



ONE FINE YEAR  
ASEF BAYAT

---

Asef Bayat, the Catherine and Bruce Bastian Professor of Global and Transnational Studies, teaches Sociology and Middle East Studies at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Before joining Illinois, he taught at the American University in Cairo for many years and served as the Director of the International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM), holding the Chair of Society and Culture of the Modern Middle East at Leiden University, The Netherlands. His research areas range from social movements and social change to religion and public life, Islam and modernity, urban space and politics, and the contemporary Middle East. His recent books include *Being Young and Muslim: Cultural Politics in the Global South and North* (with Linda Herrera, Oxford University Press, 2010); *Post-Islamism: the Changing Faces of Political Islam* (Oxford University Press, 2013); *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (Stanford University Press, 2013, 2nd edition), and *Revolution without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring* (Stanford University Press, 2017). He is currently writing a book on the everyday life of the Arab revolutions. – Address: Department of Sociology, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 3086 Lincoln Hall, 702 S. Wright Street, Urbana, IL 61801, USA. E-mail: abayat@illinois.edu.

I cannot believe it is almost over: our Wiko life, I mean. It is July, and in a few days we will be heading back home to Illinois. One is not only consumed by the work of the eventual exit – packing, cleaning, and sifting through tons of papers and notes – but also confronted with that enduring question, “What have I done in these ten months?” I imagine that perhaps all of us wished these days were the start of the Wiko year, rather than the end.

I came to Wiko with a clear plan and a large amount of material to write a book, a second volume on the recent Arab revolutions, focusing on Tunisia and Egypt. The idea was to examine the “everyday life of the Arab Spring”, to show what these revolutions meant to ordinary people in their daily lives. I had begun thinking about the subject as soon as the first sparks of the uprisings in 2010 had taken the world by surprise. I had therefore set out to produce a book. I was in fact in the midst of research for this book when I was overcome by an urge to put that temporarily on hold and first do a different book that could explore these revolutions in their totality, in their historical and comparative perspectives. I set out to write volume 1 of my study of the Arab Spring. In fact, I had submitted the manuscript to the publisher before arriving at Wiko and the book has just been released as *Revolution without Revolutionaries* (Stanford University Press).

Once I settled in this wonderful apartment in Wiko’s Villa Walther overlooking the serene lake and sliding docks across the street, I was impatiently ready to pursue volume 2. I was initially confident that I would write the large bulk of the manuscript during my Fellowship at Wiko, but it soon became clear that this was too ambitious. As I went through my materials, I discovered that I had collected and brought with me a massive amount of data – interviews, field notes, newspaper clips, reports, videos, as well as published works – that I needed to analyze, tabulate, organize in the pre-digital way of writing down on notecards, and then use them to weave the narratives. I am happy to report that I have completed most of this rather difficult task of data analysis and organization and have begun to actually write. I imagine that I will be busy with writing for the next several months after I return home.

In my experience, work at Wiko is not limited to one’s intended and essential project. Truth is, one gets so much inspiration from activities at Wiko and there are so many productive distractions one encounters by being part of the scholarly communities of Berlin and beyond. One cannot resist participating in parallel thinking, listening, speaking, and writing. So, beyond working on my primary project, I also wrote two articles “Is There a Youth Politics” and a short piece “Reminiscing Gramsci”, which resulted from my trip to Sardinia, Italy. I also managed to carry out the groundwork for another book in production, *Global Middle East*, that I have been commissioned to prepare together with Linda Herrera. Linda and I are married, and this is the second book we are working on together. Our first joint book project on Muslim youth in the global South and North was a “success” – which means that it did not lead to divorce!! We are quite optimistic about this one, too.

During the months at Wiko, I engaged in many public events. I gave public lectures in Germany at the Philipps-Universität Marburg, EUME in Berlin, the Technical University in Berlin, the Haus der Demokratie und Menschenrechte in Berlin, and the German Association for East European Studies, Berlin. I also traveled to participate in conferences at the Middle East Studies Association of North America in Boston, the American University of Beirut in Lebanon, the conference on “Contradictions Urbaines” in Paris, and a Gramsci conference in Cagliari, Sardinia. In addition, the proximity of Berlin to North Africa made it easier for me to take a research trip to Tunisia in June in an effort to follow up on questions about where the Tunisian revolution is heading – something I have been doing since early 2011.

Clearly, all these activities were greatly facilitated by the central location of Germany and my residence in Berlin’s Wiko. But in truth, Wiko itself offered much more than I had expected. The assembly of Fellows from very different disciplines – ranging from Biology, Theology, and Music to Sociology, Literature, Art, History, Law, and more – created a productive synergy reflected most vividly in the Tuesday Colloquiums – the hallmark of Wiko’s intellectual activity. Collusion between different perspectives was clearly evident, and the good humor and faith in learning generally brought us together rather than separated us. In fact, the exchange of ideas over daily lunch proved to be equally fruitful. Where else could I learn from a composer how a piece of music is crafted; or what goes into writing a novel; or how economic rationality finds religious justification? On Tuesdays, when the colloquia took place, discussions would continue with intensity and passion over the lunch, while the indefatigable and always attentive and gracious kitchen staff served us elaborate meals.

In fact, Wiko’s staff – whether those dealing with our housing, paperwork, IT, library, or the kitchen – allowed Wiko to function as a well-oiled machine. Their efficiency and good humor have been simply remarkable. In my career, I have never experienced a library as efficient and accommodating as that at Wiko; the speed with which the library responded to the Fellows’ requests and the library staff’s care and academic support on our behalf were quite extraordinary. I am most grateful for the support given to me by all these dedicated members of the staff, both academic and technical.

Beyond its own merit, a key advantage of Wiko is that it is located in Berlin – this remarkable city of art, exiles, and immigrants; the city of extraordinary mix and *mélange*, of public debate, and of public transportation; of Hegel, Brecht, and Arendt; and of lakes, forests, and museums. I had visited Berlin many times in the past decade, but this time I

found it an utterly absorbing city. With the rising Middle Eastern diaspora in economic, political, and intellectual fields, Berlin this time felt quite different – it felt more familiar. Strolling in the streets of Moabit, Wedding, or Neukölln often felt like walking in the humble neighborhoods of Cairo, Ankara, or Rabat – with the difference that here pedestrians actually stop at the red lights! Wiko has now become part of my intellectual experience and Berlin my second hometown. You don't believe me? Then visit our Berlin apartment, which we recently acquired in Neukölln, a quarter of extraordinary energy and ambience, quite a place to hang out! Where else could you find a home where your street is called Karl Marx and your neighbor Herr Nietzsche?