



CONNECTING TIPS OF IVORY TOWERS ULRICH K. STEINER

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I was able to become one of the first Fellows within the College for Life Sciences, joining the Wiko for three months in the fall. When Joanna Masel suggested that I apply for the fellowship, I was curious to experience the place I had heard about from so many different people, all of whom were enthusiastic but for a number of different reasons. The timing turned out to be perfect; I had finished my second post-doc in Paris as a Marie Curie Fellow and was ready (or at least hopeful) to transition to establish my own group. I needed to write some grants and was (overly) optimistic about writing on ideas about stochastic

processes in life histories. During my stay at the Wiko, I got an offer to join the newly founded Max-Planck Odense Centre on the Biodemography of Aging (MaxO) as Associate Prof, which was a great relief but which also meant that I needed to devote even more time to grant applications than I had hoped for.

My project for the Wiko to write on stochasticity in life histories turned more into a reading, reflection, and digging into literature project than proper writing sessions. It was very enjoyable to have this freedom to read for uninterrupted, substantial periods of my time. Unfortunately, this time was short, given the grants I wrote during my first two months at the Kolleg. Still I can strongly recommend the Wiko as a place to write such grants, and the grants would have looked different if they had not been written at the Wiko (I'm not always sure that the referees embrace all the interdisciplinarity I believe in). The focused work that is possible at such a sheltered location, interrupted only by the engaging and stimulating discussions for lunch, was, at least for my taste, the perfect combination for such grant writing. Almost all of the College for Life Sciences Fellows had similar tasks at times and this created a pleasant collective atmosphere. I was also glad not to work on my laundry list of manuscripts that needed to be written (the list rather got longer), though Shripad Tuljapurkar, Tim Coulson and I finished editing a special issue on "Structured Population Models: Construction, Analysis, Inference" for *Theoretical Population Biology*.

The opportunity to think beyond the framework of a manuscript, and the integration of perspectives and ideas from the other Fellows, particularly those from other fields, was too precious to frame myself again in the standard academic formats. The ideas developed will weave into my work over the coming years. The vague definition of what the College for Life Sciences should be fostered the opportunity to just think. Three months are too short, considering the time it takes to get to know the other Fellows, and in retrospect a more structured and organized approach to exchange among the College for Life Sciences Fellows would have been helpful, but the three months were good enough as a great teaser. The lack of organization was something we as College for Life Sciences Fellows were just not putting together, with everyone first needing to arrive and all of us having deadlines nagging.

The evolution working group initiated by Bill Foley was one of the highlights for me during the Fellowship. We started off with some discussions about genotype-phenotype mapping and fitness that frequently drifted into technical details and definitions used in evolutionary biology. After some weeks, we managed to break that pattern and opened

up more and more to general discussions in which we applied evolutionary ideas and concepts to other academic fields and considered the broader influence of evolutionary concepts and thinking for societies. Seeing myself as someone who enjoys and believes in interdisciplinary research, I was still puzzled how similarly concepts, methods, tools and ideas from evolutionary biology are applied in other fields. I also enjoyed having Peter Hammerstein participating at times and thereby linking a little to the scientific community of Berlin.

Even though I grew up in Germany and am German, I had not spent much time at academic institutions in Germany since my undergraduate studies. This made me curious to explore a little in person the “German” academic environment – being aware that the Wiko is not the most typical academic institution in Germany. Talking about the internationalization of the German research community in front of an international audience in German seemed surprising and contradictory to me. Also, the discussions within the Wiko about which language to present the colloquia in were somewhat surprising. If the limitation is that the presenter is not able to deliver in the most common shared language, then restricting the alternatives to French, Italian, Spanish seems understandable from an organizational point of view, but still shows a Eurocentric perspective. To me as a younger natural scientist, the argument about the tight connection between the language and the content that would be lost if delivered in English seems weak given that a large proportion of the audience was not able to follow and grasp such elegance. The questions that were posed after the discussions seemed dominated by people who could follow the presentation in the language presented. It left a little taste of separation and not opening up to the international understanding of the Wiko. I am aware that my view is biased and that some feelings might come from my inability and maybe jealousy because I cannot formulate things so elegantly in any language. The discussions left me with the question whether certain fields are by definition less international than others. For public outreach, seminars in German are desirable.

At the end of January, a month after I had left the Wiko, I returned for a Thursday dinner and realized how much of a family it had become. It felt like coming home, and the warm welcome of the other Fellows and the staff at the Wiko was overwhelming. I had underestimated how much the Wiko grew on me and how important the people became. I am convinced that the contact with the people within my field will remain alive over many years; unfortunately I am a little less optimistic about contact with Fellows outside my field, even though these are likely more important and influential.

I would like to conclude by thanking all of the staff of the Wiko for an extraordinary and impressive job. Not only has the cliché of the German perfection and organization been heftily enforced, the prejudice about Germans being somewhat reserved and cold has also been fundamentally challenged. Thank you so much for everything!!