



VERFREMDUNGSEFFEKT
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There were two things that mattered to me most about this past year. They had little to do with the many artful balances between *Köpfe, Körper und Ideen* that the Wissenschaftskolleg so perfectly orchestrates. As delightful as the dinners, the concerts, the seminars, the unending stream of library books, the German lessons, and the Yoga were, it turned out, rather, to be the pleasures of disequilibrium that really counted. The most fundamental, and yet most elusive, was the recovery of a long forgotten freedom to wake up very slowly in silence; to be able to remain, for as long as one might wish (perhaps the entire day) in the “nach der Nacht”. It is good, especially for us Americans, who – according to the *Economist* – work on average two and a half months more of each year than do Germans, to be reminded how essential “wasting time” is to thinking through important problems. The

freedom to let that twilight state of consciousness expand, to release oneself from the narrowing effects of instrumental reason – whether lingering half-awake at 5 a.m., drifting half-distracted while riding a bicycle, or staring aimlessly out of the window of the S-Bahn – made it possible for me to finally find my way forward with a difficult book whose exact form had eluded me for more than ten years, and to compose many other things too.

The second thing that mattered most was a largely unintended and largely unanticipated *Verfremdungseffekt*, an unavoidable loosening of intellectual grip that came from working in a country that is neither the country I live in (America), nor the country I write about (France). Before coming here, many friends and colleagues asked me why I would want to spend a year in Germany, a place of no particular consequence on my professional map and with no particular archival research opportunities. My answer was simply, “because they invited me”. But it became immediately clear that distance from the professional constituencies to whom I am accountable for my livelihood (the academic and editorial institutions of the 5th and 6th *arrondissements*, the Pacific coast, and the “northeast corridor” of America) was immensely liberating: the cultural and linguistic disablement of becoming a barely literate foreigner was weirdly re-enchanting of those languages and civilizations that I thought I knew well; the pure enchantment of really discovering German; and not least the fascinating triangulation of a lifelong Franco-American dialogue with a third civilization – its language, its institutions, and, not least, its intellectual traditions and styles of thought. *Zum Beispiel*: “Emergency law”, “Ausnahmезustand” and “d^écrets d’urgence” each articulate a legal concept that is at the heart of my study of the French revolutionary terror. But the three words express very different temporal relationships to the problem of the law in moments of crisis. Thinking in threes instead of twos (*vielen Dank*, Hegel) gave me the courage to keep the middle ground of the law – that unstable terrain between the particular and general, the timeless and immediate, rights and norms – firmly in focus. Consequently, I was able to articulate an approach to the study of law as a cultural rather than exclusively juridical phenomenon.

I owe the best of the 70,000 odd words that I wrote this year – about how to read long books in the midst of a revolution, about old apples, about the strange reappearance of an unrecorded 1793 edition of Rousseau’s *Contrat Social* in Budapest after 1989 (my first *Aufsatz auf Deutsch*), about how the circulation of peoples, goods, and ideas has changed over the past five hundred years, and, not least, about the emergence of the troubling concept of “revolutionary law” and its legacy in modern democratic politics – to the engaging estrangement and the cultivated loss of discipline that the Wissenschaftskolleg made possible.