



A LEMON PEEL  
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On his island retreat of St. Pierre in 1765, Jean Jacques Rousseau imagined an endless time of reflection, “two years ... two centuries, and the whole of eternity”, an idle time for thought and creativity. My time at Wissenschaftskolleg was shorter, but no less precious for all that. And unlike the Swiss misanthropic lover-of-mankind, who spent his days

alone on the beach or walking the hills, I spent my days in delightful and learned company. The spaces of creativity are also social (and culinary!) ones, it turns out, and my thoughts were formed by unexpected intellectual discoveries. Polyphonic music, peacock tails, digitized Korans, talking robots, Romanian curses: startling features of a shared landscape that help break habits and open new possibilities for thought.

“It is said that a German did a book about a lemon peel,” Rousseau commented while resting on his island and suggested that he might well like to write one about every type of hay in the meadow. My own lemon peel this past year was the long and convoluted history of Christian sacrifice. This history travels from the early Church into our own modern world, traversing many places and following the thread of controversies in a religion so ambivalent about what kind of thing it should take sacrifice to be.

These controversies ebbed and flowed over the centuries. Acutely felt in the early Church, they settled into uneasy quiet for the longer Middle Ages, when the Western Church developed its robust sacrificial liturgy and theology. The Reformation re-opened the question of sacrifice, though, and every Christian confession in its wake was forced to determine anew what kind of thing a Christian sacrifice was and should be. The struggle to understand what Christianity *is* was conducted as a struggle to understand what Christianity *was*, the early Church reanimated for new uses. Liturgy, theology, ecclesiastical history, patristics: these were just a few of the domains in which these controversies unfolded, crossing Christian communities of every sort. From these religious controversies would grow robust theories of sacrifice and religion that shape the modern human sciences.

In a sense, then, the book is a history of unexpected consequences. Things that seemed ordinary to one age became burdens for the next, and each effort to relieve these burdens created new challenges, but also possibilities for thought. A minor story about Pope Gregory the Great in the ninth century became a vibrant source for later medieval sacrificial piety and an example of impossible Christian superstition in the sixteenth century. Frames of reference shifted, and suddenly what was ordinary came to seem strange and terrible. But in the effort to manage this strangeness, new possibilities for thinking about human affairs emerge, ones that we live with even now.

In my experience, writing – especially writing that traces complex and strange terrain – takes both time and languor. If you want to open yourself up to the world, Rousseau remarked in his *Promenades of a Solitary Walker*, you need a measure of idleness, a “precious *far niente*” ungoverned by particular cares and concerns. Noticing the lemon peel,

paying attention to the hay in the field, tracing the strange fortunes of sacrifice: these are possible only when you set aside the instrumental habits so important to our ordinary navigation of the world and allow your thoughts to settle down.

The Wissenschaftskolleg was a space for settling down. The island in the Grunewald dampened the daily noise, and my rhythms became slower and more measured, extending over days. Seasons marked the time, a brilliant fall shading to a long grey winter, ending in a burst of green. Books rolled into and out of my office, conversations had time to develop over lunches and walks. One day's thought could be carried into the next, fragile ideas given time to settle into firmer shapes.

Around this island and offering an altogether different world of distractions, however, was Berlin. I fell for this city, for its curious mix of laziness and industry, efficiency and grime, cultures high and low. It is a city that wears its history on the outside, its violent expansion, violent collapse, decades of decay, and current renewal marked in corner monuments, grand buildings, abandoned lots, magnificent art, and glowing street life. This past year added another Berlin, a refugee city, people fleeing war and taking up impromptu residence in convention halls and airplane hangars. This new Berlin made itself felt even at the Wissenschaftskolleg, a moment of historical acceleration felt in the hallways, on the lecture rooms, and in the streets outside. Tumultuous and disorganized days, terrifying for those displaced and confusing for their hosts. They were also a marvelous thing to witness and a reminder of what can punctuate history: an unexpected guest suddenly arriving on the threshold and asking for hospitality.

Between my refuge for writing and thought and the refuge offered to thousands fleeing war; between the calmness of historical reflection and the violence of historical events: this was a year of startling contrasts. But instructive contrasts as well. Our island in the Grunewald was, in the end, not as isolated as all that. A precious *far niente*, yes, but also tied to peoples and politics, porous to the world. And fortunately so: after all, neither lemon peels nor books simply grow on their own.