

Elizabeth C. Dunn

## On Successful Failures and Other Oxymorons



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For someone at the beginning of an academic career, a year at the Wissenschaftskolleg is an unparalleled opportunity. Unlike most of the senior scholars who make up the Wiko's usual crowd, it wasn't the time off from other obligations I valued so much, but the intellectual companionship of my fellow Fellows and the Wiko staff. As someone who is usually firmly ensconced in a single discipline and department, I found that the best thing about the Wissenschaftskolleg was that it pushed me to deal with ideas I *didn't* initially like because they came from people I *did* like: the other Fellows, who fast became colleagues and friends. I found myself impelled to pay more attention to the internal logics of arguments rather than criticizing them from my own disciplinary standpoint. I had to set aside my

own perspective and walk, for two hours, in someone else's intellectual shoes.

Surprisingly, I found that I often ended up incorporating these distant ideas and faraway points of view into my own work. Franco Moretti's talk on "filler" in narrative structure, for example, gave me new insights into interpreting my field notes and taped discussions with informants. Charlotte Schoell-Glass' work on the "the view from above" in painting captured my imagination and led me to think about social geographies and the representation of social space in ways I hadn't before. As a diehard member of the political-economy school, I was amazed and delighted by these new ideas, and rushed right out to try them on. The result, a paper called "Son of Stalin, the Anti-Elvis and Other Postcommunist Nightmares", can't pretend to the lofty heights of the high culture that Franco and Charlotte deal with (my paper looks at pulp thrillers, John Wayne movies, and the end of the Cold War), nor to their brilliant analyses, but for me the paper marked an enriching addition to my scholarly toolkit. It is, I think, a successful failure.

One of the greatest paradoxes of this year was that I learned the most from the people I disagreed with most heartily. Hans-Jürgen Wagener was a case in point: we both work on Polish economic transformation, but we don't agree at all – not one scintilla – on the interpretation of the events of the last decade or on our assessments of their consequences. Yet, despite these disagreements, I found Hans-Jürgen endlessly willing to share his work and discuss mine, to tutor me on the fundamentals of economic analysis, and to explain the economists' viewpoint. I didn't have a conversion experience thanks to Hans-Jürgen's good fellowship, but I came away with a more nuanced appreciation of the constraints that economic policy-makers face and the analytical power of the economic method.

If, during this year, I failed to make a brilliant analysis of high-cultural forms despite Franco and Charlotte's best efforts, and never did become convinced that the new economic policies in Poland are the best of all possible choices, I nonetheless consider these failures successes. Rather than smashing down disciplinary boundaries, I managed to smuggle some of the best and most valuable ideas from literary criticism, art history, and economics past the social-science border guards and back home to anthropology. It's sneakier, perhaps, but still a success.

Among the most spectacular successful failures was the AGORA project. We took the usual challenge of the Wiko and made it immeasurably harder: we not only had a group of people with wildly diverse personal and disciplinary backgrounds, we also set ourselves the challenge of actually producing something in common. In a fit of delusional grandeur, we originally hoped for an "AGORA manifesto" on the future of work,

knowledge, and social cohesion. I don't believe we will arrive at any such thing. Our opinions and training have simply proved too divergent. But in struggling to find common problems and a common language, we've had a great deal of influence on each others' work. In small knots of conversation among three or four of us at a time, we have each pulled others in new directions. The colleague whose intellectual traction I salute the most enthusiastically is Stefan Voigt. Stefan and I have gone more than our allotted twelve rounds debating the simplifying assumptions of economics. The constant tension in our dialogue between analytical rigor and empirical nuance, the assumed stability of preferences and the cultural construction of desire, and the freedom of rational choice and the constraints of the social order have led me to focus much less on culturally or structurally overdetermined behavior, and much more on the strategies individual actors pursue in situations of political-economic constraint and historical path-dependency. One of the most useful (and I think straightforwardly successful) products of our interaction came about when we invited scholars from inside and outside the Kolleg to join our debate on "Transnational Formations: Governance Beyond the State" at a conference in April.

Of course, there were some unmitigated successes during my year at the Wiko. I finished my book, *The Fruits of Change: Privatization, Personhood and the Transformation of Work in Postsocialist Poland*, and four other articles. Having vastly improved my job talk with the help of Ivan Krastev and the Wiko Tuesday Colloquium, I managed to land a tenure-track job. I gained a great deal of knowledge about the graceful arts of academic practice from Marie-Theres Fögen, David Olson, Ray Jackendoff, and Rick Shweder. Thanks to Gerd Spittler, I learned to play *boules* and had some great discussions about the anthropology of work. An unquestionable success was convincing Niki Lacey to chair my colloquium.

Perhaps the very best thing about this year at the Wiko was the warm welcome that my partner, Barbara Brown, and I received from the Wiko staff. Perhaps to you, we were just another ordinary Fellow-family. But to us, the acceptance and friendliness and ordinariness with which you treated us were heartwarming and touching. We are both enormously grateful.