THE INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDIES IN CULTURE

VISION STATEMENT

The Vision in Brief

The Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture is an interdisciplinary research center and intellectual community at the University of Virginia committed to understanding contemporary cultural change and its wide-ranging individual and social consequences.

The changes to which we are witness today are as complex as they are extensive and, in many respects, they are unprecedented in human history. In studying these developments, our particular focus is on the changing frameworks of meaning and moral order—the symbolic and structural frameworks within which individual life, institutional adaptation, and political conflict in the contemporary world take place. Our attention, then, is directed not to the passing trends or the artifacts of change but rather to what we call the "deep structures" of contemporary culture, to the way transformations at this largely tacit and constitutive level take concrete institutional form in the organization of public life, in the moral coordinates of people's personal lives, and in the sources of meaning that define human flourishing. The implications of these changes for how people make sense of their lives and their worlds, how public life is understood and organized, and how meaning itself is constituted and narrated are wide-ranging and morally profound. For this reason, inquiry into the deep structures of contemporary culture requires a rejection of the tendencies toward scientistic reductionism in the social sciences and a facile nihilism in the humanities in favor of an approach that transcends conventional disciplinary theories, methods, and practices.

The work of the Institute begins from some fairly simple theoretical assumptions. Most importantly, we believe that all human beings and culture itself are intrinsically normative—that is, oriented variously toward ideals of the good. Today, the prospects for human flourishing have never been greater; yet paradoxically, the realization of such flourishing is beset with unanticipated and profound challenges that render true flourishing seemingly as inaccessible as ever.

The work of the Institute is also based upon a commitment to dialogical pluralism, both within the Institute's community and as it engages intellectual life more generally. We believe that various disciplinary perspectives and particularistic convictions are not debilitating but empowering—they do not hinder understanding, but provide a means by which understanding can be made sharper and clearer. And though the Institute's work does have bearing on social and political matters, the Institute emphatically does not do the work of public policy, take partisan positions, or seek to influence government in any direction.

The Contradictions of Our Time

On the face of it, the contemporary world is deeply complex and even contradictory. At every level of human experience, the pursuit of "the good" is both enabled and challenged in heretofore unimagined ways. In many respects modernity, in all of its variation, has transformed the human condition: No longer are we forced to accept the constraints of our physical natures or our societies as "natural," given and unalterable. Every day sees the growth of our power, our ability to intervene in and attempt to control our condition; and every day our condition seems more fundamentally up to us, plastic, able to be transformed, for the better or for the worse. Our capacity for turning hopes into realities, for protecting us from external peril, is ever increasing. In short, modernity has seen the transformation of necessity into choice, and shifted the human situation from one of submission to inescapable fate to one of affirmation of deliberate destiny. But what are the consequences of this?

The historical and sociological backdrop of our situation is familiar to many, but it bears repeating for the way it brings into relief processes we consider to be of particular consequence for our time. Over the last two centuries, the idea of human progress in Western modernity framed our common understanding of the changes taking place in the world. This idea offered not only an account of history but a hope for which to strive. As daunting as the problems of prejudice, ignorance, and inhumanity were, went the story, through reason even these challenges would be met and civilization would evolve to ever-higher levels. Through science, we would expand the frontiers of our knowledge of the natural world and radically increase control over it. Through technology, scientific insight would be harnessed to ameliorate the range of burdens that plague human existence. Through empirical reasoning, we would achieve precision in our knowledge of society and certainty in our moral understanding. The work would be arduous but, in the end, truth in human understanding and justice in the political order could and would be universally realized.

It is impossible to deny the power of these utopian and promethean longings, and it is illegitimate to scorn them. Indeed, the accomplishments of Western modernity have been extraordinary. Advances in science, technology, democratization, and the free market have brought about better quality of life for many, greater individual freedom, increased diversity, and astonishing wealth. Agricultural movements concerned to alleviate hunger—such as the Green Revolution—and movements concerned with social justice and responding to human suffering—such as the Civil Rights movement, the Women's Rights movement, and, most recently, the multiple efforts aimed at securing human rights internationally—would not have been possible without the achievements of modernity. Furthermore, in the twentieth century, liberal (free-market, democratic) modernity outlasted, if not vanquished, two especially virulent strains of modernity—fascism and communism—enabling people in more of the world than ever before to enjoy the prospect of self-government, liberty, and prosperity. In the West, human societies have

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never been wealthier or less violent; and never has a newborn had a better chance of growing to a full and rich adulthood.

Yet as these longings have helped us solve some problems, they have cleared the way for others. We have discovered that, as contingent challenges have been solved, other challenges—more permanent to the human condition—confront us all the more palpably. In technology, for example, innovation in productive capacity designed for the benefit of people occurred concurrently with innovation in the means of unprecedented destruction. In economics, capitalism increased the health, comfort, and well-being of many, but it also generated novel forms of exploitation—of people and the environment—as well as new and dangerous structures of inequality. In medicine, medical researchers have cured diseases and maladies that were once thought of as inescapable, and they have also fabricated unimaginable new diseases and inadvertently encouraged antibiotic-resistant pathogens. Indeed, it is at least arguable that, throughout the world, no one needs to be hungry anymore, and yet hunger, malnutrition, and preventable diseases exist globally at epidemic proportions. Not least, we have harnessed undreamed-of energy resources and used them to master the earth to our purposes, but our carelessness with their effects on the environment threaten to savage our globe, our societies, and ourselves.

Yet, in our view, the greatest ambivalences have been manifested culturally in enduring contradictions that are deeply puzzling and profoundly significant. Our technical mastery over the material world sits alongside our deep ethical confusion and conflict over how it should be used. There is a level of wealth unimaginable in times past but no consistent values capable of limiting the way that wealth is created or of guiding its use. The achievement of political stability in various national contexts has brought with it a bureaucratic proceduralism that tends to render political purposes and ideals incoherent; with this has come for many individuals a growing alienation from public life, leaving the field to extremists whose interests are served by polarization. The creation of space for individual subjectivity is yet another triumph of modernity, but it has engendered a subjectivism that renders individual character protean and collective moral judgment difficult, if not impossible. And with the expansion of knowledge, we have learned how to analyze, question, and imagine everything, yet we seem to be left with the capacity to affirm little. In short, though the material and social conditions of life in the West have improved overall, the cultural resources needed to provide moral coherence and direction are thin at best and have little shared credibility.

It is not as though the moral goods embedded in the project of Western modernity have disappeared. Indeed, we all continue to be the beneficiaries of them many times over. But our age has come to be characterized by a thinning out of the animating sources that originally motivated the efforts to attain those goods and that have long provided the justifications to sustain them. And so, as the remnants of longstanding religious and philosophical metaphysics have been cleared away, and as the moral foundations of the modern project have lost authority, their various social and political agendas—especially those that imagined progressive social

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evolution, emancipation, universal knowledge, and understanding—have fewer and fewer resources to draw on. As these agendas have failed to deliver, they are met with increasing indifference, skepticism, and cynicism. Here again, the greatest achievements of modernity have occurred concurrently with the undermining of many of its own highest ideals.

Dissolution, fragmentation, politicization, and contradiction, then, are inescapable features of the culture of late Western modernity. To be sure, there are developments that have emerged in response to the waning of the generative religious and philosophical traditions, and they range widely. But many of these alternatives have turned out to be less promising than what they endeavored to replace. Many, we fear, are far worse—among them, ideologies of nostalgia, an assortment of fundamentalisms, economic and social libertarianism, identity politics, moral pragmatism, therapeutic individualism, consumerism, managerial rationality, and various political and aesthetic nihilisms.

The central challenge here, in our view, is none of the usual suspects—not social inequality, the decline of religion, the absence of freedom, or the power of partisan ideologies, either of the Right or the Left. Rather, the primary challenge to human flourishing is rooted most generally in *instrumental power* that is both symbolic and structural in nature. Instrumental power is means-end oriented power exercised either without explicit consideration for truthfulness or moral evaluation or in ways that renders truthfulness and moral evaluation impotent. It is not just a form of rationality but an intentionality, relationality, and action that valorizes expediency. It is manifested forcefully in various aspects of life today: in a ubiquitous market culture that has spilled out of the economic arena to permeate all spheres of life; in the primacy of technology and technological reason as the solution to human problems; in a politics dominated by the competing "will to power;" in a personal, relational ethos framed by secular and religious therapeutics and other technologies of the self; and in intellectual paradigms—some marked by crude reductionisms and others by corrosive skepticism.

So what are we to make of all of this? How do we make sense of our moment in history? How are the deep structures of our culture changing, and how do these changes play out in the public ordering of an increasingly complex and interdependent world? What changes are taking place in the frameworks of meaning by which people make sense of their lives and engage the world around them? And what are the implications of these dynamics for the ideals, institutions, and practices that constitute our global culture? Given the attenuation of that which animated them, are the social achievements and moral goods of modernity sustainable? These questions, we believe, have grave consequences for humankind, and they press urgently upon us.

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Research Foci:
The Question of Human Flourishing

The Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture exists to offer a different model—to address these basic questions and, in so doing, to take on many of the most pressing challenges of our time. It is undefensively normative, yet dialogical; non-partisan yet unafraid of offering tentative assessments of the wisdom of various paths of action (or inaction); responsible to the highest academic standards yet unseduced by the academy's complacent dogmatic faith that scholarship is only for other professors.

The common thread of concern within the Institute is the problem of the "good" or of "human flourishing." Why? Implicit assumptions of "the good" define the terms of meaning and moral order; tacit conceptions of "human flourishing" form the deep structures of culture. Given this, our core concern is to provide better accounts of human flourishing under the conditions of late Western modernity: how it has been and is being undermined, on the one hand, and how it has been sustained and enhanced, on the other.

Inquiry into the deep structures of contemporary culture requires an approach that transcends conventional disciplinary theories, methods, and practices, and an open space where such inquiry can go forward. Therefore, our intellectual labor is divided not along disciplinary lines or according to institutional spheres but around three areas in which questions of the good are most critical: the person, public life, and the constitutive elements of meaning itself. These areas of research form the heart of the Institute's intellectual agenda.

The Human Subject

As it stands, assumptions about the radical autonomy of all individuals are well established and virtually unquestioned. They pervade everything from constitutional law to consumerism, from popular therapy to art. The picture of the human person as utterly independent, self-creating, and unencumbered by social ties or moral obligations, dominates our discourses, mores, and imagination. It is also fundamentally flawed.

Yet new challenges are arising that portend further radical changes in our understanding of human life and the human person. Perhaps the most obvious of these challenges comes from novel developments in technology. In biotechnology, for example, scientists are moving genes across species boundaries and promising profound transformations in the human experience of frailty, aging, reproduction, and disease. Linked to the power of the market and a pervasive market culture, biotechnological change is raising troubling questions about the nature of life, the meaning of our bodies for our self-understanding, what is unique to the human person, and the social implications toward which these changes are pushing us. What is clear is that

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technological innovation in these areas has far outpaced our ability to limit, direct, or control them.

Many ethicists, scientists, and humanitarians assure us that these new developments will expand human freedom and dignity, not diminish them. Yet our inability to think cogently about the human person renders their confidence dubious. What is more, this new conquest of nature is not occurring in a cultural vacuum. For example, it is taking place in an intellectual environment that has already called into question the complexity of human beings, their inherent sociability and relationality, and the moral categories that define human existence. This increasingly "thin" view of the person is operationalized through a wide range of scholarly methodologies that condense human agency to "genetic wiring" (evolutionary biology and psychology), "rational choices" (economics, political science, and economic sociology), "class interests" (critical theory), "information processing" (cybernetics and game theory), and "nodes and ties" (social network analysis). Add to this the tendency in the humanities to "decenter the subject," denying any notions of the self that imply at least some stability and moral coherence.

While these methodologies claim to serve scholarly analysis and thus presume to be value-neutral, all are implicitly normative. All assume, imply, or propose a particular and, in our view, fundamentally diminished view of identity, meaning, and purpose and a reductive view of the person.

Against these wide-ranging reductionisms, we hold that the human being is *zoon politicon*—a creature of social, moral, and public meaning; autonomous, but also heteronomous; morally free, yet inherently tied to communities, traditions, and moral understandings that are constitutive of the human person. Moreover, the identities and social ties that shape one's sense of self are not simply the background for politics, but also the framework within which moral evaluations take place. Indeed, people's actions, utterances, and identity formation constitute not just a platform for economic or political exchange, but a process with which people create, maintain, and recreate significance in their lives, as individuals and as members of collectivities.

It is our task to understand the nature and consequences of the questions surrounding the meaning of human life and its moral purposes in the world of late modernity. Our objective is to understand how people make sense of their lives and what kind of meaning and purpose they impute to experience and life. What are the human consequences of market rationalities, scientific and technological innovation, or post-modern intellection whose natural, human or religious moorings are obscured or detached? In what ways are the moral depth and thickness of human experience transformed? How have understandings of what constitutes the good life changed?

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Community and the Ordering of Public Life

While we recognize that no public order or political culture can be perfect, we are conditionally but strongly committed to the historic ideals and basic institutions of liberal democracy. More than and prior to a political system, liberal democracy is a public culture defined by a set of relational and discursive practices and norms for public engagement that center around a cluster of ideals and propositions about liberty, justice, and the common good. We hold these commitments because in the historically contingent and fluid circumstances of the modern epoch, human flourishing manifests itself publicly (and not just politically) in the ideals of liberal democracy rightly understood. Far from perfect and easily corrupted, democracy is, nevertheless, the public manifestation of the common good and the political form of the humane ideal.

Perhaps the most significant challenge surrounding liberal democracy in our day concerns its longstanding and paradoxical relation to religion. Religion continues to be both a source of some of the greatest misery in the world and a source of extraordinary good. It is clearly at the root of so much of the political terror and social disorder we see around the globe but it also remains the deepest wellspring of generosity, compassion and cultural vitality. This paradox is not well understood.

The failure to grasp this paradox is reflected in the dominant narrative about the origins of liberal democracy in the modern period. The dominant account is bowdlerized—its distortions are rationalist, secularist, and hyper-individualist. It is essential to recognize that these distortions are neither present in its Western and American origins nor intrinsic to the project. Thus, while the dominant narrative is correct in seeing liberalism as, in part, a response to inter-religious conflict, it is mistaken when it views liberalism as a triumph of secular rationality. As a growing scholarly literature documents, liberal democracy in the West owes every bit as much to Christianity as it does to neo-classical republicanism and a secularized version of Lockean individualism.

This narrative urgently requires critique and revision. It is essential to get this account right historically, sociologically, and theoretically because our assumptions about the past will guide our approach to the future. Needless to say, this paradox presses upon us with even greater urgency under the conditions of globalization, not least because the perception of an imperial secularism is driving much of the discontent and even terrorism of our time. It is crucial to work through this puzzle, for it is the only way to better realize the ideals of liberal democracy not only in the West but in emerging democracies around the world.

Another central problem is the hollowing out of the practices and ideals of democracy. There are many places in which this is occurring today. Consider, for example, the consequences of the increasing importance of power politics within democratic institutions. When the shared moral bonds that make collective life possible are weakened, when the traditions that make these bonds sacred and inviolable are rendered implausible to vast numbers, there is little left to order collective life but the exercise of power. This has broad ranging implications. One very obvious

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implication is seen in the pervasive discourse of negation that is in evidence across the political spectrum. At risk are the concepts of common citizenship, loyal opposition, civic trust, and democratic difference and diversity.

At root, then, are fundamental questions about the terms by which public life in our moment will be ordered and sustained. What does a just and humane ordering of public life look like at a time when few can agree on the meaning of justice and benevolence? How have our ideas of "the good society" and its constitutive political ideals of freedom, tolerance, civility, equity, and fair play changed over time? How can different understandings of what constitutes the good be reconciled?

These questions are critically important within the American context where the first principles of our collective life are contested. Yet each of these questions plays out with arguably even greater urgency today in world affairs. Globalization can be a force for democratization and prosperity, but it tends to corrode traditional norms wherever it finds them and replace them with norms of market efficiency, individualism, and experimentation. As such, people in many parts of the world resist it, sometimes to the point of great violence. How are we to think about and address the relations between religion, democracy, and globalization? Can we have a world that is simultaneously liberal, democratic, respectful of cultural and religious difference, and prosperous? How and on what terms might this be possible?

Language and Meaning

Language is the fundamental institution and constitutive medium of any social order. Through language, the world and our experience in it is named, classified, and evaluated and is thus made comprehensible and meaningful. Through language sociality is made possible, for it is the medium by which we relate to each other, form bonds with one another, and engage the world together. Through language, it is possible to imagine alternatives to the present world, to imagine a future. Language, then, is constitutive of lives, communities, and civilizations.

One of the hallmarks of our time—a feature that may be unprecedented in human history—is a widespread skepticism about meaning itself. It is not that such skepticism cannot be found in the past. The sophists of ancient culture, for example, had such a view. What may make it unprecedented is its totalizing reach, including its penetration into the consciousness of large numbers of ordinary people.

This skepticism is most highly cultivated in the contemporary academy. In philosophy it denies any correspondence between language and reality. In literature it rejects the possibility of meaningfully interpreting a text. In the legal arena, it challenges the legitimacy of law itself. In history it resists common meanings of the past, and in science it questions the nature of basic scientific facts and the methods for establishing those facts. Skepticism of this sort goes further to identify the aspirations, methods, and contents of the liberal arts as a proxy for power:

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inherently elitist and, in a veiled form, politically oppressive. For many, the normalization of suspicion has led further to a neglect of metaphysical questions and, thus, to the conclusion that the best we can do is to understand the world in a spirit of playful interpretation.

Let us be clear, it is not that skepticism in our day is unwarranted. Indeed, it is a necessary element in questioning the current systems of the social order. The problem is that it tends to be all-encompassing, eliminating the possibility of any sustained affirmation.

The problem of language and meaning also manifests itself in popular culture. Contemporary communications technologies, by their very nature, fragment information and knowledge and give priority to image over substance. Contemporary market society instrumentalizes language; it not only commodifies objects but also symbols, experiences, relationships, and people by reducing all to changing utility value. The net effect is a dissolution of the meanings of words rendering them unreliable and manipulable.

To understand the social origins of language can have constructive effects, for it can reveal the ways in which institutions silence and oppress individuals. But this is fundamentally different from emptying meaning from language, which leaves only a nihilism in which nothing is significant, and nothing can be taken seriously, where coherence is unimaginable and consistent moral agency impossible. The malleability of language and meaning can be politically destabilizing. When the basic terms of meaning and moral order are contested in public and then politicized, cultural conflict can emerge that is capable of undermining the foundations of the social order.

We embrace a critical realism that recognizes that language is fundamental to human nature and therefore of fundamental significance to individual and social life. Yet our critical realism also holds together in tension both an epistemological skepticism about language as well as the possibility of sustained affirmation and belief. It matters a great deal that we understand the changing nature and meaning of words, language, and communication under the conditions of late Western modernity. How far does contemporary skepticism permeate the culture and what are the implications for the formation of identity? For the education of children? For the power of the state? For the nurturing of trust? To the extent that the market shapes our language and provides collective metaphors, is dissent even possible? If it is, how are alternatives to the present world order to be imagined and articulated?

In Sum

The deep structures of culture are related to implicit assumptions of "the good;" to tacit conceptions of "human flourishing." A society's conceptions of the good, and how far that

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society is aware of those conceptions, profoundly influence its beliefs and practices concerning community, individuals, and language. Normativity, then, is not one element of culture but rather characterizes it through and through, in no small part because humans are themselves normative through and through—they are always involved in evaluative processes about what is good, sacred, desirable, or admirable and what is bad, profane, undesirable, or contemptible.

The problem we face is that the symbols, ideals, practices, institutions, and objects of our late modern world mask their moral presuppositions. The same is true for the dominant accounts of the world: modern secular intellection presumes a stance of neutrality that hides the moral concerns and positions that drive it. The social world is a normative reality and not just an agglomeration of value-free objects and facts. Our views of the world need to be unpacked in ways that make visible the invisible moral claims being made about the good, bringing into relief the moral concerns concealed within late modernity in its various manifestations, and exposing the hidden normativity of things that are uncontested and taken for granted.

What does it mean to be a good person and to lead a good life? What constitutes a good society and what counts as the highest good(s) to which communities can aspire? And what is the nature of the good itself? These are among the most important and enduring questions we face as human beings. The implicit answers the late modern world provides are ambivalent, to say the least, and they are all undergoing challenge and transformation in ways and directions that are deeply troubling. What is more, these questions are becoming increasingly difficult to pose let alone answer well as the resources historically drawn upon to do just that are themselves being questioned, contested, or undergoing dissolution. Why is this important? To pose these questions directly; to understand the complex historical, sociological, and cultural dynamics; and, in the process, to make explicit what is hidden, masked, or simply implicit is the prerequisite to imagining and enacting humane alternatives to the present world order.

How We Work

In theory, our task is simple and straightforward. Our guiding objective is to put genuine conversation about the nature of the "good," the "good life," and the "good society" at the center of scholarly and public discussion. Too few scholars ask questions of this scope and ambition; and public life, now more than ever before, needs such questions asked. We do not presume to know the answers to the questions of the good, but we do propose that human flourishing depends upon our directly addressing the inescapable normativity of human life and that which undermines it.

In practice, our task is ambitious, to say the least. It is a task that is beset from the outset by inherent challenges. One challenge, of course, is that much of the language of normativity has

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been politicized as well as used unevenly and hypocritically in public discourse. Politicizing questions of the good only stifles serious engagement with the problems we face.

Yet perhaps the principal challenge to our task is due to the fact that the world of scholarship itself suffers from the very quandaries that characterize so much of the rest of late modern culture.

It is true, of course, that there is more knowledge than ever before. More finely crafted disciplinary tools and more conceptually sophisticated and methodologically self-aware modes of study have produced for us a far richer and more subtle sense of the minutiae of the past and present in human affairs than we have ever had before. Yet the very virtues of such specialization have become vices. Not only have fields become excessively narrow and self-conscious, so that the work is done only for other specialists, but academia has come to value the sheer difficulty of intellectual work more highly than it does the insight such work can provide.

Overlaying these tendencies is a pervasive skepticism toward the very possibility of truths or commitments capable of establishing humane ideals. And so it is that the dominant strain in the social sciences is a scholasticism of scientistic reductionism, and an equally reductive obsession with power is found in the humanities. In both academic contexts, there is an incapacity to bring the vast array of academic techniques and enormous intellectual energy to bear on questions that really matter. In our view, these trends have gone too far. What we require is an alternative model in which the assumptions that underwrite our larger project, the theories that direct our work, the methods that shape our ways of proceeding, and the institutional arrangements that nurture this effort are reworked with the aim of responding constructively to the challenges of our time.

The scholars of the Institute are diverse in terms of areas of research and methodologies. Even so, the research questions we pursue and the manner by which we engage intellectual life are informed by a shared assessment of the significance of the cultural transformations taking place today; by a common concern for the cultivation of human flourishing in opposition to the reductive theories, logics, rhetorical strategies, and processes now at work in the world; and by a commitment to intellectual work that resists the fragmentation, isolation, and individual hubris of current academic models. Beyond these basic affirmations, several other distinctive features characterize the Institute's work:

- *Interdisciplinarity*. The Institute's work is collective and interdisciplinary because no discipline or individual is adequate to the task of understanding the complex changes taking place today. Institute scholars work together in an intellectual community to arrive at richer and better understandings of our world. We are involved in sustained conversations over time, work together on major research projects, read and comment on each other's writing, and engage with other scholars who take up shared questions.

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- *Intrinsic Normativity*. Against the view that reason and, by extension, intellectual labor is a sphere of human activity autonomous from moral commitment, it is our view that all of culture is inherently normative and that this normativity extends to the work of intellectuals. As we have said, most scholars today, either consciously or unconsciously, keep the normative character of their work implicit, hidden, or underdeveloped. By contrast, we acknowledge the normative assumptions at the core of our work and seek to make them explicit in all that we do. In sum, the Institute's overall research focus, the theories that direct our choice of research questions, the methods that shape our way of proceeding, the institutional arrangements that foster the work—all emerge out of thoughtful consideration of the affirmations with which we take on this work.

- *Genealogy*. Because we view all intellectual work as intrinsically normative, "genealogy" is a critical part of what we do at the Institute. But rather than focus on uncovering latent power structures, as genealogy is typically taken to mean, genealogy here is constructive, oriented toward uncovering the moral goods unstated but present in social reality as well as the normative assumptions that are implicit in the work of other scholars.

- *A Method of Retrieval and Resistance*. With these shared affirmations guiding our work, the Institute seeks to understand and engage cultural change through the dialectic of retrieval and resistance, affirmation and critique. We attempt to retrieve resources and insights not only from existing scholarship but from overlooked sources, from sources that have been ignored, and from works with which we strongly disagree but see as containing elements that should be affirmed. We also seek to engage the most significant research on culture and cultural change in ways that challenge prevailing conventions and accounts. In this way we endeavor to develop new paradigms of thought particularly where scholarly accounts are thin, reductive, incomplete, or simply mistaken; and new terms of debate, particularly in areas where scholarly conversations have reached an impasse.

- *A Comparative-Historical Approach*. In terms of actual method, comparative and historical approaches to culture are indispensable to our work, for the present cannot be understood with blinders to the past and the local cannot be understood apart from the global. Neither the past nor the other can be relegated to the sidelines, for the shape of a culture is determined in large part by what it has been and by what it currently is not.

- *The Centrality of Narrative*. The scholars of the Institute are centrally concerned with narrative. The stories we tell and the accounts we give are central features of

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the deep structure of culture for the simple reason that they reflect something constitutive of the human. Narrative is fundamental to human meaning, identity, and purpose, whether individual or collective.

- *Moral Urgency*. We believe that scholarship in the social sciences and humanities bears intrinsic obligations, but in our own time, the burden is especially great. The kinds of changes taking place in our world today have brought about unprecedented challenges for which the work that scholars do matters greatly. Much is at stake. In this we are neither utopian nor apocalyptic in our disposition. And while we are not sanguine, we are hopeful, believing that serious and humane scholarly engagement with the world can be profoundly salutary.

- *Political Impartiality*. Having said this, it is essential to emphasize that while our work may have social and political implications, as an Institute we do not do public policy, take partisan positions, or seek to influence government in one direction or another. There are multiple reasons why we take this position. For one, there are myriad research centers and think tanks oriented this way already. We also believe that the fundamental predicament we face is cultural, not political. Not least, we believe that the politicization of knowledge has led and continues to lead to a distortion of the highest aims and best practices in the intellectual life. Rather, we are interested in asking fundamental questions about the nature of our moment—questions that are important not just because of their timeliness but also because of their enduring connection to the human condition.

In all of this, the Institute is committed to dialogical pluralism, both among ourselves and in our engagement with the broader world of ideas. The Institute's own work is generously informed by our members' various disciplinary groundings, as well as our diverse and particular religious confessions and philosophical traditions—including Jewish, secularist, Christian, and Muslim. We believe that these disciplinary perspectives and particularistic convictions are not debilitating but empowering—they do not burden us with blinders to reality, but provide lenses through which salient aspects of reality are made more vivid. For this reason, the Institute is a place where issues of profound methodological and philosophical import are made topics of explicit discussion and debate. Our differences—methodological and philosophical—thereby become productive of deeper, richer, and better grounded scholarship. Only through a self-conscious dialogical pluralism will it be possible to nurture and develop the assumptions, theories, methods, and the institutional arrangements that comprise an intellectual alternative capable of responding constructively to the challenges of our time.

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Toward a New Paradigm

The world we live in today is changing rapidly and becoming, it seems, ever more complex. Yet fundamental questions about meaning and moral order—about the good itself—are at play in these changes. Much is at stake in how we address those questions.

Let us be clear at this point: a nostalgia for the past is as untenable as a utopianism for the future. Just as it is impossible to recover the past, so it is impossible to achieve anything close to perfection in the future. Thus, for all the good that has been and can be achieved, there are always unintended consequences that range, often enough, from the harmless to the disastrous, from the stupid to the destructive. For all the triumphs of human aspiration, we recognize an inherent element of tragedy—tragedy finally rooted in the human condition itself.

The only direction we can go, then, is forward. Drawing wisdom from living traditions and the experience of the past, yet hope from the future, it is nevertheless essential to proceed with our eyes open to the tragic possibilities that inhere within the best-intended action. Requisite to this task is a clear understanding of our situation.

No other scholarly center exists in the world for understanding the underlying movements of contemporary culture and its consequences for individuals and social life. Though in its infancy, the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture is already modeling a new kind of intellectual engagement that is leading to new understandings and interpretations of our times. The Institute is working to generate leading scholarship that offers an alternative to the reigning intellectual paradigms and contributes to the formulation of genuine and humane alternatives to the dominant cultural currents of our present moment. In doing so, the Institute seeks to provide resources to all who seek to understand better and engage more effectively the transforming world around us—a world that is as promising as it is perilous.

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