HOPE AND CRISIS LAB

Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture · University of Virginia

CONCEPT NOTE

The Hope and Crisis Lab is an inventive research platform dedicated to understanding the role of hope as a distinctive and profound cultural and temporal mode of envisioning, inhabiting, and acting toward the future in social life and cultural imagination, and in sustaining democracy and social cohesion in contemporary life. It is designed to combine advanced social theory with rigorous empirical investigation.

Hope is not merely a private emotion; it is a structural and performative cultural force that enables people to act individually and collectively, envision a brighter future, and sustain democratic institutions. As a nation that historically articulated the American Dream as a high-performing ideal—an aspirational horizon structuring civic engagement and belief in a better life—America has implicitly promulgated hope as a vital element of human thriving and liberal democracy. Given the present challenges of despair, polarization, and cultural conflict, it has never been more urgent to understand the complexities and nuances of hope as a catalyst of human flourishing.

The Lab's agenda is built upon a bold theoretical claim: hope, in its positive, secular form, is a specifically modern mode of enchantment and signification. This framework draws on Dmitry Kurakin's research on enchantment, cathexis, mystery, and temporality, and on Isaac Ariail Reed's work on power and authority, as well as on new processes of meaning-making in modernity. It both supports and advances James Davison Hunter's insight concerning the central role of hope as a performative engine of democracy and solidarity.

This modern form of hope arises when two fundamental modern conditions clash: uncertainty and rationality. Modernity is marked by a paradoxical intensification of uncertainty: the expansion of knowledge fails to translate into a proportional capacity to act upon the world or to control its risks. Instead, a greater awareness of threats often deepens anxiety, as social actors become increasingly conscious of dangers they cannot effectively manage. At the same time, modern rationality operates as a normative narrative of universal causality, producing a heightened intolerance toward unpredictability, opacity, and indeterminacy. Together, uncertainty and rationality tend to transform the mundane lack of knowledge into sacred cultural forms, such as mystery and hope.

Hope, in this sense, is a specifically modern transcendental response to an immanent lack of predictability. We hope precisely because we do not know what will happen. Like mystery, hope elevates uncertainty rather than eliminating it. As a temporal cultural structure, hope is constituted by dissonance experienced as tension—as if always about to resolve into consonance, yet without ever fully doing so. It thus represents a distinctly modern way of confronting uncertainty, overcoming disenchantment and nihilism through forms of enchantment embedded in the very structure of contemporary social life.

Contemporary public life is increasingly shaped by implicit cultural meanings that are rarely articulated directly; they become visible most clearly when violated, threatened, or publicly contested. Scandals, conflicts, and public clashes—including culture wars—possess both epistemic and performative power: they reveal underlying cultural formations, such as collective hopes, and sometimes they reshape social and political realities. As a paradigmatic example, the Watergate scandal not only produced institutional reform, but it also revealed and revitalized deeply held hopes regarding democracy, accountability, and repair. The Lab mobilizes this epistemic potential to uncover the cultural hopes that sustain democratic life and to analyze how their breakdown or reconfiguration conditions future possibilities for solidarity.

Along with robust, evidence-based knowledge of the cultural foundations of civic life, the Lab's work promises to generate a modern social theory of hope. By connecting sophisticated cultural insight with practical relevance, it positions hope as a tangible, actionable resource for leaders in business, government, and civil society to pursue democratic renewal. The Lab actively seeks collaboration with scholars across disciplines who study hope, imagination, and the anticipation of the future.

Founding Director Dmitry Kurakin, and Associate Director Isaac Ariail Reed lead the Hope and Crisis Lab in close intellectual collaboration with the Lab's members and guests. The Lab advances IASC's Third Founding project and is housed within the Institute's Theory, Culture, and Late Modernity Colloquy.