



AN IMPORTANT TRANSITION PERIOD
IN MY LIFE
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The year in Wiko was an important transition period in my life. After studying and teaching in the United States for 15 years, I was going back to teach in China via Berlin!

The year in Berlin turned out to be a fruitful preparation for my return to China. First of all, the wonderful city of Berlin enriched my understanding of European cultures. I was introduced to Adolph Menzel’s painting by my co-Fellow Robert Pippin, from whom I also learned a lot about Hegel and “Modernity”. The conversations with Quentin Skinner taught me more about “republican” (or “neo-Roman”) tradition in the West than I had learned from reading his books previously. “Nono” (Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin) and Ronig demonstrated to me and my wife the Jewish progressive intellectual tradition by their own struggle for the liberation of the Palestine people. Stefan Litwin’s musical lessons were so enlightening that I bought the CDs of every composer he mentioned! This list could run for two pages, since every encounter in Wiko is memorable.

As for my own research in Wiko, I concentrated on Proudhon and his German follower Gesell. This might sound like an unusual topic, but my motivation came from my sense of current intellectual impasse around the world. Both Marxism and Social Democracy have

lost their political and intellectual momentum. However, the disillusion about neoliberalism is also growing after the Asian financial crisis. What is the alternative? I believe the forgotten tradition of Petty Bourgeoisie Socialism (of which Proudhon is a representative) is worth reconsidering.

John Maynard Keynes has an amazing statement in his *General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*: “The future would learn more from Gesell than from Marx.” Silvio Gesell (1862–1930) was a German businessman and Finance Minister in the government of Gustav Landauer of the *Räterepublik* of Bavaria in 1919. Gesell considers himself a disciple of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. According to Gesell, Proudhon’s central insight was that money held a competitive advantage over labor and goods (because goods get rotten while money can be kept). Proudhon tried to raise the status of goods and labor to the level of money, but failed. Since it is impossible to alter the nature of goods, Gesell proposed to alter the nature of money: “We must subject money to the loss to which goods are liable through the necessity of storage. Money is then no longer superior to goods; it makes no difference to anyone whether he possesses, or saves, money or goods. Money and goods are then perfect equivalents, Proudhon’s problem is solved and the fetters that have prevented humanity from developing its full powers fall away.”

Concretely, Gesell proposes a “stamp scrip” or “stamp currency”. Gesell’s insight was that money as a medium of exchange should be considered a public service (just like public transportation) and, therefore, that a small user fee should be levied on it. In Gesell’s time, stamps were the normal way to levy such a charge. Now, the widespread use of computers in payment would make this procedure much easier to implement. This seems to be another utopia, but after the failure of Marxism and the retreat of social democracy, it is imperative for us to enlarge our space of imagination. The scheme of financial reform of Proudhon/Gesell is worth rethinking for this reason.

One of my most rewarding experiences in Wiko was to read Gesell in his original text with the help of our wonderful German teachers. I regret that the various pressures in life made my German language progress less than I would have liked it. I hope that another chance in Wiko someday will make up for me this regret.

Finally, let me thank all the staffs in Wiko for their kindness and professionalism. I have appointed myself Wiko’s “permanent fellow in spirit”!