



NOT OF THIS WORLD
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My absurd desire to have been witness to the 30-year history of the Wissenschaftskolleg – its casting off old skins, its transformations, enlargement, changes in intellectual and institutional interests and strategies – came not so much from the knowledge that the Wiko has been the home of countless intellectuals who meant the world for my formation and of some tremendous and otherwise inaccessible musicians. Rather, it was the common intellectual playground that the Wiko had created to bring together “hard” scientists, humanists, and social scientists for mutual contagion and the exceptional occasion to see dialogues and (I was hoping) confrontations – that would have a chance of being integrated into the intellectual daily life – between practices that more often meet each other in territorial or financial negotiations.

Not that I had shared the “two cultures” syndrome. But this made me aware that the Institute was exceptional not only in terms of its sheer material resources, but also in its view of culture, knowledge, and sciences and in its systematic attempt to deprovincialize disciplines no less than individual researchers, to make them a little more vulnerable to external intellectual contagion, than they already are to the internal dynamics of their fields and to specific funding policies. Nothing surprising, then, in Wiko’s interest in inviting people with unconventional academic careers, as well as writers and musicians: rather than in accordance with an antiquated and conservative view of a Parnassus-like assembly (Wiko in its early days might have sympathized with such a view, though, I think), in accordance with a concrete intellectual project. Nothing surprising either in the encouragement of “big question” research projects, known to work as *agents provocateurs* even when the audience is composed of researchers who reject them in general, and even (or even more) in cases when the consequent “big answers” seem fragile. And nothing surprising in the slightly teasing suggestion made by the Academic Advisory Board that the Fellows are perfectly free to develop side projects and – as I understood it – to disturb as much as to accomplish their initial research projects.

A little bit unexpected for me, though, coming as I did from a Romanian environment where science seems to need a helping hand in its defense against creationism and all kinds of New Age notions that are increasingly permeating the public culture (and, moreover, still having some out-of-date ideas of my own about what I thought was a still-present, still-pervasive influence of post-structuralism and epistemic anarchism on the scholarly milieu), was the overall harmony between the humanities, social sciences, and various voices of evolutionary theories. What I thought and secretly hoped to be a never-ending dispute about the scope and relevance of evolutionism – and, eventually, about the sense in which social sciences should indeed be materialist – was actually not. The role of challenger was assumed, instead, by the two idealist philosophers.

It may be that building an interdisciplinary research community will not prove a very fruitful project on the level of the disciplines themselves. As sometimes became apparent in the Colloquia or during our long lunch discussions and seminars, their main questions can be too remote, sometimes reciprocally incommunicable, and the vocabularies untranslatable. But maybe the reason is that “interdisciplinary” is not the right word to describe the Wiko project, which seems to me more inspired by a sensitivity toward the relativity of the disciplines, their long history of mutual differentiation, specialization,

hierarchization, etc. A proof of this is the important role played at the Wiko by the history (and maybe also by the sociology and philosophy) of science.

Of course, it all corresponded to my own longstanding curiosity about the origins and development of social sciences in the late 18th and 19th centuries. And, as a matter of fact, the project I pursued at the Wiko – focused on the potentialities that Rousseau’s writings proved to have for the development of some fundamental functioning principles of sociology and anthropology – had the chance this year to undergo a mutation, or rather an enlargement of focus.

I came to Berlin to write about how consequential the intersection between historical thinking and Rousseau’s unusual critique of the economic logic behind modern commercial societies was in his writings. I didn’t write as much as I would have liked to (not least for being overstimulated in so many different intellectual directions, with a little help from the incredible library service, which also contributed more than I could have hoped to my own bibliographical quest). But I discovered that my Rousseau project was only a piece of a larger inquiry, whose common theme was the social materialism developed during the Enlightenment. What kind of explanations were given in the Scottish and French Enlightenments (the intellectual movements that probably contributed the most to the development of modern social theory) for the beginnings of political, economic, and gender inequalities, given that more or less everybody among those whom we call “the philosophers” admitted, either for theological or for natural law reasons, that all humans were initially equal in one sense or another? Was it the difference in sheer physical force between individuals? Was it natural catastrophes, demography, climate, the development of property, or the division of labor?

With the distracting beauty of Grunewald surrounding me, it was not always easy to keep my mind on original inequalities. Cut off from the outside world (and also from its own dark history of mass deportation during the war), Grunewald is an epitome of privilege in itself and, at the Wiko, of the privileged life intellectuals may sometimes have, in moments when work and leisure are one.

It’s difficult to imagine events of the outside world bursting into this exquisitely controlled environment, troubling the sensual beauty of the flowers, the play of the sun on the surface of the lake, the animals and the birds, the sparkingly lighthearted conviviality at our daily lunches and weekly dinners. But also the parallel life of the great chair in the main hall, the glamorous austerity of the photos taken for the Wiko magazine special issues, the irreversible burst of exuberance at the (absolutely first?) Wiko Carnival. And the

regular and wholesome life, so amazing for someone coming from the frantic – and more socially mixed – Eastern European cultural environment.

And so this year has ended. This exceptional and wonderful year that I owe to the Wiko and to the members of its awesome staff.