

# Engaging the Cultural Complexities of Our Time

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It is obvious to all that the world around us is changing and changing dramatically. But what is the character of this change? What is its significance? And why should we care?

Consider, in broad outline, aspects of our present situation.

## *Modernity on Endless Trial*

Throughout much of the last two centuries, one found in America and in the West more generally a pervasive sense that progress in human affairs was not merely possible but inevitable. As daunting as the problems of prejudice, ignorance, and inhumanity had been, through reason even these challenges would be met and civilization would evolve to ever higher levels of distinction. Through science, we would expand the frontiers of our knowledge of the natural world and gain domination over it. Through technology, scientific insight would be harnessed to ameliorate the range of burdens that plagued human existence. Through empirical reasoning, we could achieve certainty in our moral understanding and precision in our knowledge of society. 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.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, that confidence has waned.

Indeed, the epoch we call modernity is marked by deep contradictions. To be sure, reason through science has generated a sense of boundless possibility. But in the same way that it has empowered us to analyze, question, and imagine everything, it also leaves us in a place where affirmation of anything is difficult. Similarly the achievements of technology have been stunning, but at the same time that these innovations have improved the quality of life, they also have delivered new forms of violence and oppression. Democracy itself has expanded its reach in astonishing ways, drawing more and more people into the political process and empowering them with tools of self-governance. Yet democratization has also spilled out of the realm of politics and into the realm of aesthetics and morality with the consequence of flattening out ethical and artistic distinctions, undermining our ability to make judgments. Much the same can be said about capitalism. The free market has become perhaps the most powerful institution in the world and with its growth, it has brought unprecedented freedom, wealth, and mobility to people. But a consumer mentality has moved out of the market place and become a dominant cultural logic, transforming inherited frameworks of moral meaning and social obligation. And so it goes.

Thus for all the achievements of modernity, there is also now a profound uneasiness that marks our time. The possibilities for creative action in our world are everywhere, to be sure, yet there is also an abiding sense that something is missing; that in terms of the cultural resources available to us, we are, in significant ways, impoverished.

In few places have modernity's hopes and contradictions played out more sharply than in the academy. On the face of it, higher education in America is second to none in the world. It is intellectually fertile, technologically advanced, organizationally strong, and globally influential. Yet, as an institution, it is largely bereft of a clear sense of direction or coherent sense of purpose.

Indeed, the Enlightenment quest for certainty has led to a ubiquitous skepticism that has called into question the core ideals of academic inquiry. It is not just that words like truth, knowledge, reason, academic freedom, and academic community have lost their resonance but the very terms of disciplinary study are in question. In philosophy, that skepticism undermines any agreement about the meaning of reality or the words used to make sense of reality. In literary theory, it dissolves any agreement about the significance of texts and the authority of the author over that of the interpreter. In historical study, it takes shape as doubt about the very possibility of telling any coherent narrative of, let alone the truth about, the past. In law, this skepticism undermines the legitimacy of law itself, regarding it instead as little more than an instrument of power. With science, it questions the validity of established facts, and the methods for determining those facts, by portraying science as merely one of several vocabularies by which certain institutions maintain their position of privilege. Underneath all of this, there is a profound doubt -- particularly in the humanities -- about the existence of any basis by which coherent agreements in these areas could be reached. We are left, therefore, not with certainty but indeterminacy, not with objectivity but with a myriad of subjectivities.

Thus, what Nietzsche announced over a century ago is pretty well established in the academy and increasingly commonplace in our culture as a whole: in short, the cultural logic of late modernity allows no place in the culture for God or God's substitutes, be they named Nature, Essence, Humanity, Reason, Democracy, or the Self. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the animating moral visions at the heart of Western civilization are increasingly characterized by an exhaustion, or that contemporary cultural discourse -- academic and otherwise -- increasingly reflects controversies that cannot be resolved and an absence or void that cannot be filled.

### *Facing the Consequences*

Our historical circumstances then confront us with questions as basic as they are urgent: What kind of society is now taking shape and what will be its consequences -- not only for our personal lives but for our common life together?

Will the “self” as a stable and consistent “essence” disappear as a category of consciousness, as some suggest, in favor of multiple selves particular to the different social groups to which a person is a part? If there is nothing fundamental about the human person itself, why should anyone care about assaults on people's dignity or welfare? Indeed, is it possible to recognize an affront without a set of shared assumptions about the nature of dignity?

If there is no workable agreement on the common good, and no way to ground even a partial understanding of that good, then on what terms do we order public life? Without a shared moral vocabulary, what possibility of common purpose exists? On what terms do we establish consistency in our laws, coherence in our public education, or commitment in our civic engagements?

Upon what grounds will the government establish legitimacy for its actions among a citizenry that is increasingly pluralistic and even polarized on social issues?

How are basic social obligations such as those in marriage, family, friendships, community, and work to be sustained in the face of the enthronement of “taste” or the reduction of morality to personal preference? In the same way, how will we define trust?

What are the implications of all these changes for children -- for how they are raised, how they are schooled, and how they deal with the complexities of the world they are inheriting?

### *A Strategic Initiative*

Questions like these are endless but so too are the opportunities to put creative and constructive ideas into action. The challenge facing us is how to engage the social, cultural, and political complexities of our time responsibly and effectively. In the end, such engagement will elude us unless we first see clearly and with discernment the nature and dynamic of the changes taking place.

So how shall we make sense of the changing world around us?

This question defines the intellectual mission of the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture. In particular, this initiative is concerned with understanding the changing frameworks of meaning and moral order in contemporary America, the frameworks within which individual life, institutional adaptation, and political conflict in our society unfolds. By pursuing this intellectual mission within an interdisciplinary community of scholars in the social sciences and humanities, the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture undertakes an investigation into what are arguably the most pressing questions of our time. In turn, its public commitment is to offer critical insight and educational resources to all those concerned with responding creatively and strategically to the challenges posed by a time of extraordinary change.