

Back in 2005, the Faculty of Law and Social Sciences (now “of Humanities and Social Sciences”) at the University of Akureyri (UNAK) graduated its first cohort in **Modern Studies**, namely the one and only BA-level degree line in the Humanities (especially Philosophy and History) ever to be offered—and currently still being offered—in the north of Iceland, as well as the sole undergraduate programme in “Modern Studies” (“**Nútímafræði**”) proper in the country—at least at the time of writing. Modelled upon analogous programmes taught at diverse educational levels in both Europe and North America, this Liberal Arts degree line had taken its very first steps in 2000 as part of the undergraduate curriculum of the Faculty of Education at UNAK, before ‘relocating’ into the newly-established Faculty of Law and Social Sciences in 2003, hence maturing into the BA programme celebrated hereby.

Specifically, a wealth of testimonials is being published in this new issue of *Nordicum-Mediterraneum*. The authors of these testimonials, which vary noticeably in both length and chosen language, are some of the programme’s numerous alumni and of the many exchange students who, over the years 2005-2026, benefitted from the multidisciplinary and bilingual character of the programme, as well as from the work by the teachers and specialists who have been contributing more consistently to making Modern Studies the unique and well-established academic reality that it is today. The editor of this collection of testimonials endeavored to reach out to as many alumni and former exchange students as possible, and he is most grateful to all those who replied to his messages and, quite obviously, to all those who eventually contributed their hereby-published testimonials.

Giorgio Baruchello

PART ONE – TESTIMONIALS BY MODERN STUDIES’ ALUMNI

Anna Aðalsteinsdóttir, 2008

Þegar ég byrjaði í Nútímafræðinni haustið 2004 var ég ekki viss á hvað ég skráði mig í. Ég hafði alltaf elskað sagnfræði og líkað vel við samfélagsfræði greinar og þess vegna fór ég í þetta nám (langaði ekki í skóla annarsstaðar). Ég útskrifaðist 2008 tók námið á 4 árum því ég fór 1 önn í skiptinám til Noregs. Nútímafræðin opnaði fyrir mig heim þverfaglegs náms, heim norðurslóðanna og heimskautanna sem hefur námslega átt hug minn allan síðan þá. Ég

hafði möguleika á að fara eina önn til Bodö í Noregi gegnum North2North skiptinema prógrammið. Þar kynntist ég fullt af fólki frá öllum heimshornum þar sem ég bjó á heimavist þar sem flestir skiptinemarnir í skólanum bjuggu á. Þessi önn var hluti af „Circumpolar Studies“ sem er hluti af BA gráðu frá UArctic, sem hægt var að fá (var alla vega þannig þegar ég útskrifaðist 2007). Til að fá BA gráðu í CS þá er nýtt hluti af því námi sem þú ert í í þínum háskóla í mínu tilfalli nútímafræðinni en hinn hlutinn var fjarnámið og önnin sem ég tók í Bodö. Í gegnum það nám fékk ég að fara til Arkhangelsk í Rússlandi á ráðstefnu UArctic þar sem ég útskrifaðist ásamt öðrum nemendum sem voru með mér í Bodö (eingöngu Rússa). Upp úr þessum tveimur BA gráðum fór ég í Heimskautarétt meistaranám. Það að upplifa nám sem er verið að búa til frá grunni var reynsla sem ég bý alltaf að (Kláraði diplóma). Nútímafræðin og Heimskautarétturinn gaf mér færi á að ferðast um mörg af löndunum 8 sem tilheyra norðurslóðunum með því að fara á ráðstefnur (UArctic í Rússlandi, Polar Law Symposium á Grænlandi, Finnlandi og einnig auðvita Íslandi) og skiptinámið í Noregi og 1 áfangi í Heimskautarétti sem var kenndur Færeyjum. (Á eftir að koma til Bandaríkjana og Kanada en maður veit aldrei hvað verður úr seinna á lífsleiðinni. Ég kynntist hins vegar fólki frá þeim löndum í heimskautaréttinum.) Sjálf hef ég ferðast um Danmörku og Svíþjóðar sem túristi. Þessi reynsla sem námið færði mér hefur opnað augu og huga minn fyrir hve allt er í raun tengt og lítið. Þó við búum í litlu samfélagi á norðurhvara þá erum við nátengd alþjóðasamfélaginu og umheiminum.

Anna Sigríður Ólafsdóttir, 2019

Ég var bæði fullorðin og lífsreynd þegar ég hóf nám í nútímafræði við Háskólann á Akureyri árið 2017. Samt hafði ég aldrei alveg náð að finna út hvað ég vildi verða þegar ég yrði stór. Ég vissi samt að ég vildi verða menntuð, hvað sem það orð fól nú í sér. Ég vissi bara að ég var ó-menntuð og það var ekki gott.

Að hafa fengið tækifæri til að sækja mér menntun á miðjum aldri var ein stærsta gjöf sem lífið hefur fært mér. Ég veit að þetta kann að hljóma grunnhyggið, en það er satt. Fyrir utan að hafa fengið plástur á laskaða sjálfsmynd mína færði námið mér getuna til að beita í raun og sann gagnrýninni hugsun, sem er stærsta mótvægisáðgerð mín gagnvart heimi sem hefur síðan þá orðið klikkaðri með hverju árinu.

Heimurinn í vestrinu hefur sennilega aldrei verið eins mótsagnakenndur. Á sama tíma og við

erum orðin gríðarlega upplýst um fínofna þræði mannglegrar tilvistar og merkilega klár, virðumst við vera að hverfa aftur til tíma þar sem karlmenn eiga að vera vélar sem skaffa og drepa og konur þjónar þeirra, auðmjúkir hýslar aukins vinnuafls á fórnaraltarið. Þarna nefni ég bara hin klassísku tvö kyn, en sennilega birtist mótsagnakenndi nútíminn einna best þegar umræðan um fleiri kyn ber á góma. Þau sem sjá fínofna þræðina taka breytingunum opnum örmum, hin hafna veruleika sem ekki passar inn í gamla “góða” kassann. Hlutir sem áður voru núansar eru orðnir að flekaskilum og samstaðan raknar upp á saumunum.

Í nútímafræðinni lærði ég meira en áður um samhengi hlutanna. Ekkert gerist í tómarúmi og nútíminn er alltaf afsprengi nálægrar eða fjarlægrar fortíðar. Ég lærði líka að skilja að það eru handhafar valdsins hverju sinni sem bera fyrst og fremst ábyrgð á því hvernig málum er háttað. Það verður þó sífellt flóknara að skilja hverjir það eru. Við lifum ekki lengur á tímum þar sem kirkjan eða konungsdæmi fara með óskorðað vald og það sem verra er að vald kjörinna fulltrúa í lýðræðisríkjum virðist stundum vera eins og eitthvað grín. Það hefur gert það að verkum að lýðræðið sem verkfæri er farið að líta út eins og tannlaus trunta, sem er bæði grátlegt og grafalvarlegt mál.

Eitt af því sem hefur, án tilliti til tímans, verið einkenni valdhafans eru peningarnir. Gervigreindin og þau tól sem hún færir okkur nútímafólkinu er um margt frábær, en við megum þó ekki falla í þá gryfju að halda að hún sé saklaust tæki án nokkurs kostnaðar. Tæki er nefnilega alls ekki lýsandi orð. Gervigreindin er vera, ekki mann-vera en skapnaður mannanna sneidd næmni mennskunnar sem færir okkur skilning á því sem er marglaga og flókið.

Það reynir virkilega á að gefa okkur ekki leti hugans á vald í allri óreiðunni sem nútíminn býður upp á. Á sama tíma og ég hef samúð með okkur mannfólkinu og skil hvernig við verðum svo dofin að við nenum ekki lengur að hugsa sjálfstæða hugsun verðum við sem aldrei fyrr að virkja sellurnar – því vinsælasta varan á markaðnum er athygli okkar og hugsun. Það er gjaldmiðillinn sem knýr áfram maskínuna. Við megum ekki gleyma að umboð yfir þessari vöru höfum við sjálf.

Hugvísindin fela í sér mennsku og þau fela í sér hugsun. Þetta tvennt hefur sennilega aldrei verið eins mikilvægt og í dag. Handhafar valdsins hafa þó alltaf viljað strípa hinn almenna borgara þessu og notað til þess það sem virkar á hverjum tíma. Galdur viðnámsins er fólgin

Í því að koma auga á það og beygja sig ekki undir það - nema að undangenginni meðvitaðri ákvörðun.

Alla daga fagna ég mennskunni og getu minni til að spyrja gagnrýninna spurninga. Stærstan þáttinn í hinu síðarnefnda á nám mitt á sviði hugvísinda.

Ásdís Hreinsdóttir, 2022

The Significance of Humanities in a Time of Cognitive Offloading and Ideological Simplification

The importance of the Humanities is most apparent when their absence becomes evident. The present moment exemplifies this condition. Increasingly shaped by cognitive offloading onto artificial intelligence and by ideological simplification in the form of right-wing extremism, many societies are witnessing a gradual erosion of critical skills and a diminishing capacity for reflective engagement. What is at stake is not merely the fate of academic disciplines, but the weakening of human capacities that the Humanities have cultivated.

As a graduate of the BA program in Modern Studies at the University of Akureyri, my engagement with these questions is not merely theoretical. I am proud to be among those who have completed the Modern Studies program during the twenty years it has been offered, and I am grateful for the outstanding guidance provided by the excellent professors who taught and challenged us throughout our studies. They created an academic environment grounded in rigorous inquiry in which slowing down, questioning assumptions, and justifying interpretations were not only encouraged but expected. This is a practice I continue to rely on when approaching complexity, disagreement, and uncertainty in a world that increasingly rewards speed and certainty.

The Humanities cultivate a mode of thinking centered on meaning, interpretation, and judgment. For me, this way of thinking took shape particularly through sustained engagement with philosophy, a discipline I initially regarded as abstract but gradually came to understand as foundational. The Humanities are not primarily concerned with producing answers, but with cultivating interpretation. They explore how meaning emerges, how

concepts are formed, and how historical and cultural contexts shape thought and expression. Such inquiries resist delegation.

The growing reliance on artificial intelligence poses a particular challenge to these interpretive practices. As more and more cognitive tasks are delegated to automated systems, such as summarizing texts, generating arguments, or organizing information, the risk is not ignorance but the gradual displacement of interpretive responsibility. Artificial intelligence can reproduce patterns and simulate coherence, but it cannot assume accountability for meaning. Understanding involves more than recognizing patterns; it requires situating oneself within a framework of meaning, acknowledging alternatives, and taking responsibility for how interpretations are formed.

At the same time, the resurgence of right-wing extremism exposes the consequences of weakened critical literacy. Simplified historical narratives, rigid identities, and moral absolutism flourish where ambiguity is rejected and historical depth is absent. The Humanities resist this narrowing of thought by fostering attentiveness to complexity rather than promoting competing ideologies. Through philosophy, history, and cultural analysis, students learn to examine assumptions, question origins, and recognize how language shapes reality.

The Humanities are commonly situated within the broader tradition of the Liberal Arts, where education is understood as formation rather than technical training. Rather than preparing individuals for a single function, this tradition equips them to navigate uncertainty, disagreement, and change. In a world increasingly driven by speed, optimization and certainty, such capacities are neither efficient nor easily measured. Yet they remain essential if thought is to remain more than reaction.

For graduates of Modern Studies, reflecting on these experiences is more than a retrospective exercise. It offers an opportunity to articulate, from lived academic experience, why the Humanities and Liberal Arts continue to matter at a time when their relevance is frequently questioned. In a world shaped by technological delegation of thought and ideological contraction, these fields preserve the conditions under which judgment, responsibility, and meaningful civic engagement remain possible.

Bára Jóhannesdóttir, 2009

Haustið 2006 hóf ég nám í nútímafræði við Háskólann á Akureyri. Námið, sem er þverfaglegs eðlis, reynist afar heppilegt fyrir einstaklinga sem eru að móta eða endurmeta náms- og starfsstefnu sína. Fyrir nemendur sem ekki hafa skýra mynd af þeim fræðasviðum sem þeir vilja leggja stund á, býður námið upp á fjölbreyttar leiðir til að kanna fræðileg viðfangsefni og þróa með sér þekkingu og áherslur.

Sem „eldri“ námsmaður skipti mig sérstaklega miklu máli að fá tækifæri til að prófa mig áfram í ólíkum námsþáttum og greina hvar raunveruleg áhugamál mín lægju. Á meðal þeirra námskeiða sem höfðu hvað mest áhrif voru þau er vörðuðu útópíur og dystópíur, sem og námskeið um Helförina. Þessi viðfangsefni varpa ljósi á samfélagsgerð, mannlega hegðun og pólitíska strauma, sem eiga ótvíræð samsvörun í samtímanum. Einnig höfðu námskeið í félagsfræði og afbrotafræði veruleg áhrif á sýn mína, og mótuðu þau fræðilegu sjónarhorn sem ég síðan hef notað til að skilja samfélagið og mannlega hegðun. Þar fann ég áhugasvið mitt og gat haldið námi áfram með skýrari fókusi.

Þau fræðilegu verkfæri og gagnrýnu aðferðir sem ég tileinkaði mér í náminu hafa reynst mér afar dýrmæt í starfi. Þverfagleg nálgun, fjölbreytileiki í viðfangsefnum og sú reynsla að búa á Akureyri og kynnast fjölbreyttum hópi fólks hafa haft djúpstæð áhrif á mig, bæði persónulega og faglega. Ég er jafnframt þakklát fyrir þau vinasambönd sem mynduðust á námsárunum og hafa staðið mér til stuðnings um árabil.

Nám í nútímafræði við Háskólann á Akureyri hefur veitt mér víðtæka þekkingu, aukið gagnrýna hugsun og opnað nýjar leiðir til þess að skilja og takast á við samfélagsleg viðfangsefni. Ég mæli eindregið með þessu námi fyrir alla sem vilja öðlast breiða fræðilega sýn og þróa með sér fjölbætta hæfni.

Takk fyrir mig, Háskólinn á Akureyri.

Eli Freysson, 2020

On a personal level, to *me*, the greatest value of my Modern Studies course was to help me better understand the human race, its history, and its present. Since our minds naturally

tend to revolve around our own lives and our own immediate little worlds, it can be easy to overlook the big picture of the *how* and *why* of forces that shape our lives.

Modern society is complex in a way that defies a brain that evolved to manage life as part of a small tribe of hunter-gatherers. It is a highly elaborate web of media, politics, human psychology, and the ongoing consequences of past events, which themselves are of course a part of an ongoing chain of cause and effect.

The ideas, science, and functions of media, politics and psychology are in a constant state of development, as the world around us changes at an ever-increasing rate. I would argue that psychology is the most important of these: The still-young science of human thought and behavior, due to its importance in the other two disciplines. Sadly, this is a double-edged sword, as understanding how to influence public perception is all too often weaponized by bad actors.

But that only underlines the importance of Modern Studies: Understanding the functions of current-day society, so that those functions are not turned against us.

Social sciences are also a defense against the simplistic thinking that certain forces use as their main weapon: The people who want to boil large-scale problems down to easy answers, false blame, and an us-versus-them cultural narrative for the sake of riling up anger in the name of short-term solutions to long-term issues. The wide scope of Modern Studies really drives home that there are no simple solutions, and that the people who promise them need to be guarded against.

So, on a broader level than simply my own wisdom and understanding, Modern Studies and social sciences in general are of greater importance than ever to mankind, and will continue to be so in a world battling the effects of AI, large-scale manipulation, and short-sighted extremism.

Eeva Kilk, 2013

I completed my BA degree in Modern Studies at the University of Akureyri (UNAK) in 2013. That degree became the foundation of my academic development and has decisively shaped

the direction of my work. After completing an MA in Politics and now undertaking my PhD research in civic engagement, I can clearly trace the roots of my research interests and academic approach to the education I received in the Modern Studies programme.

The programme equipped me with breadth and perspective. Through sustained study of philosophy, history, literature, and sociology, I developed a wide understanding of how modern societies have taken shape. I learned to connect political and social developments to their historical foundations and to recognise how ideas evolve over time. Concepts such as democracy, freedom, secularisation, and globalisation became grounded in context rather than treated as abstract notions. This ability to situate contemporary questions within longer developments continues to guide my research.

A defining strength of the programme was its interdisciplinary structure. Working across different fields developed my ability to approach problems from multiple perspectives. I learned to combine historical awareness with philosophical reflection and social analysis, integrating these approaches into coherent arguments. This capacity to think across boundaries has been invaluable in my later studies, particularly in political theory and civic research, where complex issues rarely fit neatly within a single framework.

It also equipped me with strong independent working skills. Research essays and extended projects required planning, discipline, and sustained focus. I learned how to formulate precise research questions, structure arguments logically, and support them with carefully selected sources. I gained confidence in handling demanding academic texts and in presenting my own ideas clearly and systematically. These skills formed the basis for my MA in Politics and continue to support my doctoral research.

Equally important was the emphasis on discussion and shared responsibility. Seminar work required thoughtful participation, careful listening, and constructive engagement with differing viewpoints. This strengthened my ability to communicate complex ideas clearly and reinforced my interest in civic participation and democratic life.

Completing the Modern Studies programme at UNAK did more than prepare me for further study; it shaped my academic identity. It provided a strong intellectual foundation, practical research competence, and a broad outlook that continues to guide my work. Its impact has

been lasting and decisive in shaping the scholar I have become.

Elínborg Sigurðardóttir, 2010

Ég ákvað að skella mér í nam haustið 2007 og eftir miklar vangaveltur um hvað mig langaði að læra varð nútímafræði fyrir valinu. Mer fannst margir áfangar spennandi en þar sem ég hafði aldrei unnið við tölvur þá varð það mín stærsta hindrun fyrsta hálfu árið í náminu.

Það sem er skemmtilegt við námið í nútímafræði er samsetning ólíkra fræðigreina eins og heimspeki, fjölmiðlafræði og kynjafræði svo eitthvað sé nefnt en það sem hefur gagnast mér allra mest eftir námið er gagnrýn hugsun. Mikil áhersla var lögð á gagnrýna hugsun í öllu náminu og tel ég hana afar mikilvæga í dag vegna aukinnar notkunar á gervigreind og falsfrétta í samfélagsmiðlum. Það getur verið erfitt að átta sig á því hvað er sannleikur og hvað er uppspuni og þá er gott að grípa til þess sem við lærðum í nútímafræði og vera á varðbergi gegn hinum ýmsu fordómum og allskonar bulli.

Hættulegustu viðhorfin eru kannski neikvæð viðhorf til útlendinga. Nú hef ég upplifað það að vera sjálf útlendingur síðastliðin 14 ár her í Noregi og umræðan er engu skárri hér en á Íslandi. Að vera útlendingur í öðru landi fær mann til að sjá og upplifa fordóma sjálfur.

Námið í nútímafræði kenndi mér að hafa opinn huga fyrir fjölbreytileikanum og að bera virðingu fyrir menningu og trú annarra. Við sem erum með gagnrýna hugsun verðum að standa upp gegn heimskulegum og jafnvel hættulegum skoðunum og þá um leið notum við námið okkar til góðs.

Elísabet Katrín Friðriksdóttir, 2010

Haustið 2007 gekk ég í fyrsta sinn inn í húsnæði HA, gjörsamlega með hjartað í buxunum og höfuðið fullt af efasemdum um eigið ágæti. „Hvað ert þú að þykjast eiga erindi í háskólanám komin á fertugsaldurinn, skólafélagarnir verða allir nýútskrifaður úr menntaskóla og vita allt en ég ekki neitt“ söng í höfðinu á mér í ýmsum útgáfum. Nýnemadagar og kynningar á námskeiðunum framundan.

Í stuttu máli þá kom það fljótt í ljós að ég hefði ekki þurft að hafa neinar áhyggjur, sem

betur fer. Samnemendur mínir voru fáir en á hinum ýmsu æviskeiðum og allir frábærir. Þessi þrjú ár í nútímafræðinni voru bæði hugvikkandi, skemmtileg og áhugaverð. Það sem mér fannst frábært við námið var að í fyrsta lagi er það sniðið að fólki eins og mér, sem gat ómögulega ákveðið hvað ég ætti að læra og þar sem þetta er þverfaglegt nám er hægt að velja sér áfanga af ólíkum sviðum. Í öðru lagi þá opnar þetta sjóndeildarhringinn upp á gátt og kennir manni gagnrýna hugsun. Einnig hef ég oft hugsað um það hversu mikils virði það var að hafa kennara af öðru þjóðerni, en það jafnast á við að hafa farið í smá skiptinám til Ítalíu og Þýskalands að hafa verið þess aðnjótandi að fá kennslu frá Giorgio Baruchello og Markusi Meckl. Þeir voru með ólíka nálgun á kennsluna og gerðu meiri kröfur, sem var gott, þótt maður hafi upplifað þakklætið meira í baksýnispeglinum.

Í nútímafræðináminu kynntist ég heimspeki og siðfræði en það leiddi mig svo út í frekara nám við HÍ þar sem ég kláraði M.A. gráðu í hagnýtri siðfræði, með áherslu á náttúru og umhverfissiðfræði. Það er einmitt þetta sem er svo stórkostlegt við nútímafræðina, að geta nýtt námið til að kynnast hinum ýmsu greinum á hug- og félagsvísindasviðinu og finna sína leið. Reyndar er sá hængur á að of lítil áhersla er á siðfræði í samfélaginu, sem gerir það að verkum að atvinnumöguleikar eru kannski ekki jafn margir og í öðrum greinum, en það er önnur saga.

En í nútímafræðinni örvaði ég námsgáfur mínar, uppgötvaði að ég gat leyst verkefni, gat hugsað sjálfstætt og gert kröfur á aðra í kringum mig. Þetta hefur að ég hygg aldrei verið mikilvægara en einmitt núna, þegar við lifum á tíma tæknialdar og við erum hársbreidd frá því að forheimskast í heimi tölvu og tækni. Í dag þarf enginn að hugsa, enginn að ræða málin, enginn að koma með hugmyndir, enginn að setja saman kennsluefni eða fyrirlestur, það er bara öllu dælt í gervigreindina og hún svarar á kurteislegan og þjónandi hátt. Hvar er gagnrýnin hugsun?

Ég tel að staða nútímafræðinnar sé sterk, þar sem hún byggir á traustum og góðum grunni. Það væri gaman að sjá þetta nám vaxa og dafna enn frekar og að boðið væri upp á framhaldsnám í nútímafræði. Þegar ég útskrifaðist vorið 2010, þá hefði ég gjarnan viljað geta haldið áfram í HA og tekið mitt meistaranám þar. Það er alltaf sú hætta (ef hættu skyldi kalla) að nemendur sem flytjast til Reykjavíkur til að sækja sér framhaldsmenntun, í lengist þar í lengri eða skemmri tíma, sem er alltaf bagalegt fyrir bæjarfélagið í heild sinni.

Ég get fullyrt það að námið í nútímafræði við Háskólann á Akureyri, breytti lífi mínu á jákvæðan hátt. Ég fékk meiri trú á sjálfri mér og sá í leiðinni samfélagið og í raun heiminn allan í nýju ljósi. Strax eftir fyrstu önnina í skólanum, þá fannst mér að þetta þyrftu allir að upplifa! Kannski óraunhæft, en hugsunin á bak við þessa óra, var sú að þetta nám getur forðað manni frá hjarðhegðun og hjarðhugsun sem er svo mikilvægt að forðast. Gagnrýnin hugsun er eitt það besta hjálpartæki sem hægt er að senda ungt fólk með út í lífið og aldrei of seint að læra að beita gagnrýnni hugsun.

Ef ég man rétt, þá var samfélagsmiðillinn Facebook að fara af stað um svipað leyti og ég var í nútímafræðináminu. Þá var þetta frekar einfaldur miðill; þar setti maður inn fróðlegar færslur um göngutúra dagsins eða matseld og upplýsti stöku sinnum um helstu afrek af skemmtanalífinu í formi „þynnkupósta“. Þá var þetta fremur saklaus miðill, en síðan þá hefur þetta breyst í einn helsta drullupoll hatursorðræðu og yfirlýsingaógleði. Þarna forðast fólk rökræður eins og heitan eldinn, en sá háttur er helst hafður á að fólk segir hvað því finnst og fyrr frýs í helvíti en að það skipti um skoðun. Þessu yrði auðbreytt ef allir myndu læra nútímafræði, ásamt heimspeki og siðfræði.

Já það er svo margt sem betur má fara og hvort sem maður fær tækifæri á að koma að því að reyna að breyta því eður ei, þá er maður í það minnsta alltaf betur í stakk búinn til að fást við hvað sem er eftir þetta nám. Ég þakka Háskólanum á Akureyri og öllum þeim sem komu að kennslu við nútímafræði, þegar ég var þar við nám, kærlega fyrir, þið auðguðuð líf mitt á margan og misjafnan hátt. Takk fyrir mig!

Guðfinna Árnadóttir, 2014

Ég byrjaði að læra nútímafræði árið 2011, þá 25 ára. Ég hafði áhuga á mörgu og það var ein af ástæðunum fyrir því að ég hafði ekki valið mér námsleið fyrr og látið verða að því að skrá mig í nám. Á þeim tíma var ég tveggja barna móðir og þurfti að taka námslán ef ég ætlaði í nám og þess vegna vandaði ég mig sérstaklega við valið. En það kom að því að ég fór á kynningu á námsbrautunum í Háskólanum á Akureyri en það var stutt heimsókn, ákvörðunin var tekin á staðnum og ég vissi að nútímafræði væri námið fyrir mig. Námið var fjölbreytt og það besta var að ég gat aðlagð það að mínu áhugasviði. Námsleiðin í heild sinni var vel ígrunduð, skipulögð og það var rauður þráður í allri námsleiðinni. Námið opnaði fyrir gagnrýna hugsun, aukin skilning á fjölmörgu og ég varð áhugasamari um að skilja umhverfið

mitt betur, bæði nærumhverfið og heiminn allan. Námið kenndi mér mikilvægi þess að skilja söguna okkar og einnig að hún hefur áhrif á hegðun og val fólks, sem t.d. speglar sig í næstu kynslóðunum.

Eftir útskrift, gekk ekki vel í byrjun að fá vinnu sem mér fannst ég geta nýtt námið mitt í. Ég fékk síðar það verkefni að “finna” ungt virknilaust fólk og aðstoða þau við það að komast í virkni og veita ráðgjöf. Það væru breyttir tímar og ungt fólk, jafnvel undir 18 ára voru sum ekki í námi og hafði ekkert fyrir stafni, jafnvel datt inn í heim tækja t.d. tölvuleikja og aukna einangrun. Það vantaði þó tölfræði um það hversu margir þetta væru, því einstaklingarnir voru hvergi skráðir og var þetta því ákveðið úr frá tilfinningu að einhverju leyti. Þó var ákveðið að eyða fjármagni í þetta verkefni tímabundið. Einnig í þessum hópi var ungt atvinnulaust fólk og fólk sem fékk fjárhagsaðstoð frá sveitarfélaginu. Ég varð síðar partur af því að sjá um lengra nám fyrir hóp sem var skemmtilegt og gefandi verkefni. Í þeim hóp var mikilvægt að allir fengu tilfinningu fyrir því að tilheyra samfélagi, hóp og fyndu fyrir tilgangi. Nútímafræðinámið nýttist mikið í þessu starfi, bæði við kynningar, að læra að skilja fólk, vita hvað nær til þeirra, hvað virkar, skilja hvað gerðist sem orsakaði aðstæður þeirra og svo framvegis.

Ég sótti síðar um starf sérfræðings hjá Skattinum á Akureyri og hef nú verið þar að verða um 9 ár. Það var stefna hjá embætti Ríkisskattstjóra á þeim tíma, að ráða fólk með fjölbreytta menntun. Þar voru nú þegar margir lögfræðingar, kennarar, fjölmiðlafræðingur, viðskiptafræðingar og fleira, en svo var ég ráðin og nú höfðu þau nútímafræðing. Nútímafræðinámið nýttist mér ekki síður á þessu sviði. Starfið krafðist ekki sérstakar menntunar beint, annað en háskólanáms. Ég sá fljótt að stærðfræði, lögfræði og annað var ekki eitthvað sem þurfti að vera mín sterka grein til að geta sinnt starfinu mínu vel, heldur það að skilja fólk og hegðun þeirra. Skilja hvað fólk meinti, sýna skilning og útskýra a mannlegan hátt en svara hnitmiðað og skýrt, rýna í gögn, finna hvað virkar og hvað ekki. Ég þurfti að setja mig í mannlegar stellingar og skilja að eftir t.d. efnahagshrunið, Covid, hamfarirnar í Grindarvík og fleiri viðburði, þá bjó fólk við aðrar og erfiðar aðstæður.

Embættið sem ég starfaði hjá hafði þar mikilvægt hlutverk í samfélaginu og hélt utan um mikilvæg úrræði og umsóknir sem almenningur nýtti sér. Úrræðin þurfti að móta og túlka eftir lögum en einnig gera aðgengileg og útskýra a mannlegan hátt og gæta þess að upplýsingarefni Skattsins væri skírt, aðgangur fólks að embættinu væri góður og andlega

þurfti að mæta fólki á þeirra stað og þeirra aðstæðum en jafnframt á sama tíma vera stærsti innheimtumaður ríkissjóðs og þurfum vissulega að fara eftir lögum og skyldum. Embættið var orðið þjónustufyrirtæki og breytt að mörgu leyti. Ég sé alltaf betur og betur að námið skilur eftir sig haf af fróðleik. Mér finnst það án efa hafa undirbúið mig i hvaða starf sem er og treysti mér i fjölbreytt verkefni eftir námið. Þakklát að hafa fundið og lært nútímafræði.

Hildur Friðriksdóttir, 2013

Besta leiðin til þess að skilja samtímamann er að setja hann í sögulegt samhengi. Að geta rýnt í þau öfl sem hafa mótandi áhrif á hugmyndir okkar og menningu og með hvaða hætti þau knýja fram samfélagsbreytingar. Allt er þetta þekking sem ég fékk út úr náminu í nútímafræði og ekki er verra að það veitti einnig óteljandi tækifæri til þess að velta vöngum, spyrja spurninga og efast.

Getan til að setja hluti í samhengi skiptir ekki síst máli á tímum þar sem sameiginleg viðmið virðast vera að gliðna í sundur og einfaldar eða öfgakenndar skýringar fá aukið rými. Við lifum á tímum þar sem tæknin getur, þrátt fyrir alla sína kosti, dregið úr gagnrýninni hugsun og ýtt undir of einfaldar – og jafnvel hættulegar – lausnir. Í slíku umhverfi er vegið sé að mannréttindum, lýðræðislegar stofnanir virðast veikjast og mannleg reisn víkur fyrir ótta eða valdi. Þess vegna tel ég gagnrýna hugsun vera orðna eina af mikilvægustu hæfni samtímans: að kunna að spyrja, draga í efa og setja hluti í rétt samhengi.

Nú þrettán árum eftir útskrift, geri ég mér betur grein fyrir því hvað námið gaf mér í raun og veru. Ekki bara fræðilega þekkingu, heldur líka hæfni til að líta á heiminn með gagnrýnu hugarfari og meðvitaðri tilfinningu fyrir því að ekkert er sjálfgefið. Og ef eitthvað stendur upp úr eftir allan þennan tíma, þá er það þetta: að halda áfram að spyrja, halda áfram að læra og halda áfram að reyna að skilja heiminn sem við erum stöðugt að móta – saman.

Hjálmar Stefán Brynjólfsson, 2010

Ég hóf nám í nútímafræði veturinn 2001-2002. Nútímafræði var þá einungis kennd sem aukagrein (30 einingar í þáverandi kerfi). Þetta var í annað skipti sem námsgreinin var kennd við Háskólann á Akureyri. Við vorum 15-20 nemendur þann vetur, nokkuð fleiri en árið áður. Það er samt óhætt að segja að þennan vetur hafi yfirgnæfandi meirihluti nemenda

verið konur, þótt sumir áfanganna hafi reyndar verið kenndir saman með stærri hópum. Í náminu voru almennir kúrsar í aðferðafræði og því sem jafna má til heimspekilegra forspjallsvísinda, en einnig fög með áherslu á nútímann. Þau fög skilja mest eftir sig í endurminningunni, bæði vegna þess að þau kjörnuðu hvað nútíminn felur í sér sem sagnfræðilegt tímabil, en einnig var í þeim fjallað um helstu stefnur og strauma í bókmenntum, heimspeki og sálfræði frá 1800 og fram til okkar daga.

Fyrir mig, sem var nýskriðinn úr framhaldsskóla, var til mikils að skilja bæði samfélags- og menningarlegar breytingar á Íslandi frá því eftir seinni heimsstyrjöld. Mér fannst eins og í skólakerfinu hefðum við varla náð að fjalla um 20. öldina, líklega af því að hún var enn að renna sitt skeið á sama tíma og ég var í námi. Ég náði því að verða hluti af 20. öldinni og klára hana, en var við upphaf 21. aldarinnar litlu nær um allt það sem þá var orðinn hluti af því liðna. Og ef skólinn átti ekki að miðla þessum upplýsingum til manns, hver átti þá að sinna því?

Í endurminningunni var Akureyri enn suðupunktur breytinga árið 2001, nokkuð sem auðveldlega ætti að vera hægt að staðfesta: Glerártorg var þá tiltölulega nýlega risið og niðurrif Sambandsverksmiðjanna sömuleiðis nýlega frá. Ekki var enn liðinn áratugur frá því Listagilið hafði tekið til starfa. Háskólinn á Akureyri var á þessum árum í fyrsta sinn að vinna úr því að nemendur voru orðnir meira en 1000 manns. Samhliða þessu voru miklar breytingar á KEA og fyrirtækjum í eigu þess á umræddum árum og einkafyrirtæki tóku við sem burðarásar fyrir samfélagið. Að ekki sé minnst á aðrar samfélagslegar umbyltingar sem þá voru enn í farvatninu: Stafræna byltingin átti þá enn eftir að snerta við hverju einasta atriði í lífi fólks. Einkavæðing bankanna var þá enn ókláruð, en langfyrirferðamesta málið í stjórnmalunum þessi ár voru fyrirhugaðar framkvæmdir austanlands: Fyrst sneru spjótin að Eyjabökkum, eftir það var umræðan öll um Kárahnjúka. Eftir þennan vetur, hélt ég í nám til Reykjavíkur til að læra aðalgrein á móti einingunum 30 í nútímafræði.

Til að gera langdregna sögu stutta lauk ég B.A. prófi í nútímafræði 2010 eftir talsverða leit, jafnvel eyðimerkurgöngu. Þá sögu ætla ég ekki að rekja hér, aðeins að láta þess getið að á þessum fyrsta áratugi 21. aldarinnar höfðu orðið miklar breytingar á námsframboði við HA. Ný deild hafði verið stofnuð sem meðal annars hafði í för með sér grundvallarbreytingar á námi í nútímafræði og við lok áratugarins var hún kennd sem aðalgrein við HA. Árið eftir, 2011, lauk ég námi í lögfræði og hafði þá lokið bæði BA og ML gráðum í lögfræði samhliða

nútímafræðinni.

Ég á margar góðar minningar úr náminu í nútímafræði, hvort heldur sem er í tímum þar sem verið var að rökræða afstöðu til heimspekilegra texta eða bókmenntaverka. Þó leitar sterkast á mig núna, þegar verið er að fagna því að 20 ár eru síðan fyrstu BA nemendurnir voru útskrifaðir úr nútímafræði sem aðalgrein, að rifja upp yfirferð yfir ritgerð Kants: Hvað er upplýsing? og rýni/gagnrýni Foucaults á ritgerðina. Hugmyndin um nútímamann sem tímabil þar sem einstaklingurinn skapar sjálfan sig, þar sem gagnrýnin afstaða til lífsins og verðandinnar felur í sér könnun á bæði þekkingu okkar, sjálfræði og - umfram allt - mörkum. Það er ekki ástæða til að endursegja grein Foucaults um nútímamann hér. Vil einungis rifja þau upp, því þau höfðu eftir á að hyggja mótandi áhrif og opnuðu augu manns. Kannski gera þau það einnig fyrir aðra. Þakka samhliða því fyrir mig og fyrir árin í nútímafræðinni.

Hjörtur Ágústsson, 2009

Learning to Think Together: Notes from a Modern Studies Graduate in 2026

I graduated with a BA in Modern Studies from the University of Akureyri in the autumn of 2009. Writing these lines in early 2026, I find myself returning to the same questions that first drew me to the Humanities and Liberal Arts: How do we learn to think together? How do we cultivate judgement, solidarity and responsibility in a world that keeps accelerating?

Modern Studies sent me across three continents. A summer at the University of Hyderabad introduced me to a democracy larger and noisier than anything I had known, where debate spills into the street and philosophy meets everyday life. A semester in Monterrey at Tecnológico de Monterrey brought a different kind of energy, entrepreneurial, inventive, generous. Iceland, India and Mexico did not give me a single “worldview”. They gave me habits of mind, curiosity about difference, humility before complexity, and the courage to act with incomplete information. Those habits proved far more durable than any particular theory I learned.

For the past decade and a half I have worked at the intersection of international cooperation, education and youth work, most of it within European programmes. The day-to-

day reality is prosaic: drafting proposals, aligning budgets, organising exchanges, and making sure that good intentions survive contact with timetables. Yet the purpose is anything but prosaic. When teachers, school leaders and youth workers meet across borders, they practise the democratic arts: listening, negotiating meaning, making promises and keeping them. I have watched vulnerable teenagers from Iceland and Norway find common connection through extreme sports and special teachers from Croatia get inspired by colleagues from Reykjavik to improve the lives of disabled children in their own communities. That is the Humanities at work, not as a subject silo, but as a way of being with others and learning from others.

We are, however, living through a sobering moment. The international order that Europe built, backed by American power for much of the past eighty years, can no longer be treated as a constant. Trust cannot be outsourced. If Europe is to remain open, fair and secure, it must strengthen its internal cohesion and take greater responsibility for its external security. That security cannot be defined only by the machinery of war. It must include the integrity of the data and digital systems upon which our societies now depend.

Here the Humanities and Liberal Arts are not a luxury, they are strategic infrastructure. We need European public digital goods, communication platforms, payment systems and, yes, artificial intelligence, designed around democratic values, linguistic diversity and the rights of the child. Building them will require engineers and lawyers, economists and educators. But it will also require historians who remember why certain safeguards exist, philosophers who can argue about ends as well as means, and writers who can keep the language of the public realm human. Critical thinking is not a slogan. It is the slow discipline of asking better questions, naming trade-offs, and distinguishing between what can be automated and what must remain human.

I work daily with AI in education. Used well, it can widen access, personalise support and reduce drudgery for teachers. Used lazily, it can narrow curricula, reward shortcuts, and turn learning into a set of clickable transactions. The Humanities help us hold this tension. They remind us that technology is never neutral and that “efficiency” is not the highest educational good. The purpose of schooling is not simply to optimise performance but to form persons, citizens capable of deliberation, empathy and responsible action.

Despite the present turbulence, I am optimistic. I have seen how deeply European children and young people wish to cooperate and how ready teachers are to share craft knowledge. In classrooms from Reykjavík to Rijeka I have witnessed the quiet courage of educators who insist that every child belongs. That commitment is the best antidote to xenophobia and the politics of fear. It is also the best foundation for a Europe that relies on itself, not in the sense of closing in, but of standing up.

If the Humanities taught me anything, it is that democracy is a verb. It is something we keep doing together, reading critically, arguing honestly, changing our minds, and showing up for one another. Twenty years after the first BA in Modern Studies at UNAK, I am grateful that my education did not give me a final answer. It gave me a practice. And in a world of powerful tools and fragile truths, that practice may be our most practical asset.

Ingólfur Stefánsson, 2019

Það var ánægjulegt að fá verkefni frá Giorgio á ný eftir öll þessi ár. Ég ákvað að bíða með þennan texta fram á síðasta dag bara til þess að hafa þetta eins líkt tíma mínum í Nútímafræði við Háskólann á Akureyri og mögulegt væri, bara út af því, ég lofa, ég vildi bara hafa þetta eins.

Nútímafræði kom óvænt inn í líf mitt á tímamarki óvissu. Í menntaskóla vaknaði áhugi á heimspeki sem varð að lokum svo mikill að þegar kom að því að velja háskólanám kom ekkert annað til greina. Ég fór í Heimspeki við Háskóla Íslands. Ég hélt að ég væri gáfaðri en ég var eftir að hafa skautað tiltölulega létt í gegnum lífið á Akureyri. Þrátt fyrir að hafa aldrei verið sá sem var nálægt því að vera með hæstu einkunnirnar, eða haft nokkurn áhuga á því yfir höfuð, náði ég að klára Menntaskólann á Akureyri, og var þar með óstöðvandi. Mér var kippt snögg niður á jörðina nokkra mánuði inn í heimspekinámið sem að náði ekki bara að eyðileggja áhuga minn á heimspeki heldur einnig alla trú mína á því að ég gæti nokkurn tímann áorkað einhverju innan akademíu. Ég vildi bara lesa og læra, ég nennti ekki að eyða öllum mínum tíma í að skrifa heimildir nákvæmlega eins og Aristóteles gerði á sínum tíma, eða einhver af þeim, ég man ekki, ég kláraði aldrei námið.

Ég flutti heim til Akureyrar og byrjaði að vinna á leikskóla, það hentaði mér ekki heldur. Ég vissi ekkert hvað ég vildi. Góður vinur minn Pétur Karl var á þessum tíma að klára

Nútímafræði við Háskólann á Akureyri, ég vissi ekkert hvað það var en hann mældi með því fyrir mig og það sannaði sig að hann þekkti mig nokkuð vel. Námið hentaði mér, það var opið og möguleikar á að sníða það eftir mínum þörfum. Áhugi minn á heimspeki vaknaði á ný og á sama tíma áhugi á samfélags málefnum nútímans, Nútímafræði, ég fattaði hvað það var.

Námið var krefjandi en stóri munurinn var sá að ég hafði áhuga á því sem ég var að læra. Umhverfið var persónulegra en áður og ég fann að ég gat staðið mig ágætlega. Ég gerði þetta á mínum forsendum og ég fékk rými til að gera það, og ég lærði að hugsa, gagnrýna, færa rök og eitthvað meira örugglega, það er langt síðan.

Ég hafði ákveðna fordóma fyrir Háskólanum á Akureyri á þessum tíma, það var meira alvöru að fara í nám í Reykjavík eða í útlöndum í mínum huga, en ég hafði rangt fyrir mér. Ég hef stundað nám við Háskóla Íslands, Konunglega tækniháskólann í Stokkhólmi og einhvern háskóla í Hollandi sem ég man ekki hvað heitir, en Nútímafræðin í HA kenndi mér mest og hafði mest áhrif á mig persónulega. Ég er ekkert sérstakur í því að skrifa góðar ritgerðir eða halda fyrirlestra og mun aldrei verða, akademískar reglur henta mér illa og ég er of latur til þess að gera hlutina almennilega, þetta er ekki áfellingardómur á HA sem útskrifaði mig þrátt fyrir þetta allt, ég fékk betri einkunn í Mastersnámi í konunglega skólanum í Svíþjóð. Munurinn er sá að þar lærði ég voða lítið, og ég hef áttað mig á því að einkunnir eða staða skipta voða litlu máli, það sem skiptir máli er hvað maður lærir og tekur með sér út í lífið.

Ég vildi að fleiri myndu læra Nútímafræði, siðfræði, rök hugsun, sögu, og fá að þæla í því, hugsa aðeins. Því var kannski sóað á mig. Ég veit að það er mikið í gangi sem er voðalega hættulegt, samfélagsmiðlar, Trump og allt þetta sem þið hafið heyrt þúsund sinnum og einhver annar nútímafræðingur skrifar örugglega hér góða og rökstudda grein um, með tilvísanir úr náminu. Eins og fyrir mælin sögðu til um. Já þessu var kannski sóað á mig og ég spái stundum í því hvort það hefði verið betra að halda áfram á leikskólanum, sótt um vinnu hjá Samherja til að græða meiri pening, láta Snorra Mátsson mynda skoðanir mínar með 40 sekúndna myndbandsbútum á Facebook, þið vitið.

Þá ætti ég kannski meiri pening væri ég kannski ekki svona hrokafullur og bitur og þið væruð að lesa texta frá einhverjum sem gæti sagt ykkur meira um hvað vandamálið er. En ég held að ég haldi mig við það að vera þakklátur fyrir það sem Nútímafræðin kenndi mér,

að hugsa, spá, taka hlutum með fyrirvara og vilja það besta fyrir samfélagið og öll sem það mynda... og að geta vitnað í Descartes og Tocquevilles á þriðja bjór.

Til hamingju með afmælið Nútímafræði!

Ívar Ingimarsson, 2023

Aftengdur heimur: Við erum meira tengd en höfum að sama skapi aldrei verið eins fjarlægð hvort öðru. Samskipti í gengum netið koma ekki í stað raunverulegra samskipta af holdi og blóði. Það að sjást þjást á samfélagsmiðlum er ekki það sama og vera við hlið viðkomandi og finna þjáningar hans.

Óhamingja, misskipting, aftenging býr til óánægju sem auðvelt er að virkja. Við förum að kenna þeim um sem síst skildi, útlendingum, innflytjendum, samkynhneigðum. Við viljum gamla heiminn okkar aftur, án þess þó að vita hvernig hann var. Einföld orð fara að hljóma skynsamlega: “Gerum Ísland frábært aftur”.

Samfélagsmiðlar magna upp það versta í okkur. Slæmar fréttir ferðast hraðar en þær góðu og upphrópanir og skandalar búa til fyrirsagnir. Upplýsingaóreiða ræður ríkjum og sannleikurinn týnist í bulli. Lukkuriddarar færa okkur einfaldar lausnir á flóknum málefnum. Einmitt þá er aldrei mikilvægara en að einstaklingar geti metið það sem þeir sjá og heyra og kunni að leita sér upplýsingar hjá traustum viðurkenndum aðilum.

Alþjóðavæðing viðskiptanna hefur búið til ótrúlegan auð og velsæld sérstaklega þeirra ríkustu en líka ópersónulegan, misskiptan heim. Að segja starfsmanni upp búandi við hið hans er ekki það sama segja honum upp frá öðru landi. Hans sársauki verður ekki þinn heldur verður tap hans fleiri frí og kokteilar fyrir hluthafana.

Við þurfum að hafa tíma til að hugsa.

Fólk er aðþrengt í kapphlaupi um að borga af húsnæðislánnum, nýja bílnum eða betra sumarfrí. Við höfum ekki tíma og gervigreindin hugsar fyrir okkur. Hún er klárari en við en hún veit ekki hversu lífið er dýrmætt ekki frekar en guðirnir sem lifa að eilífu og öfunda mennina þess vegna. Það þarf bara einn góðhjartaðan mann til að

prógramma gervigreindina og biðja hana um að finna leið til að bjarga jörðinni. Það gæti orðið endirinn af mannkyninu.

Heimur þar sem allir ljúga og hinir sterkustu taka það sem þeir vilja gengur ekki upp. Fjölmiðlar eru fullir af fréttum og falsfréttum. Traust fólks á fjölmiðlum og stofnunum minnkar. Þeir sem nærast á ringulreið ýta undir það ástand. Umræðan verður öfgakennd, pólarnir rífast og stóri meirihlutinn í miðjunni hættir að láta sig málin varða eða þar til að ástandið fer að hafa bein áhrif á hann.

Ég trúi því að boðorðin 10 hafi verið leið manna til að koma reglu á samskipti sín svo þeir gætu lifað saman, en ekki verið boð af ofan. Ég trúi því að staðan sem er komin upp muni í auknu mæli minna okkur á mikilvægi þess að virða leikreglur og alþjóðalög (boðorð *nútímans*). Ég trúi því að í auknu mæli muni fólk hætta að nota samfélagsmiðla til að sækja sér upplýsingar því það er þreytandi að vita ekki hvort eitthvað sé satt eða lygi, og muni í auknu mæli leita í traustari áreiðanlegri miðla sem eru viðurkenndir sem slíkir.

Vandamál *nútímans* verða ekki leyst með einföldum lausnum eða tækninýjungum sem hægt er að nýta bæði til góðs og ills. Heldur með því að búa til samfélög sem búa til gott fólk. Samfélög sem hafa tími til að hlúa af einstaklingnum og kenna honum að virða samfélag sitt. Samfélög sem byggja upp sameiginlega innviði og hlúa af þörfum fólks til að lifa góðu lífi. Þannig samfélag trúi ég að búi til meira af góðu fólki sem þú myndir leita til á þínum verstu og bestu stundum, fólki sem þú myndir vilja eiga fyrir vin og myndir treysta fyrir þínu dýrmætasta, fólkinu þínu.

Til að búa til þannig samfélag þurfum við einstaklingarnir, og sérstaklega þeir sem eru aflögufærir að hugsa aðeins meira um hvað ég get gert fyrir samfélagið mitt í stað þess að hugsa hvað það geti gert fyrir mig.

Jóhann Ásmundsson, 2007

I submitted my BA thesis in Modern Studies in 2007, almost twenty years ago. I had enrolled in the university few years earlier. I had been stuck in a dead-end job on an assembly line. Even though I had been feeling the need to obtain further education, both for personal reasons and for carrier advancement, I did not know which direction I should go. I

attended an open house at the University of Iceland to see what was there for me. There I met a teacher from the university of Akureyri, Sigurður Kristinnsson. He told me about a line of study for people just like me - people who did not know what to study! - namely Modern Studies.

As I acquired my education through Modern Studies, I was introduced to, and encouraged to observe closely, underlying ideas and values behind the norm. We would seek answers to questions like: How does art and architecture reflect the spirit of the time? How and why do cities grow? Why do we have certain institutions and why do they function the way they do? What is the official function and formal policy? And what is the informal policy, and its almost invisible effects on people and society? From where arises the sense of self? And on that note, how can I personally lead a meaningful life and invent my own role, in order to shape myself and my community.

What one sees as a societal norm is not necessarily questioned or challenged. In a way, this was liberating to me on two grounds. Firstly, I was born into sets of norms reaching far back, and well outside of my control and responsibility. Secondly, it forced me to take a stance in relation to these underlying values and ideas. So, on the one hand, it freed me from, at times, the lunacy of the current affairs: the spirit of the time. But, on the other hand, it forced a sense of responsibility upon me, in the sense that I lived in the norm; I led a normal life. Even now, as far as my existence is interwoven with the norm and the spirit of the time, I am responsible.

The controversy being, then, that the only way for me to get to understand and influence the present is to research the past. I must be rooted in the past to bear fruit in the present. During my studies, I discovered that I had to learn to change my attitudes, and I had to change my opinions. I was literally forced to give up certain opinions and beliefs for the sake of wisdom and truth. For me, that is the essence of education.

I felt that I was taking a very important step when I enrolled in the University of Akureyri. I thought of myself as stepping out from the assembly line, moving from the mundane to the extraordinary. My first year in the university coincided with my daughter's first year in school: her first step in the lifelong journey of learning. Now, twenty years later, she is doing much better than I do, but that is another story! As I was helping her with her

homework, I realized that I was also basically learning to read and write. Nothing extraordinary. I realized that there was a difference, not in degree but in nature, between her first grade and my first year at the university. However, in an oddly analogous way, learning to read and write with the guidance and direction of my instructors in Modern Studies, helped me to further my understanding of the world around me and build on my own life. Like my daughter, I was acquiring new tools, and I had to put them to good use.

The process of education changed me, it changed my life, my perceptions, my values and my ethical stance. One is not born with fixed morals or certain ethics. One must learn and experience, and one must seek knowledge and education. Modern Studies gave me a new sense of self. Even though all of us need education, education is not merely acquired by those who need it; education is acquired by those who *want* it. I have met people who did not really want education, they simply needed a degree. In that sense, education was actually in the way of them reaching their goal. Why is it, that for so many, education can be perceived as bothersome? Could it be for the very reason that is a catalyst for change? It pushes you in the direction of change, which is perhaps the thing that scares us the most—even though, ironically, change is the one thing that is most certain in our life. We, as individuals, are bound to change, and the society we live in is bound to change. Will the change in our life be led and fixed by others, or are we able to define and redefine our role, as individual human beings?

I wonder in this day and age if education is sometimes merely seen as a methodology. A method to rationalize outcomes and decisions that otherwise would raise moral questions or uncanny feelings. Is it merely a method to sway away from our true responsibilities, responsibilities that can only be recognised from within our individual selves? Responsibilities that arise from the same place within us as the one where mere opinions are replaced by wisdom. The only responsibilities that we can truly hold are the responsibilities towards ourselves. My individual responsibility is therefore to respond and to act from knowledge, drawing from collective wisdom. It takes courage to criticise any authority, and to argue and reason against the misuse of power. Modern Studies have made me more courageous.

The way I see it, education is something that transcends my physical being and my socio-economic circumstances. It brings with it the deep certainty that, if I stick to it, cherish it

and practice it, it is where I can root my sanity in an insane world. I can rest in the thoughts and insights of no one single man or one single time, but in the triumphs of the collective human spirit. It is something that allows me and enables me to arise above the mundane. But I must want it, I must seek it, I must put it into practice. By doing so, I also feel empowered to seek and find my own way and define my own role in this so-called “life.” I am not just a blunt tool in the assembly line anymore.

Jóhann Ingi Bjarnason, 2012

When I graduated from Modern Studies at the University of Akureyri in 2012, I did not realize how deeply the program would shape the way I view the world and acquire new skills. My BA thesis, *History of Martial Arts in Iceland and their Image in Icelandic Media*, began as an exploration of glíma, boxing, judo, karate, taekwondo, and MMA. But under the guidance of Markus Meckl, the project became something more, an investigation into my culture as an Icelander.

Modern Studies taught me to gather and digest information; think about the information I am getting and where it comes from. Something that has been very helpful in recent years with fake news and misinformation overflowing our digital spaces and right-wing extremism that has been spread through oversimplified narratives of important problems the world faces.

In the years since my graduation, the world has changed rapidly. Artificial Intelligence now performs many of the cognitive tasks that modern people once handled themselves. It is kind of astonishing how people lack the incentive to tackle problems they face and turn to AI for salvation, and the next moment they worry that AI might replace them.

As my career moved into technical fields like ERP development and data migration, the habits I formed in Modern Studies remained relevant. Complex data systems require interpretation. Data structure requires context. Don't get me wrong, AI can be a good worker and should be used for mundane tasks, but it is not able to understand what a real user in a system will think or behave, not yet at least.

Twenty years after the first BA in Modern Studies was awarded, I feel that the need for

academic studies that sharpen then mind, and encourage logic and originality, is exactly what our society needs.

Karen Dúa Kristjánsdóttir, 2013

Ég er alltaf stolt og ánægð með að hafa BA gráðu í nútímafræði, öðruvísi gráða sem erfitt er að útskýra fyrir öðrum en auðvelt að tengja við. Hefur hjálpað mér og nýst t.d. sérlega vel þegar ég las til MA gráðu í Visual (cultural) Studies fyrir nokkrum árum

Kolbeinn Gauti Friðriksson, 2020

It's now been almost six years since I finished my Modern Studies at the University of Akureyri. As I sit and reflect on that time, there is a lot to unravel. When I first entered the program, I did not quite know what to expect. I had a young child and was working fulltime as a glacier guide, and was just going through the motions trying to head towards somewhere concrete with my studies: a place I did not know what would be. But as I progressed in my studies, each course started to allow me to go a bit deeper. I started to realize that this path was a place where my scattered worldview, based on Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*, Adam Curtis' documentaries, and Aldous Huxley's novels, could actually be to my benefit. I started getting deeper into writing papers about Italian lemon thieves and creating a video made out of wartime footage set to Marvin Gaye's *What's going on* (my attempt at becoming Adam Curtis). Sometimes I would take it too far. For example, I wrote an essay stating that drugs should be legalized and soccer banned (the teacher tore that essay down, to put it mildly). The studies also allowed me to travel abroad and spend a year in Lisbon, Portugal, studying, which is a time that I will forever hold dearly. What the Modern Studies offer, in my humble opinion, is a chance to let people realize that what they think and feel about the state of things is perhaps not too absurd. It gives you tools and opportunities to organize your thoughts and feelings about the state of affairs, so that they may be more than scattered thoughts that you disperse among your closest ones, over a pint. As the world continues to evolve and become more and more absurd, these tools and opportunities, in my opinion, become more and more valuable. I will forever be grateful for the opportunities and tools that I was afforded in my Modern Studies. And the teachers that make up the core faculty of this program.

Kristján Birnir Ívansson, 2011

Þegar enn eitt árið er liðið í aldanna skaut kemur upp í hugann þegar hugsað er til baka að árið 2026, eru liðinn einn 15 ár síðan undirritaður útskrifaðist með BA gráðu frá Háskólanum á Akureyri. Margt hefur breyst á þeim árum en í ljós hefur komið að Nútímafræði hefur reynst öflugt tæki til að takast á við allar þessar breytingar. Þegar heims málinn eru í fréttum kemur oft upp í hugann hversu gott er að hafa farið í námið á sínum tíma og hafa aflað sér skilning á því að hver sé að mörgu leiti undir rót þessara breytinga svo sem arabíska vorið, uppgangur popúlisma bæði í Bandaríkjunum og í Evrópu, heimsfaraldur Covid og þær aðgerðir sem ráðist var í kjölfarið, innrás Rússa í Úkraínu og breytt samsetning fjölmiðla og samfélagsmiðla fátt eitt sé nefnt. Þetta er ekki tæmandi listi svo það sé tekið fram.

Þegar oft tíðum þegar þessa atburði hefur borið á góma þá hef ég oft hugsað hvernig námið í Nútímafræðinni hefur nýst mér til þess að annað hvort skilja eða takast á við þessa atburði. Nútímafræðinni lærðist mér það tvennt sé mikilvægast að geta skilið orsaka samhengi hlutana og að geta beitt gagnrýnni hugsun til þess að geta tekist á við atburði lýðandi stundar.

Ég held að eftirminnilegast sé að Efnahagskreppan og bankahrunið á Íslandi voru í fullum gangi á þeim tíma sem ég var náminu. Þannig að það gaf manni raunveruleg dæmi um það hvernig mætti skilja orsaka samhengið í þeim atburðum sem voru að raungerast þá og hvernig mögulega maður ætti að bregðast við þegar hlutirnir snúa að manni sjálfum t.d. kosningarnar um ICESAVE reikningana.

Þegar ég lit til baka þá er námið mitt í Nútímafræðinni með þeim hætti að er það nám sem ég hef farið í sem mér hefur fundist vera það mikilvægasta sem ég hef lagt stund á. Annað nám sem ég hef farið í eða prófað hefur mér ekki fundist geta sýnt fram á tilgang sinn ef miðast við eitthvað þröngt afmarkað svið og gangast manni að litlu eða takmörkuðu leiti við að takast á við þær hröðu samfélagsbreytingar sem hafa átt sér stað síðastliðinn ár og á komandi árum.

Á meðan Nútímafræðin getur verið svo margt einhverskonar hlaðborð í hug- og félagsvísindum. Þannig að maður gat valið mismunandi áfanga eftir því hvað var í boði og

hvað höfðaði til manns hverjum tíma. Eins og samfélagið er í heild þá þróast Nútímafræðin og má leiða að því líkum að námið hafi sennilega tekið einhverjum breytingum síðan 2008 til 2011 frá því að ég var skráður í námið á sínum tíma. Gera má ráð fyrir að inn hafa komið skildu áfangar sem ekki voru kenndir á sínum tíma og aðrir feldir út í staðinn eða gerðir að valfögum. Eftir minnilegust áfangarnir sem ég tók í náminu voru IBH-Iðnbylting og hnattvæðing og AFB-Hugmyndafræði og saga nútímans (sem þá hét Afbygging 20. aldar). Aðrir eftir minnilegir áfangar voru t.d. STJ-Stjórn málafræðileg greining og STJ-Alþjóðastjórn mála/Alþjóðasamskipti enda voru þeir áfangar teknir sem valfög.

Það sem var magnað við þessa áfanga að allir saman mynda þeir eina heild og dýpka skilninginn á atburðum líðandi stundar. Hver á sinn hátt. Í Afbyggingu 20. aldar er mér þó minnstæðast sennilega þegar var fjallað um það hverjir eru sendir á vígvöllinn það eru ekki stórefnamenn og fjölskyldur heldur öreigarnir og almúginn. Það hvernig almúganum er blásinn baráttu andi í brjóst og hann hvattur til dáða og hvernig við þurfum að ná þessum markmiðum okkar en svo þegar kemur að því að berjast þá eru það þið almúginn. Meðan við sem stjórnnum sitjum og bíðum. Við horfum en þá upp á þetta í dag til dæmis í stríði Úkraínnumanna og Rússa.

Á meðan áfanganum um Iðnbyltingunna og hnattvæðinguna var áhuga vert að átta sig á því að megin undirstaða vestrænna samfélaga eins og við þekkjum þau í dag má rekja til Frönsku byltingarinnar og uppreisn 13 nýlenda í Ameríku gagnvart Bresku Krúnunni.

Ég nefni báða stjórn málafræði áfangana þar sem þeir mynda góða samfellu þegar kemur að dýpka skilning á stjórn mála líðandi stundar. Bæði hér heima og erlendis. Mér þó minnstæðast umræður um tengsl bankanna og efnahagslífsins við stjórn málinn enda eins og áður sagði voru eftirmálar bankahrunsins í algeymingi í Búsáhalda byltingunni og voru þeir atburðir rýndir og greindir um leið og þeir gerðust. Í seinni áfanganum um alþjóðastjórn málinn er mér sennilega eftir minnilegast þegar Markus Meckl gerði grín að öryggisráði Sameinuðupjóðanna og hversu máttlaust það er í raun og veru til að takast á við brýn úrlausnar efni t.d. málefni Ísraels og Palestínu.

Þá fannst mér einnig gott að það var boðið upp á áfanga í gagnrýni hugsun og siðfræði sem og félagsvísindagreinar sem útskýrir hvaða áhrif þjóðfélagið og samfélagið hefur á einstaklinginn og að endingu fjölmiðlafræði áfanga sem ramma inn mikilvægi þess hvernig

efni er miðlað. Það skal tekið fram að það var í hugað að taka fleiri áfanga tengslum við allt ofan talið en tíminn takmarkaður þó held ég að þeir áfangar sem urðu fyrir valinu hafi endað á því að nýtast mér best. Þá held ég að það hafi sem dæmi verið betra fyrir mig að taka þá áfanga í fjölmiðlafræðinni sem sneru aðalega að miðlun efnis fremur en framleiðslu þess þegar upp er staðið enda sá ég það ekki fyrir mér að starfa við fjölmiðla.

Það er gott að vita til þess að þeir nemendur sem hafa lagt Nútímafræðina fyrir sig geta haft heilmikil áhrif á það hvernig námið er samsett og hvaða námskeið eru kennd. Ég minnst þess að annað hvort við útskrift að við annar lok í einhverjum áfanganum mögulega jafnvel í áfanganum um Iðnbyltinguna þá voru einhverjir nemendur að hvetja til þess að tímabilið fyrir Iðnbyltinguna yrði kennt líka til þess að nemendur í nútímafræði gætu fengið heildræni mynd á mannkynssöguna. Eftir að náminu lauk og ég útskrifaðist Hófst kennsla í áfanganum RFB-Frá Rómaveldi til frönsku byltingarinnar einhverjum árum síðar. Miðað við áfangalýsingar í kennsluskrá er nokkuð ljóst að hér er á ferðinni áfangi sem ég hefði viljað geta tekið á sínum tíma.

Marín Manda Magnúsdóttir, 2019

When I began my university studies, I was enrolled in Media Studies. At the time, I was primarily interested in contemporary communication, representation, and the fast moving landscape of modern media. Yet, as stimulating as that field was, I gradually felt that something was missing. I was learning how messages are produced and circulated, but I longed for a deeper understanding of the historical, philosophical, and cultural foundations beneath them. Transferring into Modern Studies at the University of Akureyri, became the turning point that filled those gaps.

Modern Studies proved to be immensely rewarding and enlightening. The program offered not only knowledge, but perspective. It connected ideas across disciplines. History, philosophy, politics and cultural analysis helped me situate contemporary phenomena within broader historical and intellectual developments. Questions that had once seemed fragmented or abstract began to form a coherent picture. How has human life evolved socially and politically? What forces shape our values and institutions? How do ideas travel through time, and how do they influence the present?

For me, Modern Studies encouraged critical reflection and careful reading, but also humility. It made clear that our present moment is part of a longer continuum. In a time when many of our cognitive tasks are increasingly outsourced to Artificial Intelligence, and when polarized political rhetoric can easily overshadow nuanced thought, the training I received in Modern Studies feels more relevant than ever. The discipline strengthened my ability to question assumptions, to identify underlying frameworks, and to resist overly simplistic explanations.

What I appreciated most was the way the program addressed both “what was” and “what is,” while constantly inviting us to consider “what might be.” It answered many of my questions about how people’s lives have developed over time, socially, culturally, and economically, but it also sharpened my awareness of what deserves attention as we move into the future. It taught me that civic responsibility begins with understanding. Understanding complexity, understanding difference, and understanding the historical roots of present challenges.

To study Modern Studies also gave me confidence. It gave me the intellectual self-assurance to pursue further education and to trust my analytical abilities. More importantly, it reshaped how I see life in general. I learned to approach social debates with greater depth, to appreciate cultural expressions more fully, and to engage in discussions with both curiosity and critical care. The program did not simply provide knowledge, it transformed the way I think.

Looking back, choosing Modern Studies was one of the most formative decisions of my academic life. It did not replace my initial interest in media, it deepened it. By grounding contemporary issues in historical and philosophical contexts, the program equipped me with tools that remain invaluable. In a world that often rewards speed over reflection and certainty over dialogue, my education stands as a lasting reminder of the importance of critical thought, civic awareness, and intellectual courage.

Marthen Elvar Veigarsson Olsen, 2015

Mikilvægi hug- og félagsvísinda í heimi vitrænna afléttinga og pólitískrar öfgahyggju

Nútímasamfélög standa nú á tímamótum sem mótast af tveimur öflum: mikilli útbreiðslu gervigreindar og hraðri endurkomu hægriöfgahreyfinga. Þó þessi fyrirbæri geti seint talist lík þar sem annað er tæknilegt og hitt hugmyndafræðilegt, þá eiga þau það sameiginlegt að grafa undan gagnrýnni hugsun og veikja tilfinningu fólks fyrir borgaralegri ábyrgð og þátttöku. Á sama tíma og ákvarðanatataka, túlkun og jafnvel sköpun eru í auknum mæli framseldar til gervigreindar er pólitísk umræða sífellt einfölduð og dregin niður í slagorð og andstæður. Við þessar aðstæður er mikilvægi hug- og félagsvísinda ekki bara fortíðarþrá heldur brýn nauðsyn. Mikilvægi hug- og félagsvísinda er því grunnstoð lýðræðislegrar seiglu, siðferðilegrar dómgreindar og merkingarbærs lífs.

Hug- og félagsvísindi eru greinar túlkunar fremur en einfalds miðlunar upplýsinga. Heimspeki, saga, bókmenntir, stjórn málafræði og listir þjálfa einstaklinga í að efast um forsendur, setja fullyrðingar í víðara samhengi og takast á við margræðni. Einmitt þessir hæfileikar eru í hættu á tímum vitrænna afléttinga. Gervigreindarkerfi, alveg sama hversu skilvirk þau eru, hvetja til samskipta sem leggja áherslu á niðurstöður fremur en skilning. Þegar flókin verkefni eins og skrif, samantektir og greining eru reglulega falin vélum skapast hætta á að mannleg færni rýrni ekki aðeins tæknilega heldur einnig í þeim hugrænu venjum sem gefa þekkingu gildi. Vandinn er ekki sá að gervigreind „hugsi fyrir okkur“ heldur að við hættum smám saman að hugsa með dýpt, þolinmæði og ábyrgð.

Þessi hnignun gagnrýnnar hugsunar tengist með óhugnanlegum hætti uppgangi hægriöfgahreyfinga. Slíkar hreyfingar lifa á einföldun: tvíhyggju, goðsagnakenndri fortíðarmynd og tilfinningahlöðnum frásögnum sem þola illa gagnrýna skoðun. Hugvísindin aftur á móti sérhæfa sig í flækjustigi. Sagnfræðin sýnir fram á tilviljunarkennt og mótanlegt eðli þjóðernis og sjálfsmynda, bókmenntagreining ræktar samkennd yfir menningarleg og félagsleg mörk, heimspekin kennir aga röksemdafærslunnar í stað fullyrðingarinnar. Þar sem öfgapólitík krefst vissu og undirgefni, þá krefst frjáls menntun efa, samræðu og íhugunar. Það er því engin tilviljun að einræðishneigðar hreyfingar ráðast gjarnan gegn háskólum, fræðimönnum og listum og stimpla þá sem elítusinni eða ógnandi. Í raun er það sem er í húfi ekki menningarstríð, heldur stjórn á því hvernig borgarar hugsa og hvort þeir hugsi yfirleitt.

Ekki er síður mikilvægt hlutverk hug- og félagsvísinda að viðhalda borgaralegum tilgangi. Lýðræði byggir á meira en tæknilegri hæfni; það krefst borgara sem skilja sjálfa sig sem

Þátttakendur í sameiginlegu pólitísku verkefni. Borgaralegt sinnuleysi eflist þegar einstaklingar upplifa samfélagið sem eitthvað sem er stjórnað fyrir þeirra hönd af tækni eða gervigreind, sérfræðingum eða sterkum leiðtogum, fremur en sem vettvang sameiginlegrar mótunar. Hugvísindin vinna gegn slíku aðgerðaleysi með því að beina sjónum að spurningum um gildi, ábyrgð og merkingu. Stjórn málaheimspeki spyr hvað réttlæti krefjist og sagan sýnir hvernig réttindi voru unnin og töpuð, listir og bókmenntir gefa þeim rödd sem oft eru útilokaðir frá opinberri frásögn. Saman efla þessar greinar það sem kalla mætti borgaralegt ímyndunarafl, með öðrum orðum hæfileikann til að sjá fyrir sér aðra framtíð og eigið hlutverk í mótun hennar.

Gagnrýnendur halda því oft fram að hug- og félagsvísindi eigi illa við í heimi sem mótast af hraða tækninnar og efnahagslegri samkeppni. Samt eiga gagnrýnendur það til að misskilja eðli tæknilegra valda og átta sig ekki alltaf á að gervigreind felur í sér gildi sem sjaldan eru hlutlaus. Án mannlegs læsis skortir samfélögum verkfæri til að greina þessi gildi eða ákveða hvaða sjálfvirknivæðingu ber að hafna. Siðferðisleg viðmið verða ekki til úr kóða heldur eru þau arfleifð, ágreiningsefni og stöðug endurskoðun.

Að lokum efla hug- og félagsvísindin vitsmunalega auðmýkt, dygð sem verður sífellt sjaldgæfari. Andstætt gervigreind sem skilar svörum án sýnilegrar óvissu, leggja hug- og félagsvísindi áherslu á túlkun, rökræðu og endurskoðun. Slík þekkingarauðmýkt er ómissandi í fjölhyggjusamfélögum þar sem engin ein sýn getur gert tilkall til algilds valds. Hægriöfgahyggja nærast hins vegar á hugmyndinni um algilda þekkingu og siðferðilega hreinskilni. Menntun sem venur fólk við ágreining og flækjustig er því öflugt mótvægi gegn slíkum straumum.

Í heimi sem glímir við sjálfvirknivæðingu og róttækni bjóða hug- og félagsvísindi ekki upp á skjóta lausn. Gildi þeirra felst einmitt í því að standast hraða, vissu og einföldun. Þær þjálfa einstaklinga ekki aðeins í vissu hlutverki heldur til þess að spyrja af hverju, ekki einungis til þess að lifa innan vissra kerfa heldur til þess að spyrja hvort þau séu réttlát. Ef gagnrýn hugsun og borgaralegur tilgangur eru á undanhaldi, þá er endurnýjuð fjárfesting í frjálsri menntun ekki fortíðarþrá, heldur stefnumarkandi nauðsyn. Framtíð lýðræðissamfélaga kann að ráðast síður af snjallari vélum en af vitrum borgurum.

Matthildur Helgadóttir Jónudóttir, 2020

Við vinkonurnar mættum fullar eftirvæntingar og mögulega með smá kvíða, á skólasetningu haustið 2017. Við höfðum þá ákveðið á gamals aldri að skrá okkur í fjarnám í Nútímafræði við Háskólann á Akureyri. Þar sem við vissum ekki alveg hvað við vildum verða þegar við yrðum stórar, þó við værum þegar samanlagt orðnar níræðar, þá fannst okkur Nútímafræðin henta fullkomlega. Satt að segja héldum við að svona fjölbreytt og skemmtilegt námsleið væri sú vinsælasta í skólanum. Við vorum því mjög hissa þegar nýnemar Nútímafræðinnar voru ekki kallaðir saman í stóra hátíðarsalinn, við vorum svo fá að við rúmuðumst vel í lítilli kennslustofu. En það var góðmennt þó það væri fámennnt og námið stóðst væntingar okkar, allt í senn fjölbreytt, krefjandi og skemmtilegt.

Það var þó stundum bras að vera miðaldra að tileinka sér tæknina að læra á netinu. Einkum í byrjun, en við vorum fljótar að pikka upp hinar ýmsu brellur til að flýta fyrir okkur og mikil var gleði okkar þegar við fundum hnappinn sem herti á hraðanum. Mér er minnisstætt að einn kennarinn talaði svo hægt að við gátum hlustað á fyrirlestrana hans með hraðastillingunni 1,75 eða jafnvel 2,0. Við vorum líka, á köflum, helsjúkar af svokallaði níuveiki - sem herjar helst á fullorðna nemendur sem allt þykjast vita og geta. Einkennin lýstu sér helst í öflugum frekju- og stressköstum þegar við fengum lægra en 9 í einkunn fyrir verkefni eða á prófi. Ég viðurkenni að það situr enn í mér að hafa ekki náð 9 í meðaleinkunn þegar ég útskrifaðist þó ég hafi verið nálægt því - ætli það sé of seint að fara í endurtekið.

Olga Katrín Olgeirsdóttir, 2016

Thirteen years ago, I was looking to find something to study that piqued my interest. When I found the Bachelor's degree in Modern Studies at UNAK, I was intrigued. The description made it seem like this degree was a kind of a melting pot of some of the major Humanities, and now, all these years later, that is still how I feel about it.

Modern Studies has, if anything, become increasingly relevant in today's political and technological landscape. I am certain that this degree enhanced my understanding of current events through the lens of the past. Certain events don't seem quite as surprising when you realise that they have happened before - there hasn't even been a full century since the second World War. The US attacking Venezuela doesn't seem quite as much out of left field, when you consider their recent history.

The common thread throughout the Modern Studies curriculum was perhaps the most important one: critical thinking. With all the polarising discussions and ever evolving Artificial Intelligence, the skill of critical thinking becomes ever more *critical*. Having learned to read articles and studies, while employing critical thinking, is very helpful, especially when it comes to wading through all the misinformation and emotional arguments. Remembering that even statistics can be misleading in many ways is important, and when such things are being used to enhance an argument it is best to never take any numbers at face value. Discussion online and in the real world tend to be fraught with fallacies, and we have to do the work to know what is credible and what isn't. The degree in Modern Studies has certainly helped me in this endeavour, and I try to remember to stop and think through arguments to be certain that they are valid and don't only appear to be so.

When looking back at this time in my life, I realise how fun, interesting, and demanding it was. I remember social life events like the *Sprellmót* and *Vísindaferð*, I remember making a short film modernising the book *Sjálfstætt fólk*, I remember a trip to Latvia that was a course in and of itself where I went to interview teenagers in an orphanage, I remember a presentation where my group compared Donald Trump to Kim Kardashian, I remember not sleeping for a week after I found out that I had to teach a class about Voltaire... these are just a few of the memories that pop into my head when I think about these three years doing Modern Studies at UNAK.

In conclusion - I learned a great deal that still comes in handy in navigating various things in my day-to-day life all these years later. I would recommend this Bachelor's degree to anyone and can't imagine a time when such a degree would become irrelevant: A.I. becomes more advanced every day, politics seem to be polarizing more and more as each day goes by, and the media, news and social alike, don't seem to care that they are spreading misinformation through clickbait headlines. In order to keep our rights and democracy, we need more people to learn critical thinking and use it.

Ófeigur Númi Halldórsson, 2023

Þegar ég byrjaði í nútímafræði við háskólann á Akureyri árið 2020 var Covid-19 faraldurinn í fullum gangi. Ég sóttist sérstaklega um fjarnám vegna búsetu minnar í Slóvakíu, þar sem ég

og konan mín bjuggum í yndisleg 5 ár. Í fyrstu voru væntingar mínar gagnvart fjarnámi ansi lágar—það er að segja—ég bjóst ekki við því að upplifa „raunverulega“ kennslu ef svo má að orði komast. Það var svo sannarlega ekki raunin. Það kom mér verulega á óvart hve margir voru virkir hvað námið varðaði. Allir þeir Zoom-tímar sem ég tók einkenndust af áhugasemi og fagmannlegri áheyrn af hálfu nemenda. Alltaf var unnið að verkefnum og hlustað á fyrirlestra líkt og við værum inni í kennslustofu uppi í háskóla—þó sumir væru kannski að grilla sér samloku eða hella upp á kaffi í náttfötunum. Það er líka vert að nefna að kennslan og kennararnir í skólanum voru frábær í alla staði. Það hvernig kennararnir yfirfærðu hefðbundna kennslu á stafrænan hátt var hreint út sagt magnað. Með miklum áhuga á námsefninu og hæfni í fjarkennslu varð námið öllu meira skemmtilegra.

Nútímafræði á sérstaklega við í dag. Líkt og hefur verið sagt áður þá hefur nútímafræði þau áhrif að víkka sjóndeildarhring okkar á málefnum samtímans, þar allra helst að beita gagnrýnni hugsun. Í því samhengi má nefna framþróun gervigreindar og allt umsvifið í kringum hana í hinni stafrænu vídd. Fyrir mína hönd sat þróun gervigreindar fremst á bekk á áhugasviði mínu og hvernig gervigreind í heild sinni hefur bein og óbein áhrif á sálræna og samfélagslega þætti. Átta sig á því hvar hættur raunverulega liggja, því þær liggja kannski ekki beint við notkun hennar, heldur fremur hvernig við bregðumst við henni. Skilningur á því að gervigreind er ekki einungis rótin að merkingar- og samhengislausum efnivið (myndbönd, myndir og texti) heldur einnig stór hluti af gangverki samfélagsmiðla og annarra forrita sem nota hana meðal annars í dreifingu gagna og hvernig hún matar viðeigandi upplýsingum til einstaklinga byggt á áhuga þeirra. Auk þess hvernig samfélagsmiðlar sem titla sig sem tól sameiningar geti haft öfug áhrif, skapað óreiðu, bergmálshelli, ýtt undir skaðlegar upplýsingar eða aðgreint samfélagshópa. Þetta eru aðeins ófá dæmi um það hvernig námið fékk mann til að huga að nútímanum

Án þess að fara nánar út í sálma samtímans, þá hefur nútímafræði fyrst og fremst gert mér kleift að horfa með gagnrýnum augum á málefni samtímans og íhuga ýmiskonar orsakir og afleiðingar, þá helst í formi hugmyndafræðilegra og heimspekilegra sjónarmiða. Tímarnir í dag eru því miður ekki einfaldir og oft á tíðum afar ruglingslegt að átta sig á hinum ýmsu sviðum sem einkenna nútímann. Með þeim forsendum var og er nútímafræði frábær leið til að ná einhverjum áttum og smávegis vott af samhengi í þessum flókna og margslungna heimi sem við lifum í. Í náminu er ekki verið að finna upp hjólið, heldur að hjálpa því að rúlla. Á þeim nótum langar mig að enda minni yfirferð og upplifun af nútímafræði.

Ólína Freysteinsdóttir, 2005

Það var á vordögum árið 2000 að vinkona mín sem var í námi í sjávarútvegsfræðum kom í heimsókn til mín, setti blað á borðið og sagði við mig, þetta nám er svo mikið þú. Ég sló til og var ég í fyrsta árganginum sem innritaðist og þeim fyrsta sem útskrifaðist með BA gráðu í Nútímafræði. Námið breytt öllu í lífi mínu og hefur gefið mér tækifæri sem ég hefði ekki getað ímyndað mér að kæmu til mín. Þegar ég lít til baka tel ég það hafi haft mótandi áhrif á mig er varðar viðhorf og áskoranir sem við stöndum frammi fyrir sem einstaklingar í samfélagi og sem þjóð meðal annarra þjóða. Ég er þakklát kona sem hef átt gott líf og spennandi og skemmtilegan starfsferil og tel námið hafi hvatt mig til að hafa áhrif á samfélagið og mæta samferðafólki af virðingu þar sem það er statt. Námið hefur haft áhrif á minn persónulega þroska og þá manneskju sem ég er og vildi verða. Ég verð ævinlega þakklát þeim kennurum sem snertu við lífi mínu og samnemendum sem gerðu námið innihaldsríkara. Takk fyrir mig!

Ólöf María Brynjarsdóttir, 2017

Um verslunarmannahelgina 2013 fylltum við hjón flutningabíl af búslóð okkar og spenntum börnin okkar niður í fjölskyldubílinn, stóran Dodge Caravan svo uppfullan af dóti að Tetris hæfileikar frá tíundaáratug síðustu aldar komu að góðum notkun til að koma öllum á sinn stað. Pabbi minn keyrði fyrir okkur flutningabílinn sem við fengum leigðan af nágretta okkar og við hjón skiluðumst á eftir, hrædd við að keyra of hratt þar sem bíllinn var svo lágreistur af þunga sínum. Ferðinni var heitið norður á Akureyri þar sem undirrituð hafði skráð sig til náms í nútímafræði fyrr um sumarið. Sú skráning gekk ekki þrautalaust fyrir sig. Verandi óhefðbundin nemandi sem hafði aldrei klárað hefðbundið stúdentspróf en klárað allskyns önnur próf, líkt og búfræði frá LBHÍ og frumgreinanám frá Háskólanum á Bifröst, var ríkisstofnunin á Akureyri ekki viss um að mér væri treystandi í fullt háskólanám. Fyrstu viðbrögð við umsókn minni voru því einfalt NEI. Láir þeim hver sem vill, ég hafði sjálf verið skeptísk á að hleypa mér inn, algerlega óvíst hvað þessi sveimhuga kona sem sagðist vilja flytja búferlum norður í land með fjögur börn og karl myndi tolla lengi við. Þetta NEI var kannski það besta sem HA gat samt mögulega gert fyrir mig, því þarna tvíelfdist mótþrói minn og linnti ég ekki látum fyrr en umsókn mín hafði verið samþykkt. Ég skildi sýna þessum norðlendingum að ég væri einmitt nemandinn sem þeir vildu fá í þetta nám.

Hvers vegna nútímafræði? Ég hafði hafið nám við Háskólann á Bifröst sannfærð um að ég ætlaði að verða lögfræðingur, mig langaði að fara í mannréttindalögfræði. Þegar kom að lögfræðinni sjálfri heillaði hún mig lítið, hins vegar þótti mér hugtakagreining sem lögfræðin byggði á mjög áhugaverð og heimspeki í heild. Ég fór því á stúfana og leitaði að námi í hugvísindum. Heimspekideildin við HÍ kveikti ekki áhuga hjá mér, þar var námið of einfasa að mínu mati en svo sá ég auglýsingu frá Háskólanum á Akureyri um þverfaglegt nám í nútímafræði. Sveigjanlegt nám í hug- og félagsvísindum sem hægt var að byggja upp í kringum kjarnagreinar þess eftir vilja hvers og eins. Þetta fannst mér gríðarlega heillandi kostur, þarna gat ég farið í nám í heimspeki en jafnframt fléttað það saman við málefni líðandi stundar. Ég gerði mér grein fyrir því að fyrir mig, manneskju með mikinn áhuga á hinu mannlega og endalaus þörf á að skilja samhengi hlutana, væri þetta nám fullkomið. Svo áhugasöm var ég um námið að þegar ég kynnti það fyrir fjölskyldumeðlimum þá heillaðist fólk með mér. Fór það svo að mamma mín ákvað að sækja einnig um og skella sér norður með mér í nám.

Það kom aldrei annað til greina í mínum huga en að fara í staðnám, því tókum við okkur fjölskyldan upp og fluttum til Akureyrar. Frá fyrsta degi við Háskólann á Akureyri var eins og ég ætti heima þarna, allt í umhverfi skólans, kennarar, nemendur og aðrir starfsmenn tóku mér opnum örmum. Námið stóð heldur betur undir væntingum og rúmlega það. Sérstaklega voru kennslustundirnar í hugvísindagreinunum mér hugleiknar fyrstu annirnar. Afbygging 20. aldar stóð upp úr, það er þessi skilningur á því hver við erum sem samfélag sem var leitast við að skoða þar sem lagði grunn að þekkingunni sem á eftir kom. Mér fannst allt námið fléttast gríðarlega vel saman. Iðnbyltingin – sagnfræði áfangi var líka einstaklega fræðandi og mótaði svo vel þennan grunn ásamt Hugmyndasögunni. Það var eins og allt námið leitaðist við að sýna okkur samfélagið í 360°. Stöðugt var verið að segja okkur „þið verðið að skilja hvaðan við komum til að skilja hver við erum og hvert við erum að fara sem samfélag“ þar með leituðumst við stöðugt við að líta okkar samtíma gagnrýnum augum. Þessi grunnur lagði til svo skilninginn sem byggðist upp í greinunum sem eftir komu þegar leið á námið. Ég heillaðist enn frekar af heimspekinni og voru málstofurnar einstaklega vel nýttar til að dýpka skilning, virkilega mikilvægur hluti námsins var að fá að rökræða og kanna með sínum samnemendum undir stjórn kennara. Það var svo alltaf takmarkið að fara í skiptinám við erlendan háskóla. University of Guelph bauð upp á kúrsa sem byggðu vel ofan á þann grunn sem ég hafði fengið við HA og þar gat ég tekið áherslulínu mína sem samanstóð af mannfræði og heimspeki – en ég lagði áherslu á heilsu og heilbrigði, þá

sérstaklega áföll í mínu vali. Ég hafði kynnst mannfræðinni í Eiginlegum rannsóknaraðferðum og þegar ég sá hversu einstaklega vel nútímafræðin byggði undir mannfræðilegan skilning þá var ekki aftur snúið.

Nútímafræðin og það frelsi að fá að byggja sjálf upp sína námsleið gaf mér svo getuna til að fara í krefjandi rannsóknartengt meistaranám í félagsvísindum þar sem ég fléttaði enn saman mannfræði og heimspeki til að greina lífssögu íslenskrar konu á áttræðisaldri sem og hugtaksins sjálfsást. Enn kom þar saman sá sterki grunnur sem nútímafræðin lagði, að skilja hvaðan manneskja sem ólst upp um miðbik tuttugustu aldar í braggahverfum Reykjavíkurborgar var að koma. Til að greina slíka sögu þarf að hafa sterkan grunn og þjálfun í að horfa á einstaklinginn sem afsprengi þeirra menningar og samfélags sem elur hann. Í störfum mínum eftir útskrift hefur þessi þverfaglega menntun nýst mér gríðarlega vel, ég hef starfað mest í ráðgjöf, bæði fyrir þolendur ofbeldis sem og í starfsendurhæfingu. Þar sem er mikilvægt að skilja þau samfélags- og menningarlegu áhrif sem mótar einstaklinginn því þar leynast oft þær hindranir sem taka þarf á. Má segja að í heiti BA rannsóknar minnar hafi kristallast hversu mikilvægt nám í nútímafræði er og hefur það heiti sennilega verið leiðarljós mitt æ síðan. Ritgerð mín bar heitið Skilningurinn gerir mig frjálsa en þar lagði ég orð sögumanneskju minnar mér í munn.

Tel ég að allt nám sé í raun leit nemandans að sjálfum sér og því verðum við aldrei full numa. Við leitum öll einhvers skilnings, á okkur sjálfum, á tilveru okkar og samferða fólki. Fyrir mér gaf nútímafræðin við Háskólann á Akureyri mikla þekkingu en fyrst og fremst gaf hún mér verkfæri til að halda áfram að leita míns skilnings hverju sinni og mæta þeim áskorunum sem blasa við í þeirri heimsmynd sem við búum við í dag með gagnrýnum huga.

Ragnheiður Jóna Ingimarsdóttir, 2005

Þegar ég hóf nám í Nútímafræði við Háskólann á Akureyri var um að ræða nýtt og framsækið nám sem opnaði í fyrsta sinn raunverulegt tækifæri til að stunda hugvísindi utan höfuðborgarsvæðisins. Það sem vakti áhuga minn á náminu var ekki síst þverfagleg nálgun þess, þar sem menning, samfélag og samtími voru skoðuð í samhengi og hvatt var til gagnrýnnar umræðu. Sem hluti af fyrsta útskriftarárgangnum upplifði ég að við værum þátttakendur í uppbyggingu áhugaverðs náms sem byggði á gagnrýnni hugsun.

Með árunum hef ég orðið vör við hversu sterkan grunn námið lagði. Hugvísindin veita ekki einföld svör, en þau kenna okkur að meta aðstæður, skilja sögulegar og menningarlegar forsendur og axla ábyrgð í ákvarðanatöku.

Í síkviku umhverfi nútímans þar sem aukinn hraði, tækniframfarir og ofgnótt upplýsinga eru stór hluti af daglegu lífi hefur aldrei verið mikilvægara að beita gagnrýnni hugsun til að greina kjarnann frá hisminu. Það er mikilvægt fyrir samfélög sem vilja viðhalda lýðræðislegum gildum að lögð sé áhersla á gagnrýna hugsun og getu til að setja sig í spor annarra.

Fyrir mig var Nútímafræðin ekki aðeins akademískt nám heldur einnig mikilvæg reynsla sem mótaði mig til framtíðar. Hún opnaði fyrir nýja sýn á samfélagið, þar sem mikilvægt er að nálgast viðfangsefni af víðsýni, með gagnrýnni hugsun og virðingu fyrir margbreytileika samfélagsins.

Sigurður Björn Gunnarsson, 2016

Ég hóf nám í nútímafræði árið 2013. Fyrsta skipti sem ég hóf nám í Háskóla. Það var yndislegt að fá að taka þátt í þessu námi. Á þeim árum mættu nemendur í tíma en hlustuðu ekki bara á fyrirlestra heima hjá sér. Ég eignaðist marga vini í skólanum sem hjálpaði mér að komast í gegnum námið. Það var svo frábært einnig að geta stundað vinnu með námi og hlustað á fyrirlestrana heima. Ég var á sjó með skólanum á dagróðrabát. Ég stríddi oft Markus Meckl með að segja honum að ég væri á hærra launum en hann. Honum fannst það fyndið og sorglegt. Markus er frábær maður og einn af ástæðunum fyrir því að ég kláraði námið dyrnar hans voru alltaf opnar til að hjálpa mér ef ég var í vanda. Ég fór einnig 2 sinnum með honum til Ríga í Lettlandi. Hann skipulagði ferðina og lagði ótrúlega mikla vinnu á sig til að við nemendur gætum farið með sér í rosalega skemmtilega og fræðandi ferðir. Hann labbaði með okkur um gamla gyðinga hverfið í Riga og var með frábæra leiðsögn. Fór svo með okkur til Daugavpils sem er nær stærsta borg Lettlands. Það var rosalega fróðlegt að fara með honum og fræðast um hvaða áhrif síðari heimstyrjöldin hafði haft á þetta svæði enda mikil átök sem áttu sér stað þar. Þetta hafði mikil áhrif á mig. Við Markus erum ennþá vinir í dag og mér finnst gaman að því að ég kenndi syni hans á bíll og er nú að kenna yngri syni hans núna. Það er mjög gaman og gefandi að kenna strákunum hans á bíll því ef að Markus hefði ekki hjálpað mér eins og hann gerði þá efa ég að ég væri

ökukennari í dag. Ég er ævinlega þakklátur fyrir þetta nám sem hefur nýst mér svo mikið í lífi og stafi þá er ég sérstaklega þakklátur fyrir kennarana og samnemendur.

Stefán Darri Þórsson, 2022

In today's fast-paced world, I often feel grateful to have completed a degree in Modern Studies at the University of Akureyri in 2022 while trying to make sense of everything unfolding around us. Raising four children amid constant political shifts, technological acceleration, and relentless media cycles requires more than reassurance. It requires perspective.

Almost every week, one of my children brings home a question about something they have seen or heard: a conflict, a public figure, a social trend. Their first explanations are often emotional or based on fragments of information. I feel responsible not only for answering, but for helping them see that events rarely stand alone. They are shaped by history, culture, power, and long-term developments that are not always immediately visible.

Modern Studies gave me that broader frame of reference. It trained me to step back, place events in context, and resist the comfort of simple explanations. In a climate where speed often replaces reflection, that habit matters.

In my professional life, working in a global technology company developing solutions that involve artificial intelligence, I face similar challenges. Engaging with AI has made me more aware of the value of human judgment. These systems can process information at scale, but they do not carry responsibility for how it is interpreted or applied. That responsibility remains ours.

Vigdís Arna, 2012

In Search of Respect: Modern Studies, 2007–2026

I began my studies in Modern Studies at the University of Akureyri in the spring of 2007. Iceland was still intoxicated with expansion. The *útrásarvíkingar* were celebrated as national heroes. Confidence bordered on inevitability; growth appeared permanent.

Then, in the autumn of 2008, the collapse came.

I experienced both climates within the same academic journey. I entered university during economic euphoria and continued through collective shock. Lecture halls became spaces not only for theoretical inquiry but for reckoning. Responsibility, accountability, and ethical failure were no longer abstract concepts; they were lived realities.

Public discourse turned toward *siðrof*—moral erosion. The crisis was not only financial but cultural. How had recklessness been reframed as ambition? How had warning signs been dismissed? How had a society that prided itself on equality allowed such imbalance to grow unchecked? Where had respect gone?

My academic path was not linear. Personal circumstances extended my studies from three years to five. I kept adding courses, driven by restless curiosity. Culture, media, sociology, political thought, gender studies, philosophy—I resisted narrowing the lens. My thesis reflected that expansiveness. It contained more threads than a conventional structure might comfortably hold.

Years later, I learned that I have ADHD. That understanding reframed those years. What once appeared as scattered attention revealed itself as intensity dispersed across too many fields at once. Yet this breadth aligned with the discipline itself. Modern Studies resists simplification. It insists that society cannot be understood through a single explanatory framework.

I remain deeply grateful for my time in Akureyri. The scale of the university allowed sustained dialogue and intellectual friction. Modern Studies trained me to interrogate dominant narratives, to analyze how language operates as power, how economic systems shape culture, and how ideology presents itself as common sense. It cultivated skepticism toward easy explanations.

For that reason, such study should not be optional for those who govern. It should be foundational.

Power without historical awareness becomes arrogance.

Power without ethical reflection becomes entitlement.

Power without critical literacy becomes manipulation.

Now, in 2026, the question returns.

Before, it was the Panama Papers.

Now, it is the Epstein files.

The names differ; the structure remains.

Power shields power.

Wealth insulates consequence.

Privilege confers a sense of exemption.

The language barely changes: I own this. I can do this. I am entitled. *Ég á þetta. Ég má þetta.* What has changed? Have we strengthened our moral infrastructure? Or have we merely become more efficient at exposing corruption while failing to prevent it?

Technology has advanced. Artificial intelligence now assists cognition. Information circulates instantly. Yet exposure is not transformation. Transparency does not automatically generate respect.

In 2012, I searched for respect in the aftermath of economic collapse. In 2026, I search for it amid algorithmic acceleration, political polarization, and recurring revelations of abuse and exploitation. The forms shift. The imbalance of power does not.

Respect is not sentiment. It is restraint. It is responsibility exercised even when impunity is possible. It is the recognition of limits even when those limits can be bypassed. If education systems reward dominance, spectacle, and strategic opportunism, erosion should not surprise us. Critical thinking cannot be reduced to technical competence. Civic maturity

cannot be automated. Ethical responsibility cannot be outsourced to algorithms.

During my final year of study, Norway was struck by terror. A manifesto circulated, exposing a worldview rooted in grievance and supremacy. It was another expression of *siðrof*—a different setting, the same erosion of respect. Although I did not address the event directly in my thesis, it sharpened the questions I was already asking about the moral infrastructure of modern societies.

In the years that followed, public discourse emphasized rebuilding. National Forums elevated equality, honesty, justice, responsibility, and democracy—values that all depend upon respect as their underlying condition.

The manifesto later inspired the long development of *En bedre mann* (A Better Man) by Thomas Seeberg Torjussen, a series that examines radicalization not to sensationalize it, but to understand its mechanisms. Within that narrative stands Berit: steady, measured, practicing dignity without domination. She does not conquer through force or spectacle; she persists through decency. In her, I recognize the same search that shaped my thesis.

Perhaps that is where the inquiry ultimately leads—not to scandal cycles or rhetorical outrage, but to the disciplined, daily practice of respect, and to the creation of environments in which individuals experience dignity and belonging.

The search continues.

Dóra Björk Ágústsdóttir, 2008

I began my studies at the University of Akureyri in 2005, already holding a BA in psychology. I remember thinking that this degree would be manageable — I knew how university worked, I knew how to write essays, I knew how to study. I was wrong.

What I hadn't anticipated was how different this experience would feel. The classes were small. The professors were not distant figures at the front of a lecture hall; they were present, engaged, and accessible. Discussions did not end when class was over: They followed us into the cafeteria, into the hallways, even into the local swimming pool. It

sounds almost exaggerated when I describe it now, but it was real. You had to be ready — ready to defend an idea, to rethink an argument, to be challenged when you least expected it. There was nowhere to hide, but there was also nowhere to disappear. You were seen. Your thoughts mattered. That closeness created a kind of intellectual courage in me that I didn't know I needed. I hope that spirit still exists, because it shaped me in ways I only understood later.

Modern Studies felt like coming home intellectually. I had always questioned authority, analyzed behavior, tried to understand the structures behind what we call “normal.” In this program, that instinct was not something to suppress — it was something to refine. That is something that I'm still working on, to be honest. But studying the origins of modernity, the rise of its key institutions, and later the critiques that targeted them, gave language to thoughts that I had carried for years. At the same time, the world around me was shifting.

When I wrote my first BA thesis, only a few years prior to my studies at UNAK, research was physical. I remember sitting in libraries for hours, stacking books beside me, carefully marking pages with slips of paper. If I needed a journal article, I ordered it and waited. Sometimes for weeks. We were told that real sources were the ones we could hold in our hands. There was something reassuring about that — knowledge felt solid, almost permanent.

When I wrote my final thesis in Akureyri, everything had changed. I didn't carry books home. I didn't wait for interlibrary loans. My sources appeared instantly on a screen. What had once taken weeks now took seconds. The shift was so fast that at the time it didn't even feel dramatic. It simply felt efficient.

Looking back, I realize I was living through the very transformations we were studying, when we examined the birth of the modern world, and the postmodern questioning of truth and authority. Today we are somewhere beyond even that. Students could easily ask AI to help them write a thesis. I could ask it to draft this memoir. The distance between question and response has almost disappeared.

We have moved from scarcity of information to overwhelming abundance, in what feels like a single breath. The challenge is not finding knowledge — it is filtering it. It is figuring out

what is reliable, what is manipulation, what is noise. Information is everywhere, and so are the structures of power that shape it. And yet, despite all this acceleration, one thing has not changed: we are still human. We still seek meaning. We still respond to fear, ambition, insecurity, hope. Technology evolves, but human behavior does not transform at the same speed.

That may be why studying modernity still matters. Understanding where our ideas, institutions, and power structures came from helps ground us in moments that feel unstable. In times like these — when the world feels precarious and unpredictable — there is comfort in recognizing patterns. In knowing that transformation is not new, even if its speed is. When I began this journey, knowledge had weight. Today it is weightless, immediate, and infinite. But the responsibility remains the same: to question, to think critically, and to understand the forces that shape our world.

Þorbjörg Ásthildar Ásgeirsdóttir, 2011

Í ljósi sögunnar get ég nú brosað þegar ég rifja upp sérstaklega viðbrögð og athugasemdir Giorgio Baruchello þegar við, nemendur hans í nútímafræði haustið 2008, kvörtuðum yfir stjórnvöldum á Íslandi. Hann setti þær kvartanir í samhengi við álit sitt á þáverandi stjórnvöldum í fæðingarlandi sínu þ.e. Silvio Berlusconi og félagi á Ítalíu og lækkaði þá róstinn í okkur. Síðan hefur mikið vatnsmagn runnið til sjávar og heimurinn breyst. Hin gagnrýna hugsun sem við brýndum í Nútímafræðinni er gríðarlega verðmæt og hefur mikilvægi hugvísinda sjaldan verið meira en í brengluðum heimi dagsins í dag. Að horfa uppá þróun veraldarástandsins vekur upp spurningar um samhengi hlutanna og orsakir - í augum okkar margra. Í viðleitni til að greina stöðuna og mynda sér upplýsta skoðun hefur Nútímafræðin komið sér vel.

PART TWO – TESTIMONIAL BY INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Adrians Alksnis, 2015-2016

I took part in courses offered by the Modern Studies programme at the University of Akureyri as part of an Erasmus exchange year. I will always be grateful for the education, support, and intellectually stimulating and pleasantly relaxed atmosphere that I enjoyed.

I am especially grateful for my experience and the high quality of education received as an exchange student from a country that is rather different than Iceland. Despite coming from across the sea, however, the concepts discussed and the ways of knowing presented were familiar - a comforting commonality in the questions asked and the answers offered.

We live in times where the landscape of knowledge creation, dissemination, and legitimation is changing very rapidly. Much akin to finding oneself in a strange land, one must make sense of this new land with its new rules.

This, I posit, is the strength and necessity of Humanities. The questions asked by the field - who are we, why do we do the things that we do, and in what ways are we different and in what the same - will never become redundant, but are especially important during times of change. Doubly so during the precarious political climate that would have us focus on our differences in a reductive, negative light.

The rise of machine learning threatens to shake the very grounds of knowledge as we know it. Still, there is no instrument or machine more suited for understanding the questions posed by the Humanities than humanity itself - no other way to make a connection with a human being than another human being. No path to becoming an expert but by being a student first.

Agnieszka Jastrzabek, Spring Term 2014

I was an exchange student at UNAK in the year 2014, so it's been a while! I found the University very modern and providing high teaching standards. I took three courses: *Good Governance, Accountability and Transparency*; *Icelandic as a Foreign Language*, and *Icelandic Society, History and Culture*.

For me it was a great opportunity to meet people from all over the world. I also appreciated the teaching methods, which were mainly group projects and discussions. These methods develop opinion-forming and cooperation, which I think is very important nowadays in the world of artificial intelligence. In my opinion, it's not always reading books and academic papers that make a good student, but also the personal touch and the exchange of reasoned opinions based on academic sources as well as one's own experiences.

Studying at UNAK was one of the biggest experiences in my life and truly shaped not only my academic career but also my personal skills in cooperation, creative thinking, and, last but not least, language skills.

Alvis Bless, Spring Term 2014

When I took the course *Good Governance, Accountability and Transparency* at the University of Akureyri, I did not yet realize how important its lessons would become for my future career. At the time, it felt like an interesting academic subject. Looking back now, I see that it shaped how I understand decision-making, responsibility, and the role of public institutions.

A key part of the course was learning to look critically at how international organisations - especially the World Bank - define and measure 'good governance'. We discussed governance indicators and policies not as neutral tools, but as approaches built on certain values and priorities. This helped me understand that words like 'good,' 'effective,' or 'transparent' can sound positive while still hiding important questions about whose interests are being served. The ability to look beyond formal language and examine what is really happening in practice has stayed with me ever since.

After graduating, I began working in Latvia's public administration, first in health policy during a particularly challenging period. There, I saw how crucial good governance is in real life - how transparency, accountability, and clear responsibility directly affect public trust and social well-being. Now, working in a different policy field, I appreciate even more how important good governance is for sound and fair decision-making.

Today, Artificial Intelligence systems raise new questions for governance. They can be useful tools, but they can also create an illusion that decisions are objective, and everything is 'under control,' simply because the results are presented in a technical or impressive way. The course taught me that good governance always requires human judgement, ethical reflection, and a real understanding of purpose - things that cannot be replaced by automated systems alone.

Anastasiya Savran, Spring Term 2019

Should I pick one highlight from my time at the *Háskolinn á Akureyri* as an Erasmus student from Vienna in 2019, I would select the course on 20th-century ideology and history taught by Giorgio: It was like a wild Icelandic waterfall; everything I learned in written and spoken form created a surrounding landscape, the falling water was my own self, shaped by the land- and soundscape around me. When you look at a landscape, you perceive details as well as the whole: this is how my education went during the course. It was a completely new approach to acquire knowledge and skills in both English and Icelandic, and the enthusiasm for the new and unknown was like climbing a hill to a viewpoint - or even building one - overlooking this landscape.

HUMOUR during learning and teaching was another element that both irritated and fascinated me. My former professor, Giorgio, undoubtedly knows ALL the books AND diaries AND notes of great thinkers and historical figures, and while he teaches and talks about Kant, he also comes up with some spicy detail, for example, the “fashionista Kant,” who apparently liked to dress up, or other myths which made us, his students, laugh and remember the content in an unforgettable way. I mean, have you ever met someone who spoke seriously about the French Revolution, and then, at the same time, enriched the story with humorous details, linking something that happened BEFORE the 20th century to current events in the 20th century, and then suddenly talks about GESTALT in German, switches back to English, Icelandic or Italian, and yes (sorry, Giorgio =P), continues flexing with other language skills, asking us, his students, to imagine what fashion Kant would have worn in the 20th century given the philosophical and historical situation?? This is also how the course 20th Century Ideology and History in 2019 at the *Háskolinn á Akureyri* went.

I think in colors when I remember that time: the history and philosophy of the 20th century were overgrown with Icelandic colors: golden brown, silvery blue, different shades of green and black. Moss settled on the words of my professor, Giorgio, and I learned with greater motivation. Putting together what I had learned—reflecting and understanding in a language other than my native language—was also a new and valuable insight for me. I would like to express my special thanks to Giorgio, who skilfully welcomed us students at the time—Erasmus students from all continents and numerous countries. Today, seven years later, I do still nourish this waterfall I wrote about in the beginning, now back in Vienna. All that remains is to express how thankful I am: My memories and experiences are an ongoing landscape, humour turned into a learning-strategy, and the 20th century ideology and history

was shaped by so much it is hard and impossible to find appropriate words.

Takk fyrir!

Andrii Gladii, Fall Term 2017

A brief memory of a lecture might spark some philosophical reflections you ponder on for days. At the beginning of 2026 there is a persistent sense that the previous era we experienced before has gradually changed. An era as familiar to us as the streets where we grew up has transformed. This transformation was not sparked by a revolution, a manifesto, or a political decree. It was not even the mere arrival of a new technology. Though one in particular now dominates both the global tech clusters and, more crucially, the human mind. I am speaking about AI. But what was that then? The answer is: the very approach of how to use AI. Is this a threat or simply the next stage of human evolution? The cliché “time will tell” would be insufficient here. Time will only reveal how we perceive the new era and how we interpret its socio-political currents.

After having studied at UNAK and worked at a research centre affiliated with it, I still remember when I was later invited to give a lecture on Ukraine for the course *Nation, Race, and Nationalism*. I hesitated at first, feeling a profound responsibility. I had to balance sensitive historical narratives, evolution of socio-political thought in Ukraine across different eras, and the shifting movements of political ideologies. We had a great discussion with students, and I still recall some interesting dialogues with them. In some interesting way, the image of the Arctic was added to our discussion, because, after all, the lecture was held at UNAK. Our discussion that day stayed in my memory, framing the very questions of the new era I mentioned before.

A few years have passed, and it was one of those evenings of my personal reflections. I was recalling those discussions with students. Sitting alone with my laptop, I felt a strange sense of void. I reviewed our old questions and scrolled through several articles, yet the emptiness persisted. Then I realized: for quite some time I have been attempting to find answers to my deepest questions and reflections through machine algorithms, but not with students. Sure thing, such algorithms might provide us with some interesting sentences. But they lack some (well, almost all) human traits. For instance, emotion and a certain degree of

unpredictability. You never know what kind of a spark might ignite between your mind and the mind of the person you are talking with. And I am asking myself: have we delegated our capacity for thought and reflection to the algorithms?

Probably this question will stay open. We now have several ways to go further. One of them will define our new era. So, we are already within it, but it still undefined. Will we remain active creators of meanings or become its passive consumers? In my opinion, humanities and liberal arts are exactly what teaches us to be creators, citizens, and finally, human beings. Even to be active humans - of thoughts, meanings, definitions for the new eras. Also, these disciplines give us a sense of responsibility for our conclusions, and consequently for our future actions and life choices. So, what is the role of the liberal arts in this modern technological era? These disciplines basically help us to understand the world through ethical lenses. In the modern age there is always an immense temptation to follow the path with fewer obstacles, i.e., to quickly use simple instruments to solve difficult issues. But this path might often be full of manipulations. If we allow our critical skills to be permanently offloaded with easy solutions, we risk gradually losing the art of civilized discourse and the value of human thought. We are risking losing a dialogue of a Human with a Human, or even more - of a Humane Human with a Humane Human. Hence, I want to keep that lecture in my memory as an invisible marker of how eras are changing.

Anthony Manzi, 2012-2013

I had the chance to follow Modern Studies courses at UNAK for one year, in 2012-2013, as an Erasmus student from France. Living in Akureyri and discovering Iceland was a milestone in my personal life. But beyond the landscapes and the exile, what truly shaped me was the way I learned to look at the world through my studies.

Modern Studies did not merely provide me with knowledge, it taught me to question everything. I discovered that history, literature, cinema, and philosophy were not only about becoming a cultured person, but real tools to understand power, ideology, the world I live in and where it comes from. I learned to deconstruct information and to never trust media without checking my sources and examining them thoroughly.

This critical awareness can sometimes be uncomfortable. Once you start questioning

representations, it becomes difficult to return to a naive relationship with the world. Yet I would not have it any other way. At a time when algorithms select our information, and when artificial intelligence offers us to reduce our thinking, the ability to interpret, doubt and contextualise has become even more necessary than it used to be.

Today, I am a secondary school teacher, and I see every day how fragile these skills are. Many adults blame young people for being the way they are, but it is only fair to realise how difficult it is to grow up surrounded by (mis)information, while being rarely encouraged to reflect on it. My experience in Modern Studies convinced me that the Humanities are not about accumulating knowledge, but also and above all about transmitting our tools and forming citizens capable of resisting manipulation.

If I strongly endorse critical thinking, I am also aware of how much I still have to learn, and how demanding it is on a daily basis. My year at UNAK, and my studies in general, taught me never to give up this fight. For that, I am deeply grateful to UNAK and to all my teachers.

Bastien Launay, Fall Term 2025

My time at UNAK was formative. For me, studying at a small international university pushed me to work more independently while constantly exchanging perspectives with students from diverse academic and cultural backgrounds. What stood out the most was the horizontal nature of the teaching, where the hierarchy between students and professors was almost inexistent, creating an open and collaborative learning environment. It was less stressful than in France and we had fewer courses. The most important thing I learned is that the administration can be very kind, which is impossible in France (Hildur Friðriksdóttir is the best person on this earth!). Studying at UNAK also meant living in Akureyri and I adapted myself to a new rhythm of life, shaped by the climate and the landscape. One of the most surprising aspects was the solar rhythm, because from the middle of November it felt like the town was almost always in darkness—which was a unique and somewhat unsettling experience. On the lighter side, I rented cars often to explore the area, enjoyed whale watching, and relaxed at the swimming pool and sauna. This balance of academics and personal exploration made for an unforgettable Erasmus experience, helping me gain confidence, autonomy, and a clearer sense of my academic

goals. I learned an important aspect of the European Union through this experience, as my mobility was only possible thanks to the scholarship I got. Without it, this Erasmus stay wouldn't have been possible. My teachers were generally very invested in their teaching, which made the courses more engaging. However, I was a bit disappointed to see that the oral part of the exams wasn't given much importance, but I was very happy to train my English and meet some new friends during this semester: I'm still in touch with a few of them.

Boris Briozzo, 2012-2013

My Erasmus experience at the University of Akureyri was extremely positive and enriching, both academically and personally. I encountered highly competent and supportive professors, a warm and welcoming academic environment, and a wide range of interesting courses and activities. The university itself is a beautiful and stimulating place to study, and especially approach new fascinating academic subjects, made even more special by its unique location in Northern Iceland. Studying in Akureyri was an unforgettable experience that combined high-quality education with a strong sense of community and an exceptional natural setting.

Courtney Carlberg, Spring Term 2014

In a world increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence, extreme political divide and right-extremism, the humanities and the liberal arts remain essential, as they form the implicit cultural backbone of democratic societies. The humanities and liberal arts encourage critical thinking, empathy, historical awareness, and ethical reflection, i.e., capacities that are vital for navigating these complex political, technological, and social transformations. While there are profound shifts across the globe in political ideologies, governance, and technological advancements, it becomes even more important to keep humanity, dignity, and kindness at the center of collective decisions.

The rapid development of technology, and more specifically artificial intelligence in the 21st century, has already brought positive as well as negative impacts on human development, influencing how societies think, work, communicate, and make decisions. Advancements in healthcare, environmental monitoring, education, and access to information have been

made possible with the developments of AI. At the same time, these benefits are accompanied by significant risks including privacy violations, data exploitation, manipulation of information, and erosion of trust, to name a few.

In this continuously evolving landscape, it is imperative that individuals and society at large develop the skills to critically analyze the information presented to them, how it is framed, who produces it, what interests it serves, and how it shapes our understanding of the world. We need to teach all generations the importance of questioning sources, scrutinizing leaders, and challenging systems that rely on misinformation or fear to influence public perception and decision-making.

As we watch the news—in our home countries and in places such as the United States, Canada, and Germany, to name only a few—it is evident that right-wing extremism is on the rise. The political divide is widening, and hostility toward those perceived as “the other” continues to grow. History has shown time and again that humans are capable of extreme cruelty when their religious, moral, or political beliefs feel threatened. When people sense that their identity or worldview is under attack, fear and insecurity can quickly transform into intolerance, dehumanization, and violence.

Yet we are repeatedly reminded that an eye for an eye will leave the whole world blind. The principle of treating others as we would like to be treated remains one of the most powerful moral anchors we have. In times of division and fear, choosing empathy over retaliation is not a sign of weakness, it is an act of profound courage. When we look at the humanities and liberal arts, we see that they teach, encourage, and cultivate precisely these capacities: critical reflection, ethical reasoning, historical awareness, and the ability to understand perspectives beyond our own. These disciplines remind us of our shared humanity, challenge us to confront injustice and hatred, and equip us with the intellectual and moral tools needed to navigate an increasingly polarized world. The humanities and liberal arts as they have in the past and will continue to do so in the future help humans recognize how narratives are constructed, how power operates, and how compassion, understanding and empathy can disrupt cycles of fear and hostility.

Dela Sawatski, Spring Term 2015

I attended the course entitled *Deconstructing the 20th Century* during my Erasmus stay at the University of Akureyri, back in 2015. What the course offered was a conceptual framework that continues to shape the way I think about politics, ideology, and the role of the Humanities today.

The course was structured around the three well-known demands of the French Revolution: *liberté, égalité, fraternité*. Rather than treating them as abstract ideals or moral achievements, we approached them as historical forces. These demands were ideas with the power to shape entire political systems, and dangerous enough to be radicalized. Throughout the semester, we traced how these revolutionary promises were taken up, transformed, and ultimately pushed to extremes in the major competing ideological movements of the twentieth century: capitalism, communism, and fascism.

What struck me most was the realization that these ideologies were not simply opposites of one another, but distorted reflections of shared aspirations. Liberty, when absolutized, could justify exploitation and inequality. Equality, when enforced without limits, could erase individuality and freedom. Fraternity, when narrowed to the idea of one homogeneous “people,” could turn into exclusion, nationalism, and violence. The twentieth century appeared less as a struggle between good and evil than as a tragic laboratory in which powerful ideas were tested without sufficient self-critique.

What further deepened this insight was the course’s effort to frame the twentieth century into a broader geopolitical horizon. While much of the discussion revolved around European history, the recurring references to developments in regions such as Japan or Indonesia during the interwar period disrupted the implicitly Western-centered perspective I had previously taken for granted. This was particularly striking to me, as my prior historical education had focused almost exclusively on German, French, and American narratives. In hindsight, this experience also sharpened my awareness of a persistent paradox of the present: despite living in an increasingly digital and interconnected world, our political imagination and historical understanding often remain remarkably Western-centric.

During the course I learned a way of thinking which was extensively comprehensive and, at times, deeply uncomfortable. Rather than offering unquestionable historical facts or moral certainty, the course trained us to recognize and accept ambiguity, to question (Western)

narratives of progress, and to remain alert to the unintended consequences of political ideals.

Looking back from today's perspective, this intellectual training feels more urgent than ever. In a world increasingly shaped by cognitive offloading onto artificial intelligence and by political movements that thrive on simplification and resentment, the ability to hold complexity and resist ideological shortcuts is an essential skill. *Deconstructing the 20th Century* was therefore not only a course about the past. It was an exercise in critical vigilance, and its value extends far beyond the classroom and into my present perception of world politics.

Daniel Cuixart Valle, Fall Term 2019

As a former student who completed *Modern Studies Seminar IV* at UNAK, I would like to offer a retrospective assessment of the course based on my academic experience. The seminar was, at the time, exceptionally well-structured and carefully designed, combining methodological rigor with a coherent and demanding syllabus. Both involved professors demonstrated a high level of academic competence, pedagogical seriousness, and intellectual openness throughout the course.

It was uncommon, in my academic trajectory, to encounter a university seminar that addressed complex and sensitive subject matter while simultaneously granting students genuine intellectual freedom. *Modern Studies Seminar IV* provided an environment in which students were encouraged to articulate their ideas openly and critically, without ideological imposition or unnecessary constraints. This approach fostered substantive debate and independent thinking, reinforcing a sense of intellectual responsibility.

From a personal and retrospective perspective, this seminar stands out as one of the few academic experiences in which I genuinely felt treated as an adult learner. This perception was shaped both by the depth and seriousness of the content, and by the respectful and demanding manner in which the professors engaged with students. Their approach promoted autonomy, critical self-awareness, and accountability, rather than passive learning.

In retrospect, I am convinced that the course contributed meaningfully to the development of my critical thinking skills. Such skills appear increasingly scarce in contemporary society, which is often characterised by superficial analysis and historical amnesia. Current realities have become progressively more complex and, in some respects, troubling. There is a persistent tendency to disregard lessons from the past, leading societies to repeat previous mistakes. The widespread presence of fake news, automated bots, artificial intelligence, and political extremism exemplifies the consequences of this failure to engage critically with history.

Viewed from this longer-term perspective, *Modern Studies Seminar IV* offered more than a purely academic exercise. By encouraging historical awareness, critical analysis, and reflective debate, the seminar provided intellectual tools that remain relevant beyond the classroom. In doing so, it helped address patterns of thought and behaviour that contributed to the major errors committed in Europe during the previous century. For these reasons, the academic and societal value of the course remains for me clear and significant.

Dávid Veress, Fall Term 2015

A decade has passed since my Erasmus exchange in Akureyri, yet the imprint remains sharp. The town, the fjord, the lovely people, the quiet softness of the winter light, and the evenings spent in the *laugar* all shaped the rhythm of my studies and reflections. Akureyri left a lasting impression on me, and I often recall it with affection and gratitude.

Without a doubt, *Alþjóðastjórnsmál/Alþjóðasamskipti* was one of the most impactful classes I took during my university years. For instance, the course's continuous criticism of big pharma and neoliberal assumptions changed how I understood policy. I began to see it not as a catalogue of technical solutions, but as a system of moral choices with consequences for distribution. It was a rigorous introduction to how power actually operates.

The Humanities are often dismissed as 'soft', but they are our primary defence against the atrophy of critical thought. Without the ability to interrogate the systems we live in — whether they are algorithmic or political — we lose our sense of civic purpose. They teach us to pause, to interpret, and to take responsibility for our judgements. What I learned at UNAK confirmed that critical thinking requires constant practice; otherwise, we risk

becoming mere data points processed by corporate or populist interests. I'm also very grateful for that.

Diana Moysevych, Fall Term 2021

Completing a Modern Studies course during my Erasmus in Iceland was a profound experience that fundamentally broadened my perspective. The course excelled at viewing a single academic topic—modernity—through a multi-angle lens, examining it *via* philosophy, economics, religion, and history. This approach taught me that there is always an alternative to the dominant narratives, such as the “Market Religion” that we discussed. In an era where we rely more and more on AI and face the challenges of extremism, the Liberal Arts is our strongest defense. By examining humanity’s long-standing moral and philosophical questions, the course gave me the critical skills to think deeply and independently. It reinforced a sense of civic purpose by focusing on the essential human, social, and moral complexity that simple, automated answers and polarized thinking often miss.

Diane-Eléonore Desplanques, 2010-2011

Life has become so fast-paced that shortcuts have become the new normal. Shortcuts to describe incredibly complex situations. Shortcuts to find answers quicker. Shortcuts because we live a life where we don't have time. No time to think, no time to reflect, no time to create. Those shortcuts have huge consequences on our societies, AI being biased, stealing the job of thinkers and creators. Shortcuts used by politician also have incredible consequences in our societies, leading to populist ideas. Deepening our knowledge by taking the time to study, digest, reflect and create is key for the future of humanity as a whole but also for individuals themselves.

Eduards Liepiņš, Spring Term 2025

I am a Latvian. I am also a former Erasmus+ exchange student at the University of Akureyri (UNAK) from the Rīgas Stradiņa Universitāte in Latvia, having studied at UNAK from the 3rd of January 2025 until the 9th of May 2025.

When I came to UNAK, I had very low expectations as to the academic material and individual personalities that would embody that education awaiting me. These expectations were informed by the reactionary and colonized academic environment that exists in Latvia. Since 1991, Latvia has been governed by a reactionary comprador bourgeois elite closely aligned with Western imperial core interests. In the modern Latvian academic environment, people who knowingly or unknowingly in any serious way critique the bourgeois dictatorship, suffer the consequences of reduced career options, reduced grades, worse social relations with other students, professors, lecturers and academic staff by being marginalized, branded as “not serious people”, ignored, and in more extreme cases, targeted by institutional or legal pressure silencing serious dissent. This is, of course, a natural expression of the bourgeois dictatorship, as the bourgeois class understand perfectly well the role of the bourgeois academic environment and its maintaining through a natural and organic system of official and unofficial disciplinary and intellectual work methods.

The Modern Studies (MS) program at UNAK also functions within the confines of the material reality of the Icelandic bourgeois pro-imperialist state, but it has certain differences to the academic environment of RSU in Riga, Latvia. The academic environment in Latvia is informed by the position of Latvia as a frontline imperial outpost, a neocolonial formation integrated into Western imperial structures and positioned primarily as a site of extraction and geopolitical alignment. That breeds a certain level of a fascistic-militaristic academic environment, even if in day-to-day academic life, the functions of it are hidden behind a veil of rhetorical liberalism and Western chauvinism.

The academic environment of UNAK in Iceland has its material roots in Iceland, also being a bourgeois dictatorship, but differing from Latvia, in that Iceland is an imperialist junior partner state - not a neo-colony - but a benefactor of imperialism. Iceland has a small but powerful bourgeoisie that benefited from the collapse of the USSR and the privatizations of the 1990s- 2000s, being the first state to immediately support and recognize the Baltic comprador separatist government of Latvia, even when the USSR still existed in 1990. There is a banking elite in Iceland that has become trans-nationalized, and has aligned itself with foreign Western capital, not national sovereignty or independence. In this context, Iceland plays the role of a peripheral imperial actor and junior partner in the imperialist chain, lacking independent imperialist power, but actively participating in the maintenance

and reproduction of imperialism by supporting NATO, monopoly finance capital, aligning with the US-EU imperial block, and in so doing receiving cheap labour, cheap commodities and consumer goods, resources, the ability to access and exploit export markets, and to gain a slice of global super profits to fund social democracy at home. This situation breeds a society and an academic environment where there is more room to be independent and critical, but which is of course still producing institutions that reproduce the ideological hegemony of the system that they represent.

At UNAK I took the course titled “Ideology and History of Modern Times”, taught by Prof. Giorgio Baruchello. The curriculum in this course centered primarily, though not exclusively, around social democracy and some famous figures tied to it in the West – notably John Kenneth Galbraith’s *The Economics of Innocent Fraud: Truth for Our Time* – Galbraith being a long-serving US government official and diplomat whose career was built on the service to US capitalism through participation in building and strengthening the “New Deal” US welfare programs, and later being an advocate of Keynesian economics. The second main piece of literature examined in the course was the pro-imperialist, anti-communist, and Euro-communist writer Eric Hobsbawm’s *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991*.

Based on these two pieces of literature, the course examined through a standard bourgeois lens conservatism, liberalism, and socialism. Ostensibly, the analyses and conclusions that the classroom at UNAK and Professor Giorgio Baruchello drew about these three ideologies were politically neutral. In reality, Western cultural hegemony and the Western bourgeois worldview were the implicit baseline that all discussions came back to as the “common sense”. The course exemplified how liberal academia refuses to address structural contradictions in a serious manner, like imperialism and class exploitation, and delves more into the realm of idealism, cultural or technological concerns, and outright misleading and propaganda narratives. During our course, the students were instructed a very economic social-democratic view of what socialism is – drawing a spider on a board that connected welfare provisions to automatically translating to socialism, which I strongly disagreed with. This is a classic example of framing the discussion and study-object from the very start, the same way that this memoir has been suggested to be framed around the “AI, extremism, and declining critical thinking crisis”. This narrow view immediately sets the tone of what is the “correct” problem, what are the “true” issues, and sets the stage for “appropriate answers

and conclusions," and obscures deeper structural contradictions.

Ostensibly, the intellectual work done by all university graduates is mostly organic but, in reality, it contributes to it in the form of reflections that will unintentionally reproduce, also in an organic way, the dominant narratives aligning with the dominant ideology in society - in our time, a bourgeois ideology. Imperialism, the neocolonial system, and the hyper-exploitation that the West engages in, as well as the role of Iceland within this global system of unequal exchange and imperial accumulation, was not talked about much. Instead, it was often subsumed under the more neutral and technocratic term "globalization" and left at that. The course mandated students to read Hobsbawm's literature. Through the use of this material as a baseline of analysis, the course approached the history of socialism primarily through Eurocommunist and liberal-critical interpretations, presenting Marxism-Leninism and actually existing socialist states in a predominantly critical light, especially the dictatorship of the proletariat, the concept and progressive reality of revolutionary violence, and the concept of revolution.

Despite all of the aforementioned context, this was the greatest study course that I have ever had the pleasure of participating in. The reasons for this lay in the fact, that all the students and the professor - Giorgio Baruchello - allowed for free speech to flourish. I could respectfully listen to a given lecture about a specific topic, and then, when the debate or task-aimed component of the lesson opened up, I was able to freely express myself and debate. This was possible because the students around me were not ideologically-driven comprador fanatics, and because Professor Giorgio Baruchello fostered an exemplary, friendly, and professional environment. For the first time in my - up to this point short - academic life, I felt respected and I did not have to run for cover in fear. I was treated as an actual person, and Professor Giorgio Baruchello looked upon me and all of us students as respectable equals - not, as is common in Riga, where we students, at least in the social sciences department where I study, are looked down upon and treated as inferior subjects.

A very direct comparison of this phenomenon emerged when I did not attend two lectures and received an email from Professor Giorgio Baruchello, in which he expressed that the course badly misses my intellectual input in the classroom, as it drives the conversation and that I am a dedicated student. Needless to say, that was and still is a massive academic compliment, and an inspiring moment. Contrast that to the academic life in Riga, where I

don't speak or write true analyses and simply lie and hide. The only time I wrote in an essay a small critique about certain events, I was personally called by the course lecturer, and chastised and reprimanded about how I am wrong and how I should think - a very demoralizing episode. Professor Giorgio Baruchello also always asked everyone how they felt, tried to get their opinion and viewpoint about current events, and sometimes offered breakfast snacks and coffee - he is a great example of how to lead a university lecture group full of students at nine in the morning as best as possible. You could also tell a joke to the professor, as he had a good sense of humor, and you could also talk to him about music and philosophy - which in terms of philosophy is logical, as he teaches philosophy, but as I found out about him while talking to him, music has been close to him in his life, and he showed interest in the fact that I could also sing, and play multiple instruments.

The final exam work for the study course was also memorable and a great task. I had to interview a close relative of mine about important geopolitical events that happened in their lives, their recollections about it, and their thoughts about the three main ideologies studied in the course - socialism, conservatism, liberalism - and which ones they felt the closest to. I ended up writing a 15-page-long work about my grandma's life in the USSR, the collapse of the USSR, and living in the modern-day neo-colony. This was not just a check-mark final-grade task, at least for me, as I was able to record on paper my grandma's memories through a unique prism that I will always save in my personal "library" - if I can call it that.

In conclusion, the following can be observed: A fascinating dialectical contradiction in my time at UNAK and in the course "Ideology and History of Modern Times" formed. UNAK is embedded, as all Western universities are, in Western imperialism. It reproduces bourgeois ideological hegemony. Yet I also encountered genuine openness, respect, intellectual freedom, and even space for dissent. This opens up several questions which are beyond the scope of this memoir, but are valid discussion points - how can a hegemonic institution still allow for dissent? Is liberal tolerance part of ideological hegemony and conformation, similar to the bourgeois electoral process, and are these "dissent cracks" real cracks in the system or organic traps within it?

Moving beyond Marxist-Leninist analysis and the dialectical materialism that it is based on and developed by thinkers such as Antonio Gramsci, Lenin and Stalin, and that I have tried to base the present memoir on, my time in the MS program was inspiring personally, as it

has motivated me to not give up on my bachelor degree even if the system is deeply flawed, and that a better academic environment exists outside the proverbial lowest level of Plato's cave, the shadow-puppet wall, that I regularly see in Riga. Finally and most importantly, I met the best academic lecturer that I have had the pleasure to learn from so far - Giorgio Baruchello - who showed me that a different way of teaching and organizing in a Western academic environment is possible, and who has single-handedly destroyed my personal subjective narrative that everything is bad in Western academia, as I have finally experienced a truly positive example of a better way. For that I am very thankful, as it is uplifting and inspiring. This has also made me realize that the "dogmatic Marxist" - actually not a Marxist - viewpoint, that materialism dictates all, and that the individual has no freedom to maneuver within a system, is wrong. Yes, the material reality shapes us into who we are, and yes, in the context of the reproduction of intellectuals, the modern academic environment serves the existing imperial system, but that doesn't negate the role of an individual and the agency of individuality. There are always alternatives through various ways to immerse the intellectual spirit in alignment with the masses, and there are options to lead an academic life that mirrors the late and great Michael Parenti, and that not all Western academics have to end up, allegedly, disgraced on Jeffrey Epstein's private island like, once again allegedly, Noam Chomsky.

Edvins Elferts, Fall Term 2011

It has been 15 years since I had the pleasure of taking two courses in Modern Studies—the *Modern Studies Seminar* and *The Concept of Modernity*. At the time, I was pursuing an undergraduate degree in economics and business at the Stockholm School of Economics in Riga. Strongly influenced by the Swedish approach to education, my studies were very practical and heavily technical, focusing on doing math proofs for various economic theories and treating capitalism as the only worldview.

Both courses I took as an exchange student at UNAK had a lasting impact on me and my worldview. It was the first time I experienced what I consider a liberal education, where the focus was to expand one's horizons by reading excerpts from influential works, such as *The Social Contract* by Rousseau and many other thinkers. The courses gave me an opportunity to explore many ideas from different religious, economic, political, and social points of view. Charlie Chaplin's films, viewed during the *Modern Studies Seminar*, were also seen

differently by me afterwards, since I was given the skills to take them apart and place them in a larger context. Without this experience, my education simply would not have been the same; perhaps, it would have been too one-sided. I am ever grateful for it.

Elena Brodeala, Spring Term 2010

I came to the University of Akureyri in 2010 as an exchange student, and my semester at UNAK has stayed with me ever since. It was a truly formative experience, both academically and personally. In particular, the course on the history of the 20th century - then part of the Modern Studies degree - profoundly changed the way I look at and understand the societies around us, and their greatest challenges. It deepened my awareness of social inequalities and helped me grasp the powerful role that politics and ideologies play in shaping the way we live. The perspective I gained during that time has guided many of my subsequent endeavours, from pursuing a PhD focused on gender equality to my current work on human rights at the Council of Europe. The Modern Studies program provided me not only with academic knowledge but also with a critical lens that continues to inform both my professional path and my commitment to advancing more just and inclusive societies.

Éléonore Robinson, Fall Term 2018

Reflexive Thoughts on a Refreshingly Cold Semester of Modern Studies at UNAK

Thinking is challenging. Learning, being reflexive, and forming one's own opinions are a demanding process. Nowadays, the ability to carry out this intellectual endeavour is increasingly undermined by the erosion of attentional resources that digital technologies appear to have precipitated. By requiring to engage with comprehensive readings and substantial arguments; by requiring to produce writings that reflected a thorough understanding of the works, while leaving significant room for reflexivity, critical thinking, and discussion; by providing regular, meticulous corrections that guided the maturation of the students' argumentative and reflexive skills; the knowledge acquired through a semester of Modern Studies at the University of Akureyri in the Fall Term 2018^[1] provided me with the means to face this growing, ongoing challenge. Whether it should be by reading *The Making of Europe* by Marco Catini, *The Great Transformation* by Karl Polanyi or *Age of Extremes* by Eric Hobsbawm, we were confronted to stringent reasoning and the outcome of

long-matured ideas that contrast with the virtual world's immediacy. The regular opportunities for exchanges and small-group discussions with distinguished academics made it also possible for me to witness science in the making — to witness the slow, demanding craft of building arguments, their growing depth, the way time leaves its mark, and the constant back-and-forth that shapes ideas.

Yet it is also essential to guard against an overly elitist approach to science. Out of fear of exacerbated relativism, the social sciences and their researchers sometimes remain highly impermeable to marginal propositions and situated epistemologies (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1992). The structure of the seminar in Modern Studies that I had the chance to follow, built around highly diverse contributions, offers the opportunity to engage with a variety of currents within the humanities, to grasp the premises of these different approaches, to perceive how individual reasoning is distinctive, and to understand that theses may be defended from the particular to the general or from the general to the particular, through an accumulation of particulars or through sweeping generalisations. Finally, these exchanges can reveal how theoretical arguments and knowledge emerging from lived experience can coexist and enter into dialogue — made all the more striking when an introduction to Keynes' Macroeconomic Theory is juxtaposed with economic considerations about the cow as a unit of exchange during the Middle Ages in Iceland.

The principal lesson that I drew from this semester was the cultivation of a culture of intellectual debate and the remarkable richness of the explored topics. We were exposed to an array of learning experiences in which the art of constructive debate was cultivated in all its forms, through confronting different perspectives, valuing their diversity, and integrating the insights generated through interdisciplinary readings of history and social phenomena. Throughout the semester, we were encouraged to reflect on the conditions under which different types of knowledge may coexist, as well as on the ways in which they may be meaningfully articulated. This occurred, notably, as we were invited to think through the connections among a wide range of subjects and problematics, which have been duly reflected in the research conducted at the University of Akureyri that I came across during my stay as well as in the successive years: From the fostering of media literacy (Guðmundsson & Kristinsson, 2017) and the role of universities in contemporary democracies (Kristinsson, 2023), to the psychology of behavioural addiction in online gaming (Blinka et al., 2015, 2016), and to an in-depth conceptual analysis of humour and

cruelty that culminates in an extensive intellectual history of Modern Philosophy (Baruchello & Arnarsson, 2022, 2023, 2024a, 2024b).

Nowadays, this wealth of culture and the values it embodies remain within me and continue to mature through my own scientific work. I have been particularly drawn to works that compel me to consider the privileges that have granted me access to these spaces of debate. They also lead me to reflect on where and how these discussions can be opened to a wider audience without over-simplifying them or sacrificing their depth.

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Emma Frumento, Spring Term 2025

During my Erasmus experience at the University of Akureyri, I had the chance to attend one of the Modern Studies Seminars offered there, which explored the concept of humour in different contexts and cultures.

Understanding humour in connection with the way people interact with each other in various scenarios, is key to gaining deeper insight into the human relationships that characterize our society. In a world where everything is becoming automated and extremely fast, there is almost no space left for genuine, real-life interactions. Humour is one of them and demonstrates how people react to certain situations or deal with problems and dissatisfaction in their lives and circumstances. It has deep roots in cultural backgrounds, and serves as a way to share and express something profoundly human in a lighter way.

It is fundamental to embrace humour as a form of authentic human behaviour, as it is something that machines could never truly replicate on their own. Humour is such a unique

way to express concepts and opinions in a manner that connects with peers on a deep level, and I am extremely grateful to have had the opportunity to learn all of this in such an effective way thanks to the seminar.

Iwona Lipinska, Spring Term 2010

My name is Iwona. Sixteen years ago, I had the pleasure of participating in the *Introduction to Philosophy* course in Akureyri. I remember these classes as highly valuable, conducted in a student-friendly and accessible manner, intellectually enriching, and, above all, taking place in a pleasant and amiable atmosphere. Professor Baruchello, as well as Professor Lorna Johnstone and Dr. Markus Meckl, proved to be not only outstanding lecturers, but also open and supportive guides and friends, who helped the exchange students to integrate into the local community — people that we could always rely on as a student community.

Jean-Baptiste Berthier, Fall Term 2011

My experience with the degree line in Modern Studies at the University of Akureyri, as an Erasmus student, was shaped less by a single discipline than by an overall approach: learning to question what appears obvious. Courses such as *Deconstructing the 20th Century* and *Media Critique* offered a demanding and formative intellectual experience, centred on critical reading, contextual analysis, and close attention to discourse. These courses encouraged a habit of intellectual distance: paying attention to how narratives are constructed, how language frames meaning, and how ideas circulate within specific historical and social contexts. While I would not claim to remember every concept or reference in detail today, the underlying reflexes developed during this period have remained with me. Also, after my exchange, I stayed on and obtained a degree in Media Studies at the University of Akureyri in 2012. After my studies there, I went on to complete a master's degree in communication and pursued my professional career in this field in Québec, Canada, where I have worked in various communication roles and eventually became director of communications. In this professional context, the analytical skills cultivated through the Humanities have proven consistently valuable. Working in communication requires more than technical proficiency. It involves understanding audiences, anticipating interpretations, navigating public debate, and exercising responsibility in the production of messages. The ability to read discourse critically, to

question framing, and to remain attentive to nuance—skills reinforced during my time in Modern Studies—has been a steady asset throughout my career. More broadly, Modern Studies did not prepare me for a single profession, but for a way of thinking that adapts across contexts. In an environment increasingly characterized by accelerated communication, automation, and polarization (especially these times), this capacity for critical reflection remains essential.

Joanne Öggesjö, Spring Term 2025

I took an exchange semester at UNAK as part of my Global Studies bachelor's degree. Looking back at my studies there, I knew already then—but I appreciate even more now—what a special opportunity that was. Not only was the content of the courses of quality, relevance, seriousness, and fun. Also, the courses were taught by a professor who is passionate about his teaching, caring about his work, serious about his business, and humorous about this cruel world. The combo made a killing education, especially for close-minded worldviews. Not only that, but there was also a new guest lecture almost every week during the months when the lectures were held. Just being present there was already a privilege. On top of all this, the community at the University, and in Akureyri, were all very beautiful: The teachers, the staff, the students, the locals—they were all welcoming and kind. Not to forget that all of this was happening in Iceland too: Beautiful nature and a magical atmosphere. If you have the opportunity to go there, go! The courses I took were:

- *Introduction to Philosophy*
- *Ideology and History of Modern Times*
- *Modern Studies Seminar*

Each course was very interesting in themselves. Together, they provided for a very good understanding of the issues in hand; from both a philosophical and a political point of view. My favourites learning experiences I had during my exchange are:

- *becoming more aware and knowledgeable of the world in which I live*
- *being in an environment that grew further my aspiration to learn*

- *learning that being ambitious to study these days is an act of rebellion, so do it!*

All the best, A little less close-minded student than before!

Jules Vasse, Fall Term 2021

The Modern Studies' philosophy classes opened my eyes and my ability to decipher complex texts that are very important in demonstrating humanity's cultural richness, far more easily than I thought. This was due in particular to Professor Baruchello's teaching style, as he encouraged us to debate among ourselves, exchange ideas, and not suppress any philosophical, historical, and/or art criticism insights that could contribute to our understanding of a text. I would do it again without any hesitation.

Katarzyna Kresa-Szulc, 2015-2016

During my Erasmus Exchange in Akureyri, Iceland, one of the classes that I decided to take was the *Modern Studies Seminar*. When I think about it now, a few years later, I realize that I chose it without fully knowing what I was signing up for. At the beginning, I was not sure whether I was academically ready for it. The course explored much more complex and abstract ideas than I had initially expected. Very quickly, I realized that the discussions required deep critical thinking and familiarity with concepts that were new to me.

Additionally, my English skills were not strong enough at the time, which made it difficult for me to fully understand some of the topics discussed in class. There were moments when I felt lost or unsure. However, despite these challenges, the experience turned out to be a very valuable part of my exchange.

The most important aspect of the course was the teacher's approach. Prof. Baruchello, quite simply "Giorgio," was extremely kind, open, and genuinely engaged in the subjects we discussed. He created a welcoming atmosphere, where students felt comfortable sharing their thoughts. He was always willing to help, both during classes and outside of them. I especially appreciate that he spent his own time after class helping me prepare my presentation. He was patient, supportive, and very understanding of my difficulties.

Giorgio also created a Facebook group dedicated to topics connected to the course. Even after I left Iceland, posts from the group continued to appear on my feed. They often introduced articles, ideas, and perspectives that broadened my views and encouraged me to explore subjects I might never have discovered on my own.

Overall, this course was a great and unexpected surprise. Giorgio's approach was different from what I was used to at my home university. It was one of the most useful classes I have ever taken because it touched upon areas and ideas I would not have encountered on my own. I am truly grateful for this experience.

Kamilè Jurgeléné, Fall Term 2011

Taking the Modern Studies Seminar at UNAK had a strong impact on how I understand society and my own place in it. I came to UNAK as an Erasmus student in 2011. Coming from a Business School, I was used to efficient, quantitative and results-oriented education, but not broader social, philosophical and cultural questions during lectures. The course approached social development and core humanistic questions through cinema, and to be honest, I chose it as an escape rather than an academic opportunity. To my surprise, we examined why certain topics mattered at specific moments in time, how societal hopes and fears shaped narratives, and how context influenced collective thinking.

While I have never put that in writing before, I am extremely happy this course made me realise that understanding society requires interpretation, empathy, and the ability to see multiple perspectives. In today's world, largely driven by automation, optimisation and efficiency, courses like the Modern Studies Seminar are irreplaceable. We *need* the ability to see multiple perspectives, question narratives, and interpret things from different points of view. For me, this course served as a stepping stone into understanding that there's much more to life than pure economics: efficiency without reflection can easily become dehumanizing, and civic responsibility depends on critical thinking and historical awareness. What was meant as an escape from "real life" broadened my understanding of the world around me, which I am truly grateful for. Oh, and the movies were great, too!

Katharina Heinrich, Fall Term 2015

With the 20th anniversary of the Modern Studies program at the University of Akureyri, I was given the opportunity to reflect on a period of time that significantly shaped both my professional and personal path. In 2015, I moved to Akureyri to spend my Erasmus semester at the University of Akureyri, not knowing that this would later become a place to which I would return in order to pursue a Master's degree in Polar Law. One of the courses that I attended during that exchange semester was part of the Modern Studies catalogue. Today, I can clearly see how much this academic experience in Iceland influenced my path. Being encouraged to think critically and independently continues to form the foundation of how I approach environmental issues and Arctic Ocean governance. Congratulations to the University of Akureyri for running such a successful program for the past 20 years.

Lina Roka, Spring Term 2023

We woke up very early in the morning and went to class together. On Tuesdays, I had Philosophy, one of my favorite courses during my Erasmus semester, in this Icelandic town between the fjords. During the class, we had a break where we all went to the UNAK café for coffee and hot chocolate, and beyond the small talk, the class had a positive effect on us because we organized ourselves into small groups and discussed the content of the lectures. Our classroom was always arranged in such a way as to encourage thinking and allow for group interaction, which made it very easy for us to socialize and get to know each other, as well as cultivate the feeling that academic knowledge could actually be produced, rather than simply transmitted. After class, I would usually sit in the library or some other quiet place and summarize the lecture. This reflection always reminded me of the liveliness of the moment and the way we reacted to knowledge, leaving me with the feeling that the day had indeed been productive. In addition, we had many guest lectures. It was an approach that suited me—I always believed in powerful interactions and that people were good at conveying one or two topics they were passionate about, and that's what happened in those small classrooms, where we had all come from different parts of the world to be together on this shared academic journey. I was very interested in the courses, and I especially remember that it was the first university experience in which I felt that my participation in the courses allowed for a parallel critical thinking that I wanted to practice and pursue. It was snowing outside, even though it was spring during my exchange semester in 2023, but everything was very warm inside the university, which taught me that when people/professors care to truly stimulate and nurture a critical approach, everything can

become a way of life that motivates you every day to seek new knowledge, new experiences, and search for that “meaning of life” that we had discussed on one of those Tuesdays.

Luca Lottero, Spring Term 2015

I attended the international relations course at the University of Akureyri as an Erasmus student during the 2015-2016 academic year. Since then, a lot has happened in the world. I remember when Professor Markus Meckl asked us to discuss which macro-theory was more appropriate for describing international relations: realism or idealism. I found myself in a clear minority in supporting the idealist thesis, perhaps more out of (indeed) idealism than real conviction. I imagine that today, with a US administration that is candid in its use of force to pursue its interests as (perhaps) never before in the contemporary era and a 20th-century-style war underway in Europe, it would be even easier for my realist opponents to win the debate.

One could argue whether the two mentioned examples are a good demonstration of realism and pursuit of national interests, or a disguised form of a kind of perverse idealism (imperialism? chauvinism? simple vanity and a desire to be mentioned in future history books?), but that would go well beyond the scope of this brief reflection. What is worth remembering is the value of the debate itself, of a discipline and an entire field of study that does not give up on the attempt to bring the debate on international relations and the state of the world to rational levels. For this reason, in a world where global public opinion seems to be moving along tribal lines, debate is manipulated and distorted by a small number of technological oligarchs, and the authoritarian use of Artificial Intelligence even threatens to render human thought obsolete, the twenty years since the first degree in Modern Studies was awarded at the University of Akureyri deserve to be celebrated.

Matej Rusiňák, Spring Term 2024

Ode to the Human Spirit

“You can be anybody!” sounds from commercials today more than yesterday, and the day before. With new and allegedly perfect AI tools, you can build your own apps, establish profitable companies, and reimagine the world(s) you live in. You can truly shape the reality

around you and make your own ideas prevail. You don't need to know anything relevant; you just need an idea, a business plan — everything else is included for just \$29.99. And I am speaking to you all, as it applies to you — You, and YOU — truly anybody!

But wait, does it?!

Our society has advanced technologically over the last three decades in ways unseen and previously unimaginable. We have explored our genes, connected entire worlds, and created a true masterpiece of behavioral reward systems. Skinner and his kind would be impressed. Social media gave us freedom of communication and the ability to follow events in the lives of our friends and the outside world. But in return? It captured our time and slowly started to chew on our cognition. Beware — it is no coincidence that “brain rot” was named Word of the Year 2024. But as Horst Fuchs would say: “just wait, there is more!”

In the last three years, we have seen the emergence of new technological tools that we (although often erroneously) have termed Artificial Intelligence. In fact, most of the hands-on experience we, the general public, can get will probably be connected to Large Language Models in the form of chatbots. The experience with them is wonderful: we can reduce the time spent on large amounts of daily tasks; in no time, we can generate everything: from grammatically correct and professionally sound emails to flowery university essays. But it doesn't stop at generating. Who can say that they have never asked an LLM for a quick summary, a problem solution, or advice? Not too many people anymore — myself included! By doing so, the cognitive load we have had to bear ever since civilization was created is greatly diminished and substituted by complicated statistical models. And while it is true that many new discoveries were often looked at with suspicion but ultimately brought about greater advancement and welfare, here I tend to be wary of our situation.

Looking at the sudden rise of division among ourselves, mostly palpable in current political discourse, it might (and it DOES) affect us on an interpersonal level even more. It is relatively easy — and I think mostly justified — to blame this on the current functioning of social media, where our place of encounter has so readily shifted. This abstract (market)place, full of malevolent agents, anonymity, and one-sidedness, offers us a comfort zone. We can stay there within a group of like-minded individuals (whether human or not), and more often than not mock people with different opinions, but more importantly, source

information that matches our personal views. Yes, it is true that more and more news and information are sourced from social media and other algorithm-based platforms, which are ingeniously programmed to create sensation and foster genuine belief in their receivers. It is more apparent now that we already kind of live in our own separate, impenetrable worlds, and that we have at least partially ceded our faculty to distinguish reliable information to some other entity. Maybe it is rightful to call these networks of algorithms and statistical models by name of Artificial Intelligence, after all, as they are slowly becoming a successor to our own intelligence, leaving us, once free 'zoon politikon', a mere compliant part of the whole monetary and power machinery.

But is there a way out of this doomsday scenario, where each part starts to live in its own reality of personalized facts, while serving higher and much more abhorrent purpose, while not aware of it? I think there is.

If you are familiar with the work of Nobel Prize-winning author Hermann Hesse, you soon start to realize that he was talking about this world of sadness, ignorance, and dubious preoccupancy, which can only be surpassed by creating a generation full of ideals, patience, and perseverance. Joseph Knecht in *The Glass Bead Game*, not aspiring to be more than a random character in Castalia, chooses a life woven from study of Arts and Culture in order to form himself as a person. Yet this seemingly naive devotion to the improvement of the human spirit takes him to the center of society. Not by virtue of being the best nor the brightest of all, but by undertaking a difficult, yet self-liberating journey of learning to understand the importance of ideals and sensing the presence of a *Zeitgeist*, he advances personally and spiritually, and becomes an important actor, living a life worth living (not only in his reality). You can be anybody, but not through management of resources and pretend-play, but through becoming a self-aware person sensitive to your historical period.

We now celebrate 20 years of the Modern Studies programme, which serves this very purpose of personal development. Artificial Intelligence, as well as social media in some form, will continue to exist and affect our lives in the future, and it will be really hard to resist the journey leading to a huge reduction in our cognitive and emotional abilities, and to living in a fundamentally fact-less world. The best way forward is not to ignore it and let the abyss devour us, but, like Joseph Knecht, to take the road of cultural and spiritual refinement — to remain curious and ready to learn, and thus to combat the distorted

portraits of success and achievement to which we are so exposed. Remember, it takes a lot of courage and personal maturity to question and examine our own reality and becoming who we really are.

Artes liberales vivant!

Mathilde Vernay, 2015-2016

I often think back to my Erasmus year at the University of Akureyri in 2015-2016, when I had the opportunity to study within the Modern Studies programme. At the time, I was drawn to its interdisciplinary approach and its ambition to offer a critical reading of contemporary societies. What I did not yet realise was how profoundly this programme serves a genuine public purpose.

This programme did more than transmit knowledge: it taught me how to think, how to question, and how to confront complexity without resorting to simplistic answers. Through discussions, the diversity of perspectives, and the intellectual rigor of the teaching, I learned to move beyond the obvious and to better understand the social, political, and cultural mechanisms that shape our societies.

Learning Icelandic was also an essential part of this experience. Beyond linguistic skills, it allowed me to engage deeply with Icelandic culture, history, and values, and to understand how closely language, identity, and our perception of others are connected.

Today, in an international context marked by growing polarization, the rise of extremist movements, tensions surrounding migration, and a weakening of democratic debate, the teachings of this programme resonate in a particularly powerful way. Recent political developments in the United States as well as in other parts of the world, where certain positions raise serious questions about respect for human rights, the rule of law, and democratic balance, highlight the importance of having strong analytical tools. More than ever, it seems essential to me (and this is a collective responsibility) that everyone be sufficiently informed, engage with history, and develop an independent critical mindset in order to analyze with rigor and discernment the events shaping our societies. Understanding the past, questioning narratives, confronting facts, and remaining attentive

to civic mobilization on a global scale have become indispensable skills.

Ten years later, I remain deeply grateful for the quality of the education I received, the stimulating academic environment, and the intellectual openness it fostered in me. I am convinced that programmes like Modern Studies, which encourage understanding of the world, critical reflection, and informed engagement, are more necessary than ever to prepare the citizens of tomorrow.

Maxime Dubois, 2021-2022

Having taken the course *From the Fall of the Roman Empire to the French Revolution* offered by the Modern Studies programme, I was at first very interested in exploring the study of art, culture and history combined. More than that, through this course, I was able to understand how political, public, and personal opinions are shaped through debate, as was the case in the coffeehouses in Europe in the 18th century. I was also thrilled to study different sources showing how critical thinking and opinions are shared through art. Overall, this course revealed how ideas and opinions emerge and are distributed. In light of present-day social realities, this course shows us how important it is to let ideas and opinions emerge and be shared, and not to proscribe and control them, as it is essential for democracy. Modern Studies are therefore essential in allowing students and academics to develop critical thinking, by studying and reflecting on how our ancestors were able to share ideas in societies that were even more controlled than today. Being challenged and threatened by the rise of authoritarian thinking, critical thinking is a powerful tool that should not be refrained, as it allows human beings to be different from one another, autonomy, development, and better decision-making.

Merle Pajus, Spring Term 2007

I happened to study at the University of Akureyri because life had brought me there for family reasons. My initial plan was to take an Icelandic course at the university, but after looking at the courses they were offering, I realised there were some very interesting ones and that I could become a visiting student.

Among other courses, I took Modern Studies' *Deconstructing the 20th Century*. I chose it for

two reasons: one entirely pragmatic, it was taught in English, and the other, it sounded fascinating. As part of the coursework, I wrote an essay on Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man*. Finding that essay in a box of old papers, almost 20 years after writing it, was interesting. Against the backdrop of recent global events (like Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Donald Trump's rise and radical actions), Fukuyama's arguments and my own reflections still seem to hold up.

Fukuyama argued that, with the collapse of Soviet communism, liberal democracy combined with market capitalism had no serious ideological rivals left. At first glance, today's world seems to contradict him: authoritarian regimes persist, nationalism is enjoying a revival, and liberal democracies appear increasingly fragile. Yet Fukuyama's deeper point remains surprisingly resilient. While liberal democracy is undoubtedly under strain, no alternative ideology has emerged that offers a universally appealing or morally compelling vision. What has changed is the degree of stability we can expect: liberal democracy now appears far more vulnerable than Fukuyama once imagined. And this is why Modern Studies matters: it equips us to question historical narratives, examine power, explore the drivers of modern conflict, and ask uncomfortable questions about the use of force and the weakening of democratic systems from within.

What I remember clearly about the course is that it never promised easy answers. Instead, seminars, readings, assignments, and group work trained us to argue, to doubt, and to think critically. This habit of questioning feels especially important today, in a world where artificial intelligence and quick, simplified answers are often far more tempting than careful, reflective judgment. The Humanities and the Liberal Arts continue to play a vital role by cultivating historical awareness, teaching us how to navigate complexity, and encouraging us to see beyond our own perspectives. In that sense, understanding modernity is not merely an academic pursuit; it is a civic responsibility.

Michaela Trnečková Štupáková, Fall Term 2011

When I chose the *Modern Studies Seminar*, I was unsure of what to expect. However, the subject proved to be both engaging and intellectually enriching. It helped me uncover deeper meanings in films and social issues that I had not previously considered. The course significantly strengthened my critical thinking skills and enhanced my ability to interpret,

analyse, and evaluate contemporary society. It covered important topics such as democracy, crime, social inequality, and international relations, providing a comprehensive understanding of modern global challenges. Thanks to the course, I have also developed further the ability to actively engage in collaborative work requiring shared responsibility, constructive exchange of ideas, and the thoughtful application of each participant's strengths and skills.

Miriam Fossati, Spring & Fall Terms 2010

When I think back to my years of study at the University of Akureyri (UNAK), a few memories and sensations immediately come to mind: the cold, the distinctive winter light of Iceland filtering through the classroom windows, the warmth and kindness of the people, their willingness to offer help whenever difficulties arose.

I came from studying literature and ancient history at the University of Genoa, Italy, and I didn't really know what to expect there. With my uncertain English and no knowledge of Icelandic, I tried to communicate and give shape to my ideas. I must admit that the first months were a constant challenge: every class required twice the effort, every text felt like a small obstacle to overcome. But that struggle was part of the journey, accompanied by the growing feeling that I was learning to look at the world with new eyes.

Every lesson helped me develop a more attentive outlook, to cultivate critical thinking—especially in an age where everything tends to be simplified and homogenized.

Modern Studies was not just an academic path: the classes with Giorgio Baruchello, Rachael Lorna Johnstone, Markus Meckl, taught me that thinking is not something you delegate, but something you nurture; that complexity is not an obstacle but an invitation to improve and move forward; that knowledge is not just information found in books, but rather living actively with a deep sense of civic responsibility.

What I remember with the most gratitude is not a single course, but the whole experience: an environment that encouraged curiosity, debate, and questioning, often through lessons that promoted group work. This is the richness I carry with me, and one of the most valuable contributions to my education.

Natalia Przybylska, Spring Term 2014

I took courses offered in the Modern Studies program at the University of Akureyri, and I truly had the pleasure of being one of the students in this unique and inspiring program. It was not only an academic journey, but also an unforgettable life experience, which I still have in my heart. The program combined many areas, like political science, sociology, history, and the analysis of contemporary global processes, in a way that was both challenging and exciting. Studying in Iceland, in such an international and open-minded environment, encouraged me to think critically, ask questions, and see the world from different perspectives. Most importantly, it shaped my worldview — teaching me responsibility, curiosity, empathy, and the value of dialogue. Which is crucial in current circumstances. I look back on this time with deep gratitude and lasting enthusiasm, as it laid both the intellectual and personal foundations for who I am today.

Stefan Holitschke, 2012 (Polar Law)

Fragments from the North: Learning to See the World Before It Vanishes into Data

Some memories return with the clarity of cold air—sharp, crystalline, almost too precise. Others drift back like snowflakes that melt the moment you try to hold them. My time in Akureyri, during the Polar Law programme in 2011-2012, belongs to both categories. It comes to me as fragments: the muted blue of winter mornings, the quiet hum of the library, the strange comfort of mountains that felt both protective and indifferent. I didn't know then that these impressions would become part of my internal architecture, shaping how I see, think, and move through the world.

I studied Polar Law, not Modern Studies, but the intellectual atmosphere of the university blurred boundaries in a way that felt natural. Giorgio Baruchello's course on *Good Governance, Accountability and Transparency* was part of our curriculum, and it opened a window into the Humanities that I hadn't expected. It was a bridge between legal structures and human experience, between institutional responsibility and the fragile realities of northern societies. In that space, something essential clicked for me: that governance is not only a matter of rules but of perception, interpretation, and care.

The Arctic sharpened this insight. It is a region that teaches you to read the world with your whole body. You learn to sense weather before it arrives, to interpret silence as information, to understand that fragility and resilience often coexist in the same landscape. That sensuality—this embodied attention—stayed with me long after I left. It shaped the way I write, the way I observe, the way I inhabit the world. I didn't need to name it or publish it for it to matter; it simply became part of how I move through life.

Polar Law added another layer: responsibility. It taught me that landscapes are never just landscapes; they are political, legal, ethical spaces. That vulnerability is not only ecological but institutional. That the Arctic, for all its beauty, is also a site of tension—between states, between histories, between futures that are still negotiable. And that governance, at its core, is about protecting what is fragile, even when the protection is imperfect.

Years later, when I moved deeper into IT and eventually into the world of AI, I realised that this combination—sensual perception, humanistic interpretation, legal-ethical awareness—had prepared me for something I didn't yet have a name for. Technology is often described as neutral, but anyone who has worked in the field knows that systems are never neutral. They encode assumptions, values, blind spots. They shape how people think, or stop thinking. And they quietly reorganise the world.

Working in IT for decades, and now in the era of AI, I see how easily cognition slips away from us. How quickly we outsource memory, judgment, even imagination. Cognitive offloading sounds harmless, almost efficient, but it has a cost. When we stop wrestling with complexity, we become vulnerable to those who offer simple answers. And simple answers are the favourite currency of extremism.

This is where my time in Akureyri returns with unexpected force. The Humanities—even the small portion I encountered through Giorgio Baruchello's course—taught me to tolerate ambiguity, to question narratives, to read between lines. They taught me that interpretation is not a luxury but a civic act. That democracy depends on citizens who can think critically, who can resist the seduction of certainty, who can recognise when language is being weaponised.

And yet, beneath all this, there is something quieter. A kind of beautiful sadness I rarely

speaking about. A knowledge—felt more than thought—that the world we learned to read so carefully is changing faster than our ability to protect it. The Arctic I knew is already slipping away. The public sphere we once believed in feels thinner, more brittle. Even the act of thinking, of paying attention, seems endangered.

But this sadness is not despair. It is the soft sting of transience, the awareness that everything we love is temporary and therefore worth guarding. It is the feeling you get when you watch the last light fade over Eyjafjörður and realise that beauty is always on the verge of vanishing. And that our task—perhaps the only one that matters—is to keep it alive for as long as we can.

In my own way, I have carried this task into my work with technology. Not as a crusade, not as a manifesto, but as a quiet orientation. A refusal to let systems replace judgment. A commitment to design and governance that respects human fragility. A belief that even in a world of algorithms, there must remain a space for the unquantifiable: dignity, ambiguity, wonder.

If I had to name this orientation, it would be a secular ethic of preservation. To safeguard what is fragile. To honour what is fleeting. To keep the world intact for as long as we can, even if we know that the future will carry its own tragedies. It is not heroism. It is simply responsibility.

Sometimes, when I walk at night—usually in winter, when the air is thin and the world feels slightly unreal—I slip back into that northern mode of perception. Streetlights shimmer on wet pavement like broken constellations. The wind carries a faint metallic scent. And for a moment, I feel the same quiet urgency I felt in Akureyri: the sense that the world is asking to be seen, not scanned; interpreted, not processed.

Twenty years have passed since the first BA in Modern Studies was awarded. The world has changed in ways we could not have imagined. But the core lesson remains: to see is to care. To think is to act. And to cultivate the kind of attention that keeps a society from losing itself.

If I have carried anything from the North into my life, it is this: fragments matter. They are

the small anchors that keep us from drifting. And our task—perhaps our only task—is to gather them before they dissolve into the white noise of the present.

Tiphaine Legeais, 2017-2018

I attended a course in the Modern Studies program when I was an exchange student, back in 2017-2018. At the time, “Fridays for Future” and the “MeToo” movements were gaining significant momentum, and “COVID” and “AI” were unfamiliar words in our vocabulary. I attended another course taught by the same teacher, Giorgio, active in Modern Studies, when I was a Master’s student in the Polar Law program, in 2019-2020. At the time, the world had taken a shift, an uneasy and alarming one. COVID had just started to spread, the war in Ukraine was already being fought, and right-wing extremism was rising on the European scene. It is now 2026, the right-wing political parties and ideologies are settling and gaining popularity in many nations, wars and tensions across the international scene have increased, and people started relying on AI to draft their thoughts and their opinions, leaving their civic purpose and critical thinking in the hands of technology.

When I reflect on the many topics that I learned in the Modern Studies classes, especially on the significance of the Humanities and the Liberal Arts, I cannot help but think that these subjects are particularly needed in today’s world. I believe that such topics, taught in universities, are powerful tools that play a role in restoring the citizens’ sense of civic purpose, as well as their judgment towards the dramatic use of AI, their critical thinking towards the increased right-wing extremist movements, and their cynicism toward the dire state of today’s world.

I remain hopeful that the education of the minds in classes such as Giorgio’s ones in Modern Studies is an effective instrument to fight against the surge of obscurantist governance, intolerant ideological shifts and anti-democratic tendencies, and to counter the decline of critical thinking and analytical abilities.

Valeriya Posmitnaya, 2018 (Polar Law)

I completed the Polar Law programme at the Master’s level at the University of Akureyri, and I found it incredibly inspiring. We had outstanding professors who came to Akureyri from all over the world - from Alaska to Australia - to teach us.

With these remarkable lecturers, we did not focus solely on law, even though it was a major

part of the programme. Instead, we gained a broad and interdisciplinary perspective, embracing the social sciences and humanities. We studied Indigenous peoples, immigration in the Arctic, as well as environmental and social changes in the region. We participated in numerous conferences and events, had access to excellent library resources, and spent unforgettable time among young people from all over the world who shared the same interests. I am truly grateful for this opportunity.

Endnotes

[1] With my eternal gratitude to the Erasmus+ Programme for making this stay (and the followings) possible.