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“The National Humanities Center as an Institute for Advanced Study “

The first institute for advanced study was founded in 1930, when educational reformer Abraham Flexner secured funding for what he conceived as a new kind of educational institution. As he saw it, the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton would constitute a radical departure from universities of the past in that it would be devoted to advanced research in “the most fundamental areas of knowledge”; this research, Flexner thought, could best be done by scholars who, operating without the burdens and distractions of ordinary university life, would “be left to pursue their own ends in their own ways . . . in tranquility.” Behind this plan was not just the belief, characteristic of modernity, that creative individuals ought to be left to their own devices, but a specific tradition of thinking about the role of research in the modern university. Wilhelm von Humboldt founded the first University of Berlin on the beliefs that a university should be a place of research as well as education and learning, and that research was best pursued in an atmosphere of freedom and autonomy. In one of the canonical expressions of this tradition, John Henry Newman wrote, in *The Idea of the University*, that “the common sense of mankind has associated the search after truth with seclusion and quiet. The greatest thinkers have been too intent on their subject to admit of interruption. . . .

Pythagoras lived for a time in a cave . . . . Friar Bacon lived in his tower upon the Isis.” A student of this tradition, Flexner conceived of the Institute as a place for scholars and graduate students; the innovation lay in the elimination of undergraduates. Soon, however, the scholars decided that even the graduate students constituted “interruptions,” and these were shed, leaving the scholars alone with their thoughts.

Just as important as freedom and solitude was, of course, the creation of a scholarly community. The scholars at the Institute were gathered together in the expectation that their interactions—even those of an informal, unstructured, and even chance nature—would produce more interesting results than any individual could achieve on his or her own. Scholars from many different disciplines, freed from the responsibilities and distractions of ordinary faculty life and from the restraints imposed by departmental organization, could, it was felt, realize to the fullest degree the idea, or ideal, of a university.

Financially and structurally autonomous, the Institute defined itself as a home for free inquiry in a wide range of fields (mathematics, natural science, historical studies, and social science), whose course would be determined by curiosity and the quest for truth alone, not by the interests of the state or the profit motive. While the founders of the Institute were confident of the ultimate value of the research that would be done there, they felt strongly that immediate utility should not be the measure of success. The history of the Institute was affected directly and radically by the rise of National Socialism in Germany, which produced an exodus of distinguished German and Jewish scholars, some of whom (Einstein, von Neumann, Goedel) wound up at Princeton. The presence of these intellectual and political refugees not only ensured that the Institute would be

international in character, but also lent political and even moral urgency to the concept of free and unfettered research.

After WWII, a second such institute for advanced study, the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, was formed at Stanford with the backing of the Ford Foundation. Like the Princeton institute, this center was financially independent and committed to the idea of free, unsponsored research conducted in a spirit of informality. Also like the Institute, the Stanford Center offered residential fellowships for scholars from all over the country, and indeed all over the world. Stanford differed from its predecessor in several ways, however. It had no permanent faculty, selected its scholars by nomination rather than by application, was largely restricted to the social and human sciences (very broadly defined), and operated on a far smaller scale—some 45 scholars in residence at a single time, rather than the nearly 200 at Princeton. In these respects, it could be described as a more fully evolved instance of the idea of an institute for advanced study than Princeton, which retained vestiges of its original conception as a new kind of university.

Perhaps the most distinctive aspect of the Stanford Center, however, was the spirit of activism that informed it. Bjorn Wittrock, Principal of the Swedish Collegium (SCASSS), describes the founding idea of the Center as “a sense of social and political awareness, indeed a belief that the social and behavioural sciences could contribute to an encompassing process of democratization. It was,” he adds, “also inspired by a commitment to a process of change within the social sciences and towards making them more akin to the natural sciences, less speculative, more experimental in their empirical orientation.” In other words, the Stanford Center conceived of itself not merely as a

scholarly sanctuary for social scientists, but as an agent for change and innovation in the disciplines themselves. It was the spirit of informal collegiality that prevailed during the early years at Stanford that inspired the sociologist Robert Merton to coin the term “serendipity.”

In recent years, other such institutes have emerged, especially in Europe, where, von Humboldt notwithstanding, the notion that universities were sites of advanced research is a more recent development than in the United States. Since 1970, institutes for advanced study have been formed in the Netherlands (NIAS, 1970), Berlin (Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, 1980), Uppsala (SCASSS, 1985), and Budapest (Budapest Collegium, 1992), with others now being developed in Helsinki, Moscow, and elsewhere. In a very striking development, Radcliffe College has over the last several years transformed itself into the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. SIAS, the consortium of American and European institutes for advanced study to which the National Humanities Center belongs, began with six members in the early 1990s and now numbers nine. Surveying these developments, Francis Oakley has suggested that we may be witnessing a third phase in the production of knowledge, the first having been marked by the emergence of universities in the late medieval era, and the second by the emergence of research universities in the latter half of the 19th century. In this new phase, the institute for advanced study, with its flexibility, intellectual freedom, and efficiency, may well prove to be the most effective way of advancing new inquiries or projects that do not conform to the patterns of pre-existing university departments or established research agendas.

As the third institute for advanced study formed in the United States, The National Humanities Center drew on elements from both of its predecessors. Like them, the NHC is structurally and financially independent of any other institution, and devoted to free and unsponsored research; like them, too, the Center offers nine-month residential fellowships to scholars from a wide range of disciplines. With forty scholars in residence at a time, the Center is closer in size to Stanford, which it also resembles in having no permanent faculty. But, like IAS, each scholar applies and is evaluated individually.

The NHC's unique focus on the humanities might seem to be restrictive, but it has not in practice been so, in large part because of the character of the humanities themselves. At one time defined in terms of a few academic disciplines such as literature, philosophy, and history, the conception of the humanities has been steadily expanding in recent decades to include more disciplines and a greater range of questions and methodologies, unified only by a common interest in the spacious and variable concept of "the human." Today, some scholars in departments of archeology, linguistics, religion, anthropology, and psychology can consider themselves to be working in "the humanities." Indeed, the now-traditional notion of a "crisis in the humanities" (the subject of a book as long ago as 1964) might be in part attributed to this increasing inclusiveness, since with each incorporation the humanities become less assured of their essential character.

There are several reasons for thinking that the National Humanities Center might be the most perfectly realized or "purest" example of the concept of the institute for advanced study. Among all the disciplines, the humanities are perhaps the most resistant to determination by political or economic interests. Seventy years ago, such interests had

little or no investment in academic research of any kind, but after World War II, when the immense practical benefits of science became apparent, the state rapidly became the leading financier of science, mathematics, and economics. With the extraordinary power of the state to set “research policy” that determines what will be promoted and what will not, it has become difficult to defend pure research as a scientific ideal. The humanities, however, remain largely independent. In part, this autonomy is simply the most favorable interpretation of relative neglect. When the National Humanities Center was founded, the budget of the National Science Foundation alone was about five times that of the National Endowment for the Humanities; today, the ratio is three hundred to one. While this huge and growing gap is often lamented by humanists, the fact is that the humanities offer little direct benefit to taxpayers, and many of the most eloquent defenses of the humanities (a genre dominated by eloquence) actually insist on the deferred, diffused, or indirect benefits of humanistic study as a point of principle. The humanities have proven to be singularly resistant to external appropriation, and in this sense they can be said to exemplify more fully than other disciplines the autonomy posited as an ideal by the founders of the institutes at Princeton and Stanford.

The humanities also exemplify the spirit of advanced research in that, more so than other disciplines, they engage “fundamental areas of knowledge.” Informing all work in the humanities, no matter how particularized, fine-grained, or local, is the question of the human. We look to the humanities to provide knowledge about human culture, human imagination, human capacities, and a human heritage; humanists are students and interpreters of human experience or creative activity. No question could be more fundamental, especially in a democratic society composed, in principle, of

reflective, self-aware citizens capable both of commitment to shared goals and of the invaluable activities of dissent and critique. Dedicated, as Edward Said argues in his new book *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, to the project of achieving self-awareness through self-criticism, the humanities contribute directly to the “encompassing process of democratization” described by Wittrock as the ideological cornerstone of the Center for Advanced Study in Behavioral Sciences.

The primary advantage of freestanding institutes for advanced study is that they encourage cross-disciplinary conversation and dialogue to a far greater extent than can be achieved in a university setting. At some institutes, however, the great range of disciplines represented actually constitutes a practical barrier to cross-disciplinary conversation; at the National Humanities Center, the contiguity between disciplines means that there is a far greater likelihood that scholars will feel themselves to be engaged in a common enterprise. When each can engage with any other—the medievalist with the architectural historian, the literary scholar with the philosopher, the anthropologist with the critical theorist—the sense of genuine scholarly community, as opposed to a mere aggregation of privilege, is strengthened. The Center is the common point of reference for what Robert Connor often described as the largest humanities faculty in the world, the more than nine hundred scholars who have been fellows there since its inception.

And so, if the first two ways in which the National Humanities Center might be said to exemplify the concept of the institute for advanced study concern intellectual autonomy and intellectual depth, the third is the singular degree to which the ideal of the scholarly community to which all can contribute equally is realized.

Over the past several years, the National Humanities Center has begun to differentiate itself from its peer institutions in another way. Through its Education Programs, the Center has become committed to strengthening teaching in the humanities. Prepared by distinguished scholars working with teachers and with the Center's staff, the Center's online professional development seminars, or "toolboxes," as well as the secondary material presented in the "TeacherServe" format, are available to any school district, any teacher, or any study with computer access. The three toolboxes currently online have been used by school districts in five states for professional development, and by individual scholars and students for a wide variety of purposes. Recently, these toolboxes have begun to appear in college syllabi as well.

It is the Center's ambition to present a comprehensive and integrated program in American culture and history that meets national standards. Today, three years after the first toolbox went online, the Center's Education Programs are already acknowledged as national leaders in the field of professional development. It may appear that, with its commitment to teaching, the Center has departed from the standard model of the institute for advanced study. But the Center regards this commitment as entirely consistent with its mission. Indeed, one might argue that with the decision to segregate scholars from students altogether, other institutes for advanced study have sacrificed one of Flexner's original ambitions, to create a new kind of educational institution, an innovative kind of university. This ambition, as we have seen, was sacrificed to another ambition, to create the best possible conditions for scholarly research. Through its programs in education, the National Humanities Center has discovered a way to realize Flexner's educational goal while preserving the productive tranquility of the scholarly environment.