



CHANCE AND COMMUNITY
(ÜBER ZUFÄLLIGE GEMEINSCHAFT)
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Because I had been here before, as a “partner” in 2007–08, I thought I knew what a year at Wiko would be like. Returning was attractive not just because of the chance to spend time in a culturally rich city, nor simply in virtue of the advantages of scholarly leisure with the full support of an extraordinary team of *Mitarbeiter* – no, beyond that I wanted to be part of the fellowship, to pass a year in the company of scholars from many different countries and disciplines, with whom I might forge intellectual and personal bonds. So I came with clear expectations. I didn't know in advance that Wiko years are unlike Tolstoyan families, that the happy ones are happy in their own way.

The first hours and days were odd, almost disconcerting. Here were the familiar places, but the faces and the voices that should have filled them were eerily absent. Where were they – Candace and Moira, Ruth and Michael, Sasha and Sabine, and Catriona and Peter? Within a week, however, Koenigsallee and Wallotstraße had been filled with new inhabitants. An experiment in community had begun. Now, as I write this report, as almost all have reluctantly packed and gone in their different directions, the environment is again pregnant with absences, emptier now because I have been part of a fellowship.

In the beginning was *Deutschstunde*. That was already remarkable – and different. For the *C Gruppe* revolved around conversation, lively conversation about interesting topics, among five of us, who came to know and befriend one another, intellectually and personally, *auf Deutsch*. Those early days with Susannah and Thomas, Bénédicte and Mauricio, were an augur of a happy future. For example, a chance remark of Mauricio's brought an enthusiastic response from Susannah, and the Rilke group was born.

The end of the *Intensivkurs* signalled the arrival of many more new Fellows, of meals regularly taken together – and a longer research workday. After years of writing, I promised myself (and Wiko) that this was not to be a period in which I worked on a new book. I wanted time to read and think, and, although there was a collection of articles to bring to conclusion, that was to be the extent of my writing. My aim was to think through the implications of my decade-long turn to pragmatism, to try to formulate a structure that might shape research on a future book. Already I had some materials from unpublished lectures, and I assumed that there would be a simple way of extending my drafts.

I was wrong. The project I'd committed myself to turned out to be larger and more complex than I had anticipated. Furthermore, I hadn't reckoned with the implications of the Atlantic as a psychological barrier: invitations came in from various European countries, suggesting that "now that I was in the neighbourhood" I might visit and give a talk or two ("Berlin–Sheffield – ein Katzensprung" was the heading on one e-mail), and it often seemed churlish to refuse. So, from quite early in the year, I found myself pressed to articulate ideas from my recent work and also to present the first tentative themes from my new general project on pragmatism – in short, writing (and traveling) *far* more than I had intended.

So did all of this interfere with my goals for the year? Certainly, the route I had planned wasn't the one I actually followed. In the end, however, I fulfilled my hopes.

In recent years, I've been arguing that classical pragmatism, particularly that of William James and John Dewey, aimed at changing the direction of philosophy (something that has happened periodically in the long history of the subject). The envisaged revolution was compromised by an apparently advantageous alliance between pragmatism and positivism, but the logical positivists quickly became the dominant partners, and, after Dewey's death, pragmatism became consigned to the margins of academic philosophy. Its recent renaissance takes one of two main forms: some neo-pragmatists emphasize the continuity between pragmatist themes and discussions in other parts of contemporary philosophy; others (Richard Rorty being the most prominent) view pragmatism as rightly

“overcoming” philosophy, bringing it to an end. I agree with Rorty that the pragmatists offer a lethal diagnosis of philosophy-as-usual, but, unlike him, I see possibilities for new directions.

The project I advertised tended to focus on the negative part of this message. The drafts I was thinking of extending were focused on showing how metaphysical excesses might be purged and a healthier – naturalistic – synthetic picture of the world and our place in it articulated. Through my reading, thinking, writing, and talking during the past year, I’ve come to view this as the first stage in a more extensive philosophical program, one that proceeds beyond the displacement of (supernaturalistic) metaphysics, to serious ventures in understanding questions about values, about the workings of collective inquiry and about the haphazard evolution of the institutions that structure human lives.

Out of the various lectures I have given, the dialogue with many different audiences, and my repeated attempts to think through the structure of my ideas and arguments has come a relatively detailed plan for a future book (or possibly a series of books). The project is far larger than I had previously supposed, and the reading I have done has by no means prepared me to start writing. There is much I must learn, but I now have a far clearer sense of what needs to be learned. I don’t know the schedule on which my plan might unfold, or how the details I now have will need to be changed as I try to elaborate them. Thanks to a year of wrestling with the issues, however, I have a structure. It crystallized in May, when I gave the annual series of lectures to the Nordic Pragmatism Network, but all the previous attempts, the false starts and the misstatements that other audiences helped me to correct, prepared the way.

Yet the story of my year isn’t simply one of hours of solitary reading and pondering in Berlin, punctuated by periods of taking the show on the road and discovering where it needed modifying. All those trips might easily have detached me from the fellowship I had so wanted. Wiko could have been the place where I sat in my office, emerging only for a once-weekly colloquium. Instead, conversations of all kinds, with historians and anthropologists, with evolutionary biologists and literary scholars and legal theorists and sociologists, pointed me in interesting new directions. Philosophy was rarely the topic of a discussion – I was the only philosophy professor in our *Jahrgang* – but there are many intellectual sources for the kind of philosophy I aspire to think through. Colloquia and lectures prodded me to new thoughts. Lunches and dinners had a tendency to lapse into friendly gossip and political chat, but they were sometimes intellectually inspiring (especially

when I sat with Ayşe, or with Jeremy). There were wonderfully enlightening one-on-one discussions at teatime at the *Café Wiener* at Hagenplatz. My fellow Fellows have played important roles in the evolution of my ideas. Among them, I am particularly indebted to Ayşe for the subtlety of her thoughts, the sympathy of her conversation and her gift for friendship.

The bonds of the fellowship were not only intellectual, but also cultural and personal. Mauricio's suggestion that our *Deutschstunde* read some Rilke together flowered into the discussion group that often met on Monday evenings, guided generously by Wolfgang and Christa for a while, and later by the gentle lucidity and wisdom of Jeremy, with helpful support from Jurko and Olivier. Those conversations have not only enlarged my understanding of Rilke (and Kafka) but also broadened my literary horizons.

Equally, if not more, significant were the enrichments brought through music. From the beginning of the year, conversations with Mauricio, and listening to his music, have brought uplift and joy. When Hollis arrived, she came with what is probably the most interesting of all our projects. Her concert in homage to the pied butcherbird was unforgettable, her colloquium was captivating, and discussions with her (and with Jon) have opened my mind and ears. Then there was Wiko's stroke of pure genius – inviting Alfred and Maria for a return visit. What they have given us can only be summed up in a recommendation (better: a demand) that they should come back, each spring, to transform the musical and cultural experiences of each generation of Fellows – and also to give object lessons in *Menschlichkeit*.

I know no Arabic, and so have access to Hoda's writings only in translation. Yet the music and the silky textures of her prose can be sensed at least in reading. Or in listening to Hollis and Susannah perform one of her plays – surely one of the most memorable evenings of the year.

So, thanks for so many memories of fellowship, including many besides those already mentioned. For Mark's tenacity in defending (wrong) opinions, his skill at challenging entrenched assumptions, and his exceptional open-mindedness; for Monique's intellectual stimulation and her provision (with Tim) of such a fund of good cheer; for ruminations with Jacob, who really is a natural philosopher; for Khaled's frequent ability to cut through to the heart of things; for the founts of wisdom and harmony offered by Claudio and Elena; for Olivier's wry humor and his *Teddyliebe*.

Rousseau taught us long ago that not just any group of people can form a society. I wanted a fellowship, but there was no guarantee of its happening. We were all lucky.