

INSight is published twice yearly and distributed to supporters of the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture and the Center on Religion and Democracy

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# CELEBRITY CULTURE

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**APRIL 12, 2005 \* 2:00  
DOME ROOM, THE ROTUNDA**

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University of Virginia  
INSight  
P.O. Box 400816  
Charlottesville, VA 22904-4816

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INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDIES IN CULTURE  
CENTER ON RELIGION AND DEMOCRACY

# INSight

Spring 2005 No. 12

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*The Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture is a research center at the University of Virginia that investigates the logic and meaning of contemporary cultural change and its implications for our understanding of the human person and the ordering of public life.*

*The Center on Religion and Democracy, an initiative of the Institute, explores the complex questions arising at the intersection of religion and democratic culture.*

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## Celebrity Culture

Spring 2005 Colloquium

How many of us surreptitiously glance at the cover of *People* magazine at the grocery store, or admit to watching *Oprah* only with the caveat that we were just flipping channels? Even to those of us who are embarrassed to admit it, celebrity culture is alluring. While entertainment and a prurient interest in the personal details of others' lives are nothing new, what is noteworthy is how many aspects of contemporary culture have taken on the form of entertainment—think of political debates, televised “arranged marriages,” the college classroom—and the extent to which celebrities now serve as our leaders, heroes, and topics of everyday conversation. Why is this so? What does it mean?

On April 12, 2005, the Institute will bring three eminent cultural critics to the University of Virginia for this year's spring colloquium, “Celebrity Culture.”

Joseph Epstein is emeritus faculty in the Creative Writing Program at Northwestern University and a noted essayist,

short story writer, and novelist. He is the author of numerous books, including *Golden Boys*, named Notable Book of the Year by *The New York Times Book Review* in 1992, and most recently, *Snobbery* and *Fabulous Small Jews*. From 1975–1997, he was the editor of *The American Scholar*.

Wendy Kaminer is a lawyer, legal scholar, and cultural critic. She has served as a contributing editor of *The Atlantic Monthly* since 1991 and is a senior correspondent for *The American Prospect*. The author of seven books, her most recent is *Sleeping with Extraterrestrials: The Rise of Irrationalism and Perils of Piety*.

Loren Glass is Assistant Professor of English at the University of Iowa. His specialties are in nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature and culture, as well as film and theory of mass culture. His book *Authors, Inc.: Literary Celebrity*

*Continued on page 2*



Wendy Kaminer



Loren Glass



Joseph Epstein

“Celebrity” continued

in *the Modern United States* was published in 2004.

The pervasiveness of celebrity is plain to see. But what is behind the growth of celebrity as a cultural phenomenon? The proliferation of media technologies and consumerism are ready answers, yet clearly more is at issue. Our identification with and adulation of entertainers, sports figures, media gurus, business tycoons, and other stars also

implicates our personal lives and desires. What, in the end, makes celebrity and entertainment so appealing to us?

At the same time, we also want to explore the social and cultural repercussions of the growing reach of entertainment and celebrity. What are the impacts of celebrity culture on our social institutions; on the line between the personal and the public; on questions of authority, taste, and morality; on the na-

ture of our ideals; and on the state of other possible sources for these ideals?

The colloquium promises to give us a deeper understanding of how celebrity came to be such a visible presence in American life and what it means for our society and our time. For more details on what is sure to be a provocative event, please refer to the back cover of this issue and to the Institute’s website at [www.virginia.edu/iasc](http://www.virginia.edu/iasc). ■

## Religion, Secularism, and the End of the West

Center Conference to be Held in Vienna

In recent years more and more writers have come to agree that the West—the once-cohesive cultural and political group comprising the societies of Western Europe and North America—is either dead or dying. Westerners themselves increasingly perceive a gulf between the United States, on the one hand, and Western Europe and Canada, on the other. America is said to be more individualistic, free-market, and bellicose, while Western Europe and Canada are more communitarian, socialistic, and pacifistic. Perhaps the deepest and most fundamental division is over religion: whereas Western Europe and Canada appear to confirm the longstanding thesis that modernization brings secularization, the United States remains on the whole a nation of believers and churchgoers.

In order to explore the empirical validity, explanations, meaning, and political ramifications of the “End of the West” thesis, the Center on Religion and Democracy has organized a conference entitled “Religion, Secularism, and the End of the West.” It will be held near

Vienna, Austria, on Friday, June 3, 2005.

The conference will explore the history of the idea of the West; competing notions of the cultural content of the West; the role of religion in shaping the democratic cultures of the West; the role of the two world wars and the Cold War in solidifying the West, and of the Cold War’s end in fragmenting it; and the implications for democracy in Western countries and for world order in general.

José Casanova (New School), Jean Bethke Elshtain (Chicago), William Galston (Maryland), Peter Gordon (Harvard), Slavica Jakelić (Virginia), James Kurth (Swarthmore), Krzysztof Michalski (Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen), and David Novak



The New City Hall, Vienna

(Toronto) will all present essays. Also participating in the conference are Barbara Bradley Hagerty, Imam Yahya Hendi, James Davison Hunter, Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali, John Owen, and others. The essays discussed during the conference will be published in a forthcoming issue of *The Hedgehog Review*. ■

## Focus Groups Discuss Ritalin

In 2004, the Institute and Center embarked on a multi-stage research project to explore public perceptions of biotechnologies in medicine. We undertook this project because the biotech revolution is creating new and powerful means of altering the mind and the body and has far-reaching social and ethical implications. Many surveys have been done to assess public awareness and acceptance of new biotechnologies, yet we still know little about the substance of the public’s opinions or their grounding. The first step in our project, therefore, was to conduct focus groups that allowed people the freedom to talk about what they found promising or troubling about particular medical interventions, and why.

Four focus groups, involving 45 people clustered by age, occupation, and education level, were conducted in Boston, Chicago, San Diego, and Greenville, SC. Given our grave doubts about the value of asking people about hypothetical developments (e.g., gene therapy) or esoteric procedures (e.g., preimplantation genetic diagnosis), we asked participants to base their responses as far as possible on their own experience or the experience of those they know or know about. This specification focused the discussion on medical interventions already in fairly widespread use. We asked people first about interventions they thought were especially helpful or promising and then secondly about any that worry them or make them feel uncomfortable.

Many issues arose in the conversations. One which was the subject of a spirited discussion in every group concerned the prescribing of Ritalin (and similar medications, like Adderall) to children for the treatment of Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). In a general population survey conducted in 2002, of those who had some idea of what ADHD was (66% of the sample),

20% answered “no” when asked if they thought ADHD was “a real disease.” In our focus groups, no one volunteered that opinion. Many shared brief stories of children—their own, their friends’, in their extended family, and others—who were “all over the place” and for whom medication had made a “huge difference.” At the same time, while acknowledging, as one San Diego teacher did, that Ritalin “can be great for the kids that really need it,” a majority of participants, including that teacher, expressed a strong concern that ADHD was being over-diagnosed and Ritalin “way overused.”

That Ritalin could represent a “cop out” or “quick fix” or “magic pill” was repeatedly stated. But in the typical case, such comments were linked with observations about changes in our society and the increased tempo of life. A theme underscored by many was that all of life, for adults and for children, is becoming more “aggressive and competitive” as a man in Greenville put it, and “everything is going zoom, zoom, zoom.” The increased pressure and time demands mean that parents have less time and energy to discipline their children, ensure that they are getting physical activity and a good diet, or permit them the space to mature at their own rate. “Adults’ lives,” said a woman in Boston, are “so fast paced that everybody has to do whatever ... just to manage.” And so “we want,” according to a participant in San Diego, “instant solutions and we want easy solutions,” and doctors, she continued, who don’t “look that carefully,” comply.

A participant in Boston captured an implicit view of many toward Ritalin when she argued that “maybe the med-



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ical intervention is preventing us from looking at” other interventions. She suggested that perhaps we should be rethinking the way boys (especially) are schooled or the age at which they enter school. Few others made specific policy recommendations but many expressed concern that putting kids on Ritalin was, as a woman who works in the Chicago school system put it, not getting “to the core of the problem,” whether that problem be time demands on parents, “the kind of stuff kids eat nowadays,” the influence of drug companies on doctors’ prescribing practices, the insidious narrowing of our social definition of “normal,” and so on. Participants emphasized the importance of getting to the core by suggesting numerous ways that drug-taking could be harmful to a child. A drug might be the right choice, many implied or stated directly, but it should never be the first choice.

For some time now, physicians and ethicists have been raising probing questions about the rapid rise in the number of American children who are taking drugs like Ritalin and Adderall (estimates range between three and four million). From the disquiet we so consistently heard expressed in the focus groups, it seems the concerns of these professionals are shared by many in the wider public. ■

Joseph E. Davis

## A Practice in Democratic Discourse

On October 20–21, 2004, the Center and Institute held the third annual LaBrosse-Levinson Lectures on “Discourse and Democracy.” We welcomed four speakers: David Brooks, columnist for *The New York Times*; Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, Professor of Communication Studies at the University of Minnesota; Todd Gitlin, Professor of Journalism and Sociology at Columbia University; and John Searle, Mills Professor of Philosophy of Mind and Language at the University of California, Berkeley.

In spite of the diversity among the four distinguished presenters at the third annual LaBrosse-Levinson Lectures, all concurred that political discourse in contemporary American society is shallow, incapable of communicating the complexity of issues. It has become emotional rather than reflective and reasoned and polarizing instead of uniting on solutions to our most pressing problems. The fact that critical differences were aired, however, illustrated that a higher level of public dialogue is possible, even in the current political climate.

David Brooks addressed the question of why our country has become so politically polarized since the 1998 election. Brooks theorized that the divide is mostly about leadership and opposing sets of virtues that have become embodied in partisan attachments based on social identity. In other words, Americans see themselves in a certain way, and their party affiliation and leadership preference become markers of collective identity and a larger worldview. Brooks noted that the two conceptions of social identity and lead-

ership exemplified by the Republican and Democratic parties are reinforced by several factors. These include the proliferation of media outlets that allow individuals’ beliefs to be reaffirmed rather than challenged, increasing mobility that enables people to live among others like themselves, and by the complexity of issues that encourages voting based on style versus substance.

Brooks is right that American elections have come to depend on a kind of symbolic politics. And necessarily so. Our world has become more complex and interconnected in significant part due to the proliferation of consumerism and information technology and the resulting globalization. In such an environment, voters do not feel they have, and in reality do not have, the ability to make an informed decision for a candidate based on their own understanding of complex issues and the candidate’s positions. Instead, Americans’ votes are based on symbolic indicators that a particular candidate best represents their own perspectives. Todd Gitlin, speaking on the second day of the lectures, argued that reliance on subtle style cues is necessary under contemporary political

conditions since “the citizen’s ability to comprehend the ensemble of social facts and the likely consequences of government policy, let alone the relations between them, weakens.”

Nonetheless, Gitlin condemned the results of this “mystification of society” as one of several factors that have led to the triumph of unreason over reason in democratic speech. It is assumed in a democratic society that educated, reasonable people will be able to distinguish between reason and irrationality in an open exchange and so better decisions are derived through rational discussion and free access to all kinds of ideas. In Gitlin’s words, “the premise was that the meeting of minds produced good judgment, or, at least, the least bad judgment.” As such, democracy, according to both Gitlin and philosopher John Searle, is a gamble on reason. It wagers that “intelligence and rationality have a better chance of prevailing in a rights-based democracy than in other sorts of systems.” But the gamble can fail to pay off, which is now the case in contemporary America, Gitlin complained, as voters elect leaders based on image, sound-bytes, and style



Panel discussion with John Searle, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, and Todd Gitlin



David Brooks



John Searle



Karlyn Kohrs Campbell

cues over substance. He states: “Unreason today—proudly and confidently—lays claim to legitimate power.”

In addition to the mystification of an overly complex world, Gitlin also blamed the flourishing of unreason on the emphasis on emotions (including slander, propaganda, demagoguery and themes rather than arguments) and entertainment (primarily through titillation and distraction). Lecturer Karlyn Kohrs Campbell agreed and indicted the media for the change in focus. Brooks argued otherwise. When asked about the role of the media in shaping the public’s views, Brooks demurred. He argued that the media abetted the negativity in American politics solely through the proliferation of media outlets, which has had the effect of reinforcing polarization. Kohrs Campbell, however, cited a variety of studies that indicated that the media, driven by market forces and the pursuit of advertising dollars, indeed influences the news. She argued that, in part, this is because of the assumption that television audiences prefer entertainment to information. Since the late-1960s, news has been valued as a revenue source, not for its prestige. As such, negative stories, which are presumed to be more dramat-

ic and entertaining, have overtaken reporting of substance and coverage of political campaigns has become shorter (the words of the presidential candidates in 2004 were heard for an average of 9 seconds a night). As a result, television news now “privileges the visual over the verbal, sound bites and slogans over talking heads, and conflict over discussion in coverage of public issues.”

What are the larger implications for democracy when emotion is emphasized over reason, image over substance, and slogans over dialogue? One result is that Americans become cynical about the role they play in the political process, and even so basic an act as casting a ballot seems futile. Anecdotally, Brooks raised another significant consequence: the difficulty of governing in such a hostile environment. Brooks related that he has had a running argument with members of President Bush’s administration about their communications strategy, which is built around a “zone of trust.” Policy decisions are deliberated and made within this zone, outside of the public eye, because in the present divisive political environment discussion, disagreement, and change are twisted by the opposition into weakness, irresolu-

tion, and flip-flopping. Limiting policy deliberation to a select few, however, although perhaps a smart political move, only increases polarization and limits the rational discussion that is so essential to good democratic practice. The result is not only the further degradation of political discourse, but weaker policy as open debate with key stakeholders holding differing views is suppressed.

In the end, *Discourse and Democracy* raises as many questions as it answered. Especially in an election year, one might have wished for more concrete suggestions as to a way forward past our current morass of heated yet shallow rhetoric. Still, the LaBrosse-Levinson Lectures marked an important moment of thoughtful reflection, which is surely needed at this point in the trajectory of American democracy. ■

*Pamela D. Hass Cochran*

## Accounts of Innocence

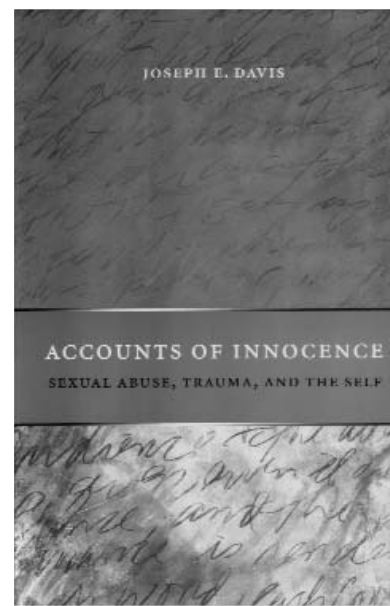
by Joseph E. Davis

*Editor's Note: In January, the University of Chicago Press published Institute program director Joseph Davis' *Accounts of Innocence: Sexual Abuse, Trauma, and the Self*. A new sensitivity and orientation to victimization has typically been identified as a legacy of the rights movements of the 1960s and early 1970s. Since then victimization claims, therapeutic programs, self-help groups, and mental illness categories have proliferated, leading some commentators to decry the emergence of a "victim culture." Large numbers of people are now characterized and characterize themselves—in self-help groups, on confessional talk shows, in autobiographies, and so on—as victims of discrimination and abuse and addiction. In *Accounts of Innocence*, Davis, using a case study of sexual abuse, seeks to understand why in our cultural moment we place such causal and explanatory significance on victimization in people's lives. In the following excerpt, Davis considers critiques of victim culture and how his study suggests a different conclusion.*

Social observers, of both conservative and liberal persuasions, have argued for some time that claims of victimization have spiraled out of control. Charles Sykes, in his 1992 book *A Nation of Victims*, contends, "society is in the grips of a Revolution of Rising Sensitivities" and "Portraying oneself as a victim has become an attractive pastime." According to Wendy Kaminer, in her broadside on the recovery movement, *I'm Dysfunctional, You're Dysfunctional*, "Like contestants on 'Queen for a Day,' Americans of various persuasions assert competing claims of victimhood, vying for attention and support." David Rieff, surveying the rhetoric of the recovery movement, asks "victims, all?" and notes that "millions of apparently successful people" now identify themselves as "some sort of

psychological cripple." Robert Hughes, in his *Culture of Complaint*, argues that the "claim to victimhood" has become "all-pervasive." "It is virtually impossible," writes Alan Dershowitz in *The Abuse Excuse*, "to flip the TV channels during the daytime hours without seeing a bevy of sobbing women and men justifying their failed lives by reference to some past abuse, real or imagined." Nicholas Lemann, focusing on a "vast new body of work about unhappy childhood in middle-class America," finds "childhood misery" to be a "vogue." Being a victim has become, according to Eva Moskowitz, "fashionable."

The popular critiques of the "culture of victimization" do not focus on the institutional arrangements that promote victim claims. Rather, they are primarily concerned with the claims themselves and their consequences. Despite differences, these critiques share an essential sameness. They argue that the central theme of victim culture is the evasion of responsibility, that the central dynamic is blaming something outside one's volition—prejudice, past abuse, mental disorder—for personal failures, unhappiness, and even crimes. They then chronicle the many ways in which victimization claims are extended and often enough distorted and trivialized. Not all victim claims are merely evasions or excuses, these observers hasten to emphasize. There is "real" victimization, such as the civil rights movement fought, and then there is the multiplication of parasitic claims that feed off the genuine article. A decline of character (Sykes), a sense of powerlessness and a retreat from the demands of genuine individualism and rational thinking (Kaminer), and an economic affluence that buffers people "from the real harshness of the world" (Rieff) are among the reasons proffered for this unfortunate proliferation. Its consequences include the



Joseph E. Davis—Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005. 340 pp.

"abrogation of societal responsibility" (Dershowitz), the dissolution of a "sense of common citizenship" (Hughes), and the displacement of a "community of interdependent citizens" (Sykes)....

Critics of victim culture have seen the proliferation of victim claims as a sign of cultural change. The fact that people are so apparently willing to express weakness (a lack of control) and the need for help, they argue, indicates that our culture of individualism, that once esteemed strength and individual responsibility, has undergone a transformation. The sociologist Donileen Loseke argues that the "category of victim is about weakness and personal non-responsibility." Therefore, the fact "[t]hat so many people are willing to categorize themselves and others as victims means that our moral climate surrounding the morality of individualism has changed." From their various angles, the critics of

*Continued on page 7*

*"Innocence" continued*

victim culture reach a similar conclusion. In fundamental ways, they argue, the concept of personal responsibility has been transformed. According to Sykes, our society now refuses "to hold individuals accountable for their own behavior." *We might ask, however, that if individuals are held less accountable for their actions then why is it that neutral-*

*izing blame for matters such as personal failures and unhappiness are so important? Might it be that rather than a weakening of personal responsibility, claims of victimization (and the proliferation of psychiatric categories) actually signal cultural conditions that entail an increased sense of and unease about moral accountability? The implications*

of this study strongly this possibility. The proliferation of victim accounts and more broadly the political struggles over psychological knowledge, I propose, is driven not by a flight from responsibility but rather by the force of a moral ideal: the ideal of the inwardly-generated true self and its moral logic and demands. ■

## Voluntary Associations in America: Conflict and Change

An Interview with Johann Neem

**Can you briefly describe the project you're working on this year?**

My study, "Creating a Nation of Joiners" examines the political and social conflicts that were behind the emergence and spread of voluntary associations in the United States between the American Revolution and the 1840s. I explore the "pre-history" of American voluntarism in the era before Alexis de Tocqueville arrived. Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* is often quoted for his observation that "Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all minds are constantly joining together in groups." But too often we assume that Americans' tendency to form voluntary associations emerged out of the principles of 1776. I argue that in many ways the opposite was true.

The American Revolution was carried out in the name of "the people." Following independence, American leaders such as John Adams and Samuel Adams believed that all citizens should unite in pursuit of the common good. They worried that the proliferation of voluntary associations would divide the citizenry into competing groups. Following independence, it was not unusual for leaders to refer to such associations as a "poison" in the body politic. Religious dissenters, laborers,

and political minorities all discovered that they could not form legally-recognized associations.

Between 1800 and 1840, a legal environment more friendly to voluntary associations and private nonprofit corporations was gradually established. Political, religious, and economic conflicts undermined the fiction that all citizens shared the same interests. Religious dissenters and other minorities demanded the right to form their own associations. Simultaneously, the rise of organized parties made the state a battleground between competing interests. By the 1840s, Americans had concluded that any group should be allowed to associate independent of the state. In short, political partisanship forced leaders to acknowledge that the state could not represent all of society's interests and values.

But changes in law were not enough to turn the United States into a nation of joiners. Before this could happen, ordinary women and men had to start forming associations. Ministers and other civic organizers relied on print, lectures, and hired agents to teach Americans how to form associations and how to use them to influence political leaders. By joining associations, people re-defined the role of citizens in a democracy. Instead of limiting citizen-



*Johann N. Neem is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Center on Religion and Democracy for 2004–05. He received his doctorate in history from the University of Virginia in 2004 and is Assistant Professor of History at Western Washington University.*

ship to voting, they made it their responsibility to reform public opinion and to influence lawmakers. By the 1830s, American citizens had formed

*Continued on page 8*

*“Interview” continued*

thousands of associations to pursue such causes as temperance, antislavery, and female suffrage. The first generation of American reformers ensured that civil society would become a vibrant arena of democratic politics. For good or ill, they demonstrated the power that citizens’ groups could wield in public life.

#### What led you to this topic?

This project grew out of contemporary concerns about civic life in America. Today, when one looks at volunteering rates and voting rates, it seems clear that Americans are not engaged in the lives of their communities. The 1830s and 1840s stand in contrast to our current public life. In the 1830s and 1840s, people participated in many associations, including political parties. I originally intended to provide a glowing hagiographic story, but I realized that the problems are more complex. We often romanticize what a vibrant civil society will look like. We contrast, in Robert D. Putnam’s famous phrase, a world of bowling leagues against a world in which we are “bowling alone.” In reality, the proliferation of groups can produce conflict and can be very destabilizing to communities.

Antislavery activists, for example, were often threatened with physical harm. Mobs routinely prevented them from speaking and chased them out of town. Joining an antislavery society was an act of courage; it was also a way to challenge the norms of the community. Today, the same is true of evangelical moral reformers and gay rights activists. In each case, volunteering in an association is linked to a political cause that threatens to divide the community.

#### What do we learn from this project?

My study teaches us two things. First, it reminds us that the emergence of a vibrant civil society in America was both the product of and productive of intense conflict. In doing so, I hope we come to think of the United States in the post-revolutionary era as facing similar challenges as emerging democracies today. Moreover, I want us to re-think how we talk about voluntarism. If we only value associations that build community, then we must dismiss the most successful associations in American history, those that sought to mobilize Americans for political purposes. By joining an association, a citizen gains

new political commitments. Associating is one of the key ways to become an active member of public life. Certainly, associations can foster stronger ties to one’s community, but they are rarely neutral.

#### This study is nearly complete. Is your next project related?

My primary interest is in Americans’ experience with community, both as an idea and as lived experience. My new research thus builds on some of the themes raised above. In particular, I am looking at how the Industrial Revolution in the antebellum United States raised profound questions about the relationship between individual freedom and community. I am comparing three types of communities—communes, company towns such as Lowell, and southern slave plantations—and how they conceptualized the meaning of freedom and the kinds of communities that best promote it. I am also hoping to learn more about the relationship between freedom and capitalism during a period when many Americans were becoming members of a permanent working class. ■

#### Fellow Report

## Hunter to Join NEH National Council

On February 27, 2005, James Davison Hunter, Director of the Institute and Center, will be sworn in as a new member of the National Council on the Humanities of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Appointed by the White House and confirmed by the United States Senate in November, Dr. Hunter’s term will begin in February 2005 and run for six years. As part of the National Council, Dr. Hunter will meet four times each year with the 25 other



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members to review applications and make recommendations to the Chairman.

In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson established the National Endowment for the Humanities in response to what many perceived as a

decline of the humanities in American life. As an independent grant-making agency of the United States government, the NEH supports research, education, preservation, and public programs in the humanities. Since 1965, the NEH has funded many groundbreaking projects, including Ken Burns’ landmark documentary on *The Civil War*, popular museum exhibitions such as “The Treasures of Tutankhamen,” and fifteen Pulitzer prize-winning books. ■

## Media Unlimited: How the Torrent of Images and Sounds Overwhelms Our Lives

Todd Gitlin—New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2002. 260 pp.

Read this book if you’ve ever opened emails within ten seconds of their arrival, instinctively flipped on the radio before putting your car in gear, or used the Internet to follow a breaking story. Those who have never done these things should read the book anyway. If Todd Gitlin is right, none of us entirely escape the distractions of our media-saturated culture.

Gitlin, a professor of journalism and sociology at Columbia University, moves beyond familiar analyses of media’s effects on sexual mores and teenage violence to examine their astonishing ubiquity. For Gitlin, the key thing about media is their ceaseless flow of ephemeral, disposable content and sensation, a flow in which most moderns live and move and have their being. We dip into the torrent countless times every day, often without really thinking about it, seeking quick jolts of pleasure, excitement, or distraction with little cost or obligation. Gitlin suggests (building on the work of Georg Simmel) that we are primed to crave disposable distraction by the stultifying routines of everyday life in the modern corporate capitalist world.

The main contribution of this book may simply be to force readers to slow

down and examine their relationship with media, a slow-down facilitated by the fact that the book is twice as long as it actually needs to be. Gitlin is best when identifying common “styles of navigation” used in approaching media, some that embrace it and others that exploit or oppose it: the fan, content critic, paranoid, exhibitionist, ironist, jammer, secessionist, and abolitionist. The book is more notable for such entertaining schematization than for new research or theoretical novelty. Gitlin describes aspects of a media culture that we experience daily but rarely pause to consider.

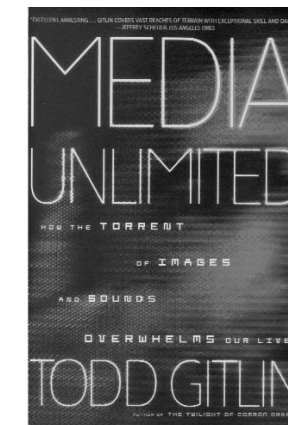
Gitlin is pessimistic about the effects of the media torrent on American political life. He argues that the “ceaseless quest for disposable feeling and pleasure hollows out public life altogether,” reducing democracy to a sideshow by distracting citizens from civic duties and turning public life—especially wars and high-profile crimes—into spectacle.

The final chapter explores the spread of American media around the world. Gitlin argues that non-Americans often sample American icons and styles for the sorts of disposable feelings discussed earlier and for the fleeting sense

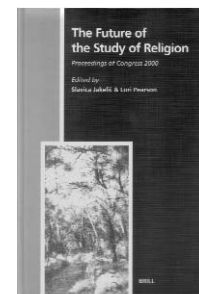
of social membership that sampling allows. Even when done ironically, sampling enables individuals to state their relationship to the products and values of American culture. This culture is uniquely attractive around the world, Gitlin argues, because it emphasizes fun, entertainment, and style; relies on images and familiar stylistic formulas; and welcomes international influences.

In the end, Gitlin sees the spread of disposable media as inexorable, though he does note some counter-movements. Modern media satisfy so many of our desires that we are unlikely to dam the torrent or escape very far away from it. Even the different styles of media navigation mentioned earlier all eventually succumb to the deluge. Does the prognosis seem overly bleak? Try stepping out of the torrent for a single day and note the results. ■

*Andrew Witmer is doctoral candidate in American History and graduate fellow of the Institute.*



#### New Publication



#### The Future of the Study of Religion

Slavica Jakelcic and Lori Pearson, editors—Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2004. 334 pp.

This volume brings together scholars of religious and theological studies for a conversation about the proper objects, goals, and methods for the study of religion in the twenty-first century. It approaches these questions by way of the most recent contemporary challenges, debates, and developments in the field. Contributors address topics such as

the connection between ‘normative’ and ‘scientific’ approaches to the study of religion, the meaning of religion in a context of globalization, the relation between religious studies and religious traditions, and the future of gender studies in religion.

Slava Jakelcic is Associate Director of the Center. ■

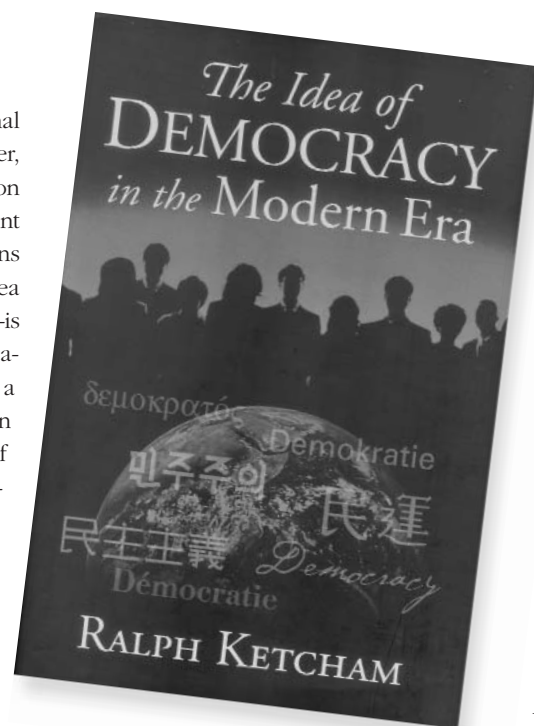
## The Idea of Democracy in the Modern Era

Ralph Ketcham—Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2004. 301 pp.

In a speech delivered to the National Endowment for Democracy in November, 2003, President Bush advanced a position on freedom and democratic government that has shaped foreign policy decisions throughout his administration. The idea that “freedom—the freedom we prize—is not for us alone, it is the right and the capacity of all mankind,” has provided a critical rationale for the American War on Terror and the active promotion of democracy in the Middle East, most notably in Iraq. Repeated even more strongly in his recent inaugural address, the President’s position is not a new one. The idea that democracy brings peace and is the right of all humans has influenced American foreign policy since at least Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points.

This idea gained credence with the success of governments in Western Europe, Japan, and South Korea. It was a driving force behind the collapse of the Soviet empire. Now, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, the campaign to spread democratic ideals seems to be in overdrive rather than resting contentedly with the successes of last century. Yet despite the considerable energies and cost dedicated to promoting democracy in the Middle East (and elsewhere), it is not at all clear what shape democracy will take there, if it takes shape at all. Questions about the blending of cultural ideals and governing principles seem to be endless. Translating Western conceptions of government into terms useful for Islamic societies is a monumental challenge.

Ralph Ketcham’s *The Idea of Democracy in the Modern Era* is a timely addition to the conversation surrounding democracy and recent attempts to pro-



mote its spread. Rather than engaging the current debate directly, Ketcham provides a conceptual history of democracy, illuminating the way it has been theorized as well as implemented. By tracing the trajectory of democracy from its modern roots, Ketcham is able to explore its ever-evolving manifestations in North America, Europe, and Asia, as well as the deep cultural work already done by the ancients (Aristotle in the West and Confucius in the East) that gave burgeoning democracies their distinctive characteristics.

Ketcham describes four distinct modernities, each giving rise to different democratic ideas and institutions. Beginning with modern origins in Bacon, Locke, and ultimately Jefferson, Ketcham explores the uniquely universalistic claims made about democratic rights and freedoms that shaped the American Constitution. He then examines the sec-

ond modernity and the rise of the liberal corporate state through the work of Bentham and Mill in Britain and Veblen and Dewey in the U.S. For his fourth modernity, post-Foucaultian critiques of and challenges to democracy, Ketcham looks at the emergence of identity politics in response to the suppression of minority opinions. The examination of these three traditions together, including dissent from each modernity, provides a lucid and textured history of Western political thought.

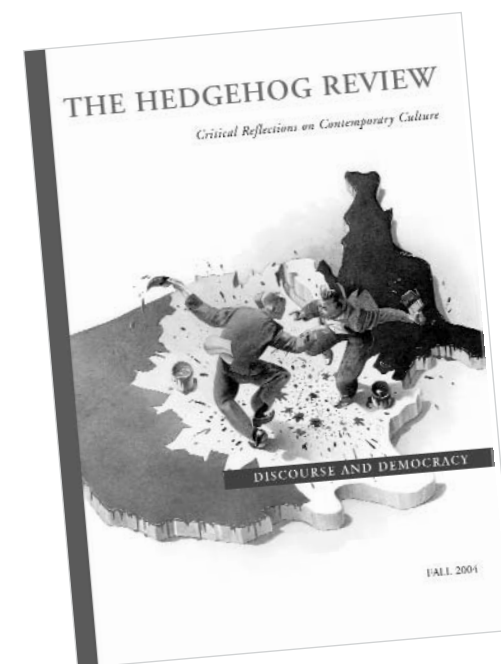
The uncommon, and for that reason, more striking feature of the book is Ketcham’s discussion of democracy in East Asia, the third modernity. By identifying the Confucian roots of Asian democratic ideas and governments, Ketcham stresses the unique characteristics that have steered democracy in a communal and hierarchical direction in that part of the world. This is a much-needed look at democratic development beyond the West. It gives one hope.

The value of Ketcham’s wider analysis, one that is neither myopically occidental nor majoritarian, is realized in his distinctive and provocative concluding suggestions about the future course of strong democracy—one that overcomes the entrenched politics of identity in favor of a robust civic commitment. *The Idea of Democracy in the Modern Era* is a timely analysis of what democracy has meant, and what it might yet come to mean. It deserves a wide audience. ■

*Joshua Caler is a Research Associate at the Center on Religion and Democracy.*

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