



“... AND YOUR SABBATICAL IS THROUGH”
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I don't remember exactly what I said during the round of introductions in September. It was something about hoping to get off the productivist treadmill that leaves us so busy writing that we have no time to read, except in the extractive manner that instrumentalizes reading by reducing it to a narrowly targeted searching and mining exercise. I also recall expressing the hope for a genuinely disruptive break with my usual intellectual routines. I may even have claimed, only half in jest, that my goal was to write nothing and devote the year to reading and reflection.

Whatever it was that I said, it touched a nerve with my colleagues. And it ensured that I would be held accountable in the subsequent months, though sometimes in surprising

ways: was I succeeding, I was asked, in doing nothing, in taking it easy, in playing rather than working?

I was flattered by these questions, which credited me with capacities I wasn't sure I had. Alas, I did little to cultivate these capacities at Wiko. Nor did I succeed in writing nothing. Worse, having come perilously close to committing myself to writing a short book with a tight deadline, I can scarcely claim to have escaped the iron grip of productivity.

Yet the year was indeed intellectually disruptive, and for this disruption, for which Wiko and Donald Trump share responsibility, I am profoundly grateful. My original Wiko project was a study of religious and linguistic pluralism that I had been working my way into for several years. Yet already by the beginning of the year, the plans I had mapped out for a large book on the subject no longer seemed compelling. Linguistic and religious pluralism are both vast and heterogeneous fields of phenomena: there is so much variation over time, place, and context *within* each domain – even if one limits the scope of the inquiry to liberal democratic settings – that it's hard to undertake a comparison *between* the two domains. The project seemed to be growing in scope and complexity while losing its clarity of focus, and the book began to feel like a life sentence. By September, I had given up the idea of working systematically on the book in favor of pursuing a series of exploratory forays into territory that I hadn't marked out neatly in advance.

But what territory? And which forays? Just before arriving in Berlin, I had written a slight conference paper analyzing the increased salience of religio-civilizational categories in the discourse of the national-populist right in northern and western Europe. I had been intrigued by the ways a civilizational and identitarian “Christianism”, defined in opposition to Islam, was joined with a secularist stance, philosemitism, and even liberal rhetoric (with respect to gender equality, gay rights, and freedom of speech) in the discourse of parties like the Dutch Party for Freedom, the Danish People's Party, and the French National Front.

That paper had referred casually to the European “populist right”, but it had not subjected the qualifier “populist” to critical scrutiny. The twin shocks of the Brexit and Trump victories, however, and the subsequent proliferation of populism-talk obliged me to grapple with this elusive yet suddenly ubiquitous term. Could this deeply ambiguous and morally and politically charged category of journalistic and political *practice* possibly serve as a useful category of scholarly *analysis*?

I used the occasion of my colloquium – three weeks after the American election – to move from the slight paper on “civilizationist” populism toward what became a broader

and more sustained engagement with the extraordinary pan-European and trans-Atlantic populist conjuncture of 2014–16. As part of that engagement, I began to think seriously and read widely about populism – about the meanings and uses of the term, within and beyond the academy, and about the varied phenomena designated by the term, within and beyond the contemporary Euroatlantic world. Discussions with Fellows were enormously helpful, as were the magnificent library services.

It was during the long gray Berlin winter that I came closest to realizing my anti-productivist fantasy of a sabbatical spent reading rather than writing. Or rather, reading *and* writing, but writing as an accompaniment to reading, writing as exploration and self-clarification, writing as process rather than product.

As winter gave way to spring (which never quite gave way to summer), a series of lecture engagements gave shape to my reading, thinking, and writing, and the outlines of a short book began to come into focus. Truth be told, I was not unhappy to have my writing once again disciplined by these emergent “products” on the horizon, though I did regret the resultant time squeeze that shadowed my final months at the Wiko.

The short book, as currently envisioned, would be in two parts. The first part, which my Abendkolloquium gave me the opportunity to think through, would be organized around the deliberately ambiguous question “Why populism?” This is both a conceptual and an explanatory question; my plan is to devote a chapter to each. The first will rethink the category “populism”, reflecting critically on its uses and developing an account of populism as a discursive and stylistic repertoire. The second will seek to explain the populist conjuncture. How did we reach the point at which Brexit, Trump, Hofer, and Le Pen – but also Mélenchon and the 2015 Greek referendum rejecting the terms of further bailouts – all had a real chance of victory, and the Eurozone and Schengen system a real chance of collapsing, at around the same time?

My ideas for the second part of the book are much more tentative. This part would be more interpretive, diagnostic, and normative. And it would shift the focus of discussion from populism per se to the crisis of liberalism (and liberal democracy) that the populist conjuncture has accentuated and revealed with stark clarity.

The crisis of the neoliberal economic order has been amply discussed. My intention is to focus on three less widely discussed dimensions of the crisis of liberalism: the crisis of public knowledge in an age of digital hyperconnectivity (as indexed by the ubiquitous talk of fake news and alternative facts); the crisis of migration regimes (of which the 2015 refugee crisis was only a particularly visible and dramatic symptom); and the crisis of

emancipatory liberalism in the domains of race and ethnicity (especially in the US), religion (especially in Europe), and gender and sexuality (in the US and Europe). The latest waves of emancipatory liberalism have not only provoked a major backlash from conservatives; they have also exposed deep rifts and tensions within the liberal tradition itself.