

INSTITUTE FOR
ADVANCED STUDIES IN CULTURE



We find ourselves in a paradoxical situation.

We enjoy all the achievements of modern civilization that have made our physical existence on this earth easier in so many important ways. Yet we do not know exactly what to do with ourselves, where to turn. The world of our experiences seems chaotic, disconnected, confusing. There appear to be no integrating forces, no unified meaning, no true inner understanding of phenomena in our experience of the world. Experts can explain anything in the objective world to us, yet we understand our own lives less and less. In short, we live in the postmodern world, where everything is possible and almost nothing is certain.

—Vaclav Havel



I. WHO WE ARE

THE PREMIER INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF CULTURE

In the history of human civilizations, there is something unprecedented about the modern and now late modern world in which we live. It is difficult to see, because this is the world we were born into; it seems natural to us. Yet the historical and sociological processes that have defined the modern epoch have now led us to a point of rupture unlike anything seen before. The full consequences of this rupture are only now beginning to unfold.

Founded in 1995, the Institute emerged as an intellectual community dedicated to understanding this world historical moment and its pathologies, and further, proposing new and constructive paradigms for human flourishing.

OUR DISTINCT APPROACH

Culture

The pervasive discontents of our times are a sign of this rupture. People from all backgrounds and walks of life feel it deeply. Yet the prevailing ways of making sense of those discontents tend to trace their roots to political dysfunction, economic inequalities and, at times, psycho-social pathologies.

We don't deny the importance of these powerful forces, but underwriting all of them, and indeed underwriting all of human history, is culture—the frameworks of meaning and moral order that provide the means through which the world around us, in all its complexity, is made comprehensible and navigable.



Importantly, the focus of the Institute is not primarily on the surface of culture—its artifacts, its current fashions or its latest trends. Rather, the Institute is mainly concerned with the deeper dynamics of culture—the understanding, beliefs, and customs that tend to be invisible to us because they are implicit, assumed, or just taken for granted. These are what we call the deep structures of culture. As the climate is to the weather, these structures are the enduring, though largely unseen foundations upon which the visible artifacts and fashions of culture operate. Neither independent from nor subordinate to the powerful forces of politics, economics, or psychology, culture undergirds them all.

Interdisciplinary and Humanistic

Precisely because the world we live in and the problems we face are so novel and complex, no one academic field can fully grasp their nature and intricacy. Consequently, the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture is interdisciplinary in its approach. The social sciences provide the empirical grounding that is so often missing in the humanities, and the humanities provide the coherence and cohesiveness that are typically missing from the social sciences. As a result, our intellectual community is a rich and dynamic mix of historians, philosophers, sociologists, ethicists, political scientists, theologians, legal scholars, literary critics, and assorted public intellectuals who bring the various analytical and interpretive tools of their trades to common questions and common problems concerning the late modern world.

Non Partisan

We also believe that one of the central reasons for the decline of higher education and intellectual life more generally during the last half-century is their subservience to politics and partisanship. We do not take sides in the culture wars, nor do we advocate for or against any specific policies. Indeed, we wholly reject the politicization of scholarly endeavor in order to be free to address the most pressing questions of our age.

That said, scholarship can never be fully separated from anchoring commitments. At the Institute, our values are firmly rooted in ideals that see all human life and the planet itself as a gift to be cherished and protected.



OUR HOME

The Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture is a research center affiliated with the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, Virginia. The Institute's permanent home is Watson Manor, a historic building within a five-minute walk of the Rotunda and central grounds of the University. Purchased in 2003 and lovingly renovated, Watson Manor is the heart of the Institute's intellectual community and point of outreach to the University community and the larger world.



I have spent considerable time at various high-profile research centers, including the Woodrow Wilson International Center in Washington, the Shelby Cullom Davis Center in Princeton, and the John F. Kennedy Institute in Berlin. Fine places, all: but none of them offered what the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture offers—a true sense of community, underwritten by profound moral engagement with ultimate questions.

—T. J. Jackson Lears,
Board of Governors Distinguished Professor of History,
Rutgers University



II. WHAT WE DO

ADDRESSING THE COMPLEXITIES OF THE LATE MODERN WORLD

The Institute seeks to understand the changing frameworks of meaning and moral order in contemporary America and the world beyond, the frameworks within which individual life, institutional adaptation, and political conflict in our society unfold. With its own foundations in a capacious humanism grounded in the particularities of a variety of traditions, the Institute operates from the assumption that all humans are normatively ordered creatures that seek to flourish. From this starting point, we aim to address the most pressing challenges of our time.

Scholarship

Inquiry into the deepest undercurrents of our historical moment requires an approach that goes well beyond conventional academic theories and methods. Indeed, it is our conviction that the leading paradigms of scholarship today are inadequate to the problems they seek to understand—too narrow to comprehend the big picture and too ideological to address the full range of human experience.

Our abiding conviction is that we need a new school of thought that opens up inquiry to allow a full reckoning with the most significant aspects of human experience in the late modern world. The Institute, then, has set out to create the conditions for such a school of thought to emerge.

To that end, our work centers on questions at the heart of any human civilization and applies them to our own. That range of questions is wide indeed. Given our size as an institute, we have chosen to focus on certain fundamental questions: What does it mean to be human in this time? How, if at all, do people today find meaning and purpose? How do they pass on their beliefs and values to the next generation? What is the nature of change in the ordering of the public sphere—in its governing institutions, its technologies, and its ideologies, and what are the implications of these changes for the flourishing of human beings individually and in the ever-widening communities of which they are a part?

We have organized these questions into four overlapping colloquies or conversations:

■ **Culture, Democracy, and Political Economy:** If politics alone cannot provide what democratic vitality requires, what are the moral and institutional sources for sustaining democratic life in the twenty-first century?

■ **Culture and Formation:** What does it take to form good children, wise leaders, and virtuous citizens in the late modern world?

■ **Culture and the Human Person:** At a time of profound cultural transformation, what are the emerging conceptualizations of human nature and selfhood, and what are the consequences of these changes?

■ **Theory, Culture, and Late Modernity:** Behind the pressing human challenges facing our civilization, how do we understand the fundamental nature and dynamics of modernity itself?



The Fellows Program

Because the challenges we face today span generations, the strategies to address them must as well. This is why a central objective of the Institute is to train, mentor, credential, and help place—in colleges, universities, foundations, and think tanks—a generation of young scholars and practitioners who will carry this new school of thought into the future.

The Institute is the most intellectually thrilling place I have ever encountered. But it's not just the ideas. It's also the mentoring. This is a place that truly cares about ideas, and so what was most important for me as a young scholar was the intellectual training I received.

—Former postdoctoral fellow, Jeffrey Guhin, PhD,
Yale University, Associate Professor of Sociology, UCLA

Journal

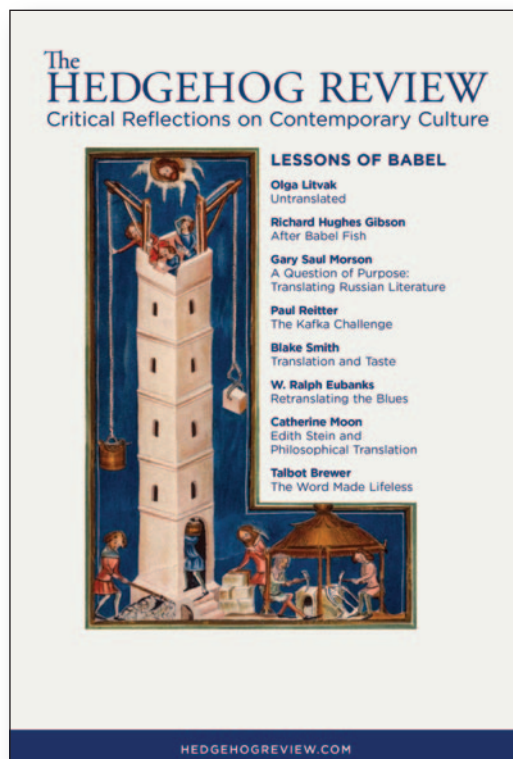
The Hedgehog Review: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Culture

The minor Greek lyricist Archilochus once said, “The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows but one big thing.” At the multiple award-winning journal, *The Hedgehog Review*, that one big thing is culture, and every issue features one big theme. Founded in 1999 and published three times per year, *The Hedgehog Review* has produced “consistently splendid” (David Brooks, NYT) issues that cover a wide range of issues of contemporary import.



The Hedgehog Review is one of the most stimulating, happily unpredictable, well-edited intellectual journals of our day. Advance guard in its instincts, scholarly in its habits, the journal deals with social and religious issues, questions, and problems in a serious and solid way well before they arise in the national consciousness. I await each new issue with a sense of intellectual excitement that is yet to be disappointed.

—Joseph Epstein, former editor,
The American Scholar



Achievements

All of this work is woven together and sustained by a conversational thread running through hundreds of public lectures, conferences, colloquia, seminars, symposia, and salons. The result is a vibrant intellectual community engaging the most pressing questions of our time. In the process, the Institute has provided critical support for over 500 major works of scholarship; 15 national surveys and reports; funding over the years for hundreds of graduate and postdoctoral fellowships; and nearly 100 issues—and ever-expanding online content—of *The Hedgehog Review*.

This body of world-class scholarship is remarkable and important in its own right, quite apart from any utility it might have. But we live in a moment in which scholarship for its own sake is a luxury the world cannot afford. And so this work is all the more significant in light of the commitment, shared by all Institute fellows, to work together to serve the common good toward humane purposes.

III. WHERE WE ARE GOING





CONFRONTING NIHILISM

After three decades, it has become clear that the cultural challenge of our time is the emergence of nihilism—a destructive cultural force that insinuates itself into the full range of human experience in our late modern age. As Friedrich Nietzsche observed toward the end of the nineteenth century, “the highest values devalue (or invalidate) themselves,” and “the aim is lacking, and ‘why?’ finds no answer.” Thus, for all of our economic wealth, political power, and technological mastery, we as individuals and as a society face the future without any sense of coherent meaning or purpose.

The point is worth emphasizing: The crisis of nihilism is, in fact, a crisis of civilization. This crisis manifests itself most obviously in our politics. In America and beyond, democracy is under threat through extreme polarization and the destruction of any conception of the common good, an absence of rational deliberation, an indifference to the rule of law, and the temptation toward authoritarian rule. Yet, the unravelling of democracy reveals a much larger crisis of legitimacy across all institutions: in a leadership class that struggles to see beyond its own interests; in technological innovation for its own sake; in the co-option of civil society by the zero-sum logic of politics; in the lack of formation of the young within families, schools, and communities.

The foundational and animating ambition of the Institute, then, is two-fold: first, to better understand nihilism and its consequences, and second, to articulate humane alternatives to it. The hunger for fresh thinking to these challenges is palpable.

Toward a “Third Founding”

The Institute’s Third Founding Declaration is a response to this crisis. It is a call to action no more audacious than is required by this moment: that America (and the West) cannot survive without a rededication to a common, civic, pluralist, and liberal democratic project and a renewal of the ideals and the cultural resources that animate and sustain that project. The Third Founding, then, addresses the range of crises we have noted—in institutions, leadership, technology, formation and the human person, among others—integrating all of the Institute’s interests under one overarching theme and providing a framework for launching such paradigm-changing projects as...

The Project on Integrated Humanism—

A philosophical and historical renewal of the humanist project answerable to the profound needs of our time, centering a pluralism that encourages institutions, their leaders, and their stakeholders to bring the fullness of their moral particularity to the challenge of living together with our differences while working toward a common democratic future.

The Project on Democratic Authority—

An ongoing and wide-ranging inquiry into the sources and processes for grounding social authority and political power in a moral order consistent with the highest values of the American democratic ideal, beyond the emotionally fleeting or merely procedural.

The Thriving Cities Lab—

Building on an earlier national research project and a layered definition of ‘thriving’ across six ‘civic endowments,’ the Lab is developing a new paradigm for urban analysis, community assessment, institutional well-being, civic engagement, and the renewal of associative democracy at the local level.



The Moral Ecology Trust—

A new paradigm for the formation of human beings, both in and out of formal schooling, towards the revivification of public life and the reestablishment of meaning and purpose in private life.

Digital Ethics and the AI Initiative—

A multi-institutional partnership seeking to understand and explain the ways in which new digital technologies both reflect and change our culture's view of the human person.

The Modernity Seminar—

Born in the pandemic, this ongoing seminar spans the academic year as scholars together consider essential readings on themes such as political myth, the nature of authority, democratic politics, and the complex relationship between various religious traditions and modern social transformations, all against the backdrop of 'Modernity,' a set of sociohistorical transformations affecting the entire globe over the course of the last five centuries of human history.



The most important and unanticipated factor of this academic year for me has been immersion in the intellectual culture of the Institute. Unlike anything I have experienced in my career, the atmosphere at the Institute and UVA, the generous presence of other scholars who found my work valuable and who gave me new ideas and inspiration, has helped me complete my book.

— Ryan McDermott,
Associate Professor of English Literature and Culture,
University of Pittsburgh



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A cultural revolution does not occur as a discernible event, or as a plurality of events, nor does it occur swiftly within a few years, as does a political revolution; only afterwards, when the revolution itself has been incorporated into the new system of controls, do such mythic condensations of cultural change occur.

—Philip Rieff



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