

## „You can't return to the past.“

*Rafael Cardoso im Gespräch mit Cordula Greinert*

**Cordula Greinert:** Mr. Cardoso, the topic of returning from exile is not immediately obvious, considering your life and works. Born in Rio de Janeiro and trained as an art historian, who lived in the U.S., the U.K. and France, you decided in 2012 to move to Berlin. Four years later, you published a novel about the escape from Nazi Germany to France and then to Brazil of your great-grandfather, Hugo Simon, a German-Jewish banker, a patron of the arts and of left-wing politics in the Weimar Republic, who never returned to Germany.<sup>1</sup> Why did you agree without hesitation on this interview?

**Rafael Cardoso:** Well, I think there is a wider tendency now to discuss return. For instance, Elisabeth de Waal's book *The Exiles Return*.<sup>2</sup> There is this whole idea of returning, people who are trying to recover their background. So, when you suggested the topic of return, I assumed you were speaking in this broader sense. In my personal case, this is not a return. Germany for me is in a way an exile. In a sense, this is a renewal of exile, which is something that fascinates me. You know, my great-grandfather and grandparents were exiled for political reasons and they had no choice in the matter. But then, my father went voluntarily to the United States. He was self-exiled, not a political refugee. Of course, the political situation in Brazil was terrible and he left at the peak of the military dictatorship, so you could say there were political reasons for leaving. But he was not really a political person and he was not suffering any kind of persecution. Then after university, when I was 21, I went back to Brazil. That for me was actually a return. I was going back to something, which I had left and which was missing and which I had to fill in. Coming to Germany is not similar in any sense. It was not some coming back to anything. It was coming to look for something that I suspected was here, but I really didn't know. It was only once I was here that I started to figure it out. And I'm still figuring it out, which is why I'm still here.

**Cordula Greinert:** One cause for your suspicion was certainly your discovery of

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<sup>1</sup> Vgl. Rafael Cardoso: *Das Vermächtnis der Seidenraupen*. Frankfurt a. M. 2016 (Originalausgabe: *O remanescente*. Bd. 1: *O tempo no exílio*. São Paulo 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Vgl. Elisabeth de Waal: *Donnerstags bei Kanakis*. Wien 2014 (Originalausgabe: *The exiles return*. London 2013).

Hugo Simon's autobiographical manuscript *Seidenraupen* (*Silkworms*) in an old mahogany chest of drawers, when you had to clear your grandparents' house in 1987. We have a copy of it in our archive in Hamburg; the original is in the Exile Archive of the German National Library in Frankfurt.<sup>3</sup>

**Rafael Cardoso:** The first time I ever set foot in Germany, was because of this manuscript. I had a girlfriend at the time who lived in Amsterdam and I was going to see her. I was already in touch with the *Exilarchiv* in Frankfurt, and I asked them whether they wanted the text. They said: "Of course!" and they paid my fare from Amsterdam to Frankfurt and put me up for one night. So, my first time in Germany was 24 hours, just to deliver this manuscript. It was written in Brazil, but Hugo Simon wrote it in German and it was intended for a German audience. So this manuscript coming back to Germany, I see as a return.

**Cordula Greinert:** The German title of your novel is *Das Vermächtnis der Seidenraupen* (*The Legacy of the Silkworms*). When writing it, did you aim at contributing to Hugo Simon's return to German cultural memory?

**Rafael Cardoso:** Hugo Simon is more alive in Berlin than I expected. When I first got here, I thought I would have to tell everyone who Hugo Simon was. And I realised very quickly that people already knew. Historians who work on the Weimar Republic were very aware of him and actually had a lot of things to teach me. So I wouldn't say it's a return. I agree with the idea that something was broken by World War II, by the whole Nazi era. There used to be a multicultural relationship between Germany and German Jews. This culture was very specific and very special. And it was destroyed. It no longer exists in Germany nor anywhere else; it's gone. It only exists in the past: in the books, the works of art and the plays and this is how we have access to it and know that it actually existed. But I think you can't return to the past. It is rather an issue of recovering an idea and maybe making that idea relevant to what happens today.

**Cordula Greinert:** Speaking of revival, I would like to turn to the community of Seelow in Brandenburg. In 1919, Hugo Simon purchased an inn and some plots of land there and established a model estate for agricultural production and recreation. A local initiative now restores the site and you are in close contact with them. Since the concept of "return", in German discourse, is often connected to the particular idea

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<sup>3</sup> Hugo Simon: *Seidenraupen*. Typoskript. o. O., o. J. Deutsche Nationalbibliothek, Exilarchiv, Teilnachlass Hugo Simon, Signatur: EB 2005/063; sowie Arbeitskopie für geplante Veröffentlichung. P. Walter Jacob Archiv, Signatur: HS/3.

of *Heimat*, I would like to know whether Seelow might have this connotation for you.

**Rafael Cardoso:** That's a really good question. You know, the people who are restoring the part of my great-grandfather's estate that still exists, they are a *Heimatverein*.

[Both laugh.]

**Rafael Cardoso:** Yes, *Heimatverein Schweizerhaus Seelow e.V.*<sup>4</sup> When I arrived in Berlin, my other book, *Sechzehn Frauen*,<sup>5</sup> came out in German and someone in Seelow read about it in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*<sup>6</sup> and they wrote to S. Fischer, asking to get in touch with me. Then they invited me to visit Seelow, so we went there in 2013 for the first time. They had no idea how much German we spoke. So there was the *Landrat*, there was a translator, there were people from the *Heimatverein*. They had organised a big lunch reception where they had invited the descendants of the former workers on the estate. The idea was that we would meet. And it was a very emotional reunion. The *Bürgermeister* came and they sent a reporter from the *Märkische Oderzeitung*. The first sentence of her article was: "Ein historischer Kreis hat sich am Freitag in Seelow geschlossen."<sup>7</sup>

**Cordula Greinert:** So, things have come full circle?

**Rafael Cardoso:** Yes, the historical cycle. There was an element of the homecoming of the Prodigal Son. No one from my family had set foot in Seelow in exactly 80 years. Still, I was not returning home. It was rather about the difference between return and revival. For my entire life, Seelow was just a word, just a name; it was a hole. There were no images or references that matched with it. But now this was going to be filled by people and encounters and memories. And in fact, this has happened. In less than five years now, I've been to Seelow over ten times. I support their project to restore this estate, that they're trying to make it into a *Denkmal*. During the Nazi era it was a *Staatliches Versuchsgut*, and then it became a collective farm, a *VEG*<sup>8</sup>, during the *DDR-Zeit*. It actually continued to be a productive place until 1990. This is when the decline began, because then it was no man's land, literally.

**Cordula Greinert:** In Germany, the Seelow Heights are particularly known as the

<sup>4</sup> Vgl. <https://www.heimatverein-seelow.de> [abgerufen: 22.2.2018].

<sup>5</sup> Vgl. Rafael Cardoso: *Sechzehn Frauen. Geschichten aus Rio*. Frankfurt a. M. 2013 (Originalausgabe: *Entre as mulheres*. Rio de Janeiro 2007).

<sup>6</sup> Vgl. Gregor Quack: Weißt du, wie man einfach verschwindet? Der Brasilianer Rafael Cardoso schreibt Geschichten über Frauen in Rio und ist der Urenkel eines Bankiers der Weimarer Republik. Jetzt sucht er dessen Spuren in Berlin. In: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*, 10.3.2013.

<sup>7</sup> Doris Steinkraus: Auf den Spuren von Hugo Simon. In: *Märkische Oderzeitung*, 19.7.2013.

<sup>8</sup> Volkseigenes Gut.

place of one of the last great battles of World War II with many casualties.

**Rafael Cardoso:** The *Denkmal* for the *Seelower Höhen* is 200 meters from my great-grandfather's house. Oral history has it that part of the Red Army was actually quartered in the house. Anyway, it's very much bound up in that history. So, for the people in Seelow, the time of Hugo Simon is like the Golden Age. It was before the war, before the battle, before the *DDR* and before the decline. So to them, to look back to pre-1933 is to sort of recover something they lost and that they consider very precious. There was an American historian who had a wonderful line: "History is what the present chooses to remember about the past."<sup>9</sup> So, this whole process of the *Heimatverein* in Seelow is something about choosing. They don't want to be known in the rest of Germany only as the place where this terrible battle happened. They want to remember Hugo Simon and they're trying to revive this past. And I am part of this revival. They are interested in an idea of *Heimat*, which is this thing of selecting the past they want to remember. But I don't think I have access to that, it's not *Heimat* for me. I didn't grow up there, it's not familiar to me, it's actually very exotic to me. And it's great, it's an insight into an aspect of German life that I would never have in Berlin or Frankfurt. I've been given access to a level of community existence and a whole other history of German life, especially East German life, which very few foreigners have. It's interesting for me in the way that it might be interesting for a German to go to a small town in Brazil. But at the same time, it is interesting to know that I belong, that people care about me, my history and there's genuine affection. And it's not something you can choose, it has to happen through circumstances that are beyond your control and I feel that because of these historical circumstances, this has happened for me in Seelow.

**Cordula Greinert:** Is there another place, then, which might be *Heimat* for you?

**Rafael Cardoso:** That is difficult to answer. Can an exile ever have *Heimat* anywhere? My father was an immigrant in Brazil. And although he was completely integrated by the time I was born, he always self-identified as French. Then he moved to the United States and I became an immigrant as a child. I always had this feeling of not belonging, not being at home, and I think that this is very common for the immigrant experience in the U.S. in the Sixties. I think now they have become much more relaxed about multicultural diversity and difference, despite Trump. When

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<sup>9</sup> Dieser Satz findet sich nicht wörtlich, aber sinngemäß in: Carl L. Becker: Everyman His Own Historian. In: American Historical Review 37/2 (1932), 221-36.

I returned to Brazil in the 1980s, what drew me was the idea that there was a place where I belonged. Where I was seen as a part of the core group. But then, as I remained in Brazil over my whole adult life, I discovered that I didn't belong in the way that other people belonged. Although in Brazil, no one would say to my face: "Oh, you're not Brazilian!" But there is always an undercurrent. Brazil is a country that has problems with dissent. You can be different, but you can't be dissident. There's a lot of pressure to be like everyone else. A normativity. Still, we don't have the word *Heimat*, we really don't have this whole concept. But if you asked me: "Where is home for you?", I would say: "Rio." However, I'm not living in Rio, I'm living in Berlin. So why am I not at home? Simply because at one point I figured out that I was not going to be completely at home anywhere. And that was when I became interested in researching the story of Hugo Simon. Which led me to come to Berlin, write a book and at least for now to remain here, in this situation which can at best be described as a limbo situation, at worst as an exile.

**Cordula Greinert:** So, the idea of returning is an illusion?

**Rafael Cardoso:** Vilém Flusser developed this concept of *Bodenlosigkeit*,<sup>10</sup> how the refugee is always a refugee, wherever he or she is. And Flusser, as usual, takes this to an extreme and says that everyone is *bodenlos*, this is the new normal, this is the new condition of the contemporary. Everyone is increasingly rootless and groundless. And I suppose that, in a way, that's true. Of course, not everyone is *bodenlos* to the same degree. I would not compare myself to a Syrian refugee who really is *bodenlos* in a very acute, and painful and terrible way.

**Cordula Greinert:** Speaking about Syrian refugees, we currently witness a revival of xenophobia and of the extreme right in Germany. Do you see any similarities to the situation in the Weimar Republic, which Hugo Simon faced?

**Rafael Cardoso:** It's not just Germany. There is a resurgence of tribalism in many places. It seems to have a direct relationship with economic crisis. As everyone knows, the 1930s were the 1930s because of 1929. And maybe what we're going through now is still a direct outcome of the financial crisis since 2008. People are worried, they're insecure, they're afraid. And many seem to take comfort in the idea that the way to deal with this is to go back to a lost tradition, the "good old days". So, if you're seen as somehow threatening the order that is supposed to exist, then this

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<sup>10</sup> Vgl. Vilém Flusser: *Bodenlos. Eine philosophische Autobiographie*. Mit einem Nachwort von Milton Vargas und editorischen Notizen von Edith Flusser und Stefan Bollmann. Bensheim 1992.

becomes violent. In Germany in the 1930s it was Jews, now in the United States it's Muslims, in Brazil people are in a frenzy about transsexuals and gays. So, yes, there is something to this comparison of the 1930s with what's going on now. It's not just superficial; there are deep similarities. Still, you can react to the situation in different ways. The people in Seelow are trying to recover the "good old days" in a way, which is to embrace very bad things that happened in the past, talk about them and try to resolve this in the present through inclusive action. The reaction against tribalism is what most attracted me when I started learning more about Hugo Simon: He staked his entire existence on moving away from that, from the tribe. He really severed his links with the Jewish community – not because he didn't like Jews, not because he was anti-Semitic, not because of self-hatred, but because he really sincerely believed that we should get over our tribal allegiances and all be human together. And he didn't just say this because he thought it was a nice idea. He actually paid the price. In Brazil he had no support from the Jewish community. None. Stefan Zweig is another of these people who staked his whole existence on this international humanist vision of the world. In the end, they lost.

**Cordula Greinert:** One last aspect I would like to discuss with you is the restitution of expropriated works of art. You are an art historian, your great-grandfather supported many artists and he collected art. When he escaped to France in 1933, he had to leave behind almost his entire collection, which was then confiscated. Have any of those objects been returned to your family?

**Rafael Cardoso:** Yes, I think we've had about six objects restituted. Most of which came from the *Preußischer Kulturbesitz*. But every institution is different, and every country is different. In Germany, these things are taken very seriously and the institutions really do make an effort to come to terms and see what has to be done. We also had a very good experience in Britain. A painting was found in the York Castle Museum. Once they became aware that there was an issue, they set up a restitution committee, they studied it and they gave the painting back. However, we've had no success ever with Austria and none of the Austrian institutions. We had a case that went to the Supreme Court, to the Minister of Culture, and the answer was "No, we're not giving it back."

**Cordula Greinert:** On which grounds?

**Rafael Cardoso:** On many grounds. In the end, it's a political decision. In Hugo Simon's case, there were hundreds and hundreds of objects in the collection, and

each one has a different history. Some cases are very clear; others are not. In this case, there is margin for doubt, margin for argument. The jargon in restitution is “just and fair” because of the Washington principles.<sup>11</sup> And you can always tell if people are trying to argue in interests of finding a just and fair solution or if they’re arguing in the sense of: “I want to hold on to what’s mine.” On the family side, I do most of this work and I always try to arrive at just and fair solutions. Restitution is very complicated. But unfortunately, there are still institutions, and even countries, that just do not want to deal with it.

**Cordula Greinert:** What does it mean to you to have these objects restituted?

**Rafael Cardoso:** Sometimes it’s a burden. The painting we got back from England is now with my brother and he’s always asking me to find a museum for it. You don’t necessarily want to have a museum-quality painting in your house. But getting it back is very powerful. It’s something about making amends and compensation. First of all, it’s about recognizing that a crime was committed. Often, just to hear that, just to have the other party admit that they did something wrong and apologize, makes a big difference. Some people will try to make good what was wrong and this is very moving, and it heals. On the other hand, the Munch “Scream” case was very painful for me and my family.<sup>12</sup> This was something we had never thought we had any claim to, and suddenly it was like having it taken from us again. We were being denied it aggressively, and it became a sort of second spoliation. It’s not even my loss, I didn’t lose this painting; that happened 70-80 years ago. But I think there is an emotional process in the restitution of works of art. I am convinced that a lot of these institutions that don’t want to talk about restitution – and there are a lot of them – would be surprised how many people would settle for an apology.

**Cordula Greinert:** Thank you very much, Mr. Cardoso, for this interview.

*Rafael Cardoso und Cordula Greinert danken der Akademie der Künste, dass sie für das Interview am 27. November 2017 einen Raum der Akademie nutzen konnten.*

*Lene Greve gebührt großer Dank für die sorgfältige Rohtranskription des Interviews.*

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<sup>11</sup> Vgl. Commission for Looted Art in Europe: Washington Conference Principles on Nazi-Confiscated Art. 3 December 1998, unter: <http://www.lootedartcommission.com/Washington-principles> [abgerufen: 22.2.2018].

<sup>12</sup> Vgl. u. a. Clemens Bomsdorf: Kritik an Sotheby’s Versteigerung von „Der Schrei“. In: Die Welt, 2.5.2012.

**Über den Autor:**

Rafael Cardoso wurde 1964 in Rio de Janeiro geboren. Er wuchs in den USA auf, studierte dort Kunstgeschichte und promovierte am Courtauld Institute of Art der University of London. Anschließend arbeitete er als Professor am Departamento de Artes & Design der Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro. Seit 2012 lebt er als freier Schriftsteller in Berlin. Zu seinen kunsthistorischen Publikationen zählen unter anderem *Art and the academy in the nineteenth century* (2000), *O design brasileiro antes do design. Aspectos da história gráfica. 1870-1960* (2005) und *Design para um mundo complexo* (2012). Literarisch veröffentlichte er unter anderem *Entre as mulheres* (2007; deutsch: *Sechzehn Frauen. Geschichten aus Rio*, 2013) sowie *O remanescente. O tempo no exílio* (2016; deutsch: *Das Vermächtnis der Seidenraupen. Geschichte einer Familie*, 2016). Rafael Cardosos Urgroßvater ist der deutsch-jüdische Bankier, Kunstmäzen und kurzzeitige erste Finanzminister der Weimarer Republik (USPD), Hugo Simon, der 1933 mit seiner Familie nach Frankreich und 1941 nach Brasilien fliehen musste, wo er bis zu seinem Tod unter dem Namen Hubert Studenic lebte.