



SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH, ACADEMIC
SOCIABILITY AND CULTURAL
ENJOYMENT – ALL AT ONCE
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When in early January 2004 I together with my wife arrived at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin as a guest of the Rector for the coming winter trimester, we were overwhelmed by the warm welcome and efficient installation that the Rector and the whole staff offered us. It was a pleasant but also most fruitful experience. The integration into the community of

Fellows, already at Berlin since the fall 2003, was not obvious: the full Fellows, indeed, had already forged their own specific team spirit and their own specific cluster of sociability and friendship, which at my arrival made us feel like some kind of intruders. The supply of an excellent infrastructure, however, and – not less important – the colloquia each Tuesday, the colloquia and the evening candlelight dinners on Thursdays, all perfectly organised by the staff, were very instrumental in our being accepted easily by the existing community of Fellows. Last but not least, this quick and efficient installation was an incentive for me to start my own research immediately and to let it benefit from the unique scientific environment of the Kolleg.

The task I had set for my stay at the institute (and for the following trimester at the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung) was to finish a book, in co-authorship with my wife, on monetary and financial collaboration in Belgium during the Second World War. During the years 1998–2002, we did research in several Belgian archives and also in archives at London, Paris, The Hague, Washington D.C., Freiburg im Breisgau (German military archives) and in the archives of the Deutsche Bank at Frankfurt am Main, where photocopies of the archives of the Reichsbank (now preserved in Moscow) are available. During the year 2003 we started writing and finished fifteen chapters, but ten chapters still remained to be written. Our original purpose was to finish the manuscript during our stay at Berlin. We nearly did, writing eight chapters. The two last chapters were completed in July–August 2004.

Research and writing were done at the invitation of the National Bank of Belgium, the central bank of the country. The war history of the National Bank was never written, for the topic was considered for a long time a touchy one. When the Belgian government in exile in London during the war returned to Belgium after liberation, the National Bank and her satellite, the Bank of Issue – both active in Brussels during the war – were accused of monetary and financial collaboration. An Investigation Commission and the General Attorney cleared both institutions of any wrongdoing, but in public opinion, doubts about them never disappeared entirely. The current Board of Directors of the National Bank, therefore, wanted to settle the question for good through a scientific investigation, followed by the publication of its results.

The war history of the two Belgian central banking institutions is worth investigating not only because of the collaboration issue, but also because of the specific structure of the Belgian monetary system during the occupation period and, finally, because of the broad international context within which both institutions were active at that time. In antcipa-

tion of the expected German aggression, the National Bank had transferred its large gold reserves to the central banks in London and Paris and to the Federal Reserve Bank in New York. The repatriation – by order of the Vichy government – of the Belgian gold deposit at the Banque de France, from Dakar to Marseilles and from there to Berlin, where it was confiscated, led the National Bank to take the Banque de France to court in New York in view of a restitution of the gold. In Belgium itself, the National Bank had to face the demands of the German *Militärverwaltung*, which to a large extent wanted to take into account the interests of the country, but which to a great degree was forced to disregard them under the pressure of the Nazi government. Berlin indeed threatened to replace the *Militärverwaltung* by a Nazi *Zivilverwaltung*, if the government hunger for money and goods was not satisfied by measures taken by the *Militärverwaltung*.

Other international aspects of the Bank's activity during the war and during the immediate post-war period were more closely connected with the London branch of the Bank. Although the Belgians were allies of the British, the Bank wanted to protect its gold deposits in London against the British demand of selling it, when Great Britain was running out of its own gold reserves at the end of 1940. The Bank under pressure of the Belgian government in exile, finally agreed to lend the gold for the duration of the war. The Bank also had to defend Belgian monetary interests when the American and British governments discussed the exchange rates for the payment of the Allied armies at the moment of the liberation of the country, and again, when they discussed the integration of Belgium into the new international monetary order, which would be finalised at the Bretton Woods Conference in July 1944.

Finally, the London branch of the Bank guided and helped the Belgian government in exile there when it was preparing the post-war monetary reform in Belgium. The Bank had to arbitrate between two policies: an orthodox one and a Keynesian one. The first opinion prevailed. Was the decision the right one? Our book tries to evaluate the decision and its outcome, taking into account the short- and long-run effects of the reform. The book also attempts to assess the charge that the activity of the Bank at Brussels during the war constituted collaboration: a charge made by the Belgian government in exile after its return to Belgium.

The opportunity to take advantage of the unique scientific and social environment at the Kolleg was a crucial factor in our ability to finish most of the manuscript during our stay at Berlin. One regret: the constraints of finishing the manuscript prevented us from having frequent in-depth discussions with the Fellows. Such discussions, no doubt, would have

enriched the scope of the book and would have helped us better understand the German context of the war period.

The same regret applies to our contacts with German scholars, specialised in my own discipline and teaching or doing research on German economic history at institutions in Berlin and its surroundings. Of course, I was invited to give lectures and seminars and to participate as a panel member in colloquia at the Humboldt University and at the Free University in Berlin, at the University of Greifswald and at the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung: the discussions and contacts at these encounters, were, as was the case at the Kolleg, very fertile, not only from a scientific point of view, but also at the human level; but the constraints of the book impeded a more in-depth fertilisation.

I have been working successfully at several institutes for advanced study in the world, but, to be honest, my wife and I will always remember the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin (and I would like to add the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung) as places of a special scientific and social flavour and of outstanding excellence.