

## Opening Remarks—SNF Agora Institute Workshop

Good morning and welcome!

It was exactly a year ago, when on this very stage Johns Hopkins' President Ron Daniels and I announced our Foundation's \$150 million landmark gift to JHU for the establishment of the *Stavros Niarchos Foundation Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins University*. A lot has happened since then. What started as an idea and a dream a year ago has now become a reality. A Board of Overseers is in place—I would like to welcome some of its members that have travelled to Athens to join us, Morris Offit, Gary Kasparov, Alan Stoga, Vishakha Desai, Renzo Piano —and the very important search for the Agora Institute's first director is nearing its completion. The creator of this Opera House and this Cultural Center, the world-renowned architect but most importantly the amazing person and friend Renzo Piano is working with JHU on the design of the Institute's home in Baltimore.

The Agora Institute has indeed arrived.

If a year ago there were questions about the need to establish a place to address the critical issue of polarization, and to promote civil discourse and civic engagement, on-going global developments today leave no doubts about the need to begin a serious and earnest conversation about these issues and how to address them. One does not need to look hard in order to see that polarization is beginning to take deep roots at every level of society, politically, economically, socially.

It is thus with great pleasure and excitement that we welcome all of you today to what is effectively the first official public event of the SNF Agora Institute at JHU. The public component is perhaps the most crucial part of the Agora Institute's mission. Engaging the public and creating open actual dialogues on critical and complex issues is the only way to try to help create practical solutions to address this excessive polarization and to establish realistic models for civil discourse and civic engagement.

As some of you may know, today's event is taking place under the umbrella of the SNF's new monthly series called "Dialogues", which was itself established to promote a real dialogue among participants

and the public, in relation to a variety of current issues, hoping to add some value towards better understanding all around.

I would like to thank everyone at Johns Hopkins for our strong collaboration in establishing the Institute, and especially Ron Daniels,

Fritz Schroeder, Elizabeth Smyth, and Dean Beverly Wendland, all of whom are here with us today. Special thanks to my colleagues at our Foundation Stelios Vassilakis, Nancy McKinstry, Lenia Vlavianou, Elenia Saloutsi, and Hopkins' Elizabeth Smyth, advisor to President Daniels on the Agora Institute, and her team for organizing this workshop, and inviting the audience to participate in this important and hopefully productive exercise.

Greek poet's Cavafy's poem "Ithaca" describes the importance of life's actual journey itself over its ultimate destination, the means being more important than the end, perhaps just like the Agora Institute itself. During this journey, we may encounter more questions than answers, in fact, we may never reach Ithaca, but the effort is well worth it. "Ithaca gave you this marvelous journey", the poet will remind us. It is the actual journey of the Agora Institute that should make us refocus on some basic human values, and help all of us engage with each other in a civil way, in order to make our world a better place. So let us begin our common journey to help disrupt the negative effects of polarization!

Thank you!