



BERLINER LUFT
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Berliners have always been very proud of the city's air, the "Berliner Luft." "Berliner Luft" is special, fresh, and crisp, both invigorating and inebriating. Yet it is far from pure, filled with the smells of cheap perfume, *Currywurst*, trash, sweat, exhaust fumes, dog poop, cut grass, and burnt plastic, along with the aromas of freshly baked bread, *Sonntagsbraten* (Sunday roast), and flowering trees. A city air filled with the smells of life. Berliner Luft famously made it into a popular song by the Berlin composer Paul Lincke:

Das ist die Berliner Luft, Luft, Luft
So mit ihrem holden Duft, Duft, Duft
Wo nur selten was verpufft, -pufft, -pufft
In dem Duft, Duft, Duft

That's what makes the Berlin air, air, air
With its very lovely scent, scent, scent
Where things rarely vanish, vanish, vanish
In the scents, scents, scents...

“Wo nur selten was verpufft...” – “verpufft” is German slang, it means “melt into air,” “fizzle out,” but also “remain without consequences.” Maybe it’s just there to rhyme with “Duft,” but it also means that in Berlin nothing just disappears without consequences.

Cities have their own air, their specific signature of typical weather, air quality, and regional climate. And cities always had their weather folklore. London air with its mix of smoke, wet and foggy weather, and the exhalations of a huge urban population was already famous for its bad air in the 17th century. London air, the folklore went, makes people suicidal. In the 18th century, doctors explained many ailments in terms of the local air. In 1818, the British meteorologist Luke Howard described the effect of the urban heat island for the first time. Cities, he argued, have their own microclimate that significantly differs from the general climate of the region. It’s usually hotter, dryer, and dustier than the surrounding rural area. A few decades later, the Austrian author Adalbert Stifter elaborated on the specifics of Vienna air. The air of the Austrian capital, he argued in an essay on *Viennese weather* (1844), is both social and meteorological. Thunderstorms and sudden rains cause frantic and hilarious scenes of people running for cover; the ball season in winter sees elegant couples in ball gowns and tailcoats angrily stumbling through snow and mud. Yet what is worst, he found, is the density of the city. When he opens his windows in the morning to let in fresh air, Stifter complained, all he gets is the foul smells from his neighbor’s bedroom. In cities, everyone inhales the exhalations of everybody else. The air is a social fact, a medium that inescapably connects all city dwellers to one another.

Today’s Berlin air, according to the Air Quality Index, is supposed to have a rather good quality, yet with occasionally elevated levels of fine particulate matter or NO₂, sometimes also high ozone levels. Climate change also changes the air of Berlin. Temperatures have risen by about 1.0 C since the 1970s, precipitation is diminishing, and the many

parks in the city have started to rethink their choice of local plants, given the changing climatic conditions.

But air is so much more than air quality or climate change. “Stadtluft macht frei” – “city air liberates” is an adage in German, originally coming from medieval law that ruled that a serf who had fled from the region where he was a bondsman would be free after one year in a city. The old legal meaning is forgotten, but the adage is still cited. City air is liberating in many respects: socially, intellectually, professionally, aesthetically, economically, existentially. Coming back to Berlin – a city I always considered “home,” even if I lived there only for a few years in my thirties – I was looking forward to exactly this. City air would liberate me, I hoped, not just from my professorial tasks at home at the University of Vienna, but also toward new ideas, new material, new encounters, and new ways of thinking and experiencing.

When I arrived in Grunewald on the last day of August, I was struck by the balmy warm weather. I remember that twenty years ago when I lived here, the luxury of dining outside was quite rare. “Always bring a sweater,” we used to say. As a German, I grew up to see hot weather as a rare boon; my childhood memories are bathed in winter gray and summer rain. Now in 2021, we would have our dinners outside until October, entranced by the almost Mediterranean warmth, the smells of freshly cut grass, the last flowers, and the rotting algae bloom of the nearby ponds – while we were enjoying the elation and excitement of getting to know one another. A social honeymoon in “honeymoony” weather, aided by the incredibly friendly, helpful, and socially graceful Wiko staff. I have never been treated so nicely. Being thus pampered and brilliantly entertained, our good spirits were reflected in the glorious and sunny skies that lasted until late November. The good weather subsided only in December to the typical concrete-gray Berlin sky. In the following summer, beginning in early May, it was sometimes almost too hot to have lunch outside. One could not sit in the searing sun, even with sunscreen and sunglasses; not even the Brazilians would do it. Throughout the summer, days in the 30s Celsius and nights in the 20s were normal, and an entirely different Berlin emerged: scorched, dusty, slowed down, more relaxed, and with balmy nights. Observing our ponds’ sinking water levels and the dried-out plants in Grunewald, suffocating in the overheated S-Bahn, swimming in Halensee and Schlachtensee, I started wondering what climate change would do to Berlin and the Berliners.

I came to Wiko to write a book on “air” or “climate” (synonyms for centuries). Not as a climate scientist, but as a literary scholar. Not so much about climate change as about

climate per se. “Air” may seem a bland, even trifling topic, a nothingness. In German, “eine Person ist Luft für mich” means “someone means nothing to me,” “I ignore her/him.” Yet with climate change, this nothingness, the boring background of local environmental conditions steps to the foreground. After decades of denial or lip service, air pollution, changing weather patterns, and shifting local climates all over the world came to be among the most pressing political topics of our times. However, even as we are frantically discussing the policies of greenhouse gas reduction, climate change mitigation, and adaptation to changing environments, we have a hard time understanding what air or climate itself *is* to us. How can we perceive or conceptualize it beyond the tables of rising temperatures and CO₂ levels, the dystopic scenarios of so-called “climate fiction,” and the apocalyptic rhetoric of *Fridays for Future*? Why do we consider it as either perceptual nothingness or simply an issue of scientific research and political intervention? All of these questions remain unanswered despite the many discourses on climate change. Steven Conner calls air “the matter of the immaterial.” Yet air was, for a very long time, very much a matter: an element in Ancient Greek and Chinese thought, a cultural influence throughout the centuries, and a bearer of health (e.g. in the European climatic spas) and disease (in the long tradition of miasma theory).

As a literary scholar, I wanted to reconstruct what “air” or “climate” meant before science came to reduce air to a mix of gases and climate to “the average weather.” How could it be perceived and represented – both in texts and in images? What was the sensorium of former epochs for the states and influences of air – be it as unhealthy winds (such as the scirocco), as dangerous smells, or as “miasma” carrying epidemics? How would they turn this sensorium into stories or metaphors? What were the models used to understand the atmosphere as a body of gases enveloping the planet? How can the relation between the earth and the air can be put into images, poems, narratives? Can one write a history of literary works on the air as a history of the changing relation of humans to the air, the climate, the “weather worlds” they dwell in?

With air liberated me to dive into an endless ocean of documents, stories, ideas, and historical forms of knowledge. Through some of the Fellows, I learned a lot about new frontiers in biology that entirely redefine the relation between organisms and their environment. With the many symbioses each body depends on, a clear separation between an organism and its outside environment is almost impossible. Much as with air, the environment is not just outside but also inside each body. We inhale our environment, and shape it by exhaling. Bodies are “holobionts,” an assemblage of a host and many other species

living on and inside of it. – With each and every Fellow’s research field or personal interests, I discovered new continents of knowledge: the evolutionary advantages (and disadvantages) of sexual reproduction, the pitfalls of statistical methods and personality trait tests in psychology, the history of fashionable fabrics and the width of farthingales, the nilometer, the hunting techniques of the snow leopard, the climate of paradise, the cosmology of the Yanomami tribe in Brazil. Interested in virtually everything, I was in heaven. I binge read. I listened to people’s research projects, anecdotes, and reading advice. Some suggested bulky Chinese novels from the 14th century, others early modern philosophers, yet others more non-European material. All of this made total sense, all of it was fascinating. And so I binge read even more, facilitated by Wiko’s fantastic book service. I drowned in other people’s erudition and ideas. I wrote, and re-wrote, wrote more, disliked it, edited it – and never seemed to know what exactly should be in the book and what shouldn’t. In short: my book project was literally melting into air, it “verpuffte” more and more while the text grew longer and longer.

As the year went on, there were not just changes in the weather, the temperature, and the smells of the Berliner Luft, there were also changes in the group’s social atmosphere. In the middle of winter, Wiko had to implement another round of Covid curfews. No more lunches, dinners, and on-site colloquia for several weeks. We met either privately – or not at all. There are “seasons” in the social atmosphere of the Fellow group, the Wiko staff told me. The late summer and fall is honeymoon, everybody getting to know one another, trying to make friends and find companions, intellectually and otherwise. Winter comes and things get more difficult. The Fellows discover each other’s limitations, character flaws, and idiosyncrasies. Competition, animosity, irritations usually flare up in the darkest part of the year, January or February. Maybe it’s also that, after the mating period, people fall back into their default mode. A few seemed unable to talk, think, or write about anything but themselves, their lives, their families, their books, their accomplishments. No questions, no interest in others, just “now back to me!” Sometimes this felt like someone filling the air with smoke while you eat or breathe or think. This was the winter of our discontent, albeit mild, but elements of it persisted throughout the year, just like occasional foul weather.

In February, the war in Ukraine started. We all felt like in a state of exception. Russian-speaking Fellows spent nights at the central bus station helping with translation and advice for the refugees arriving from Ukraine. We held panel discussions about what was going on in Ukraine; how this conflict could affect other geopolitical conflict zones, and

about the dangers that dissenters from Putin were facing in Russia. Ukrainian and Russian scholars and writers arrived at Wiko as refugees. Some of them were getting their families out of Russia, willing to maybe never return. With Covid right behind us, the war felt like a symptom of completely unpredictable times, a dark and unclear future.

But then, in the spring, the atmosphere grew calmer. Being only witness to a crisis and not immediately affected, one quickly adapts to the constant flow of bad, even terrible news from the war zone. The energy crisis, climate change, and the pandemic diluted the horrors from Ukraine. And we got used to each other's oddities, like an old family, some forming tightly knit groups, others staying aloof. Bonds deepened, aversions yielded to friendly irony. In late spring, everybody realized that the end was near. And so the honeymoon atmosphere resumed, mixed with melancholy over our looming good-bye and the regret about things we hadn't done, or seen, or written.

These seasons of Fellow life and the return of the honeymoon made me think about the air again in a different way. The air is not just the spirit or quality of a given place, it is not only the air we share, the social atmosphere. Through the seasons, the varying states of the air make it a medium of time, a pacemaker. As atmospheres change, they seem to move through us, penetrate us like the air we breathe, and shape our moods and the ways we look at things. They might not really change us in our essence, but they color our feelings, thoughts, experiences, and relations in ever new and different ways. What seemed like an awkward behavior in the winter gets to be an endearing whimsicality in the spring. What looked like an impossible task in February, broke up into manageable bits and pieces in August. And what in the fall felt like an urge to withdraw, in May melted into the pleasure of spending time with people who all of a sudden had become real friends.

Berlin air was a boon. And a challenge. And a liberation – for many of us. Maybe, for some, also a bit disorienting, outlandish, uncomfortably rude, grey, cold, and rattled by political or personal disasters. For me, it was rediscovering a home that I had believed to have left behind forever, two decades ago. The particular Northern German language I grew up with, the singing “Tschühüß” (never try that in Vienna or Zurich!), the typically German know-it-all attitude, the endearing “Berliner Schnauze” (Berlin slang and blunt sense of humor) – all this came back to me. And I found new Berlin friends living in Zehlendorf, Cape Town, Cambridge, São Paulo, Münster, Grenoble, Singapore, Chicago, New York, and many other places.