



MURMURATION IN BERLIN  
SOPHIE ROUX

---

Sophie Roux is Professor of the History and Philosophy of Science at the *École normale supérieure*, Paris, where she is currently Director of the research team “*La République des savoirs*,” which is affiliated with the CNRS, Collège de France, and *École normale supérieure*. After her doctorate, she held positions at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science (MPIWG), Berlin, at the Centre Alexandre-Koyré (Paris), and at the University of Grenoble. Sophie’s main research interest is in the history of early modern science and early modern philosophy, and more specifically in the history of Cartesianisms and anti-Cartesianisms in France. She also wrote papers concerned with philosophy of science (e.g. on thought experiments and on mathematization) and with history of philosophy of science (e.g. on Pierre Duhem, on Louis Couturat, and more generally on the so-called French historical epistemology). – Address: Département de Philosophie, *École normale supérieure*, 45 rue d’Ulm, 75005 Paris, France. E-mail: [sophie.roux@ens.psl.eu](mailto:sophie.roux@ens.psl.eu).

The words “paradise” and “refuge” come up repeatedly in past years’ reports. But I would describe Wiko neither as a paradise nor as a refuge. I don’t have a clear idea of what an existence in paradise looks like, but I would expect that every form of work would be proscribed from such a place; despite the blue skies of March, which ushered in the first blissful dives into the lakes and then the intense greens of the spring leaves, the sky should be less gray in paradise than it was in Berlin during a good part of the winter. (I didn’t suffer during the winter though, probably because warm human interactions compensated for the lack of light.) I would not speak of refuge either: I was not really sheltered from the demands of my institution or from the duties I imposed on myself; this year again, the

world continued its crazy race; above all, wherever you go, you take your joys and your fears with you. However, there was a distinctive quality of my experience at Wiko, which I will describe to express the gratitude I feel towards the staff and my Co-Fellows. This experience could be presented as a rejuvenation: as if I had reconnected with the whole of my childhood self; as if I had glimpsed again possible worlds long lost from sight; or as if I was about to embark on an unexpected and wonderful adventure.

Let's talk about work first, because there was work. As always, there were many small tasks to accomplish, papers to complete, reports and letters of support to write. But the main thing for me was to continue, against all odds, a historical investigation that I had embarked on during the pandemic, without having planned it at all. This investigation concerns Jacques Du Roure, who in 1654, i.e., only four years after Descartes' death, was the first author to publish a Cartesian textbook in French. It had the same four-part structure (logic, physics, metaphysics, ethics) as the textbooks then used in teaching, but it added to their Aristotelian content some new ideas that were mostly taken from Descartes. Starting from the indications provided by a document I had stumbled upon by chance, I followed as systematically as possible the clues that emerged progressively, and I began reading one document after another to find answers to some basic questions about the social origin, the intellectual training, and the material conditions of subsistence of Jacques Du Roure, whose life was until then totally unknown.

Playing the detective was fun, but my goal was not only to reconstruct a life. It was to understand why this man educated by the Jesuits had converted to the new ideas of his time and to determine the particular form that his Cartesianism had taken. This led me to gather material for what might be three chapters of a forthcoming book whose starting point would be his biography. Materials on the networks of patronage in the South of France first of all, since Du Roure was protected by Pierre Dalibert, a rich financier from Languedoc, the same one who in 1667 brought Descartes' bones back to Paris to have them buried there with great pomp. Materials on the articulation of a religious context and a political attitude, since Du Roure chose to paraphrase Hobbes to stand in for Descartes' nonexistent political theory, while he came from a region marked by the French Wars of Religion. Last but not least, materials on education outside of academic institutions, since Du Roure taught philosophy, and more generally the liberal arts, without however belonging to a university or to a college. I speak somewhat vaguely of materials: I read indiscriminately, in the hope of catching the threads of a life that seemed more and more mysterious and elusive as I identified some of its elements. It was a disconcerting

freedom at times, but for sure it was significant in an academic world obsessed with productivity.

There is a risk in writing the biography of an individual about whom information is scarce, and this risk is all the greater when the individual in question is neither remarkable nor even typical. I have regularly asked myself what demon was driving me to persevere in a project that was not really a project, at least if this word implies a clear vision of the goal to be reached and of the appropriate means to deploy to reach it. To answer this question, I would say that, notwithstanding all sorts of theories, it is still an open question to determine the relationship between, on the one hand, the material conditions and intellectual contexts that structure our lives and, on the other hand, the ideas or more generally the forms that we happen to produce and that are sometimes transmitted from one generation to another. If, like me, one is in principle skeptical about ambitious programs or great methodological stances, it remains to examine what this relationship is in specific cases. And there is probably something to be gained by examining the case of individuals who, representing nothing but themselves, are only that: cases.

By an unavoidable return to myself, I cannot but ask how this applies to my experience at Wiko. At the beginning, there was the Villa Walther, monstrous by its bombastic architecture, but able to make secret paths emerge between our private lives and a community life that was reminiscent of a summer camp. There was a regular rhythm that reminded me of school time: lunch at 1:00 p.m.; the intimate German class on Monday, where we were led from the burning news of the day to works of literature and poetry; the always exciting and sometimes surprising colloquia on Tuesday, followed by our informal gatherings in the evening; Wednesday and its close reading of Victor Klemperer's *Lingua Tertii Imperii: Notizbuch eines Philologen*; the specific physiognomy of Thursday when a more sophisticated dinner replaced lunch; and here is already Friday, the last breath before the weekend excursions. And then everything started all over again, just like at school. A bit farther away, Berlin was a multifaceted and inexhaustible playground: in spite of blatant social inequalities and growing gentrification, many forms of inclusivity can be felt in most of its neighborhoods; its exhilarating cultural life is easily accessible; countless forests and lakes offer welcome rests after the vibes of the city. Last, but not least, there were those Co-Fellows whom I met again and again, some of them being closer and others more distant, but all finding a place in a moving swarm that indefinitely formed, lost form, and reformed. From the first day to the last, I did not know whom I would be with, what we would talk about, what we would do, where we would go: we

were ourselves, we were together, we were there. There was a certain innocence in all of this, as at the age when, more than thirty years ago, I was eternal. At times, I wondered if this murmuration was its own end or if some of these scattered energies would crystallize into something persistent and concrete. As far as I know, it was not the case: but the story is not over yet.

It remains to be said whether this mode of existence, or rather this mode of coexistence, favored my work on *Du Roure*. Some generous discussions gave me confidence that I could write a book and helped me to imagine what this book could be. But one must go further than the enchanted circle of *Wiko* to grasp the intellectual context from which I was emerging. The globalization of intellectual exchanges, the commodification of universities, the emergence of new technological devices for the dissemination of information, the bureaucratization of academic institutions, the excessive growth of publications, and, quite recently, the expansion of online teaching during the pandemic – all these contributed to a profound transformation of knowledge. In these circumstances, one necessarily asks oneself why to write, whom to address, what form to give to one's publications, what can be expected from them, etc. These issues were also pressing during the early modern period: although historians of science have refrained from using the category of the Scientific Revolution for at least thirty years now, the production of knowledge, the material forms in which it was inscribed and the disciplines that structured it, its transmission in teaching institutions, and its circulation in other social spaces were profoundly transformed in the 17th century. To pay attention to an early modern follower of the new philosophy who wanted to elaborate a popular doctrine and to teach it to all human beings is also, indirectly, to speak about our present.