



THE DISCRETE CHARM OF  
INTELLECTUAL SUBVERSION  
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As a perusal of the many *Jahrbücher* kindly left on the shelves in the Fellows' apartments will soon reveal, all superlatives, all possible metaphors about Wiko's inimitability seem to have already been used. The deep gratitude for a magical period carved out of the fluid time of the rest of life is repeated, like a litany, in all reports. One should not misinterpret such repetitions as reflecting a literary *topos*. They simply reflect the Fellows' genuine astonishment at the rare and undeserved gift they have received.

We all reckon that Wiko remains unparalleled. Although it seemingly follows rules also applicable, *mutatis mutandis*, in other similar institutes for advanced study, it remains hard to pinpoint a quality, *un je ne sais quoi*, that makes it distinctly different. One may mention, first, the harmonious ballet of lunches, dinners, colloquia, chats, even outings, all seemingly spontaneous, but actually planned with care. Everything functions so smoothly, as if we owed the poised elegance of this ballet to an invisible hand. Indeed, it is only thanks to the careful, insightful, delicate, and persistent work of the whole smiling staff, priests and priestesses in the temple of knowledge, that it thus functions.

A special chapel in this temple is the incomparable library, a library *sui generis*. In conversation, Carlo Ginzburg, a regular visitor to Wiko, speaks about “the invisible library”: a bookless library, where books seem to arrive as soon as you request them, or perhaps even before, while other books and articles in PDF form keep popping into your mailbox even faster. For those of us whose lives are structured by conversations with books – and who are, in addition, old enough to imagine they still live in a world Marshall McLuhan called, half a century ago, “the Gutenberg galaxy” – “invisible library” is a wonderful oxymoron. But its temptations are no less dangerous than, for Ulysses, the bewitching song of the sirens. It is almost impossible to free yourself from the magical power of its call. How can (and why should) one write anything when one can read everything? Indeed, an invisible library is also an infinite one; the more you read, the more you realize how little you know, even about the broader context and implications of your own topic. As a result, what you thought was a work in progress soon becomes, as it were, a work in regress, and the neat working plan you had concocted soon becomes the pitiful scaffolding of a building doomed to remain unfinished.

There may be a way out of this predicament. It could take the form of a constant and persistent dialogue between the practitioners of the different disciplines. This is the model of epistemic practice embraced by Wiko. But such a dialogue, in which process counts more than results, is only the first step. A life of science or of scholarship, for such a conception, does not quite mean a life geared toward measurable results, but, rather, a life embedded in imponderable praxis. Rather than “goal”, the key, here, is “movement”. This, of course, sounds like a heresy in the world of the “production of knowledge”. In that sense, the Wiko ethos is, I believe, a deeply subversive one, inspiring to play with ideas, and to dream of new ones. What is truly astonishing is that so many of us are willing to play that subversive game, seem to enjoy it, and believe we profit from it.

I came here for the last three months of the academic year. This makes it a bit harder to join the already very well-formed group. I had the double advantage, however, that my wife and I had already some friends among the Fellows and that Wiko was not a totally new place for me, since I had accompanied my wife when she was a Fellow two years ago. This time around, it was easier to get to work immediately: Berlin was a “known entity”, no less appealing, but one that did not demand imperiously to be explored. Moreover, during our previous stay we had already started our efforts to move the German language from the status of a “dead” tongue, one made solely of texts (a status it had retained for us in the last half-century or so) to that of a living language, in which one dares, sometimes, to express oneself (always inadequately).

Although short-term Fellows are not expected to give a Colloquium presentation, some of the Fellows encouraged me to present my work. The few weeks I spent preparing an oral presentation (rather than reading a text), helped me formulate somewhat more clearly my current research goal. In lapidary form, it is “Judaism and Islam in the mind of Europe” in the long nineteenth century. The discourse I seek to analyze is only that of the scholars engaged in the study of religion, in a number of European countries. The idea is to attempt, for the first time, a comparative study of how these two religions, with obvious “family resemblances” to Christianity, were approached and studied in Europe in an era of secularization. One of the paradoxes of secularization, I argue, is the weakening of these family resemblances. With the European “discovery” of Sanskrit, and the recognition of its deep similarities to most European languages, the European peoples were perceived as belonging to a new family, more racial than religious in nature. While the couple “Semitic” versus “Aryan” is now well known, much more work seems to have been done on the second of these two terms than on the first one. In a sense, then, I seek to delineate an alternative history of the comparative study of religions. A few names of prominent scholars of both Judaism and Islam may give an idea of the direction of my work: Abraham Geiger, Julius Wellhausen, Ernest Renan, William Robertson Smith, Ignaz Goldziher. The envisaged study will also highlight the complex web of knowledge across political, cultural, and linguistic frontiers at the time. As should be obvious, understanding nineteenth-century scholarly approaches to Judaism and Islam has some direct implications for the contemporary scene, in Europe and elsewhere; at least for the time being, however, I prefer to deal with such implications only indirectly.

Outside some universities in possession of a first-class research library (and these are increasingly very rare outside of North America), the library facilities at Wiko represent

unmatched riches, soon to disappear. In such conditions, it is hard to spend much time writing, rather than “accumulating” material for later consumption, as it were. During my stay, I sought to read (or at least to scan) as many texts and studies as possible.

Beyond my research, I managed to correct the proofs of a forthcoming book (*Religions d’Abraham: histoires croisées*) and to travel to the Princeton Institute for Advanced Study for a workshop I had organized together with Sabine Schmidtke on “Judaism, Christianity and Islam: Religious Communities and Communities of Knowledge”. I also gave the keynote lecture at a conference held at the Central European University in Budapest. I was very happy to be able, in this way, to show symbolic support to an institution of excellence under violent attack by the Hungarian government.

My stay in Berlin also permitted planting the seed of two cooperative projects with German colleagues. The first, which involves the Max-Planck-Institut für Wissenschaftsgeschichte, would be a sequel to the workshop held at the Princeton Institute for Advanced Study, and the next one, to take place at the Israel Institute for Advanced Studies. The second project seeks to organize a workshop on varieties of Orientalism in the nineteenth century.

In Berlin, a city of echoes where today East meets West more than ever, the past is never fully erased from the palimpsest of the present. Shortly after my arrival, I gave a lecture at the Max-Planck-Institut für Bildungsforschung. As it turned out, one of the young researchers in that group, Juliane Brauer, had been a friend of my parents. As a teenager, she had met them in the small Brandenburg town where she grew up. My late father had come to speak in the local school about his internment in Auschwitz, where he had been for some time a violinist in the camp’s orchestra. She then decided to become a historian and study the role of music in the Nazi concentration camps. Juliane presented me with a copy of her voluminous book on music in Sachsenhausen, a book dedicated to my father. Later, she insisted on taking my wife and me to Sachsenhausen. The serendipitous meeting with her and her family woke in me deep emotions and has established another, highly personal and almost secret link with Berlin, across the generations and the dark history of Europe in the twentieth century.