



WIKO SWAN SONG  
THEODORE M. PORTER

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Theodore Porter grew up on the Olympic Peninsula in the US state of Washington. At Stanford, he took half of his undergraduate courses in mathematics and the physical sciences but majored in History, thereby, quite inadvertently, acquiring a decent preparation for graduate study in the History of Science. His Princeton dissertation and first book were about statistical reasoning across a range of social and natural sciences in 19th-century Europe. After a postdoc at Caltech and a year as member of a research project on the “probabilistic revolution” at the Zentrum für interdisziplinäre Forschung of the University of Bielefeld, he took up a faculty position at the University of Virginia. Since 1991 he has been a professor at UCLA. *Trust in Numbers* made his reputation, while *Karl Pearson: The Scientific Life in a Statistical Age* is his least successful and most interesting book. His press wants the next one to be called *The Unknown History of Human Heredity*. – Address: Department of History, University of California at Los Angeles, 6265 Bunche Hall, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1473, USA. E-mail: tporter@history.ucla.edu

Many of us were surprised to learn what modest demands the Wissenschaftskolleg puts on its members. There was no expectation that the group I had helped to assemble, scholars from various disciplines interested in the worldly uses of quantification, should produce an edited book or other collective project. Nor did Maecenas press us to get papers out or to complete the books we promised. The administration seemed to prefer that we devote time to something quite different, and even asked us during introductions to identify a secret project. We had a heavy responsibility to join the lunches and dinner each week.

No, Wiko did not press us to be productive in any ordinary way. The work of power here is more subtle. It wanted merely to change our lives. To this end, the staff took charge of quite a lot of the ordinary concerns of life, including the complications of moving to Berlin, finding a place to live, and registering with the authorities. Can it be by accident that we were surrounded by artists and musicians, including several Fellows and still more partners and even children? A weekly group meeting explored visual themes in scholarship and art. Many of us think of ourselves as writers, though mostly of nonfiction. Some of us work across the boundary of natural science and humanistic themes.

Although I spent a lot of evenings at concerts and operas, I was among those disciplined souls who resisted the temptation to sacrifice my research project for something new. And still the resources of Wiko got in the way of finishing it. The temptation of the archives was the least of the problems, but has to be mentioned. In the course of a discussion with our librarians about where I might turn up 19th-century reports from the institution at Leubus, a convent turned asylum in what was then Prussian Silesia, it occurred to me this information had probably been filed with the relevant ministry and might be sitting in archives. And so it had, as they soon discovered. In a few weeks I had a two-page list of relevant sources in the Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz [I love this name: the *secret* state archive of Prussian cultural heritage]. My gradual recognition of the significance of Leubus for my book was already forcing me to work up in detail a topic I had thought might be worth a paragraph. In the end I had a radically different chapter, at the cost of an extra month.

The Wiko library was the smiling face of a conspiracy to hold me back. Some years earlier, as I made my way through the 19th-century numbers of the *Annales Médico-Psychologiques*, I had been interested to discover a French commentary on the scandalous 1840 US census, which authorized the announcement of absurdly high rates of insanity among free blacks in northern states, with the highest, at one insane per 14 residents, in Maine. An industrious Massachusetts asylum doctor and statistician soon discredited this result. So what was up with this French author arguing that the high rates must be real since the northern census-takers would have had no incentive to distort them. With the assistance of a good librarian, you may find that he was an anarchist of Caribbean origin. He believed that insanity rates in the US were high for whites as well as blacks, owing to an American preoccupation with business success and the severe demands of puritanical religion.

For the most famous of French asylum doctors, Étienne Esquirol, such causes proved insanity to be a disease of civilization, but he had a rival who insisted that this was rubbish,

that insanity arose from ignorance and barbarity, not education and culture. Esquirol cited Humboldt for the almost complete absence of insanity among the “barbarians” of South America. His challenger needed, and found, his own expert on primitive peoples. That was the Baron Roger, recent French governor of Senegal and a great admirer of the mores of these African Muslims. Soon we had his books, which presented these people not as free from insanity, but as so charitable with the insane and so relaxed about rationality that the mad, though abounding, did not stand out from ordinary life. It gave me an interesting paragraph, and cost me about two weeks.

In the spring, when I reached my chapter on the great French-led “international” effort to harmonize the statistics of insanity over the whole institutionalized world, I thought I should make an effort to get hold of a report from 1864 on the asylum at Blois. Its then director, the aptly-named Lunier, was the great international advocate of standardized madness. His report didn’t seem to be available anywhere in Germany, and I did not know where to find it even in France. But the librarians soon had a copy for me, showing that, behind the veneer of an international congress, the table of causes of insanity in Blois was practically indistinguishable from the one that was said to have emerged a few years later from extensive deliberations of an international commission. This does not by itself explain why the effort so quickly broke down. It seems that after their military defeat in 1870/71, the French stopped answering German inquiries. These are just a few of the opportunities made available at Wiko to deepen my research, and to slow it down. Just once, the librarians gave up hope on an online document that I had in the meantime turned up on my own.

My project was, and still is, about how the data of asylums and of censuses of insanity provided the materials and many of the tools for the scientific study of human heredity. This is not only to recognize that it was and remains a highly quantitative endeavor, but to see how much of its dynamism came from techniques of handling data applied to distinctive populations in institutions, notably asylums, that had been created by new medical and social policies. We see also that the eugenic aspect of the investigation of heredity was present from the beginning, decades before Charles Darwin and his cousin Francis Galton turned their attention to the biological reshaping of human populations, akin to plant and animal breeding.

My fellow Fellows, and in particular the members and friends of the Quantification Group, provided a terrific working environment. There were two of them in the office to my left, two to my right, one downstairs, one upstairs. We exulted in little discoveries,

helped each other with translations, and invented some jokes. As the end approached, the group decided to pursue a plan for an edited volume in collaboration with a group with similar interests in France. Reinhart Meyer-Kalkus seemed pleased when we told him. Wiko appreciates the little indicators of academic productivity, but wants them to rise from our own initiative. I am hoping the edited volume does not develop so quickly that I will have to prepare another paper before my book is done.