



BERLIN, PORTAL TO CAIRO
&
AN EVENING WITH WEBER'S GHOST
JOEL BLECHER

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Sie erweisen mir die Ehre, mich aufzufordern, der Akademie einen Bericht über mein öffentliches Vorleben einzureichen. In diesem Sinne kann ich leider der Aufforderung nicht nachkommen.

—Kafka, *Ein Bericht für eine Akademie*

I. *Ausweg, Freiheit, and Gespräch*

I had been locked in my home for almost a year. The pixels of my computer screen unglued from the Zoom logo, allowing me to submit my application to the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin.

I had modest expectations. Not a year of freedom, as the online brochure promised, but a humble *Ausweg*, a way out, à la Kafka's ape-cum-human, Rotpeter. What I found instead was neither *Ausweg* nor *Freiheit*, but an invitation to a *Gespräch*: a conversation with a community that allowed me to wander, on any given day, through the wormholes in space-time linking the spilled coffee on the desk of a Habsburg empress to the gut bacteria of early humans. Denuded of the prestige of our titles, I found that my fellow Fellows and I encountered one another as kindred spirits, rekindling in ourselves and one another the childlike questions that animated us before we set off on our careers.

Having spent the previous spring at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, where scholars were permitted to disappear for weeks into the library to polish their footnotes until they gleamed, and where historians, mathematicians, and social scientists ate at separate tables, the setting of the Wissenschaftskolleg was refreshing. While IAS Princeton was an academic idyll in its own right, Wiko offered late nights after dinner under the stars beside Lake Halensee, and long walks through the dog trails along Lake Grunewald, where there was no *Ausweg* for a humanist when a scientist wondered about the point of a literary analysis, nor was there *Freiheit* for that same scientist when the moral consequences of their work were challenged. Instead, we had to find areas of mutual understanding – a fruitful *Gespräch*. The Wissenschaftskolleg may not be the ideal place to finish writing a book, but it is the perfect place to conceive one – or two or three.

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When I arrived in Berlin, I had been struggling to anchor my project on the history of Islam and the spice trade. I spent years in the archives poring over Arabic manuscripts, but I still needed a central character or throughline to carry the reader from the Mediterranean to the South China Sea. Was it the birth, life, and death of a group of Muslim spice merchants? Was it the story of the rise and fall of pepper? How about something even larger: the origins of capitalism itself? The problem vexed me. In my conversations at IAS Princeton, Francesca Trivellato and Sabine Schmidtke had guided me towards a range of possibilities, but months later in Berlin I had yet to narrow it down.

Unfortunately, narrowing was not on the menu at the Wissenschaftskolleg, as each new day brought a novel *Gespräch* with an eclectic group of economic historians over gurnard with ginger pickles, historians of science over pumpkin-coconut soup, literature scholars over curry cauliflower and sage mushrooms, artists and composers over celery steak with zatar and herbs, philosophers over rhubarb with sorrel ice cream, and political scientists over an espresso with a dash of milk foam. The avenues for taking my book only multiplied – no *Ausweg* yet.

Was it Andrew Hui, Claudia Verhoeven, Martha Jones, Barbara Prainsack, Marcus Willaschek, or Erika Milam who first pressed me to consider if there was a person who could anchor the book? Or was it Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger, Daniel Schönplüg, or former Fellows Michael Gordin and Stephen Greenblatt, each a master of the genre of biography in their own right? Surely it was all of them, or none of them, some hidden *tzaddik*, a person whose name my memory hides from me now, who deserves the credit. In the end, they asked me if I had a character who could serve as a pinhole through which to explore this larger world of Islam and the spice trade – *not really, no...* I pore over my notes... *not a figure that ties the route together from Egypt to Indonesia... or is there?* From a *Gespräch* springs a glimmer of an *Ausweg*...

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Our Rector had told us that each year at the Wissenschaftskolleg was inevitably defined by a global event – e.g. “the year of the pandemic,” “the year of Trump.” At the start of the year, she pleaded, “let this year be the year that the aggressor in Ukraine is defeated.” It was not meant to be. Our year was the year of October 7th and the bombardment of Gaza. As an American Jewish Islamicist in Berlin, studying Arabic manuscripts and scholarship in German by day, learning Yiddish with my children by night, I felt ripped in two. I was a double mourner. Bar Mitzva’ed on Mt. Mossada, I came of age during the War on Terror and moved to Syria after college, spending my time learning Arabic and teaching Palestinian refugees in Damascus to read. While October 7th roused others to speak out, it stunned me into silence. Mute out of intellectual paralysis – not complicity – I could only mourn. In those overcast days, I turned to Walter Benjamin, the alienated Jewish intellectual from Berlin who had spent some of his darkest days around the corner from us at the Wissenschaftskolleg and only blocks away from Gleis 17 that had deported most of Berlin’s Jews during the Nazi era. He wrote on Klee’s Angelus Novus, who reminded him of the Angel of History: *Where a chain of events appears before us, he sees one*

single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet; the angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed... but a storm is blowing from Paradise...

The week in October when *The Times Literary Supplement* at last reviewed *Merits of the Plague*, my translation of Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani's treatise on the Black Death – a plague that brought ruin upon Gaza in the mid-1300s – Gaza was again in ruins. I doubt anyone craved to turn to a book about the plague that week, but if they had, they would have been greeted by the perversely consoling voice of the Black Death itself: *You were in ashes before I came, and in ashes you will be after I go – calm, calm – in time these ruins will be rebuilt.*

Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani... could he be the anchor for my project? A paragon of Islamic thought, Ibn Hajar was also a spice trader who tied together the intellectual and commercial history of the Mediterranean and the Red Sea. But he does not bring me to Indonesia, where my book's narrative ends. He never set foot there.

II. Berlin, Portal to Cairo

Before the start of my year at the Wissenschaftskolleg, I had been appointed the Bayard Dodge Visiting Professor at the American University in Cairo – an appointment once held by the esteemed Edward Said, whose voice had been sorely missed in the wake of October 7th. This meant that the week following my Dienstagskolloquium – the day of the first snow of the year – I would head to Cairo to deliver a series of lectures on my current project, at the invitation of Adam Talib, Ahmad Khan, and Ellen Kenney in the Department of Arabic and Islamic Civilizations. Knowing I would be discussing my recent translation at one of my lectures, I borrowed the Wissenschaftskolleg library's copy of *Merits of the Plague*, with the blue Wiko stamp still fresh on the book's bottom fore edge, and took it with me to Egypt.

Broody, cloudy winter days of Berlin yielded to the sunny but smog-filled skies of Cairo. Orderly German auto culture yielded to wild near misses of Cairene traffic. From my home in Washington, DC, Cairo is quite a distance east; but from Berlin, Cairo is a short distance to the south. Berlin was a portal to Cairo.

My first day in Cairo, I mentioned to my colleague Ahmad Khan over tea that I was now considering the figure of Ibn Hajar as an anchor for the narrative of my book – but that the issue was that he could only take me from Egypt to Yemen; he could not carry the work's narrative to the straits of Malacca, the origin of the spice trade near modern-day

Indonesia. He mentioned that Ibn Hajar's grave still stood in Cairo's City of the Dead – an impoverished but history-filled neighborhood in Cairo that was now threatened by development. Ahmad helped me make arrangements to travel there the evening before my final lecture.

When the time came, I took my Wiko-library-stamped copy of Ibn Hajar's book in hand on a journey to the grave of Ibn Hajar in Cairo's City of the Dead. After both Google maps and residents among the graves led us astray, we searched in vain for his final resting place for hours. At last, we came upon the doors of Ibn Hajar's tomb – the *muqarnas* on the façade looked shockingly white, as if they had just been restored. A gate-keeper greeted me there.

"No entry – the grave is off limits to visitors." The explanation he gave in Arabic was that the tomb had fallen into disrepair, but was in the process of being renovated. I pressed him again, explaining that I had traveled all this way to visit the tomb, and that I had spent my pandemic years translating one of Ibn Hajar's books into English (I flashed the Wiko library book under my arm). He relented, but implored me to refrain from photographing the interior while it was under construction.

"Who is funding the restoration of Ibn Hajar's tomb?" I asked.

"A group of students far away..."

"Where?" I asked.

"Indonesia."

Ibn Hajar had never set foot in Indonesia. But the long tail of his ideas certainly had – and now students from Indonesia had returned to Cairo's City of the Dead to restore his memory. At that moment, I could see in Ibn Hajar a string that intertwined commerce and Islamic commentary, spanning the length of the spice trade.

I took out a pen and scrawled the date on the front page of the Wiko library book, with the following message: "On this day, this copy of Ibn Hajar's *Merits of the Plague* visited the tomb of Ibn Hajar in Cairo's City of the Dead."

On my flight back to Berlin, I spied the pyramids from the window of my plane as they receded into the distance.

III. A Conversation with Weber's Ghost

Spring 2024. Erfurt, Max-Weber-Kolleg – another Institute for Advanced Study. The year at Wiko is rapidly coming to a close. I sped down from Berlin for the day to deliver a lecture on my new book project, ready to hurry home as soon as it ended (I would need

to be prompt to help my children to their bath and bed). On the train down, I sensed Weber's ghost would be in the audience. He had haunted me since my days at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton.

"Allow me one concluding word about Max Weber," I said, "since we are at a Kolleg named in his honor, and since he had quite a lot to say about religion and the origins of capitalism, as well as Islam's relationship to economic growth. If his ghost were sitting here, attending this lecture, how might he respond?"

"But I am here!" his ghost shouted at me. He sat stiffly at the table as if he were flesh and blood, and he wore a long beard on his scowling face, which a phantom vision of Barbara Thériault attempted to trim between his inappropriate outbursts.

"Herr Professor Weber, a pleasure to meet you at last."

"I have always conceded," his spirit began, "that Islam has the capacity for a certain kind of adventure capitalism and entrepreneurship... but in the final analysis, Islam is essentially a warrior religion!" *Snip, snip.*

"But Muslims were instrumental in thickening economic relations during a time of thinning military connections," I argued, "rather than the other way around..."

"Yes, but it is still only *adventure* capitalism," the apparition retorted, "mere buying-low-selling-high... we do not see the forms of industrial capital that emerged in modern Europe!" *Snip. Snip-snip.*

"Consider again the example of Ibn Hajar," I stammered, "he was not only invested in shipping sugar but also in sugar refinery as well. And he's not the only example – many Muslim merchants were invested in mass production as well as arbitrage..."

"But they immobilized their capital through the institute of charitable donations... profits that otherwise would have been re-invested in business!" *Snip.*

"Ah – here again, consider Ibn Hajar's will! He was a merchant who invested in his students, who themselves were also businessmen. Investing in madrasas and in Sufi lodges, which played host to networks of Muslim businessmen, was also a way of re-investing in the business community..."

"So *ein Quatsch!* In any event your book does little to respond to my *Protestant Ethic and Spirit of Capitalism...*" Two more *snips* from Barbara.

Weber's argument in the *Protestant Ethic* responded to an ongoing debate over the origins of capitalism. One's perspective in this debate hinges on one's definition of capitalism, of course, but Werner Sombart's negative – and frankly antisemitic – suggestion was that capitalism originated with the cultivation of greed among Jewish moneylenders. In this

regard, Weber's thesis that capitalism was not rooted in the vice of greed but in the virtues of prudence and otherworldly salvation cultivated by the Protestant work ethic turned Sombart's argument on its head.

"Well..." I hesitated, "Islamic business ethics also contained much in the way of prudence and otherworldly salvation... this has been pointed out by many others before me, but I'm not simply pointing to timeless Islamic doctrines found in the Qur'an and the hadith and in Islamic legal codes that praise the accumulation of profit through trade... but showing how such ideas played out in a real-life like figure Ibn Hajar, and the public debates among a diverse group of merchants, scholars, and states."

"If I were to revise my thesis," Weber stuttered, "and I am not saying I would – but *if* I were to... perhaps I would say that Protestantism was not the origin of the spirit of capitalism, but a kind of a cyclical return to form..."

"Yes – a moment when religious virtues guided and animated an entrepreneurial culture rather than allowed it to grow unbound..."

"So, in this view, the great divergence in economic fortunes between Islam and the West seem less attributable to the austerity of Protestantism or a lack of Islamic entrepreneurial spirit or to some foible of Islamic law..."

"...than to a moment of norm-breaking – when European powers, in the 'Age of Exploration,' marshalled state violence in support of mercantilist trading policies, race-based slavery, and the rampant exploitation of natural resources, a breaking of a centuries-old culture of commercial norms that had been held in check, with greater or lesser success, by Muslim religious authorities!"

"*Quatsch!*" Weber scowled again and shook his head. "I would never go so far... But it could be an interesting idea for a book – or at least the start of a conversation... a *Gespräch* –"
Snip.

IV. Postscript: Ten Rules for Moderating a Dienstagskolloquiums-Diskussion

Following today's presentation, we will be using a new method to solicit your questions. Please observe the following rules:

1. Write down your name and your question on a scrap of paper.
2. Take your scrap of paper, exit Wiko, and sprint through the wooded trails of Grunewald.
3. Use your scrap of paper as a bookmark as you read through chapters 1, 2, 7, and 9 of Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood around 1900* while the dogs play beside the *Strand*.

4. Run back to Koenigsallee and use your scrap of paper as a bus ticket; jump on the M19 to hear the Berliner Philharmoniker perform.
5. Use the paper scrap to perform on stage with the Philharmoniker, pulling it so tightly that it can be plucked like the string of a cello.
6. Erase your name and your question from your scrap of paper, and instead use it to write an outline of the book you proposed to write during your fellowship.
7. Hustle back to the Wissenschaftskolleg where the scrap of paper will be roasted with fresh garlic, a goat-cheese mousse, and sea buckthorn.
8. Relish the scrap of paper on the terrace under the stars beside Lake Halensee.
9. Take what remains of the scrap of paper to the gates of Mordor, and cast it into the heart of the volcano.
10. Please return in no later than five minutes, and we will call on the first person who raises their hand.