



A LA RECHERCHE ... DU TEMPS
MICHAEL LAMBEK

Michael Lambek was born in Montreal and educated at Antioch, McGill, and the University of Michigan, where he received his Ph.D. in 1978. He has taught at the University of Toronto and for three years at the London School of Economics. He is currently Canada Research Chair in the Anthropology of Ethical Life at the Department of Anthropology, University of Toronto Scarborough and Chair of the Anthropology Department there. His books include *Knowledge and Practice in Mayotte: Local Discourses of Islam, Sorcery and Spirit Possession* (1993); *The Weight of the Past: Living with History in Mahajanga, Madagascar* (2002); and *The Ethical Condition: Essays on Action, Person, and Value* (2015), as well as edited collections, including *Tense Past: Cultural Essays on Trauma and Memory* (1996); *Illness and Irony: On the Ambiguity of Suffering in Culture* (2003); *Ordinary Ethics: Anthropology, Language and Action* (2010); and *A Companion to the Anthropology of Religion* (2013). – Address: Department of Anthropology, University of Toronto, 19 Russell Street, Toronto ON M5S 2S2, Canada. E-mail: lambek@utsc.utoronto.ca.

I came to Wiko for the gift of time, ten precious months to write and think as much as one would like. As our stay draws to a close, my overwhelming feeling is that the time passed much too quickly, as if there was not nearly enough of it. The gift was received with immense gratitude and pleasure; that it was consumed so rapidly is a matter of wonder.

It can only be because in fact there was so much to do. To sit and read or to go out into the world? To walk in the forest or explore a new neighbourhood? To linger over lunch with friends or return alone to the study? Each of the alternatives were good; there was nothing to escape from.

There were also the events inexorably unfolding in the world beyond the forest that took time to assimilate. In the fall we bemoaned the alternatives, yet debated anxiously the outcome of the American election. The morning after, we huddled in small groups on the sidewalk above the lake trying to take comfort from each other's disbelief. I thought about how reasonable German citizens must have met that way in the 1930s. The significance of being in Berlin never seemed more powerful. And yet, as Jackie Solway phrased it, the American election contextualized the German past; voters could do mad things anywhere.

The sleepless nights passed and somehow we adjusted. But then came Hungary and the lead-up to the French election and lectures about populism from Rogers Brubaker, financialization from Lena Lavinas, and flaws in the EU constitutional structure from Dieter Grimm. Not a year for optimism. We debated what kind of stand we could take and settled on the anodyne but cheerful March for Science along Unter den Linden to the Brandenburg Gate and, in effect, the US Embassy, experiencing again the thickness of history in Berlin.

My research too was a *recherche du temps*, some of it lost, some captured in old field notes. For many months, I worked to complete my ethnographic history of Mayotte. I wrote several new chapters and redrafted older ones. Preparing and presenting a Colloquium to such a distinguished and smart group of Fellows from so many disciplines seemed daunting, but in the end proved a great experience and provided much useful feedback for the book. I sent off the manuscript in early spring to a publisher, and by late June I received three positive readers' reports. *Island in the Stream: An Ethnographic History of Mayotte* is now in press and should appear in the fall.

What to write next? Instead of plunging into the planned book on the sublunary and contentious world of royalty in Madagascar, my course was set by a fateful remark by Rogers. During our round of introductions in September, he asked us to consider our guilty pleasures, what we would *really* like to be doing with our time here if freed from all accumulated obligation. I admitted to myself that I would like to work on a family project, something between auto-ethnography, memoir, and family history. Timidly, I began to reveal this to others. Encouragement came swiftly from several quarters: other Fellows were using their time in Berlin and the resources of the Wiko to explore their own family histories. Within 24 hours, librarian Sonja Grund was able to supply me with the address where my mother had lived in Berlin as a small child in the mid-1920s. I showed an essay I had written a year earlier to Cheryl Misak and David Dyzenhaus and was told with no

uncertainty to pursue the project. The fates conspired further when the city of Brno (Czech Republic), from which my mother had fled in 1938, invited the descendants of my maternal great-grandfather and his siblings to an extraordinary “family reunion” and “reconciliation” in May and when it turned out that Sonja Asal was interested in exploring with me a maternal great aunt who had studied with Heidegger. In September Sonja and I made a very enjoyable trip to the archives in Marbach, where we retrieved correspondence between Heidegger and members of my family.

If I were to name a highlight of life at Wiko, it would certainly be the colloquia. I looked forward to each, and they were always exhilarating – the introductions eloquent, the speakers uniformly excellent, and the discussions lively. We learned over the fall how to discuss without grandstanding. A rumour circulated that, compared with past years we were too polite and gentle, but in fact there was a healthy critical edge that encouraged serious reflection. What a treat to learn from so many experts and from people who, despite their great achievement and erudition, were often personally extremely modest. We had among us great writers of fiction, an outstanding filmmaker, a photographer, historians of antiquity, science, economy, art, architecture, and religion, legal theorists, and brilliant sociologists and biologists, both young and established. Another high point was participating with Michael Jennions in an Abendkolloquium at the Wiko, even if we disappointed the audience by not arguing with each other.

Sa’diyya Shaikh generously included me in her reading group and then in her workshop on Islam. The encounter with Iranian theologian Mohsen Khadivar was unforgettable, despite his stay being abruptly cut short by Trump’s visa restrictions. Opportunities to converse with philosophers Avishai Margalit on campus and Stefan Gosepath off campus were wonderful. Reading and introducing the work of classicist Barbara Kowalzig, sociologist Bénédicte Zimmermann, and poet and novelist Sinan Antoon were momentous for me.

My time at Wiko also enabled me to meet many scholars and students in Berlin and to accept invitations elsewhere in Germany and Europe. In the fall, I examined a thesis in Paris, spoke at the Max Planck Institute in Göttingen and to a graduate conference at the Faculty of Theology at the Humboldt University, accompanied my wife Jackie to Helsinki where she gave a talk and to Copenhagen where we both spoke. In the winter, we each spoke in Edinburgh and I gave talks at the CEU in Budapest and the Graduate Institute in Geneva and, in the spring, at the Universities of Göttingen, Hamburg, and Freiburg, at African Studies and the Institute for European Ethnology at Humboldt, a workshop at

the Zentrum Moderner Orient, and seminars on my work at the Berlin Graduate School for Muslim Cultures and Societies at the Freie Universität, and in the Ethnology Department at the University of Zurich.

My stay at Wiko also enabled me, wisely or foolishly, to edit for ten months the on-line open access publication *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* (<http://www.haujournal.org/>), for which I produced three issues, between 500 and 600 pages each.

A lesson I hope to take forward from Wiko is to find more time to learn from colleagues in other fields, to socialize, to engage in worldly affairs, and to enjoy the arts. How to acquire this time rather merely reflect on its passing I do not know.

I thank the Wiko for its gifts, Luca for his deep intelligence and mischievous spirit, Daniel and Thorsten for their penetrating insights, Dunia for her grace and thoughtfulness, Eva for her skill and patience, all the staff for their good cheer and kindness, and of course the marvellous “Fellows and partners” for their comradeship. As Fellows no doubt say at the end of every year, ours was the best group ever, the best of all possible cohorts.

The time is gone but not lost.