



BERLIN INTERSECTIONS –
BERLINER KREUZUNGEN
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On one of my first days in Berlin I drove my car from the Wissenschaftskolleg to the Humboldt University on Invalidenstraße. My plan was to visit my good friend and collaborator Peter Hammerstein. My guide – Arnulf Köhncke – instructed me which turns to make. At one point we ran into the big intersection in front of the Hauptbahnhof. This was my first attempt at navigating that kind of Berliner Kreuzung. Worrying about the traffic coming from all directions, I gazed at the patterns of white dashed lines on the ground. Perhaps they indicated how to make a left, but they did not make sense to me. I tried to improvise, got into trouble and stopped at some poorly chosen spot in the middle of the traffic. – Oh, that's not the way to go, Arnulf said, but don't worry, just wait here until the lights turn the next time and the other drivers will let you pass through safely. I had committed my first *Abbiegefehler*.

Errors while turning – Abbiegefehler – cause aggravation and even serious accidents in Berlin. As I later read in the *Tagesspiegel*, the Berlin Senate has compiled a list of the

city's most dangerous intersections, which perhaps luckily for me did not include the one in front of the Hauptbahnhof. The Senate also listed causes of accidents, and *Abbiegefehler* are prominent.

It seems to me that Berlin drivers have a heightened sensitivity to imminent *Abbiegefehler*. Sometimes when I have been about to make a left in an intersection, a driver coming in the opposite direction has honked at me, as if to warn me that I was violating some rule. Pondering on it, I came to the conclusion that without thinking I had been planning to perform an *altdeutsches Linksabbiegen* – an old German left turn – in which turning drivers keep right and pass around each other. The nowadays accepted method is instead the so-called *amerikanisches Linksabbiegen*, where turning drivers pass directly in front of each other. The name – American left turn – tells the story of the procedure: after World War II, the military vehicles of the American occupying power introduced it to the Germans. Over time it caught on and soon after the 1989/90 reunification it was officially sanctioned in all of Germany. Perhaps the Berliners went through a period of insecurity about left-turn navigation, just as I did.

A stay at the Wissenschaftskolleg changes the Fellows in many ways. There is the experience of being treated with the polite kindness that is a hallmark of the Wiko staff. I never felt I deserved the treatment but it had the effect on me – which I suppose was intended – that I made an effort to deserve it. In a similar way, walking into the main Wiko building and seeing the fresh and striking flower arrangement at the top of the stairs, or the tasteful seasonal decorations in the restaurant, exerted a civilizing influence, setting the expectation of respectful interaction. The Wiko emits many subtle signals to the Fellows, who have a justifiable confidence in the value of their own fields of study and, at least potentially, some skepticism or arrogance towards those of others. The signals guide the Fellows in their interchanges and make them more open to be influenced.

So how was I changed by the many encounters with people and ideas during my stay? This is not easy to say. On first inspection, the answer might be: not very much at all; I am still mostly the same as before. Of course I learned many things, about developmental evolution and the biology of social insects from Robert Page, Manfred Laubichler and the other Fellows in my focus group, or about diverse views on human and animal characteristics in the wonderful discussion group on human uniqueness set up by Steven Lukes. Having studied theoretical physics in the 1970's, I also enjoyed hearing about current ideas in quantum mechanics from Jens Eisert, Tobias Osborne and Ulrich Schollwöck. It

was like meeting an old friend one has not seen in many years: familiarity and strangeness mixed together.

I believe I am sensitive to the attitudes, typical moves and thinking habits of other intellectuals. Perhaps I am not so special in comparison with scholars in the humanities and arts, but at least among natural scientists I feel gifted in this direction. For me, meeting and discussing with people adds a layer of understanding of their thinking that is less easily accessible from just reading their works. As a Fellow I received much stronger doses of this experience, spanning a larger range of disciplines, than I do in my normal academic life. For me it was interesting to discover that there is more overlap between the humanities and the natural sciences in basic epistemological attitudes than I had previously thought to be the case. For instance, I was intrigued to find that David Freedberg, Martin Puchner and Galin Tihanov – all active in fields placed centrally within the humanities – to a large extent shared my views on how knowledge and understanding are acquired. This is not to say that there was complete agreement among the Fellows about how scholarly activities best should be pursued, but such differences tended to be submerged and only rarely surfaced. Still, there were many biologists among the Fellows this year, and my impression is that in the end some of the other Fellows got a bit fed up with always being offered a biological perspective on this and that. There can of course be too much of a good thing.

After some soul searching, I come to the conclusion that my experience as a Fellow has provided me with a clearer view of where I place myself as an intellectual in relation to the world of ideas known to me. The effect is subtle but still profound, as when lifting fog reveals the features of a landscape. My world has grown bigger with new insights, but also smaller because more is now familiar. It is not clear to me what, if anything, I will do with this. I can imagine that the experience changes how I value ways of doing science, perhaps strengthening my preference for work that aims at breadth in understanding. It might also change the attitudes I express in writing and teaching.

Last June, returning to Berlin from a trip to Sweden, I rode a taxi from Tegel airport to the Wallotstraße. Passing along the absurd jumble of roads and buildings near the Messegelände, I was surprised by a sweet feeling of recognition. What had once seemed alien and difficult to place in perspective now appeared familiar and even friendly. Having learned something of the history of the area – for instance about the AVUS, which was built as a race track in 1921 and then became Germany's first Autobahn – and having explored the area on my bike, I had incorporated it into my world. Simple things like

having a beer and a plate of Berliner Bouletten in the company of Fellows at the Floh restaurant near the S-Bahn Grunewald, or going for a bike ride along the waterways of Berlin with Peter and Marlies Hammerstein, all contributed to my feeling of well-being during my stay. The white dashed lines drawn on the ground in the Berlin intersections started to make sense to me. Perhaps foolishly, I even stopped worrying about *Abbiegefehler*.