



PRIVILEGE AND PRECARIOUSNESS  
ALICE VON BIEBERSTEIN

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Alice von Bieberstein is a social anthropologist who completed her Ph.D. at the University of Cambridge in 2012 with a dissertation on the politics of history and citizenship in relation to minority subjectivity in Germany and Turkey. Until 2015, she was a postdoctoral research associate in Cambridge on an ERC-funded project exploring issues of violence, value and materiality in Eastern Anatolia. During her EURIAS Fellowship at the Wissenschaftskolleg, she continued her exploration of local engagements with and value extraction from the material remains of Armenian heritage in far-eastern Turkey. Her work has appeared in various journals, including *Subjectivity*, *Social Research* and the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*. Since September 2018, she has been a Research Associate at Humboldt University, Berlin. – Address: Institut für Europäische Ethnologie, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Mohrenstraße 40/41, 10117 Berlin. E-mail: [alice.bieberstein@gmail.com](mailto:alice.bieberstein@gmail.com).

My Fellowship at the Wissenschaftskolleg marked my return to work following the birth of my daughter in 2016. It also marked my return home to Berlin and a first extended taste and experience of its academic scene after many years in the UK, where I had pursued higher education, received my Ph.D. and worked as a postdoctoral researcher.

As an Institute for Advanced Study, the Wissenschaftskolleg is that point at which the German academic landscape both showcases and transcends itself. Attracting and inviting the best of the various fields, it makes possible exciting and rewarding encounters and exchanges across disciplinary, linguistic, national and cultural divides, while at the same time remaining marked by and embedded in its very special Grunewald setting. The

physical world of the Wissenschaftskolleg, its villas and gardens and adjacent lakes, evoke and invite a form and practice of scholarly retreat and erudition that in its ideality appears to almost fall out of time and place. And indeed, in a time of rising authoritarianisms and right-wing populism, in a time of wars, forced migration and murderous forms of abandonment and in a time of the neoliberal restructuring of higher education, the Wissenschaftskolleg's simultaneous worldliness and isolation cannot but also give rise to contradictions and tensions.

For me personally, these became palpable first and foremost in the reality of my professional precariousness. For most of my ten-month EURIAS Fellowship, my immediate post-Wissenschaftskolleg future glared at me with the prospect of unemployment. The prevalence of limited-contract employment or fellowships without social security provisions is a pervasive reality for many young scholars, while an exception for the Fellows of the Wissenschaftskolleg. It is no news that this situation gives rise to a sense of loss of direction and purpose, to both personal as well as systemic doubts. Especially when combined with the requirements of caring for a young child, this battle against the prospect of unemployment ends up consuming the vast majority of one's energies and time. While I was able to rethink to some degree the overall framework of my project as well as the direction in which my research is going, and while I enjoyed returning to and revising some samples of writing as well as giving a small number of talks, unfortunately, most of my EURIAS Fellowship at the Wissenschaftskolleg was overshadowed by the struggle to secure an immediate future combined with everyday care work. I was lucky and, compared with colleagues with less or no institutional support at all, very much privileged to be able to lead this struggle under the auspices of the Wissenschaftskolleg. My fellow Fellows supported me with a ceaseless stream of words of encouragement. Daniel Schönflug, Wiko's scientific coordinator, most generously helped me by devising strategies, establishing contacts with relevant scholars, revising application letters and preparing job interviews. Sophia Pick helped with final editing and proofreading. It is due to this support base and the extensive practical assistance that I was able to secure, shortly before the end of my Fellowship, a five-year position at the Humboldt University in Berlin. I am immensely grateful for this invaluable help and encouragement and am happy to escape, for some years at least, one contemporary predicament of precarious young scholars: the imperative of mobility. It was especially in the last weeks, therefore, that I was finally able to turn my attention to my "actual" work and fully take advantage of the wondrous and otherworldly library services, which I will miss for the rest of my life.

A second way in which the Wissenschaftskolleg's state of simultaneous connectedness and disconnectedness became personally challenging directly concerns my research. Starting much earlier, but especially since the summer of 2015, Turkey's transformation into an authoritarian, one-party regime has impacted directly the feasibility of fieldwork. Given my triple role as a researcher on politically sensitive issues pertaining to the multiple histories and on-going realities of political violence targeting minorities in Turkey, as an activist who has taken these concerns outside the domain of academia and as a young mother with many personal connections to the region, I have been hesitant about returning to my field site to continue research. Many of my friends and informants, including my research assistant, have been in prison for what are now months and years. The emotional and political challenges arising from moving between fieldwork and academic setting is, again, something shared widely by social and cultural anthropologists and, yet, the particular realities of increasing repression and persecution in Turkey give rise to an acutely troubling dissonance. This dissonance goes far beyond the classic question, inherent in the discipline of anthropology, of bridging research and writing, to relate to a much more fundamental issue of the mutual implication and relation between places and between political, economic and epistemic orders. Following different professional and life trajectories, Fellows are differently attuned and implicated in such connections, all the while adjusting in their own ways to the specific rhythm and communality of the Wissenschaftskolleg. At times this can give rise to a sense of the co-existence of different geographical and temporal planes, a co-existence that is both humbling and promising, brimming with the unknown and yet not always free of friction, tension and contradiction.

Most interesting in many ways for me was to be granted an extended look across the great divides: to learn about the means and ways to reconstruct the climate record in Ethiopia, to watch experiments documenting the intelligence of bees, to understand more about night-time ecologies or genome history. But also to peek into the minds of musicians, composers and architects. It was an exceptional experience to be exposed to such a vast variety of different fields and to learn more about these by witnessing how Fellows positioned themselves within these fields with their own projects. But it was also great to explore and enjoy the more intimate resonances with works that share a closer kinship with my own research, whether through a shared regional interest or a shared sensitivity towards global histories of political economy and violence and their particular inflections in relation to questions of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and the transnational histories

of colonialism and empire. My hope is that the Wissenschaftskolleg will not only continue to be open to, but also structurally integrate an orientation towards epistemic traditions and trajectories, as well as forms of situated knowledges, that truly reflect the “postmigrant” realities of Germany, Europe and the world in the 21st century.