to bring not only our books with us for our second year in Berlin but also various items of furniture (a special word of thanks to Frau Fogt for her flexibility on this point) and our dog, Sam. Given the continuing difficulties in taking animals back into Britain, taking this step greatly reduced my scope to hold out for a higher salary.

After signing a contract in December I thought I would be able to concentrate on my research during the rest of the academic year in Berlin. The disruptions were, however, continuous. I shall not forget the day that I lost through a flight to Munich, with long delays at the airports caused by the bad winter weather, just to discuss our future office furniture. By June, when I officially joined the MPG, I was making regular visits to Halle, not only to hire staff and get the new Institute on its feet, but also to take part in the work to establish an *Ethnologie-Studiengang* at the Martin Luther University and to furnish the house we are renting. I must admit so far to have spent more time in Scandinavian furniture stores than I have in the Institute and I have yet to visit the Franckesche Stiftungen and the city's many other cultural attractions.

My impressions of Eastern Germany have not altered substantially since last year, when my diagnosis of the post-Wende situation was basically one of colonialism. It has proved difficult to appoint a secretary at the new Institute, apparently, in part at least, because the rates of pay for suitably qualified staff are still lower than in the *neue Bundesländer*. I was pleased to find my impressions confirmed, indeed articulated in a much stronger form, by Friedrich Dieckmann at the fascinating panel discussion at this year's Old Fellows Meeting. Most of my observations and information gathering are naturally confined to the academic world, where it is clear that many able people lost their positions in the evaluation campaigns of the 1990s. How different is the pursuit of suspected STASI collaborators from Joe McCarthy's witch-hunting of communists in the USA in the 1950s? Why have West German academics not been more critical of these tendencies? Can it really be true that even those East Germans who did manage to hold on to their jobs, because their abilities and political credentials could not be disputed, routinely have their research proposals rejected by West German referees? Many academics nowadays, in my subject and in neighbouring disciplines, profess an interest in "local knowledge", but who in Germany today applies this principle in the *neue Bundesländer*? This question was asked at a meeting I attended in July of the Professors of Anthropology in German-speaking Universities, to be met with derisive laughter by the West Germans who have moved East. In my two years at the Kolleg I have not encountered a single scholar with a GDR biography.

In order to get a reasonable amount of work done I had to be ruthless in resisting the distractions of Berlin and invitations to give talks at other institutions. I did not embark on any major new projects but my wife and I have completed a manuscript which will shortly put the main results of a long-running project in North-East Turkey into the public arena. Our text has benefited from its long gestation period and from the comments

of Murat Çizakça (Fellow last year), Riva Kastoriano (Rector's Guest this year), and Michael Meeker (distinguished ethnographer of an adjacent district of the Black Sea coast, and our guest at the Kolleg for a busy week in June). I also continued work on an outline for a volume introducing social anthropology for the *Teach Yourself* series; but, having already missed two deadlines, I hesitate to predict when this will be completed.

This introductory text is likely to seem idiosyncratic to some colleagues, who no longer feel comfortable with the term “comparative sociology” as a basic definition of anthropology. This expression is associated in Britain with the positivist school of Radcliffe-Brown, who thought that social anthropology could aspire to be a “natural science of society”. Whatever the controversies that continue to surround the definition of science, I have always tried to hold on to comparativist goals, and this will be the basis of what we try to do at the new Institute in Halle. Comparison is often problematic, but it is better to face up to these difficulties than to content oneself with ever more meticulous case-studies and not run the risk of generalization. But I come unstuck with this principle when people ask me, as many have in the course of this year, to compare successive *Jahrgänge* at the Wissenschaftskolleg. The trouble is that what the questioners are usually fishing for is not a rigorous comparison, nor even a loose description of differences and similarities; what they want is a “sound-bite” evaluation. That of course is quite impossible. All I can really do is note some of the differences that were significant for us.

First, of course, there was Sam, part of a remarkable expansion of the canine population of the Villa Walther, who, among his many other contributions, opened our eyes to the size of its mouse population. It was a pity that he and Kelly, adored pet of Kiki and Andy Markovits living right above us, never really got along together. Anyway, Sam's escapades enriched our lives in various ways. He needed his early morning walk and so our daily routines obtained even more shape and discipline. Sam had good reason, along with all the rest of us, to regret Frau Kiesewetter's absence in the latter part of the year.

Turning to the human population, last year's strong clusters from Turkey and France were replaced this year by clusters from Bielefeld and Freiburg. But, since so many of the German Fellows were pursuing international projects, the cosmopolitan ethos of the Kolleg did not alter perceptibly. There was continuity in the cuisine and I made my usual contribution to the commonwealth by fetching several barrels of beer for the *Abschiedsfest*. Once again we all enjoyed the excellent support, going well beyond the call of duty, from EDV and library staff. The Tuesday colloquia were still the same sort of giddy mixture. The question that I wanted to ask was usually put, just before it was my turn, and much more

punchily formulated, by Jürgen Kocka. It was a pleasure to take part in the AGORA conference that he and Claus Offe organized in March on the subject of “work”. I also learned much in the course of the seminars which Hansjörg Siegenthaler and Viktor Vanberg organized throughout the year as part of the continuing *Schwerpunkt*, “Economics in Context”. Frau Katarzyna Speder continued to help in deciphering obscure Polish letters concerning Ukrainian icons, and Herr Klaus Flashar once again brought the best out of our children with his inspiring piano teaching.

Certain differences from last year were unwelcome but hardly to be blamed upon the Kolleg. This year the dominant media story was the war in Kosovo, a backdrop diametrically opposed to the general ebullience of the World Cup coverage which I recall vividly from June-July 1998. It was interesting to discuss the war with other Fellows. Politically it was again an exciting year to be in Germany, as the Red-Green coalition government struggled to hold that middleground that Mr. Blair seems to have occupied so successfully in my own country.

Above all, through my regular trips to its Munich headquarters, I am beginning to have some idea about the “local politics” of the Max-Planck-Gesellschaft. The rituals I observed at the *Hauptversammlung* in Dortmund in June were particularly interesting and made me grateful that the Kolleg manages to run itself with so little fuss (at least as far as the Fellows can tell). I saw another side of Munich and some rather different rituals just a few days after this *Versammlung*, when fate presented me with Cup Final tickets in the very heart of the Bayern München supporters block at the Olympic Stadium. The match against Werder Bremen was a thriller which the League Champions did not look like losing until the last kicks of the penalty shootout. I have never seen such disconsolate faces as I saw then among these young Bayern fans.

I would like to address briefly the topic of the “awful German language”, as Mark Twain called it. Of course the language itself is not at all awful, but it has to be conceded that the Kolleg is an awfully difficult place in which to learn it. Despite the efforts of Eva Hund, my active command has hardly improved at all this year. I do understand much more, but of course this passive understanding depends on hearing German from time to time in lectures and Colloquia. I would therefore not support the suggestion that English should become any more dominant than it is already in the public discussions which take place in the Kolleg. These are difficult issues, since I do recognise that the Kolleg will always wish to attract some scholars from whom it would not be reasonable to insist on some knowledge of German or even a commitment to working on it while here in Berlin; but I have little sympathy for monoglot English speakers who expect the rest of the world to adapt to their limitations. Personally I was

immensely grateful to the staff and Fellows who were prepared to talk to me in German. Even so, a cheery exchange of greetings with Barbara Sanders or Gerhard Riedel was often the only German that I heard in the course of a whole day in the Kolleg. For these friendly greetings too I am deeply grateful.

This was a busier year than last year and time seemed ever scarcer. The approaching Millenium was obviously a good time to bring together a group of physicists to address issues pertaining to time. Despite the efforts of Jan-Michael Rost to demote the concept by deriving it from space, by the end of the year I had a strong consciousness of being propelled forward in time, as well as moving on to a quite new place. Zeno's arrow? It feels more like being slung from a catapult.

I would like to believe in some other model of time, such as a reversible one that would return me to the Kolleg one day. Unfortunately I know that it could not then be the same Kolleg, with the unique combinations of persons who have given my family and me such pleasant experiences over the last two years, for it would surely take more than the magical powers of all our physicists to squeeze two *Jahrgänge* in all at once. Double occupancy of rooms would have to be prescribed, but I'm not sure that this would work. Wolf Biermann sharing with Paul Unschuld, Wolfgang Mommsen with Paul Nolte, to name but two of the combinations from my own corridor, could make for intellectual overcrowding.