



## THE WORLD OF POSSIBILITIES BEHROOZ GHAMARI-TABRIZI

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Seldom does one find an extended and uninterrupted time to focus on reading and writing outside his or her teaching and administration responsibilities. Having that opportunity for a full academic year in the midst of one of the most vibrant and sophisticated cities in Europe, in an institution that offers absolutely the greatest accommodation imaginable, in the most collegial, friendly, and caring environment is what defines my experience at Wiko. The only shortcoming of Wissenschaftskolleg is that it offers the fellowship only once.

As teachers, we all know that every cohort comes with its distinct characteristics. It indeed remains a mystery to me why sometimes a class works and some times it doesn't. We were all fortunate that our 2010/11 cohort worked extremely well. Despite my early skepticism about this type of radical interdisciplinarity, having everyone from influential evolutionary biologists to world-renowned composers under one roof, our year at Wiko

proved that there is enough common ground, even in our often obscure disciplinary discourses, to form an intellectual community. I think what makes Wiko work is a careful plan of community building through both simple plans, such as collective lunches, and well-crafted events, such as colloquium talks and cultural gatherings and outings. I have been to a number of residential fellowships; the Wiko experience is unparalleled.

I came to Berlin hoping that I could work on my manuscript on the conception of trauma among the Iranian veterans of the eight-year war between Iran and Iraq, which began in 1980. I became interested in this project after reading a number of war memoirs and movies by internationally recognized Iranian film directors about the lasting political, social, and psychological consequences of the war. What interests me in this project is that while in state politics the war has a remarkable presence, in civil society there is a curious absence of dialogue about it. How the veterans understand their own experiences, how the medical community views trauma outside the contingencies of culture and history, and how veterans situate themselves in their own communities and families are all questions that intrigued me to pursue this project.

While in Iran in 2009, I was able to collect invaluable documents and conduct interviews with the veterans. Unfortunately, I had to leave my primary research material behind because of the post-election upheavals in Iran. So, now I had a full year to devote my entire attention to writing, but I did not have the right material to work with.

I did have a plan “B”. I had written a short piece on Foucault’s controversial essays on the Iranian Revolution of 1978–79. Unlike many others who chastised Foucault for his revolutionary enthusiasm, I had defended his position and tried to make sense of these journalistic writings in a more philosophical context as an example of his anti-teleological view of history and his genealogical historiography.

After September 11, 2001, there was a renewed interest in Foucault’s position on the Iranian revolution. 9/11 generated new political and ideological alliances. Those who raised questions about the universality of Western civilizational claims were lambasted as not being able to appreciate the significance of Western rationality and the pitfalls of abandoning it. That’s how Foucault’s writings on the Iranian revolution became relevant, again.

So, I began to work on a book-length manuscript tentatively called *Foucault, Iran, and the Enlightenment*. I finished two chapters before arrival and poured myself into finishing the book during my stay. I wrote four more chapters, finished the book, sent it out for comments and revised the manuscript all in the period of my stay in Berlin. I am aware

that many aspects of what I have written are going to be controversial. I don't think I could have written this book in the way I wrote it and as fast as I wrote it without the kind of environment that Wiko afforded all of us.

I do not say this to fulfill the niceties that are required in one's appreciation of the fellowship. Rather, this is a genuine statement about the quality of works presented during my year at Wiko and how such exposure encouraged me, and hopefully others, to be both daring and diligent in my writing. To be creative and careful, to be bold and judicious, to take chances and be cautious. Of course I think one should always strive for that. But here at Wiko the context calls for it. I can say that I learned as much from the incredible music of Helmut Lachenmann and Toshio Hosokawa as I learned from the nuanced and counterintuitive presentations of Kamran Ali and Fred Cooper about nationhood and the contingencies of state-building. I think that without any substantive connection they do the same thing, they ask their audience to leave behind their logical and disciplinary commitments and allow themselves to think, see, hear, and write outside the conventions that condition their work. Robert Boyer does the same with his critique of economists' hyper-rationality and their scientific rhetoric of economic forecasts; so does Niklaus Largier with his preoccupation with the question of possibility and how it has been overshadowed by modern rationality and the overwhelming significance it gives to a sense of reality. It was important to me to know that I was writing amid a number of scholars who showed a great degree of recognition, following the Russian semiotician Yuri Lotman, that "non-understanding, incomplete understanding, or misunderstanding are not side-products of the exchange of information but belong to its very essence", as Albrecht Koschorke reiterated in his presentation.

I cannot reflect on my year at Wiko without highlighting the incredible staff who make this experience possible. From the library to the kitchen, from the front office to those who work behind the scenes, every single staff member at Wiko does his or her job with such an exemplary diligence and dedication. They made this year of fellowship the fastest year I have ever spent.