



A YEAR AT THE WISSENSCHAFTSKOLLEG
ULINKA RUBLACK

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Definition of synergy

1: synergism broadly: combined action or operation. 2: a mutually advantageous conjunction or compatibility of distinct business participants or elements (such as resources or efforts). (Webster's Dictionary)

For many years, synergy has shifted as a buzzword from academia. It is a simple idea: you bring together trailblazing scholars who work on related problems. That way, you achieve diversified approaches and improved outcomes. Usually this happens through a very focused process: scholars self-select co-investigators to pool skill sets. Linguistically, all this joining leads to the use of lots of hyphens – two in the sentence you have just read.

Participants usually self-select scholars who share a similar background in terms of education, ethnicity, and habitus, not least because intense cooperation means spending lots of work and even leisure time together. Synergizing academics will know each other's partners and pastimes. The question is whether selecting for compatibility ensures the most diversified outcomes.

Wiko operates differently. It selects groups of scholars and artistic practitioners to engineer that mutually advantageous conjunction, yet projected outcomes remain mostly in the stars. You will never be told that it was expected that you might have much to say to X or Y. Part of the pleasure of being at Wiko is solving the puzzle that has been set up for you.

Settling into my time in Berlin, it thus never felt as if masterminded synergies went according to plan, but as if *Wiko happened* several times, when the conjunction was right. It felt like magic every time.

I was the first to give a talk that year. *Wiko happened* for me right after Syrian playwright Mohammad Al Attar came up to me. He said: "I am glad you mentioned Damascus." My project was to write the first world history of fashion for the period 1300–1800. It was obvious that I should mention Damascus, but for Mohammad it could not be taken for granted. As a result of Mohammad's presence at Wiko, I started to read with that question in mind: Where and how *are* Damascus or Aleppo represented in the scholarly literature, and where are they missing and why? I read Mohammad's play *Aleppo*, rich in refugees' memories of the bazaars of the city. When I made it to chapters five and six of my book, on the history of consumption as a political project and practices of shopping for fabrics and clothes around 1600, I realized that bazaars were completely missing from authoritative accounts of the history of consumption. Yet around 1600, they were at the heart of key initiatives of urban improvement. They were tightly policed, beautifully clean,

rich in goods, and offered free water to customers. They pointed to a pathway to modernities that needs to be written into historical accounts that focus on Western advances.

Wiko happened – in the sense of *es ereignete sich* – moreover when I was completely electrified upon noticing that Hannah Landecker had a stack of books on starch waiting for her in the library. Researching the long history of ecological changes to result from an increased consumer demand for fashion is central to my book. Starch was needed for linen ruffs and cuffs and shirts to make them seem beautifully white. But in fact, pristine whiteness derived from something black – from potash shipped around the globe in ever greater quantities. Potash was made from burning forests down. In months to come, Hannah and I would go for walks every now and then, to talk about starch, or lichen moss from which dyestuffs were harvested in colonial conditions, and many other matters of biochemistry. We spoke about whether the past of natural dyes could or should ever become the future again, to defy the damage of synthetic dyes, and what happens when bio-engineered extractions of natural colourants in factories do away with the rich culture that used to and, in some countries, still does amalgamate in the making and use of natural dyes.

Wiko happened when Kulbhushansingh Suryawanshi talked about the ecology of pashmina goats, the livelihoods of herders, and efforts of conservationists in Kashmir trying to save snow leopards. Pashmina goats yield some of the highest-grade cashmere fibers in the world. Swept up in the voluminous literature on cotton, silk, and sheep wool in world history, I had not intended to write about cashmere. But this unique fiber links to a culture that is about to be made extinct in Kashmir because of consumer ignorance, climate change, and capitalist business practices elsewhere. Soon I was immersed in books and in specialized journals from India that were difficult to source, to prepare for conversations with Kullu. Hannah and Kullu both participated in a workshop I had the privilege to organize at Wiko, on *The Past and Future of Fashion*. It was an inspiring event that likewise brought together people who otherwise would not have met and it enabled free and open conversation about difficult and political topics that are global in scope.

Wiko happened in so many other ways – as I saw on those library shelves that Hannah, Kullu, and I were all reading Amitav Gosh's new book, *The Nutmeg's Curse*, and soon a small group of Fellows memorably discussed it from the vantage point of their professional expertise; as Eva Horn, Jessica Metcalf, and Britt Koskella and I repeatedly discussed perspectives on evolution and diversity; or that night when a group of us had listened to a performance of Liza Lim's astonishing, fearless compositions and were on the way back to the Koenigsallee in the S-Bahn. It was springtime at last. That night for me

registered how we had become friends in a gentle way that allowed each of us to know and get to know others and their partners and families differently, which could mean that you were just deeply aware of their personalities and sympathetic to the way they just are. As we stood on the platform, a Fellow who tended to suddenly disappear (only to later emerge on the Koenigsallee walking her dog, we noticed) naturally had vanished; another Fellow, who tended to get lost, had gotten lost, but by then we knew not to worry. In the S-Bahn, one of the multilingual boys taught another one Italian. A girl, who sometimes would knock on our door to distribute home-baked biscuits or sweets, was practicing maths with her dad for fun, showing no sign of tiredness. The other Fellows talked animatedly in small groups all the way as we happily rolled towards Grunewald and its refreshing air.

I wrote a nearly complete draft of my book in these months, at astonishing speed. *The Triumph of Fashion* will need much further work, and years to mature and live with, but the opportunity to turn a detailed proposal I had already conceptualised in 2018 into that draft was unique. I am so grateful for that immense privilege, for Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger's utmost support of my research needs, and likewise for the immense support I received from the library. I worked with hundreds of books, often from obscure libraries, and benefitted from Stefan Gellner's brilliant support in researching bibliographies for topics ranging from natural dyes today to early modern shipwrecks. I also finished a nearly completed book I had taken with me to Wiko and an article relating to its subject. Here Lena Heidemann joined the outstanding library team to provide help with the utmost professionalism. *Dürer's Lost Masterpiece: Art and Society at the Dawn of a Global Age* will be published by Oxford University Press in the UK in autumn 2023 and by Klett-Cotta in Germany in 2024, and Wiko made all these combined activities possible. *A Revolution in Colour: Natural Dyes in Europe, 1300–1800* will be published as a jointly edited volume by Bloomsbury, and the introduction was written in happy synergy at Wiko. Generous support from all staff members undergirded all these efforts, as smiles abounded and connections were genuine.

Other highlights of those magic months in Berlin included a close examination and discussion of Iranian silk woven c. 1600 with a curator and expert; many visits to museums; countless meetings with colleagues, old and new; so many evenings with old friends; our adult children coming to stay (both of them now want to live in Berlin); sharing all this, plus concerts, opera, and theatre, with my husband, Francisco Bethencourt, when he

wasn't in the office next door; exploring plenty of *Kieze*, markets, and new shops; and the Andreas Murkudis charity sale.

The charity sale, of course, was for Ukraine. I remember Peter Burke, the cultural historian and one of my closest colleagues before his retirement, talking about his stay at Wiko in 1989, as the Berlin Wall fell. We were the year witnessing another *Zeitenwende*, the Ukrainian resistance to Putin's invasion.