

Marcello De Cecco

## Studying Markets in Berlin



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For many years, I have nurtured two desires: the first, to write a book on markets; the second, to live in Germany for a period long enough to allow me to learn some German and meet Germans in their own habitat. The offer to spend a year at the Wissenschaftskolleg gave me a chance to satisfy both of them.

Friends had told me that life at Wiko would be very pleasant and working conditions ideal. Reality has surpassed all expectations. I have never before found such a smoothly functioning institution, such a case of genteel efficiency. Comparisons are invidious, I will thus skip them. It is however easy to sing the praises of the Library, since its mechanism for acquiring

ing books from Berlin and other German libraries is proprietary, and thus hard to imitate. The European University Institute has an equivalent, but unfortunately Florence libraries are not as well stocked with non-Italian books as the ones in Berlin and other Italian libraries not as forthcoming in their intra-library lending habits as those in Germany.

Berlin is today the greenest capital city in Europe and Grunewald the greenest *Viertel* in Berlin. And winter this year decided not to come. My Berlin friends tell me I was thus prevented from appreciating the beauty of a truly Nordic snow-covered townscape but, quite frankly, this is a privilege I have easily done without. Instead, the superior powers laid out a Berlin summer at Easter time, carrying on well into May, and this was wonderful, especially because it was unexpected. Having to go back to my overcoat from the end of June to mid-July (the end of my stay) was not painful to someone who has endured about ten years of English weather, as I did in my youth.

I am sure I will, shortly after my return to Rome, wax sentimental about Berlin, the quiet efficiency of the Kolleg, the flawless public transport, the superior musical life. That is to be expected by anybody who knows the two cities. Only massive doses of Italian weather and Italian art will be able to reconcile me with my native land.

But now to serious business. Can I say I have learned German? Any of my contemporaries at Wiko will die of laughter if I say I have learned to speak Goethe's language. But I can go as far as to affirm that, through Eva Hund's abnegation (no other noun will suffice), I have learned to understand what Germans say and to read their books and newspapers without too much effort. Too late did I discover Theodor Fontane and other German writers of his generation, like Theodor Mommsen. Had I come to know their crystal-clear prose earlier, I would have spared myself the humiliation of reading pages and pages of earlier or more recent writers without understanding what was going on. Thus, I can say that, through reading Fontane on the Schleswig-Holstein war, I am among the privileged few who know anything on that arcane episode of European history. But this is a joke only my Cambridge contemporaries can still understand.

Have I managed to get to know Germans in their native habitat? I can say without too much presumption that to some extent I have, in the ten months of my stay at Wiko and in Berlin. The good stereotypes about them turned out to be correct. They seemed to be efficient, formal but warm-hearted, long-winded but deep, and in love with culture and music. The ones I met in Berlin also had qualities not normally associated with them abroad. They were quick off the mark, laid back while efficient, fast in their understanding of my garbled German. Every time I have been to the opera or concerts, it seemed to take the public five minutes to get to their

seats without bumping into each other or painfully searching for *Reihe* and *Nummer* and another five minutes to completely empty the theatre and set off on their return journeys, after getting their coats backs without visibly having to queue, and all without any visible hurrying. Anybody who has lived in a big city will find these qualities extraordinary. The Berliners seem to have taken the Roman exhortation *festina lente* to their hearts.

Being a Fellow of Wiko means daily interchange with other Fellows, Permanent Fellows, and staff. Again, I can report that I have never before had such a frictionless and pleasant experience. Our days have been filled with scholarly events, some formal, some less so, and they were enjoyable as scientific opportunities but also for the warm climate they generated as social events. Plato made communal lunches and dinners compulsory in his ideal city. From Wiko's experience this year, I can report that he was right. The good work of Marie Theres Fögen and Dieter Sadowski made working dinners of the autopoietic group on Lawyers and Economists, in particular, a scientific challenge and a culinary pleasure. It is said that many ideas have been hatched in a bathtub; perhaps even more have occurred to the diners in the kitchen of the Villa Jaffé.

And how about my research topic, markets? Sitting through the Tuesday colloquia from October to March until my turn finally came filled me, at my ripe age, with an anxiety I had not experienced since my student days. This was conducive to a lot of work, a lot of reading, and to a formulation of research outlines which, to adopt Franco Moretti's theory about novel writing, hopefully contain most of the main turning points of my narrative, while the "fillers" are left for after my return home.

Whenever I have the good luck to be able to work in an environment where book-getting is made easy (and this is eminently true at Wiko), I inevitably fall prey to the temptation of starting whatever research topic I set myself to work on with the Greeks and Romans. I have a fascination about their world only a true amateur antiquiste can entertain. Professionals are much more blasé. This I did again, looking at the functioning of markets in antiquity, indeed at the whole concept of the market in classical times. It has been fashionable among scholars of this age to deny Greeks and Romans any feeling for the abstract concept of the market. Having read a good deal of the surviving literature from that era, I have come to different conclusions. I hope I will be able to persuade my antiquiste readers, if I have any. But my book will have no more than an introduction to this topic. The main chapters will deal with markets as actual physical places. I will make an attempt to bring out the features which characterize markets throughout historical time – general markets as well as specialized markets. By reading the latest literature on commercial transactions based on the Internet, I discovered that some of the reasons they grow so

fast could also be used to explain why actual, physically-located market-places have developed through time and why they have gone through cycles of growth and decline. In fact, what engineers call the laws of functioning of networks, as general communications artefacts and not just their applications to commerce, could be used to explain the growth and decline of historically and geographically located market places.

My Co-Fellows seemed to react with sympathy to these ideas when they heard them expounded in my colloquium. They also made a great many useful comments and suggestions. Their benevolent attitude perhaps owed something to my innocent gimmick of starting with a short introduction in Latin and certainly to the over-generous presentation I received from Hans-Jürgen Wagener.

During the ten months of my stay at Wiko, I have continued to write my regular quasi-weekly column for the Italian daily *La Repubblica*. As could be expected, I gave German economic topics even more attention than I paid to them while I was in Italy. Some of my affectionate readers have let me know that I became uncharacteristically forgiving towards German international economic policy-making. This had, in my opinion, more to do with the end of the times of pre-European Monetary Union polemics, when German politicians appeased their public with anti-Italian remarks, than with my “having gone soft on Germany”. The European Monetary Union began on the assigned date. German politicians, far from boycotting it, sped it through its last paces with a commendable bipartisan stance, and that is an achievement of such importance that there is no need to harp on the fact that the fears previously expressed by many German politicians and economists proved to be unfounded. A number of them have since been heard mumbling darkly against the low-valued Euro. Having publicly stated at the time that this would be the case and a fortunate case at that, I tend to ask the mumblers what else could have assured a smooth implementation period for the new currency.

All good things end too soon. Indeed, this is the proof of their goodness. Thus, in spite of the cold and showery Berlin summer, I am very sad to leave Wiko’s scholarly paradise. I am also very sad to leave the only large country on our continent which seems to be able to go global without renouncing its European spirit, which to me means the ability to achieve economic and technological efficiency by emphasising culture and civic solidarity.