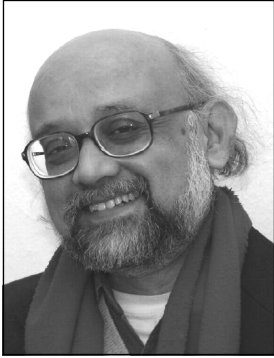


Partha Chatterjee

Turning a Corner



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I arrived in Berlin in the middle of January, by which time my colleagues had already evolved their collective lifestyle for the year. Fortunately, I was immediately inducted into the group that had established squatters' rights over Yehuda Elkana's kitchen on the top floor of the Weiße Villa. As it turned out, this was a great privilege, for reasons both culinary and intellectual. My evenings were now spent in the best traditions of cultured civility known to human beings. The food was of the highest quality – from the north, south and east of India; the drink was strong and exotic – tequila, raki, becherovka, schnapps, vodka, grappa, aquavit, caipirinha, rare single malts, you name it (no surprise, of course, since the polyglot Sanjay Subrahmanyam was in charge of the bar); the conversation could range from Sufi theology to Mexican poetry to life in the kibbutz to the sexual preferences of Vijayanagara noblemen, liberally laced with that essential nutriment of intellectual vitality – plain and simple gossip. My days, on the other hand, were spent ... but that is another matter.

I arrived with a book manuscript on the verge of completion. Perhaps it was because I was out of synch with the rest of my colleagues in getting introduced to Berlin that I suddenly realized that I had lots of time and little distraction. I finished my book in a matter of weeks. I had a good time at lunch and dinner telling people about the alleged impostor prince whose story I was writing. Richard and

Carol Bernstein were particularly excited: they read the manuscript as soon as it came out of the printer and never stopped assuring me that they would some day find a Hollywood producer to buy my story. My presentation at the Tuesday colloquium was good fun too: everyone likes a good story, and my puzzles about identity and truth were a bonus. I came away dreaming happily of signing copies of my book next year at Cannes, with flashlights popping, video cameras whirring, and the paparazzi swarming around me.

I am not averse to a life of the mind. The daily routine at the Kolleg was monotonous, but not ill suited to a few months spent in voracious reading and speculative writing. I read a great deal on areas I had neglected in the last few years. The Globalization reading group, with Steve Krasner, Robert Wade and Francis Snyder in the lead, was a good pointer to the current state of debate in that flourishing field. But I also read carefully the new revisionist history of early modern European political thought. A child of colonialism, I have never ceased to be intrigued by the inexhaustible ability of the liberal world-view to conjure away the realities of power. As I write this report on my laptop, sitting in my room on the top floor of the *Hauptgebäude* – the same room, I am told, where Mazzino Montinari edited the works of Nietzsche – the radio is announcing the transportation of Milošević to the Hague. I can hear the applause of liberal Europe.

I managed to get a few other things done. A volume of essays on *History and the Present* was waiting to be edited. I re-read Heidegger's *Being and Time*, in two separate English translations, not because I couldn't otherwise write my introduction, but because, having got hold of the books with the enthusiastic and skilful assistance of the library staff, it seemed such an appropriate thing to do. There was a continuing debate in the Kolleg throughout the year on German intellectual history in the last century. Most of the time, I just watched and listened and marvelled at the passion and anguish the subject could generate. I often share a private joke with my historian friend Dipesh Chakrabarty of Chicago that inside every Bengali heart there hides a somewhat weak and emaciated German romantic. We are both thankful that we Bengalis are physically weak; otherwise, we could have wreaked havoc. Re-reading Heidegger in the Wissenschaftskolleg confirmed my suspicions about the dangerous charms of German intellectualism.

I also began writing a set of three lectures that I will deliver at Columbia University in the autumn of 2001. Titled *The Politics of the Governed*, this will be the first output of my project begun at the

Kolleg. The larger project on postcolonial democracy, which I managed to map out, will, I now realize, take much longer to finish. I also wrote out a lecture in Bengali on globalization, to be delivered in Calcutta in August 2001. Hans-Georg Lindenberg and Pedro Muñoz-Gerdau had to work a bit to install my Bengali program on the computer. Unfortunately, I cannot convey to them the strange thrill I felt watching my Bengali text emerge, clear and sharp, out of the *Neubau* printer.

It might seem strange for me to say that my greatest intellectual gain from six months in Berlin was derived from the company of a group of South Asian historians and literary scholars. We could not have talked to one another at such leisure and under such congenial circumstances anywhere else. Velcheru Narayana Rao came from Madison, Wisconsin, and David Shulman from Jerusalem. Together, they opened up for me dimly perceived and often utterly unknown areas of Sanskrit, Telugu, and Tamil literature. Muzaffar Alam came from Delhi on his way to Chicago. He shared with me some of his vast knowledge of Indo-Persian political and philosophical thought. Sanjay Subrahmanyam came from Paris with a multilingual archive in his head and boundless enthusiasm in his heart. I was a sceptic before, but in six months I was fully converted to the idea of “early modern India”. I can already see the seeds of future papers and books emerging out of this association.

This was my primary cohort in Berlin, and with Sanjay in charge of the entertainment section, there was never a dull moment. The circle extended to include Navid Kermani, frequently depressed by the misfortunes of FC Köln but immediately revived by the rasping voice of Neil Young; Philippe Burrin, always charming and suave, who shared with us a taste for dark humor and the good life; Wang Hui, unchallenged king of table tennis, whose melodious voice, softened by wine, would break into wonderfully nostalgic songs from the Peking opera; Amitabh Joshi, biologist at night, asleep by day, and a poet in the evening; Francis Snyder, gentle, considerate and unfailingly helpful; Sue Marchand and family, whose youngest member, Henry, was, by universal acclaim, declared the wisest of us all and conferred the honorary title of Professor; Katherine Verdery in whom we bestowed the unique distinction of cooking for us at the Weiße Villa; and, to complete this list without extending it endlessly, Mauricio Tenorio, whose youthfulness and vulnerability made us all rush to his side with constant advice and encouragement. Besides food, drink, and hilarity, music occupied a large part of our evenings, and one of the soundest joint investments I have known was made

by Mauricio and Sanjay when, soon after they arrived in Berlin, they walked into a music store and bought themselves a guitar. It has served us well.

I must confess that I never quite got into the swing of things in the city of Berlin. Living in Grunewald was like living in the country, and I am not much of a nature person. When my wife Gouri joined me for a couple of months, we went to live in a private apartment on Douglasstraße, but this did not improve matters. I longed for a cafe or teashop around the corner where one could sit in the afternoon and watch life pass by. Our anomalous condition was brought home to me one night when, returning from Hackescher Markt with Sanjay at two in the morning, our jovial Iranian taxi driver, after having established a voluble postcolonial comradeship with us, turned into Wallotstraße and suddenly fell strangely silent. Driving slowly between the rows of parked Mercedes and BMWs, he turned to us and said, “Did you win the lottery or something? How can you guys afford to live in a place like this?”

Eva Hund tried hard to encourage me to learn German. I now feel sorry that I didn't give it more time. Had I put in a little more work, I might have built a reasonable base to be able to read the language. Now I fear that the little I learned will quickly vanish with disuse. But six months is not a small time late in one's professional career, even though it seemed to pass so quickly. I get a sense that I have turned some sort of corner and new directions of work have opened up before me. I cannot clearly describe them all and I am sure I will not venture into each one of them. But that is much more than what an institution can do for someone. I will remain grateful to the Wissenschaftskolleg for what it gave me.