Afterword
[Based on remarks at the SCE panel, MLA, 2006]

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The contributors to this volume have written about their memories of and contributions to SCE. I'll begin by mentioning my own. When Martha Woodmansee asked me to serve a term as president, she explained that my sole obligation would be to accept a drink at MLA. It was an offer I could not refuse. I faithfully discharged my duty. The participants and other core activists have done much more, and the rest of us owe them a big debt. It's been a good thirty years for SCE.

How to build from that start is an ongoing question. The contributors have made a number of proposals, which I will brutally herd into two corrals, then link to a concern of my own. Not surprisingly, the founders who spoke at the MLA session in December, 2006 looked back at goals they set for the organization in 1976, judged the achievement of those goals to have been no more than partial, and considered ways to reframe them and renew old energies. Examples include the principle of collaboration; the commitment to serious reasoning about hard questions (that is, to theory); the Sisyphean struggle to understand and resist institutionalization; and the attempt to subvert hierarch in the university. Other contributors have taken these aims as a given, and suggested ways to extend and elaborate some of SCE's recent projects: cultures of writing, intellectual property, the new economic criticism, and online collaborative work, for instance.

There are some references to globalization and to the commercialization of the American university. But for the most part, both groups stuck to the *internal* dynamics of theory's and of SCE's development, as they imagined its future. Well, why shouldn't they? They knew that the crazed respondent would administer his usual dose of Master Narrative.

And here it is. SCE began at a pivotal moment in our general history, and the new conditions within which we find ourselves will affect the ways it can evolve. To look farther back, for a moment, the Modern Language Association, whose meetings and journal helped fix the identity and direct the activities of our nascent profession,

was founded in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, when many academic disciplines were taking control of their practitioners' work, and claiming their places in the new university. Through the time when the academic professions grew in numbers, perks, and influence—also the time of Fordism (no accident, as we Marxists say)—increasingly specialized groups proliferated within MLA. Also, during the Fordist time, a number of organizations were founded in rebellion against or secession from MLA. For example, the National Council of Teachers of English began in 1911; the College English Association and the English Institute in 1939; and in 1949 the Conference on College Composition and Communication, within but also in part against NCTE. All those projects can be seen both as claiming professional recognition for activities previously devalued or ignored--English as distinct from philology, English as a unified field across school and college, teaching in balance with scholarship, composition as a field of its own—and as correcting some pathology in the parent group. That second theme was salient for founders of the English Institute, who wanted a venue where people could talk seriously and theoretically about literature, not in specialized subgroups but in one room and one general conversation among readers and critics.

This motivation links the Institute's founding to that of SCE, almost forty years later. Both groups wanted to shake off MLA's discursive customs, perceived as professional deformities. While the Institute pursued that aim by featuring disciplinary leaders from prestigious universities, SCE worked an egalitarian vein. Jim Sosnoski sees it as having fallen back into the institution, and perhaps he's right. But its egalitarian and collaborative principles could make it hard to digest—and in any case have kept it alive (while the English Institute is gone).

But the main thought I want to toss into the discussion is that the creation of dissident and alternative professional groups has become and will be more iffy now than it was through most of the twentieth century. The reason nearest at hand is that professionalization itself has run into bumpy times, as we see in a host of familiar disruptions: a weak job market, a shrinking tenure track, the proliferation of ill-paid contingent jobs, the foundering of our apparatus for putting out research, and so on. The walls of the market haven that academics built in the first half of the last century are weak against incursions of new market forces, among which the privatizing of knowledge and of its circulation are especially vigorous.

In short, this stock-taking of SCE comes at a time when the Fordist university system is turning into something else, and when most of the professions it supports are in retreat. Institutionalization may be less of a threat (to those who see it that way) and less of a hope (to those who want institutional respectability) in such a time than in the decades of the flourishing Fordist university. Driven as it is by a transformation of capitalism itself, I expect the destabilization of higher education to continue for quite a while, along with endless war, hard times, peak oil, and so on.

Based on those premises, my own wish for SCE would be that it cheerfully accept its outsider status, and focus its theoretical energies right on the commercialization of knowledge and of education—as of course several of its projects already do. This should be a good time to ponder that process, and even contest it. Maybe theory about privatization can a give a boost to activists in behalf of the receding public good.