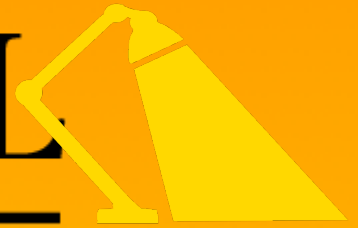


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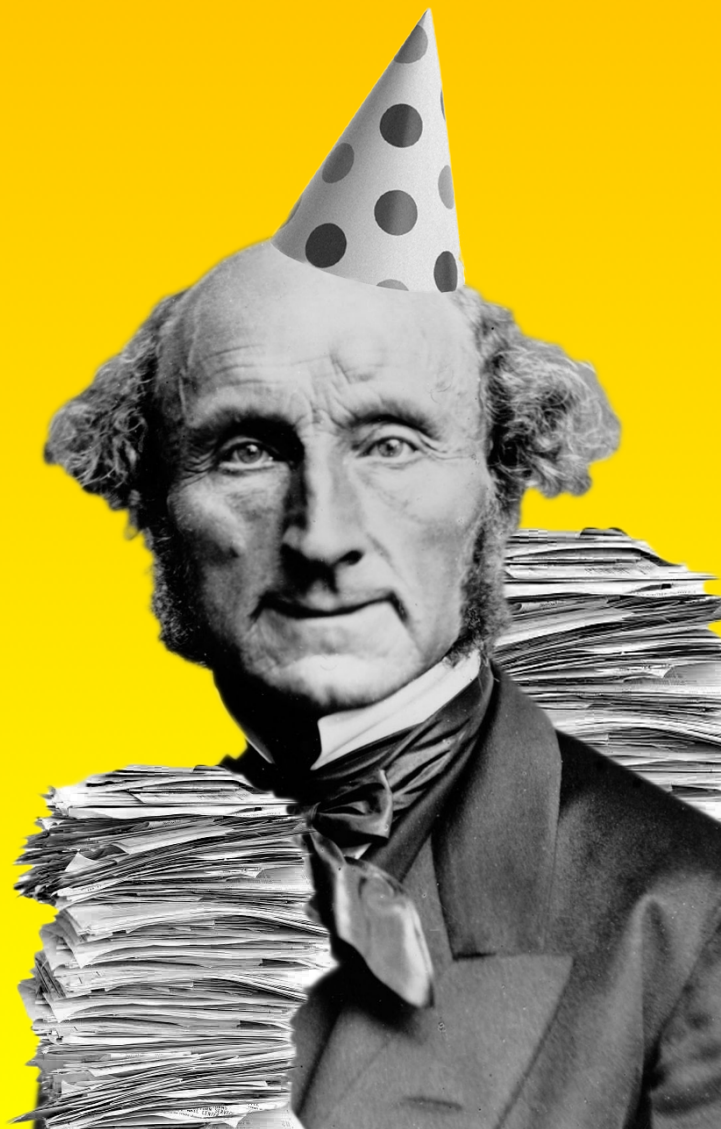


PPE ENCOUNTERS NEWSLETTER | MARCH 2023

We're back! Not just with the Paper Mill but we also released a podcast episode and on March 22nd we will be hosting a speaker event.

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Lost in Bureaucracy: PPE's Student Representatives

by Arthur Vuister

As a PPE student, you probably spend much of your time pouring over the theories of scholars both new and old. In the hubbub of your study time, practical application of the principles of fairness, justice and equality can feel like another world entirely. While the 'PPE in Practice' courses attempt the unenviable task of bridging this gap between theory and reality, much of the subject matter of PPE can be felt in the democratic processes in the John Stuart Mill College (JSMC) and the VU more broadly; or at least, it should be...

Doing a quick headcount, I managed to identify no fewer than five different students who represent me, a second year PPE student, in some capacity^[1]. On top of that, there is the student association KallioPPE^[2]. Officially, KallioPPE does not act as a representative of the students to the college on academic matters, nevertheless in almost all years board members have acted as some form of sounding board for the views of students. Inevitably, all this complexity only creates apathy. In the last elections to the University Student Council (USR), the most powerful and important student representative body, only 7.5% of VU students voted^[3].

To some degree it seems inevitable that an organisation as large as the VU will become a tangle of competing bureaucracies^[4].

However, it does not feel unreasonable to say that as a PPE college, we should aim to do better. Therefore, I was heartened to hear about the project of direct student

engagement and feedback initiated by the new dean of the college. As the second-year representative to the PPE program committee, I do my best to represent the majority views and interests of all the second-year students, but this is difficult - not least because I no longer take every subject. However, this direct link between the JSMC and students isn't the perfect solution. I can foresee many situations where time-consistent and detail-oriented students are required for student input to be effective. For instance, an idea like the reimplementation of PPE scholarships to promote diversity would be best served by consistent input of students familiar with the exact details of whatever proposal emerges.

To select these engaged students, it is only logical that some element of democracy is required. Unfortunately, democracy within PPE is neither vibrant nor massively fair. In the past two elections to the program committee, voting was not particularly secure^[5] and the elections were essentially a name recognition contest. Furthermore, during the USR and FSR elections last April, the democratic spirit felt just as weak on the 4th floor as the rest of the university.

To remedy these problems, I think students, the college and representatives share a joint responsibility. As socially engaged students, I think we should all take the time to research and appreciate the work of the USR and faculty student councils. Having witnessed one of my friends working very hard within the USR this year, it has become clear to me that her powers and responsibilities are extensive^[6]. Yet, JSMC's role should also not be understated. New students at the college should have easy access to information about who represents

them and what those representatives do. Additionally, the voting process for the program committee should be improved by implementing a more secure system, switching away from first-past-the-post voting, and the organisation of debates or other forums of discussion before the elections. Lastly, student representatives should try and update the students they work for about what they have achieved or are working towards. To achieve this, I don't doubt that 'the Paper Mill' and 'PPE encounters' could claim a more active role as the journalists of PPE's small democracy.

[1] You have the two representatives to the University Student Council (USR) for the faculty of humanities (FGW), the PPE representative to the faculty student council (FSR), the second-year representative to the PPE program committee (myself), and the student assessor of the decisions the college makes. Hon-

ourable mentions go to the students selected by track coordinators to be part of the hiring committee. Undoubtedly, I've forgotten to mention something in this already lengthy footnote.

[2] www.kalliope.com

[3] <https://www.advalvas.vu.nl/nieuws/studentenraadsverkiezingen-meer-keuze-maar-nog-lagere-opkomst>

[4] Anyone working to get something done within the VU inevitably becomes intimately familiar with Douglas North's observation that, over-time, you simply have to become good at exploiting bad institutions.

[5] Students were only asked on an online form to provide their name and date of birth as identification.

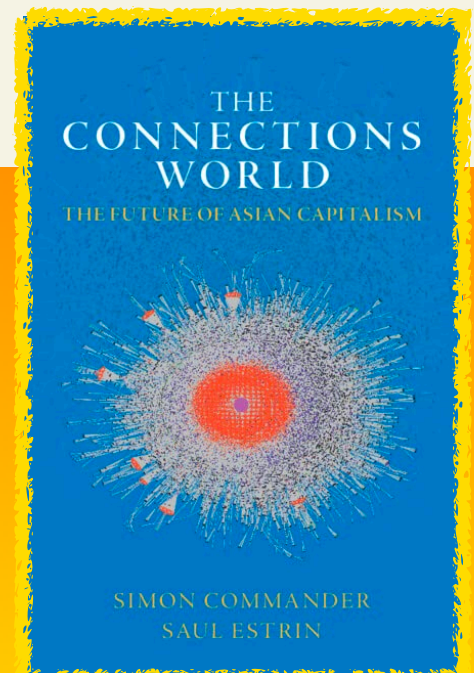
[6] The USR has many responsibilities, including advice and consent for the VU budget, but they also lobby for better student interests such as better student housing. Personally, one of my favourite projects of theirs this year was Veganuary. Unfortunately, they have not yet been able to improve the atrocious VU WiFi.

PPE Encounter's Speaker Event: The Connections World: The Future of Asian Capitalism With Simon Commander & Saul Estrin

When? March 22nd at 15:30-17:00.

Where? Adam Smith Room & on Zoom

We are excited to announce that on March 22nd the notable scholars Simon Commander & Saul Estrin. The event will be focusing on their work of their newest book "The Connections World" in which they argue that if Asia's claim to the 21st century is not to be derailed, major changes must be made to policy and behaviour so as to cut away the foundations of the connections world and promote more sustainable economic and political systems.



Saul Estrin is an Emeritus Professor of Managerial Economics and Strategy and the founding Head of the Department of Management at LSE.

Simon Commander is Managing Partner of Altura Partners providing policy advice to governments & companies. He is also Visiting Professor of Economics at IE Business School in Madrid.

Unsuccess Stories Part II

By Nele Fasshauer

Maybe y'all have a fear of failure. Maybe not. I do. Frantically! But I'm in good company: Kafka for example was sure that he would never achieve anything in his life (and frankly - he was right, he only became famous after his death). The internet is full of people that failed and got back up. But of course, those are only the ones that - well - made it back up. Might there be a gigantic iceberg of senselessly failed people under the surface of those empowering stories about the productivity of failure?

For this edition, I asked PPE staff about the biggest failure in their life, keeping in mind that being a professor (or docent, for that matter) is actually a pretty big achievement. But even those people must have failed at some point, right? Me: *"What was the biggest failure in your life?"*

Cian: *"I don't think I've necessarily failed at anything yet. I've failed modules in uni, but I ended up doing them again and succeeded. And now I'm doing a PhD. It's all about when you quit, that's when you fail... This morning I spilled coffee on my pants.... I've been in debating competitions that I did not win. I did it for years, and in 2019 we went to the European Debating Championships and barely missed the first qualification. This year an Irish team won the championship, and I was a little bit jealous.*

As you get older doors start closing faster. Genuinely not getting anywhere when you try has never happened to me. ... I got fired from my first proper job at a fast food place. They told me they were getting rid of me. because the customers did not like me, but the reason was 100% because they needed more hours for the other people so they got rid of the last person they hired, me."

Marina: *"Not spending enough time with my niece and nephew as I wanted to because I lived abroad."*

Baris: *"Not figuring out the correct work life balance yet. Sometimes I'm overwhelmed with the workload and don't take care of my mental health and sometimes i'm focusing too much on leisure time. I tend to create unnecessary pressure on myself. I've lost opportunities, friends and partners to that. If you have a lot of things you want to do, you cannot focus 100% on everything, you need to balance it out and prioritize. I was too hard on myself, judging myself with wrong criteria. Now I am realizing that the work life balance should be sorted out and I'm being more conscious about the balance between my mental health and my social life, personal interest and career aspirations. During my bachelor years it was worse, and I regret putting that much pressure on myself. The more time passes, the more realistic you become.*

If you get your satisfaction from beating others and being better than others, there is no end. There is always another language you can learn, another program to do, another internship to get. You need to separate yourself from that. Your worth is independent of those achievements. I keep in touch with some of the old PPE students, and they are disappointed they don't meet their own expectations. If you detach yourself early enough from those unrealistic societal expectations, you can save yourself a lot of trouble."

Chris: *"My biggest failure of my life was that I didn't make the most of my first three years of my undergraduate. I wasted a lot of time on unimportant things (like gaming) and failed to accomplish any of my goals during that period. I believe this has contributed to my ongoing struggles and failures in the following decade."*

Professor Patrick Overeem: *“One relatively innocent one is that I would have wanted to study abroad but then I got a girlfriend and stayed in the Netherlands. I’m now happily married but looking back we could have gone abroad together... Here is a good one (there are many). When I went to the VU in 2016 I worked before at Leiden University and was quite successful in my field then. But I wanted to start something new and was too drastic then. I should have combined the two better. I worked in public administration and moved to political science. I should have treasured my success in public administration better. Moving places I moved fields too much. That is a mistake I am trying to correct. It is not necessary to be so drastic in career changes. This also applies to other things. When I wanted to start a new life in Amsterdam, I let go of my friends and life in Leiden. That was not necessary. I could have preserved those relationships that I invested a lot in while at the same time building new relationships in Amsterdam.”*

Emmi: *“If I am honest I consider my greatest failure to be that I am not (always) there for my nieces and nephews. They all still live in Canada and I live here. I try to keep up my relationship with them, but it would be a lot different (i.e. better) if I lived there and could be there for them when they need an adult who is not a parent. I know they miss me (as I do them).”*

Professor Lilith Lee: *I put her response as its own article right after this, because it should be read on its own. Her notion of failure is in short the following: Failing to notice suffering. In the little, the academic day to day life, and in the grand scheme of things, failing to do enough against the climate crisis.*

The perceived failures are as diverse as life. To quote Tolstoy, “All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” Some reflect things that people would like to do differently if they had the chance again, some just reflect the many compromises we have to make in life.

Failure is a multifaceted thing. For some people, it is the deviation from an ideal life. For some it is unused potential. Nobody mentioned not being able to do something when they really wanted to. It is more about conscious decisions, and wrong decisions. People do not regret what they weren’t able to do, but what they were able to control and did wrong.

What I find interesting is how we define failure - and subsequently, what counts as one. I notice that women typically report more emotional topics as failures, while men list professional failures. Is this societal conditioning? And is that itself already a failure? and of who would that failure be? Is it personal or societal? Is a failure something visible on the outside, or is it something internal? Or is it both? Or is it missed responsibility? Isn’t climate change our biggest collaborative failure?

When I started with this article about failure I was thinking of a very classic, more surface level definition of failure - you know, not getting a job you like, failing courses etc. Either my sample is too biased to give us any real insight into what a failure is (you know, because professors and docents are conventionally successful people), and they just never failed. Or they just stopped having this conception of failure and started focussing more on their personal development and mental health.

Sometimes I am annoyed by the narrative that you learn from your mistakes. Some

mistakes are just shitty, and perceived failures are piercing deeply into our soul and wellbeing, without having anything good about them. I think you can see that from the stories. What we can also see is that failure does not destroy you. While you may have one part of life under control, other things might not be going perfect. And that's normal.

Writing and thinking about failures is tricky. On one side, it is helpful to hear from the mistakes of other people, because you can learn from them and try to avoid those

mistakes. On the other side, if you go through life trying to avoid every possible mistake you could ever make, that would for sure be a stressful life. Perfectionism is a dangerous trait. It strips you of your happiness because, as Baris said, there will always be something that could be better. I guess the takeaway is that Aristotle was right (the insight of about half of all my philosophical deliberations): It's all about the balance. Be curious about the failures of other people and reflect on your own failures, and know that you cannot do everything right anyways. Care a little less :).

On Failure

By *Lilith Lee*

In 1972, a (in)famous argument by Peter Singer was published in *Philosophy & Public Affairs*¹, presenting a divisive analogy using the overriding moral demand to save a drowning child as a lens to understand the moral demand to contribute to alleviating humanitarian crises around the world. Half a century since, entire cottage industries of philosophical scholarship have spawned in relation to the paper and many students today are still made to confront this very simple (perhaps even simplistic) question of applied ethics: how can you be justified in continuing to live in a certain degree of affluence when you could be contributing to alleviating the suffering or death of others, doing so justifiably up until the point where the cost of doing so begins to be morally significant? This question has also become all the more pressing given our current collective failure to prevent the planet from exceeding the 1.5°C of warming that will threaten the collapse of the west Antarctic ice sheet—leading to exponential increases in

climate injustices and the destruction of entire ecosystems (more than those that we've already seen in the past decade) as sea levels would be set to rise up to 10 meters, literally drowning entire communities (e.g. the country of Tuvalu). It is hard not to see my various entanglements in complicit social structures, as well as the indifferent banalities I perform everyday, as my—our—greatest, continuing failure. At the same time, when I first read it and even today, the rhetoric of Singer's paper (as well as the memory of it) read deeply personally, reaching down into and resurfacing one of my other greatest failures: a few months before I first read the paper, I had failed to save a drowning person in front of me.

It was, to be clear, not due to any inaction: with some other friends, we tried to remain calm and followed what anyone should do in such a situation: e.g., attempt various rescue logistics that did not put yet another life at severe risk of drowning, call the relevant emergency numbers, try desperately to wave down passersby who were possibly trained for such rescues. But we—I—nevertheless failed. For me back then, enthralled by the

conceptual apparatus afforded to me by philosophy to articulate the world and my place in it while blinkered by my immediate struggles to get by as a first-generation undergraduate, Singer's paper felt less like an indictment for the affluent to contribute more to alleviating humanitarian crises and more like a demand to see such crises and injustices as obviously happening to very real human beings rather than mere statistics and representations of abstract others: that the practice of philosophy should not be content to cognise metaphysical or moral truths but to recognise, as another philosopher put it a few years before Singer, that "The need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth."^[2] There remains a haunting degree of guilt today (unwarranted, kinder people than myself might say) as to how much more we could have given up in our effort to save the very real person (perhaps my own life?)—and this now very much merges with the chiding reminders of my climate indifference every time I doomsurf. But apart from the guilt, Singer's question also reads differently to me now, as an assistant professor: put metaphorically, how can I do better in my position behind the seawalls of academia now that I have, by the graces of Fortuna, been helped against socio-economic tides and currents and over its golden gates, while many others remain lost at sea and are even drowning? Those in philosophy are often seen as being in the business of defining concepts—but having avoided defining the concept of failure at the beginning, I shall instead let 'failure' define me now at the end of this writing. While I am often uncertain about the persuasiveness and persuasions of the drowning child analogy, its emotional hold on me with my failures retains all its strength from since the time I read it as an undergraduate. This is not to say that Singer's

paper is the most poetic of philosophical works (it is no way by far), but it nevertheless functions to illustrate what failure means for me (on my best days): a compulsion to take notice, a desperate waving. That is, apart from the guilt, the failures that Singer's paper now surfaces for me a specific task in academic philosophy that I shall articulate in borrowed words from a much more poetic philosopher:

In all eternity, it is impossible for me to compel a person to accept an opinion, a conviction, a belief. But one thing I can do: I can compel [them] to take notice.^[3]

I was told to write about only one failure, so let me now try to be more precise with my words and explain how the two cases of the climate crisis and the drowning person are really about one failure: I have been the failure, not only to others but also myself. But I am learning that to identify with failure can also be to identify as a compulsion for both myself and others to take notice of very real suffering. And, while I do not aspire to greatness, I hope that this might be at least morally significant.

^[1] Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1:3 (1972): 229–243.

^[2] Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (London/New York: Routledge, 1973) p. 17.

^[3] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, trans. Walter Lowrie (New York: Harper 3 Torchbooks, 1962), p. 35.

How not to Languish in Language: wicky

by Ray Polman

This Christmas break I actually languished in language for a bit. Overall I had an amazing two weeks, blessed as I was with my aunt's sudden call to come over and spend New Years with the family in Puerto Rico. I won't bore you with the decadent details of Caribbean nouveau riche vacations, but I'll note I had a wonderful time, which could only be improved for me with higher Spanish proficiency. My Spanish definitely proved to be sufficient to meet hitherto only heard of family members, and to cosplay as a native Dominican/Puerto Rican when out and about, but my limited vocabulary and the distinct dialect of the boricuan U.S. territory led me to have to refrain from joining a discussion or be unable to access the more subtle parts of language (witticisms, flirting) more than once. What arguably was hardest about speaking Spanish is having to deliberately mispronounce English loan words in order to be understood. Therefore, it could very well occur that I'd be driving to *gual mar* with my cousin to get some *con flei* while he tells me about last night's *elléi doyérs* game. So why can't they just pronounce it Walmart, corn flakes and LA Dodgers?

The Spanish language is quite straightforward when it comes to pronunciation: there are five vowels (*a*, *o*, *u*, *e* and *i*) which never change sound and only combine to create a limited number of diphthongs (mostly *ei*). And the Spanish language area is incredibly vast, spanning the majority of Latin America as well as of course Spain (and even oft-overlooked Equatorial Guinea), producing a wealth of literature, music and media which diminishes native Spanish speakers' need to learn a second language. Now, when a person grows up only ever hearing one

language and the phonemes (basically sounds and sound combinations) that it's composed of, this has major effects on future language acquisition, due to the process of myelination. Not to venture too deep into biology - as linguistics is already a far-fetched field for a PPE article - but myelination is the process whereby certain neurological pathways get fortified with a myelin (an organical protein) sheath. At birth there are connections between virtually all parts of the brain, but for efficiency purposes unused connections must disappear (atrophy) over childhood, while the frequently used connections marked with myelin may remain. In the realm of language comprehension this means that the neurological pathways used to detect particular phonemes will disappear if one isn't frequently exposed to them while growing up. This thus means that for people who grew up only hearing one language it has become physically impossible to properly hear foreign sounds from other languages.

So, in Spanish speaking parts of the world there's a high chance to grow up without too much interaction with foreign languages and therefore, due to myelination, an inability of recognising foreign phonemes later in life. When you can't recognise a phoneme your brain will just interpret it as sounding like the most similar phoneme you do know. For example, many native Anglophones are unexposed to the French *u* sound and will simply hear it as the similar English *oo* sound, resulting in them pronouncing it *day-shaw voo*. In reverse, French people traditionally wouldn't get much exposure to the English *th* sound giving rise to 'ze' stereotypical French English speaking accent. Beyond myelination, simple force of habit also holds significant sway over foreign language pronunciation. Another stereotypical accent is the Italian one wherein English words are outfitted with an extra final vowel ('*I bake-ah the pizza*'; sorry Italians), which to a native



Italian speaker would feel more comfortable as Italian words always end in vowels or 'soft' consonants (*l, n, r* and *s*). Other stereotypes like the Japanese pronunciation of *l* as *r*, or Russians not using, or superfluously using, grammatical articles also stem from myelination and habituation as Japanese has no *l* sound and Russian lacks articles. Aside from English accents, you and I too are bound to have stereotypical accents in almost all foreign languages. Even if you can pronounce *déjà vu* correctly, chances are your ears aren't fine tuned to the various 'sch' sounds of Polish, the five tones of Mandarin, let alone the different clicks in Xhosa.

Now back to Spanish. Without the English *w* and *j* sounds and unaccustomed to ending words in hard consonants it's no wonder that Walmart, corn flakes and LA Dodgers become *gual mar, con flei* and *ellei doyérs*. And frankly, after a few days I did grow accustomed to it, as it's much more beneficial to the flow of conversation to not abruptly contaminate your sentences with foreign phonemes. One word that did throw me off, and which has come into being due to the Dominican/Puerto Rican dialect's unpronunciation of *s* within or at the end of words, was only revealed later during my vacation while cruising the Caribbean when an uncle called me to come to the top deck to enjoy a, what he called, 'excellent wicky'. My Dutch brain immediately flashed back to the chemically-fruity tasting juice boxes of primary school lunch break and intrigued by my normally posh uncle's alleged affection for a mediocre tasting children's drink, I quickly followed along asking 'You guys have Wicky here?'. 'Of course, I believe this wicky is fifteen years old' he replied, turning this drink into a literal childhood time capsule for me. Alas, at the bar, with a glass of Glennfiddich in hand, I was sadly reminded that *wicky* (probably pronounced more like *huíqui*) was simply the boricuan pronunciation of the word 'whisky'.

In conclusion then, non-native speakers mispronouncing words is totally understandable as the correct pronunciation may literally be inaccessible to them. Only if someone has permanently moved to a new language area (and you're their teacher/coworker/partner) is it worthwhile to start the lengthy process of trying to reach the desired phonemes after all. Trying to prevent people from mispronouncing loan words is always a hopeless and useless battle, as the words will mostly be interchanged with other non-native speakers. Furthermore, using the original pronunciation likely breaks up the flow of speech, and comes off as pretentious to boot (looking at Pedro Sanchez pronouncing *déjà vu* the French way in a debate). And it may even be met with incomprehension as the 'wrong' pronunciation has already been part of the lexicon for ages (looking at Anglophones pronouncing Van Gogh). In the end, we're all victims of myelination somehow or other, as even linguistics-enthusiasts may be unable to tell Portuguese from Russian when spoken. Therefore, I held my tongue and gladly shared a *wicky* with my uncle.

Source:

Cruz, Adrienne, "A review of the neuroscience of second language acquisition" (2017). *Senior Honors Theses and Projects*. 559. <https://commons.emich.edu/honors/559>

A colour(ful)less disbelief

by Carolina Torrinha

The first known democracy in the world was created in Athens around the fifth century B.C.E. This means that more than 2000 years ago people had the necessity and urge to have a democracy. The Greek democracy was built on the idea that every adult citizen had to take an active part in government. So, if more than 2000 years ago democracy rested on the idea of political active citizens why is that today we've been experiencing an increased level of low electoral turnout? Are we paddling against evolution?

The noble purpose of politics has been lost for quite some time. Political actors stopped caring about the common good and the harmonization of different interests and started an ego-fight to the power for the sake of power. The reasons for such change can be explain by different factors, but at the end we are left with a vicious cycle hard to break.

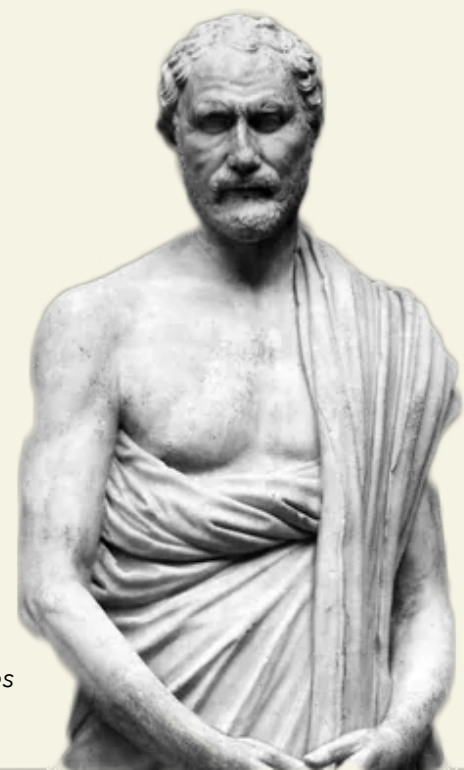
Throughout the years, the left-right dimension became unable to summarize all the problems we face in our life. The issues of the world no longer fit in such polarized dimension, neither they should. Trying to simplify such complex issues we'll only lead to what we are facing right now: an increased distance between the people and the political dimension.

Centrist parties lost their touch with the people, because the political scope has too many dimensions to only be summarized in one center from left and right. There are issues that cannot be compromised with one center only, and the need to try to avoid those by the traditional parties can be seem as dishonesty, lack of representation, self-serving ways, etc. So, while the center became more hallow in its ideologies, the

populist extreme parties are allowed a way in with the people, ready to give answers to those problems that the center is so reluctant in address. Right-wing populism starts to emerge and the center starts to erode with voters screaming for some kind of stability.

Meanwhile, while it may seem that more people are starting to vote for the extremes, what we actually see happening is simply a shift from voters. Electoral abstention is still increasing, because now the choices the people are facing with is either the extremes or a weak hallow center. Issues that remain complex and extremely important are still not being address with the same complexity and dignity that they deserve. Immigration is still seen either as a "job thief" or as a simple matter of morality; Taxes are still either "pocket's thief" or the wage of the state; even the health care discussion is now turned into something as the ones who want to save the people and the ones who want to let them die. Every issue is now reduced to black or white, but the people keep seeing in colors.

Now, the question remains why don't the parties do something about it? Why don't more options keep showing up? What happens is when less people vote the less



Cleisthenes

people do the parties need to please. Which means with an increase sense of detachment by the people to the parties, the latter start to move away from the realm of civil society to the realm of the government. Meaning they start not to care, because no one does. People are now seen as a means (votes) to an end (power), and ideologies as the product to achieve so. And so we close the vicious cycle. From an increased detachment to politics from below to above.

The solution to this lies in incentivize interest in political matters, make people care again

Death of the author: Hogwarts Legacy's legacy

by Ray Polman

As someone born in the very last stretch of the 20th century, I, for the longest time, wrongfully believed myself to be a veritable millennial. This didn't have much more implications than me from time to time pestering my couple months later born friends that their generation had got it all wrong, but it turned out I'm a gen Z'er too, as millennials purportedly have to be born between 1981 and 1996. This does check out, at least culturally, as I've never had a Myspace account, I'll pass on avocado toast and the biggest millennial obsession, Harry Potter, is entirely lost on me. But, I do find myself unable to look away from the self-destruction saga J.K. Rowling has written herself into, and it recently took an interesting turn.

This month the highly anticipated Hogwarts Legacy video game came out which led to heated debates on whether the game should be played at all (mostly due to streamers being asked by their fans to not play), considering the series' author J.K. Rowling's recent descent into transphobia. For a quick recap on the Rowling controversy: In June

and then the parties will increase again. The means to do it are infinite: through education, through campaign, through law, etc. What's missing is not vision or knowledge from the people in power, it's the need to redefine what power in politics really means. If political actors keep seeing power as something to be wielded above the masses and not something to make them thrive, then the detachment will always be something that makes their job easier and not harder. Therefore, not a true issue worth dealing with.

2020 Rowling received backlash for taking issue with the inclusive term 'people who menstruate' being used in an op-ed. When pressed, Rowling opted not to relent but to double down and devolved into a twitter breakdown that exposed her as a TERF (trans-exclusionary radical feminist), losing many fans in the process and later resulting in former friends and stars from the Harry Potter films publicly distancing themselves from her. From then on Rowling seems to have fully embraced TERFism (if that's a word), writing a detective novel in late 2020 about a case where a cis-man disguises himself as a woman to murder women. Oh, and with an exceptional feel for self-pity and dramatisation, she also wrote a 2022 book where a 'skeptical' cartoonist is being accused of racism and transphobia, resulting in them getting doxxed and eventually murdered by 'social justice warriors' (seriously).

Having established that J.K. Rowling is a person who is positively, willingly and knowingly transphobic; it is not hard to see why people would want to boycott her intellectual property. The thing is, it can be argued that art is something entirely separate from the artist and that by extension boycotting or canceling art is never necessary.



J.K. Rowling's tweet

This argument was most prominently defended by the literary critic Roland Barthes in the sixties. In Barthes' seminal essay *The death of the author* he took issue with the then prevailing method of reviewing art which was based on heavily considering the author's (/artist's) identity to distill meaning from their work. This method can be very rewarding when the author's lived experiences or background have a marked influence on the art they produced. Think of post-WWII novels like *Slaughterhouse Five* or *1984*, or art inspired by personal suffering like the paintings of Frida Kahlo or Jean-Michel Basquiat. Knowing about the artist in these cases enriches the experience of enjoying art, but the opposite may of course occur when you are cognisant of the fact that the artist in question was a horrible person or made their art for heinous ends. The most well-known examples of this are listening to Michael Jackson songs while knowing what he was indicted for, or the old meme of showing a lovely early twentieth century cityscape before revealing it was painted by Hitler. But, Barthes argued that one can never

really know everything about an artist, let alone their exact intentions with a specific work, and therefore art must be interacted with as a wholly separate entity. And this approach seems more true to life: Billions of people everyday enjoy art, be it music, prose, poetry or visual art, of which they don't have the slightest idea who made it (like you enjoying Hitler's paintings before knowing it were his).

Without knowing (exactly) who the artist is, one can still have valuable personal experiences with that art. Say, if someone always hears a specific song playing in the building's elevator when visiting someone they love, this person will automatically form their own bond with the art (e.g. be happy when hearing that song, even in other contexts), even if the artist is a terrible person or intended the art to be about something else entirely (e.g. not being too bored in an elevator). This is what happened with millennials and Harry Potter. The Harry Potter series were considered to be fairly progressive when they came out as they're an underdog story revolving around a wimpy orphan boy and his two goofy and nerdy friends fighting evil, saving the weak and vulnerable in the process. Add to that a whole plotline about trying to end slavery (something with house elves or some such, like I said, I was never into Harry Potter) and it's no wonder millennials en masse chose to devote their childhood freetime to manifesting their own Hogwarts acceptance letters. And before 2020, J.K. Rowling was just a Scottish woman who didn't let her inability to write decent prose obscure her knack for amazing fantasy worldbuilding. It thus was no problem at all for millions of people to form their own deeply personal experiences with the Harry Potter series.

Now, I'm personally partial to Roland Barthes 'death of the author' concept of experiencing art without paying mind to the artist (got those Hitler paintings all over my apartment) and since so many people genuinely enjoy the Harry Potter universe, I'm inclined to say that nobody should have qualms about playing the Hogwarts Legacy game, especially since it's unclear how much influence J.K. Rowling even had in its creation. And therefore Twitch-subscribers who are deriding their favourite streamers' decision to play the game are simply overzealous social justice warriors...or are they?

Digging a bit deeper into the subject it seems that not acknowledging 'death of the author' isn't even necessary to cancel Hogwarts Legacy. As it turns out the whole premise of the game is quite iffy, since you, the player, are supposed to put down an uprising of second-class magical beings (goblins) that seemingly just want equal treatment, and who also very much resemble an anti-semitic stereotype (they're bankers with hooked noses). But the detail that did it for me was the fact that the one trans character, a transwoman, is called - I can't



Vienna State Opera House - One of Hitler's paintings

make this stuff up - Sirona Ryan. SIRona RYAN. This might be the pettiest naming decision in art and was by some members of the LGBTQ-community described as 'worse than having no trans character at all'. And apparently, the series' only Asian and Jewish characters are named Cho Chang and Anthony Goldstein to boot. In this case then, the art (video game) itself isn't entirely wholesome, to say the least, so I'll repeat that death of the author is real, but maybe we'll have to sit this one out.

Source:

Barthes, R. (1967). The death of the author. Fontana.

The Note

by Kees van der Veek

"How admirable, to see lightning, and not think life is fleeting"

-Eri Takase

I knew it the moment beams of sunlight broke through the barrier of my eyelashes. My attempts to fend off the morning were always rendered futile without exception. But this time around there was more existential dread to the demise of my escapism. The air was pregnant with despair. The horizon seemed a continent-wide net that would swallow my will to live and all my hope to ever find purpose again. I stepped out of bed. I didn't consider myself ready to find out what had happened. However, my horrid doubts would subvert themselves nonetheless to the overruling curiosity. Whatever was wrong here, I would have to confront it. Upon entering my living room my nose started to bleed from the full frontal epiphany that hit me in the face. My dearest monstera deliciosa had disappeared. In its place lay only a note. Traces of dirt over the floor. Tears on the walls. The plant I had loved within the tiniest fibers of my intricate, difficult heart had spit on the piece of me I handed to him in all the naivety inherent to star-crossed lovers. He hadn't even bothered to take the pot I bought him for Christmas with him.

The tension steaming in my blood vessels rose to a roaring seer and spilled far beyond their banks like a raging river in a rainstorm. I felt betrayal. I felt the earth being swept from under my feet and an intense struggle to regain contact with anything. By the lack of gaps to claw abided an irrational litany of hate and hopelessness. I started swearing. I kicked my coffee table and broke all the plates in my cabinets. The note taunted me. I didn't want to read it because then I would

never be able to read it for the first time ever again. My speculations would condense to one outcome. What was said in the letter would be definitive and I wouldn't want to know either way. But it was there.

In stark contrast with the plant in which I misplaced all my endless love lies that little letter accentuating the void that it had left. That void had kidnapped a part of my eternal soul leaving me incomplete. Was it worth it to feel the warmth of my heart being held by someone else's hands? Did I finally recognize my mirror's image when I saw it in another's eyes? We were so good together. Not a cloud in the sky. Good things should come easy. Not like this.

I walked around fuming in my own rage for a little longer. What to do or where to go, how was I ever supposed to have a clue of anything again? I stared at the note from the corner of the room. On that vile piece of paper was described the way in which I had been brought in emotional discredit. Discredit that I don't deserve because I have always harbored good intentions, treated you right, I gave you my all. If anything you weren't worthy of me and all I am left to do is corrupt the memory of you I cherished simply to alleviate the pain. To fool myself into believing you weren't of cosmical value to me in the first place. Isn't it utterly stupid how emotions work? If only I never had them.

By solemnly sitting in silence I treaded down the set of rickety stairs between my heart and my head now that nothing much besides confusion dared going up them. I saw it bleeding, screaming. It needed answers above all. It couldn't bear the misty mystery that the question was cloaked in. One can easily enter this vortex of masochistic overthinking. If you don't abstract a pressing suspicion from your mind's eye you will allow it to take monstrous shapes. It pollutes your spirit like an expanding oil stain in the ocean until nothing is left untouched. You fill in gaps

automatically. Brains function as prediction machines and one wired like mine to suspect disastrous scenarios shouldn't be fed something so hollow. I find it saddening the way in which I sabotage myself sometimes. But the frequency with which I do it incapacitates me to predict what my prediction machine has in store for me. So I came to the conclusion that I should just read the note. With shivering limbs, legs turned to jelly I stepped towards it.

"Dear Kees, let me first and foremost tell you that the seventh heaven never could compare to the time we spent together. I saw the twinkle in your eye when we met at the store. My chloroplasts spazzed and sizzled. Ever since then life has felt like floating on a cloud. The little surprises you planned for me, our trip to Hawaii, the songs you would sing when I struggled to fall asleep. I felt spoiled and owned in the best possible way. You showered me with love like no one else could and I will never give anyone ever a chance to tread in your footsteps. You must be wondering why I left. And I know it is not easy to understand nor is it easy for me to describe. The love you gave me had a strong possessive aspect. Monogamy has this inherent possessivity. Yours took shape in

sweet nurture but paved a way for this fear. Not that I was inhibited in my freedom, no. I felt the fear that you would take it onto yourself once I would get old. I wouldn't want you to see me wither away. I couldn't bear the thought of being over the hump and seeing the harm it inflicts on you. So I left because I knew my time was coming soon. I had to leave you on my high point so that you'd never know what it's like to go increasingly downhill. And I know it sounds selfish and weak, and that you say to yourself you want to be there during my time of dying, but you don't. And I wouldn't want you to be there too.

I ask you now to not follow after me. Everything about me that you need has nestled itself in your heart already and I will not let that erode by the image of me gasping and grasping for drops of water in a shell of myself longing for former glory. This is a lot to take in. Be sure to take your time. I left one of my leaves in a special place in the house. I know that I don't have to explain to you where. Look at it whenever you fear for forgetting how to miss me.

I love you until eternity. This was the only way. It doesn't sound right, but good things are difficult."

That was it for now. Thank you to everyone who contributed with their work & see you next time!

Questions, comments, or suggestions on how to improve the newsletter?

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