

Holly J. Duffy
GLS Symposium
9 June 2019

How can we critique our institutions?

This question came up for me because out of all the institutions I'm a member of—personally, spiritually, politically, academically—I've noticed that, regardless of the type of institution, we're really bad at addressing and resolving our systemic problems, that our institutions are getting worse because of it, and it's pretty clear that we either continue to not solve our systemic problems and watch our institutions decay or we sort ourselves out.

Given the setting of this discussion, I have chosen to focus predominately on St. John's College but I can't think of any of our institutions that aren't in need of sorting themselves out.

In 1941, St. John's College president, Stringfellow Barr addressed the board of visitors and governors and offered this extraordinary test of an education [we must ask:] [1] do our colleges prepare [us] to make fearless and responsible decisions under a Constitution like ours and [2]—equally important, if only recently relevant—does their preparation give a man anything that would stand by him in a concentration camp? A genuine discipline in the liberal arts would meet both tests," he says. (Levine)

I believe that today St. John's College fails this test.

One quick disclaimer: I do not hate the liberal arts or liberal arts institutions. On the contrary, I believe, as every one of you have demonstrated this weekend, the liberal arts enliven our hearts and liberate our minds. I am critiquing this institution because what it is capable of is too valuable to watch it decay. (Like how our parents use to tell us, and maybe still do, that we're wasting our lives—they do it because they love us.)

Now, for the sake of following along, this essay is divided into four parts:

- I. What do I mean by institution and why do

- I. What do I mean by institution and why do we need to critique it.

Institution definition and purpose.

Most of us don't realize that each and every one of our lives is a series of movements in thought or action through one institution to another. Every one of our subjective

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experiences occurs within the informal institutions of culture, customs and language; the formal institutions of our schools and places of worship; and within the primary institutions of government, economy and family.

Thus, our lives are an inheritance and a tradition of institutions, most of which will outlive all of us.

On one hand, as liberal arts students we know, as Nietzsche said, that “much harm is caused by thoughtless transplanting.” Or, to state the issue even more frankly through the words of Tocqueville, “Every man who receives an opinion on the word of another puts his mind in slavery.” (408)

On the other hand, Tocqueville goes on to acknowledge that institutions provide us with a kind of “salutary slavery that permits [us] to make good use of [our] freedom.”

“Individual independence can be more or less great; but it cannot be boundless (408)

And, above all, ...no society... can prosper without such beliefs...for without common

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II. Why are we currently so bad at critiquing our institutions?

We're bad at critiquing our institutions because we really, really don't want to go through a thorough, systematic criticism—we don't want to "reassess the traditions in which we live and reform our institutions. (We've got other stuff to do.)" (We've got other stuff to do.)

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account. [He argued that] the liberal and humanizing arts must be constituted anew as they had been reconstituted in the past to meet new problems.”

The classical or medieval seven liberal arts McKeon was referencing and from which our modern traditions

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failed them! An education like this should make students excited about and interested in living -- and even if the course of life they choose is contemplative, they should still be excited about doing something different-- as opposed to even