



THE ROLLS ROYCE OF INSTITUTES  
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I spent the year at the Wissenschaftskolleg with my wife Katha Pollitt, writer, poet and columnist for *The Nation* magazine. Our year here was exhilarating, life-enhancing and horizon-expanding. When I write “our” and “we” here and below it is significant. Because of Wiko, much of the experience of being here was fully shared. The complete acceptance of spouses and partners into the Wiko fellowship (minus the few obligations,

such as writing this and giving a Tuesday colloquium) is unusual and makes a decisive difference to the quality of lives here.

It was not easy to persuade Katha to come. Indeed it took a year, riskily postponing my invitation and sabbatical leave, to persuade her that living in Germany, given the horrors of its recent past, was worth a try. I was aided by the unanimous enthusiasm of numerous ex-Fellow friends. Once here, the evidence of the pervasive confrontation with the German past and the civility of life in Berlin were so clear that Katha's worries vanished within days.

I myself had several strong motives to come. One stemmed from my family history. My mother's father was a rabbi and schoolteacher in a small town, Euskirchen near Cologne, where she and her five brothers grew up, all escaping the Holocaust with their parents. My sister and her family live in Cologne (her husband is secretary of the synagogue) and in November we made an extraordinary pilgrimage with four of our cousins to Euskirchen and to an even smaller town Meudt, in the Westerwaldkreis in Rhineland-Palatinate, from which the family came, where the whole community solemnly greeted us and other Jewish families in the cemetery amidst the gravestones. My mother would never speak German with us, which was a second motive for coming: to draw on such linguistic rudiments as I had, from her and from school German lessons, to try to master the language. (Vain hope! The language courses were great and I ended up reading Nietzsche with the wonderful Eva von Kügelgen, but there is still far to go.) A third reason was that in the 1970s I had been a member of the Bertrand Russell Tribunal investigating the repressive practice of Berufsverbot, blacklisting state employees for their political views. And a fourth was that I had visited the GDR in Communist times and was intensely curious to see what reunification has achieved. What I found was an extraordinarily transformed country.

There were also work-related reasons. My long-awaited sabbatical would be a time to pursue a long-cherished project that I labelled "the sociology of morals" – a topic once central to sociology and anthropology and to which most moral philosophy is resistant. How much moral diversity is there and how deep does it go? And how can such questions be pursued empirically? Among other directions, I began to engage in conceptual and linguistic history and, of course, the German sources were central. Here the unmatched Wiko human resources came to aid me: the librarian Kirsten Graupner and translator Kevin McAleer gave invaluable professional assistance. Preparing for my colloquium was also wonderful discipline, forcing me to try to formulate discussable ideas *before* they

were worked out (the best kind of discussion, at least for the speaker). Two other Wiko-generated opportunities pushed me onwards. One was the request to do an interview on moral progress with the journalist Ralf Grötzer for the Wiko magazine *Köpfe und Ideen*: His sharp, penetrating questions were a real challenge and the published interview a true work of art (on his part). And the other was the invitation to give the Beirats Lecture. I used that to reflect on the question of whether the idea of progress is still viable. This connected with two other lines of interest. One was in the thought of the Marquis de Condorcet, author of the “testament of the Enlightenment”, the *Esquisse d'un Tableau des progrès de l'esprit humain*. While at the Wiko I prepared with Nadia Urbinati of Columbia University (guest at Wiko for two weeks in January) a new English edition of the *Esquisse* along with other political writings illustrating his democratic theory of liberty. The other line of interest was in the current condition and prospects of social democracy, about which I have written and want to research more, and here was a further work-related reason to be in Germany, where experience of and reflection upon such questions is distinctive and far in advance of the USA, where I live and work.

I tried to follow the informal requirement gently communicated at the outset of our stay to accept invitations to give talks in Berlin while resisting those from elsewhere (only partially succeeding in the latter). Truth to tell, I was really reluctant to leave Wiko, where working conditions were so perfectly attuned to one's needs and companionship so congenial. I gave talks at the Free University, the Humboldt University, the Wissenschaftszentrum and the Einstein Forum and in Jena, at a centre for the study of the Enlightenment and modernity, and in Frankfurt, at an “excellence cluster” focusing on “normativity” and I slipped over to Madrid for a great conference in honour of Jose Maria Maravall (an old friend and former Minister of Education) on the prospects for social democracy. Anything more would have been a distraction. I strongly advise future Fellows to resist these temptations.

I have so far described what I was able to make of the projects I came with to Wiko. But, to my surprise and delight, a new path opened up while here. Two early conversations with the biologist Adam Wilkins and the linguistic anthropologist Penny Brown led me to propose setting up a regular discussion group about the question of what makes humans unique – it soon became known as the “human uniqueness” group. Adam, whose constant companion is his dog Jessie, had some intriguing thoughts about anthropomorphism and also about the evolutionary aspects of the question and Penny, who had with her husband written a classic work on “politeness”, provoked in me the question of

whether such a concept was indeed uniquely human in application and, if so, why. The result was a series of great discussions, focussing each fortnight on a different concept – we covered teaching, language, emotions, culture, morality and norms, hierarchy and equality, music, play and coalitions. Sometimes there were visitors and some Fellows dropped in and out but the core group remained loyal. The biologists and animal psychologists were endlessly informative about the latest findings across their fields (notably primates and dolphins) but the discussions were, inevitably, wide-ranging and, of course, inconclusive. For me these discussions and the readings we did were revelatory, since I had never thought about these issues before in any serious way. What fascinates me are the questions: which concepts travel across the non-human/human divide and, of those that do, what seems to be missing from the non-human variant, as it is understood and deployed by biologists and students of animal behaviour? My conclusion from our intensely interesting discussions was that there is no single unifying answer to the second question, but different answers in respect to different concepts.

Whether all these various activities of mine will add up to a coherent set of writings time will tell, but what is already clear to me is that Wiko not only facilitated but decisively shaped them. One example, just mentioned, was listening to the biologists talk and argue (often among themselves) – not only those in the “human uniqueness” group but also the insectologists, including Harald Wolf on walking ants (some of them on stilts) and Robert Page on honey-bees and “the spirit of the hive” (I was glad to introduce him to Mandeville’s *Fable of the Bees*). They have pushed me to think in new ways about what “social” and “social cooperation” can mean and to entertain a less sceptical view of evolutionary just-so stories. A second example, very important to me, has been the providential planting of Dieter Thomä in the office next to mine. His philosophical interest in the “sentimentalist” tradition in moral philosophy, deriving from Hume and Smith, dovetailed beautifully with the direction my inquiries into morality were taking me, but it also turned out that we had other closely convergent interests, in Condorcet and his brilliant philosophe wife Sophie de Grouchy, to whose *Letters on Sympathy* he introduced me, and in collecting antiquarian books. And a third example was my having to reflect on the reactions to my Beirats lecture on progress, not least that of Yogendra Yadav, the brilliant political scientist from India, who challenged me with the very acute observation: that in focussing on what Condorcet called the “unbreakable chain” linking progress in knowledge with progress of other kinds, I was avoiding the question of the ways in which Western-led progress has proceeded by dismantling knowledge of more traditional kinds.

It was fairly late during my time here that I realized why it was that I felt so at home in the Wissenschaftskolleg. I have spent some twenty-nine years of my life attached to Oxford colleges, as undergraduate, then graduate and finally for twenty years as Fellow of Balliol College. Of course I should have realized, as Joachim Nettelbeck pointed out to me, this is not called a Kolleg by chance. The key features that Wiko shares with Oxbridge colleges – and that exist rarely elsewhere – are commensality and disciplinary diversity under one roof. Lunching and dining together – conversing, while engaged in the intimate activity of eating and drinking with colleagues in fields often remote from one's own – shapes and deepens collegiality. In other places where I have worked – the European University Institute in Florence, the University of Siena, the London School of Economics and now New York University – nothing like that exists and academic and intellectual life are much the poorer for it. And I would go a little further with this parallel, or homecoming. The students, undergraduates and graduates, are, of course, missing – and that must be so in an institution hosting one-year visits. But also missing, thankfully, is the aura of self-satisfaction and what I call cosmopolitan provincialism – the sense, now perhaps on the way out, that Oxford and Cambridge set the standards to which the rest of the world can only aspire.

There is no such aura at Wiko, and I hope it will not arise there. And yet I am convinced, on the basis of all the reports I have had from friends and colleagues, that, among Institutes for Advanced Studies, Wiko does constitute the gold standard. It is, I venture to say, the Rolls Royce of such institutions. On the basis of my experience, it is an exceptionally finely-honed context for developing as-yet-undeveloped ideas and for discovering new lines of thought and inquiry. I do not recommend coming here with a whole set of almost completed projects; you can complete them anywhere, ideally somewhere suitably boring. Here you should even be ready to abandon what you thought you were here to do.

It has the huge advantage too of being in Berlin, about which I have written nothing here. Let it suffice to say that if you are in love with museums, with art, traditional or contemporary, or music, classical or jazz, or opera (you have three great opera houses, each with its distinctive traditions) or architecture or the club scene or just walking the city streets, the Wiko is the perfect base and point of access, above all at the hands of the extraordinarily warm, generous, helpful and interesting keeper of the *Empfang*, Vera Schulze-Seeger, with whom most Fellows are in daily contact about pressing matters, large and small. Our experience of Berlin was thus, inevitably, Grunewald-based and

hence very limited and indeed distorted. But Wiko made really imaginative efforts, assigning at the outset a historically minded architect, Rolf Zimmermann, to show us areas beyond the touristic comfortzone. Berlin is physically and socially open, less aggressive in its capitalism and less abrasive in its social interactions than any other metropolitan city I know. Exploring it was still at too early a stage as our year ends and Katha, I am more than happy to report, is as keen as I am to return, as soon as possible.