

## **Daniel Frynta sixty years old**

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### **Culture is what shapes us: An attempt to illuminate the origins of an extraordinary scientific personality**

Daniel Alex BERTI

Daniel Frynta was born on 27 August 1963 in the Apolinář maternity hospital at Apolinářská 18, Prague – and as a whim of fate – or as it is called in the Orient: *kismet* would have it, only 200 m as the crow flies from his later scientific workplace, at Viničná 7, Department of Zoology, Faculty of Science, Charles University.

But from his birthplace to his later academic domain, there were still a few very important childhood and youth years to go – to put it in Daniel’s jargon: “...things are a bit more complicated”. And, as it turned out, these years of childhood and early adolescence were particularly formative and later decisive for his choice of profession and career.

This is hardly surprising, because both parents not only had an inspiring circle of friends but were themselves extraordinary personalities, which gave little Daniel a lot of inspiration and in particular great freedom and opportunity to develop his areas of interest.

His father was the Czech writer, poet, translator and critic Emanuel Frynta (1923 Slapy – 1975 Prague), who translated Russian literature in particular, as well as other languages, and who especially cultivated the genre of nonsense poems in his work.

Daniel’s mother was the actress and pedagogue Ada Fryntová-Waldová (1928 Ostrava – 2015 Prague), who later in the 1990s began teaching at DAMU (Theatre Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague) as a principal teacher of speech arts in the creative writing and pedagogy department.

The good preconditions for a successful scientific career were not only due to his genetic disposition (his maternal great-grandfather was František Wald, a university teacher, professor of theoretical and physical chemistry and chemical metallurgy, who in 1919–1920 was elected rector of the Czech Technical University in Prague, ČVUT), but especially that highly inspiring environment that awakened and promoted Daniel’s interests from his earliest childhood. So not only was his genotype able to develop fully, but also a highly versatile phenotype came to its blossom.

Daniel Frynta grew up in the heart of Prague’s Old Town, at V Kolkovně street, in a flat mostly furnished with books and some artefacts, where artists and intellectuals from his parents’ circle of friends often gathered, such as Bohumil Hrabal, Jiří Kolář, Ilja Hurník, Ivan Medek, Jan Lukas, Vladimír Fuka and Eva Fuková, Kamil Lhoták or Jiří Suchý.

And although the family was poor and potatoes were on the menu more than once a week, his childhood can be described as one extremely rich in intellectual and cultural stimulation. Let’s just imagine how little Daniel received questions and answers from Bohumil Hrabal, which were



Daniel with his mother at home in the villa “Na Ořechovce” in 2012. Photo by Andran Abramjan.

probably not always so easy to understand and process; in Daniel’s own words: “When a young child is friends with Mr Hrabal, the bar is high.”

It was this mental terrain that shaped Daniel’s thinking and development much stronger than his years in public elementary school – anyway, he preferred to spend extended sick days at home with intensive reading.

And reading he started even before school, so for his fifth birthday, he received the *Atlas of Two-Winged Insects*. Why he became a strong affinity for biology – but only until he was about eight: now he became interested in anthropology. And then he went back to biology again. Well, since then he has been switching between the two his whole life.

Also from his early childhood on he had a menagerie at home – but at the same time he had top-to-bottom tours of the Náprstek Museum in Prague, so he knew all the Indian and black tribes by heart.

Many, many years later, already a university lecturer, he formulated this integral approach in an interview as follows: “It is impossible to understand us humans without knowing our close relatives. When one studies animals and their behaviour, the connection to humans is perfectly logical; it loses the sense of separating the disciplines strictly, even though they are formally separated. I move at the interface between the humanities and the natural sciences, in the territory of neither and both. A historical perspective is important to our study. History, the evolution of

species. And this is an approach that is different from those truly exact sciences that don't have to reckon with history, like physics. Evolution. Behaviour. Social anthropology. Ecology. That's what I'm interested in."

On the other hand, the menagerie at home taught him very early on the importance of practical observation and experience with animals – and has grown to this day into a remarkable living zoological collection, by now almost a characteristic of Professor Frynta. The realization that without fieldwork any scientific work in the life sciences is pointless also has its roots here: Professor Frynta has become a passionate field researcher and ultimately also a world traveller.

In 1975, Daniel had just turned 12 years old, and his father Emanuel Frynta died much too early. Daniel now remained under the care of his mother, who continued to promote and support him. In 1977, he moved from primary school to the Academic Gymnasium in the Štěpánská Street, Prague (Akademické Gymnasium), where he also successfully completed his Matura in 1981.



Daniel with his mother and his paper animals from childhood, in the villa "Na Ořechovce" in 2012. Photo by Andran Abramjan.





Daniel on one of the legendary student expeditions of the Department of Zoology, Bulgaria, Haskovo, August 1982.  
Photo by Helena Kulíková.

An almost fanatical reader, Daniel was also interested in language. In addition to English, he has an excellent command of Russian, and since his youth, he had been fascinated by the ancient languages of Latin and Hebrew, as well as Arabic, in which he once even gave an interview for television in Somaliland...

The foundations for a broad further intellectual development were laid and, as it should show, these foundations were so rich and varied that an academic career opened almost by itself, which eventually produced a scientist, who not only knew his subject but was used to think and argue far beyond the boundaries of his field of expertise.

It is this almost “renaissance-like” universality of scholarship that distinguishes Daniel Frynta from many other scholars in his field; he is constantly concerned with links to the humanities, especially history, psychology and ethnology, religions, languages and cultures. In everything he does as a scientist, the human and the animal are always intertwined.



And so in 1981 with the study of general biology at the Department of Animal Physiology and Developmental Biology, Faculty of Science, Charles University in Prague begins officially his academic curriculum vitae at the very place mentioned at the beginning of this text...

*A personal preliminary note: This introductory text is not a conventional curriculum vitae, listing all the stages of his career, but rather an attempt to shed light on the origins of an extraordinary personality development from an influential childhood.*

### **Balancing between the Occident and the Orient: The singular academic endeavour of Daniel Frynta**

Jan HAVLÍČEK & Lukáš KRATOCHVÍL

The aim of this essay is to outline the extremely prolific and original academic career of Daniel Frynta that spans across several unrelated fields. Initially, we wanted to focus on the dry facts but that way, we would miss most of the original aspects of his work. To make sure that does not happen, we must supplement the facts with some personal observations. But let us start with some facts from the early days of Daniel's career, events we did not witness personally: he studied general biology at the Faculty of Science of the Charles University in Prague in 1981–1987. His



Return from the Balkan expedition, Bulgaria, railway station in Burgas, August 1982. From left to right: Daniel Frynta, Olga Rothová (born Černá), Dana Holečková, Michaela Šourková and Jaroslav Flegr. Photo by Helena Kulíková.



Participants of the Czech Biological Expedition to Iran, 20 April – 20 May 1996, in the background of the Elborz Mountains. From left to right, top row: Milan Hradský, Ján Obúch, Daniel Frynta, Ladislav Šejna, Václav Pitule, Jaroslav Flegr, Stanislav Komárek, Ivan Hrdý, Petr Kodym, David Král, Vladimír Vohralík; bottom row: Jiří Sádlo, Pavel Rohlena, Milan Kaftan, Zdenka Hodková, Jana Pitulová, Hana Mikešová, Jovana Sádlová (born Čiháková), Štěpánka Hrdá (born Zitková), Lucie Leikepová, Pavel Rödl; bus drivers Tomáš Lundák and Martin Voříšek lying below. Photo by Milan Kaftan.

diploma thesis (named *A Comparative Study of Exploratory Behaviour of Seven Murine Species*) was supervised by Professor Zdeněk Veselovský. In 1987, he was awarded the title *doctor rerum naturalium* (RNDr.). This was followed by doctoral studies supervised by Associate Professor Vladimír Hanák, which in 1995 culminated with the defence of his doctoral thesis on the *Ecology and Ethology of Selected Species of Muridae Family Associated with Their Suburbanisation*.

### **Passionate lecturer**

Already during his doctoral studies, Daniel started to teach as an assistant lecturer. In 2007, he was promoted to associate professor (docent) and in 2019, he was appointed full professor. His lecturing career is closely tied to his *alma mater*, the Faculty of Science of the Charles University, and to the Department of Zoology in particular. His teaching load is extraordinary and includes master courses on subjects such as Sociobiology and Behavioural Ecology, Sociobiology of Human and Non-human Primates, or Ecomorphology and Evolutionary Ecology. We believe that especially his Sociobiology and Behavioural Ecology course had a crucial impact on the careers of many students in 1990s. It was a revelation: amongst the mostly somewhat boring courses which repeated textbook facts and demanded that we memorise them, Daniel's course was most refreshingly different. It was based on a large amount of absolutely up-to-date literature, part of which we had to start reading. But he did not just recite their content: he allowed authors with different opinions to argue in front of us, he switched perspectives, pointed to controversies,

discussed and synthesised conclusions. Daniel also often left important questions open, thus stimulating us to discuss these subjects further in the pub and to search for more information in the books and journals in the libraries (internet was at that time still in its infancy) to widen our views. He took for granted we knew the animal species well and jumped directly into the mating systems, mysteries of extrapair paternity, territoriality, or altruism, without explaining what dunnocks, addaxes, or great spotted cuckoos are. To prevent embarrassment, many of us studied animal diversity in parallel to be able to follow the course. Concepts were crucial for Daniel but the details of each system only a little less important. This was captivating, thought-provoking, and it showed the world of science as a real intellectual adventure. Majority of the regular parts of the course were in fact deep, insightful reviews of the subject. So vivid! And Daniel did not just talk about them – he liked to discuss the issues with a small group of the most enthusiastic students for hours after the scheduled time. Nowhere else one could taste this atmosphere at the



Daniel Frynta and his camel, Merzouga Oasis, Morocco, March 2007 (Expedition of Terrarium Society, Prague).  
Photo by Milan Kaftan.





Members of the Expedition to Roti Island, Indonesia, November 2008. From left to right: Kristína Holubová (born Benkvičová), Petra Frýdlová, Jitka Jančúchová Lásková, Daniel Frynta and Tomáš Protiva. Photo by Ivana Šťáhlavská (born Hynková).

faculty: with the sole exception of Biological Thursdays, regular seminars on evolutionary biology running since 1989 to this day, which Daniel attended and for many years co-organised.

His teaching also includes field excursions focused on the taxonomic and behavioural diversity of animals (such as the Field Excursion in Vertebrate Zoology or the Workshop on Sociobiology and Behavioural Ecology). And last but not least, the Introduction to Evolutionary Biology course, which he teaches together with Professor Jaroslav Flegr and earlier also with Professor Pavel Štys, became a cornerstone of undergraduate biology curriculum at the Charles University. We also should point out that Daniel is an extremely prolific mentor and supervisor. So far, he supervised over 60 undergraduate students, a similar number of MSc students, and over 15 Ph.D. students. Several of his former students later became his colleagues (including one of the authors, who will never forget the brilliant and fascinating disputations during work on their manuscript, when no sentence was too insignificant to escape new and further improvements and full attention).

### **Born to be a non-specialist**

Daniel is an intellectual educated in times when scientific truth and passion for new knowledge were more important than impact factors and grant money. That is not to say that he ignores scientometrics or never applied for a grant. Still, his applications were often considered strange, too interdisciplinary, too visionary, lacking in the application of the latest technologies. Daniel is just not a typical scientist of the Western type who again and again tackles a particular problem,

each time using somewhat more advanced methods, spending millions on them. He is not the type of scientist who could be summed up as “I am not an expert on turtles but on turtle eyelids”. The practically oriented world of current science is not for him. He prefers lengthy discussions about distant past and future alike over the technocratic commands of our time. Perhaps that is also why he prefers the slow pace typical of the East over the endless sprint of the West. He spent a lot of time on expeditions to countries like Algeria, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iran, Libya, Morocco, Somaliland, Syria, Turkey, Uzbekistan and many others. It is easier to imagine Daniel walking around a pet market in Jakarta than in Manhattan. Despite this, he is extremely successful even in today’s research environment that is ill-suited to his nature.

His academic interests can be broadly split into two directions: the evolution of behaviour and human evolutionary anthropology. Importantly, all of his academic endeavours are guided by evolutionary thinking. Since the beginning of his career, there were two groups of vertebrates he was particularly interested in: rodents and reptiles. What he particularly enjoys studying in these groups are the evolution of sexual dimorphism, body size, growth, and reproductive traits. We personally believe that house mice with their low level of dimorphism are one of the most challenging models one could use to study sexual differences in body size, but Daniel tried again and again before moving on to more fruitful models such as geckos (Kratovichil & Frynta 2002), monitor lizards (Frýdlová et al. 2010), and eventually dogs. In our view, his work on sexual size



(left) Passionate photographer in North Macedonia, May 2009 (Expedition of Terrarium Society, Prague). Photo by Helena Kuliková. (right) Daniel with his cousin, an archaeologist and anthropologist Daniel A. Berti in Cameroon, Somalomo, Réserve de faune du Dja, January 2014. Photo by Kateřina Rexová.





A moment of rest during an expedition to Cameroon, Somalomo, Réserve de faune du Dja, February 2016. Photo by Kateřina Rexová.

dimorphism across the breeds of domestic dogs is the peak of this effort (Frynta et al. 2012). It is based on a simple but fascinating idea that domestic breeds are shaped largely by artificial and not sexual selection. The fact that in large breeds, males are larger than females thus brings to doubt the role of sexual selection in the evolution of sexual dimorphism in body size and points to other selective processes that should be considered more seriously. Later, Daniel and his coworkers expanded these analyses to other domestic mammals. Many of the animal studies used the best possible way to learn about evolution: phylogenetic comparative methods, many of which were pioneering in combining morphological and behavioural data. In Daniel's case, the data are usually collected personally, which is in cross-species comparisons extremely demanding. Daniel takes these studies as a scientifically valid excuse for keeping so many animals. Recently, the work of Daniel and his colleagues on growth culminated in another masterpiece, the demonstration that lizards have determinate as opposed to indeterminate growth, a fact that should soon be reflected in every textbook on zoology (Frýdlová et al. 2020).

Daniel was apparently since early childhood fascinated by human ethnographic diversity (for details, see Berti, this issue). In late 1980s, he even studied ethnography at the Faculty of Arts. His curiosity included traditional quests in comparative linguistics, which investigates the rela-



tions between particular languages and language families. At that time, research in this area was limited by the number of linguistic units that could be entered into the analyses. This obstacle was removed by applying new phylogenetic software that had been commonly used in biological phylogenetics already in late 1990s but was extremely rare in comparative cultural studies. Daniel and his doctoral student Kateřina Rexová combined their knowledge and skills in phylogenetics and comparative linguistics, which led to the creation of the first phylogeny of Bantu languages (Rexová et al. 2006) and a significant contribution to discussions on the Indo-European language tree (Rexová et al. 2003). Nowadays, phylogenetic approaches are used in evolutionary studies of culture quite routinely but that is possible only thanks to pioneering studies such as the two abovementioned ones which paved the way to others and their novel approach came to form the mainstream in the field.

Around 2006, Daniel's group started to explore which animals people tend to like and which they do not. Since then, they published dozens of papers exploring various groups of animals, describing characteristics that make them attractive, testing respondents from various cultures. Some of the findings were unexpected. For instance, attractive animals kept in zoos are overrepresented in comparison to endangered species (Marešová et al. 2008). Surprisingly, aesthetic preferences for animals are similar across diverse cultures and irrespective of expertise of the viewers (Frynta et al. 2011). It should be noted that before Daniel's group started to explore this area, the topic was almost untouched by other researchers – perhaps because it is on the interface



Members of the inter-university biological expedition to Azerbaijan, near Xinaliq village, August 2018. From left to right: Barbora Kaftanová (born Eliášová), Milan Kaftan, František Štáhlavský, Miroslav Švátora, Daniel Frynta. Photo by Milan Kaftan.



Daniel during his professor's inaugural lecture at the building of the Faculty of Science, Charles University, Prague, November 2018. Photo by Daniel A. Berti.

of natural and social sciences and therefore on the margins of both. Moreover, to conduct such research rigorously one must have expertise in both fields, which comes naturally to Daniel but is extremely rare otherwise. It is thus no exaggeration to say that he, together with his colleagues, established a fully new field.

While Daniel's group was exploring the beauty of animal diversity, the participants of their studies sometimes loudly commented on some species by using various interjections – and soon they realised that some animals systematically elicit other emotions, such as fear (some snakes), disgust (helminths), or both (most spiders) (Polák et al. 2020). This type of studies further broadened their focus on emotions elicited by animals. In 2015, the group was invited to join the newly established National Institute of Mental Health. Natural intersection between their research interests and mental health issues led to a focus on animal phobias, such as arachnophobia or ophidiophobia. The institute was fully equipped with the latest technologies, including eye-tracking and fMRI, and the group incorporated those techniques into their portfolio. All this effort again resulted in several novel findings (see e.g., Landová et al. 2020, 2023). Unfortunately, the neuroscience line of research was recently halted due to an unfortunate reorganisation of the institute and a change of atmosphere in the previously friendly interdisciplinary working place.

## Conclusions

All of the above cannot quite capture Daniel's broad interests. He is a man with whom one can spend hours in deep conversations about speciation, the causes of aggression, priorities in conservation biology, genetic diversity factors in populations, equine domestication, the Quechua culture, Cuban snake diversity, factors determining metabolic rates... and much more. And of course politics, his favourite subject. Especially geopolitics, a bit in the style of Henry Kissinger, which could at first glance seem too pragmatic and harsh, too focused on balancing different opinions but unfortunately too often true. Daniel, we know how much you admire biological and cultural

diversity. It is great that you contribute so much to it. We wish you the best! Without people like you, the world would be a much greyer place.

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Members of the inter-university biological expedition to Somaliland in August 2018, in front of the school in the village of Buq near Erigavo. From left to right: top row: Daniel Frynta, David Král, local authority, Tomáš Mazuch, David Sommer, František Kovařík; second row, our soldier, Petr Kabátek, our soldier, guide Abdisalaan Shabeele, Petra Frýdlová, Daniel A. Bertí. Photo by Tomáš Mazuch.



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### **Daniel Frynta changing life: Of Mice and Man**

Jovana SÁDLOVÁ

As a high school student, I was looking for a subject of my school paper (known as SOČ), so I went to Řetězová street to the Prague office of environmental protection and arrived, by chance, just when Daniel was sitting there. When I timidly voiced my plea and said I was looking for a subject of my paper on biology, ideally in the Satalice forest, he asked me: “By the way, miss, do you like mice?” And the deal was sealed. He immediately took me to Viničná 7 to the Faculty of Science, where he then worked as an assistant. Well, and to cut a long story short, that is where I have, with minimal breaks, stayed to this day. I often ask myself where my life would have taken me had I arrived in that office in Řetězová an hour later or another day – Daniel apparently visited the place only very rarely.

But that is how it happened, and I feel grateful to my fate for it. Life at the Faculty fascinated me, so I applied to study biology and under Daniel's guidance smoothly transited from working on a secondary school paper to my master's thesis. Those were happy years, when we would sit, in the most remote rooms of the second souterrain, close to terraria, observing the behaviour of mice, or when we sat in Daniel's office at desks overflowing with terraria and books, drinking maté, debating, and writing articles. I think we had the best time when we shared office with Stanislav Komárek and Ivan Horáček, where Daniel's mice and snakes were complemented by Standa's quails and Ivan's bats. We, students, loved it. The Faculty was, with no exaggeration, our second home. Daniel was able to inspire us and motivate us not only in terms of research: immensely inspiring and interesting were also the debates we had with him on various social, literary, linguistic, or philosophical subjects. During the first year of my university studies, there came the Velvet Revolution, and so many things were happening around us, which Daniel helped us interpret and understand. To this day, I am always happy when I hear his views of the society and events around us. His insightful thinking, vast erudition, and knowledge of human culture and behaviour are invaluable in any time period.

But best of all, I loved travelling with Daniel. Regardless of where he arrived, he always made the impression of a dignified professor and sage, even when he was not yet thirty, and this was not only due to the length of his beard. He usually knew the history of the country he visited better than a vast majority of locals. I witnessed, for instance, how he was explaining the grammar of literary Arabic to Arabs who were just watching him with jaws hanging. At official occasions, he gave speeches more moving and entertaining than local bards, trained in this art for decades,

could ever do. In every country, he appreciated local cuisine and never forgot to praise local cooks. His dignified and judicious behaviour tended to disappear only when some object of zoological interest that had to be caught happened to appear nearby. At such moments, Daniel was capable of unbelievable feats, catching the escaping snake or unsuspecting agama with the speed of a cat, persistence of a bulldog, and elegance of ... well, an elephant calf.

Dear Daniel, it has been a great honour to be able to spend part of my life close to you. It had transformed my life, directed it towards biology, and thanks to You I now live within a circle of friends and in a marriage that arose from this direction in my life. We, all your former students and friends, wish you, at the occasion of your anniversary, much strength into future creative decades.



Daniel with his longtime friend Akif Quliyev († 2020), the late professor at Baku State University, during a visit to Azerbaijan in June 2019. Photo by Milan Kaftan.

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At the traditional meeting of former classmates, students of the Faculty of Science of Charles University "Blatec", 2020. Left to right, top row: Daniel Frynta, Martin Černý, Jan Uhlíř, Julius Lukeš; bottom row: Pavel Chvojka, Ivan Hrdý, Petr Volf. Photographer unknown.

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We all know Daniel's favourite phrase: "The matter is complicated ...". Illustration by Tereza Nekovářová (2023).



Daniel with a recently caught White-throated savanna monitor lizard (*Varanus albigularis*) in Somaliland, near Beerato village, June 2021. Photo by David Král.

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Daniel with his friend, entomologist David Král during a morning conversation in the mountains of Gaan Libax, Somaliland, June 2022. Photo by Petra Frýdlová.

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