



AN INTELLECTUAL PARADISE:  
*TIME TO THINK* IN GRUNEWALD  
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To be completely honest, before learning about the call for the College for Life Sciences fellowship at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin and deciding to apply, I didn't know that places like this existed at all. Wiko (as we more often referred to the Wissenschaftskolleg—thankfully, for non-German speakers like myself) welcomes each year a few dozen remarkable scientists (from both the natural and social sciences), philosophers, and artists from a wide range of disciplines. At first, the combination was hard to fathom and

frankly a bit intimidating: What could we possibly all talk about? Would I fit in? What was expected of me?

What to me looked like an intriguing experimental design turned out to be a unique and wonderful experience, which helped me understand why Wiko has been doing this so successfully for over forty years.

The entire staff—from the academic team to the kind and attentive people who orchestrate daily lunches and keep the Kolleg’s spaces in perfect shape—were extraordinarily supportive. Still, I believe Wiko is above all made by the Fellows. I was fortunate to be part of an amazing cohort of brilliant people, with whom I shared daily lunches, thought-provoking conversations during weekly dinners, and inspiring Colloquia. For me, getting to know these people was the most enriching part of my time at Wiko, and for that I will be forever grateful.

The College for Life Sciences fellowship at Wiko is explicitly described as “time to think” for early-career researchers in the life sciences—and I took that to heart. From the outset, I proposed an open-ended, ambitious project, one that took me outside my comfort zone. I honestly wasn’t sure—and probably still am not—what shape a potential solution might take. But I was, and continue to be, convinced of the urgency and relevance of the question behind it: I believe that biological systems are intrinsically and profoundly fluid and stochastic and that biology as a field requires a new interpretative framework—one that takes these properties not as nuisances or complications to be worked around, but as fundamental features of life. Until we understand how life uses these features, we cannot fully understand life.

Wiko was, quite simply, the ideal environment for such a pursuit. For the first time in years, I had the mental space to explore open-ended ideas without the pressure to report progress and with the freedom to reflect on unconventional approaches. I found my favorite corners in the Wiko buildings depending on the time of day—whether to read with a delicious coffee, gaze out at the greenery of Grunewald, or take a thoughtful walk around the lake. The library staff were extraordinarily helpful in finding relevant literature, and I especially enjoyed sitting in the library after lunch by the big window, soaking in the afternoon light. And if I found myself stuck, there was always a kind and curious Fellow nearby, ready for a thoughtful five-minute chat.

In some sense, I didn’t accomplish what I set out to do—and in another, I accomplished far more than I expected. I came to Wiko with a project centered on how mathematical modeling might support a much-needed conceptual shift in the life sciences. Over the past

decades, mounting evidence has shown that cells are dynamic, self-organizing, and probabilistic systems—highly responsive to their environments in ways that challenge traditional, deterministic frameworks. I believe this demands more than new models; it requires a new way of thinking about what biological explanation itself should look like.

I didn't arrive at a new interpretative framework during my three months in Berlin. But I came away with something equally valuable: a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the question itself and of the intellectual landscape around it. In particular, conversations with other Fellows—especially philosophers of science—challenged and enriched my perspective in ways I couldn't have predicted when I applied. These exchanges didn't just clarify the stakes of my project; they reshaped them. That, to me, is one of the great gifts of Wiko.

One of the most meaningful experiences during my stay at Wiko was participating in a weekly discussion group on the history and philosophy of science. True to the spirit of Wiko, the group was highly interdisciplinary—not only philosophers and scientists, but also an economist and a medievalist. The topics we explored were loosely framed around our shared interest in the history and philosophy of science and included primary sources, classic texts, and examples from our own work.

I engaged deeply with the group, often bringing in questions from my own project to the discussions. Alongside the Colloquia, these meetings were among the most intellectually enriching moments of my fellowship. They offered me a rare opportunity to understand how different fields approach scientific inquiry—how they frame questions, what counts as evidence, and what assumptions they take for granted.

Out of this group emerged a collaboration that led to a newly submitted article, co-authored with a philosopher (specializing in history and philosophy of science) and an ecologist (with hands-on expertise in experimental evolution). Together, we developed a critique of dominant notions of experimental control. We argue that current control paradigms in biology—while essential in some contexts—may inadvertently limit discovery. In particular, overly stringent control designs can obscure the very emergent properties that are key to understanding complex biological systems. Our article questions entrenched assumptions about experimental rigor and proposes the concept of well-controlled experiments as a more realistic and productive alternative for biological research. This collaboration, which would have been unlikely outside of Wiko's interdisciplinary setting, reflects precisely the kind of intellectual synthesis the Kolleg makes possible.

Wiko is a fully immersive experience—especially for those of us who traveled across the world to Berlin, leaving behind our families and partners. It's more than an intellectual

retreat; it's also the space and the people who inhabit it. One key part of that experience for me was the German classes: first during the intensive course before the official start of the fellowship, and later through the weekly lessons.

I made my first personal connections during the intensive course. Those early bonds helped me feel accompanied and grounded in the weeks that followed. The German instructors were warm, generous, and encouraging—true anchors for many of us navigating this new city and community. I feel lucky to have met them, and I hope to stay in touch for a long time.

There was also something humbling and joyful about sitting in a classroom with highly accomplished scholars—people at the top of their fields—watching everyone stumble through adjective endings and separable verbs. It was a gentle reminder that we all have blind spots and that brilliance in one domain doesn't make us fluent in another. It made us laugh, and it made us human. As one of us put it, "we are all stupid for something"—and that's okay.

For me, even though I didn't manage to speak German fluently after my short stay in Berlin, I feel that something in my brain shifted during those classes. A sort of mental flexibility was unlocked—one I hope to keep cultivating. Language learning, like science, requires patience, humility, and the willingness to start from scratch. And in that sense, my German lessons were very much part of the Wiko spirit.

I cannot emphasize this enough: I am truly grateful for the opportunity to have experienced Wiko. As I kept telling family and friends back home throughout my fellowship, Wiko is simply an intellectual paradise. Returning to reality—filled with bureaucracy, deadlines, and the usual demands—was difficult after such a vibrant, stimulating, and generous environment. But I like to think that part of me stayed at Wiko—or better yet, that a little bit of Wiko now lives in me.

I've promised myself to continue carving out those small, precious spaces where open-ended and risky ideas can flourish. I've also committed to nurturing the kind of conversations across disciplines that Wiko made possible—approaching them with humility, curiosity, and an open mind.

At times, it's overwhelming to reflect on how privileged I am—not only to be an academic, but also to have been welcomed into a place like Wiko. I'm deeply thankful to everyone who makes the Kolleg possible, and especially to those who opened its doors to me. I hope to return one day, and I look forward to crossing paths again with the remarkable people I met there. I'm confident those encounters will continue—through future collaborations, shared spaces of thought, or chance meetings in unexpected corners of the world.