UNPREDICTABLE, UNFORGETTABLE
ELENA ESPOSITO

Elena Esposito is Professor of Sociology at Bielefeld University and the University of Bologna. Working with sociological systems theory, she has published extensively on the theory of society, media theory, memory theory, and the sociology of financial markets. She was a fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study in Humanities and Social Sciences at Zhejiang University, at the Italian Academy for Advanced Studies in America at Columbia University, at the Institute of Advanced Studies University of Warwick, at MECS at Leuphana University Lüneburg, and at IKKM Weimar. Her current research project, "The Future of Prediction. The Social Consequences of Algorithmic Forecast in Insurance, Medicine and Policing," is supported by a five-year Advanced Grant from the European Research Council. – Address: Via San Vitale 60, 40125 Bologna, Italy. E-mail: elena.esposito@uni-bielefeld.de.

I went to Wiko in September 2019 to work on the problems of prediction in contemporary society, which on the one hand can produce much more precise and timely forms of forecasting, but on the other hand has to deal with new forms of opaqueness and obscurity – of the future and our ways of anticipating it. What did I predict for my time in Berlin? Obviously I did not make precise forecasts, but I had expectations, and it is curious to see how my experience confirmed and disrupted my work on prediction.

I knew, for example, that predictions tend to be disappointed by the very fact that they were made. So I expected that my experience would be different from what I expected – but this I expected. I expected surprises, but nevertheless I did not expect some of them to be so unpredictable.

I expected that the timing of my project would change – and in fact after a few weeks I found myself talking to the other Fellows about the fact that practically nobody had started their predicted research yet, even though we were all working very hard and very well. I didn't expect it to be such a pleasant feeling, this rediscovery of a freedom from schedules and programs that is deeper than the freedom from deadlines.

I expected my project to change, but not that I would work on a different project – and not because I had changed my mind. When the COVID emergency broke out and distressing data from Italy arrived every day, I realized that the freedom and time availability I could enjoy would not help me at all. Wiko kindly continued to provide us with our beautiful offices, and I could work without disturbance in the silence of my room with a view of the garden (and even with the use of an alternative coffee machine). But I simply could not stay focused on my research on algorithms and divination techniques – which also continued to interest me very much. Precisely to preserve my passion for my theme, I changed my theme and returned to the sociological foundation of my work.

For the theory of society, and in particular for sociological systems theory, which has been the frame of my studies for many years, the COVID pandemic was and still is a challenge. In the conditions of social distancing, when we are all forced to perceive society through its absence, what can a general theory of the social teach us? With the generous support of Daniel Schönpflug and our Wiko contacts, I changed the theme and the title of my presentation from "Algorithmic Prediction: A Study of its Relationship to Probabilistic and Divinatory Forms" to "Systemic Integration and the Need for De-Integration in Times of Pandemic." I started from the observation that the common response to a global emergency is a call for harmonization, close to the sociological discourse about integration. Referring to systems theory, I argued that the problem of our functionally differentiated society is not lack of integration, but rather an excess of integration. When there are difficulties in one area of society, all others are forced to make serious adjustments. In dealing with threats that come from the environment, I claimed, the opportunities for rationality in society lie in the maintenance and exploitation of differences, not in their elimination.

The new theme had the advantage, fundamental for me in that time, of allowing me to combine the pressure of daily life with the object of my work. Reading the newspapers that informed me about the course of events also gave me the material to structure my research – allowing me to stay focused and work, even when I was distracted and worried about current events.

The unexpected condition of the pandemic, which transformed our routine at Wiko, also made me focus on some aspects of the experience of the previous months – what I missed and how my expectations had changed.

I predicted that I would be sort of impatient with the structured rhythm of our days, punctuated by our common lunches and by the Thursday dinner "event"; instead, I missed that constraint on the empty and free days of the lockdown. After a few weeks, the Fellows had transformed for me from interesting and stimulating colleagues into friends – interesting and stimulating, and very pleasant. The common lunches had become a useful structure of the day, which helped me to work in a concentrated way, thanks to the distraction of an engaging and always different break.

I missed the Tuesday Colloquia, and that was predictable. Less predictable was that what I missed most weren't the presentations, but the questions. In my opinion, one of the most instructive and peculiar experiences of the fellowship at Wiko is to participate in a discussion atmosphere in which one is invited to engage with issues and problems about which in the majority of cases one is incompetent or semi-incompetent, in a group in which the same applies to the majority of the others. You can discover then, intervening in person or observing others, how it is possible to come up with questions that are often deviant, but for this very reason interesting, while the discussion takes some unexpected turns for the speaker himself. Being an expert is not necessary – being intelligent can help, but showing it is not enough – and rhetorical ability can be a disadvantage. I hope to be able to treasure this precious experience of interaction and exchange.

I expected to live in Berlin, with its concerts, theaters, Kneipen, and all the activities of a great unconventional and rich capital. After a few months, all this disappeared – but we discovered the Berlin of bicycle rides and promenades, the lakes, the half-hidden parks, and the different communities with their centers and their specific character. I didn't expect spectacular sunsets and sunrises, nor did I expect to discover the enjoyment of running on forest paths.

Everyone in our group of Fellows is aware of this: our experience at Wiko was very special and in this sense unpredictable. Not necessarily enviable, but certainly memorable. I did not foresee it, but I will definitely remember it.

Publications while at Wiko

"Systemic Integration and the Need for De-Integration in Pandemic Times."
Sociologica 14, no. 1 (2020): 3–20. https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1971-8853/10853.
German translation in *Corona: Weltgesellschaft im Ausnahmezustand*, ed. Markus
Heidingsfelder. Weilerswist: Velbrück, 2020.

"From Pool to Profile: Social Consequences of Algorithmic Prediction in Insurance"
(with Alberto Cevolini). *Big Data & Society* 7, no. 2 (2020). https://doi.org/
10.1177/2053951720939228.

"What's Observed in a Rating? Rankings as Orientation in the Face of Uncertainty" (with
David Stark). In *The Performance Complex: Competition and Competitions in Social
Life*, ed. David Stark, 122–143. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020.

"Unpredictability." In *Uncertain Archives*, ed. Nanna Bonde Thylstrup et al., 533–538.
Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021.

"Digitale Prognose. Von statistischer Ungewissheit zur algorithmischen Vorhersage." In
Kann Wissenschaft in die Zukunft sehen? Prognosen in den Wissenschaften, ed. Alfons
Labisch. Halle: Acta Historica Leopoldina, forthcoming.

"A Pandemic of Prediction: On the Circulation of Contagion Models between Public Health
and Public Safety" (with Maximilian Heimstädt and Simon Egbert). *Sociologica* 14, no. 3
(2020): 1–24. https://doi.org.10.6092/issn.1971-8853/11470.

Artificial Communication: How Algorithms Produce Social Intelligence. Cambridge, MA:
MIT Press, forthcoming.