



A SMALL WORLD
DAVID EDGERTON

David Edgerton was born in Montevideo in 1959 and moved to the United Kingdom in 1970. He studied Chemistry at St John's College, Oxford (where he is now an Honorary Fellow) and History at Imperial College London, where he later taught for 20 years before transferring to King's College London with the Centre for the History of Science, Technology and Medicine in 2013, where he is Hans Rausing Professor of the History of Science and Technology and Professor of Modern British History. He has worked mainly in two areas, the history of science and technology and twentieth-century British history. Perhaps his best-known books are *Warfare State: Britain, 1920–1970* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), *The Shock of the Old: Technology and Global History since 1900* (Profile 2007, 2019), and *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation: A Twentieth-Century History* (Penguin, 2019). His new book, a global history of production since 1900, will be published with Allen Lane/Penguin in 2027. He is a regular contributor to the press, especially *The Guardian* and the *New Statesman*, mainly on current British politics. – Address: Centre for the History of Science, Technology and Medicine, Department of History, King's College London, Strand, London WC2R 2 LS, United Kingdom.
E-mail: david.edgerton@kcl.ac.uk.

My time, our time, in Wiko has been about the discovery not just of a wonderful community of scholars and staff, but also of a historical reconnection with a city and a country. Wiko, the City of Berlin, and the German government deserve our warmest thanks for this.

The opportunity to come to Wiko came at a very particular moment that made it doubly attractive. Claire's parents were born in Breslau and Leipzig, and both left in the early

1930s. Our unwillingness to be torn away (again) from the Continent because of the machinations of the hard right led to Claire and our three children becoming German citizens. Or rather, as the German embassy in London graciously put it, they have had returned to them the birthright of their parents and grandparents. The ceremony was so correctly done that I opened my review of John Kampfner's book on Germany with a reference to it, not knowing of course that we would be Fellows together.

Claire and I both decided to learn at least some German, as a means and a symbol of reconnection, Claire with Duolingo and I with the tender ministrations of Lea Zsivkovits. Though starting from scratch, we both stumbled on traces from the past—Claire from conversations of her parents they did not want overheard, or the half-remembered name of a cake or pudding (what else); I from a year of German when I was 12 or so. But we did not expect to find, with Wiko's help, connections to Berlin itself.

In her Colloquium, Rachel Gregor included references to her Berlin antecedents that she was rediscovering with the help of Kirsten Graupner of the library. I would have not given this much thought had not Claire, as we were walking to Grunewald station, suddenly said that she thought her father had possibly started to study engineering in Berlin. It prompted me to consult Kirsten. She was extraordinarily keen to help, and so, guided by what turned out to be these false leads from me, found that parts of the prewar registers of Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität and the Technische Hochschule had been destroyed. But there seemed to be something to Claire's thought because online ship's passenger lists showed Claire's father, then Andreas Eppenstein, described as a student from Berlin, travelling twice (in 1936 and 1937) between Germany and the UK. Elementary German was proving useful, but this information made no sense.

But Kirsten was able to dig up information that showed Claire's Breslau grandmother had been living in Berlin sometime in the late 1930s. But there seemed no trace in phone books or the like. This prompted a search through documents at home, where it emerged that Claire's father (and uncle) had studied at, of all places, the Grunewald-Gymnasium (1929–1933). And he and his mother and brother lived on the corner of Ku'damm and Joachim-Friedrich-Straße, a block from Halensee station. Claire's father had intended, post-Abitur, to study law but instead went to the LSE to study economics (starting in 1934). He was indeed a student from Berlin, but was not studying in Berlin.

This turned out not to be the only unknown Berlin connection. His aunt, Dr Lisa Eppenstein, was a schoolteacher in Berlin who joined the Epiphaniienkirche in Charlottenburg and taught at Provost Grüber's *Familienschule* for baptized Christian children from

Jewish families. We visited her *Stolperstein* in Bayernallee. And, according to Claire's brother, though this is still unconfirmed, their father was in Berlin as a British army officer in July 1945, for the Allied victory parade in the city.

There was one other uncanny Eppenstein-Wiko coincidence. Jana Petri invited us Fellows to visit the Gropius-designed house in Jena now owned by her former professor. It had been built for another Jena professor, the physicist Felix Auerbach, who was married to the aunt of Claire's great uncle, Dr Otto Eppenstein of Zeiss of Jena. The Eppensteins and indeed the Auerbachs were from Breslau, where Claire and I duly went, armed with pages from a 1914 Baedeker supplied by Kirsten. There we made some discoveries and also followed a false lead to the wrong Gymnasium. Such is genealogical research.

The world is small, and our stay in Wiko unexpectedly proved it, or rather made it so. It was only in Wiko that I met, or even heard of, I am ashamed to say, my esteemed colleague David Owens, despite having had an office not 100 yards from his in King's in London for many years. On the other hand, unexpected links to Africa revealed themselves. I noticed by chance that Omar Gueye, in a footnote in one of his papers on display at the time of his Colloquium, referred to the pioneering work in African history of Robert and Marianne Cornevin. He was overjoyed to learn, as I was to tell him, that they were the parents of Claire's brother's first wife, who died tragically young. Omar marked this discovery with a much appreciated gift of a book to the eldest Cornevin child, Genevieve. I was thrilled that Charles came to dinner in Wiko and met Omar and Imani Sanga. I also earned more undeserved kudos from having as a neighbour in London the distinguished anthropologist and historian of Nigeria, Murray Last, well-known to both Basile Ndjio and Asonzeh Ukah. A small world indeed.

Wiko brought together what history had torn asunder. Exile and emigration were, it turned out, part of the family history of many of my Co-Fellows; even in the current generation, roughly one third (I estimate) are living away from their country of birth. Sherene Seikaly gave a talk about her family, loyal servants of the British Empire, who were dispossessed of their property in Palestine and moved first to Lebanon and then the USA. That such a story should be told in Grunewald, so replete with expropriated property, seemed especially poignant.

Indeed, the history of Germany was never far away from our collective discussions; nor, with all its resonances with that history, was the brutal dispossession, destruction, and starvation that worsened with every day in Palestine. Wiko was an island of sanity

and civilised exchange of views between experts on these matters, in a world (again) denying, misrepresenting, and repressing obvious truths.

Berlin is blessed with a wonderful national history museum, alas mostly closed during our stay. But the Deutsches Historisches Museum did have a temporary exhibition on “Roads not Taken” in German history. But it did not really imagine a historical path where Germany continued after 1933 to be a great centre of world Jewry, perhaps so integrated, assimilated, and converted that the very idea would make little sense. I did not find it too difficult to imagine a Germany led by Walther Rathenau and Rosa Luxemburg, instead of one with memorials to their murders. I can also imagine a Germany feeling able to condemn all crimes against humanity, rather than one that teaches us a grim lesson in *Realpolitik* and *Staatsräson*. Perhaps history, or rather particular histories, are weighing rather too heavily on us.

Argentina was once described as a land of forgetting, its immigrants wanting to leave behind memories of poor Southern Europe. My own Argentine ancestors, emigrants from Italy, had indeed forgotten, or at least not passed on such memories. There is something to be said for it. Forgetting can be liberating; remembering a curse. Misremembering is perhaps the worst option of all. For the lesson of history might well not be never again, but we can indeed do it again, we can be what we think we were.

Which brings me to my project, a global history of production since 1900. It involves thinking one’s way out of the standard entrenched stories of production that are foundational to our accounts of the modern age. It is also, I suppose, a way putting into history, in part at least, the technical and business classes, from which Claire and I spring. But most of all it is a history aimed at allowing us to think in new ways about the future of production by freeing us from the fetters imposed by misleading historical accounts. For here too, very particular histories weigh heavily on the imaginations of the present.

I found it rather thrilling, in ways I know others do not understand, to visit Siemensstadt, even to pass the Volkswagen works and the Leunawerke on the train, to be close to Ludwigshafen, to visit various technical and industrial museums in Hamburg, Essen, Berlin, Breslau, and Prague. This for me had more than the usual scholarly historical interest. My German-speaking chemist father had been in Germany in 1946 or 1947 officially stealing technical secrets from Germany’s industry. As he travelled around the country, he took colour pictures, but using a British process much inferior to the German Agfacolor process. My first knowledge of Germany, perhaps of history, came from his Dufaycolor pictures of the Soviet war memorial in the Tiergarten, the bomb shelter above Hitler’s

bunker, the balcony of the Reichs Chancellery, and of the IG Farben building in Frankfurt (where Hartmut Leppin has his office!).

As I had hoped, the book will have more of Germany than it would otherwise have had. The library was kind enough to do machine translations of Rudolf Berthold (ed.), *Geschichte der Produktivkräfte in Deutschland von 1800 bis 1945*, 3 vols. (Berlin, 1988). It turns out to be the most detailed history of production ever written, and useful for not falling for the usual naïve stage theories of bourgeois historiography. Its own perfunctory ideological commitment could not conceal the depth of scholarship behind it. Hartmut Leppin taught me how to understand this only apparent paradox. I was also, thanks to conversations with Arndt Sorge and Jürgen Kocka, able to get some more sense of how German scholars dealt with the history of production, and I made some pleasing discoveries, for example the prevalence of the phrase “Taylorist-Fordism” in both histories and industrial sociologies, and the deep commitment in the literature to, in effect, a German *Sonderweg* in production. It was also a joy to wrestle with the German of Marx, Brecht, and Celan with Eva von Kügelgen. My book will now have the odd German-language epigraph.

The library facilities are a wonderful gift to a scholar. I rather cheekily tested them by asking for a 1937 Chilean pamphlet about Palestinian Christian business in Chile. A PDF arrived within a day and turned out to me much more useful than I expected. Stefan Gellner showed great tenacity in uncovering lots of hard-to-find statistics on coal, steel, and cement. Thank you!

Above all, Wiko gave all of us time to write and to think. I was able to nearly complete a draft of what is a long and complicated book, which would not otherwise have been possible. Not only that: Wiko may yet have provided me with a title. For, after my Colloquium, Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger made a comment that made me go back to Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times*, which turned out to be richer, more political, and much more pertinent than I remembered. As a result, my book may be called *Making Modern Times*.