



A FINALE
MARK VINEY

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The time has come, finally. One always knew it would, but it is still rather a surprise, and a slightly unpleasant one at that. All year long I've toyed with ideas of what to write now, but those half thought-through thoughts now seem dim and dull. As I've read ever more predecessors' yearbooks it's also clear that there's little hope of novelty. My fellow Fellow, and now friend, Miloš Vec told me in the first few weeks of this Wissenschaftskolleg year that he had already started writing his end-of-year reflection. I laughed when he told me this, but now I am slightly envious. I don't normally keep a diary, though I am an avid reader of them. This year I did keep a diary, just for the experience and to try to capture moments of what I anticipated would be a special time. While I've been diligent in this diary keeping, it has become a bit of a chore. I'm not sure it's going to help writing this now.

In preparing to come to Berlin I thought of the Wissenschaftskolleg as a rather pleasant monastery – a place where I would be left in peace and quiet, to do the work I wished. It has certainly been a place where I have been left to work, but the stimulation and busyness has been astounding – very un-monastery-like. Busyness may sound odd, but it's been busyness of the head. I normally sleep very well. I'm asleep within moments of my head touching a pillow and don't stir for eight hours or so. Not so at Wiko. Here my sleep has been very disturbed, yet I'm more refreshed than ever. In the early weeks of the intensive German language course (level A = total beginner) I often stirred around 4 a.m., conjugating a verb, and by 5 a.m. I was awake and up, having to look up the correct answer. The language course finished, and my sleep was no longer interrupted by German grammar, but by lunch and dinnertime conversations and by the Tuesday Colloquiums. Very often I found myself early in the morning going over a conversation from the previous day, trying to reconstruct it or make sure I understood it. Biologically what I think was happening was that my brain cells were being rewired – breaking existing connections and making new ones.

I had eagerly anticipated meeting people from different disciplines, especially those from the humanities. Meeting and talking to everyone was easy, a delight in fact. Trying to understand many people's work has been much harder than I had expected, sometimes frustratingly hard. For the humanities I went on quite a journey. Initially, I eagerly anticipated learning about people's work, but I was then frustrated at how hard it was for me to understand what they were doing, or why. Latterly, my view matured to respect for what I think are the hard things that people are trying to do. Perhaps I was being too optimistic about what one could achieve in a year, and rather this year has set my head in a new way for the future. (And, of course, if only I had had this sort of humanities exposure 20 years ago ...). I thought the start of the year was interesting. Everyone was away from their normal environment and their comfort zone; we all gathered slightly nervously. I think this had a juggling effect on us all, and silently there was a negotiation and renegotiation of self-perceived relative position and role. I wonder if we've actually all been in an anthropological experiment?

The Tuesday Colloquiums became the set piece of each week. I enjoyed all of these, maybe with a couple of exceptions. I think we were probably insufficiently challenging to each other during very many of these discussions. Perhaps this was a good trade-off because we became, and remained, a group of friends, though I think we could have both been more challenging and still stayed close. Chance conversations were very important

too. I took to getting a cup of tea from the restaurant about 9:30 most mornings, because then there were always some people having breakfast who were happy to natter. Sometimes we talked of trivia, sometimes we laughed, and sometimes we had a serious conversation – or all of these together.

My office in the New Building was a slight surprise. It had (and, indeed, continues to have) no right angles. It was actually a few weeks before I realised that it actually had any internal symmetry at all. The room had two desks, which gave me a new way to work. One table was for reading, the other for computer stuff. I think I've spent about two-thirds of my time reading, the remainder attached to a computer; normally it's easily the other way around. I came to Berlin wanting to read widely around the area of phenotypic plasticity, but I also brought some other pieces of work; for example, I was thinking of writing a grant application or two. Early on I decided against writing these applications, because this is what I normally do, and I didn't want this year to be normal. I did read though. I got particularly interested in some recent work (although actually the basic phenomena are known from the 1950's, though only now are the mechanisms being understood) about noise in biological systems, specifically noise in how genes produce protein products. One of the consequences of such noise is that genetically identical cells in identical environments end up being different. While Sarah Reece was in Berlin, we both realised that we were confused about biological bet hedging. Jacob Koella and Steve Stearns patiently put us straight on bet hedging theory, but Sarah and I were still confused about what many people wrote about bet hedging. Then noise and bet hedging came together, because noise generating phenotypic difference among genetically identical individuals is commonly being called bet hedging, but we're really not so sure this is right – and we're continuing to work on this. That I ended up working on this wasn't what I had anticipated, not least because I thought I knew what bet hedging was.

When we arrived there was much talk about previous years' Fellows arriving with secret projects. I think there was a tacit hope that we'd reveal hitherto secret projects. Well I did come with one – something I worked on a few years ago, but which rather dwindled. I haven't done any active work on this in Berlin, but a surprising number of chance conversations (Franz Alto Bauer, Samantha Besson, Luca Giuliani, Philip Kitcher, Clemens Leonhard) kept bringing me back to this. So, I also leave here with a resolve to resurrect this project, that is once I've finished the new things I've started here. Oh dear.

Being in Berlin has given me a new perspective to think about the usual academic environment in which I work. Many things are good: there's a pretty large academic base

and, particularly for the natural sciences, this is comparatively richly funded. Over the last 15 years or so there have been increasing drives to measure and value our national academic endeavour. Again, this seems not unreasonable – it is good to think about how public money is being used. But this simple question seems to have turned into an obsessive, metrics-driven driver of the academic endeavour. Instead of addressing the questions of what we're doing and why, with thought and judgement, ranges of metrics (impact factors, citation rates, grant income) have become all that matters. (Yehuda Elkana pointed me to Onora O'Neill's *A Question of Trust*, which thinks clearly about these questions in other settings.) This has long-term effects too. Whole generations of younger academics now no longer know that it doesn't have to be like this. Worse, they judge the interest and quality of their work by these metrics. I don't deeply know how the Wissenschaftskolleg works – that is, how it gathers Fellows and chooses which different areas to pursue. I get a sense that it carefully thinks for itself, often over some time, and maybe asks for expert advice (which it may take, or ignore) and then it trusts its own judgement. As I look to return to the UK (which, incidentally, will be at a six-year peak of metric counting), the Wissenschaftskolleg has given me pause to look beyond metrics and reminded me what an academic life is and why I have chosen it, and so I hope to keep part of me centred and nourished from Berlin.

The Wissenschaftskolleg Fellows, partners and families became a family itself. In Wallotstraße and Koenigsallee, the Hasensprung and the Grunewald, the Wilmersdorf swimming pool, the Philharmonie, Deutsche Oper or Staatsoper, on the S-Bahn or the M19 bus, one bumps into the Wissenschaftskolleg family all the time. This has been a delight. In the back of the Villa Walther, a whole gaggle of children play together. This easy intimacy of a ready-made community sharing a Berlin life has been a rich joy. As we come to leave, we're mourning. The Wissenschaftskolleg staff are of course part of this family too. One thing that I noticed early on was that the Wissenschaftskolleg staff smiled – all the time! This isn't something one sees so often, but these smiles are real, and this is good for everyone's souls. All the previous yearbooks have said everything that I would wish to say, and far more eloquently, in praise of the staff – and so I simply echo these with my deepest respect and sincere gratitude.