



EXPERIENCING BERLIN AND WIKO THROUGH A SPECIAL LENS

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When paging through previous yearbooks, it becomes very clear that anything and everything interesting one might have to say about their Wiko stay has been preempted by the Fellows who preceded us. The only novelty can lie in the specific way in which each of us combines the multiple layers of experience and feelings lived through during our stay. And this is what I will here try to convey.

Reflecting on a time-bound experience implies looking back at the moment of arrival and the expectations one had at the time. The comparison between expectations and actual

experiences surfaces in a question I am often asked as the time of leaving nears: “What surprised you most during your stay here?” On the various occasions when it was asked, I tried out a variety of answers, going from the most intimate or personal matters to more academic ones. I will now give it another try.

It was in January that I first arrived in Berlin. The reason why already gives a clue to one of my preoccupations during my stay: the southern hemisphere has a different academic calendar from that of the northern hemisphere. October is not a good month to start a new pursuit. It would have implied interrupting academic activities at precisely the busiest time of year (like April in the northern hemisphere). Our activities diminish and we first get a break from teaching during the summer, which commences the end of December. A simple fact, taken for granted by me in my everyday life, evoked surprised reactions in my co-Fellows whenever the matter came up in casual conversation (“Oh! That’s true!”, or “I never thought about that before!”).

Merging with a group that has already known each other for several months and that has already grown accustomed to an ongoing pattern of activity calls for an intensive period of learning and of efforts to try to fit in. I had to learn who my colleagues and the staff were – not as a collective body but as individuals: faces, names and specialized disciplines; places of origin and the institutional settings where they work; and languages in which to communicate. I also had to learn the norms and rituals of Wiko. I had never visited the place before; nor had I ever stayed in Germany longer than a week. That meant having to learn much about daily interactions: from the ways of greeting each other (I come from a part of the world where there is more bodily contact when greeting, hugs and kisses being much more usual than here) to the proper way to address each other (Do Fellows call each other by first names? How does one address the Rector – Herr Rektor? Herr Giuliani? Mr. Giuliani? Luca? – What about addressing the staff?). And it still puzzles me (at Wiko as well as other Berlin venues) as to when exactly a specified time for an activity is to be taken as strict and precise – as is the 11 o’clock Dienstagskolloquium – and when it is to be understood as flexible – as is the 12:30 communal lunch.

The list of large and small features of everyday interaction that were to be learned was endless. After seven months, I still have not learned much. I know I committed countless “mistakes” – if one is to judge them from the vantage point of the norms governing interaction in the specific cultural environment of Berlin and Wiko. Fortunately, there are always a number of Fellows hailing from other places, and the staff is quite used to intercultural dialogue and the inevitable misunderstandings that go along with it.

Without much forethought or previous planning, during the initial period of my stay, I started to apply the tools of ethnographic research to my everyday life. I observed (as inconspicuously as I could) everything; not knowing beforehand what might turn out to be “significant” I spent hours taking notes on everything I observed. The rituals of the Dienstagskolloquium attracted my attention, in particular the 5–10 minute introductions by a fellow Fellow. In them, I found echoes of Marcel Mauss’ notion of *le don* (the gift), an interpretation of the act of giving as bound by rules of reciprocity. *Le don* can never be free, involving as it does a set of obligations that reflect the interdependence of giver and givee, the recipient and the community (in this case, the audience). What is given – in our case, the almost always laudatory or flattering introduction of the Fellow about to speak – also reveals the identity of the giver. His or her power lies in *le don* – and thus the significance of this little performance. Week after week, I started to see links between these introductions and the other major interactive performances in the Dienstagskolloquium, namely the comments and questions. But then I realized that there was considerable continuity and congruence between interaction in the colloquia and the patterns of interaction at lunch and dinnertime. A network analysis would have shown the patterns of power, prestige and reciprocity quite clearly.

All these performances were fascinating to me, and I had to refrain from transforming my observations into a research project in its own right. My understanding of research ethics restrained me from doing it: I cannot do research while simultaneously hiding my intentions from the subjects I am working on. In my fieldwork, I always transform such relationships into a “working with”. I felt I could not impose upon my Wiko colleagues such an outrageous proposal. They were very busy pursuing their personal projects and engaging with the rest of the group in their own ways, and I felt it would be more than an intrusion to request that they become research subjects. Furthermore, awareness of the proposal itself would so deeply alter the interaction patterns of my envisioned subjects that the whole project would become worthless. What was and is clear to me is that what at first appears to be spontaneous and personal interaction is in fact the result of clearly structured and power-driven patterns. Thus, my observations had to remain private ones, leaking out in casual conversation, perhaps at what came to be known by its participants as the “Third-World Table”.

The coming together of those very few Fellows from the “Third World” was not only a matter of a shared sensibility or mutual empathy. It was never a closed group based solely on place of residence; it was a network with loose parameters and porous boundaries, and

key to membership was a certain way of sharing some features of our intellectual work. It is fairly safe to say that most academics from the “centre” carry out their work relatively ignorant of what is happening on the periphery, i. e. are unaware that there are “others” who occupy other positions and that something can be gained by casting an occasional glance their way (and not then seeing them as exotic, or savage or colorful, please!). Those of us who work in the “periphery”, on the other hand, cannot avoid incorporating the centre, the West, and the distribution of world economic, intellectual or any other power into our understanding of our subordinate position. Working from the periphery implies a specific way of framing research questions. Perhaps what is involved is a difference in *Weltanschauung*. Issues of power relations are always present, couched at times in theoretical debates about hegemony, domination, or the position of the subaltern. What is surprising for me is how rare it is to find these issues being treated in the work of my Fellows from the centre.

A second trait is more blurry. Living and working in the periphery implies living in politically unstable and/or changing environments, with relatively weak state and non-state institutions, and where crisis and emergencies are the norm. Under such conditions, the “personal troubles of milieu” and the “public issues of social structure” – to use C. Wright Mills’ terms – are always present in whatever combination. This implies a constant awareness of the public and political dimensions of our work. Intellectual public engagement is part of our task; it cannot be avoided.

I regret not having taken the initiative to organize open discussions among the Fellows about these themes. Both centre-periphery power relations in the production and dissemination of knowledge as well as academic work’s necessary public engagement – these themes informed those few times I asked questions in a colloquium and my conversations with fellow “third-worlders”. Fortunately, they were also the themes of certain conversations and exchanges that I had with select Wiko higher-ups. Such interest in these issues was an unexpected revelation to me. It was encouraging for me to realize how much some of these issues are present in the concerns of certain people at Wiko. Their willingness to listen and their readiness to discuss the global geopolitics of knowledge and the paths leading to change was, no doubt, one of the BIG surprises I encountered during my stay.

Intellectually, I had no specific expectations for my stay at Wiko. I did not come with a certain task in mind – no book to write or finish, no specific archival research to complete. After almost a decade of concentrated efforts devoted to specific institutional tasks and thematically specific academic projects (dealing with issues of the memory of violence and re-

pression, among others), I needed time to reflect on these experiences and take some comparative notes. Berlin was the ideal place for this endeavor. My plan was to have time to think through the interrelationships between the several specific themes I had been studying, and I wanted the freedom to continue my exploration of styles and genres of writing and to convey the results of my research and reflection in alternative ways, especially the various uses of photography. Central to all of this was my concern with the convergence of the personal and the political, of one's own biography and history.

With such an open agenda, I soon found myself exploring life in Berlin, taking comparative notes and, in a sense, immersing myself in an ethnographic adventure. It was not part of my work plan; it was not even a conscious decision. Coincidences and circumstances impelled me in this direction – a direction that was also given impetus by certain Wiko people who would from time to time comment that a sojourn at Wiko finds many Fellows doing something completely different from what they had anticipated before arriving. With this indirect encouragement, and in the knowledge that I was not obligated to write an administrative report explaining the degree to which I did indeed achieve my self-imposed goals, my basic impulse was to go off exploring in various directions. Let me say something more about this.

The reasons for endeavoring to write a set of “Chronicles from (or in) Berlin” were highly personal. After a week or so, I had to send some kind of personal message to diverse people whom I feel very close to, in a variety of countries – family and friends, colleagues and students. I chose to write a collective letter telling them about my initial experiences upon landing in Berlin. The response was so encouraging that I continued the practice, taking up diverse themes, incorporating photographs, at times doing a bit of research to be able to relate certain stories about places and their significance. I wrote about the enigmas I encountered, the silences I sensed in the city, the contrast between the manifest statements about particular things and what I sensed were their hidden meanings. The themes, not surprisingly, had much to do with my previous research themes and my own conceptualizations. I found “layers of memories” in public space, struggles and controversies about the meaning of the past, changing interpretations over time – with their spatial expression in changing buildings and statues, or attempts at erasing and installing new or renewed spatial narratives. What attracted me the most were the silences, the issues that people don’t talk about. I must confess I was quite overwhelmed by the open response I often got when I made attempts to penetrate these silences. As if certain people were just waiting for the chance to meet somebody ready to listen to their stories ...

Given my own research and teaching themes, during the last decade I had done quite a lot of reading and knew much about the processes of memorialization in relation to the Nazi past in Berlin. Now, in my ethnographic adventures, I was surprised by the complex and unsettled (in my view at least) relationship between East and West Berlin. How do people talk about it? What are the “correct” and the “incorrect” names and labels to use when talking about *die Wende* (the fall of the Berlin Wall)? How to penetrate layers of silence? My chronicles (I wrote about fifteen of them) shifted from one theme to another, taking up certain questions time and again. The writing is very personal, very subjective, expressing my own feelings and hesitations, my own bewilderment and my own discoveries. With all the responses, feedback and dialogues that ensued, by now the chronicles are closer to a dialogical collective endeavor.

I do not know if there will be any follow-up to this writing. Some colleagues think the pieces deserve publication, as a kind of traveler’s selective view of Berlin. Some think that they would be especially significant for a German public that is perhaps not used to looking at itself through the eyes of others. Personally, I have arrived at a point in my life where I feel no pressing urge to publish. I will have to think about what path to follow, if any.

Beyond the pleasure of the adventure and the exploration of styles and types of writing and conveying messages in photographs, I enjoyed very much the experiment of looking at Berlin – “the centre” – through the eyes of someone from the periphery. Together with the research and writing that went into preparation of my colloquium (published in this same volume), I feel that my stay at Wiko offered the opportunity to free myself from the constraints and controls of the academic habitus, allowing me to be moved about by the serendipitous winds of chance and circumstance. For this – and much more – I am very grateful.