


# Letters

THE SEMIANNUAL NEWSLETTER OF THE ROBERT PENN WARREN CENTER FOR THE HUMANITIES

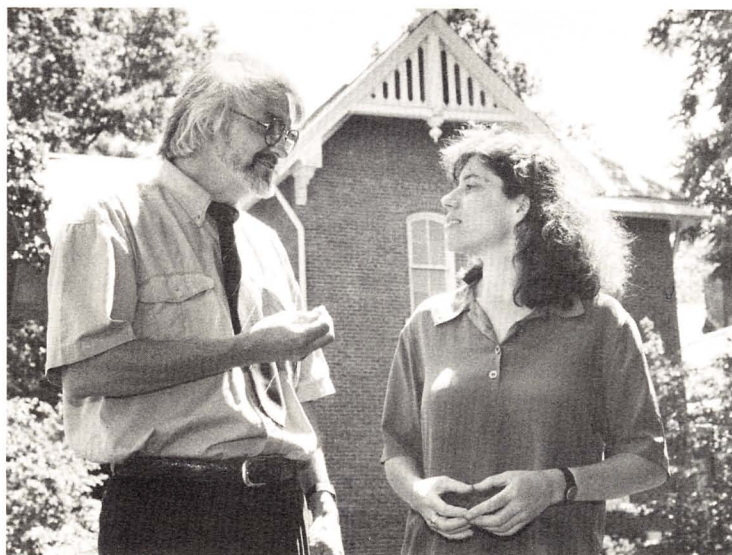
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## Science and Society

The study of the relation between science and society has become more urgent since the great technological advances of the last half of the twentieth century. The University, and the Humanities Center in particular, makes possible the interactions between scientists and their colleagues that keep this study informed and dynamic. The 1994/95 Fellows Program, "Science and Society," directed by Arleen M. Tuchman, Associate Professor of History, and John A. McCarthy, Professor of German, and including participants from diverse areas within science and the humanities, will explore connections and tensions between science and society. Professors Tuchman and McCarthy recently met with *Letters* to discuss their views of this year's program.

MCCARTHY: Arleen and I want to create a history for the Fellows group, to create a sense of organization, of ordered movement, while the actual experience might be rather disordered and in disarray. I am thinking about this in terms of the science of chaos, but not in terms of "chaos theory." In the field of literature, we are always dealing with various theories, approaches to the study of literature, and its contexts and recontextualizations. The most basic definition of theory has to do with seeing things attentively, not just taking in this or that stimulus. Now what does that mean? Seeing and making connections between individual phenomena—that for me is already theory. That was already theory for Goethe, going beyond action, beyond just the openness to sensations.

TUCHMAN: When you say



John A. McCarthy, Professor of German, and Arleen M. Tuchman, Associate Professor of History, will co-direct this year's Fellows Program.

you are not interested in chaos theory but the science of chaos, do you mean that you are not interested in the way in which the science of chaos has been misunderstood and applied?

MCCARTHY: No. In Germany last year, when I was pursuing this topic, I taught an advanced seminar at the University of Munich. It was a large group of about 50 people including mathematicians, philosophers, physicists, chemists, as well as the normal contingent of people in literary studies. I kept talking about the theory of chaos and the natural scientists said, "No, it is the science of chaos." In the English-language literature on chaos, the normal reference is "theory," while there is quite a bit of reference to science as well. On the German side they always talk about "*Chaos Forschung*," research or science of chaos. I did not want to offend. I wanted to ex-

plain why I thought it was possible to talk in terms of a theory of chaos. But after having to confront these students for three months, and they were very recalcitrant, I finally decided that by speaking on theory of chaos what I am doing is preempting a broader understanding of what is involved in this science of chaos. Science tries to be objective, tries to study phenomena without predetermining a perception of everything that occurs and can be taken in and observed by the human mind, by the senses. "Theory" indicates perhaps that there is already a preconceived notion of what is involved in the phenomenon before you even study it. I want to avoid that.

TUCHMAN: I am not sure that is the distinction I would make between science and theory. While I agree with you that scientists attempt objectivity, no scientist today would deny that the

observer is part of the process of interpretation. Chaos theorists have proposed a theory as to how certain natural processes unfold. A theory should never be understood as something that is set in stone. It seems as though you want to call it a science to suggest that there is an attempt at objectivity, but why would calling it a theory suggest that there isn't?

MCCARTHY: Let me back up for a moment. I would agree that natural scientists are fully aware that what they are doing is an attempt, and only an attempt, at being as objective as it is humanly possible to be. We are always interfering; every time we reflect upon what we have perceived there is already an imposition of the self on the object, and we change things that way. But I was reacting to the perception of these German scientists who were very adamant about not referring to chaos as a theory but rather as a science. For them theory implied the imposition of a human order on a natural phenomenon, and by observing phenomena from that preset position, one could no longer see what was happening because one was looking for certain things.

TUCHMAN: How does one propose to engage in scientific study without a theory? It almost would be suggesting that it is possible not to have some idea of how things are ordered when one goes out to study nature, which is

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## MCCARTHY:

There seems to be some genetic coding in us, something that forces us to dare to toy with ideas, to dare to expand those parameters just to see where they will lead, and we cannot always anticipate whether the outcome is going to be good or bad.

an impossibility. It could be that we are aware that a particular theory has problems—for instance, the theory of evolution according to natural selection. But to imagine that your understanding of the problems could actually lead you to be so open-minded that you no longer have an ordering system is a philosophical position with which I disagree.

MCCARTHY: Many people would disagree with the position of the radical deconstructionists who would say that it is all openness and that it does not matter which order you impose and that any order is fine, that the text opens itself to any number of different interpretations.

TUCHMAN: That is a different question than whether you are able to study nature without some kind of ordering system.

MCCARTHY: We all need some kind of ordering system, and that is what I find fascinating about this interfacing of science and society as well as society and science. We agree that it is not a one way street of influence—it is not just natural science that acts upon society but it is also the other way around. That is something that we must assume is a premise for everything that is discussed.

LETTERS: It seems unavoidable to see it as a two way street, given how you are thinking of the theoretical in relation to the scientific. I am wondering if you are thinking of theory, or if you were warned off of theory, as a sort of synonym with ideology.

TUCHMAN: When I hear “chaos theory” I think of it like “theory of evolution” or “relativity theory.” I do not think of it as ideology at all.

MCCARTHY: There are many who have come to think of it as ideology and I do not want any association with ideology. With respect to the difference between ideology and theory or science, I am thinking along the following lines. With the decentering of the universe with the Copernican turn, there has been a switch

from an emphasis on the past and from the hope that one could return to paradise, to Plato’s mythical Arcadia, or achieve the state of lost innocence associated with that more perfect realm. With this change in emphasis, there has been a shift to the future. It comes with the development of scientific tools which have extended our sensory perception. We have been able to go out beyond the rather limited spheres of interaction and reach out to the margins of the universe. Nevertheless, this shift in perspective from an ideal state in the past to the possibilities of the future is translated into a decentering of that point of view. That is to say, this shift has privileged scientific endeavors in their effort to reshape the world, to create the perfect human being, to create the perfect society. This has been particularly obvious since the 16th century, and of course it picked up speed in the 18th and 19th centuries and it still dominates. So that there is, even in our endangered world, a general perception that we can turn to science to save us from our own mistakes, that science will be able to correct its mistakes. I am not sure that it is appropriate to talk about the mistakes of science, but rather the scientific paradigms that have evolved. We are evolving, we are playing with our genes and with our environments, in the same sense that we are hoping to get our students to play with ideas. It is no longer a question of finding a focal point, a place, a locus which gives us meaning, it is now a question of the perimeters. The corner markers are being shifted around all the time, and so the perimeters are being shifted, but we still have our coordinates.

So I agree that we need order, we cannot operate without any kind of order, but we have now

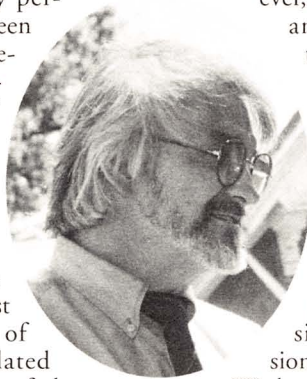
come to understand that our ordering systems are not permanent, that they are constantly undergoing change.

LETTERS: Would you see the development of science in the same light?

TUCHMAN: I would be more comfortable than John is about talking about mistakes. However, John has pointed to an interesting irony, that as a society we blame science and technology for the problems that we are grappling with in the 20th century, and yet we turn to them to solve those very problems. There is a similar kind of tension in medicine as well.

We have a population that is growing increasingly dissatisfied with what modern medicine produces while its expectations of what modern medicine should deliver are rising. Part of the problem is that science, understood as the natural sciences, has emerged as the body of knowledge to which people turn to answer fundamental questions. Who are we? Why is nature what it is? What are we capable of?

With the turn to the natural sciences, an expectation also arose that the natural sciences could do only good. There was a shift away from any kind of discussion about ethics, and an expectation that the questions that were being asked and their answers would only further human progress. The collapse of ethical discussion is something that we are continuing to struggle with today, most directly in society’s unwillingness to police the internal activities of the scientific and medical communities. The claim by the scientific community is often that people who do not have the knowledge cannot possibly police those who do have it. Yet a lot of the decisions that we are confronting today about our society and where it is going have to be debated in



an environment that moves outside of science, that works with the scientific community but that is conducted on a much broader ethical plane. I was recently reviewing some essays in which a number of students were asking why the Nuremberg medical trials had absolutely no impact on the American medical community at the time, why there was very little response to them, and most importantly why they generated so little self-reflection or self-policing. The medical community thought that what happened in Germany was barbarism, but that it had nothing to do with ethics because it had been bad science, and since it had been bad science then that was the central issue. Had it been good science . . . they did not even pursue that. Where I would differ with John is that I think it is important that we start a discussion about mistakes, those we have already made, and those that we are about to make. For instance, I am very concerned about the human genome project.

MCCARTHY: You are?

TUCHMAN: Yes. I am concerned not only about what is going to be done with the knowledge, but also about one of the ways in which the project is being promoted—that we are going to learn about human identity. I cannot see what decoding the human genome is going to tell us about human identity.

MCCARTHY: I am not sure that we can determine or alter human identity by simply rearranging gene sets. If we are not capable of objectively perceiving external reality without changing it by the very act of attention to certain things, because we are prioritizing by attending to them, we may be altering the game plan even as we think we are determining how that game plan works. What sets chaos apart from other paradigms is its indeterminacy, its openness, its unpredictability, its non-linearity. Because of all those fuzzy terms



## TUCHMAN:

The kind of knowledge the scientific and medical communities are producing is so powerful that . . . I am not certain that we should leave it up to scientists and medical researchers alone to determine what is good and what is bad.

which do not allow us to come up with a strictly ordered structure, what we find is that instead of having something concrete to work with, we are opening up spaces. By defining spaces we are opening up the margins and the periphery. In between these defined spaces, there are holes. We all know this. If we take a microscope to our skin, our skin is very porous, it has got to be because we need its interaction. This table is not really firm and solid. Particles could pass through it. What I see here is a parallel to opening up spaces in the science of chaos.

In terms of science being perceived as an instrument for the good, yes, that was absolutely the case. There was actually no question in the 18th century that science and technology could be used to bring about a better life. But that usually translated into material goods. It is clear, however, that the quality of the good life is determined by moral components as well as physical, while science and technology had been too long focused only on the material side.

TUCHMAN: Unless you think about the sciences of man. The real hope in the 18th century was that the sciences would provide us with an understanding of human nature and enable us to shape it in the same way that we shape our environment. They hoped that they would be able to enhance human evolution, and the material ends were certainly a part of it. It was a translation of science into technology. Perhaps what concerns me is that the craving or thirst for knowledge will end in a Faustian nightmare.

MCCARTHY: The Faustian nightmare? I thought it was an ideal!

TUCHMAN: This ideal will sometimes lead to a disregard for values that a particular culture holds dear. I am not saying that people who engage in science do not have any understanding of ethics so that they need people from outside who can consider such issues. But any group will

sometimes lose perspective if it functions in isolation. The kind of knowledge the scientific and medical communities are producing is so powerful that it is altering all of our lives all the time at every moment, and I am not certain that we should leave it up to scientists and medical researchers alone to determine what is good and what is bad. We as a society need to be engaging in a dialogue. I am too much a realist to think that we could ever stop certain avenues of research, so the most I could hope for is that they are being discussed.

MCCARTHY: I could not agree more. We need to break down the disciplinary boundaries and apprise one another of the distinctive parameters of the discipline. Without those parameters, no discipline. Obviously, we cannot do without the disciplines. I could talk in terms of convergent and divergent forces. Thomas Kuhn uses those terms in his notion of a paradigm change. The convergent forces are those which are disciplinarily focused. The divergent ones would be those which would take the attention off the task at hand and force the researcher, whether in the humanities or in the sciences, to look at a related field and say: "Well, what impact might my project have in another area."

TUCHMAN: I would want to argue here that ethics should be part of the scientific enterprise.

MCCARTHY: I agree with you. But on the other hand I am also firmly convinced that any thought which is capable of being formulated will be formulated. And if it is capable of being formulated and thought privately for oneself, we are also "communication bound." As social creatures, we are driven to share those thoughts with others. Once you have thought a thought, there is no way you can police it or cen-

sor it. It is going to come out.

TUCHMAN: No, but you can perhaps, if there is enough discussion, develop a consensus that this is something on which we do not want to act.

MCCARTHY: You have reminded me of the dilemma faced by Robert Oppenheimer in the development of the atomic bomb as thematized by the Swiss writer, Friedrich Dürrenmatt, in his black comedy *The Physicists*. The chief protagonist, Johann Wilhelm Möbius, feigns insanity to prevent his theory of field unity from becoming public knowledge. If it got into

the wrong hands, the consequences could be deadly. However, he was a scientist, an atomic physicist, and he continued to work in his cell. He thought only for himself, but his manuscripts were spirited outside and he was no longer in control. "All these years," he said, "I have tried to protect the world from the abuse of this knowledge, but at the same time I could not stop from developing my ideas." There seems to be some genetic coding in us, something that forces us to dare to toy with ideas, to dare to expand those parameters just to see where they will lead, and we cannot always anticipate whether the outcome is going to be good or bad. If we take a perspective which is far removed from that of the human race, what happens to the human race is of little concern within the cosmic perception.

LETTERS: There is a difference between the two of you of which I am sure you are well aware. John, you are willing to use scientific terminology and the products of science itself in metaphorical terms to help you with your theoretical work and your understanding of the world. Whereas, Arleen, you do not

seem to do that at all. You also seem to be slightly suspicious of it. Is this merely an aesthetic, stylistic difference?

TUCHMAN: This is one of the things about which I am curious to learn in the course of the year. I do not know whether it is because of my training in the sciences or because of my upbringing, but I do not tend to use a lot of metaphors when I speak, at least not consciously. John does. I often do not know how metaphorically he is speaking and how literally. My sense is that what he says functions more on the level of metaphor and then I just think we have a difference in style. I am actually intrigued to move around in that space. If he is speaking more literally in these moments, then we will get into more disagreements about this, because, for instance, I am uncomfortable with claims that somehow we can explain our creativity through our genetic code. But I do not think that is what he means. I also keep thinking, "I do not need to do anything with John, the scientists will!"

MCCARTHY: Yes, I know. I am looking forward to that. I was not aware that I was using metaphors. I thought I was talking about things.

TUCHMAN: I was actually surprised when you first said suspicion, but I may indeed be suspicious. This was apparent when we were constructing the project and we had a similar discussion about whether there was a two way street between science and culture or not. My sense is that John accepts the power of the scientific paradigm more than I do. I do not think that there is any difference between us in how much we admire the knowledge that science is producing. Sometimes I think that John's fascination with science translates into a willingness to give it an explanatory power on broader questions than I am willing to give it.

MCCARTHY: What I am hoping is that my obvious bias which





is predetermined by my own profession and what I do on a daily basis will be corrected toward the middle. That means that maybe some of the metaphorical language, some of the fuzzy thinking which is endemic in this kind of endeavor will be corrected. But on the other hand, "fuzzy thinking" is what goes on in every creative individual; it is part and parcel of the aesthetic in the humanities. So I am looking forward to this chance and opportunity for a correction of the imbalance.

I do not mean to privilege the stance and the attitude of the natural sciences. They give us a different perspective, but it is a perspective on the same questions which concern humanists deep down beneath the surface. We are all looking at the same thing, and it is a question of identity, as you said before. "Who am I?" "What am I doing here?" "Where am I going?" We no longer have the comfort of a telos which has been passed onto us. God has disappeared. Maybe she died, right? As Nietzsche mused. We no longer have this light to follow and we are sort of groping in the dark, and any theory or any hypothesis is valid until it is proven to be inappropriate within a given context. Meaning that maybe given the appropriate context, even the wildest of hypotheses might be appropriate.

LETTERS: Are you taking science as roughly well-situated within an accepted and unquestionable metaphysical enterprise?

MCCARTHY: Yes.

TUCHMAN: So you do have this idea that with science, it is possible to figure it out once and for all.

MCCARTHY: Isn't that what the human genome project is all about?

TUCHMAN: That is what some believe it is all about.

MCCARTHY: Well, OK. This is what the particle physicist believes it is all about.

TUCHMAN: Yes, but you are accepting it! As critics of the scientific enterprise we are supposed

to point out the questionability of that belief.

MCCARTHY: That belief is a function of what scientists do. They examine and they dissect and they try to understand. It is entirely logical and appropriate for them to act that way. We cannot just simply go off in all directions at once, we have got to study the needlepoint.

TUCHMAN: I agree with you. But I wonder about your claim that this reductionist path will lead inevitably to a point where we will have "figured it out."

MCCARTHY: I am not that convinced that even if we were able to decode the genetic codes so that we can recut it the way we want to that we would in fact be entirely successful on a more global plane. The global perspective is something we are always paying lip service to, and indeed we need to try to keep the big picture. Nevertheless, all our endeavors are in the small realm, in the very restricted and limited area, because we can police that and we can measure progress and movement.

TUCHMAN: You and I differ here as well. I agree with you about the global, but I disagree with you about the small. Every time a question is answered, a thousand others are raised. I have never seen the development of science as ever leading to the point where something has been figured out. It is constantly changing.

MCCARTHY: That is why finding the top quark does not constitute an end.

TUCHMAN: It is the beginning.

MCCARTHY: It is the beginning of something else, though we do not know of what it is the beginning. We do not know because it is unpredictable.

TUCHMAN: When I look at the search for the top quark, what is interesting to me is why at a particular time, in a particular place and context do people believe that finding the top quark would answer an important set of

questions. I distance myself from the knowledge, though at the same time I am fascinated by it. I distance myself from the particular knowledge and what it might be saying about how the real world is structured. I do want to know what they are finding out. There is a part of me that is as much a materialist as you are, but I tend much more toward a social constructionist position than you do.

MCCARTHY: I will accept that. I am motivated by a search for philosophical unity or wholeness, a theory of everything.

TUCHMAN: You are looking for some kind of truth, with a capital "T", but I do not know what it means to tell the truth here. It depends what is meant by "truth." When I say that there is a material world that sets constraints, I do not mean that it dictates one possible answer. We are constantly changing what we are asking of nature. For example, in genetics when one starts talking about the central dogma where information travels in only one direction, from the gene out into the cell, there is a lot riding on that interpretation. The central dogma regards DNA as an autonomous structure, uninfluenced by its environment. This picture dominated genetics for decades and is consistent with ideas of biological determinism. Yet as early as the 1950s, Barbara McClintock argued for a different picture of DNA. She viewed DNA in a dynamic relationship with the environment. Yet her work was ignored until recently. What fascinates me is how this dynamic picture of DNA raises interesting questions about the divisions we make between biology and environment, or nature and nurture. I would imagine it is the same with the physical world. Sure there is some kind of truth about the discovery of the structure of DNA and how it replicates itself, but the way scientists interpret these processes is much more than a self-evident description of natural events.

MCCARTHY: If we are in fact products of nature in our biological and mental make-up, if we are willing to grant that the information flow or knowledge flow is not just from the sciences to the humanities and social sciences, but also the other way around, then it seems to me logical to expect that it is not just we human beings who are making demands of nature, but in a very real manner nature is also making demands of us. Nature is provoking us to respond to natural phenomena, to our physical environment, and to notions of what the good life is to be. And I see therefore a dialogue between human consciousness and physical reality, and that is what motivates me. I am not sure I would be very happy with consensus. I am not expecting the Fellows' seminar to reach a consensus. I do not care if we all agree upon the actual existence of material reality or not. What I am hoping for is a consciousness raising. That I will know a lot more about modernity in Spanish literature, and a heck of a lot more about molecular biology than I did at the beginning. And that enhancement of the knowledge and the perspective hopefully will impact upon what I am thinking about and what I am trying to do.

LETTERS: Do you have the same kind of hope?

TUCHMAN: I would have to say yes and no. I do not want a lot of consensus because that would be sterile. I also do not want there to be such fundamental disagreement about the basic assumptions about who we are in the world that it becomes impossible to talk to each other. So, I hope that there is enough consensus that we can have a very stimulating discussion about our disagreements.

MCCARTHY: Arleen and I have agreed to disagree.

TUCHMAN: We have no choice, do we!



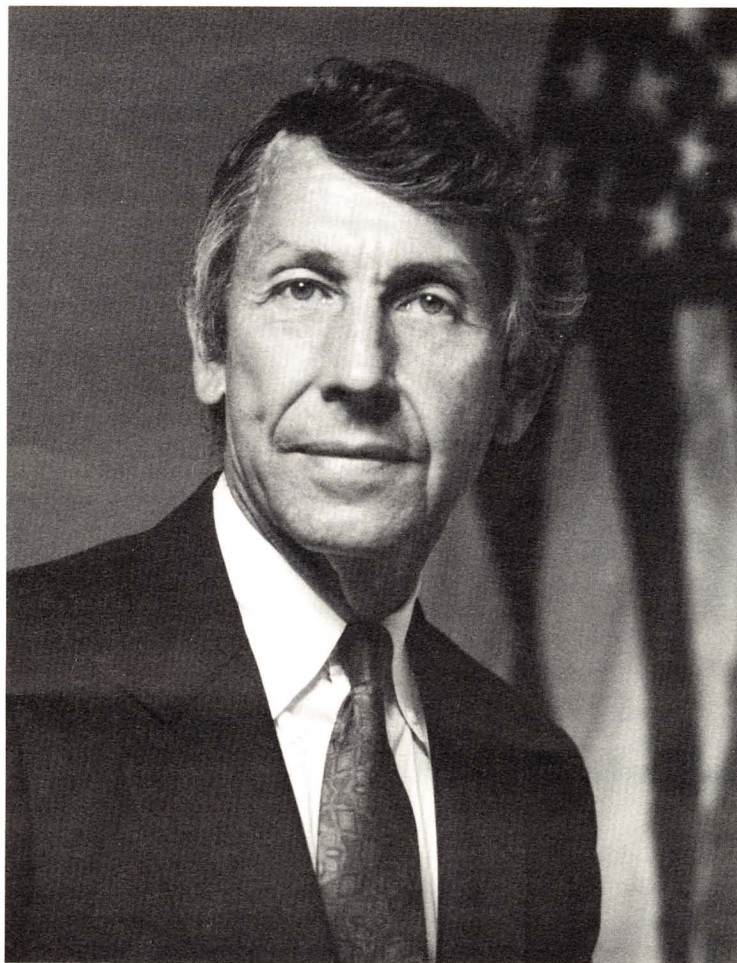
# The National Conversation

*Remarks by Sheldon Hackney  
Chairman, National Endowment for the Humanities*

*On March 30, 1994, the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities hosted a visit by Sheldon Hackney, Chairman of the National Endowment of the Humanities and Vanderbilt University Alumnus, Class of 1955. Dr. Hackney participated in a seminar at the Center for the Humanities. He also gave a public address regarding his new initiative at the N.E.H., the "National Conversation." Following are the remarks he delivered to members of the Vanderbilt community.*

**W**hy does it matter who we think we are, either individually or collectively? What difference does it make what image of America is shared by its citizens? The idea of America, though always more rooted in aspiration than reality, has pulled this experiment on democracy forward from the first toward its dream of "liberty and justice for all." That dream, the same one Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke so eloquently about at the Lincoln Memorial during the march on Washington in 1963, has powered one of the noble stories of America, the story of the expansion of the promise of American life to embrace increasing proportions of its citizens. The idea is tutor to the act.

Archibald MacLeish, in an essay published in 1949 as a warning against the mounting hysteria of anti-Communism, wrote, "the soul of a people is the image it cherishes of itself; the aspect in which it sees itself against its past; the attributes to which its future conduct must respond. To destroy that image is to destroy, in a very real sense, the identity of the nation, for to destroy the image is to destroy the means by which the nation recognizes what it is and what it has to do. But the image a people holds of itself is created not by words alone or myths but by its actions. Unless the actions are appropriate to the image, the image is blurred. If the actions deny the image, the image



is destroyed. . . . A people who have been real to themselves because they were for something cannot continue to be real to themselves when they find they are merely against something."

The question I raise today is not so much about actions that are inconsistent with our image of ourselves as about what we are going to be for now that we don't have the "evil empire" to be against? Do we have a clear and an adequate image of ourselves in the post-cold war world, given all the threats to political stability and human welfare both foreign and domestic, given the dangerous fragmentation of a world in which the closeness imposed by modern communications and the global economy has reemphasized the differences within the human family? What is the United States

going to be for in the 21st century? What picture of an ideal America is going to inform our struggles with current problems? What notion of shared commitments, mutual obligations, civic virtues, will help us come together to solve common problems?

Writing in the *New York Times* (March 27, 1994), Henry Louis Gates, Jr. of Harvard University put the challenge of Minister Louis Farrakhan and his hate-mongering disciple, Khalid Abdul Muhammad, in perspective by quoting Rabbi Yaacov Perrin's eulogy for Dr. Baruch Goldstein, the man who massacred worshipping Palestinian Muslims in Hebron: "One million Arabs are not worth a Jewish fingernail."

But we have heard this voice before, Gates writes. "It is the

voice of messianic hatred. We hear it from the Balkans to the Bantustans; we hear it from Hezbollah and from Kach. We hear it in the streets of Bensonhurst. And of course, we hear it from some who profess to be addressing the misery of black America."

Professor Gates goes on to connect these and other examples of murderous utopianism to the weaknesses of liberalism and to less lethal forms of what he calls identity politics.

"There has been much talk about the politics of identity," Gates writes, "a politics that has a collective identity at its core. One is to assert oneself in the political arena as a woman, a homosexual, a Jew, a person of color.... The politics of identity starts with the assertion of a collective allegiance. It says: this is who we are, make room for us, accommodate our special needs, confer recognition upon what is distinctive about us. It is about the priority of difference, and while it is not, by itself, undesirable, it is—by itself—dangerously inadequate."

Glancing around our nation now does not give one much reassurance. Not only does Khalid Abdul Muhammad of the Nation of Islam travel from campus to campus spewing bigotry and leaving divisive squabbles in his wake, but a few weeks ago the National Conference of Christians and Jews released the results of a survey of race relations commissioned by them and done by Lou Harris. The results revealed, perhaps unsurprisingly, that among Anglo-Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans, and Hispanic Americans, disturbingly high percentages of each group held negative stereotypes of each of the other groups. So much for the myth of "the new majority," the idea that people of color are united against Euro-Americans. No wonder the village square these days is full of sound and fury.

As effective as the politics of difference have been in bringing



previously excluded groups into the mainstream of American life (one might, in fact, say because the politics of difference have been so effective in giving formerly silent groups access to the national public address system), rancorous debates are increasingly occupying our attention. Take for example the angry debates in state legislatures around bills to make English the official language of the state, an act that is primarily symbolic and is emotionally resisted for the very same reason (nineteen states have such laws; Maryland just turned down an "official English" bill). The growing debate over immigration policy will be no less clamorous. From South Central Los Angeles to Crown Heights, from Libertyville to the recent assassination on the Brooklyn Bridge, tensions among racial and ethnic groups in the United States are in volatile condition.

That this is more than academic is clear if one recalls the hand-to-hand combat within school boards involving such issues as bilingual education and Afrocentric curricula, the dispute over the literary canon at the college level, or the court decisions seeking to remedy past patterns of discrimination in voting rights cases by requiring redistricting or changes in the form of local government so as to guarantee the minority community representation in the legislative body. In most of these cases, and others you can probably think of, public authorities are being asked to confer some sort of official status on a particular cultural group. Large parts of the public sense that this form of particularism is a problem in a system based on universal values of individual rights. Simply saying that everyone must respect everyone else's ethnic identity therefore does not solve the problem.

Furthermore, how is one to embrace cultural equality when one is aware of so many practices one does not admire: polygamy,

genital mutilation, the subordination of women in various other ways, the rejection of life-saving science, authoritarian social structures, ethnocentric and racist beliefs, etc. On what occasions and in what circumstances should the practices of cultural minorities give way to the general society's rules, regulations, and expectations? At the same time, how can an inclusive American identity be defined so as not to obliterate the particular cultural identities that make America's diversity so enriching? These are complex matters that require careful thought.

America, of course, has always been diverse and its diversity has always been problematic, which is the reason for our motto, "*E Pluribus Unum*." We take pride in the fact that our nation rests upon a commitment to individual equality and democracy rather than upon ethnicity, but we worry about cohesion, and we bounce back and forth along the continuum between the assimilation implied by the "melting pot" myth and the persistence of pre-American cultural identities assumed by the metaphor of the national quilt or the mosaic.

What is our image of the America of the 21st century? What kind of American do we wish to be? Is America to become, as Arjun Appadurai worries (*Public Culture*, Spring, 1993), a collection of exiled groups whose members have loyalties only to their own group or perhaps to their homeland rather than to the United States? Are we to be a nation of exiles rather than a nation of immigrants? Should our image be of an undifferentiated America of "melting pot" individuals without any hyphenated identity? Can it be an America of shared values and commitments that nonetheless retains the modulation of cultural differences, an America in which we are all American *and* something else? Can we define what Henry Louis Gates calls "humanism," which starts not with a par-

ticular identity "but with the capacity to identify with. It asks what we have in common with others, while acknowledging the diversity among ourselves. It is about the promise of shared humanity."

Can we identify those values and commitments we need to share if we are to be a successful society? Is a belief in the Constitution and our political system enough to hold us together without violent friction between members of different groups? To what extent can any inclusive national identity enlist our loyalties if it does not squarely face the issue of social justice? If equal opportunity is to be part of the American ideal, shouldn't we talk about the extent to which it does not exist and how to bridge the gap between ideal and reality?

There is not one of our considerable number of social ills that would not be considerably improved if each of us felt a sense of responsibility for the whole. I was in Savannah, Georgia not long ago visiting some N.E.H. funded projects and I learned about an oral history project that is reclaiming the past of a residential community called Cuyler-Brownsville. One of the people interviewed remembered his childhood in that neighborhood. His memory was that it was the kind of place where "everybody's momma could whip everybody's kid." I can't think of a better definition of community or of civic virtue than that. Everybody looks out for everyone else, feels responsible for everyone else. It would be utopian to aspire to the same level of community spirit on a national level, of course, but some analogous sense of identification with the whole is needed.

Two things are required if each of us is to be willing to subordinate our individual self-interests on occasion to the good of the whole: we must feel a part of the whole, and we must see in that whole some moral purpose that is greater than the individual. Our

problem is our inadequate awareness of what might be called the sacred order that underlies the social order and is the source of legitimate authority in the social order.

At an earlier defining moment in the nation's history, on the eve of the outbreak of the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln, speaking between his election and his inauguration, in Philadelphia in Independence Hall where the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution had been drafted, found the meaning of America in its mission of being the exemplar for the world of the ideals of human freedom and equality set forth in those great documents. On that occasion, Lincoln said, "I have often inquired of myself, what great principle or idea it was that kept this [Union] so long together. It was not the mere matter of the separation of the colonies from the mother land; but hope to the world for all future time. It was that which gave promise that in due time the weights should be lifted from the shoulders of all men, and that all should have an equal chance." It was not only about slavery but about slavery as a violation of the principles of democracy and the sanctity of the Union because with the Union rested the world's hope for democracy.

The Civil War thus became a test of whether democracy, with its promise of liberty and equality, could survive, whether the last best hope on earth could endure. Returning to this theme two and a half brutal years later at the dedication of the military cemetery in Gettysburg, Lincoln declared that defending the Union was worth the sacrifices exacted by that terrible struggle because the sacrifices made possible "a new birth of freedom."

The challenge of our time is to revitalize our civic life in order to realize a new birth of freedom. All of our people—left, right and center—have a responsibility to



examine and discuss what unites us as a country, about what we share as common American values in a nation comprised of so many divergent groups and beliefs. For too long, we have let what divides us capture the headlines and sound bites, polarizing us rather than bringing us together.

The conversation that I envision will not be easy. Cornel West, for instance, writes that "confused citizens now oscillate between tragic resignation and vigorous attempts to hold at bay their feelings of impotence and powerlessness. Public life seems barren and vacuous. And gallant efforts to reconstruct public-mindedness in a Balkanized society of proliferating identities and constituencies seem farfetched, if not futile. Even the very art of public conversation—the precious activity of communicating with fellow citizens in a spirit of mutual respect and civility—appears to fade amid the backdrop of name-calling and finger-pointing in flat sound-bites."

Despite the difficulties, the conversation must proceed. The objectives are too important to abandon. What I envision is a national conversation open to all Americans, a conversation in

which all voices need to be heard and in which we must struggle seriously to define the meaning of American pluralism. It is a conversation that is desperately needed, and the National Endowment for the Humanities is in the process of encouraging that conversation through a special program of grants, through a film intended for national broadcast on television but which will also be repackaged for use in the nation's classrooms, through the ongoing activities of the state humanities councils, and through creative partnerships with organizations throughout the country that can help to stimulate and facilitate the discussion among citizens from all walks of life.

This will be a risky enterprise, because the N.E.H. comes only with questions, not answers. The outcome is therefore unpredictable, contingent as it is on the course of the discussion and on what we learn from each other as we talk.

However large the challenge, I believe we must reconstruct public-mindedness in America. Without a sense of shared values, individuals are not willing to subordinate personal self-interest to the common good. Our first step out of the moral nihilism of our

public and private lives is to define our common identity and to find in it a moral purpose that is worthy of our loyalty.

Fortunately, there is some evidence of the continuing power of the idea of America that has moved generations of our people to sacrifice in order to build a better life not just for themselves and people like themselves but for others, that has called forth the best in Americans in national crises, that has enlarged our sense of ourselves so that we more nearly approximate the universal ideals set forth in our founding documents. When the American Jewish Committee wanted to rally public support against the sort of intolerance preached by the Nation of Islam, it called upon familiar rhetoric that reveals a particular conception of America and its civic values.

"We are Americans, whose diversity of faith, ethnicity and race unites us in a common campaign against bigotry," (read the copy of the advertisement that ran in the *New York Times* [February 28, 1994] over an impressive and diverse array of signed leaders).

"We are Americans, who know the rights and dignity of all of us are jeopardized when those of any of us are challenged.

"We are Americans, who reject the ugly slanders of the hatemongers seeking to lift up some Americans by reviling others.

"We are Americans, born or drawn to this land, children of immigrants, refugees, natives, and slaves, whose work together honors the history of the civil rights struggle and makes it live, for all Americans.

"In recent weeks, leaders of the Nation of Islam have gained wide attention for their verbal attacks on whites, women, Jews, Catholics, Arabs, gays, and African Americans who criticize their persistently divisive message.

"We, the undersigned, believe the best response we can give to those who teach hate is to join our voices, as we have so often joined forces, in a better message—of faith in each other, of shared devotion to America's highest ideals of freedom and equality.

"'We must learn to live together as brothers,' the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, 'or we will all perish together as fools. That is the challenge of the hour.'

"Together we strive to meet that challenge. For with all our differences, we are indeed united, as Americans."

## THE ROBERT PENN WARREN CENTER FOR THE HUMANITIES

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### Statement of Purpose

Established under the sponsorship of the College of Arts and Science in 1988 and renamed the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities in 1989, the Center promotes interdisciplinary research and study in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. Members of the Vanderbilt community representing a wide variety of specializations take part in the Center's programs, which are designed to intensify and increase interdisciplinary discussion of academic, social, and cultural issues.

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## 1994/95 Humanities Center Fellows

MICHAEL D. BESS, Assistant Professor of History, is interested in theoretical issues raised by nonlinear ("chaos") dynamics, and in the long-term ethical implications of scientific research in artificial intelligence and genetic engineering. Professor Bess is currently working on his second book, "The Changing Face of Progress: Nature, Technology, and the Popular Imagination in Postwar France," a study of the extensive shifts in perceptions of technological progress, and of the human place within nature, among the French population since 1945.

JEFFERY J. FRANKS, Professor of Psychology, works chiefly in cognitive psychology. He is interested in questions suggested by radical changes in the context and nature of psychological inquiry in the last twenty-five years, especially in the development of cognitive and neurosciences. Professor Franks is the author of numerous articles in his field.

PETER J. HAAS, Associate Professor of Religious Studies and Jewish Literature and Thought, is the author of *Morality After Auschwitz: The Radical Challenge of the Nazi Ethic*, an examination of how a complete and coherent moral discourse of genocide could be constructed on the basis of a larger scientific discourse. Professor Haas is interested in articulating the interconnections of scientific and moral discourse.

RICHARD F. HAGLUND, JR., Professor of Physics, brings two major projects to the program: the pursuit of the relationship between the scientific program of nonlinear dynamics (i.e. chaos theory) and the question of the freedom of the will; and an interest in the differences and connections between the scientist's technical ability and issues in literature, history, and politics. Professor Haglund's publications concern nonlinear interactions of laser light with low-dimensional systems.



Standing, left to right: Richard F. Haglund, Jr., Gisela Mosig, Jeffery J. Franks, Cathy Login Jrade, Arleen M. Tuchman, and Michael D. Bess. Kneeling: Barbara M. Kinach, Mark L. Schoenfield, John A. McCarthy. Not pictured: Peter J. Haas, Arkady Plotnitsky, and Efstratios Prassidis.

CATHY LOGIN JRADE, Associate Professor of Spanish and Portuguese, is the author of *Ruben Dario and the Romantic Search for Unity: The Modernist Recourse to Esoteric Tradition*. Her research focuses on the relationship between the arrival of modernity in Spanish America toward the end of the 19th century and the literary production that has followed. She is working on the alternative world views and epistemologies offered by literature in response to the dominant belief system of the modern world.

BARBARA M. KINACH, Assistant Professor of Mathematics Education, focuses on the philosophical study of education. Author of *Toward a Model of Teacher Preparation: Reform and Curriculum Theory Perspectives on Teachers' Subject-Matter Knowledge*, Professor Kinach will be engaged in the interdisciplinary exploration of the formation of knowledge in the classroom and its curricula.

JOHN A. MCCARTHY, Spence and Rebecca Webb Wilson Fel-

low, Professor of German, is currently working on his book "The Good of Chaos: On Science, Evil, and Creativity," a study of the interrelationship between philosophy and literature from Spinoza to Nietzsche and from Goethe to Grass with special attention paid to the parallels between modern chaos research and the creative process of value formation. Professor McCarthy will co-direct the Fellows' seminar.

GISELA MOSIG, Professor of Molecular Biology, is currently studying the genetics of control of DNA replication. Her studies demonstrate the resilience of biological systems in responding to different situations by using backup mechanisms if the primary mechanism fails. The author of numerous articles in genetics, Professor Mosig was recently elected to the American Academy of Microbiology.

ARKADY PLOTNITSKY, William S. Vaughn Visiting Fellow, Assistant Professor of English, University of Pennsylvania. Professor Plotnitsky is the first

William S. Vaughn Visiting Fellow to the Center. He is currently working on a study concerning the role of women in the development of the natural sciences, mathematics, and in the human and social sciences during the past century. Professor Plotnitsky is the author of *Complimentarity: Anti-Epistemology After Bohr and Derrida*.

EFSTRATIOS PRASSIDIS, Assistant Professor of Mathematics, is mainly interested in topology, the branch of mathematics that studies properties of spaces that remain invariable under continuous transformations. Professor Prassidis will examine the relation between the development of mathematical ideas and changes in social structures.

MARK L. SCHOENFIELD, Assistant Professor of English, is interested in the dissemination and normalization of various social, political, and aesthetic ideas in the periodic press of the romantic period. In the seminar, he will focus on the ideological force of science and the rise of a rhetoric of science. In particular, he is interested in the effect of the popular discussion of matters for which inadequate evidence and theoretical frameworks exist (e.g., the scientific structure of racial differentiation) on the structure of knowledge.

ARLEEN M. TUCHMAN, Jacque Voegeli Fellow, Associate Professor of History, is most recently the author of *Science, Medicine, and the State in Germany: The Case of Baden, 1815-1871*. Professor Tuchman specializes in the history of medicine, particularly in 19th-century Germany. She is currently working on a book, "Gender and Scientific Medicine at a Crossroad: The Life and Times of Marie Elizabeth Zakrzewska (1829-1902)." Professor Tuchman will co-direct the Fellows' seminar.