



ON THE OPPORTUNITY OF CHANGING
ONE'S PROJECT
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I have never been to a boarding school. Nor have I been through the typically Anglo-American and more particularly American experience of the university dorm or of the intensely communal environment of a graduate school. But I have spent almost a year at the Wissenschaftskolleg and I think that, in a way, my ten months there have partly made up for these moments I could have experienced some three or four decades earlier. In all

honesty, I must add that it was not without some apprehension that I contemplated the perspective of a year-long stay at the Kolleg. Some of the “rituals”, especially the frequent common meals, were likely to acquire a rather invasive character; more generally, the whole idea of sharing a finite space with a relatively dense community of scholars did trigger a mild feeling of discomfort at the idea of a potentially claustrophobic situation.

It took me very little time – perhaps a couple of Thursday dinners – to realize that my fears were unfounded. To quote the late and much missed Yehuda Elkana, the Kolleg is a place that embraces contradictions: containment and freedom, liberty and discipline, comfort and challenge, focus and contemplation ... The result is an indefinable feeling of bliss and contentment, which ends up creating the illusion of a coziness and comfort that will never come to an end. But it eventually does – to be precise, by mid-July; and that is really when one fully realizes how exceptionally blessed we have been throughout our stay in Grunewald. If there is a paradise for deserving scholars, I would like to think that it might have been (re)modeled on the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin.

I have no intention of listing all the virtues of the Kolleg and its amazing staff; I would feel like repeating what many others have said in past editions of the yearbook, and I would fear to overlap with the praise that some Co-Fellows of this year will certainly sing of all the help, understanding, support, and even outright pampering we have all been subjected to. Then again, I cannot either pass under silence my deepest feelings of gratitude, if only because I know that man is an ungrateful animal and because I remember how easy it was at times to take for granted all the advantages and kindnesses that were bestowed on us. From the library to IT services, from the kitchen to Fellow Services, from German language teaching to public relations, from the reception to housing services, every single staff member has contributed in his or her own way to our well-being and our comfort, material and intellectual. In a rather extraordinary way, each and everyone of us has been made to feel special, the target of an individual attention, almost as if the entire system revolved around us. There is no way one can adequately express enough gratitude for such an extraordinary combination of kindness and efficiency. The end-of-the-year party with which we Fellows tried to entertain staff members was a heartfelt but very pale expression of our feelings.

I suppose we, the Fellows, deserve some credit, too, or at least a little bit of patting on the back. After all, we, like any other crop of Fellows before and after us, are not bad people, and the Kolleg certainly helped bring out the best in us. Throughout my stay, I was put in a situation of exposure to, and conversation with, an amazing variety of

disciplines, approaches, methods, beliefs, attitudes, and characters with a density and intensity that is highly unlikely to ever occur again. I have listened, discussed, argued, shared, learned, missed, and failed to understand an overwhelming amount of information. For this, and for all the fun that came with it, I have all my Co-Fellows to thank. Last, but not least, how can one not acknowledge the incredible influence and attraction exerted by the ever-present actor who made all this so enjoyable and so easy, Berlin?

I came to Berlin with a project I had developed years ago and left dormant for lack of time. My discovery – literally – of the Ottoman Bank personnel files went back to 1989, when I had first started to rummage through boxes and crates of archives that had remained untouched for decades in a half-abandoned warehouse belonging to the bank. Part of the material I would discover there, especially the accounting, I just catalogued and was never able to use; most of it, of a less technical nature and concerning the bank's administration, I put to use in a number of publications on the bank's history and on the socio-economic and cultural context of the society it catered to. The personnel files, an impressive 6,000 of them spread over a period of some 40 years between the early 1890s and the early 1930s, was too big a chunk to be properly processed with a busy research and teaching schedule. I had to settle with just drawing a rough nominal inventory and then keeping them "on the back burner" in the expectation of better times, hopefully a productive sabbatical year.

What made this series particularly attractive was, of course, its sheer size, but only because it was combined with a truly amazing level of information concerning each and every individual. To a historian obsessively convinced that history is in the details, this was just too tempting. Each file started with a four-page sheet of paper, printed as a form to be filled in by, or for, the employee at the very beginning of his career, when he or she was still a candidate for a job. These sheets not only provided the basics about the identity of each of these employees – nationality, age, marital status, education, former employment – but they did so with a level of sophistication and detail that was simply astounding. One could thus learn the individual's father's name and occupation and about his religion and obtain a detailed chronological breakdown of all the educational institutions attended and of all former jobs held. Even more astonishingly, the files systematically kept track of the kind of information one could only dream of ever seeing spelled out in such detail. Every individual's linguistic capabilities were recorded under two separate headings: written and spoken languages. Two other entries dealt with what we would today call networking: under one heading, the individual was requested to state all

relatives, however distant, working for the bank; at another point he or she was asked to list “references and guarantors”, i.e., people who would be willing to recommend, or even vouch for, that person. Some of the information, though much more difficult to handle, was fascinating in a very different way: the bank itself made it a point to evaluate the candidate on the basis of mesmerizingly subjective criteria, ranging from “personality” to “dedication” and “demeanor”. This information may have been limited in its capacity to really provide me with a reliable picture of the individual, but it certainly would tell me a lot about the bank’s corporate culture and its social expectations.

In short, I had a complete series of standardized forms revealing an exceptionally detailed view of some six thousand individuals working for the bank throughout the Ottoman lands. As if this were not enough, every file included one full-body, standing photograph of the employee, taken in a studio for this specific purpose. One could thus match the factual information contained in the file with a multitude of visual details concerning the individual’s looks, attitude, pose, style, fashion, attire, headgear, costume, facial hair ... without forgetting the tricky but fascinating issue of the “contamination” of the image by the bank’s expectations and by the photographer’s agency. There was little doubt that the sample was exceptionally rich and promising, but the question remained of what should be done with it. To use it as the basis for a prosopography of bank employees was certainly interesting, but my objective was somewhat more ambitious. Given the centrality of the bank as one of the major economic enterprises in the empire and given its widespread branch network, I was hoping to be able to treat this database as a representative sample of a rising middling class, possibly a white-collar petty bourgeoisie, characteristic of the turn of the 20th century. This could then become a pioneering inquiry into the complex process of transformation undergone by those sectors of the population that were rapidly integrated into modernity through a process of economic, social, and cultural Westernization. The originality of the project lay in the fact that it relied on a formidable amount of detail, thus allowing for an in-depth quantitative analysis of an unprecedented nature. The fact that the period covered by the series spanned the crucial passage from empire to republic and from a multiethnic society to the construction of a nation brought a fascinating diachronic dimension to the whole study.

With all these projects in mind, I made sure I would be able to present my project as soon as possible at my Tuesday Colloquium. The point was to get proper feedback at an early stage so as to be able to take it into account once I started working on my database. Sure enough, my presentation on November 8, 2011 was followed by a long discussion

rich with questions, suggestions, and comments. Rather predictably, the “hard” scientists tended to concentrate on issues of data collection and organization, representativeness, and statistical treatment, while the Fellows from the humanities showed greater concern for historical context and for the overall relevance of the socio-economic reading I proposed. This exchange of ideas was extremely interesting, at least from my perspective, and it did help me reformulate some of my arguments and hypotheses. Nevertheless, there was little it could do to alleviate what was my most banal and immediate concern: feeding the data into my database software so that I could start testing the viability of the whole project. This was a tedious and repetitive task, but one that I could hardly avoid. My hope was to be able to feed a sample of at least 500 to 1,000 individuals in a few months; after some time spent designing the database structure and input mask, I dutifully started entering my records.

And then, during a conversation concerning workshops to be organized by Fellows, Reinhart Meyer-Kalkus said something to the effect that Fellows could, if they felt an urge and sufficient reason for it, sidetrack into an alternative project. In all honesty, I may have partly been lured into a form of procrastination due to the overwhelming feeling caused by the seemingly endless chore of entering data; but it was also true that I had been working for the past two years on a new project on the history of archaeology in the Ottoman lands, from the end of the 18th century to the end of the Empire. Just before leaving Istanbul for Berlin, I had finished a project on this topic, and I was expecting to receive its final product, a collective volume entitled *Scramble for the Past: A Story of Archaeology in the Ottoman Empire, 1753–1914*. Following several talks with my Co-Fellow Franz Alto Bauer, we had started toying with the idea of trying to set up a workshop on this topic, but with a specific focus on Germany and Turkey, and with a chronology that could be stretched down to the present. With Reinhart’s encouragement – as I interpreted it – in mind, I felt I had to lay my bank employees to rest and concentrate on this new research perspective.

There were several other very good excuses for this shift. Obviously, together with London and Paris, Berlin was one of the major centers for scholarship, past and present, in the field of archaeology. More specifically, Germany had started to dominate the archaeological scene in the Ottoman lands from the 1880s on, well into the Republican era, after the downfall of the Empire. The Pergamon Museum, built around the remains of the Zeus altar removed from the Anatolian city in the 1880s, still stands as a stunning reminder of what archaeology could achieve, when combined with Great Power politics

and diplomacy. Yet what made the German dimension interesting was not just history, but also very contemporary issues of politics and ideology closely linked to archaeology in present-day Turkey. With the largest number of excavations carried out by foreign nations throughout the country, the Germans had also become the prime target of a recent escalation of nationalist and protectionist discourse and policies in Turkish governmental circles. The Ministry of Culture and Tourism, in particular, was threatening to rescind foreign excavators' permits in retaliation for a number of alleged misdemeanors, from refusing to restitute finds claimed by Turkey to failing to publish sufficiently or in a timely manner. Rather disturbingly from the perspective of a historian, the ambiguities of European archaeological acquisitions of the 19th century were abundantly exploited to confirm an already well-established feeling of systematic spoliation.

The workshop Franz Alto and I were planning to organize would therefore have to take into account this *longue durée* and bring the historical perspective in contact with the political problems of the present. We were lucky enough to get a very positive response from all the parties concerned: the German Archaeological Institute, the State Museums of Berlin, and German and Turkish universities were represented by some 15 to 20 scholars who submitted papers or shared their views on this complex and multilayered narrative and its latest repercussions. By the end of the workshop, in March, I was fully convinced that the rest of my stay at the Kolleg would be devoted to archival research on the topic, more particularly on the German dimension of archaeology in the Ottoman lands in the last decades of the Empire. Throughout the preceding year I had amassed a very considerable number of documents from the Ottoman state archives; it was now time to probe the major archival series of the Antikensammlung, the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, and the Staatsbibliothek. Thanks to the help and support of colleagues in these institutions I was soon able to exploit a sizeable portion of these resources; the yield was extremely promising, as it dovetailed perfectly with my documentation from Istanbul.

I like to think that this academic sidetracking was more than just a convenient digression triggered by a series of favorable coincidences, and that it will bear its fruits in a very near future. In fact, I would even suggest that I may have already received "signs" that I did the right thing. Just days before my departure, I was notified that the paper I had submitted to our workshop was accepted for publication in the next issue of the *Jahrbuch des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts*; less than a month after I had left, a longish piece I had written on the present problems encountered by foreign excavators in Turkey

– encouraged by Reinhart, once again – was published in the *Feuilleton* of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.

It looks like the Ottoman Bank employees will just have to wait a little longer. Perhaps there is a clause in the Kolleg's chart that allows Fellows to come back for "unfinished business".