



ON EMPATHY
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I do not believe for a single moment that we live in the best of all possible worlds. After ten wonderful months at the Wissenschaftskolleg, however, I do believe I’ve lived and worked in one of the best of all possible academic environments. Before I say anything else in this short report, I would like to thank the many individuals who make the Wissenschaftskolleg such an incredible place: the Rector and the Secretary; the Fellows Selection Committee; the PR group; the General Administration and the *Fellowdienste* teams; Lena, the cooks, and the restaurant workers; the terrific maintenance and cleaning

personnel; and the absolutely incredible (and I mean, i-n-c-r-e-d-i-b-l-e) librarians. Much of what I accomplished during my fellowship year I owe directly to all these individuals. I feel especially lucky to have had the privilege to be at the Kolleg before Reinhart Meyer-Kalkus's retirement. I know I speak on behalf of many hundreds of former Fellows when I say that the Wissenschaftskolleg will be a very, very different place without him.

I used the ten months at the Wissenschaftskolleg to begin writing a book about the trial and execution of Joseph Süß Oppenheimer (a.k.a. "Jud Süß"). Oppenheimer is one of the most iconic figures in the history of anti-Semitism. Originally from the Jewish community in Heidelberg, in 1732 Oppenheimer became the Court Jew (special financial advisor) of Carl Alexander, the duke of the small German state of Württemberg. When his patron the duke died unexpectedly in March 1737, the Württemberg authorities arrested Oppenheimer, put him on trial, and condemned him to death for unspecified "misdeeds". On February 4, 1738, Oppenheimer was hanged in front of over 10,000 spectators just outside Stuttgart. He is most often remembered today through the vicious Nazi propaganda movie made about him in 1940, directed by Veit Harlan.

As I see it, one of the great joys of academic life is the constant need to face different interpretations and perspectives. Academe is inherently diverse, and the Wissenschaftskolleg is a prime example of that. In every *Dienstagskolloquium* – indeed, at almost every meal and in almost every conversation I've had – I had to reconsider my views on some pretty fundamental issues. The majority of scientists in our group thought very differently about certain topics than the humanists among us; and these, in their turn, had some pretty strong opinions about topics no social scientist seems to ever consider seriously. The experience of trying to figure out why another Fellow's perspective was so different from my own has been incredibly enriching to me, even if – indeed, especially if – it did not change my mind in the end. All of this is a rather cumbersome way of expressing my gratitude to the other Fellows this year. Even when I strongly disagreed with you, I learned a great deal from our exchange. For that, as for many other things, I am deeply thankful.

I mention the issue of diversity of perspectives for another reason. One of my early discoveries while working on the eighteenth-century trial of "Jud Süß" this year was that even those people who wanted Oppenheimer to die had an uncanny ability to look at the world through his eyes. This is true for Oppenheimer's political enemies while he was still in power, his inquisitors during the trial, and the many contemporary eyewitnesses of his execution, including those who rejoiced at his death. I even found some eighteenth-century

descriptions of Oppenheimer's execution, which literally told its story through the eyes of the condemned man himself, i.e., in the first person singular. ("I was brought to the execution place. I was raised onto the gallows. They put the noose around my neck. They hanged me. I was dead.") The unnerving fact about such descriptions is that they seem to have little to do with empathy. I spent many weeks contemplating this fact and many hours discussing it with other Fellows.

We are told by academics with otherwise very different intellectual agendas that one thing that binds human beings to one another is their ability to look at things from the other person's perspective. There is a long philosophical-economic tradition that views the free market as the place in which ties of empathy are forged because of the different players' need to anticipate each other's actions, among other things. Much more disconcerting than these unconvincing attempts to sing the praises of capitalism, however, are arguments stemming from the humanities themselves. Martha Nussbaum and Lynn Hunt are no court philosophers of early 21st-century American capitalism. And yet they, too, seem to think that if we only look at things from someone else's perspective most of our political problems will disappear.

In fact, the issue of perspective-as-empathy is much more than a purely academic issue. Please pardon my use of the first person plural when I say this, but many of us seem to believe in this, too: when things get rough, when we find ourselves in an interpersonal or inter-communal conflict, a first and perhaps even sufficient step in addressing and even solving it is exactly this ability to look at things from the other side's perspective. I like to paraphrase the Beatles here and say with Paul McCartney and John Lennon that a lot of us believe that "if you only look at it my way, we can work it out".

As I hope I already made clear, I am a great believer in the value of multiple perspectives, in academia and elsewhere. What the story of Jud Süß shows us, however, is that there are people who have a remarkable ability to look at things from someone else's perspective without a shred of empathy, let alone morality. Looking and feeling are not identical; perspective and empathy are not one and the same thing. I do not doubt that humans have an ability to imagine the world through other people's eyes. What I strongly disagree with is the simplistic idea that this ability makes us into moral creatures. Humans imagine someone else's perspective for multiple purposes: sometimes as a form of entertainment (including even pornography), sometimes as a way of controlling, manipulating, and even killing others. The chess player has to look at the board through her opponent's eyes in order to beat her; the colonial administrator needs to understand the natives in order to

control them; the hunter has to think a little bit like the deer in order to kill it. There is little empathy involved in any of these cases, neither as a motivation nor as a consequence.

I leave the Wissenschaftskolleg having forged what I hope will be lifelong friendships, an incredible amount of food for thought, and many, many wonderful memories. I also leave it with a renewed confidence in the absolutely indispensable social and political role of the humanities in general and history in particular. I have never believed that history is a source of simplified “lessons from the past”. History is better viewed as an arena in which to cast doubt on existing power structures, a source base for arguments with which to defend core humanistic principles and oppose any vulgar or complacent explanations for why change is unnecessary. It is the fundamental obligation of the intellectual to challenge the powers that be rather than to serve them submissively; to cast doubt on, rather than propagate, the dangerous idea that we live in the best of all possible worlds.