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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.

www.virginia.edu/iasc
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Celebrity Culture
Spring 2005 Colloquium

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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. In each case, people were asked about their prior knowledge and their opinions about anything related to AD/HD, whether it was in their family or someone they knew of. They were asked to consider the pros and cons of using medications to treat ADHD and to think about whether the terms “ADHD,” “hyperactive,” or “ADD” are useful to them. The discussions were then taped so that respondents could be invited to listen to the tapes and provide comments or feedback.

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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 organized a conference entitled “Religion, Secularism, and the End of the West” in 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 societies 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 Jakelic (Virginia), James Kurth (Swarthmore), Krzysztof Michalski (Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen), and David Novak (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.
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 polarized 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 partly due to the proliferation of media outlets that allow individuals 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 relationships between them, weakens.”

Nonetheless, Gitlin condemned the results of this “mythification 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 right-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 cues over substance. He states: “Unreason today—proudly and confidently—lays claim to legitimate power.”

In addition to the mythification of an overly complex world, Gitlin also blamed the flourishing of unreason on the emphasis on emotions (including slander, propaganda, demagogy 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 view, 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-1950s, news has been valued as a revenue source, not for its prestige. As such, negative stories, which are presumed to be more dramatic 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 bits 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, irresolution, and flip-flopping. Limiting policy deliberation to a select few, however, actually 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 weakens 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.
Continued on page 7

The popular critiques of the “culture of victimization” do not focus on the institutional arrangements that promote victim claims. Rather, they are generally concerned with the claims themselves and their consequences. Despite differences, these critiques share an essential commonality. They argue that the central theme of victim culture is the erosion of responsibility, that the central dynamic is blaming something outside one’s volition—prejudice, past abuse, mental disorders—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 (Kammen), and an economic affluence that buries people “from the real hardness of the world” (Bleff) are among the reasons profited for this unfortunate proliferation. Its consequences include the

“abrogation of societal responsibility” (Dershowitz), the dissolution of a “sense of common citizenship” (Hughs), and the displacement of a “community of independent citizens” (Sykes).

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 con- flicts that helped 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 ar-rived. Tocqueville’s Democracy in America is often quoted for his observa-tion that “Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all minds are constantly joining together in groups.” But too often we assume that Americans’ ten-dency 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 car- ried 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 warned 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-recog-nized associations.

Between 1800 and 1840, a legal en- vironment more friendly to voluntary associations and state nonprofit cor-porations was gradually established. Political, religious, and economic con-flicts 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 barri-er between competing interests. By the 1840s, Americans had concluded that any group should be allowed to as-sociate independently of the state. In short, political partisanship forced lead-ers 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 hap-pen, 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-
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 members to review applications and make recommendations to the Chairman.

The main contribution of this book may simply be to force readers to slow down and examine their relationship with disposable media as inexorable, though he does note some counter-movements. Modern media satisfy so many of our desires that... read the book anyway. If Todd Gitlin is right, none of us entirely escape the distractions of our media-saturated 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 v...
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 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 promote 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 second 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 broad 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 examination of these three traditions together, including dissent from each modernity. 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.