



WONDER YEAR  
MICHAEL TABORSKY

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Michael Taborsky is a behavioural biologist, Professor emeritus at the University of Bern, and affiliated with the Max Planck Institute of Animal Behavior in Konstanz. He studies the evolution of social behaviour and cooperation, complex social organisation, and alternative reproductive and behavioural tactics. He identified three principal ways to succeed in resource competition: *scramble*, *power*, and *cooperation*. The latter has four alternative, mutually non-exclusive selection scenarios: *coercion*, *deception*, *by-product benefits*, and *altruism*. He clarified that *altruism* can evolve if payoffs for all involved parties correlate. Further, he found that *generalised reciprocity*, based on the decision rule “help anyone if helped by someone,” can create stable levels of cooperation under a range of conditions. He pinpointed selection mechanisms underlying genetic and conditional alternative reproductive tactics, established the social niche concept, and outlined the key functions of extended phenotypes as signals. He and his collaborators initiated several model systems to study the evolution of social organisation, including social cichlids, wild-type Norway rats, and fungus-cultivating ambrosia beetles. He has published 240 papers in peer-reviewed journals, edited several collected volumes, was editor-in-chief of *Ethology*, co-edited *Behavioral Ecology*, and published the book *The Evolution of Social Behaviour* (with M.A. Cant and J. Komdeur, Cambridge University Press). – Address: Ethologische Station Hasli, Universität Bern, Wohlenstr. 50a, 3032 Hinterkappelen, Switzerland. E-mail: michael.taborsky@unibe.ch.

My report on this sublime year at Wiko comes in separate parts, addressing different audiences.

*For my fellows and partners*<sup>22</sup>

Cast the dice with a random bunch of intellectuals from as diverse fields as imaginable and let them do as they please. Feed them well and support their odd wishes. Prompt them to interact oftentimes over a year and see what eventuates. A bizarre idea doomed to failure, no? By no means! This is *the* Wiko recipe. As by a wonder, it works. And how! What appears like an omnium-gatherum of classmates develops into a terrific colloquy, in fact turning out to be damn addictive, and in essence, immensely informative. Sprouting especially at and around the collective meals, but that's not all there is to it.

The weekly colloquia provide excellent opportunity for fruitful exchange. *Prima facie*, they expose how the different academic cultures uphold their quirky traditions. Regardless of whether fabulous slides are accompanied by the extemporised ramblings of a natural scientist, verbatim read-off erudite texts are illustrated by incomprehensible miniature pictures in humanities' fashion, or a baffling philosophical treatise is complemented by a hand-out filled with exacting propositions – before grasping the content of it all, be sure to get into the swing of the style. Then you can wholeheartedly enjoy the intellectual treasures presented with zeal. And anticipate the subsequent vivid discussion, which may encompass lengthy speeches of bookish discussants that at times may challenge your patience. In any case, these hour-long discussions are among the highlights of the week: so much to gain from!

A revelation for me was to learn how different fields approach the quest for knowledge and understanding, not to say “truth.” I'm ashamed to admit that I had previously not thought much about alternatives to the reductionist approach we use in natural science. In essence, we attempt to establish causal relationships by rigorous experimentation, aiming to proceed toward an understanding of general principles. This is what I thought it must be. But how can this be applied to the acquisition of historical knowledge? Here I learnt that contingency, prudent interpretation, and source criticism are at the fore. Not that arriving at general principles should be neglected, but it is not the major, let alone “only acceptable” justification of academic endeavour. While in science we are obsessed with the “big picture,” supposedly using the special case just for illustration, the particularity of circumstances has priority in the humanities. In philosophy, instead, critical musings on the multifarious meanings of key terms and underlying processes seem to be the name of the game. The methods suited to promote our understanding of the world have priority over the knowledge itself, as a means to an end. The language of literary culture, fine arts, and music is again a different kettle of fish. Here the absolute often has a bearing on the personal, which is another viable approach to a deep understanding. Social sciences, on the other

hand, use disparate approaches that are based on either quantitative or qualitative evaluations, where some build on thorough quantification while others seem to have a distaste for it. Obviously, a critical validation of the methodological approach makes sense only within each of these different fields; no generalisation across disciplines appears to be appropriate. Quite a trivial insight it may seem, but important notwithstanding (even if only for me).

Some of the most revealing and enjoyable discussions arose on the 400m walk between Villa Walther and the main building, which often extended over much longer than the 5 min needed to cover the distance. I felt somewhat sorry for those who dwelled closer to the hub and thus missed such opportunities. These occasions allowed us to learn from each other's interests and predilections and to plan more formal exchanges on topics of mutual interest. Keen discussions off schedule also continued on our way to various cultural activities, including the diverting choir rehearsals, joint visits to museums, concerts, theatre performances, exhibitions, and public activities (like the Stolperstein-cleaning commemorating the Pogrom Night of 1938, just to mention one memorable example). This was another, important way to come to appreciate everybody and to make friends. Often the bus M19 or the city train S7 turned into alternative venues for enthusiastic discussions, whether sober or quirky.

Why did this all work out so miraculously? Obviously, it depends on the mixture of people. We were told every now and again that we were quite a special crowd. Well, this may be a predicate every cohort receives. If so, all the better. But truly, what is the secret of this success? I suppose first and foremost it is the character of the team players. In our group we luckily missed the overambitious ego, the personality trying to upstage the rest. As if by a miracle, we did not have a single one of these. This is not self-evident, even if as by design we were not competing for any resources. Modesty, open-mindedness, and mutual respect and interest characterised our fellows and partners. Everyone indeed! I really had the feeling that we all liked each other. Exaggerated, idealised, wishful thinking? No, I don't think so. I dare say it was a marvellous experience to get to know each and every member of our clique in all their distinctness and to really become friends. Such brilliant, kind, and broad-minded people – I am not above confessing that I miss you folks, already a few weeks after departure!

*For those in charge and all the wonderful Wiko staff*

The Wiko year 2022/2023: what an enormous success! Even after reading many reports from previous years, it was hard to imagine how well this might all work out. Clearly you are all cunning experts on how to successfully run this business. The course of action

seems clear and simple: invite merited scholars on the basis of promising project proposals, prompt them to interact intensively, and support both their demands and freedom. But how tough does it become if you think of each procedure in detail! How to determine the most auspicious Fellows among the vast crowd of those longing to come? How to compile a creative mixture of savants from diverse fields who are open enough to benefit from each other's expertise? How to find the ideal compromise between providing them with sufficient time for research and creativity while at the same time inducing fruitful interaction? And how to satisfy all their physical and intellectual cravings and needs to promote their progress? Coping with all this needs a prudent approach, genuine devotion, and fierce determination by everybody involved. Not to forget infectious joy and pleasure, as the atmosphere is half the battle. A toast to the whole Wiko team: you phenomenally succeeded!

The support we received at any time and in any circumstance was absolutely captivating. Regardless of whether you needed technical help in your flat or with the IT infrastructure, books or papers for your work, information about this and that, special food due to ailment – everything worked out instantaneously and in the best mood. Unbelievable and outright praiseworthy. Take the kitchen, for example. Not only that Dunia and her fabulous team produced a different delicate meal on every weekday over our entire stay – yes, there were NO repetitions! – but on top they indulged every wish or whim of us spoilt brats. Sure enough, in case of malady the meal was brought to your home door! Dunia's exceptional benevolence was so affecting that embarrassingly, when I bid adieu to her I was choked with emotion.

As for running the business, Wiko is obviously in the firm hands of historians. Even if surprising at first glance, this was certainly not to our disadvantage. If anything, the prevalence of historians may adversely affect only them; while the Fellows from other disciplines benefit from what they can learn from their historical expertise, historians themselves might not get as much back in return from the slightly smaller share of experts from other fields. To that end, the College for Life Sciences is a fantastic extension, what a splendid idea! Concerning the composition of Fellows, an extension toward other fields of science might be worth consideration. Theoretical physicists, mathematicians, experts from geosciences, chemistry, and computer science, for example – many of these folks might not depend on permanently having a lab at their disposal. And if they do, one might get desirable candidates just at the transition to emeritus state. This applied in my case, for example, which for me was a lucky punch.

The rules and traditions at Wiko hint at a thorough and prudent optimisation process. The diversity of Fellows is truly unsurpassable. This concerns every feature, from gender to age to origin to discipline, you name it. The selection process obviously succeeded to balance out everything. But prudence does not end at the preparative level. For instance, the scheme to pay for the joint meals even if not coming is a smart move, as is the tradition to have roughly two regular meetings a week. More may seem enticing but might rather get in the way of the progress of individual projects. The Three Cultures Forum is a terrific series prompting one to really think outside the box. If anything, there could be more of these. The explicit focus on the discussion parts of any form of presentation hits the mark; it makes perfect use of the phenomenal diversity of backgrounds, experiences, ideas, and insights represented in the group. And the policy to support the partners of Fellows just like the Fellows themselves is applaudably wise. Typically, the partners of Fellows are similarly absorbing, and fully including them in the procedures not only benefits the atmosphere, but also clearly enriches the merit for all.

Scope for improvement? Honestly, how can something so well attuned as the Wiko machinery be improved? Well, nothing is so good that it cannot be made better. Scope for advance might exist in the design of evening events, for example. I wonder whether something like the format of the Three Cultures Forum could also appeal to the evening spectacles. Something more in the form of a lively ping-pong of dialogue instead of a mere lecture or interview. Having said that, the evening events were still enlightening as they were! Another issue with scope for improvement is the information exchange about what is continually produced by fellows and partners during their stay at Wiko. The attention of Fellows is drawn to their talks and lectures outside of Wiko in the Calendar of Events, for instance, but in comparison, publications emerging during their time at Wiko are hard to find. Also, for external visitors to Wiko's web pages, the published scientific output of Fellows is inexplicably secluded. It is customary that academic institutions worldwide feature a "publications" button prominently on their homepage. Omitting this is a drawback, because the scientific community interested in the work done at Wiko may first and foremost seek information on just that. Also, for the general public, the taxpayer, and politicians, the productivity of Fellows during (and in consequence of) their Wiko year is an important record of their hard work and ingenious creativity that gives no reason to be concealed.

*For the taxpayer (whether high-minded or sceptical)*

How can the indulgence of a lucky elite of pampered academics be justified in the eyes of the hard-working taxpayer who settles the bill? This is a delicate question, as any argument must bear examination. In plain terms, what added value can be achieved by patching together a group of historians, biologists, philosophers, anthropologists, psychologists, economists, jurists, writers, musicians, and scholars of literature and religious studies from 32 nations to let them think, work, and interact with each other for a full academic year? Well, even if the result cannot be measured in centimetres, kilograms, or light-years, the progress achieved by such endeavour is truly imposing. Each and everyone in these professions is usually interacting among their own kind. This stands to reason and makes indeed sense. However, it inevitably creates tunnel vision. To think outside the box needs stimulation from different fields. Progress in science, arts, and humanities needs cross-fertilisation; this is as sure as death and taxes. The history of progress in human culture is a history of successful interaction between complementary expertise. No price seems too high to promote such interplay. Proof needed? Consult the list of publications from Fellows emerging during and after their Wiko year – thoroughly impressive: <https://www.wiko-berlin.de/en/institute/library/books-music-on-site/made-at-wiko>

*For my own memory*

Bringing Covid-19 unwittingly with us from Bern was not a good start at Wiko for Barbara and me. Missing all the initial get-to-know-each-others was not really helpful. So I enjoyed all the more the lunch conversations during the first weeks after recovery, which afforded so much to learn from my fellow diners. This was a key blessing, and in fact the highlight of every day. For months to come at the meals, no time was wasted with small talk or giddy chatter. Always a tricky decision whom to join – the fellow biologists? Sure, but there was often more to learn from Fellows with a different background. After a while, one had met everyone and the choice of company became less of an issue – without diminishing the intellectual elation.

One of the key challenges became the organisation of one's schedule, with so much time available between video sessions with left-behind collaborators. So much time? Well, I had a new book project and both of us several papers to write up and to conceive, but then – all the distractions! More important ones and less important ones, ranging from appealing conversations with fellows and partners to exploring Berlin and its pleasant surroundings – Grunewald is a magnificent starting point for that matter – from moving

early music recitals to absorbing theatre plays, from immersing ourselves in the copious museum landscape of Berlin to strolling through the political and historical centre of power, from jogging through the Grunewald to biking to Pankow or a refreshing swim in the Halensee (if temperature allowed...), not to forget the diverting choir rehearsals and enjoyable movie nights in the Villa Jaffé. In the end, it is not monastic asceticism we are here for, but for learning and to broaden our mind, full stop!

And then this other sizable threat of distraction – an enormous TV screen in our flat! For those who never had television at home in their life, this is a serious challenge. I now understand even better why we have never got a TV set. Such a waste of time, so difficult to resist the temptation of rather futile consumption. Not that one cannot benefit from informative programs like ZDFinfo or Welt TV, and even the late night talk shows in the main TV stations can be revealing. For someone who never had noteworthy history lessons at school, it was truly an asset to learn about historical world affairs and the turbulent German past, even if cast into a stagy narrative. But time flies, the project is falling behind, alas!

An achievement giving us great pleasure was the workshop we were able to organise on “Division of labour as key driver of social evolution” at the end of March 2023, with many Fellows and outside guest speakers participating. This was generously supported by Wiko and provided a great opportunity to treat an issue of common interest from very different perspectives, including all the cultures represented by our fellows and partners. Subsequently, the Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B have luckily agreed to publish a special volume on the outcomes of this meeting, which is currently being implemented. Hopefully, something with long-term effect from a memorable Wiko event.

#### *For forthcoming Fellows*

It came as a surprise when, at an early wine reception, a member of the rectorate mentioned to me that succeeding with the envisaged project is not of primary importance – in fact, failing with this might even be better. The reason became clear soon after. There is so much to benefit from the interactions at Wiko that may broaden your view, ideas, and approach. Hence what you originally thought of may in the end take a back seat, and rightly so. My piece of advice: be open, and enjoy the marvellous exchange!

#### *For the Federal Minister of Education and Research, Bettina Stark-Watzinger*

Das Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin ist ein einzigartiger Leuchtturm im Wissenschaftsbetrieb weltweit. Kaum jemand, der nicht davon gehört hat, kaum jemand, dem die

Strahlkraft der Wissenschaftskultur in dieser Institution entgangen wäre. Nichts Entsprechendes in Umfang, Ausrichtung und Reichweite existiert anderswo in Deutschland oder Europa. Dabei ist die Funktion, die das Wissenschaftskolleg erfüllt, von unschätzbare Bedeutung. Nirgends sonst haben hochangesehene Vertreter aus Wissenschaft, Kultur und Gesellschaft die Gelegenheit, sich ein Jahr lang intensiv miteinander auszutauschen und ihren Horizont auf diese Art substanzial zu erweitern. Die Leistungen des Kollegs sorgen Jahr für Jahr für erhebliche Aufmerksamkeit in der Welt der Wissenschaft, den Medien und der Öffentlichkeit. Es zeugt von Vernunft und Weitblick, dass sich das Land Berlin und der Bund die Finanzierung der Trägerorganisation, der Wissenschaftsstiftung Ernst Reuter, paritätisch teilen. „Matching funds“ sind ein probates Mittel für die Finanzierung von Institutionen, die von öffentlichem Interesse sind. Sie funktionieren aber nur, solange die Partner miteinander kooperieren, also auch ein gemeinsames Interesse an der jeweiligen Institution haben. Ist das nicht mehr gegeben, blockiert ein Partner den anderen und die Institution ist über kurz oder lang dem Untergang geweiht. Unfassbar, aber genau dieses Damoklesschwert scheint nun über dem Wissenschaftskolleg zu hängen. Das Land Berlin hat sich zwar Jahr für Jahr bereit erklärt, die steigenden Kosten durch eine dringend benötigte Anpassung der Zuwendungen auszugleichen, was der Bund aber bislang unerklärlicherweise verwehrt. Dadurch gerät diese hochverdiente und nach allen Maßstäben erfolgreiche Institution in eine heikle wirtschaftliche Lage. Dies ist besonders prekär in einer Zeit, wo die spezifische Förderung geflüchteter Fellows aus der Ukraine und die Etablierung von Partnerinstitutionen in Osteuropa, speziell der Ukraine, zusätzliche Anforderungen stellt. Eine akademische Institution dieser Prägung kann man nicht gesund-, sondern nur krankschrumpfen, was über kurz oder lang ihr Ende bedeuten würde. Ich vertraue auf Ihre Einsicht, dass Deutschland dieses Risiko nicht eingehen sollte und Sie der erforderlichen Anpassung der Fördersumme an die gestiegenen Kosten – im Einvernehmen mit dem Land Berlin – zustimmen werden.

*For the future*

All this is such an asset – for all the world, keep in touch!