

The Function of Cultural Criticism in a Changing World: An Interview with Stefan Collini

Jiang Huiling & Stefan Collini

Abstract: This interview with Stefan Collini examines the function of cultural criticism in a changing world. The interview focuses on topics like the tradition of Cambridge literary criticism, the Two Cultures Controversy, scientific selection and AI literature, the roles of intellectuals, and ideas about universities. Stefan Collini expresses his continuing commitment to scholarly values in the context of the development and changes in the new era. Collini's insights suggest a nuanced and multifaceted approach to literary and cultural studies. With an emphasis on intellectual adaptability, Collini's perspective on intellectuals highlights their evolving role, influenced by changes in media and communication. Ultimately, Collini considers universities as the home of free inquiry. He understands liberal education as a broader sort of education which attempts to equip people with mental and cultural capacities which should be used for any kind of employment.

Keywords: Stefan Collini; literary and cultural criticism; scientific selection and AI literature; the roles of intellectuals; ideas about universities

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标题：变化世界中文化批评的功能：斯蒂芬·科利尼教授访谈录

内容摘要：本次访谈探讨了变化世界中文化批评的功能。访谈聚焦剑桥文学批评的传统、两种文化之争、科学选择与 AI 文学、知识分子的角色和大学的理念等论题，斯蒂芬·科利尼教授表达了在新时期发展与变革的背景下，他对学术价值观的持续坚守。科利尼教授认为，文学和文化研究需要将细致入微的方法和跨学科的研究方式相结合；知识分子在媒体和交流方式的变化中

应具备良好的适应能力；大学是自由探索的家园，通识教育是一种更广泛的教育，旨在培养人们的心智和文化能力，这些能力应适用于任何类型的职业。

关键词：斯蒂芬·科利尼；文学与文化批评；科学选择与 AI 文学；知识分子的角色；大学的理念

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Jiang Huiling (Jiang for short hereafter): Professor Collini, thank you very much for offering me this valuable opportunity to interview you. I admire your remarkable expertise in British literature and intellectual history. I am deeply impressed by your words in “Postscript” of *The Nostalgic Imagination: History in English Criticism* (2019) that “writing history inevitably involves the use of both the telescope and the microscope” (208). I think the saying is very poetic. Today our interview will basically cover the areas of literary and cultural criticism, the Two Cultures Controversy, scientific selection and AI literature, the roles of intellectuals and ideas about universities—either by looking back through a telescope at lineages, or by conducting a close examination under a microscope on specific questions.

Shall we begin from the area of literary criticism? As a visiting scholar to the Faculty of English of the University of Cambridge, I attended many lectures during the past three terms. I found that literary criticism is a main course and the names of literary critics like I. A. Richards, F. R. Leavis and Raymond Williams were repeated again and again. They have great influence on Cambridge literary criticism. Could you please recall the origin and its development? May I know your way of teaching this course?

Stefan Collini (Collini for short hereafter): Well, I'll start with the history because I think it is important to understand that the teaching of English in Cambridge began much later than in other British universities. In the 19th century, courses were set up in British universities such as Manchester, Leeds and Liverpool and then eventually at the end of the 19th century in Oxford. And at that time, the style of work was heavily historical, and there was a lot of emphasis on biographical information, and a lot of emphasis on contextual information indeed, just a lot of emphasis on *information*. Students were required to learn a lot about the writers and

their historical settings.

Cambridge at that point didn't have a separate course of English. When it was established first in 1917, and then the English Faculty was established in 1926, the approach to the study of literature was changing. Especially in Cambridge, the emphasis was much more on looking closely at the literary text itself, rather than on the historical information about the text or author. This is why I. A. Richards, who taught in Cambridge in the 1920s, became so important: he devised this experiment which he called "practical criticism," which involved getting students to comment on poems when he had hidden the details of authorship and context. They only had, as it was put, "the words on the page."

Criticism of that kind, attempting to elucidate the meaning of "the words on the page," became more central and really very distinctive of Cambridge. Since then, that style of close criticism has become very widespread. In the United States, in the middle decades of the twentieth century, New Criticism really was doing something similar. Most courses now involve some of this kind of attention to the text. But the Cambridge Faculty of course remains rather proud of this origin and many of the people who teach here have themselves studied practical criticism and been to some extent shaped by it.

I taught it for many years, as you know. And I think the exercise of getting students to do practical criticism is one of the most valuable pedagogical exercises in teaching literature. The students can't prepare their answers; they can't simply unload information. They have to respond to the words put in front of them in a particular text. So I think for that reason, Cambridge has continued to emphasize this. It plays an important part in the undergraduate course. That's why you have come across so many references to it in lectures and classes.

Jiang: I see. Thank you. In *The Nostalgic Imagination*, you focused on the roles a number of prominent literary critics played in Britain between 1920 and 1960. You mention that "all literature has a pastoral dimension" (113). May I know your purpose of writing that book?

Collini: What I said in answer to your previous question was about those figures who are famous for having concentrated very much on "the words on the page" as close critics of the text. It is often assumed that those figures have very little to say about history. So what I was trying to do in *The Nostalgic Imagination* was to show that in fact, although they did concentrate on close reading of the text, there were many historical assumptions buried in their work. And I tried to show how they developed those between 1920 and 1960, and how teaching literature

in that style, especially as developed by people like F. R. Leavis and Raymond Williams, came to serve as a form of cultural history. That was really to change the emphasis, if you like, in the interpretation of that school of critics, to say not that they were ahistorical but that there were historical assumptions in their work, even though their explicit methodology emphasizes looking closely at the text, not history. So that was the purpose of that book.

Jiang: Still in *The Nostalgic Imagination*, I notice the sentence: “In helping to promote the divorce of reason from the feelings, Bacon ‘points forward to the conscious and unconscious utilitarianism of the nineteenth century of which we ourselves are the embarrassed heirs’ (Knights 109) that characterized that much-demonized century” (Collini, *The Nostalgic Imagination* 97-98). Speaking of the “divorce of reason from the feelings” and the rise of industrial civilization, how can we understand better T. S. Eliot’s concept of “dissociation of sensibility” and F. R. Leavis’s “organic community”?

Collini: I think the quotation you referred to there comes from L. C. Knights’s discussion of Bacon and the seventeenth-century dissociation of sensibility. He is interested in what was often called “the scientific revolution” or “rise of scientific modes of thought” and so on. I think the part which you quote is where he is expressing, when he’s writing in the early twentieth century, a reaction against that scientific mode, emphasizing some of its undesirable consequences, perhaps of industrialism and industrial society. It is not a view of my own you are quoting there, it is a view of L.C. Knights’s which I’m discussing.

But that view was quite closely tied to T. S. Eliot’s famous conception of “dissociation of sensibility,” where he suggested something happened to the mind of poets, and more generally to the mind of England, so that reasons and emotions, roughly speaking, became separated. And he went on to claim that it was only in the poetry in his own time that a way was being found to re-unite them. That, of course, was not an interpretation of poetic history that everyone endorsed even at the time.

Similarly, I think Leavis’s emphasis on the “organic community” was a way of criticising the present, especially the present as formed by industrial society, and he was looking back with some nostalgia to an age which was thought to be more organic, where relations were more direct and human, not so much based on machines and on economic exploitation and so on. So again in his case, there is a nostalgic yearning for some imagined past, something he used to criticize the present. Again, I think I would say very few people now endorse this particular way of thinking, but it had considerable persuasive purchase in the 1930s and earlier,

even though it subsequently fell out of favour.

Jiang: What about the present situation? Do you think that it is deteriorating?

Collini: I can't answer for whatever state or states people may think the world is in now. But I do think there is a tendency for people, when they encounter features of their own time and their own society which they don't like or disapprove of, to assume that it was better before. Especially as people get older, they are prone to do this more and more—everything was better in the old days, and things have all gone to the bad now. I've written quite a lot both in *Absent Minds* and in *The Nostalgic Imagination* criticizing that kind of nostalgia. I think it simplifies the past and simplifies the present as well. It runs too many different things together. It is nearly impossible to say in any general way whether things, whatever that means, were better in the past—better for whom?—than they are now. It is often just a way of complaining about the ways things are now. And I think if we take a broad view of the question, for most people on the planet, it is surely better to be alive now than in any time in history. It may not be true for some Western white middle-class men, who used to have more privilege, but now that privilege is more challenged. That in itself is not a reason to generalize and say that “the world” is getting worse. I remain, I think, quite a trenchant critic of those forms of declinism and nostalgia for this imagined better past.

Jiang: I am interested in British literature that is closely related to society and politics between 1930s and 1960s. Can the novels portraying the society in this period be categorized as Neorealism?

Collini: I don't have much to say about this, to be honest. As you know, for that question, the period, especially between 1910 and 1940, is often spoken of as the period of Modernism, in poetry, the novel, and also in some other arts such as painting and music. And Modernism is traditionally thought to be marked by a sense of experiment, using different forms, involving dislocations of ordinary narrative or ordinary time sequence, rather than any illusion of realistic portrayal, and so on—a style of work associated, I suppose, in the novel particularly with people like James Joyce or Virginia Woolf.

I think it is true to say that in the succeeding decades, particularly perhaps the 1940s and 1950s, there was something of a reaction against that and a move back to a kind of realism, a kind of social description which attempted to portray society in a familiar type of narrative progression. I know from correspondence with you that you're interested in C. P. Snow as one of these, and he would be certainly

an example of this. I mean, that very long sequence of Snow's novels from 1940 onwards certainly could be called a kind of realist novel. But also in poetry, I don't know which figures you've come across, but people like Philip Larkin and for a while, Kingsley Amis, and Donald Davie—these figures also wanted to get back to what they saw as a more commonsensical, down-to-earth account of human existence as represented in literature. So I think to that extent there is some sense you can talk about a return of realism in those decades.

Jiang: Yes. It seems that you have written in a similar way in public writing. In *Common Writing: Essays on Literary Culture and Public Debate* (2016), you focused on literary culture, media and public debate. You explained the title of the book that you “hope that the title phrases do suggest the presence of a literary form that is deeply familiar” (1). I am wondering what your inspiration of writing that book is.

Collini: Well, I should say, as you perhaps know, that I quite often write articles and essays for periodicals such as the *London Review of Books* or the *Times Literary Supplement*, and it's a kind of writing that I have done for many years and that I enjoy. It's a little bit different from ordinary scholarly writing because although it's for a very sophisticated audience, a highly educated intelligent audience, it's not a specialist audience. The readers may be professionals in many fields, and even the academics among them may not be only in English or History. So writing for that kind of readership requires different sorts of tone, and different sorts of exposition. You can't quite assume everything you might if you write for experts, but on the other hand, you must absolutely not write down to them.

So reading articles of that kind, in those periodicals, is a common experience. Perhaps we do it on Fridays: the periodical comes through the letter box, we sit down, have a cup of coffee and read an article. So writing of that type can be considered a form of “common writing”: it happens frequently, it's not addressed to a narrow group, but to a wider group of non-specialist readers. So I wanted to write a series of essays that explore that kind of writing addressed to that kind of audience and that's what that book represents.

Jiang: Thanks. These days, when we come to literary theories, new dimensions like queer studies, new materialist criticism and distant reading are being paid more attention to. What do you think of the new trends in literary theories?

Collini: Well, so again there are a lot of different trends there. Surely what has happened in the last forty or fifty years is that new groups, social groups, have

come into education, come into the world of culture, going beyond the narrow small selection as it was in the first half of the twentieth century, and they have brought fresh concerns into play. So, one of the most obvious would be to say that as the number of women in public life and education grew, much more attention was devoted to questions about feminist reading and to the work of women writers. That seems to me a wholly desirable beneficial development as new groups come on the scene, and they help transform what we pay attention to. Similarly, I think with gay and queer writing, it has been very much recognized in the last generation as an expression of social movements as well as literary methodological fashions. And to me, these are things we should welcome. This is part of the democratization of literary studies.

I have to say that my own work is not in that style. My work remains a combination of close criticism and historical contextual interpretation. Although I've learned from some of these trends particularly from deconstruction, which has drawn our attention to the instability of meaning and language—to, if you like, the playfulness or apparently metaphoric nature of so much that is treated as plain statement. Language escapes us in certain ways, it's not simply something we command, and I have learned a lot from works in that tradition, just as a bit earlier I learned a lot from Marxist literary criticism, its attention to the role of, broadly speaking, economic determinism, the clash of classes and so on in culture. So I am sympathetic to those, but my own style of work, what I've written in the last thirty years doesn't correspond to any one of those. It's much more a mixture of close criticism and historical context.

Jiang: Similarly, there is a tendency that science fiction and climate fiction are becoming increasingly popular these days. I think this is due to the change of time. As we all know, it is a time of AI and Anthropocene. But I think that the charm of classic novels of the mid-20th century can never be eclipsed. So how should I study these old novels in the new era?

Collini: The new era is a response to new developments, which literature is obviously always taking into account at present. The enhanced attention to climate change is bound to generate different perspectives—sometimes extremely long historical perspective—that think of the present as part of the Anthropocene beyond historical time. So those things will become material for literature.

I suppose the question you ask is, if that is the case, does it change, should it change, the way you deal with the old novels from this earlier period? And I'm not sure that it should. It depends a little bit what contemporary debates or discussion

you want to relate to. If you're principally trying to get the attention of scholars of fiction in the twentieth century in Britain, then it seems to me the very traditional way in which you have been approaching C. P. Snow would be right, because that's going to bring up his characters, novels, and their relations to the themes that he was writing about fifty, sixty or seventy years ago. But if you wanted to make Snow's novels seem more fashionable for a generation, which is now absorbed by different questions, maybe you could find anticipations of climate crisis in Snow and his worries about the role of science and so on, solving the world's problems including the problem of hunger.

But my point is, you would have to in some way read back dominant contemporary concerns *into* Snow's work if you wanted your writing to attract the attention of those who are absorbed in those debates in the present. I don't think you have to do that. Scholarship is on the whole an escape from topicality, and scholarship is attempting to understand these things in their own terms, often in their own time. So there's no need to do that. But of course, you know, as you say, the world has changed and people have their own different preoccupations from the world in 1950.

Jiang: That makes sense. Thanks for your encouragement. Then we are going to talk about cultural criticism. C. P. Snow's *The Two Cultures* has been well received in China. It has been translated into Chinese, with your long and inspiring "Introduction," which gave me great enlightenment on the understanding of the Two Cultures Controversy. In *What Are Universities For?* (2012), you mention that "In 2009, those studying pure 'humanities' subjects accounted only for some 11% of undergraduate and 9% of postgraduates in British universities" (32). In China today, I notice that there is also a tendency of declining of enrollment in disciplines like humanities in universities. I am wondering what your definition of "culture" is. What are the situations of disciplines today?

Collini: First, just go back to C. P. Snow's the "Two Cultures." You know from the "Introduction" that I wrote that I think it is often a very misleading concept. I think I say somewhere in that "Introduction" we might as well say "two hundred and two cultures" (xliv), it just depends on how you want to divide these things up. I think Snow exaggerated what he saw in his own time as the neglect of science and the scientifically trained. I don't start from Snow's position. One of the difficulties in writing that "Introduction" was to try to make it accessible to a wide audience, without agreeing with or endorsing it.

Then, moving on to the figures about the numbers in humanities in British

universities (and much the same is true around the world). There is surely a long process of historical change at work here: in the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, the regard for traditional notions of culture focused on things like literature, history and classics was very high and those became staples of university courses. As time has gone on, there has been much less deference towards a traditional concept of high culture and many more sorts of concerns have come into the university—for example, the growth of the social sciences has been a twentieth century phenomenon. And then in the last few decades the growth of much more vocational and applied courses; management or business studies is the most popular at the moment, but you can do courses—I expect the same is true in China—you can do courses in Event Management, you can do courses in Aeronautical Engineering, you can do courses in a great many things. And so the numbers within these expanded universities, who are doing humanities inevitably declined because the number doing these other things has greatly increased.

You can tell me about China, but in the last six, eight or ten years in Britain and the United States, there has been a very sharp decline in the numbers doing humanities subjects, English and foreign languages in particular. And I think that partly has to do with the new fee system in Britain, in which students feel themselves very heavily in debt when they graduate and they think they ought to find some subjects which will enable them to earn a lot of money and pay off the debt. And it is partly the result of a propaganda campaign by the government and others to say scientific or applied scientific subjects are the most worthwhile and that's what people should study. So I think this is a difficult situation for the humanities now to face, which is to make a case for the humanities when it's surrounded by a lot of opinions and a lot of noise about the ways in which they're becoming, as critics say, irrelevant or outdated. They are not at all irrelevant or outdated, of course, but we have to make the case better.

Jiang: Then let's come to the Two Cultures Controversy. In the "Introduction" to Leavis's *Two Cultures? The Significance of C. P. Snow* (2013), you write about the challenge of cultural criticism. You mention the possibility that Leavis plays "the role of 'slow criticism' which, by its indirection and arrest, causes readers to lose their habitually confident footing and to stumble into more probing or reflective thinking" (48). Do you think that the Richmond lecture could be considered as a classic of cultural criticism?

Collini: The short answer is yes. I mean, it's often much attacked because he was so vehement in his criticism of Snow, and it seems so personal. And it's true

that it is quite a fierce attack, but really what Leavis was doing, as I try to explain in that “Introduction,” is to undermine Snow’s authority, to show that he doesn’t have a position of great intellectual eminence from which he pronounces in this way. He is actually not a distinguished scientist and he’s actually not a distinguished novelist. So to do that kind of thing, I think, requires particular rhetorical strategies on Leavis’s part, and one of them is to challenge everyday terms and everyday descriptions. That’s really where the issue about “slow criticism” comes in, to try to make people hesitate and think again about these terms. So in those ways, not necessarily because of his personal attack on Snow, but because of his strategy of critique, I think it is a small classic of cultural criticism.

Jiang: Surely it is. In Leavis’ lecture, he makes his point clear by way of analogy to AI with the satirical claim that Snow’s novels “are composed for him by an electronic brain called Charlie, into which the instructions are fed in the form of the chapter-headings” (Leavis 57). For Leavis, it is unlikely that a machine could possess the creativity of a novelist. However, we cannot deny that we have come to the era of “scientific selection” after “ethical selection”¹ and we have to deal with the interdependent relationship between science and human beings. As Professor Nie Zhenzhao mentions in his article, AIGC (Artificial Intelligence Generated Content) literature is imitating human beings in terms of composing literary texts and “will foster the emergence of virtual AIGC digital writers” (Nie, “Scientific Selection and AI Literature” 9). These narratives seem to “shape our understanding of AI as well as the ways AI is shaped by social, cultural, and historical contexts” (Matthews 115). Could you please express your views on Artificial Intelligence as a fast-developing form of scientific culture? Do you think it will change our common ideas about literary forms and contents, writers and readers, and theories and criticism?

Collini: Leavis, of course, was making a topical reference to “ERNIE,” the acronym for the computer which made the selection of winning numbers in the monthly premium bonds competition. By implication, he was suggesting that Snow is so blindly committed to scientific and technological thinking that he addresses literature as a machine might do.

We now live in a very different world, one which has been transformed by the digital revolution. The development of AI is the most recent stage of this revolution, one that is so recent, and so fast-moving, that it is difficult for anyone to take its

1 See Nie Zhenzhao, “Ethical Literary Criticism: Sphinx Factor and Ethical Selection,” *Forum for World Literature Studies* 3 (2021): 383-398.

measure yet. I am so far from being any kind of expert in this field that I really do not feel I can comment. Naturally, writers and literary scholars would like to believe that, however sophisticated AI may become, there will be levels of creativity and judgment that are beyond it, but I have to say that my cursory reading of news reports about the astonishing achievements in this field make me wonder whether even that is true. But this is a topic best left to people younger than I am: I feel lucky to have lived my own writing life entirely in a pre-AI world!

Jiang: Thanks. In such a changing world, as you mention in *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain* (2006), convictions that the twin forces of “academic specialization” (162) and “mass celebrity” (480) signal the demise of the intellectual. How do you define “intellectual” and what responsibility should intellectuals in the contemporary age bear?

Collini: Another small question! First, I’d like to say about that book that I am, of course, attacking another version of declinism, which is to say the view that there *were* real intellectuals in the past, but now because of media popularization, on the one hand, and academic specialization, on the other, they’ve died out, they’ve become extinct. So I challenge that view. That’s why I discussed those two supposed trends in order to say no, and similar forces have been at work for a very long time. It’s not the case that once there were real intellectuals, but now they have become extinct.

After all, when we talk about intellectuals, we’ve got to think about a variety of ways in which figures who have some kind of specialist expertise address wider audiences on matters of public concerns. What expertise they have changes over history. There is not one template for being an intellectual: those figures who can command public attention on the basis of some intellectual authority and then use that to address matters of public or political concern are going to be called intellectuals.

So I don’t think there is one way to do it right. I think we always have such figures with us. It’s not that they used to exist and died out or whatever. It is that those forms of communication change. Now, maybe quite a few people who would be called intellectuals use podcasts, which, of course, didn’t exist at all a generation ago. As with much use of the Internet and social media generally, those are all channels of communication. So how we understand what intellectuals do has to adapt to those new forms of communication. There are still intellectuals around who are using them, and I suspect they are never going to die out.

Jiang: Thank you. I appreciate your conviction. In your just-out book *What Is Cultural Criticism?* (2024), you and Francis Mulhern grapple with problems of literature, politics and intellectual practice. It originates from two opposing critical traditions: the elite pessimism of “Kulturkritik” and the populist enthusiasms of “Cultural Studies” (32-33). Your opinion is: Tension between culture and politics there may be, but it worked productively in both directions. Could you kindly give some examples to illustrate this point?

Collini: Well, I think in a way you have to look at the book to get the illustration. I should explain perhaps that this began with Francis Mulhern publishing his book *Culture/ Metaculture* and my being asked to review it for *New Left Review*. Then he wrote a piece in *New Left Review*, responding to my critique. And so I wrote a piece responding to that, and we both then wrote further pieces. So it’s a debate that grew up out of his book, and those two traditions you mentioned, Kulturkritik and popular cultural studies, are the ones he contrasts within that book. So I am attempting in my half of the book to, as it were, open up the field of cultural criticism, to allow things other than political perspectives or affiliations to come in, to allow the play of imagination, and to allow for the value of drawing on literature and the other arts in forms of public debate. But my view as expressed in the book will, I think, only make sense in the dialogue with Francis Mulhern’s part of the book. It’s not any kind of freestanding statement, and in that sense, it’s very much a jointly-authored work.

Jiang: Well, speaking of the relationship between culture and politics, it reminds me of Max Weber’s two famous lectures: “Science as a Vocation” and “Politics as a Vocation.” For example, Weber advocates “plain intellectual integrity” (156) in the context of the “disenchantment of the world” (155). What do you think of his ideas?

Collini: You ask such small questions! Well, I’ve quite often quoted Weber from those lectures because I’m very much an admirer of them. Especially, when he says at one point in “Science as Vocation” that the scholar needs “to put on blinkers” (135) against the present, and needs to shut out the contemporary world so that they focus on their scholarship. And I think that’s a particularly relevant point today. We put a lot of emphasis now on the impact of scholarly work in the world “outside”, of reaching out and addressing topical concerns and great issues and that’s all good. But scholarship also has its own imperatives and sometimes it needs to shut out the topical and just concentrate on that. I think Weber gave a long-lived, very powerful, expression to those views. I’m very admiring of those lectures.

Jiang: Me too. Next, let's come to universities. In *What Are Universities For?* (2012), you have re-stated a familiar view of the nature and function of universities. You mention that John Henry Newman's *The Idea of a University* (1873) is highly valued for its defence of the ideal of a "liberal education." For example, American scholar Frank Turner's words are quoted, "No work in the English language has exerted more influence on the public ideals of higher education" (40). May I know your understanding and attitude towards "liberal education"?

Collini: Of course, the phrase is associated with Newman, but it is used to mean a variety of things over various periods since his time. I think the element that has remained important from Newman is the idea that education at university level should be in some sense a training of the powers of the mind, not simply a preparation for one form of specialized employment. And when we use it today, in a very different world from Newman's and with different sorts of universities, I think the tendency is for it to mean that attention is primarily given to the processes of thinking and understanding and marshaling evidence and so on that can be found in most disciplines, rather than to preparing people to occupy one particular slot in the division of labour. So preparing someone to be a dentist perhaps doesn't normally get considered as a form of liberal education, but training someone in medicine that underlies dentistry, leading them to reflect on the categories of information, to see how causality works and so on—that can be a training of the mind which is often called "liberal education." So I don't think there is one fixed syllabus for it, but the way the term is now used is to concentrate on that broader sort of education which attempts to equip people with mental and cultural capacities which should be used for any kind of employment, and for the improvement of our understanding of our lives, rather than as training for a specific job.

Jiang: In *What Are Universities For?*, you reinforce that the relation of universities to society's needs is necessarily an indirect and long-term one, and we should be cautious about allowing their purposes to be reduced to that of training for employment and generating economic growth. In your opinion, what would an ideal university be like?

Collini: There is no ideal university. Universities change over time and different cultures have different types of universities for different purposes, so there could be no ideal university. But the other part of question is that, at the moment, there is emphasis on universities serving economic needs by training people for employment and by undertaking research which will be commercially or industrially profitable. And I think it has always been very important to say that universities

have other functions than that. The character of education goes beyond training for employment. The character of research and scholarship goes beyond anything that might be economically profitable. Universities are the home of free inquiry, and while we protect that kind of academic freedom, we have to let the inquiries go where they will go, where scholars think it is important intellectually and not try to direct them all to economic growth.

Jiang: What is the future of higher education? To be more specific, what qualities should a university graduate have? What can a qualified university teacher do to cultivate his or her students?

Collini: Well, I think I can only repeat the same answer. What surely should be aimed at is to encourage our students to become reflective, analytical and skeptical. That is to say, to challenge, receive opinions, to look for the evidence and where the evidence is different from what was expected, to change their opinions. So I don't think that there's a single blueprint for this. But universities are, perhaps one can say, spaces within which free inquiry can happen and we need to keep that element of freedom about the inquiry. Otherwise, students won't be encouraged to be reflective and analytical; they will simply be trained to fill one particular slot in society.

Jiang: Last but not least, it is said that you have recently completed the book manuscript: *Literature and Learning: A History of English Studies in Britain*¹. Would you please share with us briefly what the book is about?

Collini: Yes. It is about English studies as an academic discipline in Britain from the late eighteenth century until about 1960. So it's a story of universities, and of the growth of institutions, courses, syllabuses, appointments and so on. It's not a history of literary criticism, it's a history of the institutions within which English literature was taught in Britain, from the beginning up to about 1960. And if all goes well, it should appear in about a year's time.

Jiang: I look forward to reading that book. Thank you very much for your generous and enlightening words. Best wishes for you.

Collini: Thank you very much. Best wishes for you and your future career.

¹ See Stefan Collini, *Literature and Learning: A History of English Studies in Britain*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2025.

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