



A FAREWELL TO BERLIN QUENTIN SKINNER

Quentin Skinner was born in 1940 and educated at the University of Cambridge. He became a Fellow of Christ's College Cambridge in 1962, a post he has held ever since. A member of the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton between 1974 and 1979, he then returned to Cambridge, where he was Professor of Political Science from 1979 to 1996 and is now Regius Professor of Modern History. He is a Fellow of several academic Academies, including the British Academy, the American Academy and the Academia Europaea, and has been the recipient of many honorary degrees. He is married to the philosopher Susan James, and they have two children, Olivia and Marcus. His scholarship is available in twenty languages, and his principal publications include *Machiavelli* (1981), *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes* (1996), *Liberty Before Liberalism* (1998), and *Visions of Politics* (3 volumes, 2002). His best-known work is *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (2 volumes, 1978) which won the Wolfson Literary Prize and was recently named by the *Times Literary Supplement* as one of the hundred most influential books of the last fifty years. – Address: Faculty of History, University of Cambridge, West Road, CB3 9EF Cambridge, Great Britain.

I have found these few lines surprisingly hard to write. Nor have I found it much of a help to look at similar reports written by Fellows in previous years. They already seem to have exhausted all possible rhetorical strategies for capturing the attention of readers (including, of course, the strategy of explaining how surprisingly hard such pieces are to write). My difficulty stems, I feel sure, from the fact that my year proved to be such an extraordinarily full and memorable one. Unable as yet to recollect it in tranquillity, I can only offer a few

random reflections that flash upon me as I sit staring out of my office window for the nth but also the last time.

I arrived at the Kolleg with several clear expectations – perhaps three in particular – about how I would spend my time. One was that I would get away from the demands of University life and devote myself entirely to my research. Another was that I would significantly improve my understanding of German. Finally, I saw myself continuing to write the book about political liberty that I had announced as my project for the year.

None of these things happened. The invention of e-mail means, I now see, that no one can ever escape from their ordinary professional life. Few hours went by without my receiving a message that began: “Although I am sorry to disturb you while you are on leave ...” If this was my one major frustration, my one major disappointment was my failure to master the language of Goethe. I am disappointed only in myself, for the teaching I received in the intensive German course at the start of the year could scarcely have been bettered. Eva and Nadia were enthusiastic, imaginative and endlessly patient. But I am still speaking German only in broken half-sentences. This must be due in part to my native incapacity for languages, but a further reason is that my research went badly during my first two months at the Kolleg, and I became so preoccupied that I found it impossible to give proper attention to anything so shockingly complicated as German grammar.

My problem was that, as I soon came to see, the book I had hoped to write about the theory of freedom needed to be embedded in a much broader study, the principal focus of which needed to be an account of representative government and how this concept emerged. Not without grave misgivings, I eventually decided to hurl myself at this larger piece of work. Due to the perfect working conditions at the Kolleg, I managed by the end of the year to draft almost the whole of this more ambitious book. Even if it turns out to need a great deal of revision, I shall still count this year as one of the most productive of my academic life.

It would have been entirely my own fault if I had *not* managed to write under such ideal circumstances. But it was by no means entirely due to my own efforts that I *did* manage to write. The staff at the Kolleg is beyond praise, and they help the Fellows in a humbling number of unobtrusive as well as more obvious ways. Food, shelter, books and technical support are all provided in *de luxe* style, but I also encountered a seemingly limitless supply of much rarer commodities: kindness, courtesy, forbearance, resourcefulness.

What I expected from my year may have failed to happen, but a lot of unexpected and much more interesting things happened. I never imagined that I would make so many new

friends. But I met an exhilarating number of truly remarkable people with whom I shall do my very best to keep in touch. Nor did I expect to have much time to absorb new information or insights. But in fact I learned from my colleagues all the time. I loved the intense musical life of the Kolleg, and I was especially grateful to be taught so much by so many people about our contemporary world. I was constantly reminded that University teachers are very far from inhabiting the ivory tower in which, according to an ignorant cliché, their discussions allegedly take place.

As well as being an ideal place in which to work, the Kolleg seems to me ideally situated. Get on your bike and turn right at the end of Wallotstraße and you almost immediately find yourself in dense woodland. A sustaining place in which to walk and brood at the end of a day's work, and an astonishing resource to find within the city limits. Turn left instead, and you reach the bright lights no less quickly. The city at first struck me as a haunted place, and I never ceased to feel overwhelmed by its past. But at the same time I found it wonderfully glamorous and a great source of education in itself, architecturally and musically above all.

As I settled into my life in Germany, I was disconcerted to find how marginal England began to seem, and how spiritually far away. Observing my homeland from this vantage-point, I came to feel more strongly than ever that it is much too distant from continental Europe for its own good, and much too close to the United States. My year here has made me even more pro-European (as we say in Britain) than I was before. It has also made me totally pro-Berlin. Most of all, totally pro-Wissenschaftskolleg.