



ATYPICAL NORMALITY COSIMA RUGHINIȘ

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Shortly after my arrival at Wiko, my friends at home asked me what is it that I have to do here, in Berlin. I answered that I must attend a seminar weekly, and that my other obligation was to take part in the common meal, every day. Of course, they laughed at me and my strange fellowship with no strings attached. It seemed to me bizarre, too, but still, quite natural.

Unlike them, I had had a similar experience before, at the New Europe College in Bucharest. Since then I had tried to position this type of fellowship on my mental map of academic institutions. Well, it was uncommon, but it was not strange, because it made sense. Then I recalled a friend coming back from a scholarship in Barcelona and telling us that there everything was normal, running smooth; with a sociological reflex I thought, then it must be quite abnormal from a Romanian perspective – and even from a global one. Normally, things do not run smoothly, but with bumps.

Indeed, normality has two meanings that often interact: the statistical meaning and the normative one. The reason for this ambivalence is that normality is rooted in expectations, while expectations are both a product of past experience and hopes of better times – hoping for the best, while expecting the worst.

Emile Durkheim has brought this dual meaning to the forefront of sociological understanding by his assertion that criminality is normal – or, more specifically, that certain levels of criminality are normal for a given type of society. He deployed the statistical definition, which contrasted deeply with the moral understanding of crimes as abnormal occurrences. He wrote: “There is no society that is not confronted with the problem of criminality. Its form changes; the acts thus characterized are not the same everywhere; but, everywhere and always, there have been men who have behaved in such a way as to draw upon themselves penal repression. There is, then, no phenomenon that represents more indisputably all the symptoms of normality, since it appears closely connected with the conditions of all collective life.”*

Besides numbers, normality is rooted in rationality. If something contrasts with a rational arrangement, then it strikes us as absurd, unnatural. For example, it is common throughout the world for women to live longer than men. In the countries with the highest human development levels, with a life expectancy at birth of around 80 years (such as many Western European countries, Canada, Australia, Japan, Israel, Hong Kong and others), the difference between women and men is around five to six years, and the probability of reaching the age of 65 is around 90% for women and 84% for men. Is this normal, we may ask? Statistically speaking, it is as normal as it can be, with the vast majority of the world’s societies on the same side of the divide. Still, it is disconcerting, because it reflects a systematic difference in the living conditions of men and women – even in societies that struggle to give equal opportunities to every citizen. There are some countries, though, where the life expectancy of women and men is approximately the same, such as Bangladesh (61), Pakistan (61), Nepal (60) or Zambia (33). Paradoxically, this numerical equality reflects deep social inequalities in the life chances of men and women, which annihilate the advantage that women usually have in life expectancy.

In many other instances, there are social practices that are normal by virtue of their frequency, but abnormal by virtue of their interpretation. Instances of corruption strike us as

* Simpson, George. *Emile Durkheim: Selections From His Work*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1963, p. 62 (from *The Rules of the Sociological Method*).

abnormal, even if they have been common for decades. Political compromises also induce contrariety, despite their institutionalization. In such cases, expectations refuse to conform to the statistical reality, and stick to higher standards.

Academic life is not exempted from such ambivalence. While criteria of academic performance and ethical norms in science are defined and shared, the degree to which they translate into practice is variable from one community to another and the gap between ideal and real is often noticeable and perceived as a distortion. For example: the pressure to conform to the expectations of the financing institution may bias the research in its agenda, in its interpretations, or even in its results. There is a widespread feeling, at least among my colleagues, that we are reading only a little fraction of what we should reasonably do. Communication among peers is fragmented, and it rarely extends across disciplinary borders. We are not aware of what our colleagues are working on – and sometimes the mutual ignorance becomes amazing even for ourselves. We know better what happens abroad than what happens in the neighboring universities. This list of holes in the texture of academic life can continue; most importantly, they are often not only departures from a theoretical ideal, but also from what we feel it could be achieved with reasonable effort – if only ... Nevertheless, while they are diagnosed as abnormalities, they may become, statistically speaking, normal, due to their continuity and, why not, tradition, in a specific academic context.

This “institutionalized abnormality” is, in a way, a sociological paradox, since it means that widespread practices fail to induce the corresponding expectations. One source of divergence is the daily frustration of making compromises that we would rather not make, the clear conflict between our will and rationality, on the one hand, and the external world, on the other. Still, a more powerful force for maintaining this state of perplexity in the face of highly frequent occurrences is the comparison with other social contexts, which opens our minds to the wide range of what could possibly be achieved.

The Wissenschaftskolleg, like the New Europe College, is such an institution that, by its daily functioning, challenges the routines of many academic organizations and thus maintains the level of perplexity at home. Still, in a somewhat mysterious way, it does not seem so strange while in residence – instead, it feels familiar. I have experienced my stay in Berlin as a period of unconditional professional support in many matters personal and all matters professional – the kind of relationship more common in the intimate circles of family and friends than in professional groups.

While the scientific community is theoretically defined as a community of equals, in which the binding force of authority is replaced by the logic of argument, this is rarely the

case in practice. At Wiko, the difference in authority usually associated with relationships of financial support has been replaced by horizontal ties of collegiality.

A research project is often pushed forward by several motivating factors – some intrinsic and some extrinsic. Wiko is an experiment in intrinsic motivation, since Fellows have a freedom that is very close to absolute in its negative dimension, and it is highly empowering in its positive dimension. Its Aladdin's-lamp type library is one obvious example.

Another challenge of the Wiko has been the diversity of research fields that it connects. Weekly seminars have been in competition with daily common meals and with workshops, in an attempt to put together different perspectives and skills. Seminars elicited divergent questions; meals elicited mutual curiosity.

Still, the most interesting feature about the Wiko environment has been the speed with which it became “normal”, even taken for granted. I remember that at one point during my fellowship I realized that the staff was not there during the weekends, as we were, because they were still working in the Kolleg as professionals, and they were not living there as Fellows. This distinction was blurred before, and it faded again. The organizational mechanisms were almost invisible, nothing close to the academic bureaucracy as I knew it from home.

Despite its statistical oddity, the Wiko climate has only rarely (in moments of reflection, usually in the companionship of other Fellows) elicited in me the feeling that it was abnormal. The institution followed so closely my needs, and the answers were so well fit, that they became camouflaged in my daily surrounding. From this point of view it resembled the holodeck in the Star Trek series: the landscape was deeply unusual, but with a persuasive feeling of “home”.