



A TIME OUT OF THE ORDINARY:
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I did not arrive at the Wiko with any expectations. I had visited the place before when friends were Fellows, but apart from being impressed by the intangible aura of the place, I had really no sense of how everyday life was organized at the Kolleg. Having been there,

however, I now know that the pace and rhythm of the everyday is set in part by the Fellows themselves, by the sheer accident of the mix of personalities and the projects they bring to and develop while at the Kolleg. In my year, there was a distinct process through which we found the pace of a collective life, a life that, by the time I concluded my stay at the Kolleg, felt enchanted and somewhat out of the ordinary. An experience that, in retrospect, feels both dreamlike and distant but – at the same time – unforgettable.

This, however, did not happen overnight. The physical settings of the Kolleg are charming and have perhaps always been so. The historical and leafy neighborhood of Grunewald with its forests, walks, villas, and lakes presents an idyllic setting in which to spend a few contemplative months. The courtesy and the friendship that the staff extend to the Fellows are simply phenomenal. The library and the catering services could not be better. The living apartments are among the most comfortable I have seen for accommodation for visiting academics. But the magic of the place had something quite unexpected about it, at least for an academic coming from the hyper-professional world of the US research universities. The Kolleg's informal requirement that the Fellows spend time together at lunch four times a week and attend dinner on Thursdays in addition to the weekly colloquium produced, in the beginning, some discomfiture in quite a few US-based academics. I would hear myself and others murmur, "Does this help productivity? Wouldn't it be better to work all day and relax only in the evening?" Some others would say: "This lunch really breaks up the day. I would rather have a sandwich in my office and continue working."

It took me a while – perhaps more than two months – to realize that "breaking up the day" was indeed the idea. Not just the "day"; what the Kolleg was inviting me to break up were working habits developed over long years of an academic life in which one speaks only to the small group of scholars who inhabit one's area of specialization. Here was a collection of forty most interesting people – some artists, some musicians, many scientists, some literary scholars, some historians – and the question was: should they continue to move only along the familiar and narrow grooves of their specialization? But the change was not easy. It went against the grain of all that gets "ingrained" (sorry about the pun) in American academics as the basic habits and principles of hyper-productivity, which usually entails a withdrawal from life and curiosity.

The year at Wiko was a standing invitation to get back into life. Or that is how I experienced it. There is no way one can enjoy being at the Kolleg without engaging the work of other Fellows, many of them in areas far, far from our individual interests. I am su-

premely grateful for the exposure I had to the work of scientists in my year, especially biologists and the scholars who worked on intelligent machines. There was much to learn there – not just about what they did, but also about how what they did made me rethink my own work. I was not alone in feeling thus. I know that from my daily discussions with colleagues closer to my own discipline of History: philologists, literary scholars, sociologists, historians, legal studies specialists, artists, art historians, and so on. This return to the elements of curiosity and wonder that are often drained out of us by the process called “productivity” was something I did not expect at all. Wiko freed me up to explore pathways of thinking that I would not have normally taken. It must have been under the spell of such enjoyment that I did something very unusual during one of my months at Wiko. I researched and wrote a children’s play in Bengali about the ancient Indian emperor Asoka that will be performed in Calcutta this December. I was myself surprised by the ease with which I put aside deadlines and editorial requests to do this (this time at the request of the Children’s Little Theatre in Calcutta).

And then there was the city of Berlin, a magnetic city. I spent much time exploring it. (The German classes helped.) Each neighborhood was fascinating. I used to say to friends, “Well, there is no Taj Mahal in this city, but every neighborhood is interesting.” I gave many lectures around Berlin and in Germany and other parts of Europe. They opened up a world for me, drawing me out into discussions about the prospects of cultural plurality in Europe. I discovered leads I would like to follow up in the future. I worked on chapters of my forthcoming books and found myself especially fortunate to have the speciation group near at hand. Axel and Jim, in particular, took charge of my education and taught me a great deal about how they discussed the concept and history of “species”, something central to my project on climate change. One of my most memorable experiences, however, came out of an unexpected invitation I once received by e-mail. The senders described themselves as the “counter-realism” group of Berlin, a bunch of doctoral students and young artists who wanted to meet with me to discuss some of my work. But they insisted that, since they were not an institution or a bureaucracy, we meet in a park in eastern Kreuzberg, sit in a circle (no hierarchies here!), and go out for a döner kebab meal after the discussion was over. I agreed. It turned out to be a wonderful group of young, bright, and curious students interested in contemporary critical theory. I had a great time. But my greatest surprise came when they posted a photo of our meeting on the web – they had blacked out all their faces but not mine (and another friend’s)! “What if the police got

me!” I asked them with fake anxiety. But this contact with the young was very rejuvenating. It brought me a different taste of Berlin.

Another strong moment of the magic of Wiko was built around friendships – with Michel, Eva, Axel, Jim, Andrea, Srini, Seyla, Christoph, Catherine, Ibrahima, Hector, Sina, Frank, Robert, Holk, Cindy, my Chicago colleagues Jim and Sheila – the names come crowding like little children chasing an ice cream van. That ice cream van – the wonder palace where all kinds of magic happened – was my year at the Wiko. I realize that a lot of quiet labor actually went into making that magic possible. And that is the labor or love or duty – or perhaps a mixture of both – that the staff of the Kolleg, right from the Rector to the receptionists, put in, year in and year out, to make this dream come true. I take this opportunity to offer them my most grateful and appreciative thanks.

Colleagues still ask me, “How was your year at the Wiko? Productive?” I say that it was productive alright, but it was unusual in making work a part of life and not the other way around. My struggle now is to hold on to this principle in an academic world that is organized principally to subvert it.