

## *Et in arcadia ego*

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In 1966 I came to Johns Hopkins University on a Fulbright Scholarship to study mathematical sociology with Professor James S. Coleman. His seminal *Introduction to Mathematical Sociology* had been published in 1964. Reading the preface I could see that he had written most of it nearly a decade before, at the *Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences* in Palo Alto, up on the hill behind Stanford University. He also told me about how that Center functioned: That each year a select group of scholars were given a year to pursue their research interests with no other obligations whatsoever. And how, for this highly distinguished and very influential scholar, this had been the best year of his academic life.

In 1974/75 I was invited to spend a year there, in the company of the likes of the sociologist Robert K. Merton and the political scientist Aaron Wildavsky – and Nobel laureates like Steven Weinberg or Kenneth Arrow coming by at lunchtime. Clearly that year ranks as the best and most productive in my life as a scholar – I have some work started then that can be completed now.

Not only was the personal gain obvious but also the public benefit as well. It is easily documented from the so-called Tyler-collection in the Center's library which holds the books written by former fellows while there. Many have been among the most influential in fields as diverse as linguistics and statistics or economics and literary criticism. *Introduction to Mathematical Sociology* was one of these.

While a graduate student at Hopkins, I also learned about other such institutions – the most notable of which was the *Institute for Advanced Study* established at Princeton in 1930 (Albert Einstein had been of its first fellows), or the much later established *Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin*.

In 1987 I was asked to chair a Royal Commission on reorganizing higher education and research in Norway. This provided the opportunity for launching a proposal for establishing a "Center for Advanced Study" in Norway. In writing the proposal (found in NOU 1988: 22, "Med viten og vilje", pp. 183-185), I went back to and read carefully the original justification that the legendary Abraham Flexner had given when he first proposed the Princeton Institute.

In the report of the Royal Commission, a key concern was to improve the conditions for doing basic research. The key arguments for establishing a center for advanced study in Norway were:

- The fraction of total resources going to basic research was declining.
- Funding for applied research influences more than before how funds for basic research are being spent.
- The social organization of research is not only democratized – it is bureaucratized.
- Researchers themselves have more taxing administrative tasks.
- The organization of teaching at universities can interfere with the concentrated periods of work that basic research requires
- External demands for taking part in evaluation, funding activities and administration are increasing.

- Extra-university tasks and temptations – ranging from consultancies to business opportunities – may draw attention and effort away from basic research.

Hence basic research needs an organizational counterweight. It is a high-risk activity: it can fail, but also lead to breakthroughs. Hence basic research needed a defense out of the ordinary.

A brief presentation of different types of centers of advanced study abroad was given, which could inspire a similar construction in Norway. The recommendation made was that it should provide the best possible conditions for concentrated basic research for established researchers in a multidisciplinary environment – ordinarily for a year's time. The fellows should have no administrative or other duties and be sheltered from the chores of their home institutions. It was proposed to locate the Center in Oslo.

After the Royal Commission had delivered its report in 1988, the next phase was to try to implement it. Two lines of action were followed. First to convince the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters to house the Center in its beautiful mansion in Oslo. The then Presidium was not hard to convince and the Secretary general, professor Leif Mæhle, became an enthusiast. I was invited to present the proposal at a Plenary meeting of the Academy on November 10, 1988 – and the audience for once broke the tradition never to applaud after an introduction.<sup>1</sup>

Institutional support had to be matched by funding. I was asked to chair an interim committee to drum up financial support. One colleague on it was Tora Houg, a prominent member of Parliament and of its Education and Research Committee as well. Another was the General Director of the Kvaerner Group, Mikal H. Grønner. The net result was that appropriations from the Norwegian Parliament came in place and some support from private sources as well. Hence the plans for redesigning the basement and loft of the mansion of the Academy to house a Center could begin.

In the fall of 1990 I became Minister of Education, Research and Church Affairs. I could then pursue the policy of establishing a Center for Advanced Study from that vantage point, little by little expanding its financial support. Some of it came at the end of the year when funds for other purposes had not been spent. I had, however, to move slowly, not to come under the double attack of favoring my own baby, so to speak, and not funneling too much in the way of research funds towards the capital in a political environment where decentralization was very much on the agenda.

In the fall of 1992 the first three groups got started at the new Center: One on Henrik Ibsen's writings, one on Human rights in the Baltic states and one on Fractal Growth processes. The rest – as the saying goes – is history.

But it is a history with three footnotes. One is that it is a history in every way in the making – most of the groups have worked very well, have left important contributions and maintained scholarly exchanges since. Second: the Center bridges the two cultures – it has made students of lemmings interact with students of the Scriptures or students of quantum phenomena regularly meet students of ethics.

Third: The ideal Abraham Flexner sought to realize by his Institute at Princeton in no insignificant way has also been made real in Norway. He wanted to make the best possible

environment for free, basic research, "untrammelled facilities for easy-going and informal work between men who had passed the Ph.D. stage, had given promise of unusual ability, and who needed now the informal contact with masters which had characterized the German universities in their golden days." He believed that they should be exempt from all other burdens for a full-time engagement in absorbing basic research and hence needed an institutional defense for the use of useless knowledge.

My guess is that those who have been at the CAS in Oslo have appreciated this place of simplicity and contentment – being a Norwegian academic equivalent to the Arcadia which I found in Palo Alto: An almost imaginary and almost paradisaal place.

Note:

<sup>1</sup> The speech at that meeting, "Et norsk 'Senter for høyere studier' knyttet til Det Norske Videnskaps-Akademi" is printed in the Annals of the Academy 1988, pp. 170-181