



IN THE FULLNESS OF TIME  
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I had hoped to spend the full ten months in Berlin, but I was able to negotiate only a six-month leave from work, from October 2006 to March 2007. I finally arrived in Berlin in mid-January 2007, more than three months late, having spent the best part of 2006 seeing a close family member through a critical illness. Mirroring my own exhaustion, my laptop crashed two days before I arrived; its former contents accompanied me dormant in an external hard drive, waiting to be restored to life. During my first grey days in Berlin I could not imagine that this dark, wet frog would soon turn into a Prince Charming when kissed

by the gracious welcome of staff and colleagues, held in the tender embrace of a skilfully designed routine. Once it did, the Wissenschaftskolleg reinvigorated me. Then time somehow came to dominate. How much did I have? How should I spend it? Might I have just a bit more?

Given that 2006 had been professionally unproductive, I was determined to press ahead. I brought two projects to Berlin. The first was to prepare a long book manuscript for publication. Files went back and forth to the copyeditor, followed by proofreading and, ever the final straw, index compiling. As I write these words in September 2007, *Beshara and Ibn 'Arabi: A Movement of Spirituality in the Modern World* should appear any day. Designed by the Berlin Atelier that produced the twenty-five year logo of the Wissenschaftskolleg, its vibrant dust-jacket reminds me of rainy mornings in the Villa Walther spent scrutinising pages, rescued by the welcome steps of Fellows making for lunch, always ready to commiserate. The second project was a manuscript-in-progress entitled *Ibn 'Arabi and his Shrine in Contemporary Damascus*, designated my main focus in Berlin. Precious little progress was made in writing as such, but the project benefited in many ways from the Wissenschaftskolleg. The Library team conjured up relevant sources at breathtaking speed. Computing Services retrieved the contents of oddly formatted audio-visual materials brought from Damascus. Fellows' Services provided the skills of Kevin McAleer and Mitch Cohen, who patiently translated out loud German ethnographic studies of Syrian saints and shrines as I typed, their company cheering an otherwise tedious task. Anthropologists among the Fellows and guests offered a timely opportunity to explore questions concerning the nature and place of my own ethnographic research in this project, and how I might integrate my field materials: encounters with Abdellah Hammoudi (who illuminated the intensely personal nature of Muslim ethnography on Muslims), Thomas Hauschild (whose broad-ranging comparative insights forced a fresh perspective on my specific case-study), and Thomas' guest André Gingrich (who convincingly highlighted the indispensability of ethnographic methods to an understanding of what texts mean on the ground) provided much food for thought. So did a periodic debate, shared with Muhammad S. Umar, concerning the relative merits of anthropological fieldwork and textual approaches in the study of modern Islam, and whether/how to synthesise them. I gradually developed a clearer sense of where the emphasis should lie in my project, and realised more generally that lingering delusions that I might reinvent myself as a full-fledged anthropologist would have to be deferred to another lifetime ... Meanwhile it was heartening to discover that both Muhammad S. Umar and Thomas Bauer shared the defining concern of

my work on Ibn ‘Arabi’s legacy in Damascus, for each of us has sought to underline how rich the classical Islamic tradition is in resources for the embrace of pluralism and the tolerance of difference: contemporary Islamic discourses neglect such resources, with dangerous results.

Alongside these two projects, I brought with me a sense that I should use the break from employment to reassess the focus of my research. Professional sensitivities had made it difficult for me to publish on Islamism or political Islam in recent years, and I hoped to find a way to revive this aspect of my work by creating some facts on the ground. At the Wissenschaftskolleg I took the plunge. I accepted a timely invitation to a UK Foreign Office-related conference, which gave me just over a month to update myself on the trans-national Islamist movement Hizb al-Tahrir, the subject of my first book, and to compare its ideas and strategy with those of other radical Islamist movements like al-Qa‘ida. Apart from professional sensitivities, it would have been impossible to efficiently amass, devour and critically assess a decade’s worth of material on this movement, and to re-establish contact with activists, in my daily work life. The Wissenschaftskolleg made this possible through a single intensive distraction-free burst. In addition to the Library, it provided a superb research infrastructure and facilities – in contrast with my routine working arrangements from a modest home office, from which I travel 100 km to my London Institute office, or twice that to my Exeter office, for good facilities. Moreover, the Fellows’ group and the Wissenschaftskolleg milieu were energising. My new old direction quickly produced results. I was able to tackle the thesis of a neo-conservative think-tanker who advises on US policy towards the Muslim world (among others, Arne Mooers showed me how challenges inherent in the scholarship/policy-world encounter know no disciplinary boundaries). I also agreed with a publisher to update and expand my book on Hizb al-Tahrir, which is a major reference work now out of print. So, for better or for worse, I stepped back into the crowded theatre of competing “expertises” on Islamism and Western policy towards it, hopefully bringing a somewhat more nuanced voice than certain others. (I must thank Thomas Bauer specifically for sharing his cache of materials from an al-Qa‘ida website that shut down just when I needed it.)

Intensive work in these three areas was punctuated by diverse activities. The Tuesday colloquia were both fun and stimulating in their breadth, and in the manifest encounters between different academic traditions and cultural-intellectual styles (I did not undergo this Wissenschaftskolleg *rite de passage* myself, but I did develop a sense of how the group might have reacted to a presentation of my work from cumulative observations and con-

versations). The meandering and ever self-transforming Religious Transformation Group organised by Friedrich Wilhelm Graf offered an interesting comparative perspective across religious traditions, cultures, space, and time. I found this further enriched by my encounters with Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin and Marcia Pally and by a periodic debate, often ignited by Almut Höfert, on modernity. Seminars and workshops of the project “Europe in the Middle East – The Middle East in Europe” proved particularly lively, as did the project’s impressive group of young Middle Eastern scholars. I rationed my attendance at all such “non-mandatory” Wissenschaftskolleg events, however, and tried not to be enticed by Berlin’s broader Islamic Studies community. I was very much torn between the constant stream of events at the Wissenschaftskolleg and other Berlin institutions on the one hand, and my professional projects on the other. Although I was eventually able to extend my Wissenschaftskolleg stay to just under five months in total, this was in a piecemeal manner, and with what felt like substantial time spent away from Berlin as part of the deal. I imagine that colleagues probably identified me early on as the Fellow who could never give a simple answer to the question “How long are you staying?”. The ongoing uncertainty meant that I was always running out of time and just about to leave, making it difficult to plan ahead. After a promising start I drew my German lessons to a close. I was disappointed not to attend the Bioquaria and Round Tables, given my interest in biology (I completed the first year of a Biochemistry degree before metamorphosing into a student of Islam), but time was always an issue. Among others, biologists Wayne Maddison, Steve Frank and Andrew Read graciously fielded my primitive if enthusiastic science questions, and allowed me to explore whether I could claim I had not completely lost the ability to think “like a scientist”. Lunches and dinners provided a welcome opportunity for animated briefings on missed events. They also furnished many a frank encounter or jovial exchange with Fellows, their families, guests, and staff, even if sometimes cut short by an “eat and run” policy because of work commitments. As a latecomer, I found that the regular contact at meals made possible fairly rapid integration. This “community” aspect was for me one of the most fun parts of the Wissenschaftskolleg experience; as something of a throwback to younger days at university (or further back?), it was somehow rejuvenating. It was also an excellent antidote to the isolation of academic work, while the camaraderie of shared professional trials and tribulations was soothing. It was fascinating to watch the dynamics of the group, and to contemplate with others the apparent marginality or absence of certain cultural and religious voices and perspectives, and the defining assumptions of the Wissenschaftskolleg project as a whole. The opportunity to gain an understanding of the workings

of German academia was especially welcome; one easily forgets just how firmly UK academia remains on the margins of Continental Europe.

On a practical note, the Wissenschaftskolleg staff expended every effort to accommodate my uncertain plans, making it possible for me to honour commitments elsewhere in such a way that I could continue with my Fellowship; Reinhart Meyer-Kalkus deserves special thanks for encouraging me to pursue this. The staff moved me seamlessly from one apartment to another and between different offices. Without exception they were supportive and kind, but the computing staff were perhaps especially heroic in their patient handling of my extended computer problems, which dominated my first month in Berlin.

The programme of events organised by the Wissenschaftskolleg was varied and stimulating; I found the in-house musical evenings fascinating, even though I am no lover of modern music, and the Artemis Quartet was a high point on the eve of my departure. Beyond the Wissenschaftskolleg there was much pleasure in evening and weekend excursions into Berlin's rich cultural life, squeezing in at high speed exhibitions, museums, operas, concerts, restaurants, cafes, the cinema, even the zoo; this relaxed cosmopolitan city proved a joyful contrast with congested, polluted and overpriced London. The Berlin spring was exquisite and beat the celebrated English summer hands-down, especially after the very bleak winter, and the Grunewald birdsong was wonderful. There were lovely times with Thomas Hunter (a refrain from an intimate rehearsal of his Hindustani music remains engraved on my memory), Martin Stritt, Thomas Bauer, Wayne Maddison, Steve Frank, Muhammad S. Umar, Viola Shafik, Joe Bergin and their partners and families, Fuad Rifka, Carl Tham, Marcia Pally, and many more. Many of those I met at the Wissenschaftskolleg challenged, enriched, entertained, heartened, impressed, annoyed and confused me, sometimes in equal measure. Collectively, they and the Wissenschaftskolleg experience somehow remoulded me, by sparking a reassessment of aspects of professional, intellectual, social and personal self. Given that the outcome of such a process can be unpredictable, I would say that the Wissenschaftskolleg is a potentially dangerous place for those in mid-career who have long been denied the luxury of space and, of course, time ...

It seems in some ways that my Wissenschaftskolleg stay became a metaphor for the finitude of life. Given the uncertainty concerning how long I had, did I prioritise well and choose wisely? "Time," the Prophet Muhammad said, "is like a sword. If you don't cut it, it will cut you." Many meetings and conversations were deferred until time ran out and it was simply too late, and much was left undone or unsaid. Time also had its tricks to play, as in my final day and a half, which coincided with Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin's return to

Berlin and witnessed a hilarious succession of near-misses in and out of buses and buildings, and misunderstood appointments, with the result that, when he reached me by sheer chance moments before I left for the airport, we concluded by phone that time did not wish us to be together in Berlin: we would have to meet in London or Jerusalem. Yet it is in such conceived but unfulfilled plans that the real flavour of the Wissenschaftskolleg experience lies for me: it was about potential, not actualization. It was a taste of what might be, what one might become, in time. To quote the iconic 1980s UK pop group “Culture Club” (can there be wisdom in popular culture?): “In time it could have been so much more.” Thank you, Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, and everyone I encountered there, for an unforgettable experience, and for the precious taste of what might be – in the fullness of time.