

Proposal for the Centre for Modern Thought

Development of the Centre for Modern Thought in the Evolving Context of Post-Graduate Study in the College of Arts and Social Sciences

The objective of this proposal is to establish the framework for an interdisciplinary research and graduate program that will strengthen Aberdeen's offerings in modern intellectual history and theory in a manner that will serve post-graduates and staff in each of the three Schools of the [College of Arts and Social Sciences](#). The fundamental idea is to develop the nascent Centre for Modern Thought into a program that will function as a focal point of interdisciplinary work for a considerable number of the programs in the new Graduate School. The goal of the Centre will be to energize interdisciplinary interaction by achieving a significant public profile for itself as a research centre, while complementing the programs in post-graduate training already available in the College. It will help to offer post-graduates the kind of programmatic flexibility sought by the new Graduate School while strengthening the general level of post-graduate training.

I will begin by describing the thinking behind the creation of the Centre for Modern Thought, and then suggest how I believe it should be developed into a research and graduate centre. I place the intellectual project at the forefront, but I feel that its institutional development will determine its degree of success as a public enterprise.

The purpose of the Centre, as I have envisioned it, is to establish a platform for interdisciplinary linkages throughout the College of Arts and Social Sciences. The inherent basis of these linkages is theoretical, since contemporary research in fields as diverse as literature, history, anthropology, sociology, art history, film studies, and gender studies (this list is not exhaustive) is shaped by theoretical assumptions shared to some degree by all these fields, or at least debated in them. This "common ground" has developed to such a degree that it virtually carries a disciplinary designation of its own; one frequently hears reference, in this respect, to the field of "theory." Moreover, the impact of theoretical speculation in the fields enumerated is such that high-level research in any particular area cannot proceed without cognizance of developments in a number of other areas. Theory has effectively opened the disciplines of the humanities, the social sciences, and even some positive sciences, to one another. One task of the new Centre, as I conceive it, is to explore the grounds of contact between the different fields of knowledge and to use this exploration to enrich research within those fields while promoting new forms of interdisciplinary inquiry.

The designation "modern thought," however, also points to the necessity of a kind of departure with regard to contemporary tendencies in the field of theory. The state of the field is difficult to characterize, but it does seem safe to say that the contemporary theoretical project has lost something of the reach and verve that characterized the decades of its initial opening (in post-war efforts to rethink the foundations of the human sciences in France and in the intense critical activity that followed this project throughout Europe and North America). The absorption of theory by forms of cultural studies that leave aside its philosophical underpinnings and heritage has resulted in a dramatic shortening of perspective in a great deal of work in the humanities and social sciences. The reference to "modern thought" in the Centre's title represents an effort to reverse that tendency. It points both to an awareness of intellectual history (and the requirement that critical thought engage more deeply the question of its historical site and the problem of history itself) and an imperative that "theory" be informed with philosophical rigour. At the same time, it points to a need to attend to a broad worldly context in which the pressing questions of contemporary life are addressed. It speaks to the need to carry "theory" away from the formalisms of schools and narrow disciplinary pursuits and toward the task of engaging the questions of our time. At Aberdeen, it also points to an interest in complementing traditionally strong historical offerings in the College of Arts and Social

Sciences (in early modern history, for example, or Scottish and Irish studies) with a more modern focus.

The research undertaken in the Centre

I presume that the research projects to be undertaken by the Centre will be shaped by the interests of the participants. While the Centre is informed by a relatively strong claim regarding its theoretical mission, this claim should not be conceived as restrictive in nature or as the instrument of one individual's special interests. The Centre's success, I feel, should be measured by its capacity to generate strong collaborative enterprises and by its capacity to aid in lifting the sophistication of research undertaken in the College. A great many topics can be envisioned that would serve these goals, and I look forward to unanticipated proposals. But in order to give an indication of the level of analysis I would like to see the Centre achieve, and to provide it with some initial lines of orientation, I have formulated in general terms a set of questions for research. These are meant to help shape the choice of visiting scholars and topics for discussion in an opening stage. They are guided by two framing ambitions:

The first of these may be described as a kind of research program in that it entails a reflection upon "the modes and practices of knowledge." This undertaking would represent a contemporary effort to define the specificity of the orders of knowledge and the relations that inhere between them. It would have an important epistemological dimension, but it would also require a confrontation with questions and practices that exceed or challenge the traditional purview of philosophy and thereby demand new forms of attention to the "pragmatics" of knowing. It would establish that one dimension of the Centre's work will be "meta-theoretical" in that it entails a reflection on the very possibility of interdisciplinarity.

The project is motivated most immediately by the uncertain status of humanistic inquiry in the contemporary academy and the need for a redefinition of both its nature and its place. How can one characterize the distinctive traits of humanistic inquiry, and how do we think the passages that are occurring with growing frequency between the humanities and the social sciences? How can the relations between the humanities and the sciences be reconceived? And what institutional structures are called for by reason of these relational possibilities? It goes without saying that all of the issues involved in these questions have institutional dimensions and must be examined in relation to disciplinary structures. Indeed, on the horizon of every effort to think the specificity of disciplinary protocols, interdisciplinary openings, and new "practices of knowledge," there stands the question of the nature of the modern university and its place in contemporary society. In light of the ambitious transformations underway in the College of the Arts and Social Sciences and in the University of Aberdeen as a whole, this latter question deserves sustained attention.

A second aim is less easily characterized, but no less imperative. As previously noted, much contemporary theoretical work has tended to foreshorten its horizons and recede into local disciplinary concerns or turn in upon itself in the formalisms of schools. One result of this tendency has been a retreat from socio-historical and socio-political questioning of a broad character. Needless to say, the time of grand theoretical narratives has passed, as has the time of their critical dismantling. But issues of broad social concern still demand theoretical formulation and treatment. To enumerate just a few:

- Social formations such as fascism, or religious fundamentalism, now resurgent in the modern world and challenging the tenets of the enlightenment ideals informing modern democracy, call for interdisciplinary attention.

- Issues in human rights and humanitarianism require critical attention in light of the critical assault on the foundations of modern humanism that has characterized much post-structuralist thinking. A rethinking of the nature of “the human” also has profound implications for areas such as bioethics or ecology.
- The new forms of terrorism (including its nuclear variant) appearing both at the borders and at the heart of Western nations, and the new currency of practices such as torture and incarceration (or new forms of surveillance), call for a critical examination that reaches beyond journalistic reporting or easy moral categorization. The latter topic also leads to intersections with important work in modern trauma studies.
- The very conceptual status of a term such as “culture” (which is used freely in so much contemporary work in the humanities and social sciences) calls for examination in relation to philosophical notions such as “worldhood” or “forms of life.”
- Contemporary developments in the media and their impact on democratic processes raise challenging questions regarding the possibility of political agency and the status of modern political life (questions that have a strong bearing on the role of the modern intellectual in the academy and in associated realms).
- Global transformations in communications and economic relations entailing an increasing homogenization of social experience raise urgent questions—already sketched half a century ago by Walter Benjamin--about the nature of modern “experience” itself. The latter question is as much sociological as it is philosophical in that the very notion of experience has received searching questioning (reflected recently in the critique of appeals to “experience” in historical study by the eminent feminist historian Joan Scott).

I enumerate questions here almost at random, and I do not necessarily seek more than an occasional status for their treatment (in brief colloquia, discussions with visiting scholars, etc.). But I believe that there should be a platform on which they can appear and receive searching consideration as circumstances and historical events allow or dictate.

Institutional Structure

Whether the research topics I have sketched are actually pursued in the early stages of the Centre’s formation or are taken up at a later point will depend, once again, on the interests of the participants. I think it is especially important that the new Centre engage the collaboration of individuals already deeply involved in theoretical projects (Professors Paul Coates, Michael Syrotinski, Tim Ingold, and Drs. David Duff, Janet Stewart, Ben Marsden and Ian Maclachan come immediately to mind—though I must emphasise that this list is generated on the basis of the personal contacts I have made in my first month at Aberdeen and is in no way exhaustive). I am pleased to say that the ideas I am advancing here have received enthusiastic support from members of this group and are already being translated into strategic planning for the new M.Litt in Comparative Literature and related courses at the post-graduate and undergraduate levels.

In relation to this point regarding staff involvement, I want to address an important structural feature of the Centre that opens it to development as a research and post-graduate program.

Here, I will allow myself one observation as a newcomer to the university system of the United Kingdom. As someone who has taught in the American and French systems (and is familiar, by reason of my academic specialty, with the German), I am quite surprised to discover how little training post-graduates receive in even the newly configured “1+3” system that programs a year of course work at the level of the Masters. Through extensive experience in post-graduate literary and philosophical training, I have come to presume that far more advanced seminar work is required than the year offered in the British system. Not only does training in methods and founding

disciplinary concerns require more time by reason of the need for sustained study of particular authors and questions (in fact, I cannot imagine doing it in less than two years in my fields, and in the program in literature and philosophy I co-directed at Binghamton, we required three). An aspiring scholar also needs to form habits of analysis and thinking through exposure to the practice of mentors—they need to undertake the practice of advanced research in their field with more senior guides (several of them), and with peers. Hence the need for what is termed in North America the graduate seminar. Of course, a few advanced seminars exist in the different programs at Aberdeen (notably in Theology), and a number of lecture series help to meet this function (and I should note that I am impressed by the level of activity at Aberdeen), but they cannot fully meet the needs entailed in advanced post-graduate training. I cannot presume to judge the possible effects of the British system for want of experience, but I can report from discussions with numerous new colleagues at Aberdeen the impression that the British structure encourages narrow specialization. My own knowledge of the shape of much theoretical work in the U.K. leads me to give credence to this impression.

My personal reaction to this dimension of post-graduate training in the United Kingdom has simply been to plan to offer every year at least one post-graduate seminar and see who, among the staff and post-graduate community, might wish to participate. I have been planning to use the Centre for Modern Thought as the platform for this form of teaching. But discussions with colleagues have led me to conclude that there would be a place for a number of seminars of this kind, since post-graduates and staff from across the College would benefit from such activities. It is in this respect, first of all, that I think the Centre should be developed into an institutional entity offering post-graduate training. By offering a range of such seminars at a high theoretical level, the Centre could complement in a very important way the post-graduate teaching in the College. Moreover, it would do so in a manner that would bolster areas where offerings are currently somewhat weak: literary theory and psychoanalysis, modern continental philosophy, and modern intellectual history.

Active participants in the Centre's activities might welcome the opportunity to offer such seminars, and mechanisms should be set in place to make possible these contributions and give post-graduates inducements to participate in them. But the fact that the Centre is attempting to concentrate in areas of research that require development in the College leads me to think that it would also be appropriate to request a set of new appointments. Indeed, I believe that staff resources in the areas I have pointed to are insufficient if the Centre is to take on a significant role in post-graduate preparation in the College and make a strong contribution to the general level of post-graduate training and the research energies of staff. If a critical mass in the area of modern thought, as I have described it, is to be achieved, Aberdeen should make a set of strategic appointments serving the interdisciplinary site I have described and the related disciplines. I believe that the exact nature of these appointments can only be determined through careful planning, so I do not want to make suggestions of an imperative character. But I would like to suggest the kinds of appointments I have in mind. I offer five, possibly six:

- **Modern Intellectual History.** The Centre's historical orientation requires significant discussion of what might be called, for brevity, "the history of history." That is to say, a scholar should be found whose specialty in some way entails the capacity to deal with representations of history of the past two centuries, from Hegelian or Marxist philosophies of history to the more contemporary, "post-structuralist" genealogies. Such a scholar might come from the fields of philosophy (in its "continental" form), literature (a specialist in the work of Benjamin and the Frankfurt School might well have this capacity, for example), or the history of ideas.
- **Science Studies.** For the project of thinking the relations between "the modes of knowledge," it would be most beneficial to have a specialist trained in the kind of thinking

pursued in recent years by individuals like Bruno Latour, Isabelle Stengers, or Peter Lipton. It goes without saying that the work of the individual selected for this role must be of the utmost rigour, particularly as they would be expected to interact closely with the strong team of scholars now being assembled in Anthropology.

- **Theory of Art Here**, it is to be hoped that an important point of contact can be created with the [Centre for Visual Culture](#), whose efforts should be seen as strongly complementing those of the Centre for Modern Thought. A scholar capable of addressing issues related to the development of the new media would be most appropriate. It might also be possible to create a strong link with the appointments in art and architecture sought by Anthropology, and for this a second individual might be sought; a specialist in architecture and urbanism, for example, could fit in extremely well. It is my sincere hope that the Centre for Modern Thought can make vital connections to the new proposals for development in art and architecture offered by Anthropology. The appointment or appointments in this area might also serve to support Aberdeen's program in History of Art.
- **Literature and Literary Theory**. Though there exist several talented staff in the [School of Language and Literature](#) capable of working in this area, the number needs to be increased if Aberdeen is to assume a reputation as a campus with a significant modern program in the humanities. Literary scholars capable of a strong engagement with authors such as Paul Celan must be eminently capable theorists. More generally, the campus needs literary scholars who are capable of gifted and inspiring readings and at the same time able to speak to the place of literature in the modern world. Maurice Blanchot phrased the latter question in the most powerful way when he described the guiding question for much of his thought as follows: "What is at stake for the fact that something like literature exists?" A literary thinker is needed who can help bring such a question to life.
- **Political Philosophy**. This individual would ideally have a strong capacity in the history of philosophy (for seminar training along the lines sketched above) and would have a special interest in political thought. They should be capable of an openness to contemporary issues that would advance thinking along the lines of some of the socio-political topics I enumerated above.

Of course, the question of how such appointments might be made is not a simple one. Two problems must be acknowledged. First, while it would be desirable to attract eminent senior scholars for the roles described, the difficulty of locating suitable ones and drawing them to Aberdeen could be considerable. A second problem is that senior scholars at the top of their field are not always receptive to collaborative projects like the one described. The difficulty of finding top-quality senior scholars capable of working productively in the framework of the Centre for Modern Thought (at least at the outset) cannot be underestimated. For this reason, I would like to suggest a broad search that would be open to scholars at the level of senior lecturer who would be intrigued by the project and might be induced to pursue their research and teaching programs along lines that would serve its goals.

Because these scholars would be strongly versed in theory and specializing in modern topics, their selection would have to be made by an interdisciplinary committee of individuals strongly supportive of the project. The composition of hiring committees should include a group of participants from the Centre and appropriate administrative staff. The appointments should be made within the framework of the Schools (the appointments should be made to established programs), but they should be undertaken with the purpose of developing the programs of the Centre.

It is my hope that the Centre can maintain a flexible character. It should retain the independence of a research centre (comparable to that of other successful centres at Aberdeen) and have the capacity to attract post-graduates from the U.K. and abroad. Thus, while it would not seek the

normal status of a post-graduate program or department and would work rather as a core site for interdisciplinary exchange, it should be capable of offering the equivalent of an M.Litt or M.Res, or of “hosting” students who would pursue such degrees in one of the established programs. Its strength would surely be increased if it could become the home for a group of top-quality post-graduates. The Centre should have an important public function, as noted above, but post-graduate seminars should also bear some kind of credit in order to reward the participation of post-graduates from programs across the College.

It should be noted that the Centre will be intimately linked to the project for a Summer Institute, now in organization (an initial meeting of the international team that will form its guiding committee will take place in May of this year). The purpose of the latter institution is to lift the international profile of Aberdeen as a site for research in modern thought. The exact character of the links between the Centre and the Institute remain to be defined, but there is good reason to presume that the publicity brought to the University of Aberdeen by the Institute will bring significant attention to the Centre as a site for possible post-graduate study. There is every reason to assume that the latter will gain a strong national and international reputation.

In conclusion, let me suggest that what is “grand” about this idea is its projected impact on the shape of post-graduate study in the College of Arts and Social Sciences. It involves a considerable investment to be sure, but the real scope of its ambition is to be measured in relation to the extent of the changes it seeks in the form and level of post-graduate research and interdisciplinary interaction. The appointments sought are not simply for the development of particular fields; they are sought for their impact on the nature of research and post-graduate study in the College as a whole. It goes without saying that this proposal will have to be adjusted in a number of ways in order to define most effectively the Centre’s institutional anchoring and to develop its potential. But I am hoping that the spirit of the proposal will carry it forward in the category of “big ideas.”

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