



MAY IT STAND STRONG, AND LONG
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“So, is it like college, more or less?” I visited my home institution a few times over the course of the fellowship year – Berlin is a little too well connected to Cambridge for the distance to entirely loosen the tug of institutional duties – and invariably my efforts to describe the Wiko environment led to this question. For I spoke at first of its obvious features: a multidisciplinary

fellowship, which dined together every day, sometimes with wine, always with dessert. A regular seminar, where we discussed a bewildering range of research projects and consistently found our way to questions like *what is life* and *what is truth*. A big, beautiful period building, where we had sets, small or large, as suited our circumstances. Sylvan surroundings of course, and bodies of water, in which could be espied swimming, possibly fishing, though never punting. Swans. Bikes. Occasional post-dinner lectures.

“Yes, I suppose it is, but, you know, no long-term context.” A feature both remarkably freeing, as also lamented, by the cohort was that our time at Wiko was so limited. A short 10 months – an interlude, in which we could live differently from our usual lives. In the absence of a long-term context, we could talk at meals not about college policies or other pressing institutional matters, but at constructive random. With fewer obligations, we could read more and pursue side interests, long-forgotten skills, and indeed, open ourselves to entirely new fields. Then too, when we missed, as we did of course, our students and colleagues – and in some cases, families – we could tell ourselves it is really only 10 (for some, 3 or 5) months; I’ll be back in the summer.

It is summer now, and having dropped my bags off at my college set, I am visiting my family in India. I am writing this sitting in Munnar, up the Western Ghats in Kerala, South India, where my partner and I have come away for a week’s vacation. The slower pace here – each morning, we stroll downhill and wheeze our way back, the point of our walks being to meet little Pinky, whom we thought a pup and a stray, but have since gladly discovered to be well-seasoned and cared for by some local people – allow us to reflect on the past months of my leave and the upcoming months of his. It is early August, and with the start of the new term over six weeks off, still too soon for me to fully process what a year away in Wiko has meant. But it is already clear that the change it offered from my Cambridge college was not about the absence of a long-term context *in general*. Rather, what I had enjoyed was the absence of the particular circumstances that have shaped the experience of being an academic in Britain in recent years.

For over five years, staff in British universities have been locked in dispute with our employers. The dispute is over falling pay, rising pay gaps and workloads, increased casualisation, and fragile pensions. Ours are not the only worsening working conditions. They are a pattern across sectors, affecting, among others, nurses and doctors, air, bus, and rail transport workers, schoolteachers, and civil servants. With multiple strikes, the winter that I spent in Berlin was reported as a “winter of discontent” in Britain, if different in some essential respects from its 1979 counterpart. There are of course differences in how

intensely the effects have been experienced both within and across sectors. At Cambridge, I am rather better off: my employer takes a more generous line on docking pay, whereas colleagues at some other universities have lost entire months' salaries for participating in the ongoing marking boycott, even if they fulfil every other aspect of their role.

But as I look ahead to the new academic year, with the prospect of a new strike ballot on the horizon – as I tell my partner (who is an academic too, but not in Britain) about it, on a wheeze uphill – I feel more intensely one essential aspect of the time off that Wiko gave me. This was time off not from teaching, which I missed; nor indeed from academic service or “admin,” which carried on. Rather, it was time off from the emotions – chiefly dread and exhaustion – that mark the experience of being in an industrial dispute.

Unsurprisingly, striking is not much fun. As academics frequently repeat, we would rather be teaching. We do not enjoy seeking understanding from batch after batch of students that our working conditions are their learning conditions; that we strike for the future of our universities, we strike in solidarity with our colleagues, that we strike for our individual and collective circumstances. Even though our students do generally understand, we do not enjoy the disruption that strikes pose to carefully planned papers. We worry when graduations must be held up. We do not like cancelling events. Nor do we revel in the sense of division, however respectfully we may approach it, between those striking and those choosing not to.

In place of the heightened anxiety that industrial disputes engender, Wiko offered something else entirely: a very protective and nurturing environment. There was Dunia Najjar's food: fresh, nourishing, delicious, and served with warmth. The gently patterned weeks, with the Tuesday Colloquium, sometimes a Thursday one, occasional evening lectures and receptions, and sessions of the Three Cultures Forum giving definition to vast fertile periods of time (ah time!). Magical housekeeping, reception, and financial services: right from the first day, when Vera Pfeffer waited for me to arrive by my late flight, with her 18-year-old son in tow to haul my bags up the stairs (a feat he accomplished in something rather less than the blink of eye). Top-notch IT. And a general climate of interest in (y)our work; with so many taking initiatives to place it into conversations Berlin-wide and beyond. In my case, one such initiative, spearheaded by Katharina Wiedemann, was a wonderful feature essay (for her magazine *Köpfe und Ideen*) complete with photos that has allowed me the chance to luxuriate in a very perceptive reading of my work by Maxim Bönnemann, editor of the very fine *Verfassungsblog*.

And then there was the library. The thing that every Wiko alum sighed over when I asked them about the place, prior to starting the fellowship. It is not that Wiko's library

is big. Quite the contrary, it is what real estate agents like to call “charming”: two or three lovely rooms within the “White Villa,” its own collections running to perhaps two dozen shelves; on the floor above is an all-purpose studio where we did Pilates once a week. But this comes with the most magnificent research and borrowing services I have ever encountered. Wiko librarians are famed for their ability to procure – within days – practically anything you seek to read. And more: they will write to you, as Stefan Gellner did, offering their help to work out how *they* can advance *your* research, delivering to you, for example, a treasure of an annotated bibliography, or chasing down obscure facts and references.

It is hard to articulate just how much all of this means for any individual researcher. The year is not of course about insulation; there is distance from our usual workplaces certainly, but not necessarily detachment. Nearly all Fellows were engaged in one or another of our standard activities – examining, writing institutional grants, supervising students, sitting on committees, following university strikes. Through our cohort members we also followed the personal as well as public dimensions of events unfolding across the world, from war to earthquake. We learnt from each other about the ways in which academia could be difficult, if rewarding, and the turns that higher education was taking in different jurisdictions. Some in our cohort were dealing with the brunt of authoritarian governments, some others worried about the future of their disciplines. But amidst it all, there was Wiko: enabling, facilitative, reminding us of the worth of scholarship, helping us make it happen. The comfort this gave me is indescribable; and I hope that the institution continues on its mission to expand its reach, opening its doors and opportunities even more to colleagues for whom this version of the academy is not so much a vanishing condition (as it is for us in the UK) as a never realised and now increasingly thwarted one.

The reassurance that Wiko offers against the crises of academia playing out in so many parts of the world is the product of many hands – I name some people above, but in fact I should be naming four dozen, from the Rector and her office, to the vast arrays of departments and teams that welcome us, settle us in, engage with us through the year, and lead to our misty-eyed farewells at the end. Everybody goes above and beyond, with patience and kindness even for the oddest queries and worries. But in addition is that fact that it *is* four dozen people, that there are *departments* and *teams*; and that it continues to stay this way, when the creeping McKinseyfication of the sector elsewhere – so many elsewheres, so many *sectors* – leaves smaller and smaller numbers to hold things together with grit and Sellotape. This too is part of what is at issue in our UK strikes. And it is thus both important and heartening to see in Wiko the persistence of a different institutional imagination. May it stand strong, and long.