



## THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY ROBERT BOYD

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I can never remember whether Lee van Cleef was the bad or the ugly. Probably the bad, because he’s not that ugly, but I saw the movie a long time ago, and it’s hard to remember. Now, at the very end of my year in Berlin every event is still fresh, and I don’t have that problem. So, lets begin with...

### The Good

Eleven years ago I spent a year at the Zentrum für interdisziplinäre Forschung in Bielefeld. I went to the ZiF planning to write a book with Pete Richerson, who was also there for the year. Our 1985 book, *Culture and the Evolutionary Process*, had been a big success in some ways: It was well reviewed, it won the Staley Prize, and it was widely cited. Unfortunately, it was much less frequently read. You could tell because people often said stuff about it that

was wildly at variance with the actual contents. The problem was that for most of the readership in anthropology, it was too mathematical. (One cynic told me that each equation cuts your readership by half. On this basis we calculated our maximum possible readership at  $10^{-50}$  people.) Our plan for the ZiF year was to write a more accessible, empirical, non-mathematical treatment of our work. At the end of the year, we had learned a lot about continental sociology, but we hadn't written our book.

Over the next 10 years, Pete and I struggled to finish what we had started, but with students and other projects, progress was slow. As each year passed, this millstone got heavier and heavier until I felt like Frodo struggling up Mt. Doom. This year I arrived at Wiko full of anxious resolve. I had a very rough draft of five of seven planned chapters, mostly the result of Pete's hard work over the previous year. My plan was to finish it before the year was out. It seemed that the freedom provided by Wiko would make it possible, but if I failed I would have no excuses. It is now the middle of July, and miracles of miracles all seven chapters are done. The whole shebang will be ready to go to the publisher for reviews as soon as we clean up the references. What a feeling of relief!

Losing the millstone wasn't the only good thing about my year at the Wissenschaftskolleg, either. In September, the new *Rektor* was installed at a ceremony attended by what seemed like much of the elites of German society. One of the speakers was the former head of Nordrhein-Westfalen, home of the ZiF. He went on at some length comparing the ZiF favorably with the Wissenschaftskolleg. Having spent a year at both institutions, I have exactly the opposite opinion. The staff makes the institute, and the Wiko staff that I dealt with were terrific. It all begins with Barbara Sanders, who knows all, manages all, and does all with immense good humor. Christine Klöhn and Katarzyna Speder went out of their way to be kind and helpful during November and December, when I was on crutches (see *Bad* below). Andrea Friedrich handled passports and insurance and rescued us from impenetrable bureaucratic mysteries. The competence and resourcefulness of Sofia Pick, Wiebke Güse, and Christian Schmitz made preparing my *Dienstagskolloquium* a breeze. To these and all the other staff, many thanks. The other thing that makes the institute is the Fellows, and this year at least, the Fellows were an interesting bunch. I learned a lot and made many new friends.

The final good thing that happened this year is that I found a new love. When I was in graduate school I spent a lot of time riding my bicycle instead of working on my dissertation. Somehow with kids and big city life I had fallen to riding only for transportation. After I got off my crutches (see *Bad* below) I still couldn't return to running for several

months, and so I started riding out along the Wannsee most days. At first I rode a heavy city bike, but after a month of being passed by everybody, I decided to buy a new bike, and after a bit of searching met my new true love at the Bikeline shop in Steglitz. She is bright red, weighs less than 9 kg, and is short, stiff, quick, and a joy to ride. I had tons of fun riding this spring, and when I get back to LA, I plan to do more of same.

### The Bad

Late one afternoon at the end of October, Joe Henrich (another Fellow) and I were jogging in the Grunewald. It was a fine clear day, and the roads were covered with a thick layer of yellow autumn leaves. Joe and I had been running a lot and were flying along pretty fast, when I stepped on a pointed stone hidden under the leaves. My right ankle turned under me, and I heard a distinct snap. As I hobbled toward the road, Joe jogged off, got the car, and took me to Martin-Luther-Krankenhaus. The good news was that I didn't have to attend the "Meet Berlin" night, but the bad news was that I had snapped the end off my fibula. The next two months were spent on crutches. This turned out to be a major hassle. We lived at Heydenstraße, about 3 km from the institute. I couldn't drive and couldn't ride my bicycle, and crutching along the icy winter sidewalks of Berlin was not easy. In January, I was off crutches but forbidden to run by my traumatologist, Professor Dr. Hertel. He wasn't the kind of guy you disobeyed either: about 60, 6'4" or so, and very fit and very stern – give him a sword, shield, and braids and he could be a Saxon king.

The other thing I wasn't prepared for was Berlin weather. When we first got to Berlin last August, I happened to meet Clark Barrett, a postdoc at Gerd Gigerenzer's MPI and another expat Californian. It was sunny, humid, and hot, and I complained that it was hard to exercise. Clark laughed, and said it was likely the last sunny day we would see. I thought he was joking. It started raining the next week, and it was cold and gray and miserable until May. The Berliners kept saying what a mild winter it was. Maybe so, but for us California dreamers, it seemed that winter would never end.

### The Ugly

September 11. It had been a gray drizzly day, and I waited until late afternoon to go jogging. As I started out, I tuned my little radio to the World Service. There was some talking head going on about terrorism. At first he seemed like one of those Dr. Strangelove types,

thinking about the unthinkable, spinning out a worse case scenario to get people to spend more money on spies, defense, etc. However, as I listened it slowly dawned on me that this was real. Somebody actually had crashed an airliner into the World Trade Center, and hundreds or maybe even thousands of people were dying. I rushed home and, lacking a TV, logged onto the CNN website. It was horrendous – the slow-motion collapse of giant structures full of people, the leapers who chose certain death over the fire, and the fourth plane somewhere searching for another target.

The aftermath was less gruesome, but more disquieting. For me the message from September 11 was clear: we had an enemy to reckon with. Our enemy was somebody who wanted to kill me, my family, my friends; and everything else I hold dear. Moreover it was somebody who could recruit 20 grown men with wives and families to take part in a mission that entailed 18 months of planning and training, all with the sure knowledge that they would die if the mission was successful. It is a frightening prospect.

The first reaction here was an outpouring of sympathy. The sidewalk outside the U.S. consulate on Clayallee was covered with flowers, and thousands of people kept a vigil. However, a couple of days after the event itself I went to pick up my daughter at a friend's house. Ruby was busy, so her friend's mother and I got to talking. She knew I was an American, but nonetheless was unguarded in her anger and disgust at Bush's just announced War on Terrorism. "Americans are so nationalistic and violent," she said, "You can't solve anything that way." Later, when it became clear that the U.S. was mobilizing for strikes against the Taliban government of Afghanistan, one of the Fellows and I had a heated discussion over lunch at the Kolleg. He was deeply opposed to any military intervention. "It's only 5000 people," he said, "war can kill millions. We Europeans know this." And, when the war actually began, the BBC kept up a drumbeat of pessimistic, critical reporting. There were other voices, of course, but as time went on my main impression is that there is little support in Europe for trying to destroy Al Qaeda.

It is hard to know what is the best course of action. History is full of examples of bellicose powers that blundered into costly, self-destructive wars through pride and overconfidence. It is also full of examples of timid self-deceptive governments that failed to defeat their enemies while they were still weak and as a result perished when they grew strong. We have an enemy who wants to destroy us. We need to coolly weigh alternative courses of action, and choose the best one. The most disturbing result of my year at Wiko is the realization that many intellectuals seem unwilling to attempt such calculations.