



THE WISSENSCHAFTSKOLLEG
EXPERIENCE
MOIRA GATENS

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Perhaps it is true that if one had stayed at home one would have read more, written more and have more publications to show for the year. But the Wissenschaftskolleg does not appear to be concerned to maximize the “outputs” that many contemporary academics have come to internalise as the sole marker of research activity. Rather, the atmosphere and norms of the Kolleg encourage curiosity about one’s Fellows’ research projects, vigorous debate and the exchange of ideas. The Tuesday Colloquia were an education and the range of disciplines represented in our year ensured that the seminars were never dull. The re-

search community was further enriched by the presence of the spouses of the Fellows, some of whom also are academics, all of whom are interesting.

In some ways, being at the Kolleg is like attending a conference that goes on for a very long time. In other ways, the Kolleg is nothing like a conference, because conferences usually involve discussing topics within the narrow range of one's own specialization. By contrast, I found myself discussing, among other subjects, the notion of "absorption" in painting, Arabic philosophy, modernist cinema, the concept of "risk", the benefits of "open access" publication, the work of R. C. Dutt, the evolution of lactase persistence and why it is important to be honest with children who have a terminal illness. These and many other topics were mulled over in the corridors, at lunch and at the Thursday evening dinners. Our research community was certainly intellectually challenging and rich, but it was also an intensely sociable and constructive community. Many of the Fellows from 2007–08 have, I am sure, forged relationships that will continue into the future. It was particularly pleasing to be part of a cohort in which the gender balance more nearly approached what one might expect from a fair-minded and forward-thinking research institute.

In addition to the tempting distractions presented by other Fellows' research, the task of learning at least *some* German was time-consuming. While the tired battle over whether English or German should be the language of the seminars limped on, I was fighting my own battle with the *Dativ*. Almost every non-German speaking Fellow made an enormous effort on the language front. And many German-speaking Fellows, and their spouses, were touchingly patient and kind in the face of non-German speakers' attempts to communicate in German. I always will have fond memories of Frau Eva von Kügelgen's friendly smile as she inquired whether I would be joining the *Deutschisch* for lunch! For myself, I regard as a triumph that I managed an interesting and lengthy conversation in German with a six-year-old at the final Thursday *Familienabend*. (One must keep in mind that the children of the Fellows are exceptionally clever and mature beyond their years!).

Despite the fascinating research projects of the other Fellows, the considerable time I spent working on my German and the endless distractions provided by the spectacular city of Berlin, I am satisfied with the progress I made on my project, which is in the field of philosophy and literature. I spent several months studying the work of Ludwig Feuerbach (in English but consulting the German text) in order to assess his influence on George Eliot (a Victorian novelist and the first English translator of Feuerbach). George Eliot also translated the work of the seventeenth-century philosopher, Benedict Spinoza, whom Feuerbach acknowledged as his precursor on the question of religion. Part of my interest in this

research is to understand how the relationship between religion and morality was conceptualised in the nineteenth century. Although the framework of my project did not change over the course of the year, an informal philosophy and literature *Schwerpunkt* (with Philip Kitcher and Candace Vogler) certainly helped me over several hurdles and has influenced how I now see the project going forward. I completed an edited anthology of twelve essays on the philosophy of Spinoza, completed most of the work of editing a special issue of *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* (on the topic of “Gender and Genre”), drafted four chapters of the planned monograph on Spinoza, Feuerbach and Eliot and presented aspects of this research at Oxford, the University of Utrecht and the Freie Universität.

Although it sometimes seemed as if the Wissenschaftskolleg operated by magic, this illusion itself stands as a testimony to the exceptional competence, intelligence and diligence of the wonderful support, kitchen, IT, library, and language staff. They are the lifeblood of the Kolleg and I am grateful for their warmth, patience and generosity.