The Migration of an Educational Ideal: Examining the History and Role of a Liberal Arts Education and its Potential Efficacy in the Integration of Refugees into German Society

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Abstract

Considering the current European refugee crisis and the historical challenges of the integration of immigrants into German society, a serious examination of the question "*What role can and does a liberal arts education play in the integration of refugees into German society?*" proves itself to be of vital importance. This essay will seek to address this question: It will first examine the history and nuances of a liberal arts education, turning to Enlightenment ideals and those of classical antiquity to make sense of the implications of such an education in a modern-day context. It will then turn to the history of the development of the German model of education, analyzing the discrepancies and overlaps between these two educational ideals and the influence each has had on the other over the centuries. Next, it considers the case study of a liberal arts institution in modern-day Europe: the ever-evolving ECLA (European College of Liberal Arts) turned ECLA of Bard turned Bard College Berlin. In analyzing the efficacy of a liberal arts education versus that of a traditional German higher education, this essay will explore the role of higher education in integration more generally as well as the potential role a liberal arts education could play in the long-run maintenance of a flexible yet unified German society.

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Part 1.1 Migration of an Educational Ideal: The history of a liberal arts education from classical antiquity to the Enlightenment

The history of a liberal arts education is that of the migration and transformation of an educational ideal. According to Calvin College, the meaning, purpose, and goals of a liberal arts education have long been disputed. The two main understandings of such an education are derived from eighteenth century Enlightenment thinking and classical antiquity respectively. The Enlightenment model advances that the purpose of a liberal arts education is to free the individual from time and place bound ways of thinking and doing things in favor of pure Reason: “a liberal arts education is to free students from their antecedent opinions, from the idols of their tribe, from the provincialism of their perspectives on life” ("The History of Liberal Arts Education and Place"). This model places an emphasis on rational criticism and objectivity.

The Classical understanding, by contrast, does not purport to create free individuals but rather requires that an individual already be free to undertake it. During times of classical antiquity, this type of education was intended for the elite who were exempt from work; non-free members of society might rather pursue vocational training. Instead of “[divesting] students of the beliefs and values of the ambient culture”, the Classical model attempts to inculcate its students with the values of the place and time in the creation of a fully developed individual who can adequately participate in civic life and fulfill their civic duty (“History of a Liberal Arts Education”). As such, students of the liberal arts during classical antiquity were required to study subjects like grammar not just to learn about syntax and parts of speech, but to be exposed to the ideals that permeated the literature of the day ("The History of Liberal Arts Education and Place").

The ultimate goal of the Enlightenment model of a “liberal” education is to form a student who is able to detach themselves from their previously held beliefs and sentiments and rather view the world through the lens of Reason; the Classical model attempts to “fold [students] into locality” while discouraging criticism of the ways of the time ("The History of Liberal Arts Education and Place").

Part 1.2 Migration of an Educational Ideal: Establishment and proliferation of liberal arts higher education institutions in the United States (17th Century to present day)

As the historical meaning of a “liberal” education is disputed, so the establishment of the first liberal arts higher education institution is also disputed. Some may say the Socratic “Thinkery” immortalised by Euripides's The Clouds is among the earliest while others say true liberal arts institutions could only possibly have been established during or after the Enlightenment when the ideology first came into being. What is commonly understood is that institutions modeled around both these understandings were established in the United States as early as the 17th century. The earliest liberal arts school in the United States, Harvard University, was established in 1636 after the English models of Cambridge and Oxford that were themselves modelled after the Classical tradition. During the early 1800s, it was more common to encounter “small, locally supported, residential liberal arts colleges modeled in the … ‘Classical’ tradition” ("The History of Liberal Arts Education and Place"). As the century wore on, however, larger, state-sponsored universities modelled after the Enlightenment understanding gained popularity.

Over time, these larger universities broke from the traditional model of a liberal arts education and allowed themselves to be influenced by the German model of higher education: They provided for a more diverse student body that encompassed women, minorities, and those of lower income brackets; they emphasized research according to the Humboldtian educational

ideal, which integrates research into the study of the arts and sciences; they forwarded "disinterested" and non-religious teachings ("The History of Liberal Arts Education and Place").

As the centuries wore on, in light of scientific and technological advances and educational thought from Germany, many colleges changed their educational focus. Colleges like Harvard, Princeton, and Yale "switched their teaching methods to suit this new paradigm and are no longer considered liberal arts colleges today" ("History of a Liberal Arts Education").

Part 1.3.1 Migration of an Educational Ideal: The importation and transmutation of the German model of higher education in the United States

Though it is commonly acknowledged that the German model of higher education had a large influence on the development of universities in the United States, it is also noted that this development originated in misunderstandings of what the German model truly entailed (Wolken). According to Syracuse University's Immigration and Education Project, the distinguishing features of a German education included "*Lehrfreiheit*" and "*Lernfreiheit*". The former provided "freedom for faculty to study and teach what they want, unencumbered by social or utilitarian relevance" whereas the latter provided "freedom for students to take any course they choose, at any university in Germany". The standard degree that one could obtain at a German institution was a Ph.D., which "did not qualify one for the professoriate" (Wolken).

Elements of the German model made its way to the U.S. via academic immigration: In the late 1800s, it became increasingly common for students and professors to undertake a higher education in Germany before returning to their home country to begin or complete their studies. Over 10, 000 U.S. citizens attended university in Germany in the middle of the 19th century alone (Muller 253). The American higher education model was transformed by imported

misconstructions of the German model: Advanced research training was added to the liberal arts college program but was split from ordinary university courses to become known as graduate school; the Ph.D. "became the highest credential and signifier of accomplishment in original scholarship". James Turner and Paul Bernard (1993) summarize that "The Germans invented the research ideal. The Americans invented an institution to house and perpetuate it" (qtd in Wolken).

Part 1.3.2 Migration of an Educational Ideal: The Humboldtian model

The German model itself during this time of ideological importation by the United States was largely inspired by the teachings and educational theories of the Prussian born Wilhelm von Humboldt, founder of the University of Berlin in 1810. At the center of his teachings lay the conviction that teaching and research ought to be unified:

> Von Humboldt's fundamental purpose was "*das Prinzip zu erhalten, die Wissenschaft als etwas noch nicht ganz Gefundenes und nie ganz Aufzufindendes zu betrachten und unablässig sie als solche zu such en*" [to uphold the principle that views science not as something already found but as knowledge that will never be fully discovered and, yet, needs to be searched for unceasingly]. (qtd in Muller 254)

Additionally, Humboldt advocated for the freedom of the arts and sciences and for a university's independence from the state in regulating internal academic affairs (Germany). Freedom of the arts and sciences refers primarily to "freedom from religious orthodoxy"; indeed, Humboldt's conviction that knowledge is yet discoverable was considered heretical during the time (Muller 254). Humboldt's ideal university would be a place to undertake a "general education" that "taught all the sciences and did not concentrate on occupational training"

("Wilhelm Von Humboldt" 7) The purpose of such a general education, Humboldt asserted, is to serve the society. He is recorded to have written in his diary in 1789 that "the education of the individual requires his incorporation into society and involves his links with society at large," and that "self-education can only be continued ... in the wider context of development of the world" (qtd in "Wilhelm Von Humboldt" 9)

Humboldt's educational theories smack of the same ideology that governed the establishment of the original liberal arts higher education institutions. The freedom of the arts and sciences from religious orthodoxy reminds of the Enlightenment ideal of a "liberal" education that advocates for the reign of reason over provincial preconceptions; that an individual's general education must necessarily serve the higher purpose of societal advancement reminds of the Classical model that attempts to create a fully developed human who participates in civic life and fulfills their civic duty.

This so-called liberal ideology is manifest in the German term *bildung*. *Bildung* has no direct translation in English but can loosely be understood to apply to a fully formed and "cultured person". *Bildung* is acquired by an individual through education and teaching: It is both a "process and a status". The *gebildete* person has mastered and critically considered a broad range of knowledge, has questioned and held firm to their values, and has realized their individual responsibility for humanity (Danner 5). This is what a liberal arts education also aims at – the full development and flourishing of the human being in a societal context.

Part 2.1 Higher Education in a Modern Context: Germany and its lack of liberal arts institutions

But what has come to pass? What ideals shape Germany's system of higher education today? Though some may claim that "Humboldt's ideas regarding the unity of teaching and

research, the freedom of the arts and sciences ... and education through science and scholarship [still are] integral parts of German higher education policy" others declare "the Humboldtian model to be dead" (Germany).

This perceived death is largely a result of the dramatic socio-political change that took place in Germany during the succeeding centuries. While universities in the U.S. continued to develop loosely along the lines of the Humboldtian ideal, German universities "declined because of dictatorship, war, and the country's division during the Cold War" (Ash).

Whereas Humboldt conceived of an institution where an individual could undertake a general education, the majority of German bachelor programs offered today are specialized in a particular area of interest. Even in *Gymnasium,* the German counterpart to the American high school, subjects studied in the latter years have become increasingly specialized (Ash). This is contradictory to Humboldt's vision wherein the broad and sturdy foundation for a generalized higher education must be laid during these formative years (Muller 255).

As of 2006, just about a third of higher education institutions were "considered universities" while the "the rest [were] specialized in more limited areas such as technical disciplines, the arts, social work, education, and theology." Furthermore, most German universities are supported by the state, contrary to Humboldt's assertion that these two realms ought to remain separate; few private institutions exist, and, as Ash cynically asserts in his essay on "The Humboldt Illusion", their "size and their impact on the system as a whole are small."

In this same essay, Ash claims that "The liberal arts and two-year community colleges so common in the United States have no counterparts in Germany." This statement, however,

overlooked the existence of ECLA, a small and little-known liberal arts college in Berlin-Pankow.

Part 2.2.1 Higher Education in a Modern Context: A brief history of Bard College Berlin, a Liberal Arts University

The modern conception of a liberal arts university is that of an institution that offers a broad and transdisciplinary higher education. The Association of American Colleges and Universities summarizes that a liberal education is “an approach to college learning that empowers individuals and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity, and change,” with an emphasis on “knowledge of the wider world ... as well as in-depth achievement in a specific field of interest.” As the ideology of classical antiquity demands, such an education is designed to instill a sense of social responsibility and civic duty within its students. The specific disciplines studied at this institution are collectively referred to as the “liberal arts”; all students must undertake a general education which “provides broad exposure to multiple disciplines and forms the basis for developing essential intellectual, civic, and practical capacities” ("What Is a 21st Century Liberal Education?")

It is to this ideal that ECLA aspired. The European College of Liberal Arts was originally established in Berlin-Buch in 2002 by Stephan Gutzeit, Anne Sliwka and Olaf Amblank (Bisky). A year later, in 2003, the ECLA campus was moved to Berlin-Pankow, where it continues today under the name Bard College Berlin. The idea for ECLA was born after the three gathered together at McKinsey, a consulting firm in the United States, in 1996 to express their dissatisfaction with the German educational system (*History Timeline*). In an interview with Amblank in 2000, before the idea was yet a reality, he expresses disdain for young academics trained in Germany: "You only get the 29-year-old computer scientist who can program but has

no leadership skills" (Soldt). The three set out to Germany to bring back and give concrete form to the Humboldtian ideals that had such a great influence on the development of universities in the United States in the 19th and 20th century. As one article from the Berliner Zeitung wittily put it, "the Americans are now moving out to show the Germans what a humanistic education should look like today; they obviously have more confidence in the ideas of Wilhelm von Humboldt than most German professors do" (Bisky).

When it was established, ECLA intended to combat what its founders saw as the one-sidedness of state colleges that promoted "passivity instead of creativity and conformity instead of individuality" (qtd from ECLA brochure by Soldt). The founders sought to enroll students from all over Europe to bring a diversity of opinions to the classroom. Students, furthermore, were expected to share an interest in the service of humanity and in the type of general humanistic education ECLA offered: The college did not intend to provide purely vocational training, nor did it wish to become a secluded place for studying. Rather, it wanted to balance the two functions to be able to graduate students who were intellectually free and personally independent in this fast-paced and ever-changing world of ours (Soldt).

Almost a decade and a half later, the college has seen radical transformations in curriculum, teaching capacity, and ownership. While ECLA initially comprised 64 students and 8 professors as of the autumn of 2002 (Bisky), today the college is made up of 210 students and 19 core faculty members and sees a constant exchange of guest professors. ECLA first achieved state recognition as a university and was welcomed by Leon Botstein, President of Bard College in New York, into the Bard Network in 2011. From 2011 until 2013, ECLA was known as ECLA of Bard. Thereafter it adopted the name of Bard College Berlin, which it still holds today.

Despite these superficial changes, Bard College Berlin upholds much of the same traditions that ECLA originally stood for. Their most recent informational brochure, updated in 2016, boasts that BCB "offers intensive, interdisciplinary education in the humanities and social sciences." The student body remains small and highly international in comparison with that at the majority of state universities, allowing for Socratic-style seminars that enable students to "[learn] from diverse perspectives" and "[shape] common approaches to the fundamental concerns and opportunities of the 21st century" (Bard College Berlin).

Part 2.2.2 Higher Education in a Modern Context: The Program in International Education and Social Change (PIESC) at Bard College Berlin

In the long-standing spirit of civic engagement at the heart of both ECLA's and Bard's teaching philosophies, Bard College Berlin established the *Program in International Education and Social Change* (PIESC). PIESC aims to support students coming from regions of political or economic crisis who have a record of civic engagement and who intend to continue to work for the public good after the completion of an undergraduate degree at BCB. The program is currently able to provide scholarships and cover the living expenses of four Syrian students and one Greek student who began their B.A. degrees in August 2016. It also provides logistical and academic support within the framework of BCB while working in close co-operation with local NGO *wir machen das* to connect students to Berlin-based mentors ("Bard College Berlin in the Context of the Migration and Refugee Situation").

PIESC was inspired by PIE – the *Program in International Education* that was originally developed by Bard College shortly after the fall of the Berlin wall. PIE worked to "bring students from emerging democracies in Eastern and Central Europe and Central Asia to Bard to study," thereby enabling education through mutual exchange. PIESC amends PIE's goals by adding the

component of social change that those students involved in the program must be committed to (Bard College Berlin in the Context of the Migration and Refugee Situation).

Part 2.3 Higher Education in a Modern Context: The perceived advantages of a liberal arts education through PIESC over an education at a German state university

The benefit of higher education – be it public or private, specialized or broad – for both the recipient and the society wherein such education takes place is indisputable. It is especially valuable to someone of migrant or refugee status as it increases their human capital and thus endows them with greater social mobility. Moreover, the society thereby gains a skilled worker able to contribute to and enhance the common good. As will be explored in greater detail in Part 3 of this analysis, education aids integration by easing an individual's adaptation to their new environment and inclining the recipient society to be more open to the newcomer.

Refugees may choose to pursue a higher education in Germany as anyone else. The application and admission process is the same as that which an international student must go through ("Information for Refugees"). However, this is not to say it is easy to gain admission or obtain a degree. One of the greatest barriers to education is language. As lectures and seminars are typically taught in German, all students are required to speak the language proficiently. For most incoming and newly arrived migrants, to expect German proficiency is unrealistic. And, despite the opportunity to apply for German language courses six weeks after arriving in Germany, the trauma and bureaucracy involved in such a transition would likely hinder the language-learning process. Though online educational platforms like Kiron are working to facilitate the opportunity of higher education for refugees, something which only 1% of refugees worldwide have access to ("Kiron: About") it is not yet the most promising of prospects.

An interview with Bard College Berlin history professor Marion Detjen, also a human rights advocate who played an integral role in the establishment of the Scholarship network and member of the action alliance *wir machen das*, gave further insight into the status of German higher education and its accessibility to refugees. Though it is more common to encounter specialized and vocational degrees at universities in Germany, German universities do also provide opportunities for an education in the social sciences and humanities. Yet the difficulties associated with a humanities degree are even greater than those associated with many others: It is an "intellectualized and academic education" that makes use of jargon assumedly not taught in conventional German language-learning course. Marion described the humanities and social sciences in Germany as a sort of self-sustaining intellectual bubble dominated by white, middle-class males. And, she says, even if German state universities did have adequate infrastructure to teach the growing international population, the humanities would remain an unattractive option to most migrants as it is not a remunerative degree; most professional prospects are located within the exclusive realm of academia. Those who are able to obtain such a degree and wish to carve a career within the realm of the public sphere must disregard the restrictive jargon of their academic education and teach themselves how to appeal to a wider audience.

A consequence of this exclusivity is that it divests migrants of the opportunity to participate in those professions to which the humanities and social sciences are most applicable – professions in media, journalism and politics that "bring meaning into the world". As Marion points out, the giving and informing of opinions and interaction with the opinions of the public is a function and privilege primarily reserved for Germans. With the general ambivalence in contemporary German society as to its willingness to adapt to the incoming refugees, it is easy to see why it is important to provide all members of the evolving German society an opportunity to

be heard and "brought into positions to interpret what is important for all of us". This, Marion asserts, is what the concept of a liberal arts education is helpful in doing and part of what PIESC hopes to achieve.

Part 3.1 Immigration and Integration into Germany: Defining integration

In evaluating the efficacy of a liberal arts education in the integration of refugees into German society, one must consider two contesting but intersectional definitions of integration. The first and most commonly acknowledged definition is similar to the notion of assimilation whereby an incoming refugee is required to conform to the values and norms of the so-called "host" society: This definition considers that an adjustment or adaptation must take place on the part of the refugee but makes no provision for the society that receives them. However, a second, more holistic definition of integration that allows for a degree of diversity and heterogeneity has come to be publicly accepted in recent years. This definition seeks to balance assimilation of an incoming individual with adaptation on the part of the recipient society. Such a definition is concerned with "an arrangement of unity despite, and maybe because, all are different." This unity requires a consensus on basic values amongst the members of a society and an "agreement on how much diversity can be tolerated without threatening unity" (Davy 127-128).

Since Germany has adopted an open-door policy towards refugees, integration and the laws that pertain to it have become central topics of discussion in both private and public spheres. Davy explains the ways in which law defines the framework wherein integration takes place: Law specifies the extent to which likeness is legally desired and that to which individual rights such as education and freedom of religion may be enjoyed; it can provide social security; it may promote "cognitive integration" (e.g. through the financing of language courses); it can choose to combat discrimination (128).

Though it must be acknowledged that German law does make allowances for differences between people and indeed protects the pluralism of its society – for example, through its guarantee of freedom of religion by Article4 (1) and (2) of the *Grundgesetz* and the same social benefits for all regardless of nationality (129) – its most recent legislature and findings as to the sentiments of the already established German society point to a failure of the government in encouraging the reciprocal adaptation required for integration.

The most recent legislature on the issue seems to adhere to the first definition of integration similar to one-way assimilation: A new integration law was passed in May 2016 that aims to encourage refugees to "learn enough German to be able to find a job and help pay for their living expenses". The law demands that asylum seekers undertake 100 hours of courses on German culture, society, and values; those failing to do so will suffer a decrease in their social welfare benefits. The law allows for asylum seekers to apply for German language courses six weeks after arriving in Germany and requires that a refugee be fluent in German if they wish to obtain permanent residency. Other facets of the law involve the establishment of work programs providing 100, 000 obligatory low-wage jobs and the relaxation of labor regulations to encourage companies to hire refugees even in competition with more qualified German or EU citizens (Kern).

While it cannot be denied that the new integration law is beneficial to refugees with regards to understanding the ways of the German society and navigating through it, it also cannot be said to encourage adaptation on the part of the host society to nearly the same extent as it demands of the incoming individual. Indeed, a study conducted by the Bielefeld University in 2016 found that 55 percent of the population "believed migrants should return home once the

situation in their country of origin permits" while 36 percent saw large-scale immigration as "a threat" to Germany's future ("Germany Passes Historic Law on Refugee Integration").

Such an approach and response to integration has likely been taken because, as Davy points out in her essay on the "Integration of Immigrants in Germany", the German concept of democracy is closely tied to a vision of a largely homogeneous body of people united by language, traditions, religion, myths, and so on (Davy 125). As one refugee student belonging to the class HI2181 In Search of a History: Migration in Germany from WWII to the Present at Bard College Berlin this past fall semester put it, he feels like he is being pressed through a "sausage machine".

The non-acknowledgement that refugees, with all their superficial differences and core human similarities, are as intrinsic as any other member to a unified German society is crippling: In failing to recognize its own fluidity and adaptability, society itself disables such necessary change.

Part 3.2 Immigration and Integration into Germany: Examining the efficacy of a liberal arts education in integration

What is needed for effective integration is not simply a change of legislature but a true change of public sentiment. Such change can most reasonably be achieved through education, specifically the type of liberal arts education embodied by Bard College Berlin in their *Program for International Education and Social Change*. A liberal arts education would not only provide refugees with the opportunity to be heard and "brought into positions to interpret what is important for all of us," as Marion Detjen asserts, but it would also allow all students enrolled at such an institution to interact in a community predicated on the values of respect and equality.

These values are manifest in the Socratic-style seminar employed at Bard College Berlin and other liberal arts institutions wherein the students and even professors are open to informing their individual opinions through an equal exchange of ideas. Thus it traverses both ways of the definition of integration. The Socratic-style seminar is integral to the achievement of BCB's mission of "learning from diverse perspectives and shaping common approaches to the fundamental concerns and opportunities of the 21st century" (Bard College Berlin). The teaching ideology at BCB should be contrasted with the hierarchical lecture format in place at German state-funded universities that the original founders of ECLA protested and sought to remedy, which instead imposes knowledge on passive recipients without encouraging critical thought or the challenging of one's (e.g. potentially narrow and discriminatory) beliefs.

This is not to say that the importance of the current legislature attempting to aid integration should be belittled or disregarded, but rather that the German government would be wise to couple their newest policies with an expansion of multi-lingual humanistic higher education programs modelled after the liberal arts ideal. An amplification of the liberal arts ideal of equal exchange and openness is required on a societal level if Germany wishes for effective integration. With the expansion of the liberal arts programs, such change is more likely to follow than not.

The current legislature treats the influx of migrants as a problem that can best be mitigated by their (one-way) assimilation. This legislature perpetuates destructive patterns of thought that refugees are alien and ought to adapt within the falsely self-identified "host" society. A paradigm shift dependent on education is required in both legislature and public mentality that recognizes refugees as valuable individuals in their own right who can contribute both their skills and unique perspectives to a new version of German society. A broad, transdisciplinary liberal

arts education provides a proactive and long-run solution to the problem of intolerance and inflexibility preventing effective integration for the common good. Not only would such an education, if made available to refugees, bring them into places where their voices can be heard and experiences learned from, but it would also give rise to more *gebildeten* citizens who recognize their individual responsibility in the maintenance of a necessarily diverse but unified society.

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