



CONVERSATIONS, CRITIQUE AND
CONVIVIALITY
SA'DIYYA SHAIKH

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Sitting down on a warm and balmy spring afternoon in Cape Town to reflect on my extraordinary year at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin elicits many feelings and thoughts. Let me get one thing out of the way: I am singularly happy to be away from the Berlin winter – the unrelenting and lengthy northern cold was the single greatest challenge to my elemental southern constitution. However, the physical trial of a Berlin winter was indeed

compensated for tenfold by the incredible warmth, hospitality and energy that defined my Wiko experience. It was ten months of intellectual capaciousness, vivifying conversations, demanding provocations and exciting conviviality. A rare privilege indeed!

There are certainly additional practical and emotional challenges faced by Fellows who come with younger children – transitions are difficult enough for adults. In retrospect, however, my children in Cape Town now speak longingly of Berlin – and in their conversations I hear subtle yet powerful traces of growth – appreciation of cultural and linguistic diversities, a vision of self and other that has deepened and expanded by virtue of living and schooling in another country for a substantial block of time ... and their friendships that are still being sustained and cultivated with the help of all forms of technology.

The friendships and deep connections that I too made at Wiko will continue to reverberate in my being. It was indeed a lovely cohort of Fellows, this group of 2016/17! And then amidst a lovely cohort, one finds and gravitates to one's tribe – so to the tribe: Menaka; Michael and Jackie; Sinan and Ibtisam, Asef and Linda; Mary and Jonas; Elias and Najla; and of course, my beloved husband Ashraf, thank you for such deep connections of mind, heart, laughter, politics and personhood. Indeed, supporting all of us was the caring, efficient presence of all the Wiko staff whose commitment and generosity enabled the most capacious of spaces. Here, one of the gems possessed by Wiko is certainly Thorsten Wilhelmy, who might be one of the first faces of Wiko that a potential Fellow encounters from across the oceans. His lucidity, energy, care, sincerity and clarity – what can best collectively be described as simply gracious ways of engaging and communicating – are really what initially convinced me (and at the beginning, my somewhat reluctant family) to consider coming to Germany. Collectively, these multiple groups of wonderful human beings enabled my family and me to enjoy an intellectual environment also defined by an experience of community, support and fellowship.

For most Fellows coming to Wiko, there is a deep sense in which an extended period away from the numerous demands of university administration, committee work and teaching provides one with a pause – a luxurious pause of possibilities and openings. Wiko was for me a time of openings ... I think of them as the “Berlin openings” ... openings that were intellectual, epistemological, personal, interpersonal, social, political, spiritual and cultural. Most delicious, an opening out towards different kinds of conversations with people from varied disciplines and epistemological trajectories, conversations on issues seemingly remote from one's own academic interests that sometimes had intriguing

and unexpected echoes of one's ideas and then the unique conversation that made you rethink your entire approach to a phenomenon (thank you Alberto Posadas, for making me aware of the limitations of my assumptions and evaluations of music and of aesthetics more broadly!). Meals taken during these conversations (... often accompanied by a search for spicy sauces or chilli!) and the leisurely Thursday night dinners were particularly enjoyable.

An absolute highlight of my stay was the Wiko-funded workshop on *Social Justice and Contemporary Muslim Ethics*. This was the single most intense and intellectually productive space I have experienced with a small cohort of like-minded scholars attentive to the intellectual, ethical and spiritual concerns closest to my heart. The value of a small and tightly focused workshop with carefully chosen participants cannot be overestimated when thinking through one's own intellectual project. Enriching this experience was the participation of the academic co-ordinator at Wiko, Daniel Schönflug. An incisive interlocutor, his thoughtful and rigorous engagement was deeply productive for my research project – and for my experience of intellectual friendship. Yet another experience of intellectual conviviality, provocation and excitement was being part of an informally created reading group on a pioneering new book *What is Islam: the Importance of being Islamic* – the diverse disciplinary locations of the six participants allowed for robust debates, generative insights and plain fun. Collectively, all these intense and lively conversations, debates and exchanges created a stimulating context that deepened my own thinking on a book project that I reconceptualised, refined and worked on during my time at Wiko.

Yet, as idyllic as so much of this was, I also experienced some frustrations – the fact that there was a clear dominance of voices from the Global North reflected in the range of our cohort (and from the available yearbooks, it seems almost all previous ones as well); the sometimes uncritical preponderance of Western epistemological hegemonies (often with a polite nod to “difference” and to alternate historical trajectories without any evidence of real engagement with the implications of such alternatives for rethinking one's own assumptions and framework). Given the international status of Wiko, I would love to see a substantial increase of numbers of scholars from the Global South, as well as all scholars who bring self-reflexive and critical epistemological lenses, particularly in relation to power differentials in North/South relations, as well as thinkers from a variety of disciplines who are more critically attentive to how complexities of gender, sexuality, race and class, amongst other social inequalities, might impact their field of study. It is my considered view that both careful attention to more inclusive and critical demography

and intellectual positioning of future cohorts will enhance the already capacious environment of Wiko.

Circumspectly, the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin was an extraordinary experience for me and for my family. I originally arrived depleted from an exhausting year of burdensome administrative responsibilities and tense university politics, and left ten months later feeling energised, nurtured and intellectually inspired. The exceptionally caring and efficient staff at Wiko had a large role in creating this replenishing haven for me. Thank you ... truly.