



OCCUPY WIKO
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When I arrived in Grunewald last September, the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin was just the name of another institution I would visit for the year. It seemed difficult to think, back then, that the German capital had any surprises left in reserve. I had already spent many

months in the city and returned to it as an old lover who knew exactly where to get lost to rediscover past thrills. Coming from Albania, nowhere else in Western Europe caters better to my *Ostalgie* than taking long walks surrounded by the grey giants of Karl-Marx-Allee or staring through the glass at the shelves packed with old bus tickets and children's toys in the GDR museum. Yet Charlottenburg and Wilmersdorf had never been on my map. Only once do I remember venturing into the KaDeWe, getting angry either with the people or with the objects or with both, running out rather quickly and promising myself that from then on I would simply ignore the existence of anything west of the former Wall.

It should be obvious, given all this, that once on Wallotstraße, my very low expectations could not be disappointed. The targets I had set myself, on the other hand, were on the high side. I was determined to finish the book we had planned on the importance of political parties to political theory and had already decided I would avail myself of a number of well-known strategies to make that possible: avoid all distractions, cut lunches short, keep attendance at social events to the minimum required by norms of courtesy to my host institution, only accept those invitations to seminars that were directly relevant to my current research, that sort of thing.

Halfway through October I began to feel sorry for myself. I started to realise that I had scheduled so many outside workshops, lectures and conferences, in Germany and abroad, that the idea of uninterrupted working days began to look like a fading utopia even without the Tuesday Colloquium and the Advanced German classes on Wednesday mornings. I noticed I was often itching to leave the lunch table just when discussions became most interesting and that this had a tendency to make me resentful both towards the Fellows who lingered over coffee seemingly unconcerned by ambitious goals like the ones I had decided to pursue and towards myself for having decided to pursue those goals.

Events took a particularly dramatic turn when I discovered what I could do with the library services. It all began rather conventionally with ordering a few books I needed to consult for the chapter I was writing on the difference between factions and parties. But when the chapter took a more historical turn and I realised how quickly the books would arrive at my desk and how little effort it took to order them, the whole thing turned into a sort of competition between me and the library staff: I would order books, go through them as fast as I could, take them back to the shelf and discover with amazement that the next load, which I had only requested about two hours beforehand, had already arrived. When I realised I could not win these battles, a sort of cold war was unilaterally declared. I began to order books in more and more languages, from more and more remote places,

demanding to see them in shorter and shorter amounts of time. At one point I confess I almost ordered a book that had not been written yet – I just wanted to see what the library staff would come up with. I knew I would lose. And I did.

My Eastern European friends who had visited the Kolleg in previous years already filled me with stories of how they'd spent the whole ten months buried in the library, trying to photocopy books and articles they could then take to their under-resourced research institutions. I was not in the same position, of course. Many of the books I ordered would have also been accessible at the LSE, though undoubtedly with much more effort. However, the books acquired a little "je ne sais quoi" when they arrived on Wallotstraße, something to do not just with the speed and efficiency of their delivery or with their ability to materialise, literally, from nowhere, but also with the way they revealed themselves and became part of your day, how they seamlessly joined a conversation over lunch, shared a drink over a Thursday dinner or helped you out in a Tuesday colloquium. The world of books became a pleasure rediscovered away from conventional disciplinary, linguistic and methodological boundaries and, most importantly, one did not even need to come up with an excuse (not even an excuse to oneself) for reading books apparently unrelated to THE RESEARCH PROJECT.

Yet, as I also realised with horror at one point, the more books I ordered, the more I read. And the more I read, the less I wrote. The result was that MY GRAND PLAN was even less close to execution eight weeks into my Berlin stay than when I arrived, and the anxiety over "achievement", "performance", "output", "peer review", "impact", "target readership", "referee feedback" and all the other rather well-known torments of the contemporary academic, far from abandoning me, had begun to feel rather suffocating.

The crisis went on until the middle of November and was unexpectedly brought to an end by something on the surface entirely unrelated to the world of books and writing deadlines: the chocolate cake. I feel as though I ought to explain this. It was my son's fourth birthday and, as usual, we were late with preparations. On our way out of the breakfast room, we met Thorsten Wilhelmy and, embarrassed to confess the urgency of the matter, we asked him rather vaguely if he had any tips on where to buy a chocolate cake with strawberries on top, just like the one Arbien had requested. We had a little chat, and it was only about two minutes after that, before we even had time to put our coats on, that Vera emerged from the reception with a printed piece of paper and instructions on all the bakeries nearby, recommendations on the different kinds of chocolate cakes, shapes and sizes, complete with information on opening times and speed of delivery.

I still have no idea how Thorsten from the cafeteria managed to convey the message to Vera in the reception, it was just one of those usual Wiko things where all the staff seem to know exactly what the Fellows need, sometimes even before the Fellows know it. But it was also the kind of episode that made you realise that Wiko is not “just another place you visit”. After that, I was no longer in denial about the quiet revolution that Wiko had triggered in me from the beginning.

With that new awareness, slowly the writing pressure, the slavery of self-inflicted deadlines, and the obsession with output for the year were gone; I found myself making a fresh start. I discovered I enjoyed lingering at lunch, I ceased to see the German classes as just another opportunity to consolidate my grammar and I stopped being annoyed when we read *Eine blassblaue Frauenschrift* rather than finishing exercises. Every Tuesday Colloquium marked the beginning of a new learning adventure and every dinner became an opportunity either to meet new interesting colleagues or to invite guests to share in the Wiko atmosphere. With all the financial and administrative support received, organising conferences seemed easier than it had ever been before, and so began a series of productive collaborations with colleagues from Frankfurt and the Freie Universität, leading to more invited lectures than I can remember and to two Wiko-based workshops (on structural injustice and on issues of rectification for past historical wrongs). I also decided to take the opportunity to invite colleagues from the UK and Australia to stay in the Kolleg and work on joint projects that had been long postponed and, by the end of the year, taking advantage of Wiko infrastructure went as far as bringing over the members of an entire research network on the ethics of economic institutions. Surprisingly, just as we no longer intended this to happen, we also managed to finish our book.

It is perhaps because of how the Wiko works and makes you work that the more you get to know it, the harder it is to leave. This is not difficult to understand. Imagine that at some point during what you thought was just another visiting academic year abroad, you discover that you are living in your favourite city, with an infinite supply of books, almost unconstrained time for research, facilities to invite visitors, money to stage conferences and the smartest people in the world as your intellectual companions. Add to all this the most efficient administration you ever encountered in your life (so efficient one is loath to call it “administration”), Michelin-starred food, world-class music and more social events than you can remember since you were a university fresher. Imagine further that all of this can be enjoyed (unlike most of what you experienced in the last few years) without choking on your glass of wine while chasing your four-year-old.

You might find yourself wondering, as I did more than once during the second half of the year, if such a place is real. The Wiko is, of course, real, as real as the new big bunch of flowers that greets you every morning at the reception, those flowers one is compulsively brought to poke and smell, after asking if they really are fresh. To put the point somewhat more prosaically, you also know Wiko is real because eventually the year comes to an end and it is time to leave.

In my last few weeks in Berlin, before finally reconciling with the idea that these really were the last few weeks, my most recurrent thought became how to occupy Wiko. I proceeded in the usual way: sought allies, looked for cracks in the system, made discrete enquiries to the people who mattered, asked provocative questions ... we might even have threatened an insurrection at one point. But I was defeated. Wiko cannot be occupied, and if it could, it would perhaps lose some of its magic.

Yet, what I also discovered in that process, and after, is perhaps more comforting. Although Wiko cannot be occupied, it occupies you. I packed my suitcase with much more than I had brought with me. I took away all the people I met, the conversations I had, the books I read, the papers I wish I had written, the plays I watched at the Berliner Ensemble, the smell of the woods, some unforgettable evenings around Savignyplatz, the Rathenau memorial covered in snow, the Lufthansa gate at Tegel Airport and a little boy who could hardly say a word in German when he arrived and who now sings along to "Wildschwein" as his all-time favourite tune.

I also discovered that Wiko both occupies and liberates; it occupies you in a way that is liberating. There have been times in the last few years, when with all the writing pressure, the administrative burdens, the teaching performance reviews, the need to keep an eye on impact factors, the demand to publish papers that can only pass peer review if they start with the same sentences and end with the same conclusion, I forgot why I decided to be an academic in the first place, what it was about the world of research that had ever appealed to me. Wiko reminded me of the meaning of all that, of what it takes to work without being alienated from work, and of what it is like to feel the familiar pride of accomplishment together with the more unusual enthusiasm of discovery.

I am not entirely sure how much the magic of Wiko will continue to surprise and enchant given current political and economic constraints on academic life. It is hard to make predictions whether the research utopia it still stands for will be allowed to survive for much longer. But long may it last and, while it lasts, occupy Wiko and let the spirit of Wiko occupy you when it is time to return to the unreal world.