

Progress Report for the Centre for Modern Thought, June 2006

Prepared by Professor Christopher Fynsk
Director of the Centre for Modern Thought

The Centre for Modern Thought has developed rapidly since the time of its launching in the spring of 2005. What follows is a brief summary of activities and achievements over the past year, and statements regarding future directions.

Recruitment

The primary focus this year has been on staff recruitment. In this area, we have enjoyed considerable success, both in appointments made to the Centre and in related areas.

Two appointments have been made directly to the Centre, with attachments in appropriate programmes. Professor Alberto Moreiras of Duke University, a literary scholar and political and cultural theorist of world-renown, has accepted a 6th Century Chair. Dr. Petar Bojanic, a young legal philosopher attached to the C.N.R.S. in Paris and currently completing a year's work at the Society for the Humanities at Cornell University, has accepted a one-year contract as a Research Fellow. Prof. Moreiras and Dr. Bojanic will help us in forming a concentration in the area of political philosophy. We have also added Raoul Ruiz, the distinguished film director, and Professor Danny James of Indiana Univ., a historian, to our list of active Research Associates.

A further appointment related to the Centre's project should also be mentioned here: Prof. Teresa Vilarós of Duke University, a world-renowned specialist in modern Spanish cultural history will join our Hispanic Studies programme. She will join us as Professor of Hispanic Studies and Modern Thought at Aberdeen.

The concept of the Centre is clearly a major attraction for scholars in other disciplines and has had a very strong impact in recruitment for other positions. Dr. Nikolaj Lubecker of the U. of Copenhagen, a specialist in modern French intellectual history, and Dr. Adrienne Janus of Stanford University, a young literary scholar specializing in the work of James Joyce and Samuel Beckett, have come to Aberdeen expressing particular interest in the Centre for Modern Thought. Prof. Robert Segal, recently appointed in Divinity in the School of Divinity, History and Philosophy, has also expressed very strong interest in the activities of the Centre. Other staff at Aberdeen who have joined us include Prof. Anthony Carty, of the Law School, and Dr. Lorenzo Zucca, a legal theorist also in the Law School. Prof. Celso Gribogi, in Physics, will also start working with us in the coming year. Current recruitment in film studies and French also indicate clearly that the existence of the Centre for Modern Thought is a major attraction for potential faculty. It is clear that the Centre has the capacity to attract international scholars of the highest calibre.

Almost 400 individuals applied in response to an initial call for applications, and enquiries continue on a weekly basis. We anticipate that Raoul Ruiz will join us on a regular basis and contribute in the area of philosophy of art. We will then have two areas remaining in relation to the original plan: Philosophy of Science and Modern Intellectual History. Our hope would be to make one appointment in each of these areas in the coming two years. We will also seek to make a permanent appointment in Political and Legal Philosophy, and will continue to seek outside funding to strengthen our cross-disciplinary staff strengths in art and other areas.

Activities in the Centre

The Centre for Modern Thought was launched with a colloquium entitled “Forms of Thought for a Change in Times” in April of 2005. This event involved the participation of 7 distinguished scholars, several of whom have been asked to serve on an international board of advisors.

Since that event, meetings of participants have been organized largely around visits related to recruitment. The Centre hosted visits by Professor Juliet Flower MacCannell of the University of California at Irvine, Dr. Nahum Chandler of the Johns Hopkins University, Dr. Benjamin Arditi, a Research Fellow at the University of Edinburgh, Dr. Jason Read of the U. of Maine, Dr. Petar Bojanic of the C.N.R.S., Prof. Danny James of Indiana University, Prof. Peter Osborne of Middlesex University, and Raoul Ruiz. Professor Jonathan Culler of Cornell University will address the Centre on July 6th.

A visit by Gerald Beasley of the Avery Architecture Library of Columbia University was also organized in conjunction with the Committee overseeing the University’s Library Project. Further meetings of this kind related to the Library Project and linked to the agenda of the Centre will follow in the coming years.

The Centre has also hosted technical advisors for the construction of its web site. We consider that there is more at stake here than strategies for marketing. Indeed, it is clear that the Centre for Modern Thought must find ways of *inhabiting* the web if it is to take its place in a global academic context and achieve its goal of becoming self-sustaining. Moreover, the changing configuration of world communications in the academic and cultural spheres makes the question of the internet a genuine intellectual topic for the Centre. Measures have been taken to pursue a multi-year strategy of development of our web site, including recruitment of a post-graduate student who will take charge of this development as a condition of his studentship.

Research Projects

The list of potential topics enumerated in the initial Proposal for the Centre remains active and viable, though a joint grant proposal to the Leverhulme Trust developed this winter in conjunction with several programmes in the University (on the question of the valuation of natural resources) also points to the importance of ecological issues and the topic of sustainability. We will be exploring in the coming months connections with the medical sciences relating to medical training and possible links to the humanities, and we are planning an event with staff in mathematics relating to the Centre’s stated concern with possibilities for cross-disciplinary encounters. We are also exploring the possibility of a seminar with members of the Aberdeen community in the area of global policy relating to oil and alternative energies (after the notable interest generated by the Simmons lecture this winter).

It should be noted that the area of modern political thought has emerged as a point of special focus. Global cross-disciplinary discussion in the humanities and social sciences appears to be concentrating in this area, and we sense that we have strong potential in it by reason of our commitment to pursuing rigorous cross-disciplinary thinking in relation to the urgent socio-political questions of the day. The one-year research position offered to Dr. Bojanic reflects our interest in exploring this concentration in conjunction with the School of Law.

We are also in the process of organizing a series of events on the topic of the relation between the academy and the public sphere. We believe that the Centre for the Modern Thought can become a vehicle for exploring this relation in *practical* terms by creating new links between academic forms of research and discussion and the work of institutions in the private and governmental sectors. We will begin this exploration with meetings involving prominent journalists concerned particularly with the quality of Scottish public life. As we develop our thinking on this topic, we will also want to

involve business and political leaders. A recent discussion with a senior staff member at Glasgow University has underscored our sense that new thinking about the place of the University in the public life of Scotland is urgently needed. We would like to make the Centre for Modern Thought a key platform for this thinking, but also an important actor in the transformations to come. We believe, moreover, that the progressive agenda of the University of Aberdeen makes this university an ideal site for this enterprise.

Student Progress

Mr. Ian Cameron is scheduled to complete the first M.Litt by Research in the Centre for Modern Thought this year. His research, on relations between the work of Martin Heidegger and Ludwig Wittgenstein, was successfully presented to Prof. Fynsk's seminar on Heidegger in May 2006. Archie Graham, a Ph.D. student attached to the School of Education (as one of the administrators of the Hunter Project) also made excellent progress in his Ph.D. research on the topic of the work of Edith Stein (an assistant to Husserl) and the significance of her work for the notion of "ethos" in educational settings. Edith Doron, a half-time student at the M.Litt level working in the area of the philosophy of children's education, has also made strong progress on her thesis. Each of these students joined staff and students from French, German, Hispanic Studies, and Philosophy in the Heidegger seminar.

Grant Development and Funding

Numerous grant proposals have been undertaken in the current year, most notably a major proposal for SRDG funding (still in elaboration), and a proposal for support for an "Erasmus Mundus" consortium that would bring us post-graduate students from "third countries" throughout the world for work at the M.Litt level. A Leverhulme proposal (described above: results are still pending), and a bid for RCUK scholarships (unsuccessful), were also submitted.

We recognize, with members of our senior administration (including Principal Rice), that significant efforts will have to be made to demonstrate the importance of public funding for the humanities in Scotland. Currently, bids for major grants in the humanities stand little chance of success in competitions involving major scientific interests. A public effort to raise awareness of the importance of support for the humanities will be required and will take considerable time. In the meantime, we will have to try to complement possible sources of public support with private contributions. Our longer-term goal is to make the Centre for Modern Thought self-sufficient through fee-generation from post-graduate students and grant generation in projects linked to sectors throughout the University, including the sciences. However, in the shorter term, we will have to depend on University support and private donations in order to cross a threshold of public visibility. The Centre for Modern Thought represents an effort to change the very structure of post-graduate training and advanced research in an important sector of the Scottish university system by introducing a far more significant dimension of cross-disciplinary thinking and new thinking about the public function of the university. For this purpose, it requires a significant critical mass of strong scholars and students from various disciplines. With a sufficiently strong presence, we will be in a position to shape thinking and gain further financial support. But for these early steps, we will continue to require private contributions and University subsidy.

Impact at the University of Aberdeen

Beyond the effects described above in the area of recruitment, it may be worth noting that the Centre for Modern Thought is helping to shape curricular thinking in the College of Arts and Social Sciences, particularly in the School of Language and Literature. The School of Language and

Literature has created a kind of sister-programme offering an M.Litt in Comparative Literature and Thought that is generating significant interest (this taught programme comes on line in the academic year 2006-2007). The School is also introducing cross-school courses at levels 2 and 3 designed to give students a stronger grasp of modern history and modern intellectual history. The aim is to foster cross-disciplinary and historically informed thinking that will give students a better understanding of the importance of their own special fields of study and a richer view of the place of art and literature in the modern world. This is an extremely important development in a School that is seeking to define common aims among the various degree programmes. Related efforts sponsored by the Centre for Visual Culture (closely linked to the Centre for Modern Thought) will work to achieve comparable cross-school programming involving the Schools of Language and Literature and Divinity, History, and Philosophy.

In sum, a key ambition of the Centre for Modern Thought is to stimulate broad cross-disciplinary thinking that helps students to discover the deepest meaning of humanistic training. We hope to encourage an approach to work in the various disciplines that is aware of its place in a broader intellectual history and cognizant of its meaning for public life. We hope that our undertaking will help shape all dimensions of education and research in the College of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Aberdeen.

Future Steps

As the community involved in the Centre comes into form, we recognize the necessity of developing our administrative structure. We are in the process of creating an internal committee of participants who can assist the Director and Associate Director with planning and programme administration. This committee will be formed this summer at the time of the arrival of Professor Alberto Moreiras.

In addition to the projects scheduled for next year (mentioned above), we will set in place a structure for regular meetings related to the Centre's core agenda; we will thereby seek to make operative our ambition to link ongoing research to discussions relating to global socio-political concerns. The research seminar directed by Professor Fynsk this current year (on the topic of Heidegger's *Being and Time*) will be jointly directed by Profs. Moreiras and Fynsk, and will concentrate on the concept of the political in the texts of Kant, Hegel, and Schelling. As the number of Centre participants increases (both staff and students), we will increase the number of post-graduate seminars.

In institutional development, we will give special attention to post-graduate recruitment and will strengthen our ties with units across the University of Aberdeen. We will also strengthen our links with external institutions, including institutes in Japan, the U.S., Slovenia, Stockholm, and Barcelona (Dr. Bojanic will also work on institutional links relating to research in legal philosophy and international law, and Prof. Moreiras will bring connections with other institutions in Spain and Latin America).

The Director will be exploring fund-raising opportunities in all possible areas. We will also encourage participating staff to seek possibilities in their respective fields. The long-term ambition of the Centre is to give its core staff the responsibilities of research directors and grant administrators. This represents a significant departure from normal procedure in the Humanities, and is an important part of the Centre's innovations.

By the end of the coming year, we should be in position to draft a three- or even five-year plan that sets out a research agenda. We will always remain open to new possibilities (our structure is geared to this ambition), but we should soon be prepared to announce defined research goals.

