



OF RATS AND APES
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I probably owe my life as a scientist to rats. The details are not so important, apart from the fact that, because of them, it became obvious to me what I wanted to do: to understand how the mind works, preferably the non-human one. During an animal behaviour practical at the University of Zurich, one of us had the idea to teach a lab rat a new skill to see whether other cage mates appreciated this. We found some effects, I don't remember the details, but I finally knew I was on the right track. For my diploma thesis, I was able to study wild monkeys in the Ivory Coast and then one thing led to another. I graduated in Zoology and Anthropology from Zurich in 1993, obtained a Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania in 1998, followed by a postdoctoral position at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology. In 2001, I got my first job as a lecturer at the University of St. Andrews, where I still am. – Address: School of Psychology, University of St. Andrews, South Street, St. Andrews, Fife, KY16 9JP, Great Britain.

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I came to Berlin as part of a focus group on animal communication, joined by another St. Andrews researcher, Vincent Janik, an expert on marine mammals. Originally from Berlin, Vincent knew the Wissenschaftskolleg and all its virtues, and I was easily convinced to put in a joint application. We wrote a proposal and obtained an invitation; it all seemed very easy. As the departure date approached, however, matters became remarkably more complex. How can one morally justify uprooting five other lives, four of which were under the age of 9, for the simple benefit of not having to teach or going to meetings for one year? How could we handle so much uncertainty with so little extra capacity and so few language

skills? In the end we did travel; we exited the Autobahn into the Grunewald in a bouncing car with a broken suspension, and arrived in a Berlin with summer in full swing: heat, bicycling, the “naked lake”, the Floh restaurant, the Flohmarkts, history at every doorstep, creative ambition and city sidewalk cafes all over. I lived in Berlin more than 10 years ago, but now it was different. It was great to be in the centre of all this past and blossoming presence. Yet, the slightly bitter discovery was that, as parents, the priorities lie elsewhere. Settling our four little minds was unexpectedly much harder, in every way, and this went on for some long months.

Things finally began to improve around New Year. The city had been frozen for weeks, including all its nearby lakes. We finally had built up enough courage and walked across the Hertasee with a bunch of little children in tow, a terrifying responsibility. The ice did not break, and we made it. And the days got longer, slowly and steadily. As predicted by theory, finally, everyone became increasingly fluent in German, made friends at school, gained confidence, and began to take possession of the park behind Koenigsallee 20 – that silent, colossal and circumspect monument, built by Berliners who no longer exist, who left behind a commanding expression of their aspirations for style and grandeur, and (I suspect) hunger for power. Unaffected by all, the children spread their belongings and activities far and wide in this old lot; Schlecker balls, plastic shovels, jumpers, single socks, downed bicycles, guns and hoses, the sandpit, everything hidden and strewn. This bustling activity was a source of joy for me, perhaps not for all other Fellows living in the same building, although there were few complaints. With spring arriving, life finally became what it should have been. The bicycles, lakes, beer gardens, metropolis and all the rest were now a natural part of us. We finally were Berliners. Simultaneously, some personal relationships changed, generally by replacing functional properties with emotions, in some cases intensely: affection and agonism grew, unexpected, unplanned and incomprehensible. And suddenly there was the goodbye party, packing, planning, moving away.

For my work, the Wissenschaftskolleg easily lived up to its promises. Never before have I encountered such an approving and supporting environment, to the point of making me feel guilty (my wife maintains this is a cultural problem: growing up under too much social control). But how did the people of Berlin, whose tax money I was using, benefit from my work? Giving talks provided some assistance in balancing this perception, particularly the ones at the nearby Grunewald-Grundschule, to the people who educated our children and to their friends and classmates. It is never easy to assess one’s own work, but I think it has been a very productive year, by all accounts. My students and I managed to crack several

difficult problems in great ape communication, which (I hope) will lead to significant theoretical progress in the field. The true luxury was all that extra time, not just to read, think and write, but also to interact with the other Fellows, no matter how remote their areas were from my own research. I thoroughly enjoyed the Dienstagskolloquium, the weekly 120-minute marathon of floundering in another field of academic inquiry, learning about its priorities, understanding its methods, pondering its products and comparing all this with others' perspectives in the subsequent discussions. The only contact with the wider academic world I had had before was my solitary weekly readings of the *New Scientist*. Never before have I had such intimate contact with the forefronts of art history, philosophy, physics or robotics. It was eye-opening to see that the world's knowledge, all its cultural and intellectual achievements, are nothing but a distributed network of people who administer it in the quiet of their studies, without knowing much about each other. A particular merit of Wissenschaftskolleg is the conversation it fosters between all these solitary processes; it bestows "Wissenschaft" with a consciousness.

Although our specific interests were all very divergent, some of us were guided by the same central question: what does it mean to be human? A particularly rewarding product from this shared curiosity was a reading group, the best I have ever attended so far. We read and made much progress on topics such as the nature of morality, language and social cognition with inputs from experts in sociology, linguistics, psychology, philosophy, biology and other fields. It amounted to an interdisciplinary experience that one could only have at places like the Wissenschaftskolleg. I still am very grateful for this. Another personal highlight was two workshops born out of our focus group, one on complexity in animal communication and another on the problem of reference. Particularly the second was of notable quality, attended by an international select group of expert empirical workers and theoreticians, including two Max Planck directors. In my opinion, we made much progress on an age-old problem, and this has generated important new material for publication.

It is not easy to sum this all up: hardship, challenge and growth at a personal level; inspiration, integration and progress at the professional level. And none of this would not have happened without a few albino laboratory rats.