



CONTEMPLATING BOXES SORIN ANTOHI

Born in Romania in 1957, Sorin Antohi was educated in his native country and in France, earning degrees in English, French, and History. He has taught in several countries, spending most of the last decade at Central European University, Budapest, where he was also Academic Pro-Rector, has established Pasts, Inc. Center for Historical Studies, and became Head of the History Department on August 1, 2005. He has published widely on Utopianism, Romanian intellectual and cultural history, the history of ideas, historical theory, and the history of historiography. He is the Secretary General of the International Commission for the Theory and History of Historiography, as well as a Member of the Board of the International Committee of Historical Sciences. – Address: Director, Pasts, Inc. Center for Historical Studies, Central European University, Nádor utca 11, 1051 Budapest, Hungary.

At 5:50 a.m. on my last day at Wiko, July 26, 2005, when most other Fellows and spouses sleep soundly, contemplating my own boxes of papers and books – ready to be picked up at 11:15 a.m. – is a sobering experience.

My solitude is fragile, since I know quite a few early birds among the Fellows. How do I know? I live in Villa Walther, and thus I enjoy both the romantic vista of the Hubertussee (mellow in autumn and crisp in winter, when the lake is frozen over, an occasional fox dashing to the minuscule island), and the panoptic delights of a closely-knit community. Never since my days in the Romanian army have I ever measured the true meaning of this ambiguous word, “community”, as I did during this past academic year. I do not mention my various stays in pioneer and student camps, they were simply too short, although intense and fabulous in retrospect; nor do I mention the years I spent in village or small-town

neighborhoods, as the pressure and intrusions of society (“really existing socialism”!) were too strong. Those who have struggled with the meanings of Ferdinand Tönnies’ fuzzy distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* know what I mean.

Wiko creates a community every year for ten months, extracting some of the (already) happy few from their respective societies (in which some of them seem to suffocate), grafting them onto a hard core of dedicated staff members. The free-floating (*freischwebende*!) individualities of the Fellows are thus blended into a group identity, at least for outside observers. If utopian social engineering, so dreaded by Karl Popper, could be defended, Wiko would be the best example of a success story, or maybe the next best after Hesse’s (fictional) Castalia. (In real life, from Plato’s Academy to a present-day Oxbridge college and the like, intellectual competition and personal conflicts ultimately poison and eventually jeopardize the very foundations of community.) Should Erving Goffman’s idea of a “total institution” ever become a standard for democratic institutions in our aging societies, Wiko would be an example of a vibrant soft version of the species, in which the many perks and privileges, as well as the many breaks, would attenuate the rigors of inmate lives. In all fairness, as a survivor of another interdisciplinarity boot camp, the Stanford Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, I should add that it came close to Wiko. But the Fellows’ apartments were scattered over the vast expanse of Silicon Valley and its tributaries. After-hours residential segregation was not entirely counterbalanced by the proximity of our offices and by the *al fresco* lunches.

Under the circumstances prevailing this year at Wiko, community triumphed over society (and nobody seemed to regret it) and at times over individuality. I haven’t conducted a comparative survey based on archives, oral history, neighborhood legends, and the like, so I don’t know how typical our 2004/05 group was for this peculiar type of intentional community. Have there ever been more scheduled events per week, ranging from the mandatory colloquium to the evening lecture to the afternoon seminar to the film screening to the reading group to the concert to the exhibition opening? Have there ever been longer lunch breaks and more animated Thursday dinners? Have the other classes found it equally hard to leave and return to their routines? Did they all want to become Permanent Fellows, ready to fight to the last at the Wiko gate, heroically resisting any future (by definition undeserving) Fellow’s insidious attempts to enter? As I write these lines (it is now 6:37 a.m.), I still look forward to a long lunch conversation and yet another farewell party. I won’t revise my report to include impressions from these last two instances of exhilarating conviviality, but I think I can safely predict, despite my reluctance to do so (for reasons best

explained in Popper's *Poverty of Historicism*), that they won't radically change my overall evaluation.

This evaluation has two parts. The first, already figured out by the discerning reader (who else would read this?), is about Wiko. And it is basically ecstatic, with cumulative instant nostalgia turning even the moments of frustration, boredom, and other such all-too-human experiences into blissful instants of learning, reflection, enlightenment, and even illumination and communion. I have nothing to add to what the multi-annual, virtual (super-)community of Fellows have already said and will continue to say.

The second part of the evaluation is about me. It is the hardest part, too.

I had sent to Wiko other boxes, filled to capacity with projects, with half-baked and/or half-written manuscripts, with applications to various funding agencies, with conference outlines, notes, books, and so on. I found everything here, ready to use. It took an enthusiastic afternoon to organize my office, while my wife, Mona Antohi, a translator and a book editor, was organizing her own, a few steps apart. (The generous sponsors should finally be told that Wiko offers Fellows not just one, but two Fellowships at a time, one of which is discreetly passed on to the Fellow's spouse/partner.) It took a hectic October, in which I was the main organizer of a huge conference, to realize there was something unrealistic, maybe surrealistic, about the content of my boxes and my plans. And it was not only that my health has been frequently less than good; that the community at Wiko proved to be more engaging, more interesting, and more intense than was beneficial for my solipsistic authorial dreams; that Berlin and German television (in this year of anniversaries and commemorations) has provided me with unsuspected opportunities for one of my hobbies, society watching; that *l'uomo* (not just *la donna*) *e mobile*, and his interests, priorities, and passions (just like hers) mutate in specific ecosystems. But it may well be that the boxes I came here with contained starting points for the remaining years of my scholarly work, not merely the overdose for a year, albeit miraculously productive. At 48, I might carry with me, in boxes and in my mind (a black box, according to some), whatever it is that I can still create. Consequently, no amount of interdisciplinary seminars, of conferencing, chatting, or reading can possibly derail me from the projects I am determined to carry out. Everything I continue to learn finds its "place" in what I already know and dream and fantasize. Am I the only Fellow in this situation?

While at Wiko, I nevertheless made progress on several projects. And I resisted (with mixed feelings and mixed results) the temptations to embark on many others, my own or anyone else's.

I revised a book on Utopianism I had finished in 1987 and published in 1991; with 45 more manuscript pages, written at Wiko, this second edition appeared, and a copy is already in the Fellows' library, for those who know or will learn Romanian. While working on the revisions and the addition, I have assembled another book manuscript in Romanian, based on my first book-length project ever, also on Utopianism, which I had finished in 1983, could not publish until the abolition of censorship in December 1989, and (foolishly, I now think) decided to leave in my drawer even when it became possible for it to see the light of day; it will appear next year. While preparing a new text on *Uchronia* for a conference I organized in November (it was graciously hosted by Wiko and benefited from the contributions of some fellow Fellows), I had the opportunity to resume work on that trace of my youthful intellectual passions, which I rediscovered with a certain thrill. And not without sympathy for the very young man I once was, immersed almost without hope in *Dystopia Carpathica*, writing to understand and exorcize it.

Then came the (near) completion of many edited and co-edited book manuscripts, on which I had already started to work: on Europe's symbolic geographies (with Larry Wolff); on time and temporality (with Tyrus Miller); on the post-1989 changes in historical sciences in six Central and Eastern European countries; on the new research on Central and Eastern European recent history (with my younger colleagues, Peter Apor and Michal Kopecek); a three-volume collective work on the theory and history of historiography, still in progress as I write this (co-edited with Chris Lorenz, Jörn Rüsen, and Hayden White); and a few new ones, two of which I started while at Wiko.

There followed the editing of a book of conversations with Moshe Idel and the preparation and taping of two more such books, one with a young Romanian historian, Mirel Banica, the other with a Romanian American kindred spirit and role model, Virgil Nemoianu.

All of the above have also been Wiko's and my guests in Grunewald, just like the participants in the conference on time I mentioned, in a seminar on the comeback of space and spatiality in historical sciences, and in various editorial and brainstorming meetings.

Finally, I was away from Wiko several times for conferences and the 20th International Congress of Historical Sciences, where I was elected to two very important offices; I also had to take care of business at my Center for Historical Studies, just as I had to continue to work on the strategic development of my university and prepare to become head of its History Department.

And how about the Big Project? (I actually had two: “Ethnic Ontologies: The Metaphysics of Nationalism”, and “Mapping Romania: Symbolic Geographies and Collective Identities”.) I have read a lot (mainly stuff from my boxes, with many additions from other sources, including my Bucharest and Budapest personal libraries). I have written less than I hoped, but I am now closer to the ideal books I have been working on over the last years. I’ll finish them in Bucharest and Budapest, not in Berlin.

But the movers are early: 10:45 rather than the scheduled 11:15. Also, I had to make phone calls, read my e-mail and answer it, close the last suitcase, etc. It’s time for me to move on as well, and get ready to welcome my boxes in Budapest. I’ll have considerably less time to contemplate them, though. I’ll have to take them to task. From tomorrow on, my *vita activa* resumes.