



THOUGHTS ON THEFT AND FREEDOM
JAN-WERNER MÜLLER

Jan-Werner Müller is Roger Williams Straus Professor of Social Sciences and Professor of Politics at Princeton University. He works mainly in democratic theory and the history of modern political thought; he also has a research interest in the relationship between architecture and politics, as well as the normative implications of the current structural transformations of the public sphere. Publications include *Constitutional Patriotism* (2007), *Contesting Democracy: Political Ideas in Twentieth-Century Europe* (2011), and *What is Populism?* (2016), which has been translated into more than 20 languages. 2019 saw the publication of *Furcht und Freiheit: Für einen anderen Liberalismus*, which won the Bavarian Book Prize; in 2021, *Democracy Rules* appeared with FSG, Penguin, and Suhrkamp. Müller is a columnist for *The Guardian* in the US and writes regularly for the *London Review of Books* and other publications in Europe. – Address: Department of Politics, Princeton University, 107 Fisher Hall, Princeton, NJ 08544-1012, USA. E-mail: jmueller@princeton.edu.

One way of understanding privilege is that it insulates one from common experience. That might be a good thing or a bad thing. Obviously, spending a year at Wiko is a tremendous privilege, and it's a good thing in ever so many ways (some of which previous Fellows have described in much more poetic ways than I ever could – one only needs to consult the *Jahrbücher*). But 2020/2021 was also an academic year when I – and, I suppose, many others – could not fully withdraw from larger collective experiences. Obviously, there were additional COVID waves. Wiko was as caring as one could wish any institution to be; folks at all levels made heroic efforts to deliver lunches, make obscure books appear on one's library shelf, keep up a sense of intellectual engagement – the list goes on.

But there was also Trump and Trumpism. And, in a way, Wiko helped dealing with that, too.

Sometimes it felt like Trump was stealing one's fellowship. Not really, of course. But the feeling that one could not take one's eyes off the screen, and the Twitter feed in particular, dominated the early part of the academic year 2020/2021. That political attention surplus disorder was, of course, part of a tactic – what Stephen Bannon at one point had called “flooding the zone with shit”: put out so many lies, create so many scandals and provocations that people are constantly disoriented or at least distracted. The hope that one could relax after November 3rd was of course disappointed. True, there was a lull in December. But the hope that things had been resolved – and that politicians who had received fewer votes would accept that they had lost an election (not an issue that political theorists have ever thought required much philosophical probing) – turned out to be an illusion.

Wiko, in its own way, facilitated coming to terms with what happened on January 6th. Thanks to Daniel Schönflug, a number of former Fellows Zoomed in to a small workshop at the end of January; they helped make sense of images that few could have imagined, no matter their level of pessimism about US democracy: Charlotte Klonk masterfully decoded some of the highly confusing symbols found on flags and garments during the insurrection; Philip Manow, wearing his hat as realist political scientist, explained why the kind of party Trump had formed – in effect a personality cult with no long-term programmatic commitments – could not act like normal losers after a democratic election, which, as Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger had explained, also has a very particular ritualistic character that might get lost (even at the time of this writing there is of course no reason fully to relax about the state of US democracy).

And COVID, and what Germans came to call a seemingly endless *Dauerdämmerlock-down*? There is now a very understandable, very human desire to draw “lessons” from the pandemic (after all, it must have been good for something!): the need for society's “resilience” or new techniques of “self-care,” for example. Indeed, it seems plausible to view COVID-19 as a kind of test for humanity: but it's been a Rorschach test where everyone tends to see what they already believed anyway, or perhaps a Rashomon-style experience where everyone thinks something different happened. Still, there might also be something not reducible to confirmation bias.

And what could that be? Here I might be told to check my privilege or not to enter the territory of what Germans call *Leiden auf hohem Niveau* – pseudo-suffering in a very privileged position. But I would suggest that, in however attenuated a way, we all got a

glimpse of three distinct forms of *unfreedom*. Because of the lockdowns and restrictions (often entirely justified), we all learned what it feels like simply to lack access to certain goods and places. But that is of course the experience of the poor every day. Freedom is not just money, but money in many significant ways simply *is* freedom. Second, most of us had a larger sense of losing the world – not just because we became involuntary infrequent flyers, but because we felt that there was no future filled with experiences of novel aspects of the world (though to be sure, Grunewald, in its own way turned out to be inexhaustible). This is arguably the sense Jean Améry captured in his brutally honest reflections on old age. He argued that accumulated layers of time leave us with nostalgia in old age (akin to the nostalgia felt during the unstructured, homogeneous time period of lockdown); *time* – experienced as passing ever more quickly – comes to dominate *space* in life. The old, in other words, don't tend to have the sense of open horizons that younger generations have; and as much as entire industries are devoted to helping us be in denial about this fact, the basic unfreedom cannot be wished away. Finally, while many old people – warehoused in underregulated nursing homes and subject to existential fear – suffered particularly from the pandemic, younger generations also came to know novel hardships: they were left uneducated, and often uncared for. While education is often experienced as a constraint, it is actually constitutive of present and future possibilities: to be undereducated is to be unfree in many ways. To say so is not a matter of liberal elitism.

When restrictions were finally lifted a little in May, I tried to get these points about unfreedom across in a public debate in a church in Kreuzberg (broadcast, but with no public in the church itself). A politician who is often mentioned as a potential future president of Germany pushed back very strongly: she claimed that we cannot equate our kinds of experiences with those of the truly disadvantaged. Of course, on one level she was right. But on another level, I felt it was a curious thing for a politician to say. Is the task not precisely to transform disparate lived experiences into a something that as many citizens as possible can identify with? Orwell famously observed about the Second World War that if the war didn't kill you, it made you think. Yes, it can be obscene if the privileged pretend to be in exactly the same position as the most disadvantaged: the flip side of "let them eat cake" is "we were suffering too, that one time when the bread was stale." But concerns about socio-economic – as opposed to cultural – appropriation are vastly exaggerated, I think. No two lives of citizens in a democracy are ever exactly the same; and yet we expect political parties to construct platforms that appeal to people with very different forms of lived experience. In the 1940s, the British aristocrat who could retreat

to his country home had a very different war from a worker fighting at the front. But the Labour Party managed to appeal to a collective sense of sacrifice and solidarity (and shared vulnerability) in order to legitimize the creation of the welfare state. It is a question of political imagination, not of technocratically deducing individual policy lessons.

Finally: Thanks not least to the amazing work of the library staff, I was able to start a new, vast, possibly undoable project on architecture and democracy. I hope to have the privilege of finishing it one day.