

Culture

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INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDIES IN CULTURE

HOW WE WORK

A vision for how we do what we do



ON CULTURE

SINCE 1999, THE INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDIES IN CULTURE HAS published a twice-yearly newsletter called *INSight*. My goal as editor has always been to report on the various activities of the Institute as well as to provide something of the intellectual substance of our work. News, as such, has been combined with short essays, book reviews and excerpts, interviews with fellows about their research projects, and the like. A suggestion that it might be time to give *INSight* a new look led me to wonder if this might also be the moment to change more than the design.

The Institute is going through a transition. As we have grown, we have felt the need to define more carefully and completely our intellectual program. The first step in this process is now complete. Over the past two years, the faculty of the Institute has written a “vision statement” to express our understanding of culture, cultural analysis, and the times we live in. An excerpt from that statement appears in this issue, and the full statement will be published soon on our website. The next step will be to draft a report that specifies more concretely how this intellectual program will be carried out in our educational and research initiatives. It will be a work in progress, refined in the give and take of intellectual exchange and development.

This new publication will serve as a helpful site for such an exchange, for new ideas, and for dialogue. Moreover, it will be public and open to all who take an interest in culture and cultural change. *Culture* is an experiment and will, no doubt, evolve. In the meantime, I hope to create a lively forum for exploring the complex of meanings that informs and shapes our social world.

—JED



This first issue of *Culture* is dedicated to the memory of Clifford Geertz, who died on October 30, 2006.

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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 individual and social consequences.



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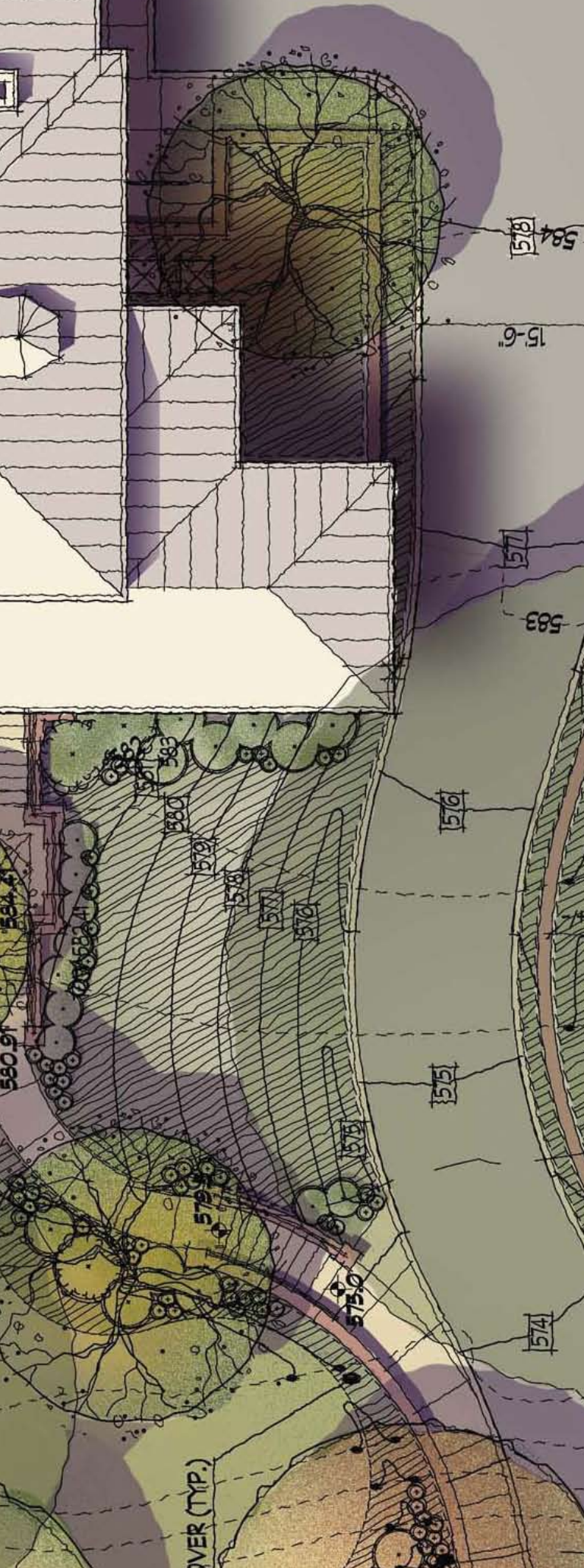
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HOW WE WORK

A vision for how we do what we do

Over the past two years at the Institute, we have been engaged in an ongoing conversation about the locus and purpose of our work and the manner in which we do it. Specifically, we have sought to understand more clearly how tacit assumptions of the good are embedded within the cultural frameworks of social life and what that implies for the sort of questions we ask and the methods we use to address them. The final product of our deliberations is a lengthy vision statement; what follows is the final section, which broadly tackles the problem of method but also suggests some of the theoretical assumptions that guide our research strategies.

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, of course, 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 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 scientific 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

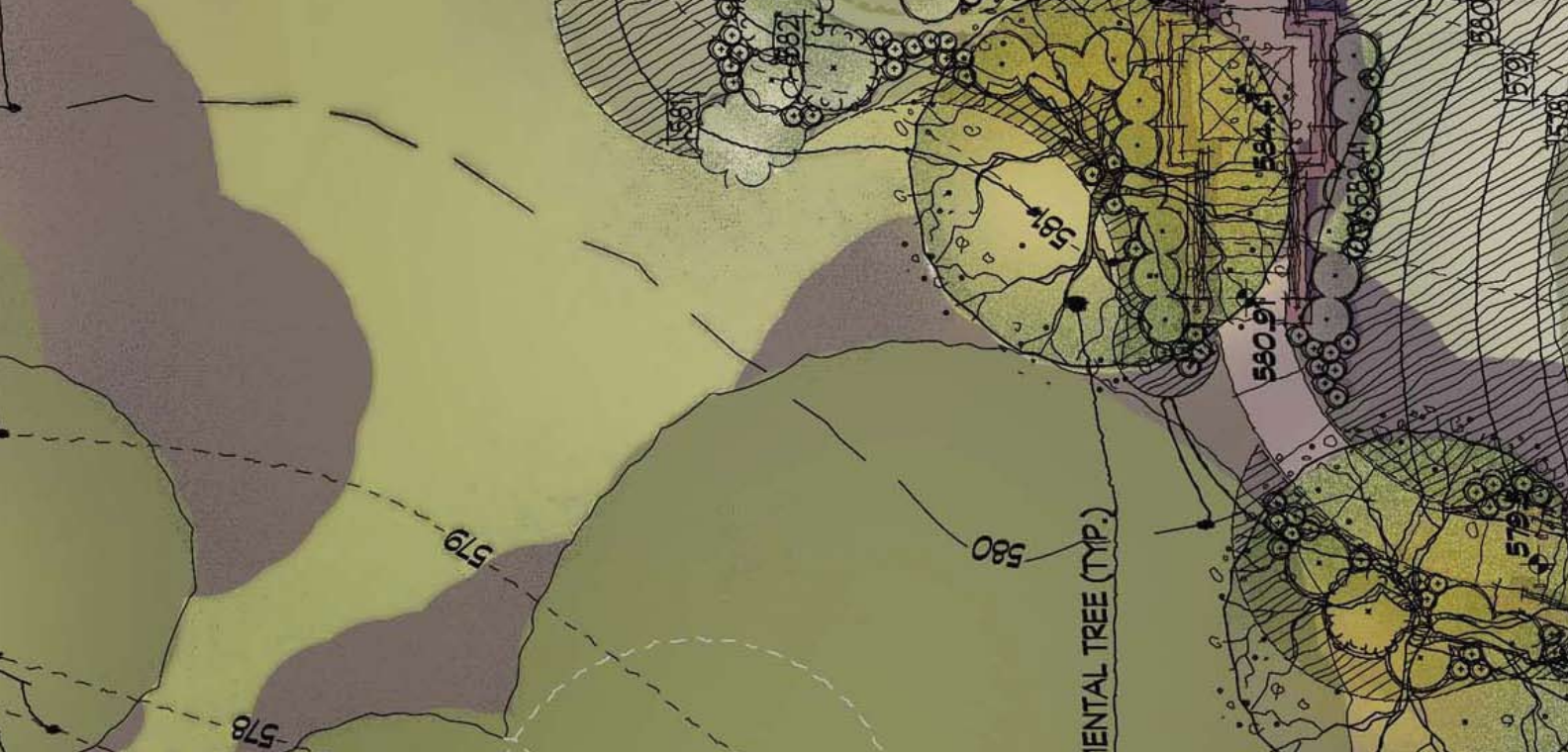
this effort are reworked with the aim of responding constructively to the challenges of our time.

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.

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.

■ **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.

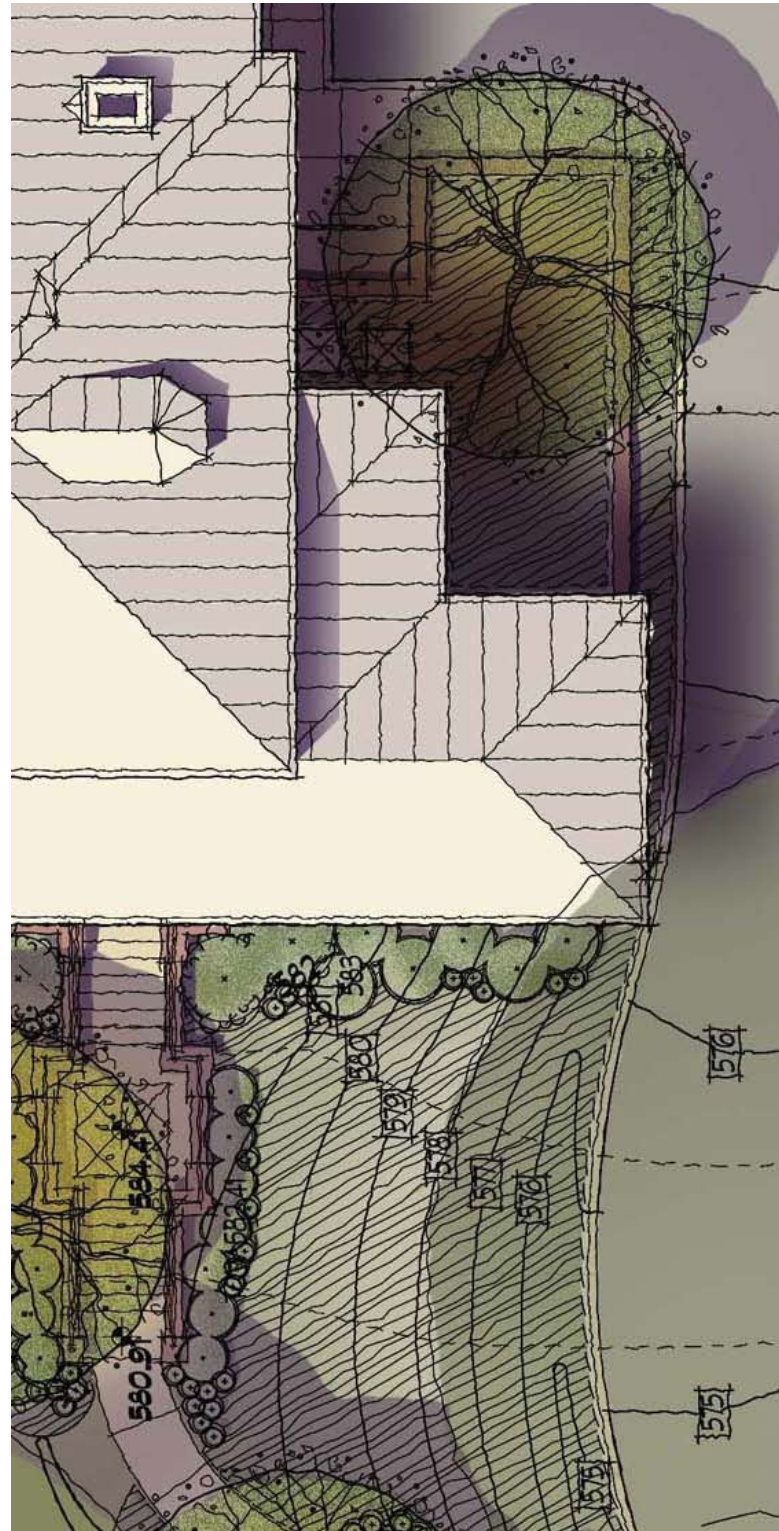
■ **The Centrality of Narrative.** The scholars of the Institute are centrally concerned with narrative. The stories we tell and the accounts we give are central features of the deep structure of culture for the simple reason that they reflect something constitutive of the human. Narrative is fundamental 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.

...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.

■ **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. ■





The Priority of Culture over Politics

Why culture is the key to political renewal

*This essay is taken from James Davison Hunter's responding remarks to Alan Wolfe in their book *Is There a Culture War? A Dialogue on Values and American Public Life* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2006, pp. 94–5).*

WE LIVE IN A TIME in which everything seems to be either monetized or politicized. In the case of political scandal, it is both. (There is money to be made in political *schadenfreude*!) Politicization means that politics defines the primary frame of

action and significance for social life or parts of it. With the ever-proliferating special interest organizations, lobbying and litigation is, of course, their daily fare. But tendencies toward politicization reach far beyond this realm into nearly every part in civil society as well. In journalism (even on education, science, art, family, and so on), reporting is all too often reduced to the narrative of winners and losers in the struggle for power. Professional organizations lend their legitimacy to one side of the controversy or the other, even when there

is no clear and intrinsic relationship between expertise and advocacy. In religious organizations ideology is often elevated over theology to such an extent that the public witness of faith in our day has become a partisan and political witness. This is no less true in academia, where scholarly contribution is often classified politically before it is engaged intellectually. Throughout civil society, partisan, political and legal objectives define the identity of groups and the priorities of their public agenda. In a culture that has been so thoroughly politicized, it is hardly surprising that a perspective oriented to “the politics of culture” is given precedence over one oriented to “the culture of politics.”

I have a different take on this. In my view politicization may be the most visible aspect of the present normative conflict, but that also makes it the most ephemeral and, therefore, the least important part of the story. The reason is that culture nearly always leads politics, not the other way around. Thus, for example, a sea change in the acceptance of homosexuality and gay rights by educated professionals and the resymbolization of gay life in art and media long preceded its acceptance in law and public policy. Laws protecting the rights of women followed its popular acceptance, especially within the upper middle classes. And so on. Culture frames concerns, legitimates claims, and articulates arguments that are then ratified by law and policy. As I say, culture tends to lead and politics tends to follow.

Politics will and must change almost on a daily basis. The movements of culture, however, are far slower. Attention given to the observable and the behavior aspects of conflict tends to make one inattentive to what is taking place in the deep structures of cultural change in our moment in history, to the ways it relates to epochal shifts we speak of when we talk of late modernity. Not least among these are the subtle but profound shifts in the nature and dynamics of authority.

If this is true, then, America’s move to the right politically and to the left culturally is highly portentous. It means that the religious Right is wrong to be confident and that progressives are wrong to fret; cultural conservatives will likely lose this struggle for power. They have sought political solutions as a way of addressing issues that are deeply cultural—and not just issues, but taste, manners, morality and authority. Cultural conservatives bet on politics as the means to respond to the changes in the world and that politics can only be a losing strategy. What political solution is there to the absence of decency?

To the spread of vulgarity? To the need of civility and the want of compassion? The answer, of course, is none—there are no political solutions to these concerns and the headlong pursuit of them by conservatives will lead, inevitably, to failure.

Politics is neither the best nor exclusive form of public activity. Yet we give far too much credence to it. Our expectations for what it can accomplish are too high. The Christian

Politics can provide a platform for dissent, rituals of consensus, and the procedures for pursuing social justice and public order. But to ask politics to do anything more than solve administrative problems, much less “heal” a divided social order, may be asking too much.

Right is wrong on this no less than the secular left. But so are all who look to politics for solutions. In “Why the Culture War is the Wrong War,” for example, E. J. Dionne wrote that “the culture war exploits our discontents. The task of politics is to heal them.”¹ Even at its best, politics represents a simplification and vulgarization of sensibilities found in culture. Politics has its place and that place is critically important, of course. Politics can provide a platform for dissent, rituals of consensus, and the procedures for pursuing social justice and public order. But to ask politics to do anything more than solve administrative problems, much less “heal” a divided social order, may be asking too much. Though it is dominant in our society, it is of secondary importance. Liberal democracy is not just a political structure; it is first and foremost a political culture: a myth, a set of ideals, a discourse, and the habits of mind, belief and relationship that sustain it. Until liberal democracy is renewed at the level of its cultural substructure, politics, and political expedience, may only further denigrate public life, even if it proceeds in the name of lofty and admirable political ideals. ■

¹ E. J. Dionne, Jr. “Why the Culture War Is the Wrong War,” *The Atlantic Monthly* (January/February 2006) 135.

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The Disappearance of Shop Class

An interview with IASC Fellow Matthew Crawford



Last fall, IASC Postdoctoral Fellow Matthew Crawford's article "Shop Class as Soulcraft," published in The New Atlantis, was hailed by New York Times journalist David Brooks as one of the three best essays of the year. We talked to him about the essay, its implications, and what his current writing plans include.

Could you tell us about your article?

The article is on the theme of manual competence. I take the disappearance of shop class from schools as a jumping-off point for a wider reflection on material culture and our changing relationship to our own stuff. The experience of making things and fixing things gives one a feeling of agency that buying stuff just doesn't. I think this is connected to certain deep human needs, both cognitive and social, so I try to understand what is at stake in the decline in tool use. We've become more passive and more dependent, and this has broader implications, including political ones—I think we're more amenable to being administered in various ways.

How did you begin thinking about this?

The article began as an attempt to understand my own struggles with fixing modern cars versus the cars from the 1960s that I worked on growing up. A couple of years ago, I was trying to replace the timing belt on my Camry. The job took me a week, but in the end the Camry felt like it was mine. I'd like to understand the psychology of spiritness that leads us to take things in hand for ourselves, whether to fix them or make them.

Who were your conversation partners for this project?

My conversations around the Institute have been invaluable. In particular, [Dissertation Fellow] David Franz has been a source of crucial insights about the world of work and its human dimension. What I get from both him and Joe Davis is insight into the subtle moral prescriptions that get conveyed in commercial culture. Joe looks at the view of personhood that is urged upon us in advertisements for psychiatric drugs—a particular image of what it means to be a good person. David does something similar in explicating the world of management and



career advice. These guys are exemplary of what I would like to do: they're trying to understand certain features of our culture that are massively self-evident, yet dimly grasped—the stuff that confronts you on television or in the airport bookstore.

What does this project suggest about our cultural moment?

I think the de-valuing of manual work is tied to a certain reductive view of human subjectivity. The computational theory of mind would have us believe that thinking consists of executing formal logical operations on abstract symbols, like a computer following an algorithm. But the phenomenologists give us good reason to think that cognition is inherently embodied and pragmatic. In actual experience, you don't come to know a hammer by representing it in your mind with symbols, but by using it with your hand.

This insight forces us to re-evaluate the so-called “problem of technology,” which is usually framed in terms of an obsession with control, as though the problem were the objectification of everything by a subject who is intoxicated with power, leading to a triumph of “instrumental rationality.” But what if our subjectivity is inherently instrumental, and using the hammer is really fundamental to the way human beings inhabit the world? In that case the problem of technology is almost the opposite of how it is usually posed: the problem is that we have come to live in a world that does not elicit our instrumentality—the kind that is original to us. There is less occasion for its exercise because of a certain pre-determination of things.

Could you give us an example of what you mean by the “pre-determination of things”?

One of the hottest things at the shopping mall right now is a store called Build-a-Bear, where children make their own teddy bears. I went in one of these stores, and it turns out that what the kid actually does is select the features and clothes for the bear on a computer screen, and then the bear is made for him. Some entity has leaped in ahead of him and taken care of things already. The effect is to displace the kind of embodied agency that is natural to humans.

The activity of giving form to things seems to be increasingly the business of a collectivized mind. It always feels like this forming has already taken place, somewhere else. In picking out your bear's features, you choose among the predetermined alternatives. Of course, choosing is a kind of freedom, but freedom is not the same as agency. The market ideal of choice by an autonomous self seems to act as a kind



© iStockphoto/Dan Wilton

of narcotic that makes the displacing of embodied agency go smoothly.

We understand you plan to turn this article into a book. Can you offer any hints as to how you see the book unfolding?

It will have some history of the useful arts and of philosophic reflection on them as a source and mode of knowledge. Perhaps most ambitiously, it will attempt a novel form of philosophic writing (at least, I am not aware of any examples). You might call it a phenomenology of craft knowledge. I will try to explicate the logic, I guess you might say, of perception, apprehension, and intention as I grapple with various problems that present themselves in two very different kinds of work: fabricating things from scratch and fixing machines built by someone else. I think it's fitting that this will be a popular book, rather than a scholarly one, because the task phenomenology sets itself is to account for common experience and answer to that common experience rather than to the canons of some specialized discourse or another. ■

“Shop Class as Soulcraft” can be found online at <www.thenewatlantis.com/archive/13/crawford.htm>.

The **God** of a Second Chance

Director Paul Wagner chats about IASC's first film project



For several years, the Institute has partnered with local Academy Award-winning director Paul Wagner to create a film that examines the role of religion in the inner city. The result, The God of a Second Chance, premiered in October 2006 at the Virginia Film Festival. We recently talked with Paul about the film.

Congratulations on your recent film premiere, The God of a Second Chance! How did the screening go?

We were thrilled. The audience reception was enthusiastic, and it was wonderful to have a post-film discussion, led by Josh Yates from IASC, with Hal and Janice Gordon. The Gordons lead C.A.G., a rehab program sponsored by a Catholic church and one of the faith-based programs featured in the film.

What is the basic story of the film?

The God of a Second Chance follows two men who live in the inner city community of Southeast, the poorest neighborhood in Washington, DC. Sleepy is a teenager, the unwed father of a little boy, and a member of The House, a Christian after-school program. He has a new girlfriend, Jennifer, and new struggles with issues of fidelity and sexuality. Richie is a 40-year-old crack addict and a member of C.A.G. We follow Richie in his efforts to keep himself and his addicted wife Cassey free of drugs.

Where did the inspiration for this film come from?

I've been interested in the role of religion in the African American community for some time. Traditionally, religion is a powerful force in the Southeast community. As we point out in the film, Southeast has 65,000 people, one restaurant, and hundreds of churches.



What do you find the most powerful about this project?

I think the most exciting quality of the film is that it presents people who are routinely stereotyped in the public imagination and allows us to see them as fully realized, complex human beings. I especially appreciated IASC Senior Fellow Nick Wolterstorff's comment after seeing the film: he said that he liked it because he is a philosopher and all the people in the film seemed to him to be philosophers. The people we stereotype as "problems" in our society turn out to have something very powerful to say about humanity.

Can you describe the process of making the film?

Honestly, it took longer and was more difficult than I would have liked. A lot of people ask about the issue of being a white filmmaker in a black neighborhood, and I did consciously bring in African American collaborators because I thought that would enhance the "comfort level" of the people in the film. But frankly, if someone agrees to talk to you about their religious beliefs, they are opening up their entire life to you, whether you're white or black or a stranger with a camera.

How has the film changed shape over the years?

A film like this is an exploration: you enter a world seeking to discover something that is true and original, but with little understanding of exactly what it will look like. Even after completing the filming, there was a long period of exploration in the editing. It was like creating a sculpture from a block of stone—cutting away massive amounts of footage to reveal the shape of the story within.

Where is the film now, and what is the plan for moving the film forward?

I'm very excited because we hope to expand the 83-minute film into a 3-hour series, making it perfect for broadcast on television. ■



Film stills from *The God of a Second Chance*

Book Reviews

The Averaged American: Surveys, Citizens, and the Making of a Mass Public

Sarah E. Igo

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007. 408pp.

This fascinating book explores the development and halting public acceptance of social scientific efforts to define the “average” American citizen. Sarah E. Igo tells the story of three influential experiments in social surveying: Robert and Helen Lynd’s *Middletown* (1929), George Gallup and Elmo Roper’s mid-century commercial research and public opinion polling, and Alfred Kinsey’s controversial reports on American sexual practices (1948 and 1953).

The obsession with the “average” citizen that Igo discerns in these studies and in the public response to them represents a striking departure from the focus on social deviance that characterized nineteenth-century social science. Igo argues that surveyors, policy makers, and the broader public welcomed the new emphasis on normalcy partly because they were worried about how to preserve morality and community in a rapidly fragmenting industrial society.

Like the social surveyors she studies, Igo understands that numbers on a page can exert enormous power in defining reality. The new findings about typical opinions and behavior gave scholars the authority to define what it meant to be an American. Igo describes social surveyors as “covert nation-builders” who (through mountains of aggregate data) created a mass American public and



sought to build a sense of nationalism in the midst of bewildering diversity and social change.

While social scientists posed as disinterested seekers after truth, most (including the main characters in this book) aggressively pursued a particular vision of the good through their research. More troublingly, those who defined the “average” American often deliberately ignored people who did not fit their preconceived notions of normality. Igo’s analysis is particularly incisive in showing how social surveyors left African Americans, immigrants, and other minorities out of their studies. The Lynds selected Muncie, Indiana, precisely because they believed the town had few minorities, and pollsters systematically excluded minorities from their supposedly representative surveys.

Partly because they wanted to sell their books and partly because they saw

aggregate data as an important commodity in a representative democracy, social surveyors attempted to disseminate their findings to the public. Perhaps the most impressive achievement of the book is Igo’s ability to show how local people responded to the understandings of typicality offered up by distant experts. Residents of Muncie claimed that social scientific ways of knowing their town could never capture the experience of living there, and citizens across the nation gleefully excoriated pollsters after they wrongly predicted a win for Thomas Dewey over Harry Truman in the election of 1948.

In the end, however, even the fiercest critics began to see the world through social scientific lenses. Igo describes Americans’ gradual acceptance of previously unthinkable encroachments on their private thoughts and experiences in the name of social scientific advance. Moreover, even the most vehement criticism began to reveal how important it was for Americans that they and their views be seen as mainstream. Ironically, while Alfred Kinsey sought to free Americans from social conventions governing “normal” sexual behavior, many Americans found solace in his work precisely because it suggested that their “aberrant” desires were more common than they had suspected; in other words, Kinsey showed them that they were “average” Americans after all. ■

Andrew Witmer is a doctoral candidate in history at the University of Virginia and a fellow of the Institute.

The Toothpaste of Immortality: Self-Construction in the Consumer Age

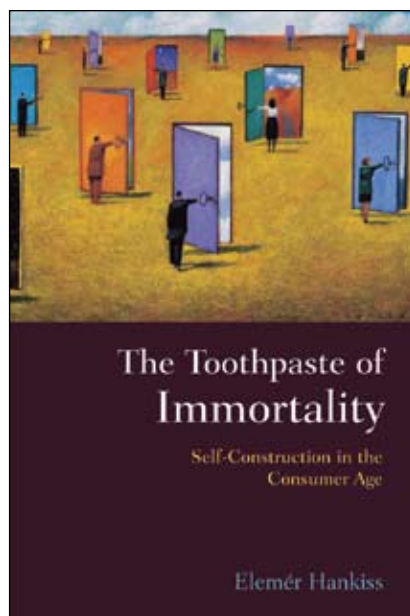
Elemér Hankiss

Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006. 448pp.

According to sociologist Elemér Hankiss, brushing our teeth is not simply a matter of personal hygiene. It is also a manner of engaging in the compelling, even if unfounded, illusion that we will remain “young and beautiful forever,” defeating the constant march of time, decay, and death.

In *The Toothpaste of Immortality*, Hankiss argues that the consumer products we use, often without much thought or reflection, actually play a critical role in shaping our identities. Although on the surface we may seem to be addressing only our basic bodily and social needs, Hankiss suggests that we are also constantly engaged in the labor of constructing a self. We do so in the context of our “consumer civilization”—a world brimming with both “new opportunities” and “new dangers”—and Hankiss places his analysis of selfhood squarely in this cultural context.

His sociological imagination is marvelous. Hankiss engages in a detailed microsociological analysis of mundane activities—going to work, socializing at the bar, and indeed, even brushing one’s teeth—and illuminates the ways in which these activities are a vital part of our search for meaning in the absence of the clear transcendental sources that informed our sense of purpose in the



past. Consumption, he claims, provides structures and symbols that quell the existential anxieties we face in an age fraught with uncertainty, “after the collapse of overarching metaphysical constructs,” and enable us to cope with the experience of our own mortality. The demise of reliable meaning structures has placed the search for meaning at the center of our everyday lives. Hankiss grapples with one of the key contradictions of the epoch, an epoch that simultaneously “worships rationality” and “longs for spirituality and mysticism.”

However, much of the book is an extended “thought experiment” without any empirical foundation. Hankiss promises early on that he will follow a person through his or her daily routine, noting the ways in which “trivial” activities are moments in an unfolding “existential drama” through which the person’s life is imbued with meaning. But the woman

whose life he examines is purely hypothetical. The experiment is punctuated only occasionally by empirical examples. His attempt to present a “typical” person moving through a “typical” routine in a “typical” social environment is certainly not lost, nor is his attempt to uncover the ways in which consumer society addresses the human quest for identity and for answers to questions of purpose. But his eloquent descriptions of public space—particularly the shopping center, which is emblematic of the consumer society he endeavors to describe—veer toward the romantic. In one passage, shoppers become “philosopher-flaneurs,” and the shopping mall itself becomes the “*jardin des délices*.”

Despite occasional lapses, *The Toothpaste of Immortality* is, overall, a nuanced portrait of the search for identity and significance in the consumer age. It stands in good company with a burgeoning literature in the field of consumption that carefully assesses both the potentialities and the dangers of our cultural and historical moment. Furthermore, aware that he is a bit of a renegade, Hankiss bravely poses questions of cosmological as well as scholarly significance, asking how the most central features of our “consumer civilization” both “help” and “impede” us in our “everyday struggle with time and death.” ■

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In the News



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IASC Hosts Symposium on Justice

Most contemporary philosophical approaches to justice focus on institutions and the political procedures that are necessary to confer legitimacy on governmental structures. Little explicit attention is given to the question of whether it is necessary to ground such procedures in anything more fundamental. In his forthcoming book, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs*, IASC Senior Fellow Nicholas Wolterstorff develops a theory of justice that provides such a grounding. He argues that justice is based in the rights of individuals and counters those who claim that the idea of natural human rights was born of modes of thought that are problematically individualistic.

To engage the central themes in *Justice*, IASC hosted a symposium on Professor Wolterstorff's book in March. Participants offered critical extensions of those themes in *Justice* that touched most directly on their areas of expertise. As such, presenters engaged in independently creative work that took Professor Wolterstorff's analysis as a point of departure.

Participants in this symposium

came from a variety of disciplines and included Richard Bernstein (New School of Social Research), Sarah Coakley (Harvard Divinity School), Russell Hittinger (University of Tulsa), Oliver O'Donovan (University of Edinburgh), Charles Reid (University of St. Thomas), Miroslav Volf (Yale Divinity School), Chris Eberle (U.S. Naval Academy), and Paul Weithman (University of Notre Dame). ■



Jack Looney

Adam Michnik

Adam Michnik Presents Fall Lectures

This past November, Adam Michnik, Polish activist, historian, and journalist, was the Institute's guest for the Fourth Annual LaBrosse-Levinson Lectures.

His three lectures, collectively titled "Democracies, Dictatorships, and Intellectuals," addressed concerns over the rise of the Catholic Right in Poland and the relativism of the Left. As an alternative to the foibles of each, he articulated his own position, that of the Democrat-Skeptic.

A longer version of the first lecture will be printed in the Spring 2007 issue of *The Hedgehog Review*, "Intellectuals and Responsibility." ■

IASC Film Premieres at Virginia Film Festival

The God of a Second Chance premiered this past fall at the 19th Annual Virginia Film Festival, held in Charlottesville from October 26–29.

Next look for the film at Filmfest DC, the Washington, DC International Film Festival, which runs from April 19–29. For more information, visit www.filmfestdc.org. ■



Casey Wagner



Casey Wagner

Top Hal Gordon (C.A.G.), filmmaker Paul Wagner, and James Hunter (IASC) following the premiere of *The God of a Second Chance*. **Bottom** Virginia State Assembly Member David Toscano with wife Nancy, son Matthew, and Ellen Wagner.



Margaret B. Edwards

Donald Hall

The Hedgehog Review Hosts U.S. Poet Laureate Donald Hall

Those who claim that poetry is a dying art may have to rethink their position. On February 2nd of this year, 475 people attended U.S. Poet Laureate Donald Hall's poetry reading at the University of Virginia and responded with a standing ovation. Mr. Hall, who has written fifteen books of poetry and twenty books of prose, read from his collection, *White Apples and the Taste of Stone: Selected Poems 1946–2006*, eliciting hearty laughter and tears at different points during the reading.

Sitting beside him at the book-signing table, Jennifer Geddes, *The Hedgehog Review's* editor, heard story after story of the ways Hall's work had affected people. Two young children asked him to sign their tattered copy of his award-winning children's book, *Ox-Cart Man*. A teenage girl told Hall enthusiastically that his poetry had changed her life. And others, in more subdued tones, mentioned the loss of a wife, a husband, a young child and how much comfort they had found in

reading Hall's poetry about his wife, poet Jane Kenyon, who died after a fifteen-month battle with leukemia. "Without," one of the poems he read about his wife's illness, is printed along with an interview in the Fall 2006 issue of *The Hedgehog Review*, "Illness and Suffering."

Earlier in the day, Hall led a seminar on illness and poetry for a group of physicians, medical students, poets, and IASC fellows. After reading sever-

al poems about his wife, Hall answered questions ranging from the role of laughter in dealing with illness to the ways composing poems helped him to "write out" his grief.

The Poet Laureate's visit was co-hosted by *The Hedgehog Review*, *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, and the Center for Biomedical Ethics and Humanities, with generous financial support from UVa's Office of the President. ■

THE HEDGEHOG REVIEW

CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

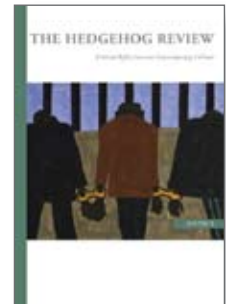
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CLIFFORD GEERTZ

August 23, 1926–October 30, 2006

Clifford Geertz, the eminent anthropologist and theorist of culture, died on October 30, 2006. He was 80 years old. No thinking about the concept of culture (see “The Last Word”) over the past half century, in any field of study, has been untouched by his influence. His remarkable career included a key role in founding the School of Social Science at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton; eloquently written monographs and essays, based on extensive field research and translated into more than 20 languages; and a long list of awards and honorary degrees. In dedicating this first issue of *Culture* to the memory of Professor Geertz, we acknowledge not only his contribution to thinking about culture but the unpretentiousness of his style. We are indebted to the former and aim to emulate the latter. ■

The Concept of Culture

Joseph E. Davis

The concept of culture has had a tortured career. In the humanist tradition, it has sometimes been synonymous with “civilization” and at other times directly contrasted with it. Culture has signified cosmopolitanism and discernment in the arts (“high culture”), modernity and materialism (“industrial civilization”), and kitsch and the manufactured life of suburbia (“mass culture”). In the human sciences, the meanings of culture have been no less varied and fluid. From 1920 to 1950, for instance, American social scientists advanced no less than 157 definitions of the term.

Today, talk of culture is everywhere. Crime has a culture, as do biomedicine, gays, and Bible Belt Catholics. There is a culture of fear, of flowers, and of food, not to mention pain, pastiche, and peace. We know corporations have cultures because, when mergers fail, incompatible cultures take the blame. Multiculturalists celebrate the cultures of minorities, while cultural studies scholars champion popular (but not mass-produced) culture. Both abhor the “culture of the establishment.” Remarkably, in all this culture talk few feel any need to define the concept.

Some scholars have suggested we simply drop the term “culture” and stick with more serviceably and scientific categories. Others imply that while talk

of myth, ritual, and the sacred may be appropriate in Samoa, it has little to do with modern technocratic society. We don’t go in for that sort of thing anymore. Even among many who speak of culture, the concept carries little weight. The stuff of culture in their view—ideas, knowledge, consciousness—is in fact determined by other, more tangible institutions and interests. The point of studying culture is to show how it reflects something else.

These orientations to the culture concept aren’t new. I encountered them for the first time in the late 1970s as an undergraduate anthropology student at the University of Minnesota in a wonderful class taught by Mischa Penn. We read, among various theorists of symbols, *The Interpretation of Cultures* by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz. Here in one eloquent series of essays was an extraordinary articulation of the role of culture in social life that seemed to answer all the critics at once. Years later, during a one-year sabbatical at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, I had a chance to meet Cliff and, along with a dozen or so colleagues, read some of his essays and discuss them with him. Though certainly not in agreement with all the directions that his work took, his influence on me has been profound.

From Clifford Geertz, I learned that all social worlds are shaped by the practical and metaphysical meanings that human beings invest in them, and culture is the concept that specifies this most basic and symbolic dimension of social life. Culture, in this sense, does not derive from and cannot be reduced to some other social force that is outside of the domain of meaning itself. We are always and everywhere “suspended in webs of significance” that pattern and structure what is real and what matters to us, how we define the good in life and our place in it. Moreover, these textured webs consist of signs, symbols, and narratives that are socially shared and so can be studied through empirical investigation.

The study of culture involves careful interpretation and explication of the meanings embedded in the particularities of human action and symbols. This method Geertz called “thick description.” But more than a method, the interpretation of culture is also a moral act because it is an interpretation of how people understand and live their lives. It requires, as Geertz modeled in his writing, moral seriousness combined with a keen sense of scholarly limitations and the uncertainties and ambiguities of social life. ■

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Recent Books

Liberalism in the Shadow of Totalitarianism

David Ciepley

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University
Press, 2006. 379pp.



By tracing the turn toward liberalism in America since the New Deal, Ciepley argues that today's paralyzing political and cultural polarization results

from early twentieth-century reactions to totalitarian regimes around the world. In particular, Ciepley picks apart the myth of "liberal neutrality" that subsequently emerged and instead pushes toward a fuller, more sustainable "sociological" liberalism that accounts for the moral and cultural conditions of our time.

David Ciepley is a postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Virginia. He held a post-doctoral fellowship at IASC's Center on Religion and Democracy in 2004–2005.

Religious Identities in Britain, 1660–1832

**William Gibson and
Robert G. Ingram, eds.**

London: Ashgate, 2005. 327pp.



Sitting uneasily at the juncture between the early modern and modern worlds, the eighteenth century has perhaps provided historians with an all-

too-convenient peg on which to hang the origins of a secular society. Yet, as this study makes clear, religion continued to be a prime factor in shaping society and culture in spite of the innovations and developments of this period.

Robert G. Ingram is Assistant Professor of History at Ohio University and was a postdoctoral fellow of IASC's Center on Religion and Democracy in 2002–2003.

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