



News from CIS

Center for Independent Study • New Haven, CT
spring 2017

END OF AN ERA

CENTER FOR INDEPENDENT STUDY BIDS FAREWELL AFTER 40 YEARS

Last May, in the final formal gathering of its membership, CIS hosted a luncheon that was both a celebration of our history and an acknowledgment of current realities. In this last newsletter, we remember our origins, review recent events, and explain what led to the decision to dissolve the organization.



CIS: the origin story

In 1977, five women — all married to Yale professors — came together to establish the Center for Independent Study (CIS). By Yale's rules at that time, the women were ineligible to join the faculty, though they were equally qualified, because Yale would not hire members of the same family. CIS would provide its members some of the perks that faculty positions offered: a letterhead to be used in applying for grants; a structure to oversee and administer grants; and, perhaps most important, collegiality for those who work independently.

CIS was the second such organization of independent scholars in the country, and the first to be open not only to academics but also to writers, artists, and editors. It immediately attracted a sizable and enthusiastic membership. We met in affinity groups—a writers' group, a study group to examine the language used to write about photography, a freelancers' group—that went on for years, and also in small clusters with specific purposes, which dispersed once the purpose was achieved. Public readings and day-long conferences fleshed out CIS activities for many years.

— Ruth Hein Schmidt

The salons emerge

Ruth has described the affinity groups or "seminars" that were the focus for most of our interactions in CIS's early years, but by 2006 or so, only two were left: a book group and a small writers' group.

By 2007, when I became president, membership was declining, and many who still paid dues were not engaged. We needed to find ways to interest a wider group of people. We'd noticed that when we were together — at seminars, talks, meetings — interesting conversations arose. Why not provide opportunities "just to talk," but about a particular subject, in the comfort of peoples' homes, with refreshments? Thus the salons. The first, in March, 2008, was *Speech and Self: A Conversation about How Language Shapes Who You Are*. It drew 22 attendees and was so successful that a follow-up took place, also well-attended. Our hope had been that these conversations might serve as a starting point for an ongoing seminar, but there was little interest. The salons, though, were worthwhile, and continued until the last months of CIS.

— Ellen Brainard

Independent scholarship in the digital age

Forty years ago independent scholarship was a movement, in the sense that new institutions, CIS among them, were being founded to support independent scholars. None of these movement institutions, however, including the National Coalition of Independent Scholars (NCIS), got past the threshold of membership high enough to hire a staff, acquire headquarters, establish fund-raising campaigns, or achieve similar benchmarks of success for non-profits. Volunteers alone cannot sustain a movement. I see local groups of independents turning into social groups with no need for a traditional organizational structure. The only use for formal independent scholarship organizations right now, perhaps, would be for helping scholars outside the US who are fleeing persecution.

New conditions in the US have both helped and hindered the goals of independent scholars. For instance, the internet can support organized groups; on the other hand, it also has undermined organizations by allowing people looser forms of association. Second, for independents looking to become affiliated with universities, the nature of universities itself is changing. Finally, for independents seeking alternative careers, the nature of employment is changing. We're now in the "gig economy." I think that this new work environment offers good opportunities for independent scholars as individuals, if not as organized groups.



Thanks to all **CIS board members**, past and present, for their work in maintaining the organization and sustaining its mission. Following is a list of those who served over the past ten years. Presidents during that time are noted with (*)

Barbara Beitch
Barbara Bell
Ellen Brainard
Marlene Demarque
Teri Dykeman *
Rosalie Feldman
Liliane Greene
Gwen Heuss-Severance *
Rhea Hirshman
Sara Ohly
Lauren Pinzka
Carol Ross
Sylvia Ryan
Constance Sherak *
Ruth Hein Schmitt

As part of the dissolution process, the CIS board decided unanimously to **disburse remaining CIS funds** (about three thousand dollars) **to the National Coalition of Independent Scholars (NCIS)** in support of members' conference travel, conference registration fees, and library fees incurred to support members' research. The **CIS archives** were also sent for safekeeping to NCIS.

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*...a community of individuals
with diverse intellectual and
creative interests*

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CIS: the last official gathering

President's report from the spring luncheon | 15 May 2016 at The Study at Yale

First let us give a moment to remember the members who were active in CIS over the years and are no longer with us.

I am here to welcome you all to this celebration of 40 years of the Center for Independent Study! Today is a day of celebration, and a sad day, for we are contemplating and voting on perhaps disbanding CIS

As you probably know from the survey we recently sent to members, we have been facing challenges with membership and attendance at our events. To get a comparative perspective, I wrote seven letters for a take on how independent study organizations both domestic and international are faring. Some responded that given that they were historians, they were doing fairly well, but most others were facing attrition and other issues similar to ours. The panel today will enlighten us on the nature of these issues.



In addition, to hear from our own members, we sent a questionnaire to all of them. The findings in brief: 18 answered. Of those almost 53% were members for over ten years. 72% joined for the groups, 45% for the salons and spring meetings, 36% for fall meetings and some for intellectual stimulation, encouragement, and inspiration. Most enjoy CIS for social interactions, followed by educational opportunities, and some to present work and obtain feedback. Almost all had participated in the spring annual meetings followed by fall general meetings and salons, public lectures and conferences and some in book and writing groups. Many had enjoyed access to Yale libraries, and being audiences for the presenting and discussing of individual's works.

So why are members not active? Responders said they are too busy; turnouts have been disappointing. What would be missed without CIS?
Answer: Social interaction.

Given the responses, should CIS close? The answer was yes, for these reasons: CIS was created for a different time; members are aging; attracting new members is an on-going challenge.

These answers helped the board recommend the painful step that CIS disband — particularly painful to me because, for the past 25 years, I have depended on CIS for its opportunities and friends, and a Yale University library card, without which I could never have written the publications that are now in Sterling Library.

So we take a vote today on the board's recommendation re: the dissolution of the Center for Independent Study in New Haven. With this vote we agree to close CIS in accordance with the by-laws, which mandate a two-thirds majority. Decisions and actions involved in the termination process will be concluded by January 2017.

A few additional words: Recently, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* ran a story about a boy from Mongolia who took an MIT massive open online course (MOOC) and is now a junior at MIT. When asked the most important idea he learned, he said: *As one person, no matter how good you are, you can do nothing. You need a team or a group...in order to really build the complex and amazing thing!* He added that what is also needed to put knowledge into practice is “maker-spaces.” Our “maker-space” has been the Center for Independent Study — composed of members who operate according to by-laws and love of intellectual and artistic pursuits.

Teri Dykeman, President of CIS

Diverse intellectual and creative interests: events in review 2010 - 2016

2010-2011

Sunday salon. Discussion of Nicholas Kristof's and Sheryl WuDunn's *Half the Sky*, led by CIS members Rhea Hirshman and Gwen Heuss-Severance.

Fall meeting. **Talk and presentation of music by Kathryn Alexander**, professor of composition in Yale Department of Music

Sunday salon discussion on **social networking**.

Sunday salon discussion on the **theme of insider/outsider in a variety of texts**, led by CIS members Sara Ohly, Lauren Pinzka, Gwen Heuss-Severance, and Constance Sherak.

Sunday salon discussion of Stacy Schiff's book, *Cleopatra: A Life*, led by CIS member Carol Ross.

Spring luncheon. CIS member Arnold Pritchard discussed his **storytelling** based on letters and documents written during WW II by his father.

2011-2012

Fall meeting with guided tour of Yale Art Gallery's *We The People* exhibit, led by curator John Gordon.

Sunday salon. *In Retrospect: The US Civil War in the Camera Eye*, with Alan Trachtenberg.

Sunday salon. *Getting It Done*: an open conversation about members' current work.

Sunday salon. *Philomela's Crown*, a discussion of literary rape narratives and their implications. Led by independent scholar Patricia Klindienst.

Sunday salon. *Greener Pastures? The Complex Legacy of Co-Education*, led by CIS members Rhea Hirshman and Gwen Heuss-Severance

Spring luncheon, featuring Adrienne Munch, professor of literature and culture at Stony Brook University, speaking about the **rise of shop girls and the emergence of shopping** as a social activity.

2012-2013

Fall meeting. Presentation by Joy Gordon, professor of philosophy at Fairfield University: *Invisible War: The Human Damage of Economic Sanctions on Iraq and Iran*.

Sunday salon. **Discussion of election**.

Sunday salon with CIS member Gwen Heuss-Severance discussing *Meeting the Past: An Introduction to the Basics of Genealogy*.

Sunday salon. Guided tour of the Yale Center for British Art exhibit *Edwardian Opulence: British Art at the Dawn of the Twentieth Century*.

Spring luncheon with Joan Channick of the Yale School of Drama: *Original Works of Authorship: Copyright Issues in the Visual and Performing Arts*.

2013-2014

Fall meeting with presentation by Mary Lou Aleski, executive director of **New Haven's International Festival of Arts and Ideas**.

Sunday salon. Tour by CIS member Richard Yanowitz of the Peabody Museum's exhibit *Echoes of Egypt: Conjuring the Land of the Pharaohs*.

Sunday salon. CIS member Teri Dykeman spoke about her work on American philosophers **Julia Ward Howe** and **Voltairine de Cleyre**.

Spring luncheon. CIS members, Barbara Beitch, Barbara Bell, and Richard Yanowitz led a panel on **solar energy**.

2014-2016

Public event. In conjunction with the Yale bookstore, CIS sponsored *Word for Word*, readings by five featured readers well-known in the community.

Sunday salon (on a weekday!). Exhibit tour of *No One Remembers Alone: Memory, Migration, and the Making of an American Family* at Yale's Slifka Center with its creator Patricia Klindienst.

Sunday salon. *Abigail's Revenge: How the Women's Movement Shook Up America*, led by CIS member Rhea Hirshman

Sunday salon. CIS member Gwen Heuss-Severance screened and led a discussion of *Christmas Without China*, exploring consumerism and immigration in the U.S. through the experience of two families.

Spring luncheon. *Word and Image in the Life of Leslie Gillette Jackson*, presented by CIS member Robert L. Jackson, professor (emeritus) of Slavic Languages and Literatures at Yale.

Public event. *A Coherent Big Picture for Our Time*. Talk by Nancy Ellen Abrams, author of *A God That Could Be Real: Spirituality, Science, and the Future of Our Planet*.

Sunday salon. Tour of *Samurai and the Culture of Japan's Great Peace* at the Peabody Museum, led by CIS member Richard Yanowitz.

Sunday salon. Discussion of Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me*, led by CIS members Lauren Pinzka and Constance Sherak.

Sunday salon. *Displacements* — a discussion of our immigrant pasts.