



A SEASON TO RETHINK HISTORY
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I said farewell to the Wallotstraße at the end of my three-month invited sojourn on the morning of June 19, 2018, with weather as fair as the previous two months had offered. The

Wissenschaftskolleg, one of my colleagues had said at an earlier lunch, was our own Magic Mountain, but, as I had added, a *Zauberberg* without tuberculosis. As I walked back to Villa Walther along the Koenigsallee savoring the melancholy of departure – past the little Koenigssee on which the two white swans who had fruitlessly guarded their nest for two months magically reappeared for my departure – I recalled Hans Castorp, who in Thomas Mann’s final scene darts and dodges under the lurid fire of the Great War then shattering the careless civilization whose merits he and his sanatorium companions had endlessly debated.

As I start to write this report *en vol* back to Trump’s America – my own country whose government is apparently ready to destroy the institutions that it constructed to stabilize a liberal global order – no one can predict the outcome of the complex political crises that have unfolded in recent days. There is an unprecedented tension between Bavaria and Berlin that may break the long-standing union of the CDU and CSU and force new elections that could benefit the populist Alternative for Germany. To resolve it, the Berlin government needs Brussels to stabilize a revised refugee regime, but the EU is unprecedentedly divided between populist governments in Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Austria, and Italy, on the one hand, and liberal Western regimes, on the other, weakened by the exit of Great Britain and by Germany and France’s differences over how to strengthen a financial system that has strained the Union for a decade. Perhaps all these manifold tensions will be resolved, although ultimately they derive from the fact that in the 21st century, continents blessedly wealthy and hitherto peaceful (at least for the last decades) live next to regions in turmoil and civic breakdown, and borders cannot really protect against the almost hydraulic sociodemographic pressure emanating from the Middle East, Africa, and Mesoamerica.

Perhaps, however, Europeans and Americans will look back and ask themselves how they heedlessly threw away the most sustained era of welfare and progress that they had hitherto enjoyed in their respective histories, just as in 1914 they abandoned over 40 years of peace for an unnecessary war that resolved little. According to a recent poll, 30 percent of Americans believe that their country, my country, is headed toward civil war, and I myself fear the worst – if not outright civil war, then the lethal political violence that marred the early and late Weimar Republic. As a Fellow at the Wiko, I could look at the memorial erected across the street to one of its prominent victims, Walter Rathenau. *Si monumentem requires, circumspice.*

How do these gloomy thoughts relate to my stay at the Wissenschaftskolleg, which is a monument to Germany’s transformation into a paragon of soft power? I came to the

Wiko as a historian of the 20th century, and historians always hear resonances from the past. My self-assigned task at the Wissenschaftskolleg was to think about how to interpret the 20th century. In contrast to most of my intellectual companions, I did not primarily engage in the opportunity to read. Although the wonderful librarians summoned books so efficiently, my own vast university library, I knew, would also allow their ready consultation. Instead, I worked through a book outline and introductory essay – the basis for my colloquium presentation – and exploited the lovely, quiet reference library for its silences. Sitting at a window desk, gazing out at the magnolia blooms, undisturbed amidst treatises on civil law and political theory in my favored corner allowed me a sustained and precious time for reflection that my university office never has. My problem needed definition. How does one write a history of the last 100 years, say since the First World War, that accounts for the disastrous outcome that may be unfolding before our eyes? Not just a narrative of “the unwinding” itself, but a long-term account that makes plausible, even if it does not exhaustively “explain” what has been developing (I believe) since the 1970s and with ever greater momentum since the end of the Cold War?

Historians of the 20th century in Europe and the United States have followed catastrophe and violence, tyrannies and emancipation; but they have generally narrated the epic conflicts between democracy and fascism, or capitalism and communism, colonialism and national independence, all with an implicit if not explicit happy ending: welfare states and the European Union, the advance of India and China, the prodigious technologies of the digital age, the advances in the status of women – the 70 years since the Second World War apparently justifying a Whig history of our era. But how do we tell the story if the ending no longer seems so happy? How do we rethink the great ideological protagonists of the epoch?

Political and social theory has always beckoned to me, and in this case Montesquieu’s *The Spirit of the Laws* offered a challenge. The philosopher sought to define the political systems at stake and the underlying principles that let governmental archetypes function: civic virtue in the case of democracies, status distinctions for monarchy and aristocracy, fear of despotism. I proposed archetypes for the 20th century different from the usual heroes and villains, democrats and totalitarians: first, “project states” with ambitious agendas, whether democratic or totalitarian, for transforming civil society; second, rentier empires, important until 1960 and depending on the enjoyment of colonial revenue and deference; third and fourth, the interstate or transnational webs of capital and governance. My account of the last 100 years was to follow the changing weights and evolutions

of these four collective agents. It would be called “The New Spirit of the Laws: Political Society Since the Era of World Wars”. I do not know whether the units, much less the title will remain, and I have not had time or leisure since leaving the Wiko to continue in a sustained way. Sometimes I think I should abandon Montesquieu and just write “Rethinking the History of the Last Century in the Shadow of Autocrats”. All the work lies ahead.

We do not know how Hans Castorp reflected back on the formative hiatus in his life at the Berghof. I will remember the Wissenschaftskolleg for this privileged season of tranquility. Also for the discovery of original minds and creative spirits. As a Short-term Fellow I heard only a few presentations, but they expanded my horizons: Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann, perhaps closest to my field, along with the political economist Manu Goswami and the political philosopher Lisa Herzog and her effort to preserve a non-algorithmic polity. Since I had written at intervals over the years on collective memory, Paweł Machcevicz’s travails with the Danzig/Gdańsk Museum of the Second World War were, alas, familiar. Hannah Mumby and Kevin Gaston connected me to the world of large mammals and night-time creatures. Asfawossen Asrat Kassaye’s exploration of Africa’s long-term climate history helped me place my own *histoire événementielle* into a longer perspective; Vladimir Tarnopolski’s music and Andreas Staier’s wonderful performances – along with the offerings of musical Berlin (seven operas in 12 weeks! after which I debriefed with Carola Lentz) – took me beyond words. Mohammed Hanif’s fantastically whimsical sense of humor; our Syrian writer Yassin al-Haj Saleh, who demonstrated such vitality while weighed down by the laceration of his homeland and the disappearance of his wife; Vittorio Lampugnani was the most observant and urbane of urbanists; and the chance to get to know my own Harvard colleague James Simpson to a degree that I never had when we both were at home, all demonstrated the value of translocation. Totally unanticipated but delightful was the friendship with Jan and Aleida Assmann.

Berlin is a small town in feel compared with London, Paris, and New York – sometimes eerily devoid of traffic in its grand squares – but with great music and theater. Its temporalities and geography can be disconcerting; the architectural establishment’s efforts to reappropriate Hohenzollern tradition across the “parentheses” of 1933–45–89 overlap ambiguously with the earnest efforts at memorialization (of which Gleis 17 at the Bahnhof Grunewald is one of the most touching). The Wiko sits beyond the urban center and among the green spaces with their villas annexed to Berlin a century ago, thereafter successively aryanized, bombed, restored, and now recycled as institutes or old age homes.

History in Berlin does not so much flow as it deposits sediments of memory, and the Wiko's permissive schedule, punctuated by lunches and colloquia, reinforced this detached sense of a furlough from normal time, intensified in my case by the chance to reconnect with close friends dating from decades of repeated visits.

The Wiko experience depended upon the fantastically dedicated staff: it is unfair to single any out, but Vera Pfeffer was my very congenial point person; and having Dunia Najjar as a personal culinary consultant was a benefit I've never before enjoyed. She manages a wonderful kitchen, and the cooks who baked my farewell cakes along with daily offerings did a superb job. Restaurant, hotel, academy – the institution was run with such a light touch by Luca Giuliani, seconded by Thorsten Wilhelmy and Daniel Schönplüg, whose own intellectual interventions were unfailingly acute, that I wanted for nothing – well almost nothing: an economist or two would have played a useful role.

Let me mention finally what I most appreciated: the Wiko fully integrated my wife, Anne Sa'adah, into its activities. Given her writing project about failed Middle East politics, she found the Wiko with its contingent from Syria and Lebanon rewarding beyond expectations; Sonja Mejcher-Atassi provided particular encouragement. By June, though, it was time to leave – Hans Castorp decided that he had to descend from his asylum in the Engadine, and I too found that I must as well, if not yet to war, international or civil, then to the viscosity of family and institutional life, but refreshed, befriended, and educated.