

Teaching in the Tyrol

A few months ago, I received an invitation to teach that was both surprising and daunting: I was asked to join with the philosopher, Prof. Marc Bedau, to run a week-long series of seminar afternoons on synthetic biology, at European Forum Alpbach. Oddly little known in the anglophone world, European Forum Alpbach was founded in 1945, almost immediately after the end of World War II, by Otto Molden, to discuss themes relevant to the building of a peaceful, united Europe within a just world. The first was attended by people who literally walked or bicycled to the place but the event was so successful that it became an annual fixture. Each year since, the tiny village



Arrivals at Alpbach, in the early years.

has hosted various seminar series on many topics, attended by some of Europe's brightest students and young professionals. Most seminars take place in the high-school (closed for the summer vacation), the walls of which are covered in photographs of the world-famous politicians, economists, scientists, and other thinkers, who have run the seminars and workshops.

It was the history of this that made the invitation so daunting. A quick web search revealed that seminar leaders of previous years included scientists such as Werner Heisenberg, Manfred Eigen, Ernst Chain, Erwin Schrödinger, Konrad Lorenz, Martin Rees and Karl Popper,



A seminar of the early years; quantum mechanics?

as well as equivalent luminaries of other fields. What on earth were they doing inviting me? After worrying about this for a while, I remembered a wonderful piece of advice from Richard Feynman in his comical biography *Surely you're joking, Mr Feynman*: if other people have judged you capable of doing something and you are not, the fault is theirs, not yours. Chanting this over and over to myself, I replied that I would be delighted to come. I am so glad that I did!

Getting to Alpbach involved a flight, a train from Munich, and being met at the station by a student in a car loaned by BMW to support the event. The entrance to the village itself was chocolate-box



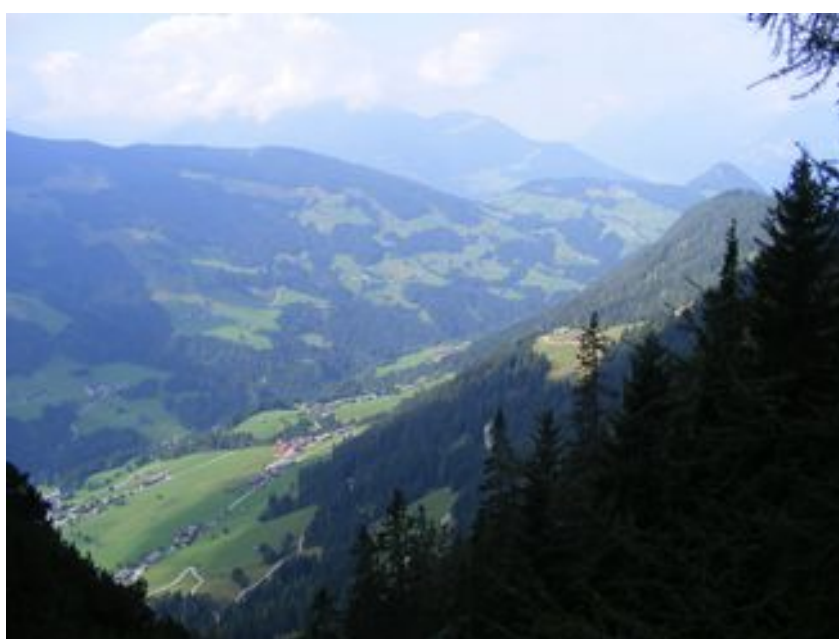
magical, with flower-decked chalets nestling below alpine peaks, the jagged outlines of these young mountains so different from the age-rounded profiles of their Scottish cousins I know so well. Groups of young people chatted on the streets, and I rapidly lost count of the number of languages I heard. The one thing that shone through, whether I happened to be able to

understand the words or not, was that these students were really engaged in the discussions.

The days had a regular pattern: the mornings were free for Mark and me, and we taught in the afternoons, then had a free evening although this usually involved enjoying various impromptu artistic or cultural events being put on by the students. The young people who elected to follow the synthetic biology strand were diverse: a few were scientists and knew a great deal of technical information already. Others were economists, philosophers, theologians and politicians, who wanted to understand the main potentials and dangers of a new technology that they felt might become very important in the Europe to come. What was really striking is how little work we seminar leaders had to do to create really good discussions. Each day, one of us presented some background, with some detailed examples, and suggested points to ponder. Very soon the room was alive with intelligent questions and debates, and I felt that we spent most of our time not as seminar leaders but as

participants in a truly joint event, learning from the students as much as they learned from us. The intellectual quality of these young people was amazing. I have of course sometimes encountered such people at the top of the classes I teach at Edinburgh, but at Alpbach the whole room was at this very high standard. These young people did not merely know a lot: they expressed it well, they argued logically, they politely listened to the arguments of others and, most impressively of all, they allowed their own positions to change in response to what they heard.

I spent most mornings walking in the hills, either alone or in the company of students. Here I learned more of the story of some of these bright individuals. Many had come from the East and their lives had been lived during the adaptation of these countries to post-communist life. Their curiosity about the world, their determination to make a



Looking down at the village, on a morning stroll.

positive difference to it, and their strong, almost visceral, support of European unity were striking. It was not that these people were intense or humourless about their commitment; merely that their personal experiences had made them real believers in education, and in the equality and liberal values that are, to them, epitomized by modern Europe.

The time passed all too quickly, and I left positively invigorated, rather than jaded, by five consecutive afternoons of teaching. I also left with advertising leaflets for next year's event, because I will make a point of recommending Alpbach to any PhD students who have a free summer between their MSc graduations and coming to my lab for doctoral study in the autumn. Alpbach will not only broaden their minds by making them think very broadly about topics in diverse company: it will also give a clear message about the very high standard of enquiry that young people can reach.

Everyone can apply to attend European Forum Alpbach, and there are even financial assistance schemes available. I challenge anyone to attend, to meet the other young people who are accepted as students, and not to come away optimistic that as this generation grows up, Europe will be passing into safe hands.

Jamie Davies,
Edinburgh,
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Links:

- Wikipedia article on European Forum Alpbach: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_Forum_Alpbach
- Homepage for the coming session: <https://www.alpbach.org/en/> (updated every year)
- Prof Mark Bedau, with whom I taught: <http://people.reed.edu/~mab/>