



DISCOVERING GERMANY FAWWAZ TRABOULSI

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The first two months of my stay at Wiko were devoted to putting into Arabic my latest book *A History of Modern Lebanon*, written and published in English (London, Pluto, 2007). The Arabic version, published in Beirut by El-Rayess Books, came out on time for the December 2007 Arab Book Fair in Beirut and was declared by the organizers the best-selling book for its category. A new edition has come out in October 2008. But the greatest part of my time was devoted to pursuing my research project on the relationship between business and politics in postwar Lebanon (post 1975–90 wars). That entailed the reconstitution

of the interests of some 80 leading business families of the Lebanese financial and commercial oligarchy and tracing their modes of intervention in the country's political life, including the new layer of enriched warlords and immigrants. Work done in Berlin finished laying the foundation for the writing of the papers (and ultimately the book). More work and time are still needed for field research and interviews.

My Wiko residence also provided me with the occasion to realize a long-time project, the organization of a workshop on the life and work of Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq, the prominent figure of the mid-19th-century Arab cultural renaissance. The workshop, the first ever to be devoted to the rebellious and radical Lebanese belle-lettrist, translator (of the Bible), travel writer, social critic, satirist and linguist, convened for three days in March 2008 with the participation of a dozen researchers and scholars, funded by Wiko's "Europe in the Middle East – The Middle East in Europe" program (EUME) and the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung. A follow-up workshop will meet in Beirut in October 2008. As a way of sharing that experience with my Wiko Fellows, I decided to make the life and work of Shidyaq the topic of my Tuesday colloquium. I also abused the generosity of the Wiko administration to appear once more in the conference room of Wallotstraße 19 for a "Thursday afternoon" lecture (presented on a Tuesday!) to talk about Zionism, the state of Israel and the Arab-Israeli conflict.

My participation in a number of EUME's activities was the occasion to meet and interact with a new generation of young scholars on Arab and Middle East Studies. My critical comments on their work were delivered as a lecture on "Occidentalism", which unfortunately failed to provoke the discussion I had hoped for.

More importantly, the Wiko fellowship was the occasion to discover the benefits of mixing and interacting with a congregation of colleagues from different countries and disciplines. With Dhruv Raina, I immediately discovered many common friends and areas of interest, in addition to learning about another aspect of the craft of the historian, that of the historian of science. At the "Third World Table", and elsewhere, Salman Bashier was a "neighbour" with whom I shared a common admiration for Ibn Arabi and Sufism. Antje Krog introduced me shyly to the delights of her poetry and suffered patiently and smilingly my remarks against her "nativism". Robert Perlman opened my naïve eyes to the relationship between class analysis and evolutionary biology. Norman Birnbaum informed us all with his rich knowledge of American politics. Michael Fried has his magical way of introducing you to his magical version of realism as Ruth Leys leads you to delve deep into the fleeting and complex relationship between trauma, memory and forgetfulness. Hearing

Randolph Nesse lecture on depressions, you wish you were depressive. Horst Bredekamp's *Bildakt* theory inspired me in an introduction I was writing for a book on the posters of the civil war in Lebanon (1975–90). With Elizabeth Jelin you share much more than her delightful brands of Argentine *maté*. And all this does not exhaust the very interesting and challenging encounters and discussions with so many others around lunch and dinner tables. But I should add that on some such occasions, I was surprised to find how many prejudices and stereotypes about Islam and Arabs still linger among the “internationally renowned scholars” and their guests.

For my extra-Wiko activities, I participated in a number of lectures and panels. At the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, I spoke on a panel on Culture and Resistance about the misuses of culture as a substitute for socio-economic development. “Do Collective Rights Contribute to Conflict Resolution? The Lebanese Case”, was the title of my contribution to the conference on “Ethnonationalisms and State Building”, organized by the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung. “Do We Understand the Middle East?” organized in London by the British Society for Middle East Studies (BRISMES) conference in London gave me the occasion to speak on “To Forget or Not to Forget a Civil War – the Lebanese Case”. I also addressed a meeting of a group of bright political science students of the Freie Universität in Berlin preparing a simulation on Lebanese politics.

Despite the fact that I missed the occasion to study German properly, Wiko provided the opportunity to fill a few of the huge gaps in my knowledge of Germany and German culture. The occasion presented itself to discover Ernst Bloch's monumental *The Principle of Hope* and Heiner Müller's theatre.

I am grateful to Zuheir and May Shawi and to Illan Halevi and Kirstin Maass for ritually coming on weekends to take out their friend from his “boarding school” and introduce him to the wonders of Berlin. A fan of carnivals, I attended the Köln festival, which I discovered was no different from any other carnival, in its orgiastic consumption of beer, “turning the world upside down”, and its “soft” symbolic social redistribution, in this case with chocolates and sweets. Dresden, in company with my wife Nawal, was a far cry from the grey, war-scarred city I had visited in 1978. The visit of my sister and niece and of my daughter Jana, after long winter months of hermetic retreat at Wallotstraße 10, was the occasion to discover those parts of the city that cater to youth and art lovers in green Berlin. However, my visit to Germany would not have been complete without a trip to the Rhine region in the company of Aziz al-Azmeh, including the inevitable pilgrimage to the Karl-Marx-Haus in Trier.

Writing these lines, I realise that I did much more in terms of discovery and activities than I had thought I did. At least I can say that, for somebody who belongs to a region that has long suffered from a fixation on French or Anglo-Saxon cultures, I managed to get a few glimpses of another European culture. Even if that had been all I did in ten months, the visit would have been more than worthwhile.

In conclusion, I cannot adequately express my admiration, gratitude and affection toward all the wonderful people in all the departments of Wiko. I owe them a big thank-you.