

Liberal Education. “Sometimes it is almost as if we are walking about in the streets barefooted discussing as they once did in Ancient Athens,” one of the student remarks. *Weekendavisen* has visited the first *liberal arts college* in Europe. It is located in the middle of Berlin, is primarily financed by an American foundation, and it has a Danish dean.

The Berlin Athens

“We used to be up with the gods, but somewhere in the process we botched it”. It is David Hayes, an American scholar in philosophy, who is deeply engaged in discussing Plato’s philosophy with his students at European College of Liberal Arts in Berlin. Hayes is seated at a round table with eight students and their mugs. They have gathered for a two-hour seminar on the *Phaedrus*, which is an ancient text where Socrates conducts a dialogue with the young Phaedrus about the human condition after we can no longer be with the gods. Hayes discusses selected sections with the students and brings Plato’s philosophy down to earth. It is simultaneously dialogue and symposium in Berlin, like when the philosophers and students met at the Academy in Ancient Athens.

The two main themes in the *Phaedrus* are Eros and rhetoric and the 37-year old professor asks whether someone can translate into everyday language how Plato describes lovemaking. You can notice that the more Hayes squeezes his eyes together behind the dark glasses, the more thoughtful he becomes.

His white shirt matches the office’s chalk-white walls, table and white-board, but Hayes is a colorful teacher pushing the cognitive ability of the young people who are all about twenty years old. Unlike Plato’s Athens, they are not dressed in robes, but wear jeans, T-shirts and sneakers.

“Why is Socrates saying to Phaedrus that one’s wings grow when experiencing true love?”

When the teacher is asking questions it is clear that he often does not know any simple answer.

“What is love?” ... “Why is love beautiful?”

“Can justice also be beautiful?” ...

“Why not?”

The discussion and conversation continue intensely until the end of the seminar in which *Weekendavisen* has been “a fly on the wall”. After the students have left the room, Hayes says that he could not ask for a better teaching format: “It is so enriching to teach such small classes. I am dedicated to the dialogue in the classroom. In return, I demand hard work from the students, and they are expected to read much and write many essays.”

Next to him is a shelf full of books indicating his other interests such as Homer, Dostoyevsky, Marx/Engels, Pangle, Coetzee, Nabokov, Shakespeare, Updike, Kant, Tocqueville, Aristotle, Dante.

We find ourselves in the Niederschönhausen neighborhood in the former East Berlin. *European College of Liberal Arts* (ECLA) bought a number of former embassies and diplomat residences in this area. Here we meet one of the two managers of ECLA, the 38-year old philosopher Thomas Nørgaard, from Århus. He is a tall, slim,

short-haired man with a pair of light glasses. He is sharing the job as dean and *Geschäftshführer* with a colleague from Hungary. Nørgaard is showing us the green campus where we meet teachers and students from all over the world. The working language is English although we are situated in the German capital.

“ECLA is still quite a small private university, founded ten years ago by a number of European intellectuals with a penchant for *liberal education*, which can probably be best understood as an ideal about general education or *Bildung*”, Nørgaard says, and explains that the financing primarily comes from the American *Endeavour Foundation*.

He continues:

“The idea is to create a European *liberal arts college* for the 21st century. The inspiration derives from the best *liberal arts colleges* in the U.S., from the tutorial system in Oxford and Cambridge (i.e. systematic one-to-one teaching) and from theoretical works from Plato via Humboldt to contemporary thinkers.

When one talks about *liberal education* today, one usually means a broad education which is not directed towards a specific profession. This form of education is traditionally found at a high-school level in Denmark, however, there might be reason to believe that this is not sufficient. In the U.S., it has for a long time been acknowledged that higher education can have a strong dose of *liberal education*, and in Europe the interest for this form of education is increasing.

“In the U.S. many people have realized that there is no better way to begin one’s adulthood than a general education”, Nørgaard says and refers to famous universities such as Harvard, Chicago and Columbia which are all defending a *liberal arts*-ideal. “Expertise is of course necessary” he continues, “but it is not enough”. We have good reasons to create university-educations that combine depth and width”.

The students at ECLA spend half of their time on generally educating core-courses and the rest of their time on contemplation in the subjects that interest them the most.

There are many models for *liberal education*, but one of the most famous is the *Great Books* program. There secondary literature is almost or completely omitted. Only the great works have value.

Nørgaard mentions St. John’s College in Maryland as a famous example. They amusingly promote, on their website, “the following teachers are returning next year: Homer, Euclid, Einstein, Virgil, Augustine, Aristotle, Woolf, Plato, Tocqueville, Austin, Newton, Cervantes, Darwin, Mozart, Galileo, Tolstoy, Descartes, Freud and more”.

ECLA has so far only offered one-year courses, summer-courses and other shorter courses. But last Spring Nørgaard & Co. finally launched a four year B.A. program in *Value Studies*, which represents a new development out of older *liberal education-models*. “*The Values Studies*- education is actually the first of its kind in the world,” Thomas proudly declares. “We are also spending much time on the great texts, but where the *Great Books* program tend to praise works for their own sake, we first and foremost use them to illuminate fundamental value questions concerning freedom, justice, tolerance, equality, love, solidarity, property rights, etc.”

The students at ECLA are mainly taught by philosophers, scholars in literature, art historians, and other humanities scholars, but also by biologists, jurists, economists and others able to contribute to the

interdisciplinary studies of value questions.

There are according to Thomas Nørgaard many good reasons to establish an education in *Value Studies* in the middle of Europe.

He points out: “We live in an increasingly fragmented world. Therefore, there is an increasing need for educating people that are able to think broadly on an informed basis. We are giving our students such a basis. ECLA is a university without institutes. The teachers, often teaching together, come from many different disciplines. The students are used to treating a problem from many perspectives and to taking part in a discussion across the normal boundaries between academic disciplines. It should be noted, on a high level, for we are very picky when we hire teachers and we only accept very well-qualified and engaged students.”

After *Weekendavisen* attended the seminar on Plato’s *Phaedrus*, we asked Nørgaard whether we have not become so much smarter than in the 3rd century B.C. and that it is more important to focus on modern texts.

“We include many texts from the 20th century but it is necessary to study works from the entire intellectual history. If one does not read Locke and Hegel, it can be very hard to understand and criticize our own concept of property. If one does not read the *Phaedrus* or *The New Testament*, it can be very hard to understand our high appreciation of love today.”

Thomas is witnessing an increasing interest in *European College of Liberal Arts*. Within the last year the college has been visited by delegations from universities in Hong Kong, Amsterdam and New York, which were all interested in the new developments that ECLA stands for. A few years ago he was in Stockholm to talk about ECLA, and he will in a few weeks give a lecture about ECLA in Kyrgyzstan. Recently ECLA has also established cooperation with the prestigious private university *Bucerius Law School* in Hamburg. The idea is that the teachers from ECLA provide classes in intellectual history to future jurists. In return, teachers from *Bucerius* teach the students from ECLA in relevant juridical theory.

ECLA is a small intellectual community, a so-called *residential college*, where the students are obliged to live on campus. The purpose is that the students after classes continue the discussions: in the breaks, over dinner and in the evenings, where texts have to be read. At the moment there are twelve tenured teachers, a number of guest lecturers, twelve B.A. students and forty students in a one-year program.

The hope is that the new bachelor programme will attract more students – and more than gladly from Denmark. But only students with a talent for value studies will be accepted. ECLA is in that sense an elite institution. It is at the same time an institution where the students pay themselves. The full price is 15,000 Euros, which covers tuition fee, housing and all meals. The school maintains, however, a so-called need-blind acceptance policy. The application committee only considers academic qualifications. If one is qualified but lacks means, ECLA will offer either financial support or a scholarship.

One of the B.A. students is Sarah Junghans, who is a smiley blond German girl from Saxony. After high-school in Leipzig she studied psychology in Kiel, but she dropped out when she heard about ECLA in Berlin.

“I wanted an education, where one truly thinks about things in a thorough manner”, she tells me. “In Kiel we normally were at least 30 in the class, and often it became superficial. Here we are 10 students and a teacher around a table. It is a completely different and an intimate way of teaching. There is a big engagement; it

actually is an entire lifestyle. Sometimes it's almost as if we are walking about in the streets barefooted discussing as they once did in Ancient Athens," she says laughing. And then stresses, "but just almost".

Sarah Junghans goes on to say that she only seldom has time to go into the city, although the sparkling Prenzlauerberg is quite near to Niederschönhausen. "It is a tough program we do not waste our time. One probably has to have a strong will in order to make it here. Once in a while there is of course time to go to the movies." Sarah Junghans considers the program as a stepping stone to becoming a journalist or to getting a job in an international organization.

We are now back in Nørgaard's office where the bookshelf is more comprehensive than in David Hayes' office. Thomas is educated in philosophy from Aarhus University and continued his studies in the U.K. and Germany. He received his PhD from Oxford with a thesis on pity. In 2002, we was hired by ECLA at the age of thirty and alongside others he came to teach Dante and Dostoyevsky. Although he is a managing director of ECLA, he does still teach. His next course will be on ethics and political theory in the 20th century.

- If at one point you get tired of managing a university, what will you do? Are you going to return to Denmark?

"That is possible but probably not as a scholar. I have broken rule no. 1 in the academic world which is "find a niche and get a name". The pioneer work that we are doing here does not count. If one wants to create a traditional academic career the only thing that really matters is to publish articles and write books. Full stop. I probably shot myself in the foot in relation to a university career in Denmark. But I have no regrets."