13 September 2017

Dear friends and colleagues,

As you know, the beginning of this new academic year also happened to coincide with sad events of national and international significance that occurred right here in Charlottesville, both in town and on the grounds of the University of Virginia. As I’ve written before, the Unite the Right rally was a grotesque parody of democratic freedom and a carefully staged piece of violent political theater. The nativism and racism of the events were repugnant, and the consequences were horrifying. These sad events in our hometown may become, in their own way, a one-word trope in their own right—like Skokie—symbolizing tectonic shifts in our political culture.

There is so much to say about all of this, but in understanding the deeper cultural currents that have brought us to this point, the Institute is well-positioned to provide the kind of analysis and reflection that is generally lacking in our public culture. From the time of the Institute’s founding, I have felt an urgency about our work. My sense is that all of us feel that urgency today. It is time to redouble our efforts.

A New Moment

In anticipating the increasing need for the work we do, just over a year and a half ago the Institute began an important organizational transition. In several different settings last fall, I spoke to faculty, fellows, and staff about some of the moving parts, though I know I raised many more questions in your mind about the nature, direction, and meaning of this transition than I had answers. Mostly behind the scenes, the Institute during the last year has been undergoing significant organizational changes. As we enter the new academic year, I want to bring you up to date on the many things that have already begun to take shape and how I see the near future unfolding. The prospects for expanding our work and positioning it better within our public culture are excellent.

The Transition in Leadership

As you all know, in January 2016, Josh Yates stepped down from his position as Director of the Institute to pursue the Thriving Cities initiative full time. At that point, the Institute had provided four years of seed money for the Thriving Cities Project, and under his intellectual guidance, the project was growing in leaps and bounds. He and I both agreed that the Thriving Cities Project was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and that it would be a misuse of his gifts and a squandered moment not to take full
advantage of this opportunity. Since then, Josh has been running at Mach 5 to keep pace with the interest, demand, and need TCP has generated.

In the months and, truth be told, years leading up to this moment, I had become convinced that while I have played a part in founding and building the Institute to this stage, the Institute would not move to a higher level without new leadership. There are scholars who are talented institution-builders and effective managers of human, intellectual and financial resources, but I am not one of them. I long ago concluded that whatever role I play going forward, the Institute, in order to thrive, will need someone with different skills and greater capacities.

Launching our search for a new Director, we found Ryan Olson a year ago last May. Ryan has been an outstanding fit for the Institute; I couldn’t be more excited about the vision he is helping to shape. As many of you know, he has a D.Phil. in Classics from Oxford University, he is a published scholar (with, among other things, a book from Harvard), and has years of experience working with scholars, growing organizations, managing teams, building networks, and raising money. As I’ve mentioned before, Ryan’s title is Director of the Institute, but his actual role is defined more along the lines of a “dean.”

Most importantly, Ryan’s responsibilities are to build out the community of the Institute and lead it to a higher level of intellectual vitality, stability, productivity, visibility, and influence. In the process, he has been charged with cleaning up our systems, professionalizing operations, and building out our capacities (our development and communications functions, among others). This is an enormous job, and much of the institutional work was during the last year.

A Reorganization of Intellectual Labor

In addition, Ryan has begun to reorganize the Institute’s intellectual structures. While there are many details to work out, the work of the Institute will fall into three major sites: colloquies, phenomenology labs, and pan-Institute initiatives.

Colloquies: Our six Colloquies are interdisciplinary scholarly conversations organized around major questions concerning the reality and implications of cultural change. We are moving away from programmatic language to emphasize scholarly conversation and resulting products such as monographs, edited series, journal articles, and the like, rather than on pragmatic agendas.

The Colloquies and their basic guiding questions (at this point and certainly subject to refinement) are:

- Culture & Democracy: What are the fundamental challenges to liberal democracy in the early twenty-first century and what are its prospects for the future? (Chair: Owen)
- Religion & Late Modernity: What are the challenges to the viability of religious faith and other ethical sources in the late modern world? (Acting Chair: Hunter)

* A note on definition and usage: Latin col-[together] + loqui [to speak]. The plural of colloquy is colloquies, as in “The Colloquies of Erasmus”; the plural of colloquium is colloquia. The distinction in our usage is that a colloquium tends to be a singular, eventful conversation or discussion; a colloquy is an ongoing series of conversations and the network that gathers as a result.
• Picturing the Human: What are the emerging conceptualizations of human nature and selfhood, and what are alternatives? *(Chair: Davis)*
• Culture & Formation: What does it take to form good children, wise leaders, and virtuous citizens? *(Chair: Olson)*
• Culture, Capitalism & Global Change: What is the changing relationship of culture to capitalism in the early twenty-first century and what are the cultural conditions that might make genuine thriving possible, equitable, and sustainable? In this, what is the meaning of work? *(Chair: TBD)*
• Knowledge, Technology & Culture: What are the limits and possibilities of knowledge in our current technological climate? How do technologies that enable our knowledge affect our moral and ethical capacities? *(Chair: TBD)*

Institute Fellows and affiliated scholars will be invited or re-invited to be part of the Colloquy or Colloquies that match their areas of academic expertise and interest. Each Colloquy is chaired by a senior scholar who is able to spend administrative time providing direction and organizing networks. Depending on the scholars and the fields of study represented, Colloquies may meet once or twice each year in conferences and seminars, may host major or regular public lectures, and produce scholarly books, journal articles, weblog posts, and edited series or collections.

Out of these colloquies, we will continue to fund fellowships—as we have for over 20 years—for young, mid-career, and senior scholars. Going forward, we will likely tilt funding toward more established scholars. While we took a break this year so our Fellowship Committee could reevaluate and possibly tweak our fellowship program, we would like each incoming fellow to be associated with at least one colloquy that matches the fellow’s scholarly interests.

Phenomenology Labs: While we analyze and track changes in the deep structures of culture, we know these changes are experienced in the quotidian realities of daily life. While the Institute’s colloquies advance scholarly conversations in areas of relevant academic research, the Phenomenology Labs attempt to understand how people are grappling with cultural change at the level of lived experience or appearances. “What we need to explain is people living their lives,” wrote Taylor in *Sources of the Self*. “The terms in which they cannot avoid living them cannot be removed from the explanandum, unless we propose other terms in which they could live them more clairvoyantly. We cannot just leap outside of these terms altogether...."

The labs, then, attempt to understand the human experience of cultural change in urban centers that are often driven by metrics (Thriving Cities Lab—Yates, Research Director), in critical areas of social life where change is acutely felt but mysterious, e.g. self-presentation on technological platforms (Culture Lab—Davis, Research Director), and in large-scale institutions, e.g. of democracy or of religion (Survey Lab—Bowman, Research Director) for which quantitative data can be collected and innovatively interpreted every two to four years in major survey projects.

* *The Greek word from which we derive “phenomenon” means “what appears to view.”*
Our signature Friday Seminar will be run again under Joe Davis’s leadership as part of the Culture Lab. It will continue to serve as the discursive thread of the Institute, tying various elements of our ongoing intellectual conversation together. We will continue this as a discussion of great works and great works in progress, about every three weeks to a month. We want to offer other opportunities to gather to nurture friendships and collaborations, so we will begin hosting a mid-week lunch twice a month, as well as hosting occasional salons and discussion groups such as Tertulia. Please watch for invitations and come along to as many as you can make.

Pan-Institute Initiatives: In addition to the Colloquies and Phenomenology Labs, the Institute will continue and extend a number of Institute-wide initiatives.

The Hedgehog Review: Our flagship journal remains an indispensable product of the Institute. Jay Tolson continues to lead THR with Joe Davis as publisher. THR will draw ideas and material from the Culture Lab, and will work with all Institute leaders and scholars to develop ideas, themes, authors, and essays. Our goal is to of provide more resources to extend the journal’s quality, outreach, and beauty, as well as to assist in transitioning the journal to a quarterly.

Anchoring Statements: As this revised organizational structure is intended to provide the institutional context from which the emerging school of thought may arise, we also imagine revisiting and continuing to collaborate on anchoring statements. These can be books, essays, manifestos, etc. that define, elaborate, and clarify the Institute’s emerging school of thought. At this point, the only “official” statement is the vision statement the faculty and fellows wrote in 2006 and that the faculty and fellows of the Institute affirmed again in February 2016. For those who are unfamiliar with it, it is currently on our website. Others will come.

The Next Culture Conference: In addition to collaboration among colloquies and labs on anchoring statements, we also plan to launch the “Next Culture Conference.” As imagined in the past, this would be a singular gathering of scholars and public intellectuals, meeting once a year, to discuss the most important questions of the unfolding crisis of our late modern world.

Changing Roles:

In the midst of these changes, I will continue to hold the title of Executive Director, but I will occupy this role differently. I will continue to represent the Institute to the University administration and I will play a role in guiding the intellectual work of the Institute in all ways, not least through its colloquies. Otherwise, my role will be that of a senior fellow of the Institute contributing to building out the school of thought through my own scholarship.

Ryan will be running the Institute in the way that a dean would run a business school, a med school, or a college of arts and sciences. Though I’ll remain actively involved, he will be making and implementing decisions about all sorts of things, including strategy, personnel, budgets, and the
allocation and deployment of resources. Together, Ryan and I will serve as “co-principals,” designating administrative leaders who are facilitating the emerging school of thought.

All of what I’ve described thus far does raise questions about what the organizational chart for the Institute would look like, especially as it structures its intellectual labor. Here is a picture that might help:

All of this will need to be fine-tuned as we put it into practice. Note initially, however, that the colloquies appearing in dark blue are those that will be active in 2017-2018 because there were existing projects and/or defining documents that provide clear direction. The colloquies represented by the gray boxes (e.g. the Colloquy on Capitalism) do not have an event scheduled. Boxes with dashed lines indicate positions that are not yet filled, but may be in the coming year.

The Council Trust will serve as a “brain trust” for the intellectual agenda of the Institute, with each member indexed to at least one of the colloquies or labs, and with more frequent and granular engagement than the Board of Advisors. The Institute Council will be comprised of the current chairs of the colloquies and the research directors of the labs. The Council will be advised by the Trust. These bodies will change over time as we have the funding and strategic plans in place for the current and developing colloquies and labs.
Important Questions:

Beyond these, there are substantive questions about our future. Let me address what I anticipate will be several of these.

A school of thought? We have long spoken about the mission of the Institute as being oriented toward building a “school of thought.” The founding conviction of this Institute over 20 years ago was that we live in a moment of rupture, of civilizational transformation marked by the end of the Enlightenment project, and that both the intellectual paradigms for making sense of this moment and the models for practically addressing the challenges of this moment no longer work. We need a new paradigm for understanding the massive changes taking place and how to address them. This, of course, plays out differently in different areas of inquiry, but in each we aim for fresh and creative ways of thinking.

Is our use of the idea of “a school of thought” valid? Some may disagree, but I maintain that it is not only justifiable but useful. First, the school of thought we speak of is aspirational. No organization or community can achieve ends it hasn’t defined and no organization can rise above its ideals. As they say, our reach should exceed our grasp. So, our school of thought is something that will help us direct our strivings. Second, the school of thought is emergent. Elements of it already exist—our substantive concern with the nature and consequences of cultural change in late modernity, our focus on culture as “deep structure,” our inter-disciplinarity across the social sciences and humanities, our resistance to all forms of reductionism, and our refusal to politicize the pursuit of understanding into the kind of partisanship we see everywhere in the academy and in our public culture. The methodological elements of our emergent school of thought are as important as its substantive elements. Our task, above all, is to see clearly. All of these commitments are found in our “manifesto” and they are elaborated in over twenty years of scholarship, programs, survey work and publications. Yes, we need to theorize this aspirational and emergent school more fully, elaborate upon its nature and implications, and promote it more aggressively, but its contours are anything but inchoate.

In developing and advancing our school of thought, we will be ever more diligent and disciplined in all of our work. This commitment to the school will guide the kinds of decisions we make going forward about programs, projects, personnel, and so on. Precedent for what we hope to achieve can be found, among other sources, in the description of the Frankfurt School that was derived from the letters between Max Adorno and Walter Benjamin:

The letters reveal a sort of system of accountability, a relationship in which each was responsible for the integrity of the other’s “vital outlook” which would not become corrupted in their surroundings. The letters reveal “that ruthlessness with regard to the essential questions—and the authors regarded every one of their individual works as a contribution to a shared project of theoretical importance—expressed precisely that solidarity of criticism which is equally and simultaneously a form of intellectual self-criticism. That republic of the learned, which had lost its place in the established academic world, lived on in those who were forced to relinquish all academic security and to renounce all conventions external to the fundamental issues.” (Lonitz, Henri, ed., Theodore Adorno and Walter Benjamin: The Complete Correspondence 1928-1940. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998. Pg. 347.)
Intellectual capital? What we have accomplished over twenty years has been remarkable. The tally and quality of intellectual work, along with the fellows supported, fellows placed, and awards received, are significant for a small institute like ours. Yet, for all of this, we are intensely aware of the need to build intellectual depth if we are to shape the conversations we are in. This Institute has always been an act of faith and we have done the best we can, even while we aspire to do more and more better.

Our aim over the next five years is to make a dramatic leap forward in developing dense networks of scholars and a critical mass of scholarship within the colloquies. In the transition, however, our aim is to build depth through a renewed Advisory Board program involving senior scholars, through an effort to more greatly involve key UVa faculty, and through a few strategic junior hires.

Intellectual Leadership? How will we build this intellectual capital and who will constitute the intellectual core of the Institute?

The leadership of the Institute will, no doubt, evolve. While some this will occur naturally, we will actively seek to (a) expand the number, (b) diversify the profile, and (c) deepen the quality of our ranks. But what are the core criteria by which we pursue these aims?

All social organizations, as Shils observed, are differentiated by a continuum from center to periphery, and inside the center, we should add, is the core. These differentiations are only natural, and they will continue to exist in the Institute. How one is situated within the Institute will be a function of several considerations.

First, the core of the Institute’s interdisciplinary intellectual community will consist of those who are committed to the vision and mission of building out our unique school of thought. In short, they are intellectually “on board.”

Second, the heart of the community will be those who are institution-builders. Clearly, different people bring different skills, abilities, and experiences to the table, but the ideal is for a group of scholars who are constructive (as in positive, helpful, supportive), and proactive (as in initiating and self-starting), and entrepreneurial (as in intellectually, socially, and financially generative) in their commitment to the task of building out the Institute’s emergent school of thought and the community that gives it expression. Against the fragmentation of intellectual life so rampant today, this kind of mutual commitment is the only way that scholarly conversations and the communities that sustain them can become more than the sum of their parts.

Third, the core of the Institute’s community will be defined by its talent and constituted by accomplished innovators. Academic institutions have created hierarchies of rank that are byzantine in character. The reality is that the intellectual and scholarly world actually tends to be a binary between those who generate ideas and energy and demonstrate mastery in the craft and those who don’t, and this holds across rank. We already have a solid record of drawing from the company of rainmakers, and we will continue to build that record with scholars who pursue the highest levels of excellence and accomplishment in their fields, and do this, of course, without consideration for formal rank or anything else.
It should go without saying that we will continue to preserve the freedom and authority of scholars to pursue their work as they see fit. Once delegated, those in authority will have authority to get the job done.

Moving Forward:

The recent events in our hometown have reminded us that the appearances of day-to-day life often mask monumental changes taking place all around us. Our task is to make sense of and critique those changes from the vantage point of a capacious humanism. This continues to be an enormous task, but one—given all that is at stake—that carries a moral imperative. Given the magnitude of the task and all that is at stake, it is essential that the Institute live into its mission.

It is to these ends that through the coming academic year, we will continue to move along the trajectory I’ve outlined over the last few pages, taking stock of each part of our work and community as we reestablish a foundation for the future. As you have questions, please ask. Ryan and I will do our best to provide answers.

The Institute has been, from its earliest days, a work in progress. It continues to be so. For all of the mistakes we have made along the way and for all of our enduring flaws, I don’t believe there is anything anywhere quite like the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture. Its dedication to posing intellectually exciting questions of enduring significance, its ability to provide a congenial place for robust intellectual engagement and scholarly excellence, and its potential to provide clarity in this confusing and conflicted world is unrivaled.

Thank you for being part of this initiative and in helping to bring the Institute to this stage. Ryan and I look forward to working with you in the future as we strive to more fully realize its goals.

With best wishes,

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