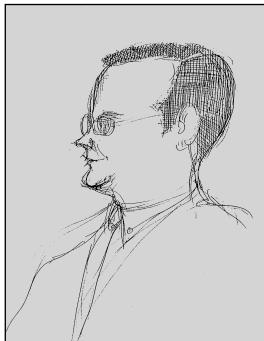


Lawrence Lessig

The Country of the Blind



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There's a well known story by H.G. Wells of a man who stumbles into a valley where the natives are blind. After spending some time with the people in the valley, a doctor from the valley determines what troubles the man. "His brain is affected," the blind doctor says, with "[t]hose queer things that are called the eyes." The man's troubles would be eliminated, the doctor opined, with "a simple and easy surgical operation – namely, to remove these irritant bodies" – the eyes.

Over the course of our extraordinary year at the Wissenschaftskolleg, I came to see myself as the blind doctor within our tribe. It was my game to suggest that we give up the many different languages that might float about in the Kolleg, and select the single language most could speak, English. The analogy is not perfect, but the direction is right: Mine was the argument that we give up the richness of multiple languages, and fix on a single language that most might understand. That we should acknowledge the natural handicap of most from my nation – mono-linguality – and speak in the single language that we could speak well (of course not as well as the English would have us, but well enough.)

This handicap of course was not actually shared by all the Americans among us, and there were some who were eager to be pushed to learn. But this picture of English-only Americans, with the world conforming to our language, did raise, even in me, a real anxiety. That while the world is filled with people who speak more than one language, while Europe is filled with people who take it as given that people ought to speak more than one language, I come from a nation where only a single language is

thought necessary, and where by virtue of the power of this nation we push this single language on others as well.

This pushing, no doubt, feels to many as the blind doctor's operation feels to most readers. But over the year, the ambiguity in the story became increasingly salient to me. For there is certainly a sense in which the effectiveness of the community of the blind is indeed sustained if some are not troubled by the visions of the sighted, as the community at the Wissenschaftskolleg is increased if we selected a language that even the handicapped could speak well. But efficiency cannot be bought without a sense of the loss, equally grotesque depending upon your perspective.

This is the lesson for an American in Europe – the undeserved dominance of a culture, and the ways the world bends to acknowledge that dominance. No doubt not the most interesting in the collection of lessons that the community on Wallotstraße taught, but the one I will reflect on most often and with the greatest unease.