



STRUGGLE IN BERLIN
GREGORY CLARK

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I was struck, looking over some of the previous descriptions written by Fellows, by the reverential and almost ecstatic way that they wrote of their year at the Wissenschaftskolleg. They speak of grace, and poise, of relaxation, of exploring Berlin, of deep friendships formed, vistas opening, and calm achieved. I wish such a narrative would describe my year. But while the fellowship at the Wissenschaftskolleg was enormously valuable and interesting, and probably the most productive year I have ever had, for me it was no paradise, but by the end an often painful struggle to dig a few gems of insight from a hard and stony ground. I feel now, narrowly, that I emerged victorious. But the joy of that success will forever be intermingled in memory with the bite of anxiety that I would wake to each day around 5 a.m. from May to July. I would do it all again in an instant, but my feeling by August was not that of one who had been admitted for a year to the Garden of Eden and now, cast out, faced a life of loss and longing for that tranquillity. Instead I felt more like

I imagine those explorers who trudged across Antarctica by foot felt: triumph, mixed with relief that the ordeal was over.

The project I brought to the Wissenschaftskolleg was to complete a very ambitious book, a brief economic history of the world, that I had been working on periodically over the past 10 years. This was not only an ambitious book, but also the first book that I would write in my 20 years as an academic, since in economics the journal article now dominates. The very title of the book was a joke at its own pretensions. But at the beginning of the year, full of confidence, I thought I would not only complete the book, I would also finish a number of journal articles, begin another book, master some German, understand the other disciplines represented by the Fellows at the Wissenschaftskolleg, travel to give seminars all across Europe, entertain friends in Berlin, visit my elderly parents in Scotland, and generally accomplish wonders. In September, as we Fellows assembled, all was sunshine and possibilities. I happily toddled off to try out my rudimentary German on unsuspecting bakery assistants and Turkish greengrocers. I looked forward to each Tuesday colloquium as a chance to visit new intellectual terrain.

However, as we marched towards the Berlin winter, and the leaves fell from the trees, self-delusion about superman abilities to multi-task gave way to an all too powerful awareness of my limitations. The revisions of the first chapters I had planned to breeze through extended through months. Alone in the preposterous quiet of my elegant Neubau office, I also had to confront the fact that writing is hard, and the ordinary distractions of academic life we complain about so often are in many ways a welcome excuse for not having to confront our limitations. I came to dread the funereal stillness of that office and the preternatural quiet of the Grunewald. I also became aware from the weekly lectures by the other Fellows just how small was the community of people that my economic history of the world would speak to. Apparently the intellectual world I inhabit was now but a tiny island off the coast of an impenetrable landmass. Would there be ten people interested in reading the book I was writing?

By January it was clear to me that there would be no book, unless I devoted every free hour from then to July to work on it. Concerned that I would never finish without a binding commitment, I nailed my colours to the mast, promising the publisher that I would deliver the manuscript by July 31. But though I was committed, I still had to fulfil the obligations I had so blithely accepted at the beginning of the year. There were still seminars scheduled, visits to Italy and Spain, articles to be completed. Though productive, my life was impossibly full.

As winter turned to spring, like a traveller lost in the desert, I began to jettison baggage in a desperate struggle for safety. Things that seemed so valuable at the beginning of the year gradually became a dead weight on my back. First to go was homework for the German class, then the class itself, followed by cooking, reading for leisure, and cultural events of any kind. I heard only from others of the wonderful architectural tours of Berlin that Monika Wagner was leading. I abandoned my children to their mother. By early July my family had taken themselves back to California, and I barely left the apartment, now spare of most possessions, except for hurried meals at Wallotstraße.

But by July 31, midnight, there was a manuscript, flawed and inelegant to be sure, to be dispatched to Princeton University Press. And as I write this reflection on September 30, the manuscript has just been accepted for publication. So though I will eternally regret missing the many wonderful things that Berlin has to offer in those last six months of the Fellowship, I am profoundly grateful to the staff and Fellows of the Wissenschaftskolleg for the opportunity to undergo this ordeal.