



REFLECTIONS ON A YEAR IN BERLIN  
TOM H. WENSELEERS

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Tom Wenseleers seeks to understand the evolution of social systems, using insect societies as the prime model. Born in Antwerp, Belgium in 1973, he went on to study biology at the University of Leuven, Belgium, where he obtained his M.Sc. in 1995 and his Ph.D. in 2001. Since then, he worked as a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Universities of Sheffield, UK (2001–04) and Oulu, Finland (2004). From this year on he will take up a fellowship at the University of Leuven. He has written extensively on the evolution of insect societies and has published more than thirty articles on the matter in leading scientific journals. – Address: Laboratory of Entomology, Zoological Institute, University of Leuven, Naamsestraat 59, 3000 Leuven, Belgium. Web: <http://www.shef.ac.uk/uni/projects/taplab/twpub.html> and <http://www.kuleuven.be/bio/ento/Wenseleers/wenseleers.htm>

To do a systematic study of how social conflicts are resolved in biological systems – that was going to be the topic of a focus group at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin in which Francis Ratnieks, Kevin Foster and I would take part. Before, each of us had been involved mostly with the study of social insects – ants, bees and wasps – and the various social conflicts that can plague and upset their societies. But conflicts are also rife in other biological systems. Some genes are known to spread at the expense of the organisms that contain them. Biological conflicts can also exist between mating partners, between parents and their offspring and between partners in interspecies mutualisms. And of course human societies are full of conflicts. Reading up on all these various topics promised to be a fantastic way to expand our scientific horizons. And no place could have been better for it than the Wissenschaftskolleg. When I arrived in October, I was instantly amazed at the facilities.

The library in particular proved to be an invaluable resource. Never before had I seen a library that worked with such efficiency. No matter how obscure the references, the articles would be found and delivered neatly scanned into my e-mail box the next day. On top of that we were provided with apartments of unsurpassed luxury and beauty and got our meals served twice a day so that we did not have to deal with any of the worries that normally plague one's life.

Of course, all this did not take away the fact that our project still was a huge undertaking. Not only did we have to read up on a vast amount of biological literature, amounting to tens of thousands of articles. We also had to get into areas we hadn't had much exposure to before, including evolutionary anthropology, evolutionary psychology, experimental economics and behavioural genetics. Reading on such a variety of topics was intellectually most stimulating. I learnt that of all human societies, the Aka Pygmy have the most gender-equal societies. And that church attendance is culturally transmitted through the maternal line. And other such trivia. Reading on all this frequently took us on side alleys. Making us write commentaries on recently published papers. Or making us conceive of papers we hadn't initially planned on doing. While this sometimes distracted us from our main project, it made our stay at the Wissenschaftskolleg all the more successful and worthwhile. I ended up producing close to twenty articles, including a paper in the prestigious journal *Science* with Francis Ratnieks, a major review forthcoming in *Annual Review of Entomology* with Kevin Foster and Francis Ratnieks, and a popular book on social wasps, with a colleague from Leuven. Our main book project will probably still take another year to complete. But most of the required literature study has been completed, thanks to our stay at the Wissenschaftskolleg.

For such an interdisciplinary project, the melting pot that the Wissenschaftskolleg is could not have been a better environment. Nowhere else could one expect to have breakfast with a philosopher, lunch with an anthropologist and dinner with an historian. At times, the interactions with the humanities people proved a little bit tense or provoked some unexpected reactions. When I showed a slide of two hermaphrodite slugs fighting over which would take on the male role, I was accused of male chauvinism. And many expressed a deep distrust in genes and whether they could tell us anything about the way we are. While I often found such reactions slightly amusing or puzzling, given the available scientific facts, it also made me more aware of how sensitive people are when one tries to apply evolutionary logic to human behaviour. Clearly, no one would disagree with the fact that humans have descended from apes – something that in Victorian times many would have

considered preposterous. But when it comes to our behaviour, any evolutionary similarity with other species is usually plainly denied, or put down as purely cultural. In that sense, I felt that the integration of the biological and social sciences is still a long way off.

At a personal level, my year at the Wissenschaftskolleg had a very significant moment. On the 6<sup>th</sup> of November my wife gave birth to a son, Wout, in Belgium. I discovered the beauty of having a child, but also the awkwardness of being separated from each other. A salsa dance course that I enrolled in brought some solace and helped me forget my otherwise rather lonely evenings. Even better, it allowed me to learn a bit of German at the same time. I figure it must have been at least as effective, and certainly a lot more fun, than any of the language courses officially provided for by the Kolleg. Perhaps a nice piece of advice for next year's Fellows?

For a list of works produced at the Wissenschaftskolleg by the "conflict resolution group" in 2004/05, see p. 175 (report of Francis Ratnieks).