

# ПОНДЯ

Issue #1/2026



# PONDR

*Your curated reading, beautifully typeset*

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# Welcome to the Swarm



Folklore

~6 MIN READ



## Welcome to the Swarm

**L**ast summer, Rafa (@rafa on Farcaster) joined the Summer of Protocols[1] to explore how protocols shape our lives. During his research, Rafa looked into how people, bots, and content are coordinating in digital spaces. Here we present an excerpt of the full research for Folklore readers. The full essay is available as a PDF here.[2]

**On the internet, we are part of swarms: networks of people, bots, and content, coordinated through algorithmic feedback loops.**

Swarms are harbingers of misin-

formation, heralds of mutual aid, and representatives of the public will. But this is not our grandparents' crowd. Swarms are networked tempests of humans and information. Most importantly, they can act collectively without explicit protocols; they are minimally protocolized entities. In this research, I document a variety of swarms, such as the mutual-aid response to the devastation of Hurricane María, to uncover their unique methods of cooperation. To understand swarms, we also need to understand their peers within the broader category of online forma-

tions. This category includes group entities like memetic tribes and online communities that have explicit protocols which separate them from their swarm peers and makes them more explicitly manageable.

This inevitably leads us to the question: How do we steer swarms?

The sky turned lilac at the break of dawn on September 22, 2017. It was an omen of Juracán, the wind spirit, summoned by the indigenous deity Guabancex. Hurricane María, the worst storm since 1899, was about to make landfall in Puerto Rico. It was mythic: the storm crossing on to land one minute after sunrise. Thousands would die in the aftermath. Millions of Puerto Ricans living in the U.S. and around the world waited in anticipation, without a way to connect to or help their family and friends.

A Berlin-based Puerto Rican working in climate venture-building, Jorge Vega Matos fidgeted on his phone through the morning, watching his Facebook feed nervously. He dreaded the challenges his elderly parents and family might face in the coming days and weeks. Unknown to Jorge, an old acquaintance and Puerto Rican social activist in New York named Pablo Benson did the same.

There was a deafening silence online. Everyone was alone but watching together. As the silence continued due to an islandwide

blackout, Jorge noticed that the Puerto Rican diaspora had begun to share drop-off points on Facebook for aid supplies. Rumors of stronger-than-expected damage crawled from phone to phone, urging those with an internet connection to broadcast their fears and take action. Facebook's ever-watching algorithm understood the opportunity for engagement and amplified their voices. A collective direction emerged as anxiety transformed into support: *Let's not delay, let's get supplies to those in need.*

There was no banner or organizing institution, just posts about where to go and visual memes with lists of useful supplies. Jorge's feed became a cacophony of activity. The digital diaspora had mobilized into a swarm: a network of people, content, and bots kept aligned by the algorithms of Facebook's feed. It was a symbiotic alliance between social media and the Puerto Rican community: both needed to aggregate attention.

By the end of the day in Berlin, while Hurricane María was still ravaging the island, Jorge had created a public spreadsheet to aggregate supply drop-off points circulating on Facebook. He shared the link with various mutual aid groups, in hopes of accelerating donations. In New York, Pablo saw the spreadsheet and immediately forwarded it to others in his network. It turned out that the recipe

for their swarmlike collaboration had been simple: provide a platform of connection to those with a common desire. The message found its way across the Atlantic: We're creating a team and we want to use your spreadsheet.

It was not the presence of certain protocols but their *absence* that gave the swarm its advantage. While government agencies and aid organizations sought approvals, individuals were able to act freely and broadcast their intentions via posts. Social media had enabled collaboration at scale through algorithms and instant messaging rather than being slowed down by explicit protocols, central planning, or strategic oversight.

The story of Hurricane María highlights the structures and affordances of online swarms. But swarms are all around us. Other instances are regularly referenced in pop culture and daily news: celebrity cancellation raids, misinformation campaigns, fandom hypes, activist rallies, and memestock frenzies.

We can see another swarm's footprint in the paths to ruin of four banks in 2023. The episode began that year when the Silicon Valley Bank published a surprise announcement on Wednesday, March 8. In it, the bank mentioned that it was taking action to address some liquidity challenges. A frenzy of panicked founders and CEOs

(sparked in part by newsletter writer Byrne Hobert's analysis of the situation) messaged each other frantically as funds (such as Peter Thiel's Founders Fund) advised them to withdraw their money. A torrent of provocative content flooded digital spaces. The swarm had been summoned.

Screenshots of texts and emails were forwarded from one person to another. Posts on social media and in group chats created a pattern. In turn, the algorithms identified it as highly engaging content and accelerated its reach. The impending collapse manifested itself: within a day, over \$42 billion had been withdrawn. The bank was unable to react in time. By March 10, just two days later, the bank was placed under the receivership of the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC). Later, it became evident that the banking collapse was incited by other issues, but the swarm had accelerated its fate, striking like lightning fueled by desperate attention. Three more banks were claimed throughout the summer. Eventually, attention moved elsewhere and the swarm dissipated. The hurricane response and the bank run are examples of online swarms: networks of people, content, and bots. They allow participants to act individually, with collective impact. Through a shared orientation that emerges in algorithmic feedback loops,

swarms coordinate without internally directed protocols.

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## ANIMALS, CROWDS, AND GUERRILLAS

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Swarms mirror similar patterns we see in animals, crowds, and guerrillas. Animal aggregations such as fish shoals evade danger by finding dark waters. Army ants build bridges over tricky terrain.

Online swarms also create collective solutions, but navigate networked online worlds instead of purely physical ones. The hurricane response built bridges of information enabling a supply chain of aid. The bank runs evaded financial ruin by collectively removing themselves from the unsafe institutions. Yet unlike animal aggregations, online swarms include a diversity of agents—people, content, bots, and algorithms—each with their own objectives or programming.

It is not sufficient to characterize swarms as a basic mixed crowd. In a crowd, participants gather organically and then act as a collective. We can picture a crowd of people gathering at a sunny spot in the park.

Each person makes an individual decision to join and move from one part of the park to another. From afar, it would seem as though the crowd was working together. In reality, the sun was serving as a shepherd.

For an online swarm, the sun is the algorithm. But swarms operate with key differences. They include spectral objects like bots and content. They are digital-first, while crowds are often physical gatherings: location and mobilization are decoupled in a swarm. Additionally, swarms are deeply networked and everyone can broadcast information or send instant messages to each other. In contrast, crowd participants only communicate with their nearest physical neighbors.

At the intersection of algorithmic navigation and networked crowds, swarms take on guerrilla-like traits. They use their ecosystem as infrastructure for communication and coordination. They also form celllike teams. These teams are autonomous and self-contained, each with its preferred protocols, but globally oriented via an emergent promise.

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*Read the full essay at:*

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## LINKS

[1] [summerofprotocols.com/](http://summerofprotocols.com/)



[2] [summerofprotocols.com/research/the-swarm-and-the-formation](http://summerofprotocols.com/research/the-swarm-and-the-formation)



# The Intrinsic Perspective

Erik Hoel

theintrinsicperspective.com · ~48 MIN READ



Art for The Intrinsic Perspective is by Alexander Naughton[1]

**O**ver the weekend this essay of mine won 1st place and \$5,000 in Scott Alexander's anonymous book review contest, which was hosted at Astral Codex Ten[2].

Steven Pinker@sapinker



Book Review Contest 2022 Winners from Astral Codex Ten: Unusually thorough, unbiased, & analytic book reviews (they put familiar book review outlets to shame). [astralcodexten.substack.com](https://astralcodexten.substack.com)

Book Review Contest 2022 Winners

5:21 PM · Sep 3, 2022

23 Reposts · 176 Likes

[3]

*The winning entry is now being published here under my real name. I highly encourage you to read it, as it's truly one of the better things I've ever written. More than just a book review, it attempts to solve the "Sapient Paradox," which asks: Given that humans have been around for 200,000 years, why did civilization take so long to get*

*started? Why were we stuck in prehistory for so long?*

ON ROUSSEAU, ESSAY CONTESTS, POLITICAL MOTIVATIONS FOR REVISITING THE ORIGIN OF HUMAN CIVILIZATION, AND THE BOOK IS INTRODUCED

In 1754 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, at the comfortable age of 42, was composing a monograph for an essay contest not dissimilar to this one. Hosted by a local university, the prompt for the contest was "What is the origin of inequality among people, and is it authorized by natural law?" Rousseau's submission, *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men*, became an intellectual sensation. In its long life as one of the foundational documents of the Western world it has been, at times, blamed for the bloody slaughter of The Terror, and, at other times, lauded as the inventor of the progressive Left.

Disqualified from winning the contest due to its unapologetic length, the *Discourse's* depiction of an original state of nature populated by

noble savages, a state eventually sundered by agriculture and the invention of private property, was monumentally influential. His genius move was to politicize the past, offering up an alternative mirror to Hobbes' view, itself already political, which portrayed life in prehistorical societies with that oft-repeated phrase: "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." Hobbes, founder of the political Right, and Rousseau, founder of the political Left, both built their arguments on the bedrock of pre-history. But on different bedrocks. The lesson being: if you want to change human society, change the past first.

Enter *The Dawn of Everything*, which tries to change the past by taking a third way orthogonal to the Rousseau/Hobbes spectrum. Published to widespread acclaim last year, it was blurbed by the likes of Noam Chomsky and Nassim Taleb, and given glowing reviews in *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, and many others. A door-stopping tome of public-facing but dense scholarship, it harkens back to an older age—it even has overwrought Victorian section titles calligraphed in ALL CAPS.

It's a co-authored book by David Graeber and David Wengrow. The Davids. First, we have David Graeber, anthropologist, famed author of *Debt: the First 5,000 Years*, notable figure in the 2011 Occupy Wall

Street movement, a playful but snarky writer, almost certainly the reason for the section titles being the way they are, and now deceased at the relatively young age of 59, dying just several weeks before *The Dawn of Everything* was published, victim of a totally inexplicable and blazingly fast case of necrotizing pancreatitis. The surviving David, David Wengrow, is lesser known but more erudite, more pragmatic, classically academic both in his pedantry but also in his impressive armament of archeological knowledge, and it's Wengrow who's been trying to fill the shoes of the more famous Graeber by making the post-publishing media whirlwind tour, sometimes to visible discomfort as he goes on long-winded lectures while the hosts try hastily to cut to the next segment.

What is the version of prehistory the Davids offer in *The Dawn of Everything*? It is an anti-story. The Davids are offering up an alternative to (as well as a criticism of) thinkers like Steven Pinker or Jared Diamond or Yuval Noah Harari, all of whom give a standard model of human prehistory that goes *smallhunter-gatherer tribes* → *invention of agriculture* → *civilization* (with its associated hierarchies and private property and wealth inequalities).

The original hunter-gatherer tribes are often reasoned about via the analogy of contemporary hunter-

gatherer tribes (or at least, those in recent history surveyed by anthropologists). Yet which tribe is an “appropriate” analogy changes depending whether the reasoner is a follower of Hobbes or Rousseau; a modern Hobbesian might prefer to use the war-like Yanomami as the analogy, whereas a follower of Rousseau might prefer the more peaceful and egalitarian Hadza, Pygmies, or !Kung.

The thesis of *The Dawn of Everything* is that neither of these is correct. In fact, the Davids argue the standard model of prehistory isn't supported at all by modern archaeological and anthropological evidence; in its place they offer a complexified account, wherein prehistorical humans lived in a panoply of different political arrangements, from extreme egalitarianism to chattel slavery, and that, just like humans in recorded history, they consciously collectively chose to live in the arrangement they did (well, except for the slaves), with the result being that

*the world of hunter-gatherers as it existed before the coming of agriculture was one of bold social experiments, resembling a carnival parade of political forms... Agriculture, in turn, did not mean the inception of private property, nor did it mark an irreversible step towards inequality. In fact, many of the first farming communities were relatively free of ranks or hierarchies. And far from*

*setting class differences in stone, a surprising number of the world's earliest cities were organized on robustly egalitarian lines...*

So for the Davids, the question is not, as it was for Rousseau, “How did inequality arise?” but rather, given the diversity of prehistorical ways of life, “How did we get stuck with the inequalities we have?”

This is a very interesting question to ask and the Davids marshal a veritable trove of evidence, some of which really does convincingly support their theses. But there is a problem with the book. For their own version of prehistory is corrupted by politics, the same corruption they accuse Rousseau and Hobbes and other thinkers of falling prey to before them. After all, the Davids' express purpose is to argue that humans, in their diverse forms of prehistorical governments, are free, even playful, and capable of imagining new ways of living and consciously choosing to live in these ways, which the authors take to imply that their own beliefs in radical progressivism, or post-capitalism, might therefore be successful in our modern world—and moreso, that their research implies our current world and its ills are, in turn, a choice. The Davids certainly don't hide their political goals, either in the book or in interviews, and their leanings are evident from the way it's written as

well: their eagerness to line up with progressivism spins throughout like a finely-tuned gyroscope. The result is a tendency to get carried away and issue blanket statements, like how Western civilization is currently great “except if you’re Black,” or outright misrepresentations of their intellectual opponents, like assigning to Steven Pinker the claim that “all significant forms of human progress before the twentieth-century can be attributed only to that one group of humans who used to refer to themselves as ‘the white race’” (Pinker doesn’t claim this), or rejecting the science of kinship-based theories of altruism with reasoning like “many humans just don’t like their families very much” (these are all real quotes).

Somewhere, within the morass of innuendo and expressions of their own political leanings, as well as the undeniable encyclopedic display of archeological and anthropological knowledge, there is a truth as to how humans lived prehistorically, and how civilization, with all its ills (and its goods) came to be. But what is that truth?

THE AGRICULTURE REVOLUTION WAS NO REVOLUTION, NOR DID IT INEXORABLY LEAD TO INEQUALITY; INEQUALITY, EVEN CHATTEL SLAVERY, ALREADY EXISTED

*Our world as it existed just before the dawn of agriculture was anything but a world of roving hunter-gatherer bands. It was marked, in many places, by sedentary villages and towns, some by then already ancient, as well as monumental sanctuaries and stockpiled wealth...*

And with this the Davids begin their dissection of the idea that agriculture was the root cause of political inequality, arguing that agriculture was not actually a “revolution” that irrevocably changed how humans lived.

Instead, the Davids present a wave of evidence that pre-agricultural hunter-gatherer societies could be incredibly politically diverse, and, sometimes, rival the worst atrocities of modern societies; at other times, they could rival their best. They zoom into the Native American foragers (not farmers) who lived on the California coastline, and observe substantial political differentiation, even out thousands of years into the past. Particularly between the Yurok in California and their northern neighbors of the Northwest Coast. The Yurok

*struck outsiders as puritanical in a literal sense... ambitious Yurok men were ‘exhorted to abstain from any kind of indulgence... Repasts were kept bland and spartan, decoration simple, dancing modest and*

restrained. There were no inherited ranks or titles.

Compare that to the Native Americans of the Northwest Coast, right above them:

**Northwest Coast societies, in contrast, became notorious among outside observers for the delight they took in displays of excess... They became famous for the exuberant ornamentation of their art.**

The Yurok and other micro-nations to the south only rarely practiced chattel slavery. In stark contrast,

*in any true Northwest Coast settlement hereditary slaves might have constituted up to a quarter of the population. These figures are striking. As we noted earlier, they rival the demographic balance in the colonial South at the height of the cotton boom and are in line with estimates for household slavery in classical Athens.*

Indeed, there is evidence of Native American chattel slavery that goes back to 1850 BC in Northwest Coast societies (again, these are not agricultural societies).

*The behavior of the Northwest Coast aristocrats resembles that of Mafia dons, with their strict codes of honour and patronage relation-*

*ships; or what sociologists refer to as 'court societies'—the sort of arrangement one might expect in, say, feudal Sicily...*

So we have slave-owning Mafia dons to the north, and meanwhile, ascetics to the south. Despite both being foragers, they ate extremely different diets, with Californian tribes relying on nuts and acorns, while the Northwest Coast societies were sometimes referred to as 'fisher-kings' (presumably due to their two loves: aristocracy and fish). As the Davids say,

**this is emphatically not what we are taught to expect among foragers... within the tiny communities that did exist, entirely different principles of social life applied.**

Furthermore, the Davids make a good case that agriculture was not the sort of parasitic memetic invasion it is often portrayed as by writers like Yuval Noah Harari.

*Once cultivation became widespread in Neolithic societies, we might expect to find evidence of a relatively quick or at least continuous transition from wild to domestic forms of cereals... but this is not at all what the results of archeological science show.*

Instead

*the process of plant domestication in the Fertile Crescent was not fully completed until much later: as much as 3,000 years after the cultivation of wild cereals first began ( . . . to get a sense of the scale here, think: the time between the putative Trojan War and today).*

This is despite the fact that scientific experiments on wheat genetics have revealed that

*the key genetic mutation leading to crop domestication could be achieved in as little as twenty to thirty years, or at most 200 years, using simple harvesting techniques like reaping with flint sickles or uprooting by hands. All it would have taken, then, is for humans to follow the cues provided by the crops themselves.*

So if it was a revolution, it was one that occurred as slowly as almost all of post-literate human history combined. And not only that, but prehistorical societies seem to occasionally develop agriculture and then consciously abandon it, preferring some other way of life. The Davids give several examples of this, including the builders of Stonehenge, who

*were not farmers, or at least, not in the usual sense. They had once been; but the practice of erecting and dismantling grand monuments*

*coincides with a period when the people of Britain, having adopted the Neolithic farming economy from continental Europe, appear to have turned their backs on at least one crucial aspect of it: abandoning the cultivation of cereals and returning, from around 3,300 BC, to the collection of hazelnuts as their staple source of plant food. . .*

This sort of laissez-faire attitude toward farming is true in many other places, for example, in the early Amazonia there are seasonal cycles in and out of farming, and same for the habit of keeping pets but not domesticating animals fully, i.e., people who were neither forager or farmer, and often for thousands of years.

Nor did the agricultural revolution, even as it was occurring, result in one way of living; it seems like during the transition toward farming very different societies were possible, even those that lived in proximity to one another, the exact same as hunter-gatherer societies. Consider the upland and lowland sectors of the Fertile Crescent in the Middle East; sectors which are themselves demarcated by Göbekli Tepe, the world's oldest construction of stone megaliths, dated to around 9,000 BC.

(a) Göbekli Tepe, with its circular and rectangular regions, as seen from above. (b-c) Complex representational stone carvings.

Between the upland and lowland sectors we see, again, political differentiation. North of Göbekli Tepe, in the upland, there was a city wherein at

*the centre of the settlement stood a long-lived structure that archeologists call the 'House of Skulls', for the simple reason that it was found to hold the remains of over 450 people, including headless corpses and over ninety crania, all crammed into small compartments. . . Human remains in the House of Skulls were stored together with those of large prey animals, and a wild cattle skull was mounted on an outside wall. . . Studies of blood residues from the surface, and from associated objects, led researchers to identify this as an altar on which public sacrifice and processing of bodies took place, the victims both animal and human.*

In comparison, lowland villages of the Fertile Crescent also attached a great importance to human heads, but treat them in an altogether different manner, in a way one might describe as touching (despite its macabre nature), like the 'skull portraits' found in lowland Early Neolithic villages.

*These are heads that are removed from burials of women, men, and occasionally children in a secondary process, after the corpse had decomposed. Once separated from the body, they were cleaned and care-*

*fully modelled over with clay, then coated with layers of plaster to become something altogether different. Shells were often fixed into the eye sockets, just as clay and plaster filled in for the flesh and skin. Red and white paint added further life. Skull portraits appeared to be treasured heirlooms, carefully stored and repaired over generations. They reached the height of their popularity in the eighth millennium BC. . . one such modelled head was found in an intimate situation, clutched to the chest of a female burial.*

Such details in art and priorities corresponded to political differences: the upland sectors of the Fertile Crescent were

*most clearly distinguished by the building of grand monuments in stone, and by a symbolism of male virility and predation. . . By contrast, the art and ritual of the lowland settlements in the Euphrates and Jordan valleys presents women as co-creators of a distinct form of society—learned through the productive routines of cultivation, herding and village life—and celebrated by modelling and binding soft materials, such as clay or fibres, into symbolic forms.*

And yet we know that the regions traded with one another. There are plenty of other examples of political differentiation, both pre- and post-agriculture, although even the

Davids are forced to admit that agriculture marks a change. Eventually it

*saw the creation of patterns of life and ritual that remain doggedly with us millennia later, and have since become fixtures of social existence among a broad sector of humanity: everything from harvest festivals to habits of sitting on benches, putting cheese on bread, entering and exiting via doorways, or looking at the world through windows.*

But the fact that humans were able to invent, and then abandon, agriculture, and have inequality or equality to greater degrees throughout the invention of agriculture, and to continue to have political differentiation after agriculture, all suggests to the Davids that our ancestors, despite (as one might say) having the handicap of living in prehistory, were choosing to live a certain way, not simply driven like automaton by environmental inputs or new inventions. They made conscious political choices, just like us.

#### CONSCIOUS POLITICAL CHOICE AMONG NATIVE AMERICANS AND THE “INDIGENOUS CRITIQUE” OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION

This thesis may sound surprising, but the Davids bemoan that this is because non-Western, non-

European civilizations are consistently stripped of political self-consciousness in standard historical accounts, e.g.,

*to Victorian intellectuals, the notion of people self-consciously imagining a social order more to their liking and then trying to bring it into being was simply not applicable before the modern age. . . this would have come as a great surprise to Kandiaronk, the seventeenth-century Wendat philosopher-statesman. . . Like many North American peoples of his time, Kandiaronk’s Wendat nation saw their society as a confederation created by conscious agreement; agreements open to continual renegotiation.*

The conversational nature of the Wendat government led most Jesuits to describe French-speaking Native Americans as highly eloquent, as, at least among those who spoke Iroquoian languages, open conversation and debate were how tribe decisions got made, a process that rewarded the more eloquent and convincing of its members (although not all Native American states valued the reasonable debate of the Iroquois).

But somehow the self-consciously political nature of New France was replaced by either the idealized fantasies of Rousseau or the idealized barbarism of Hobbes. The Davids have a story for how that happened, and it actually involves

Kandiaronk himself. They argue that Native American intellectuals were the true originators of many of the criticisms of the Western World that would go on to define the political Left, and European intellectuals in turn co-opted their criticisms, using fictional Native Americans as mouthpieces, while the originals were forgotten to mainstream history. This is because Native American intellectuals,

*when they appear in European accounts, are assumed to be mere representatives of some Western archetype of the ‘noble savage’ or sock-puppets, used as plausible alibis to an author who might otherwise get into trouble for presenting subversive ideas...*

The reality was quite different, the Davids suggest, once you investigate evidence from the Great Lakes region where tribes like the Wendat, and Jesuits and fur traders, all mixed together. In the late 1600s, Lahontan, a French aristocrat, spent much time in New France, and there met the Kandiaronk (also called ‘Le Rat’, since his name meant ‘muskrat’). Kandiaronk was

*at the time engaged in a complex geopolitical game, trying to play the English, French, and Five Nations of the Haudenosaunee off against each other... with the long-term goal of creating a comprehensive in-*

*digenous alliance to hold off the settler advance... Everyone who met him, friend or foe, admitted he was a truly remarkable individual: a courageous warrior, brilliant orator, and unusually skillful politician.*

Kandiaronk was known for engaging the Europeans in debate, attending their dinner parties to converse with them, and Lahontan witnessed some of these debates and knew Kandiaronk personally. Later, an old man in Europe, Lahontan would publish *Curious Dialogues with a Savage of Good Sense Who has Traveled* which was a dialogue between fictional versions of himself and Kandiaronk; the latter offered forth convincing and eloquent critiques of European civilization, from its pitilessness to those in need, to its obsession with money, to its social inequality, to its lack of basic human freedoms that the Wendat still possessed. This “indigenous critique”

*won a wide audience, and before long Lahontan had become something of a minor celebrity. He settled at the court of Hanover, which was also the home base for Leibniz, who befriended and supported him...*

The indigenous critique served as a shock to the European system, setting the path to Rousseau’s *Discourses* by creating an entire genre of literature, as

just about every major French Enlightenment figure tried their hand at a Lahontan-style critique of their own society, from the perspective of some imagined outsider. Montesquieu chose a Persian; the Marquis d'Argens a Chinese; Diderot a Tahitian; Chateaubriand a Natchez; Voltaire's *L'Ingénu* was half Wendat and half French. . . . Perhaps the most popular work of this genre, published in 1747, was *Letters of a Peruvian Woman* by the prominent saloniste Madame de Graffigny, which viewed French society through the eyes of an imaginary captured Inca princess. All took up and developed themes and arguments borrowed directly from Kondiaronk. . . .

But for a long time the dominant historical view was that Lahontan essentially created a fictional character (with intimate knowledge of European life and customs) to use as a convincing mouthpiece to give European critiques of European culture. Except actually the pieces fit much better that Lahontan was, perhaps with only some exaggeration, writing the real Kondiaronk. This is attested to by Lahontan himself, who claims to have based it off of Kondiaronk, and is backed up by lost historical details like how outside accounts attest that Kondiaronk was indeed invited to debates comparing European life to indigenous life, and also how

there is every reason to believe that Kondiaronk actually had been to France; that's to say, we know the Wendat Confederation did send an ambassador to visit the court of Louis XIV in 1691, and Kondiaronk's office at the time was Speaker of the Council, which would have made him the logical person to send.

Judging this, I have to say I think the Davids are correct; there is a good case that there were real and serious intellectual contributions from Native Americans in critiquing the inequalities of European civilization, particularly from the articulate and debate-based Iroquoian-speaking nations.

This is a great hand to be holding, but, in a pattern that repeats throughout the book, the Davids overplay it. They claim the idea of inequality arose in Europe *entirely* through the indigenous critique, essentially proposing that some conversations being held by Jesuits and fur traders in New France were the mono-causal origin of the political Left. This spills into other ambitious overclaims, like how

one cannot say that medieval thinkers rejected the notion of social inequality; the idea that it might exist seems never to have occurred to them.

Really? In medieval Europe, the role of wealth in the clergy was fractious and constant. And Christ, the most important intellectual figure for medieval Europe, was himself a political radical and revolutionary, overturning the tables of the moneylenders and frequently espousing things like in Matthew 20:25-28:

*You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave...*

What is that if not a statement of disgust at social inequality? And not for the only time in the book, the Davids undercut themselves when they later point out that the conception of inequality was alive and well in European peasantry:

*A certain folk egalitarianism already existed in the Middle Ages, coming to the fore during popular festivals like carnival, May Day, or Christmas, when much of society reveled in the idea of a 'world turned upside down,' where all powers and authorities were knocked to the ground and made a mockery of. Often the celebrants were framed as a return to some primordial 'age of equality'...*

So in their overly confident conclusion, the Davids end up pushing a progressive mirror to the conservative take that all the good aspects of the Western world are based entirely on the Christian tradition; the mirror the Davids offer up is that the progressive politics of the Enlightenment are based entirely on the indigenous critique, and therefore, by extension, that the political Left is an extension of Native American thought.

#### ON SEASONALITY AND THE "THEATRICAL" GOVERNMENTS OF PREHISTORICAL SOCIETIES, AS WELL AS THEIR CAREFUL BURIAL OF ABNORMAL INDIVIDUALS

One of the defining features of prehistoric humanity seems to be their dynamism and ever-changing nature. Even at the times when they are building monuments, things we would think of as "early civilization" like Stonehenge or Göbekli Tepe, it is often not permanent, but rather as celebrations or markers, structures otherwise abandoned for much of the year. For instance, at Göbekli Tepe:

*Activities around the stone temples correspond with periods of annual superabundance, between midsummer and autumn, when large herds of gazelle descended on to the Harran Plain.*

This goes back even further; almost all the early signs of civilization look seasonal to some degree, like the striking “mammoth houses,” which were constructed from the bones of mammoths, often circular around a central open space, some going back 25,000 years[4], but not always suggesting continuous habitation—rather, grisly but beautiful meeting places or ceremonial floors.

This seasonality also shows up in anthropologist accounts of hunter-gatherer societies. The Davids quote from a 1903 book on seasonal variations among the Inuit, describing how during the summer,

*Inuit dispersed into bands of roughly twenty or thirty people to pursue freshwater fish, caribou and reindeer, all under the authority of a single elder male. During this period, property was possessively marked and patriarchs exercised coercive, sometimes even tyrannical power over their kin. . . But in the long winter months, when seals and walrus flocked to the Arctic shore, there was a dramatic reversal. Then, Inuit gathered together to build great meeting houses of wood, whale rib and stone; within these houses, virtues of equality, altruism and collective life prevailed. Wealth was shared, and husbands and wives exchanged partners under the aegis of Sedna, the Goddess of the Sea.*

One might reasonably ask whether this was all responding solely to environmental concerns: altruistic during periods of being flush with resources, despotic during periods of scarcity. But that’s not what we see. Among the Kwakiutl of the Northwest Coast of Canada

*it was winter—not summer—that was the time when society crystallized into its most hierarchical forms, and spectacularly so. Plank-built palaces sprang to life along the coastline of British Columbia, with hereditary nobles holding court over compatriots classified as commoners and slaves, and hosting the great banquets known as potlatch. Yet, these aristocratic courts broke apart for the summer work of the fishing season, reverting to smaller clan formations—still ranked, but with entirely different and much less formal structures. In this case, people actually adopted different names in summer and winter—literally becoming someone else, depending on the time of year.*

Which brings up why an early hierarchical government, like an aristocracy, capable of moving gigantic stones, or coordinating large hunts and storing food, would give up its authority in the off-season so easily—if there were rulers of these people, they did not have the sort of authority those in written history do, for

these would have been kings whose courts and kingdoms existed for only a few months of the year, and otherwise dispersed into small communities of nut gatherers and stock herders. If they possessed the means to marshal labor, pile up food resources and provender armies of year-round retainers, what sort of royalty would consciously elect not to?

So should we really even think of such rulers as royalty? Or are they almost a form of play royalty? There's a certain *theatricality* to all this, isn't there? Like how

among societies like the Inuit or Kwakiutl, times of seasonal congregation were also ritual seasons, almost entirely given over to dances, rites and dramas. Sometimes these could involve creating temporary kings or even ritual police with real coercive powers (though, often, particularly, these ritual police doubled as clowns). In other cases, they involved dissolving norms of hierarchy and propriety, as in the Inuit midwinter orgies.

The Davids suggest that for much of prehistory humans were seeing what fit, playing along, and under such structures formal authority was a wispy, changeable, seasonal, almost humorous thing. And various techniques kept formal authority from ever becoming too real.

For instance, the Native Americans of the Plains would

dismantle all means of exercising coercive authority the moment the ritual season was over, they were also careful to rotate which clans or warrior clubs got to wield it: anyone holding sovereignty one year would be subject to the authority of others the next.

Of course, it might be easier to see how prehistorical societies worked if they buried more of their dead. Instead:

Most corpses were treated in completely different ways: de-fleshed, broken up, curated, or even processed into jewellery and artefacts.

But we see some of the weirdness of humans, their political diversity, peeking through. In an oddity of rich Upper Paleolithic burials

a remarkable number of these skeletons (indeed, a majority) bear evidence of striking physical anomalies that could only have marked them out, clearly and dramatically, from their social surroundings. The adolescent boys in both Sunghir and Dolní Věstonice, for instance, had pronounced congenital deformities; the bodies in the Romito Cave in Calabria were unusually short, with at least one case of dwarfism; while those in Grimaldi Cave were extremely tall by our standards, and

*must have seemed veritable giants to their contemporaries.*

Such unexpected incongruities humanize our ancestors—perhaps we sometimes buried favored clowns rather than favored kings.

So yes, I think the Davids are right on this as well: there is at least suggestive evidence of a period of time, particularly around or right after 10,000 BC, of what might be called political experimentation by prehistorical humans. These nascent governments and formal systems of law and order might not have been taken all that seriously at first, more theatrical and seasonal in nature, until, slowly, as John Updike said, “the mask eats the face.”

### THE SAPIENT PARADOX AS AN ANCIENT ANALOG TO THE FERMI PARADOX, AND THE GREAT TRAP OF PREHISTORY IT IMPLIES

Almost everything we've talked about so far, with the exception of the mammoth houses and some remains of gathering places, takes place after 10,000 BC. It's really only in the Upper Paleolithic (12,000-5,000 BC) that there is any good evidence for what we would call civilization, with its associated lavish burials and monumental centers of ritual congregation and pilgrimage and trade networks and specialization of tribes toward certain industries, and it is only at this

point that complex representation in art becomes essentially universal.

What was happening before then? Isn't that the question we're most interested in? The primal state of human nature? The vast majority of the Davids' evidence throughout *The Dawn of Everything* comes from post-10,000 BC societies. And this is a problem, since even the Davids admit in the book that humans have been around for between 100,000 to 200,000 years.

This is a striking mismatch: let's say modern humans genetically (mostly) and physically (definitely) were around 100,000 years ago: why does it take 90,000 years to get Göbekli Tepe? This perplexing question is called the “Sapient Paradox.” Colin Renfrew, the coiner of the Sapient Paradox, describes it[5] as a

*puzzling aspect, which I call the Sapient Paradox. . . we can see in the archeological record. . . the appearance of our own species, Homo Sapiens, about 100 or 150,000 thousand years ago in Africa, and we can follow the out-of-Africa migrations of our species, Homo sapiens, 60-70,000 years ago. . . Apart from the episode of cave art, which was very much limited to Europe and a bit further on to Asia, not a great deal happened until about 10,000 years ago. . . modern genetics has made clear that our genetic composition, speaking in*

general... is very similar to the genetic composition to our ancestors in Africa of about 70,000 years ago.

So, *Homo sapiens* (broadly: people who wouldn't look out of place on the subway), go back almost 200,000 years, possibly having language all that time. And who knows, human-level cognitive abilities might even go back further than that—our cousins (and ancestors) the Neanderthals wouldn't look very out of place on the subway either. Perhaps prehistorical minds were similarly similar.

In asking “What took so long?” the Sapient Paradox is the prehistoric analog of the Fermi Paradox. Instead of: “Why are we alone in the universe?” the Sapient Paradox asks: “Why were we trapped in prehistory?” And just as the Fermi Paradox implies a Great Filter, the Sapient Paradox implies a Great Trap, a trap in which human society lived for, at minimum, 50,000 years, and, at maximum, something like 200,000 years or even more. Depending on your politics, the Great Trap might be an oppressive patriarchy, or perhaps a decadent matriarchy, or a lazy commune, etc (e.g., Steven Pinker, in *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, discusses a “Hobbesian trap” of mutual warfare between tribes—although he does not connect this to the Sapient Paradox).

Some might try to dismiss the Sapient Paradox by pointing to evidence of ongoing human evolution. And while there is some evidence of recent human evolutionary changes, it often seems clustered around things like dietary changes—at least, there's no well-accepted evidence that human cognitive abilities emerged at 10,000 BC, and almost everyone who tackles these issues, from the Davids to Yuval to Pinker to Diamond, agrees that *Homo sapiens* was pretty much genetically-intact, at least in the ways we think should matter, somewhere between 100,000 to 200,000 years ago. Indeed, early *Homo sapiens* 300,000 years ago had brains as large[6] as our own!

In *The Dawn of Everything* the Davids dismiss the Sapient Paradox in a curt section. It's one of the worst-reasoned parts of the book. They simply miss what is puzzling about the paradox, instead trying to dissolve it by gesturing to evidence of ancient culture from Africa (which they argue is ignored due to a lack of funding compared to European archeology), with points like:

Rock shelters around the coastlands of South Africa are a key source, trapping prehistoric sediments that yield evidence of hafted tools and the expressive use of shell and ochre around 80,000 BC.

And also how

*a cave site on the coast of Kenya called Panga ya Saidi is yielding evidence of shell beads and worked pigments stretching back 60,000 years.*

They speculate there is undiscovered complex representational cave art in Africa that goes back equally far. This claim is based on how

*research on the islands of Borneo and Sulawesi is opening vistas on to an unsuspected world of cave art, many thousands of years older than the famous images of Lascaux and Altamira, on the other side of Eurasia.*

In other words, the Davids point out that beads, trinkets, pigments, and some (very rare) cave art, does go back quite far, even to 40-50,000 BC. But, wait, this only makes the Sapien Paradox more perplexing! For then, why did it take so long to invent the sort of rich cultural products like megaliths and congregation points, trade networks, or agriculture, or stone carvings, or like, walls? Why did so little go on for so long? A few hafted tools and a couple strings of beads aren't Göbekli Tepe, and rock art (and representational art in general) gets consistently more complex and omnipresent as time progresses—in

the Upper Neolithic there's rock art almost everywhere globally, but it really is extremely rare before that, even though enough instances prove we were capable of it. Taken altogether, it does appear like we were climbing out of some Great Trap that was our initial condition, our state of nature.

In another example of willful ignorance on this issue, the Davids ask:

*Given that humans have been around for upwards of 200,000 years, why didn't farming develop much earlier?*

The answer they give (in fact, the Davids barely give it, they sort of vaguely imply) is that the advent of farming was due to the ending of the Ice Age and retreat of the glaciers. But this is in direct contradiction to a bunch of their previous points around farming, like how the post-Ice Age was actually a "Golden Age" for foragers, that early farming in general was done in more extreme environmental conditions and was often even an act of desperation, that agriculture was easy to discover and evolve as a technology, and that it was a natural, almost inevitable, outcome of the caring relationship hunter-gatherers had with the land.

So the Davids leave the Sapien Paradox unexplained. Of course, the Davids might simply say that

there was civilization from the beginning, but their evidence for this would be nonexistent; even they admit there is a cut-off

*beginning around 12,000 BC, in which it first becomes possible to trace the outlines of separate 'cultures' based on more than just stone tools.*

That is, if the cavalcade of cultures that the Davids posit stretched back further than the 12,000 BC boundary of the Upper Neolithic, there would surely be some evidence—prehistorical societies, in their experimentation with different forms of organization and life, would leave traces of their divergences, or inventions of different technologies and art, i.e., all the myriad goings on during the time of political experimentation that the Davids do have suggestive evidence for. Instead, everyone was silent for tens of thousands of years.

And it's this silence, just like the silence of the stars, that is striking. The question becomes: How were the silent people before the Upper Neolithic living, and also, what accounts for this efflorescence in culture and ways of living in the Upper Neolithic?

The work of Robin Dunbar seems important here, somehow, although no two thinkers on these topics use it in the exact same way. Dunbar's number is the idea that

humans can hold around 150 distinct social relationships in mind at any one time, and that this is a function of their cortex size, for, in primates, the greater the neocortex the larger the average social group size.

Our Brain Size Limits Our Number of Social Connections

It seems there's likely something special about Dunbar's number being violated—after all, a lot of the Upper Neolithic revolution is occurring when groups of humans (in the few hundreds) are getting together seasonally into much larger groups, making pilgrimages, joining, and then dispersing. Each theory of prehistory could reasonably be said to have a different relationship to Dunbar's number; e.g., for the followers of Rousseau, past Dunbar's number egalitarianism begins to break down, and therefore the terrible necessity of the inventions of hierarchy, state, and bureaucracy. Even the Davids admit that the violation of the Dunbar number is likely important, writing we should

*picture our ancestors moving between relatively enclosed environments, dispersing and gathering, tracking the seasonal movements of mammoth, bison and deer herds. While the absolute number of people may still have been startlingly small, the density of human*

*interactions seems to have radically increased, especially at certain times of the year. And with this came remarkable bursts of cultural expression.*

Is there *any* hypothesis that fits all these disparate facts? We somehow need there to be (a) an initial condition to humanity that keeps it in a Great Trap for tens of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands, of years, and then also (b) we need that initial condition to have led very naturally to the diverse political and cultural experimentation of the Upper Neolithic, which almost looks like it precludes having a single initial condition at all, and finally (c) the explanation would ideally also explain the mechanism by which the violation of Dunbar's number is important as a step toward civilization.

How can there be an initial condition that doesn't lead to predictable developmental stages, and yet still kept us in a Great Trap? All the hypotheses on offer seem to not fit the whole story: neither Rousseau's version, nor Hobbes', nor the Davids' (e.g., if egalitarianism or patriarchy or matriarchy or hierarchy was the initial condition, we should see it universally, and leaving that stage should generally involve a next predictable stage, and this is precisely what we don't see).

All I, all anyone can do, is offer speculations, which should be

taken with a grain of salt. But with that said, it does seem to me there is an alternative theory, which tells the story of *The Dawn of Everything* in a different way. It's the book I wish the Davids had written.

### IN WHICH AN ALTERNATIVE HYPOTHESIS FOR THE INITIAL CONDITION OF PREHISTORY IS PROPOSED, AND AN EXPLANATION OF THE GREAT TRAP OF HUMAN HISTORY IS GIVEN

If we imagine being transported back to 50,000 BC, what would we expect to find? In the end, we have to give a metaphor to current life of how things were organized: a follower of Rousseau would expect Burning Man, a follower of Hobbes might expect to find a bunch of warring gangs, the Davids might expect to find the deliberation of a town council full of Kandiaronks.

But perhaps small groups of humans less than the Dunbar number were organized by none of these, since they didn't need to be—instead, they could be organized via raw social power. That is, you don't need a formal chief, nor an official council, nor laws or judges. You just need popular people and unpopular people.

After all, who sits with who is something that comes incredibly naturally to humans—it is our point of greatest anxiety and subject to our constant management. This is extremely similar to the

grooming hierarchies of primates, and, presumably, our hominid ancestors. So 50,000 BC might be a little more like a high school than anything else.

I know the high school metaphor sounds crazy, but given that any metaphor we're going to give will fail, I think this one possibly fails less than the others. After all, the central message of *The Dawn of Everything* is that prehistorical people were just people, with all the weirdness, politicking, cultural hilarity and differentness this implies. But, unlike what the Davids seem to want, most people aren't Kandiaronk—he was exceptional. Most people are not exceptional. They are... well, like the people you remember from high school. So if we take the heart of the message of *The Dawn of Everything* seriously, perhaps entering a new tribe in Africa at 50,000 BC would not involve a bunch of mysterious rituals in the jungle enacted by solemn actors with dirt smeared across their faces. Maybe it was a bit more like the infamous lunch table scene from the movie *Mean Girls* (I encourage you to watch), with some minor surface alterations, like clothes (picture beads and furs instead).



YouTube: [▶](#)

After all, in high school there is a clear social web but no formal hierarchies. And while there is a social hierarchy, it's not ordinal—you couldn't list, mathematically, all the people from least to most popular, like you could with a formal hierarchy. It's more like everything is organized by a constant and ever-shifting reputational management, all against all. And there's actually a lot of evidence, even just in what the Davids themselves introduce, that fits with the idea that our initial condition was something like anarchist bands organized by raw social power only.

Because it sure looks like being popular was the primary concern for prehistorical societies, at least if we use the same evidence the Davids do. In 1642, the Jesuit missionary Le Jeune described this phenomenon of a lack of all formal power among the Montagnais-Naskapi, who anthropologists normally consider "egalitarian" bands of hunter-gatherers:

*All the authority of their chief is in his tongue's end; for he is powerful in so far as he is eloquent; and, even if he kills himself talking and haranguing, he will not be obeyed unless he pleases the Savages.*

In fact, chiefs were basically just the most popular people, nothing more, for instance, in Northwest

Coast Native Americans a high-status male

*had to 'keep up' his name through generous feasting, potlatching, and general open-handedness.*

The same lack of formal power but attention to popularity was true across America, even in Kandaronk's tribe.

*Wendat 'captains' . . . urge their subjects to provide what it is needed; no one is compelled to it, but those who are willing bring publicly what they wish to contribute; it seems as if they vied with one another according to the amount of their wealth, and as the desire of glory and of appearing solicitous for the public welfare urges them to do on like occasions.*

And similarly:

*Wealthy Wendat men hoarded such precious things largely to be able to give them away on dramatic occasions like these. Neither in the case of land and agricultural products, nor that of wampum and similar valuables, was there any way to transform access to material resources into power. . .*

That is, material resources were worth almost nothing, all that mattered was the social pressure you could apply. This is true even

for things like crime, which was prevented not by a system of laws, but by a system of social pressure, wherein guilty Native Americans were not punished but rather their lineage or clan had to pay compensation (implying that the anger of one's lineage or clan would be enough to not lead to recidivism for offenders). This system of social power to prevent crime was highly effective in its implementation, as the Davids describe the Jesuit Le Jeune grudgingly admitting.

It may even be that money, rather than being invented to keep track of trade relationships or debts for private property, was invented to keep track of social relationships instead. For example, consider again the Yurok, who inhabited the northwestern corner of California, and note that

*the Yurok were famous for the central role that money—which took the form of white dentalium shells arranged on strings, and headbands made of bright red woodpecker scalps—played in every aspect of their social lives.*

The most famous of this sort of "money," wampum, was not originally used by indigenous Americans as something that could be settled for goods or services, like the way we understand money now, or the way it became once European set-

tlers arrived. Instead, according to the Davids, wampum “largely existed for political purposes,” i.e., to keep track of social capital, not material capital. Even private property itself might have been only an extension of social relations.

*Among the Plains societies of North America, for instance, sacred bundles (which normally included not only physical objects but accompanying dances, rituals, and songs) were often the only objects in that society to be treated as private property: not just owned exclusively by individuals, but also inherited, bought and sold.*

And this fits with the theatricality and seasonality that the Davids make so much of, like in the case of Native American tribes, wherein

*an office holder could give all the orders he or she liked, but no one was under any particular obligation to follow them.*

In fact, it’s almost tautological that early societies had to be organized by raw social power—there are no formal powers to enforce anything else, nor combat social pressure when it’s applied (and humans will always apply it). It also explains why early formal governments are theatrical or seasonal, since they are merely a mask of raw social power—which families are important, which are liked, who are

friends, who are enemies, who are frenemies. Which means that what the Davids assume is a set of constantly shifting Neolithic “political experiments” is really just a bunch of constantly shifting mores that, like the Gestapo, hide the real power. Which was who was popular and who was not. Heck, the high school metaphor (despite definitely not being perfect) does a better job than the other metaphors of explaining the odd evidence that skeletons given the honor of burials in the Upper Palaeolithic were often dwarfs or giants or bore physical anomalies: they were mascots.

What’s interesting is that anthropologists, from what I’ve read, seem to assume that raw social power is mostly a good thing (one wonders if they’ve ever seen social pressure applied). Mostly they focus on gossip, and if we look at the work of Robin Dunbar, and his 1996 book *Grooming, Gossip, and the Evolution of Language*, he speculates that the need to gossip was why language was invented in the first place. And gossip has (as far as I can tell), an almost universally positive valence throughout anthropology. In the literature it is portrayed as something that maintains social relationships and rids groups of free-riders and cheats, i.e., gossip is a “leveling mechanism” that prevents individuals from accruing

too much power. According to the Davids, in the Hazda

*talented hunters are systematically mocked and belittled...*

And the evolutionary anthropologist Christopher Boehm came to a similar conclusion:

*Carefully working through ethnographic accounts of existing egalitarian foraging bands in Africa, South America and Southeast Asia, Boehm identifies a whole panoply of tactics collectively employed to bring would-be braggarts and bullies down to earth—ridicule, shaming, shunning...*

As sociologist Helmut Schoeck described:

*In Haiti, G.E. Simpson found that a peasant will seek to disguise his true economic position by purchasing several smaller fields rather than one larger piece of land. For the same reason he will not wear good clothes. He does this intentionally to protect himself against the envious black magic of his neighbors.*

But it never seems to strike Dunbar or others that living under a dominion of raw social power, with few to little formal powers anywhere, would be hellish to a citizen of the 21st century (which is why I say the closest analog is high

school). My mother used to quote Eleanor Roosevelt all the time:

*Great minds discuss ideas. Average minds discuss events. Small minds discuss people.*

A “gossip trap” is when your whole world doesn’t exceed Dunbar’s number and to organize your society you are forced to discuss mostly people. It is *Mean Girls* (and mean boys), but forever. And yes, gossip can act as a leveling mechanism and social power has a bunch of positives—it’s the stuff of life, really. But it’s a terrible way to organize society. So perhaps we leveled ourselves into the ground for 90,000 years. Being in the gossip trap means reputational management imposes such a steep slope you can’t climb out of it, and essentially prevents the development of anything interesting, like art or culture or new ideas or new developments or anything at all. Everyone just lives like crabs in a bucket, pulling each other down. All cognitive resources go to reputation management in the group, to being popular, leaving nothing left in the tank for invention or creativity or art or engineering. Again, much like high school.

And this explains why violating the Dunbar number forces you to invent civilization—at a certain size (possibly a lot larger than the actual Dunbar number) you simply

can't organize society using the non-ordinal natural social hierarchy of humans. Eventually, you need to create formal structures, which at first are seasonal and changeable and theatrical, and take all sorts of diverse forms, since the initial condition is just who's popular. But then these formal systems slowly become real.

So then what is civilization? It is a superstructure that levels leveling mechanisms, freeing us from the gossip trap. For what are the hallmarks of civilization? I'd venture to say: immunity to gossip. Are not our paragons of civilization figures like Supreme Court justices or tenured professors, or protected classes with impunity to speak and present new ideas, like journalists or scientists?

#### ON THE TECHNOLOGICAL RESURRECTION OF THE GOSSIP TRAP AND THE DEVOLUTION OF CIVILIZATION YOU'VE BEEN NOTICING

A lot of things change as you age, but one that's particularly strange is finding hairs in weird places. Like your inner ears. It turns out this is because aging is basically genetic confusion, down at the molecular level. As they age, cells get mixed up as to what sort of cell they're supposed to be. And there's a lot of ancient instructions, just lying around, still in your cells. Weird hair growth is the result of a cell latching on to some ancient ge-

netic instruction. Our predecessors had lots of hair everywhere, your cells get confused, and you begin to manifest your hirsute ancestors. The hairy tufts springing from your grandfather's ears are there because parts of him are literally devolving into an ancient creature. As William Faulkner said, "The past is never dead. It's not even past."

What if there were a mental equivalent? After all, if we lived in a gossip trap for the majority of our existence as humans, then what would it be, mentally, to atavistically return to that gossip trap?

Well, it sure would look a lot like Twitter.

I'm serious. It would look a *lot* like Twitter. For it's on social media that gossip and social manipulation are unbounded, infinitely transmittable. An environment of raw social power, which, despite its endless reign of terror[8], actually feels kind of good? Wouldn't we want to go back to forced instances of fission between human groups, exiling those we don't like? Wouldn't we punish crimes not with legal proceedings, but via massive social shamings?

The difference between the horror of crabs in a bucket and a human tribe or group living in a gossip trap is actually that the humans are generally quite happy down there in the bucket. It's our natural environment. Most people *like* the trap. Oh, it's terrible for the ac-

cused, the exiled, the uncool. But the gossip trap is comfortable. Homey. People like Jonathan Haidt will look at modern life and scratch their heads in [9]*The Atlantic*[10] to try to pinpoint when and why the social media algorithm began to spread misinformation and sow discord. They miss the truth, which is that all social media does is allow us to overcome Dunbar's number, which dismantled a barrier erected at the beginning of civilization. Of course we gravitate to cancel culture—it's our innate evolved form of government.

One obvious sign you're living in a gossip trap is when the primary mode of dispute resolution becomes social pressure. And almost everywhere you look lately, it's like social media is wearing a skin suit made of our laws, institutions, and governments. Does it not feel, just in the past decade, as if raw social power has outstripped anything resembling formal power? How protected from public opinion does a judge feel now? How protected does a tenured professor feel? How protected do you feel? To what degree is prosecution of crime a matter of law, or does social media have its billion thumbs on the scale? Putin of late seems more afraid of cancel culture[11] than he is of nuclear weapons. Maybe that's for a good reason.

Which means that, with the advent of social media, and the resultant

triumph of the spread of gossip over Dunbar's number, we might have just inadvertently performed the equivalent of summoning an Elder God. The ability to organize society through raw social power given back to a species that climbed out of the trap of raw social power only by creating societies large enough they required formal organization. The gossip trap is our first Eldritch Mother, the Garrulous Gorgon With a Thousand Heads, The Beast Made Only of Sound.

And if the gossip trap was humanity's first form of government, and via technology it's been resurrected once more into the world, how long until it swallows up the entire globe?

#### IN WHICH THE TRUTH IS REVEALED

An admittance. For it should be obvious by now: this text is corrupted. The same corruption that I accused the Davids of falling victim to, and that they, in turn, accused Rousseau and Hobbes of falling victim to. I have made the past political, and prehistory a sepia reflection of the current day. Just like Rousseau, or Hobbes, or the Davids, I have spun a yarn.

I think it's a true yarn, I really do. I think the gossip trap is real, or at least, explains more than other hypotheses about prehistorical life I've read. I think it's likely we did accidentally, via social media, sum-

mon back the Elder God that is our innate form of government. And I think we should be worried about civilization itself.

This is almost certainly not the conclusion the Davids hoped a reader would get from *The Dawn of Everything*. But perhaps corruption by the peccadillos we see in our own civilizations is inevitable for all who write about these issues. For the past is political—it does matter what our “natural state” was, it does matter how we lived, it does matter in what environs we

evolved. It does matter where we started, for otherwise, how can we see where we’re going?

Maybe the ultimate truth or falsity of prehistorical narratives is unknowable. Maybe speculations such as these are only stumbling through a maze, all of human history a hall of mirrors in which we wander. And, projected in gigantic distortions all around us, we see only our own face.

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## LINKS

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# The Eight Metaphors of Organization



Venkatesh Rao

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**M**ix of technical, philosophical and pragmatic reasons:

1. Technical: My background is in control theory, the foundational field from which System Dynamics forked off, due to Forrester, in the 1960s. SD remains to this day “applied 1960s control theory.” Developments since then, in controls (40 years worth) make SD rather obsolete and flawed. That would be a longer, mathematical discussion that I don’t want to have on this blog’s comments sections :)

2. Philosophical: I think the SD folks’ basic philosophy of modeling is flawed, another discussion I don’t want to have here.

3. Pragmatic: Within the restricted domain of problems where SD is applicable and *useful*, four things need to be true for there to be value. i) the modeler asks the right question, ii) he/she has the aesthetics to build a model with the right level of coarseness/fineness depending on the question and the quality of data available (time constants etc.), iii) Has the plug-and-chug technical skills to code the model in a tool and run it without making conceptual mistakes, iv) Actually understands the plug-and-chug formulas properly to interpret the results right.

In my experience, people who have all 4 skills are generally smart enough to build a MUCH leaner model using a judiciously-selected mix of modeling tools that ends up being MORE expressive and answering the question better. So you get more for less. So the best modelers in my experience rarely pick SD as the right way to answer any interesting question.

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On the flip side, if any of those conditions fail, you get dreck. The most common failure modes are a) asking unimportant questions that matter to nobody b) knowing only skill iii, plug-and-chug.

In the first case, you get good answers to questions nobody asked. In the second case, you get aesthetically ugly answers to the wrong questions, with the (correct) answers being interpreted incorrectly.

This is for classic system dynamics modelers who actually go to the trouble of even using the tools for questions answerable by simulation. There are 2 ways SD slides into even worse territory under the generic, meaningless label “Systems Thinking.” If I hear that phrase, I run a mile.

In the first way, some clever talker will use a single mind-candy example (like the bullwhip effect in the beer supply chain) to riff on huge, very different questions, wail about how people are idiots and end with some idiotic line like “to answer important questions like global warming, we really need to understand the real dynamics.” Such people absolutely don’t get how huge socio-cultural-political problems are ACTUALLY solved in the real world. The big variables are not the objective realities but interpersonal dynamics, personalities and other psycho-social factors playing out in the people involved in solving the problem.

The second way is even worse. Here, even the mind-candy examples (which at least reveal a single relevant insight) are dispensed with, and you get into purely philosophical territory about how the world ought to work. I couldn’t finish Peter Senge’s Fifth Discipline because I had objections on nearly every second page — it is a thoroughly shaky extrapolation from already shaky technical “systems thinking” foundations into organizational theory and self-improvement. But his book after that (forget the name) which is a series of conversations with a group of people who seem to want to change the world, was basically in New Age spirituality territory rather than science. That sealed the deal for me.

Hope that doesn’t offend anyone.

For the record, I do understand the technical end of SD, have played with the tools and have even had one paper in the IEEE Transactions on Systems, Cybernetics and Man :). (It isn’t a core SD journal, cybernetics is the precursor created by Norbert Wiener, who was a contemporary of Vannevar Bush, Jay Forrester’s adviser). So this isn’t a completely unfounded opinion...

Still, after that long rant... yeah, basic stock-and-flow/iThink System Dynamics is a useful tool under some narrowly circumscribed conditions. It just isn't the world-changing epistemological revolution its practitioners think it is.

Venkat

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# Domestic Cozy

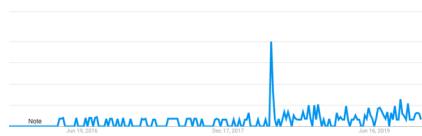
Venkatesh Rao

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There is an interesting emerging relationship, I think, between domestic cozy and the slightly older “trad” turn in contemporary youth culture (which I think began at the height of the recession with burned-out Millennials), complete with tendencies towards religion, social conservatism, and traditional gender roles. The term tradwife, in particular, which I first encountered a few years ago, appears to be slowly trending, after a bit of a peak in 2018. On Twitter[1], it’s now turned into a term of art, used ironically or unironically, generically or with fully loaded memetic potency, and with or without connotations of vaguely alt-right sympathies.

In 2019, I suspect, the trad turn broke out of the subcultural wilderness, lost its original edge-political connotations, and went mainstream.



As Gen-Z starts to establish households, I suspect trad patterns are going to spread via some sort of Fifth Wave feminism following the #MeToo era, which appears to have consolidated its claim to being the Fourth Wave (I’m going to lazily risk linking a Vox explainer[2] for those not familiar with the wave-theoretic history of feminism; if you have alternative links, please post in the comments).

I suspect Fifth Wave feminism is going to be based on some sort of post-#MeToo reconstructed notion of domesticity that attempts to reclaim the domestic arena as a feminine-centric space, but without giving up the political and economic agency gains of the four waves of public-arena feminism. There are very strong economic tailwinds favoring such a development.

To a degree, domestic cozy is Zoomers and younger Millennials playing “house” in ways that are

indicative of the patterns of adult domesticity they will be adopting soon. This New Domesticity in the US is shaping up to be 80% Fifth-Wave Feminist households, 10% non-traditional (LGBTQ+) households, and 10% HouseBro households (a category that doesn't seem to exist yet, but is bound to emerge based on the Dirac equation of anti-archetypes). I'm still puzzling over what to make of this development. I think it will get underway in earnest in a couple of years.

In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt noted that the domestic sphere, historically, was a fully constrained zone of non-stop labor, where nobody, not even the master of the house, enjoyed any freedom. It was only by venturing out in public that even the master could enjoy a measure of freedom and agency. At home, there was a defined role with duties for everyone. And if you never really left the domestic sphere, you were basically never really free.

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Starting in the late 19th century, as Arendt observed, increasing availability of technological conveniences made the domestic arena primarily a zone of intimacy and leisure rather than non-stop labor. Consumer products and domestic

automation slowly began replacing housewifery, slavery, and servant-work. Childcare increasingly became the business of schools and television. Entertainment media — board games, the phonograph, the radio, television, effective contraception, video games — injected increasing amounts of leisure activity where there was once only labor. Shopping began to replace cooking as the prototypical housewife responsibility.

The story of feminism along the way has been one of pendulum swings (so the wave theory makes sense). In the West (and to a lesser extent outside the West), early feminists tried to cash out the technological convenience dividend, by breaking out of domesticity between the world wars. They enjoyed a peak of public life participation leading up to World War 2, but then ran into the feminine mystique[3] era in the post-WW2 decades, which was an earlier trad turn between the first two waves of feminism. I personally attribute it to a sort of Parkinson's Law kicking in for newly leisure-rich home economies, with domestic "work" expanding to occupy the leisure available.

Though it's a tempting hypothesis, I don't think we're at the threshold of Feminine Mystique 2.0, and Betty Friedan need not roll in her grave.

I suspect what's actually happening is that a set of economic factors — inequality and high housing and childcare costs being the big ones — have made it financially advantageous for a certain segment of middle-class households to return to a pattern of domestic organization built around housewifery.

Pamela Hobart has a thoughtful take on this surprising development.[4] It's a huge narrative violation that feminists are going to have to grapple with. Elizabeth Warren's actually appears to have seen this coming with her 2004 book, the Two-Income Trap[5] (that's another Voxsplainer link, sorry), co-authored with her daughter, making it a two-generational view.

A big part of what's happened, I think, is that the gains in domestic convenience have hit diminishing returns, while both the financial and cognitive costs of running a "normal" household have risen dramatically. It's now turned into a sort of high-stakes budgeting rocket science.

On the labor-demand side, new gadgets add far less marginal convenience compared to refrigerators, washing machines, dishwashers, microwaves, and vacuums (the Big Five from the early consumer revolution). And on the consumption side, shopping has gone from being a pleasant social routine at the local mall and grocery store to a

very demanding budgeting and purchasing optimization activity that is approximately as complex as being COO of a small business. And it is done largely at home, online, with social aspects increasingly limited to online communities built around consumption, such as Yelp reviews.

A good household manager — and it is almost always a woman taking this role on, whether or not they adopt the tradwife identity — can effectively double the household income simply through canny shopping, deal-stalking, and maintaining strong awareness of consumption trends. And as housing becomes less affordable, all other areas of consumption require all the optimization they can get. Women who are good at this are probably responsible for holding major cities together, by figuring out ways for households to continue existing in increasingly unaffordable urban cores.

(I'm neither condoning, nor criticizing this emergent role, merely observing that it has emerged as a function of necessity, with mostly women filling it).

In a way, the trajectory observed by Arendt is reversing itself. Homes are once again becoming entirely constrained spaces, where leisure and intimacy have a diminishing role to play, and there's a lot more work for everybody to do. It's just that instead of making their own

soap, tradwives now have to find the coupons and deals that buy the desired soap at the available income. It's almost as much work.

These economic forces, of course, are affecting non-traditional households too, including groups of friends living together.

The Venmo public feed (Your Source for Domestic Cozy Voyeurism) is a striking window into the emerging patterns of New Domesticity. It's no longer just people paying each other to split restaur-

ant checks. They are paying each other for rent, household expenses, transportation, cleaning services, and all sorts of other things. Commercial transactions with service workers are mixed in with an endlessly varied stream of friend-to-friend transactions. An entire future is taking shape there. The Venmo economy of today is going to be the mainstream economy of 2024.

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## LINKS

[1] [twitter.com/search?q=tradwife&src=typed\\_query](https://twitter.com/search?q=tradwife&src=typed_query)



[2] [vox.com/2018/3/20/16955588/feminism-waves-explained-first-second-third-fourth](https://vox.com/2018/3/20/16955588/feminism-waves-explained-first-second-third-fourth)



[3] [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Feminine\\_Mystique](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Feminine_Mystique)



[4] [bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-50749764?ocid=socialflow\\_twitter](https://bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-50749764?ocid=socialflow_twitter)



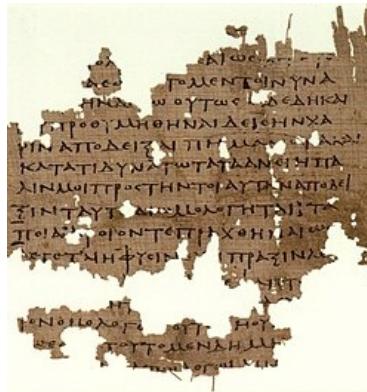
[5] [vox.com/policy-and-politics/2019/1/23/18183091/two-income-trap-elizabeth-warren-book](https://vox.com/policy-and-politics/2019/1/23/18183091/two-income-trap-elizabeth-warren-book)



# Republic (Plato) - Wikipedia

Pondr Staff

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P. Oxy. 3679, manuscript from the 3rd century AD, containing fragments of Plato's Republic.

**P**hilosophical work by Plato around 375 BC

The *Republic* (Ancient Greek[1]: Πολιτεία, romanized[2]: *Politeia*[3]; Latin[4]: *De Republica*) is a Socratic dialogue[5] authored by Plato[6] around 375 BC, concerning justice[7] (*dikaiosúnē*), the order and character of the just city-state[8], and the just man. It is Plato's best-known work, and one of the world's most influential works of philosophy[9] and political theory[10], both intellectually and historically.

In the dialogue, Socrates[11] discusses with various Athenians[12]

and foreigners the meaning of justice and whether the just man is happier than the unjust man. He considers the natures of existing regimes and then proposes a series of hypothetical cities in comparison, culminating in Kallipolis (Καλλίπολις), a utopian[13] city-state ruled by a class of philosopher-kings[14]. They also discuss ageing[15], love[16], theory of forms[17], the immortality[18] of the soul[19], and the role of the philosopher and of poetry[20] in society[21]. The dialogue's setting seems to be the time of the Peloponnesian War[22].

## PLACE IN PLATO'S CORPUS

The *Republic* is generally placed in the middle period[23] of Plato's dialogues. However, the distinction of the middle dialogues from the early dialogues is not as clear as the distinction of the late dialogues from all the others. Nonetheless, Ritter, Arnim, and Baron—each adopting separate methodologies—agree that the *Republic* was well distinguished, along with *Parmenides*, *Phaedrus* and *Theaetetus*.

The first book of the *Republic*, which shares many features with earlier dialogues, is thought to have originally been written as a separate work, with the remaining books being conjoined to it, perhaps with modifications to the original of the first book.

## OUTLINE

### BOOK I: AGING, LOVE, AND THE DEFINITIONS OF JUSTICE (327A–354C)

Socrates[24] and Glaucon[25] visit Athens' port, Piraeus[26], when they are invited to join Polemarchus[27] for a dinner and festival. At Polemarchus' house, Socrates encounters Polemarchus' father, Cephalus.

### CEPHALUS (328E–331D)

In his first philosophical[28] conversation with the group members, Socrates asks the aged Cephalus, "is life painful at that age, or what report do you make of it?" Cephalus answers by saying that many are unhappy about old age because they miss their youth, but he finds that "old age brings us profound repose and freedom from this and other passions. When the appetites have abated, and their force is diminished, the description of Sophocles[29] is perfectly realized. It is like being delivered from a multitude of furious masters." The repose gives him time to dedicate himself to sacrifices and justice so that he is prepared for the afterlife.

The discussion then turns to the definition of justice. Cephalus says that justice is honesty and returning to people that which they are owed. Socrates refutes this by arguing that it would not be just to honestly return a borrowed knife to a man who has since gone mad and would harm himself with it.

### POLEMARCHUS (331D–336B)

Polemarchus argues that justice is giving what is appropriate to others — to do good to one's friends and bad to his enemies. Socrates refutes this in four parts, concluding that harming anyone, even one's enemies, in itself creates in-

justice, and thus cannot appear just.

### THRASYMACHUS (336B–354C)

Thrasymachus[30] then argues that justice is that which is advantageous for the stronger. Socrates responds by posing the scenario where the strong make mistakes that are not advantageous to them. Thrasymachus then responds by claiming that one is stronger when he does not make mistakes as to their advantage. Socrates refutes this with a further argument: Crafts aim at the good of their object, and therefore to rule is for the benefit of the ruled and not the ruler. Thrasymachus then observes that the shepherd, for example, herds his sheep not for their benefit but for his own, and argues that injustice is better than justice, for one who commits undetected injustice to satisfy his own desires is better off than the just person.

Socrates further observes that a shepherd's concern for his sheep is different from his concern to make money, which is extraneous to the art or craft of shepherding, and that no power or art provides what is beneficial to itself. He claims that the best rulers are reluctant to rule but do so out of necessity: they do not wish to be ruled by someone inferior. Socrates then gives three arguments in favour of the just life over the unjust life, centering

around wisdom, harmony, and the soul.

### BOOK II: RING OF GYGES

#### (357A–383C)

Glaucon[31] and Adeimantus[32] are unsatisfied with Socrates's defense of justice. They ask Socrates to defend justice as a thing good in itself, and not only for its consequences. To demonstrate the problem, he tells the story of Gyges[33], who – with the help of a ring that turns him invisible – achieves great advantages for himself by committing injustices. Glaucon uses this argument to challenge Socrates to defend the position that the just life is better than the unjust life.

Socrates suggests that they use the city[34] as an image to seek how justice comes to be in the soul of an individual. After attributing the origin of society to the individual not being self-sufficient and having many needs which he cannot supply himself, Socrates first describes a "healthy state" made up of producers who make enough for a modest subsistence, but Glaucon considers this hardly different than "a city of pigs." Socrates then goes on to describe the luxurious city, which he calls "a fevered state". Acquiring and defending these luxuries requires a guardian class to wage wars.

Socrates then asks how the guardians will not become tyrants to the people they guard. He concludes that it is necessary for there to be careful education of the guardians, which education would involve censorship of poetry and stories. For example, he argues that stories that ascribe evil to the gods or heroes or portray the afterlife as bad are untrue and should not be taught.

### **BOOK III: NOBLE LIE (386A–417B)**

Socrates further describes the program of censored education in such a city: Poetry should be censored in such a way that encourages courage, obedience, cunning, and self-discipline, while discouraging the fear of death, laughter, absolute truthfulness, avarice, or hubris. Further, the guardians will require physical training to prevent illness, benefit the soul, and in preparation for war. From the guardians, the rulers of the city will be selected, which rulers shall act only in the city's advantage. For the citizens to accept their role in society, the rulers must perpetuate a noble lie[35] (*γενναῖον ψεῦδος*, gennaion pseudos).

The noble lie is illustrated by Socrates's myth or parable of the metals. In this version of the noble lie, each human is regarded as either containing gold, silver, or bronze, and, correspondingly, are

best suited to rule, guard, or merely produce. Socrates claims that if the people believed "this myth...[it] would have a good effect, making them more inclined to care for the state and one another."

Socrates then ends with the conditions in which the guardians must live. For example, they shall be prohibited from owning private property, privacy, and wealth, so as to keep their focus on the good of the city.

### **BOOK IV: KALLIPOLIS, CARDINAL VIRTUES, AND THE SOUL (419A–445E)**

At this point, Adeimantus interrupts Socrates, noting that in such situations, the guardians are likely to be unhappy. Socrates argues that in the just city, it is the entire city's happiness that is maximised, and not just that of the guardian class. To achieve this, it is necessary for certain conditions to be satisfied, such as the strict education of the guardians and the rules imposed upon them. Moderation, for example, must be emphasised, since both poverty and excessive wealth will corrupt them. In this ideal city, it would be pointless to worry over specific laws, like those pertaining to contracts, since proper education ensures lawful behavior, and poor education causes lawlessness. Socrates further observes that in such a just city, the guardians will share wives and children.

Having established the theory of the just city (Kallipolis), Socrates argues that because the city is completely good and virtuous, it embodies the four cardinal virtues[36] of wisdom, courage, justice and temperance. He then proceeds to search for wisdom, courage, and temperance in the city, on the grounds that justice will be easier to discern in what remains. He finds wisdom among the guardian rulers, courage among the guardian warriors, temperance among all classes of the city in agreeing about who should rule and who should be ruled. Finally, Socrates defines justice in the city as the state in which each class performs only its own work, not meddling in the work of the other classes.

Socrates then creates an analogy between the parts of the city and the soul. He argues that psychological conflict points to a divided soul, since a completely unified soul could not behave in opposite ways towards the same object, at the same time, and in the same respect. He gives examples of possible conflicts between the rational, spirited, and appetitive parts of the soul, corresponding to the rulers, auxiliaries, and producing classes in the city. Having established the tripartite soul[37], Socrates defines the virtues of the individual. A person is wise if he is ruled by the part of the soul that sees and knows "what is beneficial for each part

and for the whole," courageous if his spirited part "preserves in the midst of pleasures and pains" the decisions reached by the rational part, and temperate if the three parts agree that the rational part lead. They are just if each part of the soul attends to its function and not the function of another. It follows from this definition that one cannot be just if one does not have the other cardinal virtues.

Having established the theory of justice as a balance between the parts of the soul, Socrates seeks to address the remaining question whether justice is better than un-punished injustice by exposition of a broader political theory[38].

## BOOK V (449A–480A): PHILOSOPHER-KINGS AND THE THEORY OF FORMS

At this point, Adeimantus again interrupts Socrates, questioning him on the point about the sharing of wives and children. Socrates is overwhelmed at what he perceives to be an "ambush" on his argument.

He then goes on to elaborate his theory in detail: In the Kallipolis, both male and female guardians will receive the same education and perform the same roles, for sex is not relevant to the governance of the city. The rulers of the city, nonetheless, should govern sexual intercourse by organising sex festivals in which a rigged lottery will

be held, allowing the best male guardians to have sex with as many female citizens as he wants. The subsequent children shall be raised in ignorance of their parents, and vice versa, so that all parents think of all children as their own. Socrates notes the risk of incest[39].

Socrates is about to discuss his theory of war, when Glaucon interrupts him, questioning the feasibility of such a city. In response, Socrates concedes the difficulty of establishing such a city but notes the theoretical value of the ideal in discussing concepts of justice and injustice. Nonetheless, Socrates believes that such a city may come into being, but only if ruled by a philosopher[40], who would thus be known as a philosopher-king[41]. This is because, according to Socrates, only philosophers are unlike persons who merely have opinions[42], for philosophers have knowledge[43] through their understanding of the Forms[44].

## **BOOK VI (484A–511E): SHIP OF STATE, FORM OF THE GOOD, AND THE FIRST TWO ANALOGIES**

Socrates continues to argue for why philosophers should rule, when he is interrupted by Adeimantus, who observe that philosophers are corrupt, strange, or useless.

### **SHIP OF STATE (488A–489D)**

Socrates refutes Adeimantus's argument by likening the governance[45] of a city-state to the command of a ship, the Ship of State[46].

## **FORM OF THE GOOD (505A–505E)**

Socrates argues that in the ideal city, a true philosopher with understanding of forms will facilitate the harmonious co-operation of all the citizens of the city. This philosopher-king must be intelligent, reliable, and willing to lead a simple life. However, these qualities are rarely manifested on their own, and so they must be encouraged through education and the study of the Form of the Good[47].

## **THE SUN AND DIVIDED LINE (507C–511E)**

Socrates then offers two analogies to illustrate the Form of the Good: that of the Sun[48] and the Divided Line[49].

## **BOOK VII (514A–541B): ALLEGORY OF THE CAVE**

Building from his previous two analogies, Socrates offers the allegory of the cave[50]. The Allegory of the Cave[51] depicts Plato's distinction between the world of appearances and the 'real' world of the Forms.

## **BOOK VIII (543A–569C)**

Returning to his earlier point, Socrates categorises governments into five types of regimes: aristocracy[52], timocracy[53], oligarchy[54], democracy[55], and tyranny[56], in the course of which Plato's number[57] is enigmatically mentioned.

The starting point is an imagined, alternate, just aristocracy[58] ruled by a philosopher-king. Aristocracy degenerates into timocracy when, due to miscalculation on the part of its governing class, the next generation includes persons of an inferior nature, inclined not just to cultivating virtues but also producing wealth. In a timocracy, governors will apply great effort in gymnastics and the arts of war, as well as the virtue that pertains to them, that of courage. As the emphasis on honor is compromised by wealth accumulation, it is replaced by oligarchy. The oligarchic government is dominated by the desiring element, in which the rich are the ruling class. Oligarchs do, however, value at least one virtue, that of temperance and moderation—not out of an ethical principle or spiritual concern, but because by dominating wasteful tendencies they succeed in accumulating money.

From the conflicts arising out of tensions in an oligarchy, the poor majority overthrow the wealthy minority, and democracy[59] replaces the oligarchy preceding it.

In democracy[60], the lower class grows bigger and bigger. The populism of the democratic government leads to mob rule, fueled by fear of oligarchy, which a clever demagogue[61] can exploit to take power and establish tyranny[62] where no one has discipline[63] and society[64] exists in chaos. In a tyrannical government, the city is enslaved to the tyrant, who uses his guards to remove the best social elements and individuals from the city to retain power, while leaving the worst. He will also provoke warfare to consolidate his position as leader. In this way, tyranny is the most unjust regime of all.

## BOOK IX (571A–592B)

In parallel to this, Socrates considers the individual or soul that corresponds to each of these regimes.

He describes how an aristocrat may become weak or detached from political and material affluence, and how his son will respond to this by becoming overly ambitious. The timocrat in turn may be defeated by the courts or vested interests; his son responds by accumulating wealth in order to gain power in society and defend himself against the same predicament, thereby becoming an oligarch. The oligarch's son will grow up with wealth without having to practice thrift or stinginess, and will be tempted and overwhelmed by his

desires, so that he becomes democratic, valuing freedom above all. The democratic man is torn between tyrannical passions and oligarchic discipline, and ends up in the middle ground: valuing all desires, both good and bad. The tyrant will be tempted in the same way as the democrat, but without an upbringing in discipline or moderation to restrain him. Therefore, his most base desires and wildest passions overwhelm him, and he becomes driven by lust, using force and fraud to take whatever he wants. The tyrant is both a slave to his lusts, and a master to whomever he can enslave.

Socrates points out the human tendency to be corrupted by power leads down the road to timocracy, oligarchy, democracy and tyranny. From this, he concludes that ruling should be left to philosophers, who are the most just and therefore least susceptible to corruption. This "good city" is depicted as being governed by philosopher-kings; disinterested persons who rule not for their personal enjoyment but for the good of the city-state (*polis*). The philosophers have seen the "Forms" and therefore know what is good. They understand the corrupting effect of greed and own no property and receive no salary.

## BOOK X (595A-621D): MYTH OF ER

Concluding a theme brought up most explicitly in the Analogies of the Sun and Divided Line in Book VI, Socrates finally rejects any form of imitative art and concludes that such artists have no place in the just city. He continues on to argue for the immortality of the psyche and espouses a theory of reincarnation[65]. He finishes by detailing the rewards of being just, both in this life and the next.

Artists create things but they are only different copies of the idea of the original."And whenever any one informs us that he has found a man who knows all the arts, and all things else that anybody knows, and every single thing with a higher degree of accuracy than any other man—whoever tells us this, I think that we can only imagine to be a simple creature who is likely to have been deceived by some wizard or actor whom he met, and whom he thought all-knowing, because he himself was unable to analyze the nature of knowledge and ignorance and imitation."

*And the same object appears straight when looked at out of the water, and crooked when in the water; and the concave becomes convex, owing to the illusion about colours to which the sight is liable. Thus every sort of confusion is revealed within us; and this is that weakness of the human mind on which the art of conjuring and deceiving by light and shadow and*

other ingenious devices imposes, having an effect upon us like magic.

He speaks about illusions and confusion. Things can look very similar, but be different in reality. Because we are human, at times we cannot tell the difference between the two.

*And does not the same hold also of the ridiculous? There are jests which you would be ashamed to make yourself, and yet on the comic stage, or indeed in private, when you hear them, you are greatly amused by them, and are not at all disgusted at their unseemliness—the case of pity is repeated—there is a principle in human nature which is disposed to raise a laugh, and this which you once restrained by reason, because you were afraid of being thought a buffoon, is now let out again; and having stimulated the risible faculty at the theatre, you are betrayed unconsciously to yourself into playing the comic poet at home.*

With all of us, we may approve of something, as long we are not directly involved with it. If we joke about it, we are supporting it.

*Quite true, he said. And the same may be said of lust and anger and all the other affections, of desire and pain and pleasure, which are held to be inseparable from every action—in all of them poetry feeds and waters the passions instead of*

*drying them up; she lets them rule, although they ought to be controlled, if mankind are ever to increase in happiness and virtue.*

Sometimes we let our passions rule our actions or way of thinking, although they should be controlled, so that we can increase our happiness.

## LEGACY

### ANCIENT GREECE AND ROME

Aristotle[66] systematises many of Plato's analyses in his *Politics*[67], and criticizes the propositions of several political philosophers for the ideal city-state.

Zeno of Citium[68], the founder of Stoicism[69], wrote his version of an ideal society, *Zeno's Republic*[70], in opposition to Plato's *Republic*. *Zeno's Republic* was controversial and was viewed with some embarrassment by some of the later Stoics due to its defenses of free love[71], incest, and cannibalism and due to its opposition to ordinary education and the building of temples, law-courts, and gymnasia[72].

The English title of Plato's dialogue is derived from Cicero[73]'s *De re publica*[74], written some three centuries later.<sup>[citation needed]</sup> Cicero's dialogue imitates Plato's style and treats many of

the same topics, and Cicero's main character Scipio Aemilianus[76] expresses his esteem for Plato and Socrates.

Augustine of Hippo[77] wrote his *The City of God*[78]; Augustine equally described a model of the "ideal city", in his case the eternal Jerusalem[79], using a visionary language not unlike that of the preceding philosophers.

Several Oxyrhynchus Papyri[80] fragments were found to contain parts of the *Republic*, and from other works such as *Phaedo*[81], or the dialogue *Gorgias*[82], written around 200–300 CE. Fragments of a different version of Plato's *Republic* were discovered in 1945, part of the Nag Hammadi library[83], written c. 350 CE. These findings highlight the influence of Plato during those times in Egypt.

## MIDDLE AGES

### IBN RUSHD

Islamic philosophers were much more interested in Aristotle than Plato, but not having access to Aristotle's *Politics*[84], Ibn Rushd (Averroes[85]) produced instead a commentary on Plato's *Republic*. He advances an authoritarian ideal, following Plato's paternalistic model. Absolute monarchy, led by a philosopher-king, creates a justly ordered society. This requires extensive use of coercion, although

persuasion is preferred and is possible if the young are properly raised. Rhetoric, not logic, is the appropriate road to truth for the common man. Demonstrative knowledge via philosophy and logic requires special study. Rhetoric aids religion in reaching the masses.

Following Plato, Ibn Rushd accepts the principle of women's equality. They should be educated and allowed to serve in the military; the best among them might be tomorrow's philosophers or rulers. He also accepts Plato's illiberal measures such as the censorship of literature. He uses examples from Arab history to illustrate just and degenerate political orders.

## THOMAS MORE

Thomas More[86], when writing his *Utopia*[87], invented the technique of using the portrayal of a "utopia" as the carrier of his thoughts about the ideal society. More's island Utopia is also similar to Plato's *Republic* in some aspects, among them common property and the lack of privacy.

### HEGEL

Hegel[88] respected Plato's theories of state and ethics much more than those of the early modern philosophers such as Locke[89], Hobbes[90] and Rousseau[91], whose theories proceeded from a

fictional "state of nature[92]" defined by humanity's "natural" needs, desires and freedom. For Hegel this was a contradiction: since nature and the individual are contradictory, the freedoms which define individuality as such are latecomers on the stage of history. Therefore, these philosophers unwittingly projected man as an individual in modern society onto a primordial state of nature. Plato however had managed to grasp the ideas specific to his time:

*Plato is not the man to dabble in abstract theories and principles; his truth-loving mind has recognized and represented the truth of the world in which he lived, the truth of the one spirit that lived in him as in Greece itself. No man can overleap his time, the spirit of his time is his spirit also; but the point at issue is, to recognize that spirit by its content.*

For Hegel, Plato's *Republic* is not an abstract theory or ideal which is too good for the real nature of man, but rather is not ideal enough, not good enough for the ideals already inherent or nascent in the reality of his time; a time when Greece was entering decline. One such nascent idea was about to crush the Greek way of life: modern freedoms—or Christian freedoms in Hegel's view—such as the individual's choice of his social class, or of what property to pursue, or which career to fol-

low. Such individual freedoms were excluded from Plato's *Republic*:

**Plato recognized and caught up the true spirit of his times, and brought it forward in a more definite way, in that he desired to make this new principle an impossibility in his Republic.**

Greece being at a crossroads, Plato's new "constitution" in the *Republic* was an attempt to preserve Greece: it was a reactionary reply to the new freedoms of private property etc., that were eventually given legal form through Rome. Accordingly, in ethical life, it was an attempt to introduce a religion that elevated each individual not as an owner of property, but as the possessor of an immortal soul.

## 20TH CENTURY

Mussolini[93] admired Plato's *Republic*, which he often read for inspiration. The *Republic* expounded a number of ideas that fascism promoted, such as rule by an elite promoting the state as the ultimate end, opposition to democracy, protecting the class system and promoting class collaboration, rejection of egalitarianism, promoting the militarization of a nation by creating a class of warriors, demanding that citizens perform civic duties in the interest of the state, and utilizing state intervention in education to promote the development of warriors and future

rulers of the state. Plato was an idealist, focused on achieving justice and morality, while Mussolini and fascism were realist, focused on achieving political goals.

Martin Luther King Jr.[94] nominated the *Republic* as the one book he would wish to have on a desert island, aside from the Bible.

## 21ST CENTURY

In 2001, a survey of over 1,000 academics and students voted the *Republic* the greatest philosophical text ever written. Julian Baggini[95] argued that although the work "was wrong on almost every point, the questions it raises and the methods it uses are essential to the western tradition of philosophy. Without it we might not have philosophy as we know it." In 2021, a survey showed that the *Republic* is the most studied book in the top universities in the United States.

## CULTURAL INFLUENCE

Plato[96]'s *Republic* has been influential in literature and art.

- Aldous Huxley[97]'s *Brave New World*[98] has a dystopian government that bears a resemblance to the form of government described in the *Republic*, featuring the separation of people by professional class, assignment of profession and purpose by

the state, and the absence of traditional family units, replaced by state-organized breeding.

- The Orwellian[99] dystopia[100] depicted in the novel *1984*[101] had many characteristics in common with Plato's description of the allegory of the Cave[102] as Winston Smith strives to liberate himself from it.
- In the early 1970s the Dutch[103] composer Louis Andriessen[104] composed a vocal work called *De Staat*[105], based on the text of Plato's *Republic*.
- In Robert A. Heinlein's *Starship Troopers*[106], his citizen can be compared to a Platonic Guardian, without the communal breeding and property, but still having a militaristic base. Although there are significant differences in the specifics of the system, Heinlein and Plato both describe systems of limited franchise, with a political class that has supposedly earned their power and wisely governs the whole. The *Republic* is specifically attacked in *Starship Troopers*. The arachnids can be seen as much closer to a *Republic* society than the humans.

- The film *The Matrix*[107] models Plato's Allegory of the Cave[108].
- In fiction, Jo Walton[109]'s 2015 novel *The Just City*[110] explored the consequences of establishing a city-state based on the *Republic* in practice.
- See also Ring of Gyges: Cultural influences[111]

## CRITICISM

### GADAMER

In his 1934 *Plato und die Dichter* (*Plato and the Poets*), as well as several other works, Hans-Georg Gadamer[112] describes the utopic city of the *Republic* as a heuristic[113] utopia[114] that should not be pursued or even be used as an orientation-point for political development. Rather, its purpose is said to be to show how things would have to be connected, and how one thing would lead to another—often with highly problematic results—if one would opt for certain principles and carry them through rigorously. This interpretation argues that large passages in Plato's writing are ironic[115], a line of thought initially pursued by Kierkegaard[116].

### POPPER

The city portrayed in the *Republic* struck some critics as harsh, rigid, and unfree; indeed, as totalitarian[117]. Karl Popper[118] gave a voice to that view in his 1945 book *The Open Society and Its Enemies*[119], where he singled out Plato's state as a dystopia[120]. Popper distinguished Plato's ideas from those of Socrates, claiming that the former in his later years expressed none of the humanitarian[121] and democratic[122] tendencies of his teacher. Popper thought Plato's envisioned state totalitarian as it advocated a government composed only of a distinct hereditary ruling class, with the working class—who Popper argues Plato regards as "human cattle"—given no role in decision making. He argues that Plato has no interest in what are commonly regarded as the problems of justice—the resolution of disputes between individuals—because Plato has redefined justice as "keeping one's place".

Popper insists that the *Republic* "was meant by its author not so much as a theoretical treatise, but as a topical political manifesto", and Bertrand Russell[123] argues that at least in *intent*, and all in all not so far from what was possible in ancient Greek city-states, the form of government portrayed in the *Republic* was meant as a practical one by Plato.

## VOEGELIN

Many critics have suggested that the dialogue's political discussion actually serves as an analogy for the individual soul, in which there are also many different "members" that can either conflict or else be integrated and orchestrated under a just and productive "government." Among other things, this analogical reading would solve the problem of certain implausible statements Plato makes concerning an ideal political republic. Norbert Blössner (2007) argues that the *Republic* is best understood as an analysis of the workings and moral improvement of the individual soul with remarkable thoroughness and clarity. This view, of course, does not preclude a legitimate reading of the *Republic* as a political treatise (the work could operate at both levels). It merely implies that it deserves more attention as a work on psychology and moral philosophy than it has sometimes received.

Eric Voegelin[124] in *Plato and Aristotle* (Baton Rouge, 1957), gave meaning to the concept of 'Just City in Speech' (Books II–V). For instance, there is evidence in the dialogue that Socrates[125] himself would not be a member of his 'ideal' state. His life was almost solely dedicated to the private pursuit of knowledge[126]. More practically, Socrates suggests that

members of the lower classes could rise to the higher ruling class, and vice versa, if they had 'gold' in their veins—a version of the concept of social mobility[127]. The exercise of power is built on the 'noble lie[128]' that all men are brothers, born of the earth, yet there is a clear hierarchy and class divisions. There is a tripartite explanation of human psychology that is extrapolated to the city, the relation among peoples. There is no family[129] among the guardians, another crude version of Max Weber's[130] concept of bureaucracy[131] as the state non-private concern. Together with Leo Strauss, Voegelin considered Popper's interpretation to be a gross misunderstanding not only of the dialogue itself, but of the very nature and character of Plato's entire philosophic enterprise.

The paradigm of the city—the idea of the Good[132], the *Agathon*—has manifold historical embodiments, undertaken by those who have seen the *Agathon*, and are ordered via the vision. The centerpiece of the *Republic*, Part II, nos. 2–3, discusses the rule of the philosopher, and the vision of the *Agathon* with the *Allegory of the Cave*[133], which is clarified in the theory of forms[134]. The centerpiece is preceded and followed by the discussion of the means that will secure a well-ordered *polis*[135] (city). Part II, no. 1, concerns marriage, the

community of people and goods for the guardians, and the restraints on warfare among the Hellenes. It describes a partially communistic[136] *polis*. Part II, no. 4, deals with the philosophical education of the rulers who will preserve the order and character of the city-state.

In part II, the *Embodiment of the Idea*, is preceded by the establishment of the economic and social orders of a *polis* (part I), followed by an analysis (part III) of the decline the order must traverse. The three parts compose the main body of the dialogues, with their discussions of the "paradigm", its embodiment, its genesis, and its decline.

The introduction and the conclusion are the frame for the body of the *Republic*. The discussion of right order is occasioned by the questions: "Is justice better than injustice?" and "Will an unjust man fare better than a just man?" The introductory question is balanced by the concluding answer: "Justice is preferable to injustice". In turn, the foregoing are framed with the *Prologue* (Book I) and the *Epilogue* (Book X). The prologue is a short dialogue about the common public *doxai*[137] (opinions) about justice. Based upon faith, and not reason, the *Epilogue* describes the new arts and the immortality[138] of the soul[139].

## STRAUSS AND BLOOM

Some of Plato[140]'s proposals have led theorists like Leo Strauss[141] and Allan Bloom[142] to ask readers to consider the possibility that Socrates[143] was creating not a blueprint for a real city, but a learning exercise for the young men in the dialogue. There are many points in the construction of the "Just City in Speech" that seem contradictory[144], which raise the possibility Socrates is employing irony[145] to make the men in the dialogue question for themselves the ultimate value of the proposals. In turn, Plato[146] has immortalized this 'learning exercise' in the *Republic*.

One of many examples is that Socrates calls the marriages of the ruling class 'sacred'[147]'; however, they last only one night and are the result of manipulating and drugging couples into predetermined intercourse with the aim of eugenically breeding guardian-warriors. Strauss and Bloom's interpretations, however, involve more than just pointing out inconsistencies; by calling attention to these issues they ask readers to think more deeply about whether Plato is being ironic or genuine, for neither Strauss nor Bloom present an unequivocal opinion, preferring to raise philosophic doubt over interpretive fact.

Strauss's approach developed out of a belief that Plato[148] wrote esoterically. The basic acceptance

of the exoteric[149]-esoteric[150] distinction revolves around whether Plato really wanted to see the "Just City in Speech" of Books V-VI come to pass, or whether it is just an allegory[151]. Strauss never regarded this as the crucial issue of the dialogue. He argued against Karl Popper's literal view, citing Cicero[152]'s opinion that the *Republic*'s true nature was to bring to light the nature of political things. In fact, Strauss undermines the justice found in the "Just City in Speech" by implying the city is not natural, it is a man-made conceit that abstracts away from the erotic needs of the body. The city founded in the *Republic* "is rendered possible by the abstraction from eros".

An argument that has been used against ascribing ironic intent to Plato is that Plato's Academy[153] produced a number of tyrants[154] who seized political power and abandoned philosophy for ruling a city. Despite being well-versed in Greek and having direct contact with Plato himself, some of Plato's former students like

Clearchus[155], tyrant of Heraclea[156]; Chaeron[157], tyrant of Pellene[158]; Erastus[159] and Coriscus[160], tyrants of Skepsis[161]; Hermias of Atarneus[162] and As-sos[163]; and Calippus[164], tyrant of Syracuse[165] ruled people and did not impose anything like a philosopher- kingship. However, it can be argued whether these men

became "tyrants" through studying in the academy. Plato's school had an elite student body, some of whom would by birth, and family expectation, end up in the seats of power. Additionally, it is important that it is by no means obvious that these men were tyrants in the modern, totalitarian[166] sense of the concept. Finally, since very little is actually known about what was taught at Plato's Academy, there is no small controversy over whether it was even in the business of teaching politics at all.

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# Lively Worlds: How Worlds Absorb Novelty



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## Lively Worlds

BY DAVID HUANG

What does it mean for something, like a world, to feel more “alive” than something else? Liveliness is a vague quality, but it is nevertheless clear that when people discuss the aliveness of a thing (like a room, painting, or party), they are considering an observable characteristic. A farmers’ market on a busy weekend feels more lively to us than a virtual meeting

hosted in Meta’s Horizon Workrooms.

Liveliness also seems to be irreducible to the terms of biological life, which usually involve an entity capable of self-replication and converting thermal energy into work. While it is possible to view worlds from a biological perspective, this framing can be awkward when applied to things that are not organisms. Guerrilla warfare can be

alive, but not always in the same way a gorilla is alive.

The most interesting worlds are evolved, not engineered. What if we think of liveliness as being about creating space for abundant novelty and surprise? A world is most alive when it has enough open-endedness for unexpected behavior to emerge in a bottom-up, democratic manner. A lively world can be a complex system, composed of many elements that interact with each other and influence each other's progression.

It is easy, however, to create a system that is complex, yet not maximally lively. For example, a bad codebase is complex but also frustrating enough to discourage the maintenance of itself and the world it sustains. A world that is alive has rules for how relationships between entities can be continuously created and destroyed.

## ONCHAIN GAMES AND AUTONOMOUS WORLDS

It is the nature of an Autonomous World that anyone, not only its creators, can keep it alive as long as some invariants hold.<sup>1</sup> Today, the most common manifestations of Autonomous Worlds are onchain games.

A popular viewpoint to adopt in the realm of onchain games is to magically assume that increasing

agency—for example, allowing players to change the rules of the game or introduce new entities—will automatically make a world more alive as if by some natural consequence of the blockchain medium's permissionlessness.

But in many cases, the players of a game are worse stewards of a world than its creators. Imagine an MMO game that has given players the ability to add any custom item with an associated custom behavior into the game. Giving anyone the ability to create any type of item means everyone will make themselves gods. Players might create extremely powerful swords or impenetrable armor. But eventually, things will converge to an “interestingness equilibrium” because every newly introduced object, like an invincible armor, also allows anyone to introduce a counter, like a sword that destroys an invincible armor.

This world starts lively but sinks lower on the liveliness spectrum until it is unable to surprise itself. Without formalized introduction rules, the relationships between entities in the world are left undefined and have a tendency to become meaningless.

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## FEEDBACK LOOPS IN WORLDS

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A lively world is an economy where the main currency is relationships. The most valuable relationship for encouraging liveliness is positive—where one party benefits from another without either being harmed.

Because new relationships can build on previous ones, all you need for liveliness—as continuous novelty and surprise—is a feedback loop:

1. New information is introduced to the world. This can be a discovery, like a glitch in its physics, or intentionally created, like an item for accomplishing some goal.
2. The new information disrupts relationships between entities. Existing entities might latch onto it, creating new connections and even breaking old ones.
3. If the number of positive connections the new entity receives reaches critical mass, it is “memed into existence” as part of the world and can interact with new information in the next iteration of the loop. Otherwise, it is destroyed by competition.

## COOPERATION EMERGES

We have described a general algorithm that describes how a world changes but have not yet defined exactly what it means for “relationships and connections to form or change.” What is the specific process through which the world evaluates whether or not it can assimilate a source of novelty? How does it transition to the next version of itself?

Let us reconsider our example MMO game from before and define a more structured way for relationships to form:

- Every newly introduced item can be destroyed by anyone. Destroying the creator also destroys the item.
- Destroyed items are expensive to rebuild.
- Each player can only introduce one item.

This creates an interface for destructive interactions—introducing competition into the world.

Imagine if a player introduces a machine that lets you detach and reattach arbitrary limbs. If the machine unlocks new feats of heroism and spawns entire industries where bodybuilders auction off their arms and engineers can replace your legs with rockets, the world will build castles to protect the machine. But

if the machine suddenly forgets how to reattach limbs, assassination markets emerge to target its creator.

How does the three-step system apply here? Players introduce new information into the world in the form of the limb machine (Step 1). The machine then interacts with existing entities in the world (Step 2). Once enough positive relationships have been formed with it, such as the emergence of a market, it ingrains itself as part of the world and is less likely to be destroyed (Step 3).

This model implies that avoiding competition is the best way entities can ensure their continued participation in this world. Suppose Player A and Player B both decide to build hyper-efficient shovels that let them harvest resources much faster. Competition emerges if this resource is scarce. Given our rules, players could try to destroy each other to escape the loop. As competition implies a constant threat, it is hard to be selfish in this world.

The other way to escape the loop is to specialize and cooperate. For example, Player A builds a device that makes crops grow larger and works together with Player B, who keeps the hyper-efficient harvester. Cooperation can also take the form of composition, where relationships and ideas build on top of each other. This is most commonly

seen in economic development, where new products or technologies are combinations of existing ones.

An item is more likely to maintain its existence when many positive links point to it. Cooperation improves each item's (and its creators') chances of survival by increasing the number of positive links each entity receives. Consequently, the world becomes less alive when items that originate many positive relationships are destroyed. An example from nature is the extinction of a keystone species in an environment.

Each world has its own "positive link evaluation process" that decides whether or not new information can be accepted. We can measure how well novelty incorporates itself into the world by how many positive loops—positive relationships between two entities in both directions—it creates. As long as the new information maximizes the number of positive loops it creates, there is less incentive for others to destroy it.

The drive to maximize loops means entities not only maintain positive links but also actively seek out new relationships that could be formed. The more positive links an entity already has, the more likely it is for newer entities to attach more links to it in the future. We can say the most lively worlds exhibit a semilattice structure. Christopher Alex-

ander's essay "A City is Not a Tree"<sup>\*</sup> describes the semilattice as a connection pattern where all elements are deeply intertwined.<sup>2</sup> Alexander argues that embodying this connection-maximizing structure in our cities creates the healthiest possible communities.

## SYSTEMATIC WORLDING

When tasked with the goal of creating the most realistic and interesting simulation possible, there are two approaches at opposite ends of the ladder of abstraction:

1. A symbolic approach, where every interaction and entity is defined by high-level concepts specified by humans. For example, nearly every video game.
2. A physics approach, where interactions between individual base components are represented through low-level primitives, like cellular automata. For example, falling sand simulations.

Taking the concave disposition<sup>3</sup> — a systematic approach to worlding<sup>4</sup> — will not allow us to engineer a specific outcome, but it can help us answer questions about how the different components of a world might generally work together in the future. Questions like: "Under what conditions does cooperation

develop?" can be answered without zooming in on the world's implementation (physics) or zooming out on its anthropocentric biases (symbols).

You may discover that taking a systems - level view of everything makes it hard to find meaning. The heart is just a bunch of cells (muscle) that move a bunch of other cells (blood) through some more cells (arteries and veins). It does not care about the things we humans care about.

How do we understand the complexity that surrounds us? Traditionally, cultures use storytelling and narrative to derive meaning from within a world. The heart might be a bunch of cells, but it is also the engine that moves your arms when you go to hug your family.

Meaning-making happens by identifying a slice — a journey or story — within a world and giving participants the ability to progress within that slice. The more open-ended and surprising the world is, the more opportunities there are to find the most meaningful slice for yourself. Over time, the boundaries of the slice itself (and therefore the participants' capabilities) can expand and shrink. Slices often grow into their own worlds that bump into each other as they move through even larger meta-worlds. The most lively worlds have plenty of room for many journeys.

The creator of a world should view it not as a bag of systems, but as a rich medium that supports curated interfaces for meaning. As more people attempt to make Autonomous Worlds a part of our lives, we have the opportunity to elevate them from being mere containers for MMOs and drive them towards

embodying models for worlds worth living in.

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# Epics vs. Lore

Venkatesh Rao

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**P**art 4/7 of the *On Lore*[1] series.

I have some unsolicited advice for Jon Favreau, showrunner of *The Mandalorian*, that he probably doesn't need: do *not* follow the obvious return-of-the-true-king epic plot arc suggested by the Darksaber. It would ruin what is best[2] about the show — the leisurely exploration of *Star Wars* lore that doesn't just live in the interstices of the epic 9-movie saga of Skywalker, Palpatines, and Kenobis, but exhibits an indifference, bordering on affectionate contempt, towards it.

In the show, both Empire and rebel alliance are distant forces, and the recent victory of one over the other has not made a lot of difference on the ground. This lends the show an air of relaxed self-absorption, but one mercifully free of self-importance. It explores the everyday-life details of the world whose rough contours were established by the movies in passing. The characters recognize the power of the larger forces battling for supremacy, but don't necessary respect them or

take their conceits, or claims to nobility and virtue, at face value. They may be less powerful, but are somehow more real for it. Where the epic heroes of the world are bound by their Chosen One roles in history, the characters here enjoy a freedom derived from security through obscurity.

Other shows that started out wonderfully rooted in lore have been ruined by unnecessary epic ambitions. I'm thinking of *Grimm* and *Once Upon a Time*, both based on classic European folklore. Both succumbed to dumb epic plot arcs and grand conflicts between good and evil in the later seasons.

In fiction, lore is orthogonal to the epic-ness. Though it isn't itself a type of narrative (being more of an inventory of narrative artifacts, such as archetypes, tropes, plot devices, and so forth), it tends to have a bias towards the small and timeless rather than the epic and historicist. Lore lends itself better to what Ursula Le Guin called Carrier Bag[3] fiction, than to epic hero's journey fiction. The epic hero's journey is of course present

in lore-based fiction, but it is marginalized rather than centered. It is just one class of stories among many.

This tension between epic and lore aspects of worlds, incidentally, is beautifully developed in Terry Pratchett's Discworld novels, via the contrast between the wizards of Unseen University, and the witches of the countryside.<sup>2[4]</sup> The wizards live lives isolated from the rest of the world, dabble in esoteric, epic magic, are full of themselves, strut around in fancy robes and hats, and are never *quite* as important to history as they imagine themselves to be. The witches dabble in deceptively ordinary-seeming everyday magic, are intimately involved in the everyday lives of ordinary folks, and sort of nudge life along, serving as stewards of the normalcy. Their attitude towards the wizards is one of mildly amused tolerance mixed with some contempt. The suggestion is that the wizards and witches are equally powerful in their own ways, but that the latter exercise way more actual agency in the world precisely because they lack delusions of grandeur and have more actual involvement with reality. In Talebian terms, wizards are fragilistas, while witches are antifragile.

To return to the central concerns of this series, management and organizations (with or without DAOs and blockchains), the epic dimen-

sion of management is the one represented by grand mission statements, ten-year visions, big external enemies, and existential threats.

Epics are about putting a VR headset on every face, and an AI-powered robot in every home.

About slaying dragons like Covid, world hunger, or climate change, or defeating Evil Dark Lords (a role currently played by Putin).

Historically, epics have usually been explicitly religious: manifest destiny, reclaiming the Holy Land, defeating Communism, defeating Capitalism, establishing the world Caliphate, absorbing or liberating Ukraine, protecting Taiwan, creating AGI, and so on.

It's Skywalker/Palpatine/Kenobi stuff.

Interestingly enough, while there are epic elements to the blockchain world, it is fundamentally not epic-structured. To the extent the world ever had an epic hero in Satoshi (rendered larger than life by his anonymity), he appeared briefly as a Genesis figure and likely died a few years later. He triggered a slow revolution peopled by relatively ordinary types who bicker on twitter and reddit, and lack an epic center like Mecca, Silicon Valley or Washington, DC. This might be why lore has a particular appeal in this world.

Epic forces may or may not provide an overall long-term motive force

to everyday events, and may or may not have any real substance to them. At the level of day-to-day behaviors, to the extent they are real rather than religious fictions, epic forces usually manifest as either headwinds or a tailwinds that affect everything but aren't particularly responsive to any individual thing.

Moore's Law, for instance, is just this epic tendency in the world right now that you'd be foolish to fight, but isn't particularly out to either lift you up or drag you down. How Moore's Law affects you is largely up to you.

Depending on which way you decide to go in your smaller-scale life, you'll either benefit from epic forces, or find yourself fighting them.

With any force that presents as epic, there is a small chance it is real, and will create either serendipity or zemblanity in your life, and a large chance it is fake and will have no effect at all unless you are foolish enough to believe in it.

Importantly, there are times and places where epic forces are largely absent or quiescent. These periods are the negative times/spaces of history. Doldrum zones with no secular narrative winds. The decades when nothing happens punctuating weeks where decades happen. The years in a company when there are no dramatic stock move-

ments. The periods between peaks of excitement in the long-term evolution of a technology. The screen time defined by the B-roll.

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It is during these periods that lore comes into its own. It is no accident that *The Mandalorian* is set between the second and third *Star Wars* trilogies. One epic drama is done, the next is yet to start. But life — and the show — must go on.

Lore to the rescue.

What makes lore important is that it what persists through epic ages and dark ages, through booms and busts, through iconic era-defining product seasons and incremental update seasons that merely keep the product alive and chugging along. Lore creates slow-burn meaning in a way that isn't subject to the vagaries of epic winds.

Epics wax and wane. Gods come and go. Visions of utopia or glorious afterlives arise and unravel.

Lore just plods on through it all.

Another way to understand it is that while epics supply a *consequentialist* logic to long periods of time — typically decades or lifetimes — lore supplies a *deontological* logic to day-to-day life. Epics are about big goals, lore is about systems of small habits.

To be a virtuous person within a consequentialist logic is to be a hero who goes forth on a great adventure for a month to slay a dragon.

To be a virtuous person within a deontological logic is to show up day after day, for years, stewarding or backstopping something upon which life itself depends.

Epics are about 2°C warning scenarios over decades. Lore is about recycling habits[5] today.

Epics and lore are not opposed, but orthogonal. History features both, but perhaps the twentieth century taught us to overvalue the epic aspect and undervalue the lore aspect. To over-venerate Pratchettian wizards, and under-venerate Pratchettian witches. To be too interested in hero's journeys, and not interested enough in carrier bags.

Perhaps the twenty-first century will be about restoring the balance, not between the light and dark sides of the Force, but between the Forced and non-Forced aspects of the world. Between the creative-destruction aspect, and the sustained aspect. Between the things that change profoundly and quickly, and the things that change slowly over a long period.

I'm a bit wary here, by the way, of inadvertently propping up a fragile idealization of a more "feminine" understanding of narrative culture. Arguably, while epic narratives do

have a strong masculine bias (the hero's journey is definitely a masculine pattern), lore is not so much feminine-biased as balanced.

To summarize: lore is a dimension of narrative cultures that is orthogonal to, and currently undervalued relative to, the epic dimension. It is about everyday habits rather than long-term goals.

We can add this idea to the understanding we've built up over the previous essays, to arrive at a nice seven dimensions of lore —

1. Lore is anti-marketing
2. Lore is inner psyche-management
3. Lore is born-baroque imaginative irony
4. Lore is **Posture, Narrative, Behavior** (PNB) triad molecules
5. Lore is narrative territory catalyzed by shaky epistemologies
6. Lore is about circumstances you manage, not problems you "solve"
7. Lore is epic-orthogonal everyday life habits

You could say the seven dimensions kinda roll up into a single broad function — lore is *working knowledge that knows its own limits*.

We typically make no big philosophical claims for the lore we live

by. We merely resist efforts (often epic efforts) to make us *stop* living by it. We recognize that lore is uncertain, evolving, unstable, and rife with bullshit, superstition, and outright conscious lies. It contains enough truth to be functional, but enough obvious untruth that we are conscious of its limits. We do not delude ourselves that it is the whole truth, or nothing but the truth.

Lore is what actually plays the role in our lives that we pretend some idealized “truth” does.

Ideology, arguably, is a religious pretense that lore is truth. A pretense that is usually no more than a flimsy justification for an epic pursuit of religious power.

*Next: Part 5/7 — Dark, Gray, and Light Lore[6]*

1[7]

I've previously tweeted some of the ideas in this essay in the form of TV show review threads. Here's my *Mandalorian* Season 1 thread[8], Season 2 thread[9], and a related thread on the *Book of Boba Fett*[10], which I disliked to start, but grew to like as the first season developed.

2[11]

This contrast is actually a fractal element at many levels in the Discworld cosmogony. The mainstream life portrayed in the City Watch novels is a decidedly unmagical contrast to the witches and wizards. The Discworld overall, including the magic, exists in relatively ordinary dimensions, while typical epic stuff — monsters and dragons — is relegated to the dungeon dimensions or to Dunmanifestin, the realm of retired gods. And finally, at a metaphysical level, Death is a remarkably mundane personification of a routine everyday force (since people die all the time) that stands in contrast to the Auditors of Reality, a sort of epic bureaucracy of existence itself that is Death's main antagonist. At every level in the Discworld stories, the apparently ordinary is elevated to a sublime level, and the apparently epic diminished to a kind of annoying puffed-up theater that is less consequential than it pretends to be.

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## LINKS

[1] [studio.ribbonfarm.com/p/on-lore](https://studio.ribbonfarm.com/p/on-lore)



[2] [contraptions.venkateshrao.com/p/epics-vs-lore](http://contraptions.venkateshrao.com/p/epics-vs-lore)



[3] [theanarchistlibrary.org/library/ursula-k-le-guin-the-carrier-bag-theory-of-fiction](http://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/ursula-k-le-guin-the-carrier-bag-theory-of-fiction)



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# A Brief History of the Corporation: 1600 to 2100



Venkatesh Rao

ribbonfarm.com · Jun 08, 2011 · ~39 MIN READ

**O**n 8 June, a Scottish banker named Alexander Fordyce shorted the collapsing Company's shares in the London markets. But a momentary bounce-back in the stock ruined his plans, and he skipped town leaving £550,000 in debt. Much of this was owed to the Ayr Bank, which imploded. In less than three weeks, another 30 banks collapsed across Europe, bringing trade to a standstill. On July 15, the directors of the Company applied to the Bank of England for a £400,000 loan. Two weeks later, they wanted another £300,000. By August, the directors wanted a £1 million bailout. The news began leaking out and seemingly contrite executives, running from angry shareholders, faced furious Parliament members. By January, the terms of a comprehensive bailout were worked out, and the British government inserted its czars into the Company's management to

ensure compliance with its terms.

If this sounds eerily familiar, it shouldn't. The year was 1772, exactly 239 years ago today, the apotheosis of power for the corporation as a business construct. The company was the British East India company (EIC). The bubble that burst was the East India Bubble. Between the founding of the EIC in 1600 and the post-subprime world of 2011, the idea of the corporation was born, matured, over-extended, reined-in, refined, patched, updated, over-extended again, propped-up and finally widely declared to be obsolete. Between 2011 and 2100, it will decline — hopefully gracefully — into a well-behaved retiree on the economic scene.

In its 400+ year history, the corporation has achieved extraordinary things, cutting around-the-world travel time from years to less than a day, putting a computer on every desk, a toilet in every home (nearly) and a cellphone within reach of

every human. It even put a man on the Moon and kinda-sorta cured AIDS.

So it is a sort of grim privilege for the generations living today to watch the slow demise of such a spectacularly effective intellectual construct. The Age of Corporations is coming to an end. The traditional corporation won't vanish, but it will cease to be the center of gravity of economic life in another generation or two. They will live on as religious institutions do today, as weakened ghosts of more vital institutions from centuries ago.

It is not yet time for the obituary (and that time may never come), but the sun is certainly setting on the Golden Age of corporations. It is time to review the memoirs of the corporation as an idea, and contemplate a post-corporate future framed by its gradual withdrawal from the center stage of the world's economic affairs.

### Framing Modernity and Globalization

For quite a while now, I have been looking for the right set of frames to get me started on understanding geopolitics and globalization. For a long time, I was misled by the fact that 90% of the available books frame globalization and the emergence of modernity in terms of the nation-state as the fundamental unit of analysis, with politics as the fundamental area of human activity that shapes things. On the face of

it, this seems reasonable. Nominally, nation-states subsume economic activity, with even the most powerful multi-national corporations being merely secondary organizing schemes for the world.

But the more I've thought about it, the more I've been pulled towards a business-first perspective on modernity and globalization. As a result, this post is mostly woven around ideas drawn from five books that provide appropriate fuel for this business-first frame. I will be citing, quoting and otherwise indirectly using these books over several future posts, but I won't be reviewing them. So if you want to follow the arguments more closely, you may want to read some or all of these. The investment is definitely worthwhile.

- *The Corporation that Changed the World*[1] by Nick Robins, a history of the East India Company, a rather unique original prototype of the idea
- *Monsoon*[2] by Robert Kaplan, an examination of the re-emergence of the Indian Ocean as the primary theater of global geopolitics in the 21st century
- *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History: 1660-1783*[3] by Alfred Thayer Mahan, a classic examination of how naval power is the most critical link between political,

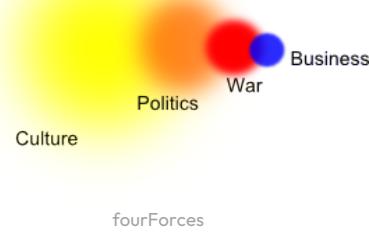
cultural, military and business forces.

- *The Post-American World*[4] by Fareed Zakaria, an examination of the structure of the world being created, not by the decline of America, but by the “rise of the rest.”
- *The Lever of Riches*[5] by Joel Mokyr, probably the most compelling model and account of how technological change drives the evolution of civilizations, through monotonic, path-dependent accumulation of changes

I didn't settle on these five lightly. I must have browsed or partly-read-and-abandoned dozens of books about modernity and globalization before settling on these as the ones that collectively provided the best framing of the themes that intrigued me. If I were to teach a 101 course on the subject, I'd start with these as required reading in the first 8 weeks.

The human world, like physics, can be reduced to four fundamental forces: culture, politics, war and business. That is also roughly the order of decreasing strength, increasing legibility[6] and partial subsumption of the four forces.

Here is a visualization of my mental model:



Culture is the most mysterious, illegible and powerful force. It includes such tricky things as race, language and religion. Business, like gravity in physics, is the weakest and most legible: it can be reduced to a few basic rules and principles (comprehensible to high-school students) that govern the structure of the corporate form, and descriptive artifacts like macroeconomic indicators, microeconomic balance sheets, annual reports and stock market numbers.

But one quality makes gravity dominate at large space-time scales: gravity affects all masses and is always attractive, never repulsive. So despite its weakness, it dominates things at sufficiently large scales. I don't want to stretch the metaphor too far, but something similar holds true of business.

On the scale of days or weeks, culture, politics and war matter a lot more in shaping our daily lives. But those forces fundamentally cancel out over longer periods. They are mostly noise, historically speaking.

They don't cause creative-destructive, unidirectional change (whether or not you think of that change as "progress" is a different matter).

Business though, as an expression of the force of unidirectional technological evolution, has a destabilizing unidirectional effect. It is technology, acting through business and Schumpeterian creative-destruction, that drives monotonic, historicist change, for good or bad. Business is the locus where the non-human force of technological change sneaks into the human sphere.

Of course, there is arguably *some* progress on all four fronts. You could say that Shakespeare represents progress with respect to Aeschylus, and Tom Stoppard with respect to Shakespeare. You could say Obama understands politics in ways that say, Hammurabi did not. You could say that General Petraeus thinks of the problems of military strategy in ways that Genghis Khan did not. But all these are decidedly weak claims.

On the other hand the proposition that Facebook (the corporation) is in some ways a beast entirely beyond the comprehension of an ancient Silk Road trader seems vastly more solid. And this is entirely a function of the intimate relationship between business and technology. Culture is suspicious of technology. Politics is mostly indifferent to and above it. War-making

uses it, but maintains an arms-length separation. Business? It gets into bed with it. It is sort of vaguely plausible that you could switch artists, politicians and generals around with their peers from another age and still expect them to function. But there is no meaningful way for a businessman from (say) 2000 BC to comprehend what Mark Zuckerberg does, let alone take over for him. Too much magical technological water has flowed under the bridge.

Arthur C. Clarke once said that any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic, but technology (and science) aren't what create the visible magic. Most of the magic never leaves journal papers or discarded engineering prototypes. It is business that creates the world of magic, not technology itself. And the story of business in the last 400 years is the story of the corporate *form*.

There are some who treat corporate forms as yet another technology (in this case a technology of people-management), but despite the trappings of scientific foundations (usually in psychology) and engineering synthesis (we speak of organizational "design"), the corporate form is not a technology. It is the consequence of a social contract like the one that anchors nationhood. It is a codified bundle of quasi-religious beliefs externalized into an animate form that seeks to

preserve itself like any other living creature.

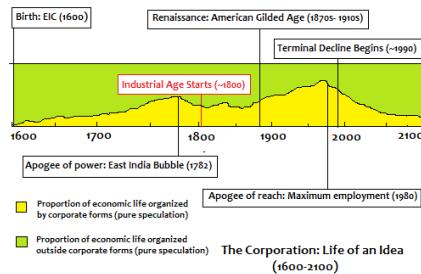
The Corporate View of history:  
1600 – 2100

We are not used to viewing world history through the perspective of the corporation for the very good reason that corporations are a recent invention, and instances that had the ability to transform the world in magical ways did not really exist till the EIC was born. Businesses of course, have been around for a while. The oldest continuously surviving business, until recently, was Kongo Gumi[7], a Japanese temple construction business founded in 584 AD that finally closed its doors in 2009. Guilds and banks have existed since the 16th century. Trading merchants, who raised capital to fund individual ships or voyages, often with some royal patronage, were also not a new phenomenon. What was new was the idea of a publicly traded joint-stock corporation, an entity with rights similar to those of states and individuals, with limited liability and significant autonomy (even in its earliest days, when corporations were formed for defined periods of time by royal charter).

This idea morphed a lot as it evolved (most significantly in the aftermath of the East India Bubble), but it retained a recognizable DNA throughout. Many authors such as Gary Hamel (*The Future of Management*[8]), Tom

Malone (*The Future of Work*[9]) and Don Tapscott (*Wikinomics*[10]) have talked about how the traditional corporate form is getting obsolete. But in digging around, I found to my surprise that nobody has actually attempted to meaningfully represent the birth-to-obsolescence evolution of the idea of the corporation.

Here is my first stab at it (I am working on a much more detailed, data-driven timeline as a side project):



lifeofcorp

To understand history — world history in the fullest sense, not just economic history — from this perspective, you need to understand two important points about this evolution of corporations.

The Smithian/Schumpeterian Divide

The first point is that the corporate form was born in the era of Mercantilism, the economic ideology that (zero-sum) control of land is the foundation of all economic power.

In politics, Mercantilism led to balance-of-power models. In business, once the Age of Exploration (the 16th century) opened up the world, it led to mercantilist corporations focused on *trade* (if land is the source of all economic power, the only way to grow value faster than your land holdings permit, is to trade on advantageous terms).

The forces of radical technological change — the Industrial Revolution — did not seriously kick in until after nearly 200 years of corporate evolution (1600-1800) in a mercantilist mold. Mercantilist models of economic growth map to what Joel Mokyr calls *Smithian Growth*, after Adam Smith. It is worth noting here that Adam

Smith published *The Wealth of Nations* in 1776, strongly influenced by his reading of the events surrounding the bursting of the East India Bubble in 1772 and debates in Parliament about its mismanagement. Smith was both the prophet of doom for the Mercantilist corporation, and the herald of what came to replace it: the Schumpeterian corporation. Mokyr characterizes the growth created by the latter as *Schumpeterian growth*.

The corporate form therefore spent almost 200 years — nearly half of its life to date — being shaped by Mercantilist thinking, a fundamentally zero-sum way of viewing the world. It is easy to underestimate the impact of this early life

since the physical form of modern corporations looks so different. But to the extent that organizational forms represent externalized mental models, codified concepts and structure-following-strategy (as Alfred Chandler eloquently put it), the corporate form contains the inertia of that early formative stage.

In fact, in terms of the two functions that Drucker considered the only essential ones in business, marketing and innovation, the Mercantilist corporation lacked one. The archetypal Mercantilist corporation, the EIC, understood marketing intimately and managed demand and supply with extraordinary accuracy. But it did not innovate.

Innovation was the function grafted onto the corporate form by the possibility of Schumpeterian growth, but it would take nearly an entire additional century for the function to be properly absorbed into corporations. It was not until after the American Civil War and the Gilded Age that businesses fundamentally reorganized around (as we will see) time instead of space, which led, as we will see, to a central role for ideas and therefore the innovation function.

The Black Hills Gold Rush of the 1870s, the focus of the *Deadwood* saga, was in a way the last hurrah of Mercantilist thinking. William Randolph Hearst, the son of gold mining mogul George Hearst who

took over Deadwood in the 1870s, made his name with newspapers. The baton had formally been passed from mercantilists to schumpeterians.

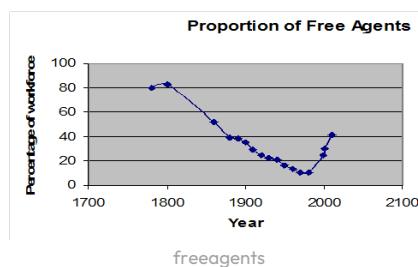
This divide between the two models can be placed at around 1800, the nominal start date of the Industrial Revolution, as the ideas of Renaissance Science met the energy of coal to create a cocktail that would allow corporations to colonize time.

### Reach versus Power

The second thing to understand about the evolution of the corporation is that the apogee of power did not coincide with the apogee of reach. In the 1780s, only a small fraction of humanity was employed by corporations, but corporations were shaping the destinies of empires. In the centuries that followed the crash of 1772, the power of the corporation was curtailed significantly, but in terms of sheer reach, they continued to grow, until by around 1980, a significant fraction of humanity was effectively being governed by corporations.

I don't have numbers for the whole world, but for America, less than 20% of the population had paycheck incomes in 1780, and over 80% in 1980, and the percentage has been declining since (I have cited these figures before; they are from Gareth Morgan's *Images of Organization*[11] and Dan

Pink's *Free Agent Nation*[12]). Employment fraction is of course only one of the many dimensions of corporate power (which include economic, material, cultural, human and political forms of power), but this graph provides some sense of the numbers behind the rise and fall of the corporation as an idea.



It is tempting to analyze corporations in terms of some measure of overall power, which I call "reach." Certainly corporations today seem far more powerful than those of the 1700s, but the point is that the form is much weaker today, even though it has organized more of our lives. This is roughly the same as the distinction between fertility of women and population growth: the peak in fertility (a per-capita number) and peak in population growth rates (an aggregate) behave differently.

To make sense of the form, the divide between the Smithian and Schumpeterian growth epochs is much more useful than the dynamics of reach. This gives us a useful 3-phase model of the history of the corporation: the Mercantilist/Smithian era from 1600-1800, the

Industrial/Schumpeterian era from 1800 – 2000 and finally, the era we are entering, which I will dub the Information/Coasean era. By a happy accident, there is a major economist whose ideas help finger-print the economic contours of our world: Ronald Coase.

This post is mainly about the two historical phases, and are in a sense a macro-prequel to the ideas I normally write about which are more individual-focused and future-oriented.

#### I: Smithian Growth and the Mercantilist Economy (1600 – 1800)

##### *The story of the old corporation and the sea*

It is difficult for us in 2011, with Walmart and Facebook as examples of corporations that significantly control our lives, to understand the sheer power the East India Company exercised during its heyday. Power that makes even the most out-of-control of today's corporations seem tame by comparison. To a large extent, the history of the first 200 years of corporate evolution is the history of the East India Company. And despite its name and nation of origin, to think of it as a corporation that helped Britain rule India is to entirely misunderstand the nature of the beast. Two images hint at its actual globe-straddling, 10x-Walmart influence: the image of the Boston Tea Partiers dumping crates of tea

into the sea during the American struggle for independence, and the image of smoky opium dens in China. One image symbolizes the rise of a new empire. The other marks the decline of an old one.

The East India Company supplied both the tea and the opium.

At a broader level, the EIC managed to balance an unbalanced trade equation between Europe and Asia whose solution had eluded even the Roman empire. Massive flows of gold and silver from Europe to Asia via the Silk and Spice routes had been a given in world trade for several thousand years. Asia simply had far more to sell than it wanted to buy. Until the EIC came along

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**At a broader level, the EIC managed to balance an unbalanced trade equation between Europe and Asia whose solution had eluded even the Roman empire.**

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A very rough sketch of how the EIC solved the equation reveals the structure of value-addition in the mercantilist world economy.

The EIC started out by buying textiles from Bengal and tea from China in exchange for gold and silver.

Then it realized it was playing the same sucker game that had trapped and helped bankrupt Rome.

Next, it figured out that it could take control of the opium industry

in Bengal, trade opium for tea in China with a significant surplus, and use the money to buy the textiles it needed in Bengal. Guns would be needed.

As a bonus, along with its partners, it participated in yet another clever trade: textiles for slaves along the coast of Africa, who could be sold in America for gold and silver.

For this scheme to work, three foreground things and one background thing had to happen: the corporation had to effectively take over Bengal (and eventually all of India), Hong Kong (and eventually, all of China, indirectly) and England. Robert Clive achieved the first goal by 1757. An employee of the EIC, William Jardine, founded what is today Jardine Matheson, the spinoff corporation most associated with Hong Kong and the historic opium trade. It was, during in its early history, what we would call today a narco-terrorist corporation; the Taliban today are kindergarteners in that game by comparison. And while the corporation never actually took control of the British Crown, it came close several times, by financing the government during its many troubles.

The background development was simpler. England had to take over the oceans and ensure the safe operations of the EIC.

Just how comprehensively did the EIC control the affairs of states? Bengal is an excellent example. In

the 1600s and the first half of the 1700s, before the Industrial Revolution, Bengali textiles were the dominant note in the giant sucking sound drawing away European wealth (which was flowing from the mines and farms of the Americas). The European market, once the EIC had shoved the Dutch VOC aside, constantly demanded more and more of an increasing variety of textiles, ignoring the complaining of its own weavers. Initially, the company did no more than battle the Dutch and Portuguese on water, and negotiate agreements to set up trading posts on land. For a while, it played by the rules of the Mughal empire and its intricate system of economic control based on various imperial decrees and permissions. The Mughal system kept the business world firmly subservient to the political class, and ensured a level playing field for all traders. Bengal in the 17th and 18th centuries was a cheerful drama of Turks, Arabs, Armenians, Indians, Chinese and Europeans. Trade in the key commodities, textiles, opium, saltpeter and betel nuts, was carefully managed to keep the empire on top.

But eventually, as the threat from the Dutch was tamed, it became clear that the company actually had more firepower at its disposal than most of the nation-states it was dealing with. The realization led to the first big domino falling, in the

corporate colonization of India, at the battle of Plassey. Robert Clive along with Indian co-conspirators managed to take over Bengal, appoint a puppet Nawab, and get himself appointed as the Mughal *diwan* (finance minister/treasurer) of the province of Bengal, charged with tax collection and economic administration on behalf of the weakened Mughals, who were busy destroying their empire. Even people who are familiar enough with world history to recognize the name Robert Clive rarely understand the extent to which this was the act of a single sociopath within a dangerously unregulated *corporation*, rather than the country it was nominally subservient to (England).

This history doesn't really stand out in sharp relief until you contrast it with the behavior of modern corporations. Today, we listen with shock to rumors about the backroom influence of corporations like Halliburton or BP, and politicians being in bed with the business leaders in the Too-Big-to-Fail companies they are supposed to regulate.

The EIC was the original too-big-to-fail corporation. The EIC was the beneficiary of the original Big Bailout. Before there was TARP, there was the Tea Act of 1773 and the Pitt India Act of 1783. The former was a failed attempt to rein in the EIC, which cost Britain the American Colonies. The latter cre-

ated the British Raj as Britain doubled down in the east to recover from its losses in the west. An invisible thread connects the histories of India and America at this point. Lord Cornwallis, the loser at the Siege of Yorktown in 1781 during the revolutionary war, became the second Governor General of India in 1786.

But these events were set in motion over 30 years earlier, in the 1750s. There was no need for backroom subterfuge. It was all out in the open because the corporation was such a new beast, nobody really understood the dangers it represented. The EIC maintained an army. Its *merchant* ships often carried vastly more firepower than the naval ships of lesser nations. Its officers were not only *not* prevented from making money on the side, private trade was actually a perk of employment (it was exactly this perk that allowed William Jardine to start a rival business that took over the China trade in the EIC's old age). And finally — the cherry on the sundae — there was nothing preventing its officers like Clive from simultaneously holding *political* appointments that legitimized conflicts of interest. If you thought it was bad enough that Dick Cheney used to work for Halliburton before he took office, imagine if he'd worked there *while* in office, with *legitimate* authority to use his government power to favor

his corporate employer *and* make as much money on the side as he wanted, *and* call in the Army and Navy to enforce his will. That picture gives you an idea of the position Robert Clive found himself in, in 1757.

He made out like a bandit. A full 150 years before American corporate barons earned the appellation “robber.”

In the aftermath of Plassey, in his dual position of Mughal *diwan* of Bengal and representative of the EIC with permission to make money for himself and the company, and the armed power to enforce his will, Clive did exactly what you’d expect an unprincipled and enterprising adventurer to do. He killed the golden goose. He squeezed the Bengal textile industry dry for profits, destroying its sustainability. A bubble in London and a famine in Bengal later, the industry collapsed under the pressure (Bengali economist Amartya Sen would make his bones and win the Nobel two centuries later, studying such famines). With industrialization and machine-made textiles taking over in a few decades, the economy had been destroyed. But by that time the EIC had already moved on to the next opportunities for predatory trade: opium and tea.

The East India bubble was a turning point. Thanks to a rare moment of the Crown being more powerful

than the company during the bust, the bailout and regulation that came in the aftermath of the bubble fundamentally altered the structure of the EIC and the power relations between it and the state. Over the next 70 years, political, military and economic power were gradually separated and modern checks and balances against corporate excess came into being.

The whole intricate story of the corporate takeover of Bengal is told in detail in Robins’ book. The Battle of Plassey is actually almost irrelevant; most of the action was in the intrigue that led up to it, and followed. Even if you have some familiarity with Indian and British history during that period, chances are you’ve never drilled down into the intricate details. It has all the elements of a great movie: there is deceit, forgery of contracts, licensing frauds, murder, double-crossing, arm-twisting and everything else you could hope for in a juicy business story.

As an enabling mechanism, Britain had to rule the seas, comprehensively shut out the Dutch, keep France, the Habsburgs, the Ottomans (and later Russia) occupied on land, *and* have enough firepower left over to protect the EIC’s operations when the EIC’s own guns did not suffice. It is not too much of a stretch to say that for at least a century and a half, England’s foreign policy was a dance in Europe

in service of the EIC's needs on the oceans. *That* story, with much of the action in Europe, but most of the important consequences in America and Asia, is told in Mahan's book. (Though boats were likely invented before the wheel, surprisingly, the huge influence of sea power upon history was *not* generally recognized until Mahan wrote his classic. The book is deep and dense. It's worth reading just for the story of how Rome defeated Carthage through invisible negative-space non-action on the seas by the Roman Navy. I won't dive into the details here, except to note that Mahan's book is the essential lens you need to understand the peculiar military conditions in the 17th and 18th centuries that made the birth of the corporation possible.)

To read both books is to experience a process of enlightenment. An illegible period of world history suddenly becomes legible. The broad sweep of world history between 1500-1800 makes no real sense (between approximately the decline of Islam and the rise of the British Empire) except through the story of the EIC and corporate mercantilism in general.

The short version is as follows.

Constantinople fell to the Ottomans in 1453 and the last Muslim ruler was thrown out of Spain in 1492, the year Columbus sailed the ocean blue. Vasco de Gama found a sea route to India in 1498. The

three events together caused a defensive consolidation of Islam under the later Ottomans, and an economic undermining of the Islamic world (a process that would directly lead to the radicalization of Islam under the influence of religious leaders like Abd-al Wahhab (1703-1792)).

The 16th century makes a vague sort of sense as the "Age of Exploration," but it really makes a lot more sense as the startup/first-mover/early-adopter phase of the corporate mercantilism. The period was dominated by the daring pioneer spirit of Spain and Portugal, which together served as the Silicon Valley of Mercantilism. But the maritime business operations of Spain and Portugal turned out to be the MySpace and Friendster of Mercantilism: pioneers who could not capitalize on their early lead.

Conventionally, it is understood that the British and the Dutch were the ones who truly took over. But in reality, it was two *corporations* that took over: the EIC and the VOC (the Dutch East India Company, *Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie*, founded one year after the EIC) the Facebook and LinkedIn of Mercantile economics respectively. Both were fundamentally more independent of the nation states that had given birth to them than any business entities in history. The EIC more so than the

VOC. Both eventually became complex multi-national beasts.

A lot of *other* stuff happened between 1600 – 1800. The names from world history are familiar ones: Elizabeth I, Louis XIV, Akbar, the Qing emperors (the dynasty is better known than individual emperors) and the American Founding Fathers. The events that come to mind are political ones: the founding of America, the English Civil War, the rise of the Ottomans and Mughals.

The important names in the history of the EIC are less well-known: Josiah Child, Robert Clive, Warren Hastings. The events, like Plassey, seem like sideshows on the margins of land-based empires.

The British Empire lives on in memories, museums and grand monuments in two countries. Company Raj is largely forgotten. The Leadenhall docks in London, the heart of the action, have disappeared today under new construction.

But arguably, the doings of the EIC and VOC on the water were more important than the pageantry on land. Today the invisible web of container shipping[13] serves as the bloodstream of the world. Its foundations were laid by the EIC.

For nearly two centuries they ruled unchallenged, until finally the nations woke up to their corporate enemies on the water. With the

reining in and gradual decline of the EIC between 1780 and 1857, the war between the next generation of corporations and nations moved to a new domain: the world of time.

The last phase of Mercantilism eventually came to an end by the 1850s, as events ranging from the first war of Independence in India (known in Britain as the Sepoy Mutiny), the first Opium War and Perry prying Japan open signaled the end of the Mercantilist corporation worldwide. The EIC wound up its operations in 1876. But the Mercantilist corporation died many decades before that as an idea. A new idea began to take its place in the early 19th century: the Schumpeterian corporation that controlled, not trade routes, but *time*. It added the second of the two essential Druckerian functions to the corporation: innovation.

## II. Schumpeterian Growth and the Industrial Economy (1800 – 2000)

### *The colonization of time and the apparently endless frontier*

To understand what changed in 1800, consider this extremely misleading table about GDP shares of different countries, between 1600-1870. There are many roughly similar versions floating around in globalization debates, and the numbers are usually used gleefully to shock people who have no sense of history. I call this the “most misleading table in the world.”

World GDP, 1600 - 1870 (in 1990 million \$)						
	1600	%	1700	%	1870	%
Britain	6007	1.8	10709	2.88	100179	9.1
Western Europe	65955	20	83395	22.5	370,223	33.61
China	96000	29	82800	22.3	189740	17.23
India	74250	23	90750	24.4	134882	12.25
World	329417		371369		1101369	

Source: Angus Maddison, *The World Economy*, Paris: OECD  
Quoted in Robins, *The Corporation that Changed the World*

worldeconomy

Chinese and Indian jingoists in particular, are prone to misreading this table as evidence that colonization “stole” wealth from Asia (the collapse of GDP share for China and India actually went much further, into the low single digits, in the 20th century). The claim of GDP theft is true if you use a zero-sum Mercantilist frame of reference (and it is true in a different sense of “steal” that this table does not show).

But the Mercantilist model was already sharply declining by 1800. Something else was happening, and Fareed Zakaria, as far as I know, is the only major commentator to read this sort of table correctly, in *The Post-American World*. He notes that what matters is not absolute totals, but per-capita productivity.

We get a much clearer picture of the real standing of countries if we consider *economic growth* and *GDP per capita*. Western Europe GDP per capita was higher than that of both China and India by 1500; by 1600 it was 50% higher than

China’s. From there, the gap kept growing. Between 1350 and 1950 — six hundred years — GDP per capita remained roughly constant in India and China (hovering around \$600 for China and \$550 for India). In the same period, Western European GDP per capita went from \$662 to \$4,594, a 594 percent increase.

Sure, corporations and nations may have been running on Mercantilist logic, but the undercurrent of Schumpeterian growth was taking off in Europe as early as 1500 in the less organized sectors like agriculture. It was only formally *recognized* and tamed in the early 1800s, but the technology genie had escaped.

The action shifted to two huge wildcards in world affairs of the 1800s: the newly-born nation of America and the awakening giant in the east, Russia. Per capita productivity is about efficient use of human *time*. But time, unlike space, is not a collective and objective dimension of human experience. It is a private and subjective one. Two people cannot own the same piece of land, but they *can* own the same piece of time. To own space, you control it by force of arms. To own time is to own attention. To own attention, it must first be freed up, one individual stream of consciousness at a time.

The Schumpeterian corporation was about colonizing individual

minds. Ideas powered by essentially limitless fossil-fuel energy allowed it to actually pull it off.

By the mid 1800s, as the EIC and its peers declined, the battle seemingly shifted back to land, especially in the run-up to and aftermath of, the American Civil War. I haven't made complete sense of the Russian half of the story, but that peaked later and ultimately proved less important than the American half, so it is probably reasonably safe to treat the story of Schumpeterian growth as an essentially *American* story.

If the EIC was the archetype of the Mercantilist era, the Pennsylvania Railroad company was probably the best archetype for the Schumpeterian corporation. Modern corporate management as well Soviet forms of statist governance can be traced back[14] to it. In many ways the railroads solved a vastly speeded up version of the problem solved by the EIC: complex coordination across a large area. Unlike the EIC though, the railroads were built around the telegraph, rather than postal mail, as the communication system. The difference was like the difference between the nervous systems of invertebrates and vertebrates.

If the ship sailing the Indian Ocean ferrying tea, textiles, opium and spices was the star of the mercantilist era, the steam engine and steamboat opening up America

were the stars of the Schumpeterian era. Almost everybody misunderstood what was happening.

Traveling up and down the Mississippi, the steamboat seemed to be opening up the American interior. Traveling across the breadth of America, the railroad seemed to be opening up the wealth of the West, and the great possibilities of the Pacific Ocean.

Those were side effects. The primary effect of steam was not that it helped colonize a new land, but that it started the colonization of *time*. First, *social* time was colonized. The anarchy of time zones across the vast expanse of America was first tamed by the railroads for the narrow purpose of maintaining train schedules, but ultimately, the tools that served to coordinate train schedules: the mechanical clock and time zones, served to colonize human minds. An exhibit I saw recently at the Union Pacific Railroad Museum in Omaha clearly illustrates this crucial fragment of history:

*In the 19th century, time was a local matter. Most towns had a clock in the town square that provided "standardized" time.*



The steam engine was a fundamentally different beast than the sailing ship. For all its sophistication, the technology of sail was mostly a very-refined craft, not an engineering discipline based on science. You can trace a relatively continuous line of development, with relatively few new scientific or mathematical ideas, from early Roman galleys, Arab dhows and Chinese junks, all the way to the amazing Tea Clippers of the mid 19th century (Mokyr sketches out the story well, as does Mahan, in more detail).

Steam power though was a *scientific* and *engineering* invention. Sailing ships were the crowning achievements of the age of craft guilds. Steam engines created, and were

created by engineers, marketers and business owners working together with (significantly disempowered) craftsmen in genuinely industrial modes of production. Scientific principles about gases, heat, thermodynamics and energy applied to practical ends, resulting in new artifacts. The disempowerment of craftsmen would continue through the Schumpeterian age, until Fredrick Taylor found ways to completely strip mine all craft out of the minds of craftsmen, and put it into machines and the minds of managers. It sounds awful when I put it that way, and it was, in human terms, but there is no denying that the process was mostly inevitable and that the result was vastly better products.

The Schumpeterian corporation did to business what the doctrine of Blitzkrieg would do to warfare in 1939: move humans at the speed of technology instead of moving technology at the speed of humans.

Steam power used the coal trust fund (and later, oil) to fundamentally speed up human events and decouple them from the constraints of limited forms of energy such as the wind or human muscles.

Blitzkrieg allowed armies to roar ahead at 30-40 miles per hour instead of marching at 5 miles per hour. Blitzeconomics allowed the global economy to roar ahead at 8% annual growth rates instead of the theoretical 0% average across the

world for Mercantilist zero-sum economics. "Progress" had begun. The equation was simple: energy and ideas turned into products and services could be used to buy time. Specifically, energy and ideas could be used to shrink autonomously-owned individual time and grow a space of corporate-owned time, to be divided between production and consumption. Two phrases were invented to name the phenomenon: *productivity* meant shrinking autonomously-owned time. *Increased standard of living through time-saving devices* became code for the fact that the "freed up" time through "labor saving" devices was actually the *de facto* property of corporations. It was a Faustian bargain.

Many people misunderstood the fundamental nature of Schumpeterian growth as being fueled by *ideas* rather than *time*. Ideas fueled by energy can free up time which can then partly be used to create more ideas to free up more time. It is a positive feedback cycle, but with a limit. The fundamental scarce resource is time. There is only one Earth worth of space to colonize. Only one fossil-fuel store of energy to dig out. Only 24 hours per person per day to turn into captive attention.

Among the people who got it wrong was my favorite visionary, Vannevar Bush, who talked of *science: the endless frontier*[15]. To be-

lieve that there is an arguably limitless supply of valuable ideas waiting to be discovered is one thing. To argue that they constitute a limitless reserve of value for Schumpeterian growth to deliver is to misunderstand how ideas work: they are only valuable if attention is efficiently directed to the right places to discover them and energy is used to turn them into businesses, and Arthur-Clarke magic.

It is fairly obvious that Schumpeterian growth has been fueled so far by reserves of fossil fuels. It is less obvious that it is also fueled by reserves of collectively-managed attention.

For two centuries, we burned coal and oil without a thought. Then suddenly, around 1980, Peak Oil seemed to loom menacingly closer.

For the same two centuries it seemed like time/attention reserves could be endlessly mined. New pockets of attention could always be discovered, colonized and turned into wealth.

Then the Internet happened, and we discovered the ability to mine time as fast as it could be discovered in hidden pockets of attention. And we discovered limits.

And suddenly a new peak started to loom: Peak Attention.

### III. Coasean Growth and the Perspective Economy

#### *Peak Attention and Alternative Attention Sources*

I am not sure who first came up with the term Peak Attention, but the analogy to Peak Oil is surprisingly precise. It has its critics, but I think the model is basically correct.

Peak Oil refers to a graph of oil production with a maximum called Hubbert's peak, that represents peak oil production. The theory behind it is that new oil reserves become harder to find over time, are smaller in size, and harder to mine. You have to look harder and work harder for every new gallon, new wells run dry faster than old ones, and the frequency of discovery goes down. You have to drill more.

There is certainly plenty of *energy* all around (the Sun and the wind, to name two sources), but oil represents a particularly high-value kind.

Attention behaves the same way. Take an average housewife, the target of much time mining early in the 20th century. It was clear where her attention was directed. Laundry, cooking, walking to the well for water, cleaning, were all obvious attention sinks. Washing machines, kitchen appliances, plumbing and vacuum cleaners helped free up a lot of that attention, which was then immediately directed (as corporate-captive attention) to magazines and television.

But as you find and capture most of the wild attention, new pockets of attention become harder to find. Worse, you now have to cannibal-

ize your own previous uses of captive attention. Time for TV must be stolen from magazines and newspapers. Time for specialized entertainment must be stolen from time devoted to generalized entertainment.

Sure, there is an equivalent to the Sun in the picture. Just ask anyone who has tried mindfulness meditation, and you'll understand why the limits to attention (and therefore the value of time) are far further out than we think.

The point isn't that we are running out of attention. We are running out of the equivalent of oil: high-energy-concentration pockets of easily mined fuel.

The result is a spectacular kind of bubble-and-bust.

Each new pocket of attention is harder to find: maybe your product needs to steal attention from that one TV obscure show watched by just 3% of the population between 11:30 and 12:30 AM. The next displacement will fragment the attention even more. When found, each new pocket is less valuable. There is a lot more money to be made in replacing hand-washing time with washing-machine plus magazine time, than there is to be found in replacing one hour of TV with a different hour of TV.

What's more, due to the increasingly frantic zero-sum competition over attention, each new "well" of

attention runs out sooner. We know this idea as shorter product lifespans.

So one effect of Peak Attention is that every human mind has been mined to capacity using attention-oil drilling technologies. To get to Clay Shirky's hypothetical notion of cognitive surplus, we need Alternative Attention sources.

To put it in terms of per-capita productivity gains, we hit a plateau.

We can now connect the dots to Zakaria's reading of global GDP trends, and explain why the action is shifting back to Asia, after being dominated by Europe for 600 years.

Europe may have increased per capita productivity 594% in 600 years, while China and India stayed where they were, but Europe has been slowing down and Asia has been catching up. When Asia hits Peak Attention (America is already past it, I believe), absolute size, rather than big productivity differentials, will again define the game, and the center of gravity of economic activity will shift to Asia.

If you think that's a long way off, you are probably thinking in terms of living standards rather than attention and energy. In those terms, sure, China and India have a long way to go before catching up with even Southeast Asia. But standard of living is the wrong variable. It is a derived variable, a function of available energy and attention sup-

ply. China and India will never catch up (though Western standards of living will decline), but Peak Attention will hit both countries nevertheless. Within the next 10 years or so.

What happens as the action shifts? Kaplan's *Monsoon* frames the future in possibly the most effective way. Once again, it is the oceans, rather than land, that will become the theater for the next act of the human drama. While American lifestyle designers are fleeing to Bali, much bigger things are afoot in the region.

And when that shift happens, the Schumpeterian corporation, the oil rig of human attention, will start to decline at an accelerating rate. Lifestyle businesses and other oddball contraptions — the solar panels and wind farms of attention economics — will start to take over.

It will be the dawn of the age of Coasean growth.

Adam Smith's fundamental ideas helped explain the mechanics of Mercantile economics and the colonization of space.

Joseph Schumpeter's ideas helped extend Smith's ideas to cover Industrial economics and the colonization of time.

Ronald Coase turned 100 in 2010. He is best known for his work on transaction costs, social costs and the nature of the firm. Where most

classical economists have nothing much to say about the corporate form, for Coase, it has been the main focus of his life.

Without realizing it, the hundreds of entrepreneurs, startup-studios and incubators, 4-hour-work-weekers and lifestyle designers around the world, experimenting with novel business structures and the attention mining technologies of social media, are collectively triggering the age of Coasean growth.

Coasean growth is not measured in terms of national GDP growth. That's a Smithian/Mercantilist measure of growth.

It is also not measured in terms of 8% returns on the global stock market. That is a Schumpeterian growth measure. For that model of growth to continue would be a case of civilizational cancer ("growth for the sake of growth is the ideology of the cancer cell" as Edward Abbey put it).

Coasean growth is fundamentally not measured in aggregate terms at all. It is measured in individual terms. An individual's income and productivity may both actually decline, with net growth in a Coasean sense.

How do we measure Coasean growth? I have no idea. I am open to suggestions. All I know is that the metric will need to be hyper-personalized and relative to indi-

viduals rather than countries, corporations or the global economy. There will be a meaningful notion of Venkat's rate of Coasean growth, but no equivalent for larger entities.

The fundamental scarce resource that Coasean growth discovers and colonizes is neither space, nor time. It is *perspective*.

The bad news: it too is a scarce resource that can be mined to a Peak Perspective situation.

The good news: you will likely need to colonize your own unclaimed perspective territory. No collectivist business machinery will really be able to mine it out of you.

Those are stories for another day. Stay tuned.

*Note #1: This post weighs in at over 7000 words and is a new record for me.*

*Note #2: I hope those of you who have read Tempo[16] got about 34.2% more value out of this post.*

*Note #3: Yeah, I am opening up a new blogging battlefield, after nearly two years of pussyfooting around geopolitics and globalization via things like container shipping and garbage. Frankly, I've been meaning to for a while, but simply wasn't ready.*



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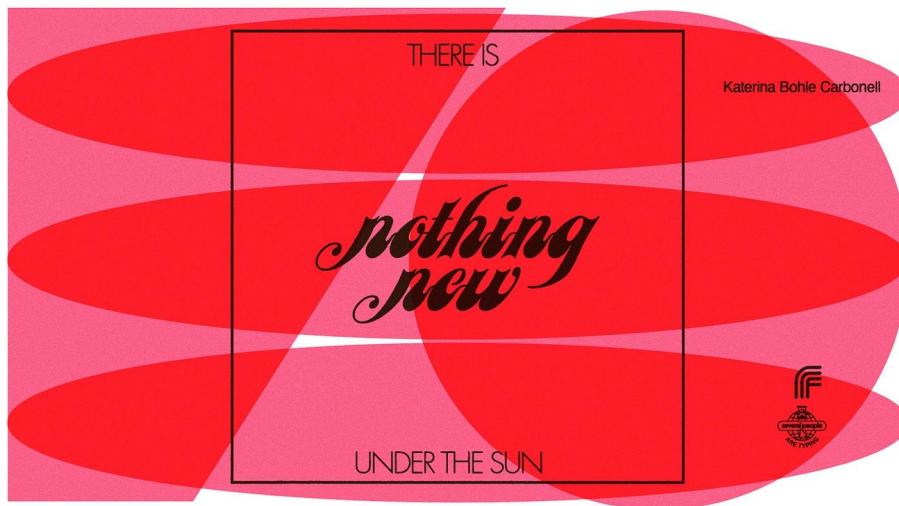


# There Is Nothing New Under The Sun



coauthored.co

~13 MIN READ



**Several People Are Typing**[1] is an experimental magazine about the wild future of decentralized media & creative collaboration. It was co-created by Foster[2], Seed Club[3], and Metalabel[4], along with dozens of writers and dreamers. You can collect a free NFT version, or purchase the physical magazine, from Metalabel[5].

This piece was written by Katerina Bohle Carbonell.

I give my kids the bombastic side eye. We're in Madrid airport, traveling from terminal 4 to 4S, and my oldest is filming herself, explaining why we are in a metro. Many hours ago, a sleepy kid asked me where her phone was as she wanted to record the trip – every single second of this 12-hour journey. I

shook my head in disbelief about this waste of precious memory space, remembering the days of tape drives and floppy disks.

My children's creative acts through physical and digital tools are a stark contrast to the hours they spend sitting at a desk in school. For much of the time we spend in traditional public education, projects are individual. Team-work isn't rewarded – indeed, it's often punished – and competition between students is encouraged to create a nice bell curve. Top grades are dangled in front of you as a possible but elusive goal, as there is always room for improvement. If there wasn't room for improvement, why spend time in school?

At the same time, outside school, kids are co-creating every day. Without instruction or encouragement from us wiser adults, games appear out of nothing, sand is transformed into a city with a whale in its center, and the living room is scattered with lego pieces (which I will surely step on, stifling a *for fuck's sake*). Co-creation and collaboration are just part of their daily life[6] – when not sitting inside an institution.

That's a small glimpse into my world, where I'm surrounded by young creators every day. They don't call themselves creators. They are just kids living their lives. Scrolling through my Twitter feed, I see participants in the creator economy, people building publicly and sharing their work. To be a creator feels so hyped, made to be something special and remarkable; although, at the end of the day, collaborating is something that comes naturally to humans. Yet, somewhere through the years, we started to eliminate natural co-creation, focusing on efficiency and linear growth. Just think about production lines. Factory workers are forced to specialize in one very narrowly defined task. Natural co-creation takes time; it's chaotic, progress is halted because of seemingly endless and useless discussions, and conflict endangers progress.

But linear growth is an illusion and efficiency a hidden trap.

I'm not sure when in the story of humankind we shifted away from a co-owned system of production and kickstarted the race to optimize everything. Technology, in its broadest sense, has always been part of our world and isn't to blame. Maybe the tipping point began when we designed machines that could do more and more of our work for us. In agriculture, the tractor replaced the horse-drawn cart, easing the slow and painful labor of planting and growing fruit and vegetables. Who could blame a farmer for wanting a less laborious day? Tractors prepared fields for the next crop with little effort. But a tractor is only truly efficient and superior over the horse and the human when it's turning the soil on large fields. Small farms were consolidated to create mega-farms with huge fields where the machine could work efficiently.

But with the disappearance of small fields, the hedges between fields disappeared, destroying an ecosystem of birds and insects. These hedges weren't just barriers between fields, but homes to animals that were useful to farmers. And now, farmers need chemicals and extra products to help protect their crops from diseases.

It's all an ecosystem of collaboration between species. And efficiency is killing it.

I'm not a farmer's daughter, but the offspring of a public servant bureaucrat, an ex-academic and problem-solver with an uncommon knack for human relationships that was hidden for years beneath his cold Germanness. Now retired, without the pressure of optimizing his time to get the greatest payoff, he has assembled a team of strangers to collaborate on scientific projects close to his heart. He is slowly working to create, build relationships, and help strangers find a common ground so they can create a publication that will impact the future of the world.

He is another creator and collaborator.

The scientist in me can't help but think that collaboration isn't magic, and there must be a recipe we can follow to perfect it: a balance between structure and chaos where collaboration can flourish. Some wise adults with three letters behind their names must have found *the* answer to bringing familiar and unfamiliar faces together to co-create something magical, mind-bending, human-saving. As a lawful holder of those three letters, I have several gigabytes of scientific work stored on my hard drive. A search for collaboration or knowledge sharing brings up endless articles. I could write more than you care to read on the science of collaboration. As scarcity is the mother of all inventions, I'm forcing myself to share one – no, let's make it three – top scientific facts about collaboration:

*High performing teams develop persistent coordination patterns that cut out the middle-person (Eric Quintaine and colleagues, 2013).*

I love that cutting out the middle person is a sign of good collaboration. Shorter communication chains are better, as they lower the risk of information being (in)voluntarily distorted by a gatekeeper. From a collaboration perspective, this little fact tells us that we should connect people. We should share our knowledge and curiosity with others, introduce them to friends and acquaintances, and cherish when they start to hang out more with our friends than with us. Because only when we are not the center of a co-creation process have we achieved our goal: collaboration. Hanging on to a person to col-

laborate with them, knowing that your friend would be a better partner, is FOMO.

By the way, building bridges is also a sign of good leadership[7]. But that's another science fact ;-)

*Knowledge transfer is more successful among people with a common identity* (Dokko and colleagues, 2003).

This scientific result points to two related facts about humanity:

1. A common purpose unites people
2. We are afraid of those who are not part of our group

Everyone struggles a bit with the 'us vs. them' conflict. If we have to make a choice, we prefer to share knowledge with and accept ideas from those who are more like *us*. We prefer to collaborate with those who are similar and compete against those who are different. This does not mean working behind walls and putting everything in a private repo. It *only* means that your ideas and knowledge are more likely to be accepted and cherished by those similar to you.

That's why bridge builders are important in ecosystems. They are neither 'us' nor 'them'. As they operate in the gray space between communities, they can pass knowledge and ideas from one community to another without getting pushback. But this great freedom to move between communities comes with a high cost: As they are not the center of a community, they can be quickly forgotten and not credited for seeding the new idea. However, over time, they are remembered as the great wanderer: The person who thanks to passing through communities brings novelty and new ideas.

*Takers will go further than givers in the short term, but will lose in the end (Adam Grant, 2013).*

Takers are the people who ask for help or favors but do nothing in return. We all need to give into the communities we are part of. We can't just always take.

And many virtual communities seem to focus on the taking part of human interactions. A quick glance at my Discord notifications is proof enough. The notification begs me to pay attention to it. It screams: *read me! engage with me!* with the hope that I will start collaborating with the messenger. But, more often than not, it's an announcement of an event or something that is not

relevant to me. It leaves me with a feeling of depletion and loneliness, instead of the energy a collaborative community brings.

## **DIGITAL ASSETS, PHYSICAL REALITY: FOR WHOM DOES IT MATTER?**

I realized how strange my (work)life is when a friend mentioned that she's not part of any online communities. I joined my first one, Workfrom[8], in 2015, and I'm still a part of it. The community has grown, the faces of members have changed, and the founders have pivoted their product, but they never forgot the OG, the original gangsters.

My online life began even earlier. I met my first online friend, a girl from Germany, in the '90s. We ended up spending a weekend together, but as it turned out, we should have stayed online friends – IRL was just different. Maybe if the metaverse had already existed at that time, we would have stayed friends.

Second Life, an early metaverse, started at the same time as MOOCs (massive open online courses). I was a junior researcher at a university and lucky to be part of a department that loved to experiment with different learning formats. I've witnessed a friend create a brand strategy course in Second Life and have never seen students so excited to complete course assignments. Second Life was like any virtual world you can visit right now, just clunkier. She created a safe but realistic learning environment for the students; no papers where students had to apply the course content, which all, without fail, end with the fictitious company making billions of euros. But instead the brand strategies were tested in the real and virtual world. Students crossed the boundaries daily between their Second Life company and their real self. Teams created real t-shirts to match their avatars to help with brand recognition. May I just remind you that this was in 2010, more than a decade ago?

We were before our time. It all died out, killed by those who had power in the universities, those who made decisions about budgets and what real learning is.

They didn't get it.

I struggle to understand the attraction of NFTs, digital assets, and the metaverse. I didn't get Roblox and saw it as a waste of time. I only saw the dangers: getting lost in a virtual world and spending money on digital assets with no real-life application.

It was only recently that I started to ‘get’ digital collectibles like NFTs, and there are several levels to it. On an intellectual level, I know what they are. I know what it means to own an NFT. But my heart and my head weren’t on the same page. When listening to an episode of Context[9], a podcast from Boys Club[10], where Marjorie Hernandez[11] talked about LUKSO Blockchain, a door in my heart opened. I remembered my beloved collection of stone elephants I had collected since I was a pre-teen. Some intricate, some small, some big. They are all beautiful. But no one can see them, because they’ve been stored in a box since we moved in 2018. I was sad that, for so long, what I once cherished and displayed in a glass cabinet had receded into the depths of my memory and been forgotten by me, their owner.

Enter the possibility of digital ownership, and more than that, the possibility of verified ownership of your assets. But the digital world doesn’t just allow for digital ownership of non-physical assets. It’s a place where you can dream, where everything is possible. And this is what attracts my kids to the virtual world: the myriad opportunities. You can build things and experiment. They are well aware that it isn’t the real world. In their words, “It’s less annoying.”

I’m getting it. For my 11-year-old daughter, Roblox isn’t a game. It’s a meeting place; it’s where she plays with her friend who I forced her to leave behind when we moved country. It’s not stupid or useless, but one of the many places where she meets others to create. Because she’s a creator, the natural, human type. And so are you.

While we adults hype the word ‘community’, looking for this elusive group of people with whom we can hang out and who get us, kids are actively participating in communities every day.

The co-creation children do in the real world continues in the digital world. It’s one and the same. *Of course I’ll buy clothes for my Roblox character*, my kid retorts when I ask if they will outfit their digital selves. Depending on the platform, their digital self and their real self are the same. The games that they play in the virtual world seep out of the metaverse and become real, while the struggles from the real world also play out in the digital world. But, at the same time, it’s different. The constraints are removed. Co-creation takes on a new, virtual, dimension.

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## INTO THE FUTURE

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While my kids discover virtual worlds and digital assets, my dad is struggling to collect one of my Mirror entries, wanting to own a part of his daughter’s

writing and support a creator. But the amazing thing about my father is that while the technology isn't doing what it should, his mind dug into the concept of blockchain and web3, and ideas started to flourish in his head. He was trying to apply it to his retirement project of writing interdisciplinary scientific books with a group of strangers from different backgrounds, with various disciplinary backgrounds and different incentives.

You see, my father, with maybe 40 years of wisdom, doesn't try to be efficient with the time he has left. He's not seeking the big book deal as one of the many thinkers behind Horizon 2020, or perfecting his foreign language skills. He's looking for strangers to work on topics he enjoys (anyone into geosophy[12]?), knowing well that working with strangers is hard. You need to build trust, develop strong relationships, and create a common language. In other words, you need to build a community around the shared mission.

The impatient part of me doesn't want to experiment with different forms of collaboration, but get it right straight away. I need to look at my children and my father, those without the pressure to perform and bring in money, to realize again that certain things can't be forced. Yes, you can create structures that nurture collaboration, but you cannot point your finger at people and order them to collaborate.

Communities have always existed and will always exist. Humans will always favor collaboration. We just, for once, have to put our egos aside and realize with our heart, and not just our head, that together we go further. I know it's a cliché. It's even in Ecclesiastes, part of the Old Testament: "Again, if two lie together, then they have heat: but how can one be warm alone? And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken." (Ecclesiastes 4:11-13)

Go out and talk with someone; create a spark.

Whether it's online or offline.

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## LINKS

[1] [coauthored.co/p/blog.foster.co/several-people-are-typing/](https://coauthored.co/p/blog.foster.co/several-people-are-typing/)



[2] [foster.co/](http://foster.co/)



[3] [seedclub.xyz/](http://seedclub.xyz/)



[4] [metalabel.xyz/](http://metalabel.xyz/)



[5] [foster.metalabel.app/several-people-are-typing](http://foster.metalabel.app/several-people-are-typing)



[6] [photos.google.com/photo/AF1QipPehoMowanwInaW0-0yXl5yWnKY-i6qdYju2SN5W](http://photos.google.com/photo/AF1QipPehoMowanwInaW0-0yXl5yWnKY-i6qdYju2SN5W)



[7] [netnigma.io/good-leaders-are-available-and-humble/](http://netnigma.io/good-leaders-are-available-and-humble/)



[8] [workfrom.com/](http://workfrom.com/)



[9] [open.spotify.com/episode/6ij0Ac2B2Vkxa2W4ii3c4d](http://open.spotify.com/episode/6ij0Ac2B2Vkxa2W4ii3c4d)



[10] [boysclub.vip/](http://boysclub.vip/)



[11] [twitter.com/m\\_h\\_d\\_v](http://twitter.com/m_h_d_v)



[12] [ukkoelhob.blogspot.com/](http://ukkoelhob.blogspot.com/)

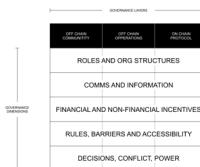


# The State of Uniswap Governance: A Paradox of Minimization



Pondr Staff

~25 MIN READ



**O**n paper, it might appear as if the surface area of Uniswap governance is minimal. In its operational reality though, protocol governance takes on a greatly expanded purview.

Uniswap's governance-minimized approach to maintenance and development has been the source of its strength and security. The protocol's constraints have for years been praised by observers who admire its elegance and alignment with the design ethos of Ethereum. But for many of the governance participants we interviewed over the last three months, minimization has been a source of frustration. It's left them feeling like the system is at times too slow, static, and difficult to navigate.

These growing pains are perhaps natural and inevitable. As the ecosystem of web3 public goods expands in complexity and new chains proliferate with ever-increasing speed, it's become clear that more formalized processes are needed. For governance to remain minimized at the protocol level, there need to be structures and processes to facilitate off-chain coordination within the community and with external partners. In the meantime something like a "procurement team" could help the protocol evaluate the field of service providers and partnership opportunities that have emerged as it matures.

In order to get a clearer picture of the most recent dynamics in Uniswap governance and under-

stand how to most effectively support participants, we spent the first two months of 2022 on a “listening tour” with Uniswap stakeholders, representing a diverse set of interests, concerns and aspirations. Building on our previous efforts in ethnographic research within cryptocommunities and following on the trajectory opened with our last post, we wanted to understand:

1. Who are the political actors in the Uniswap community?
2. What areas of governance do they care about?

But first, a note on our method.

DAO ethnography is an emergent field. As we chart this new territory we are also carving out a new method. *Pace* Vitalik’s “e-theory-um blockchain”[1] and its emphasis on wordcel theory over empiricism, a protocol is not just about technical and economic mechanisms and formal security guarantees. It is a living social organism that evolves with its human participants and the context in which it is situated. Thus, we opted for a qualitative approach in order to surface the subjective, meaning-making practices and dynamics that shape the protocol as a social system, with a specific focus on how these apply to the nascent field of human-led protocol governance.

Drawing on the interpretive approach pioneered by Clifford Geertz[2] (1973), which places em-

phasis on the cultural context within which behaviors and ideas are expressed, we organized in-depth interviews with 20 stakeholders. We then coded them on the basis of an analytical framework informed by the work of Pelt et al.[3] (2020). This framework enabled us to identify issues based on a combination of different categories.

3 governance layers, the “strata” through which governance operates:

- **Off-chain community:** in Uniswap’s case, the social dynamics and relations that occur within Uniswap’s social environments (forum, Discord, Twitter, etc.) and that inform the governance layers below.
- **Off-chain operations:** indicating governance matters that take place outside of formal on-chain voting, with a specific focus on protocol and ecosystem development and maintenance. UGP and The Stable fit into this category. As we’ll see, there are not that many more examples of formalized off-chain operations in Uniswap.
- **On-chain protocol:** the mechanisms and rules of interaction encoded in smart contracts through which the governance process occurs. In the case of Uniswap this

layer pertains to the affordances of Governor Bravo as an infrastructure for enacting decisions that may affect protocol parameters.

5 governance dimensions the key topics of governance in the context of open source software and blockchains:

- **Roles and Org Structures:** indicating organizational hierarchies and accountability mechanisms for participants;
- **Comms and Information:** pertaining to how and through which media communication takes place (both within and outside of the network);
- **Financial and Non-Financial Incentives:** that is, the monetary and non-monetary rewards for the different network participants;
- **Rules, Barriers and Accessibility:** concerning participation and membership criteria;
- **Decisions, Conflict, Power:** focusing on the decision making processes and mechanisms available to the network participants.

We ended up with a mélange of descriptors that, once analyzed, gave us a multifaceted and nuanced

understanding of some of the key issues within Uniswap governance.

A framework for conducting ethnographic studies on decentralized protocols.

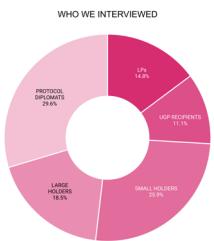
### Entangled Actors and Multi-layered Perspectives

When we started our research, we expected to find a relatively clear separation of roles among stakeholders on the basis of the size of their holdings. This follows from the narrative around Uniswap governance that pits a small class of "whales" steering the decision process against a large disempowered community of small holders.

Instead we discovered that stakeholders were extremely entangled, with several interviewees fitting in more than one category and shape-shifting into different roles depending on the specific context of their interactions with Uniswap.

Over a quarter of the stakeholders who responded to our call were actively involved in Uniswap governance—either as contributors participating in discussions in the forum and discord, or as proposal initiators, or both. We called these actors "protocol diplomats".

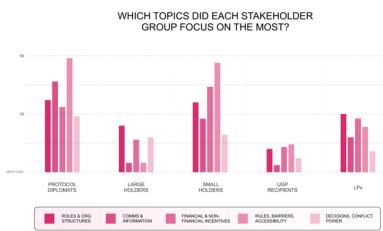
Conspicuously absent from our analysis were large or professional LPs. This is however not surprising considering the fact that LPs are not deeply involved with, and are to an extent excluded from, the governance process altogether.



A snapshot of the stakeholder perspectives represented in our interview process. Several interviewees identified themselves as more than one category.

With regards to stakeholders' perspectives on the different dimensions of governance, we found that protocol diplomats and small holders are most concerned toward issues relating to *Rules Barriers Accessibility*, whereas *Roles and Organizational Structures* were a primary focus for large holders and LPs.

Interestingly, *Financial and Non-financial Incentives* for participation take on a substantial importance for all the categories of stakeholders that we have interviewed. Perhaps protocol diplomats spoke less about this issue because their incentives are more clear from the start.



Different stakeholder groups focus on different issues.

### Multidimensional Concerns

We started our listening tour looking to study the community's role in protocol governance and the rise of interest representation/lobbying around web3 public goods. We observed that, while the volume of governance activity was low, L2 scaling solutions sparked some healthy activity in the forum and we speculated that these ecosystemic web3 issues could be a catalyst of activity in the community.

The recent surge of Additional Use Grant requests in the forum validated our initial hypothesis. However, we discovered that the main issue for stakeholders is still the governance process itself, especially when it comes to on-chain issues. Other highly discussed themes were compensation for contributors (including delegates), and power asymmetry, indicating the need to address these important blockers before turning to ecosystemic issues in web3. Arguably the lack of legal guidance with regards to regulatory risks is still one of the main sources of decisional paralysis, preventing the community from advancing proposals that might attract scrutiny by regulators. Below we discuss current blockers and emerging issues in more detail and provide recommendations on the basis of our analysis. Of course, the irony of op-

erating in a decentralized context is that often there is no one entity to address these recommendations to – a further issue that we'll address below.

## CURRENT BLOCKERS

Governance process itself as a blocker

While ecosystem-level issues are definitely a concern (especially for protocol diplomats) the governance process is the main blocker that prevents them from addressing these issues — along with compensation for contributors (especially delegates). This is particularly evident with regard to the licensure process. In order to support the community in handling the incoming additional use grant requests, Uniswap Labs has open sourced the deployment script and documentation outlining how to deploy V3 to other chains; they have also recently proposed a template[4] to facilitate the licensure process. In spite of these commendable efforts, realizing the vision of a “multichain Uniswap[5]” will entail addressing the slowness and power imbalances in the governance process first.

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**“Governance moves so slow. There’s just so much coordination we have to do.”**

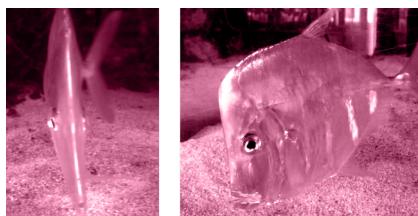
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**“We ultimately decided to stop applying for the license because we didn’t want to spend this effort just to have someone nuke the vote.”**

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Uniswap governance is *technically* minimal in terms of surface area. However in the limited area where governance is possible, it is extremely arduous. Given its size and lack of structure, Uniswap is arguably the protocol with one of the highest levels of informal governance or *politicking*. We can think of this as governance minimization by breadth, and maximization by depth.



*Selene vomer*, or the Lookdown, is a species of fish with an extremely narrow body. From the front angle it appears minimized. From the side it appears much larger.

Another classic example of this paradox in Uniswap governance is the issue of the fee switch, which has been subject to interminable discussion but no action. The “fee switch” is often referred to as a singular issue with a single on-off switch. In reality, each individual pool could in theory spin out its

own DAO and make its own governance decisions re: the associated fee structure, as some interviewees noted. The fee switch is not a monolith.

*"I can see Uniswap is taking a slow approach, but I do feel frustration with not having the simple framework laid out (Uniswap excelled at simplicity for trading UI/UX, why has this approach changed for governance UI/UX). For example, every pool can be voted upon for the V3 fee switch, i.e. USDC/ETH pool, and also every pool can be voted on for trading basis fee %'s like the stablecoin pools proposal. These two things in themselves are a lot of votes to put through a traditional forum proposal voting process."*

There are many different interest groups within "Governance," and it's difficult to get anything done when the community is modeled as a singular unit. Uniswap could, for example, try to implement different experiments on different L2s. It seems that the size and scale of the Uniswap governance portal is making it difficult to experiment and move quickly.

*"We explored per pool governance for setting the fee level. One issue is it's more complicated when it's concentrated liquidity. Which might skew with how much power / fees are allocated ... having one DAO per pool is a cool idea."*

Uniswap Labs has proposed simplifications to the governance process, which Other Internet endorsed[6] with some revisions. These changes may help simplify the "interface" to governance, but don't necessarily solve the underlying issue: namely, that even the smallest of proposals must go through a laborious political process which entails whipping 40 million votes to get anything passed. This provides a lot of security, but makes it difficult to move quickly or efficiently.

Regulatory pressure creates hesitancy

Now for the 800-pound gorilla in the room: SEC regulation. Some fear Uniswap could get fined or shut down by the SEC. Since the *Wall Street Journal* and others reported in September 2021 that Uniswap is facing heightened scrutiny from crypto's favorite regulatory body, governance participants have tread lightly. Opponents argue that the protocol is an unregistered securities exchange. Advocates say that Uniswap can't technically get shut down because no one entity is responsible for continued operation. As Coin Center put it[7], "Calling those tools "a DEX" and referring to "DEXs" as a category of things that exist in the world (rather than actions) does the entire technology a disservice: it wrongly portrays software tools as persons or businesses

with agency and legal obligations. Corporations and persons — legal or natural — definitely have agency and obligations; software tools do not. Corporations and persons can be held responsible for their actions, software tools cannot.” Still, no one knows what will happen in the coming months and years, and that’s part of the problem. Being the largest and most successful DEX means that policymakers can make an example out of you. The threat of regulatory scrutiny is felt particularly strongly by protocol diplomats, discouraging them from developing proposals. As one observed:

*“The risk aversion with Uniswap because of regulatory reasons is very high vs other projects who can do more, and who can diversify and accrue metagovernance power.”*

Our investigations also uncovered different work streams and projects that were blocked by the spectre of regulatory risk. Said one interviewee:

*“There have been a lot of proposals I wish I’d published. There have been one or 2 we’ve actually written, fixed a lot, iterated on and never published. The main reason being legal. It’s something everyone is well aware of - I don’t know how to solve it. They’ll be easier over time.”*

The contents of these proposals remain a mystery, but the implications are clear. The looming regulatory risks are slowing Uniswap down:

*“If I had to be frank, Uniswap is the bottom quartile of our experiences, because of the lack of nimbleness and some of it...is to do with regulation. We want to operate at the bleeding edge of what is interesting for DAOs. To do something like that for Uniswap the bar would be so much higher and I would have to think through, would it be worth it?”*

Perhaps a formal process could be created by which the DeFi Education Fund offers legal guidance and counsel to governance participants who successfully push a proposal to an on-chain vote. The DAO doesn’t have a legal structure, which is supposed to be a feature rather than a bug. But this means that proposers are left to manage legal risks and liabilities on their own — a responsibility that entails high fees and subject matter expertise. Uniswap governance could also set up special purpose organizations, spun out from the DAO, that could take on a legal role in matters such as enforcement of contractual terms. But the feasibility of this option would have to be further explored.

Power Asymmetry: voter apathy and delegation fatigue

The wildly unequal distribution of voting power leaves many smaller fish feeling fried. They feel there's no reason to participate in governance because their votes do not matter. And they're not wrong.

Large whales can swoop in and tip the scales at the last minute. Smaller holders have a very difficult time putting forward proposals.

*"I feel that I'm just a small fish and it's just not even an impact. It's really difficult to quantify and that's it. I find governance to be a bit exhausting because [...] [large VC firms] own everything and can sway the vote whatever way they want. Whatever they're going to do is what happens. With anything there's always a consolidation of control, in a publicly traded company it's the exact same. I don't vote on shares that I own."*

There are those who believe that Uniswap is a radically new hyper-structure[8] – a free, unstoppable, permissionless protocol – filled with untold possibility and potential for innovation. A new organisational design where none of the old rules apply. Then there are those who see echoes of the old order. A convergence towards the corporate governance modes of yesteryear.

*"Been trying to look at where the power is — power is with very few people; it's mostly like 10 parti-*

*cipants with relevant tokens and everybody else has zero tokens compared to them."*

Some community members, however, are not bothered by this power asymmetry. There is too much at risk, they say, and no reason to try to maximize governance participation if people don't have enough information or expertise to make good decisions.

*"I don't think that a large number of people voting is necessarily a metric people want. People are like: how do we get more people to vote? I don't know why that's a desirable thing. Governance is of a highly specific thing. If you care about optics, more voting participation is good – but in reality is it worth the effort to get more people to vote? They would make decisions without information. It's more important to get tokens into the hands of people who do already care and have more credibility in terms of knowledge and experience and are aligned long term that you can trust ... It's not practical for a lot of people to develop their own opinions and vote. So, best solution is either to have them delegate or let them vote along with their favorite delegate's opinion."*

More sophisticated delegation processes could help alleviate some of the power asymmetries in the Uniswap governance ecosystem.

But as of now, delegation seems to be an underutilized governance tool that hasn't fully seeped into the culture of Uniswap. The "Delegation Pitch" thread on the governance forums is relatively inactive, with only 10 posts made in the last year. a16z's token delegation program[9] is perhaps directionally correct, in that it opens up a formal channel through which engaged community members can acquire more voting power. More affordances and processes for delegation could help to activate contributors who show an interest in playing a more prominent role. However, the responsibilities that come with being a larger delegate cannot be understated. Participating in governance requires a lot of time, expertise, and social capital. Currently, there just isn't enough organizational structure or scaffolding to make this a straightforward process. The work is largely unpaid and underfunded. Several governance contributors pointed to the lack of incentives in delegation:

*"Why would I delegate if I could just LP them? I hold them because I like Uniswap. And I think there's a future value in the protocol, they'll do some great things. But it's hard to justify being like I'm just gonna delegate."*

*"If you design paying delegates in a way that can't be gamed it seems*

*worth it. It's a reason people like me don't participate more - there's no incentive. I have a lot of votes but what's the point? Part of what motivates me is importance and what's controversial. I don't know of anything that's felt super controversial or important in the past few months. If there was incentive to take 15 minutes to write out a post I'd be more likely to do it."*

One interviewee suggested the introduction of "meta-delegates", akin to political parties, to incentivize delegate participation and introduce a more inclusive approach to governance:

*"I propose the encouragement of meta-governance-abiding organizations to appoint themselves as delegates and begin active participation. To some extent, this may be perceived as DeFi Political Parties - I would agree upon this identification. By supporting meta-delegates (meta-governance), the overarching Uniswap governance model is further reinforced by two-factored governance process. Instead of having an individual delegate unilaterally vote on a proposal, emboldening the involvement of a Meta-Delegate would offer a more diligent and inclusive approach that would truly embody the community's sentiment."*

## EMERGING BLOCKERS

Slow operational decentralization

In the original announcement[10] of the UNI token, governance was given “immediate ownership” of the community treasury. In early 2021 the Uniswap Grants Program (UGP) was created to facilitate the funding of ecosystem development initiatives. Although the community can still vote on treasury-related matters, UGP essentially has a monopoly on treasury disbursement. The committee of only six people makes decisions about how millions of dollars get allocated. Of course, the most controversial proposals went through governance. But in an ideal world the UGP committee would be just one of a number of grants making bodies within the Uniswap ecosystem. Other Internet and The Stable[11], a grants subcommittee created with the purpose of rewarding community contributors, are two early examples of this poly-centralization process, as they are both working groups under the umbrella of Uniswap governance that have the ability to distribute grants. But it’s not difficult to imagine a number of other grant-making bodies, each with their own theme or focus area. They might even compete with one another, spurring more innovation with the ecosystem. As two large

holders and governance contributors observe:

*“Decentralization comes more by funding a lot of truly independent entities that do different or redundant things but that’s where the resilience comes from ... I would love it if there were 5 UGPs funding different things. Having not just Uniswap Labs working on development, funding independent teams. Grants is still a pretty good intermediary for it.”*

*“Outside of scaling, you can think about the grant program as an example of a satellite team. You could contrast this with MKR which has spun out the core operating team into all these units. IMO they are doing the best job at governing a complex protocol.”*

The centralization of the grants program was perhaps helpful “training wheels” to get things started. But now that it has several waves under its belt, our investigations show that it may be time to start thinking about breaking up its monopoly on treasury disbursement and forming several different grants programs, each with its own theme or mandate. Is it time for a great grants diaspora? Signs are pointing towards yes...

Governance scope creep & security risks

Although Uniswap governance was originally minimal by design, the scope has slowly expanded as questions of multi-chain deployment have come to the fore. As we observed in our prior report, governance has been asked to make increasingly consequential decisions that have the potential to threaten the security of the network. For example, in their January 2022 blog post on Multichain Uniswap, the Labs team wrote: “When evaluating a Uniswap v3 deployment, we encourage the community to pay close attention to the security and trust assumptions of the bridge being used to relay governance to that chain.” This expansion of the scope of governance poses new risks and goes against both the minimization ethos that Hayden Adams initially emphasized and the “un-governance” model that Vitalik put forward last year[12] (where governance has control over fewer and fewer features over time).

In addition to the “maximization by depth” discussed above (where seemingly straightforward initiatives uncover the need for structures and processes that require additional governance decisions), Uniswap Governance is also vulnerable to scope creep because its functions are so undefined. The horizon of governance’s purview is potentially forever expanding.

Since governance scope creep is likely inevitable given the circumstances, what’s needed is clear processes for dealing with expanded responsibility while avoiding security risks. Any governance system, whether it’s intended to be minimized or maximized, requires *auditing, active maintenance and ongoing, targeted intervention* to be kept that way. Governance minimization at the protocol level does not necessarily mean a minimized approach at the level of community and ecosystem. The scope of governance, both on-chain and off-chain, is a process that must be continually negotiated as the world around Uniswap changes.

Minimization, we should not forget, is a means — not the end goal, or something to pursue for its own sake. This end is not necessarily speed and efficiency, but security. This is precisely something that is threatened by, to quote[13] Hayden Adams, “new risks and trust assumptions that do not exist in immutable, automated systems”. Protocols are currently using quorum thresholds as a security measure. The thinking is that no controversial proposals will make it through the governance process if the thresholds are high enough. But this “security by aristocracy” is not an ideal approach to safeguarding the protocol. Governance powers should be designed such that they are actually actionable and access-

ible to delegates and contributors. If a parameter is so high risk that high quorums and whale veto power become a necessary counter measure, perhaps it should not be in the purview of governance in the first place. Illusory governance powers that, in reality, can be canceled by large whales, tend to detract from the credibility and legitimacy of the governance system as a whole.

#### Lack of accountability in partnerships

In addition to security risks, having Uniswap's interactions with other protocols facilitated via governance means that negotiated deals currently lack enforcement possibilities.

Uniswap governance processes that do pass via its technically minimized on-chain governance can still have time-consuming fallout, as Governor Bravo — and the alegal nature of DAOs — currently offers no formal accountability or enforcement mechanisms for these proposals. This means that in Uniswap governance, proposals are passed on-chain as if they are “binding”, and yet cannot be *enforced* on-chain, let alone enforced at all. Matters can become frustratingly manual, involving social pressure, negotiation and communication tactics, as was seen in Polygon's long-delayed liquidity mining incentives:

The v3 license exemption process, carried out via governance, also suffers from similar dysfunctions and blind spots. While according to the Business Source License[14] granting an exemption consists in adding a project's name to the text record stored at v3-core-license-grants.uniswap.eth, there is no on-chain or legal way to enforce the financial and non-financial commitments promised upon requesting the Additional Use Grant via governance proposal.

A key question for consideration: does the lack of automated accountability mechanisms mean that on-chain partnerships were poorly designed — or that off-chain solutions to accountability are inevitable? To what extent can these dealmaking mechanisms be fully automated?

DAO2DAO collaboration protocols[15] may offer ways to address some of these issues via on-chain escrow mechanisms. But some amount of off-chain coordination is necessary to the forming cross-protocol partnerships and should be facilitated with adequate processes and frameworks.

## CONCLUSION: PROTOCOL GARDENING

The Uniswap protocol has been praised by many interviewees for its elegance and governance min-

imization. But we've seen that human coordination issues cannot be eliminated. Because there were no processes in place at the start of Uniswap's journey toward progressive decentralization, the labor of governance has become unsustainable to many. It seems as though the airdrop transformed all the value that Uniswap generated for its users into new costs of coordinating the operational functions that were managed by Labs prior to the launch of UNI.

Our interviews surfaced the need for new redistributive mechanisms that could balance out the additional efforts demanded of the community, and several stakeholders offered ideas in this regard. One large holder suggested creating incentives for quality proposals "as a job that's different from the maintenance of proposals / protocol updates." A small holder and community contributor proposed instituting "delegate dividends" as some sort of LP tokens associated with one's delegated amount. Another forum contributor advanced the idea of "do[ing] a small giveaway to everyone who has been participating in governance." One protocol diplomat suggested conceiving of token design "more like gardening than architecture" and introduce ideas around token distribution accordingly:

*"There is the idea that community building is more like gardening than architecture, and I think we should think about token design similarly. Some ideas around token distribution, maybe there is a way to reward governance proposals or voters in some way based on the success of the proposals, with a 1million budget every six months and give a bunch of UNI tokens to the last voters and proposals, and that encourages more folks to propose things."*

For a garden to grow lush and bear fruits, there needs to be the right climate, soil composition and cultivation techniques. Similarly, in order to grow a community in an organic manner, there need to be processes and roles in place to facilitate decentralized contributions and decision making around these large issues. Here are some core infrastructural areas that, from our investigation, are vital for the flourishing of the ecosystem around Uniswap.

- 1. Formalize off-chain processes and mechanisms for those aspects of governance that cannot be fully automated.** Where a proposal implies no protocol change or token transfer, consensus can be achieved through off-chain means. Uniswap Labs team has proposed a gov-

ernance process simplification[16] but the proposal has not been implemented yet, in an ironic manifestation of governance's current impasse. While this is a great first step toward making the decision-making process more agile and less burdensome, there needs to be more effort toward creating credibly neutral processes to handle key areas such as partnerships and off-chain operations (i.e. setting up working groups or sub-DAOs) instead of approaching these in a case-by-case manner. In order to address the design of such processes, and also tackle some of these urgent issues in the same breath, we have created working groups[17] in areas such as Licensure & Partnerships, and Treasury Diversification.

2. **Create many centers of authority that can act independently from the core team.** Delegation is an affordance of governance that is currently underutilized but potentially very beneficial in bringing different representations to the political table. Being a delegate is not only about the size of one's bags but entails analytical and interpersonal

skills that, if not innate, need to be learned through practice. It is a job that requires time and dedication and should be compensated accordingly. Only a few delegates are active in the forum, and the ones that are more responsive happen to be in certain cases also protocol diplomats. This is not a coincidence. They have the skills, internal motivations and ecosystemic interest to make informed decisions toward the protocol's benefit. But for a truly flourishing web3 ecosystem, whose positive externalities may seep into the real world, there needs to be more representation of diverse, multi-layered interests, including protocols contributors, DAO workers, LPs, and perhaps also the local communities[18] that Uniswap connects with. Other Internet is organizing a Governance Summit, in partnership with Orca Protocol, where budding protocol politicians will be paired with IRL governance experts to learn from and cross-pollinate with one another and address these hard organizational questions. Another core piece of the polycentralization puzzle may be the establishment of a "procure-

ment team” that provides the connective tissue between Uniswap DAO requirements and the rest of the web3 community. As both partnership possibilities and the scope of governance expand, it could be useful to have a team that’s dedicated to securing resources for the protocol’s maintenance and development, especially in these initial stages of Uniswap’s operational decentralization. Other Internet is well positioned to help fill this role.

For more information on the interventions that we are currently pursuing and our approach to Uniswap governance, visit our Governance Platform[19].

Decentralized environments benefit from redundancy and parallel experimentation, and there are many more aspects of the Uniswap ecosystem that from our analysis require support.

For this reason we are also sharing our own intervention ideas for the Uniswap community to take up. In the afterglow of our listening tour we generated a series of ideas for proposals that we believe would be beneficial to Uniswap. Please reach out if you are interested in implementing any of them. We will provide support and sponsorship through the proposal process.

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## LINKS

[1] [youtu.be/KKmNs-l88Fg](https://youtu.be/KKmNs-l88Fg)



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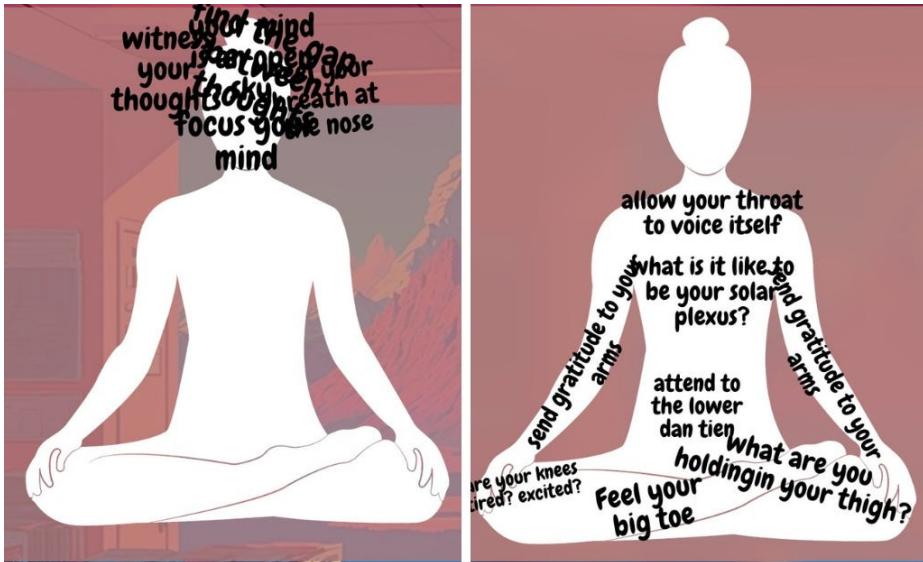


# Meme to Vibe: A Philosophical Report



Peter Limberger

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From River Kenna's "Mythopoetic Cognition is the Engine of Mind: Somatic Meditation & the Imaginal [1]" presentation at The Stoa.

**Vibe.** "A distinctive feeling or quality capable of being sensed. This place has a good/bad vibe. She gave me a weird vibe." - Merriam-Webster

**Vibing.** "Have a good time with good vibes." - Slang Dictionary

**Vibe check.** "A slang term used to invite people to express their present emotional state." - Know Your Meme

**Vibe shift.** "A vibe shift is the catchy but sort of too-cool term [Sean] Monahan uses for a relatively simple idea: In the culture, sometimes things change, and a once-dominant social wavelength starts to feel dated." - Allison P.

Davis, “A Vibe Shift Is Coming. Will Any of Us Survive It?”

I like vibe words. They feel good to say—*vibe*, *vibes*, *vibing*. I get a sense of what it means immediately, and as the Merriam-Webster definition indicates, it is about something *sensed*. What is being sensed is nebulous and hard to put into words, but many have been trying. Here are a few recent attempts...

- Kyle Chayka in *The New Yorker*[2]: “Vibes are a medium for feeling, the kind of abstract understanding that comes before words put a name to experience. That pre-linguistic quality makes them well suited to a social-media landscape that is increasingly prioritizing audio, video, and images over text.”
- Melanie Bühler in *Mousse Magazine*[3]: “Being attuned to a “vibe” means partaking in a shared reality, but it’s more than that. It involves picking up on the lingering notes of that shared reality, on the *je ne sais quoi* that is still in the air after most other things have dissipated.”
- Mitch Therieau in *The Drift*[4]: “[V]ibe is primarily about the spread and creep of diffuse feelings through shared space. Vibes are

“caught” or “given off” from one body to another; the gnomic phrase “vibe check” is, among other things, an invitation to share one’s feelings, to put the vibes one is emanating into words.”

The consensus is that the word is an overused catchall, engendering many lazy phrases: *the vibes are off*, *it’s not a vibe*, *such a vibe*, *don’t doubt your vibe*, *just vibe*, etc. All this vibe talk was getting too much for some. *Gawker*’s editor banned the word[5] for internal use in 2021, and *The New York Times*[6] first prediction for 2023: *No more ‘vibes’*.

The word did not go away in 2021. It will stay in 2023. Robin James[7], a feminist philosopher and critical theorist, is optimistic about a “vibe episteme” forming, arguing that the word’s popularity is a form of “lay phenomenology.” I agree. I also agree with Nick Burns, who defended the use of the word in *The New Statesman*[8], arguing we should make do with the words emerging from our “sentimentally stunted age,” regardless of how woo-woo they sound.

The word *vibe* is best understood as a “mongrel concept,” a term Ned Block, a philosopher in Consciousness Studies, uses to refer to a word that jumbles up many concepts while pointing to numerous phenomena. I do not think this is a bad thing. If denotative accuracy is the

aim, then yes, the word leaves something to be desired. On the other hand, if connotative freedom is valued, the collective has picked a good word.

This mongrel concept is a portal from propositional to non-propositional knowledge. Propositional knowledge is knowledge encoded into truth claims, has a universal quality, and is abstracted beyond context. Non-propositional knowledge falls outside the propositional, which includes what cognitive scientist John Vervaeke calls perspectival knowledge: a knowledge that honors the *here* and *now*, engaging in “salience landscaping,” our sensing what is relevant for us in whatever context we find ourselves in.

To not bury the lede further, here is what I *sense* is happening with the “overuse” of vibe-related words: a “**vibe consciousness**” is collectively forming. This is not a new thing but an old thing, being rediscovered, understood, and expressed in new ways. This philosophical report will give examples of how this vibe consciousness is emerging and how we can encourage its emergence with wisdom.

#### Vibe Consciousness > Meme Consciousness

The recent focus on vibes postdates another mongrel concept in cultural use: *memes*. The colloquial meaning narrowly refers to viral images and videos shared on the

internet. The Dawkinsian meaning broadly refers to “units of cultural transmission.” What is the difference between memes and vibes? Memes are cultural information the mind perceives, coupled with an urge to replicate them. Vibes are cultural “exformation” the body receives, coupled with a choice to experience them.

Science writer Tor Nørretranders coined exformation, an abbreviation of *explicitly discarded information*, describing it in the following way: “Exformation is everything we do not actually say but have in our heads [and bodies] when or before we say anything at all. Information is the measurable, demonstrable utterance we actually come out with.” I am repurposing the term to include everything that gets exchanged that cannot be encoded through measurable and demonstrable utterances like propositional knowledge.

An undue focus on memes brings about a “meme consciousness,” which is the predominant mode of consciousness for an “extremely online person,” a person impulsively engaging in internet culture, or what is called “pathological internet use.” This type of internet usage comes with an increased reduction of meaningful relationships IRL (“in real life”), with an increased investment in social media use AFRL (“away from real life”).

The epiphenomena of meme consciousness - its “three sins” - include...

- *Zombie Scrolling*. The security software company McAfee coined Zombie Scrolling Syndrome in 2016[9] to describe the phenomena of “mindless scrolling out of habit with no real destination or benefit.”
- *Doomscrolling*. The phenomena of excessively looking at negative news online about the putatively despairing state of the world.
- *Pornification*. This is a phrase from Korean-born German philosopher Byung-Chul Han, describing the phenomena of everything being commodified and shamelessly put on display. I would expand this to include presentations of dishonest performances, such as “outrage porn,” “civility porn,” or what I have been guilty of more than once: “meta porn.”

During the “Covid moment[10]” - the collective focus on Covid-19, government response measures, and the culture war between “Covid-idiots and Covidians[11]” - lockdowns were in full swing, and online usage increased, creating a world where everyone became ex-

tremely online, indulging in the three sins of meme consciousness. I date the Covid moment from March 11, 2020 (WHO giving Covid-19 pandemic status) to February 24, 2022 (Russia invading Ukraine). After the moment ended, Western media turned its focus and moved the collective focus away from Covid-19, with restrictions worldwide dropping soon after.

A curious thing happened eight days before the Covid moment ended: an announcement that a “vibe shift” was coming. Allison P. Davis in *The Cut*[12] wrote about trend forecaster Sean Monahan’s musings on a culturewide shift occurring, moving away from woke politics toward a more fragmented culture. Davis’ piece focused on the anxiety of missing out on the vibe shift and Monahan’s specific predictions: “He thinks the new vibe shift could be the return of early-aughts indie sleaze. ‘American Apparel, flash photography at parties, and messy hair and messy makeup,’ he riffs, plus a return to a more fragmented culture.”

While I love the naughty aughties and wrote about our cultural fragmentation in 2018[13], I do not think the vibe shift is only a cycling of memes and continued fragmentation of our “postmodern condition.” Those associated with the Dimes Square scene, such as Angelicism01, a claimant to the vibe shift coinage, write about a “pure

vibe[14]," and the Remilia Collective about a "network spiritualism[15]," a digital spirituality that gestures toward post-politics, performative identity, transcendental posting, collective prana (vital energy), and tapping into shared consciousness—a vibe consciousness.

The vibe shift is the shift from meme consciousness to vibe consciousness. I sense this is why there is anxiety associated with Davis' announcement. One cannot track this shift by focusing on the movement of memes. A different way of knowing, one that is non-propositional, is needed. Not everyone will make the shift simultaneously, and the natural anxiety is some fear they will not make it at all.

I am optimistic many will make it, and this report is an act of performative[16] philosophy to help us with the shift. I argue that the vibe shift from meme to vibe consciousness is good because it leads to three good things...

*Vibe consciousness leads to psychosecurity.*

*Vibe consciousness leads to senseliness.*

*Vibe consciousness leads to vibe tribes.*

*Psychosecurity > Gaslighting  
No Thoughts, Just Vibes.*

That is the motto for Fiona Fairbairn's viral Bimbo Mani-

festo[17]. Some of the rules from her manifesto:

*"I don't know" is the answer to everything.*

*Stop watching the news all the time.*

*Cut the hyper awareness of yourself and others.*

What struck me about these rules is how they parallel my practice of Stoicism. Like Stoicism, Fiona's bimboism is a way to protect against memetic gaslighting online that happens when you create a "second self[18]," an online identity that people relate with and who you co-create with. Given my hobby of studying living philosophies that emerge on the internet or the "noosphere[19]" (our collective mind), I was curious about the bimbo scene Fiona was a part of, hence inviting her to present at The Stoa.

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**What struck me about these rules is how they parallel my practice of Stoicism.**

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From Fiona's "Bimboism: No Thoughts, Just Vibes[20]" presentation at The Stoa.

Her session helped me better understand the role of vibe consciousness in protecting one's mind while online. I asked her about the origins of her manifesto, and she spoke about a past narcissistic abusive relationship and how she responded with the tactic of "grey rocking," the basis of her bimbo-

ism: a non-responsive form of behaving when one is being socially manipulated.

In narcissistic abusive relationships, the abuser “gaslights” the abusee, making them doubt their ability to assess reality, forcing reliance on their presumably superior ability. This can happen quite intentionally with those with Cluster B personality disorders, but the phenomena can also occur via “unconscious gaslighting[21].” In conscious and unconscious cases, the gaslighter invokes doubt in their target’s intuition, memory, and reasoning capacities. They often speak as if they are the representatives of truth itself, aka propositional knowledge. If the abuser has greater ability in verbal intelligence and emotional self-regulation (and lacks “emotional integration”), the abusee is disadvantaged in conflictive conversations, regardless if they are in the right.

There is a good reason why gaslighting was Merriam-Webster’s word of the year for 2022[22]—it is happening on the internet en masse via toxic marketing, fifth-generation warfare[23], and the so-called culture war. The “sensemaking crisis[24],” our inability to make sense of what is real, is gaslighting writ large. Multiple parties attempt to make us doubt our reality and orient us toward something not in our best interest.

Attention merchants[25], culture war profiteers[26], secular gurus[27], cyber magicians[28], Black PR firms[29], and any sociopath with an internet connection are in the gaslighting game. The internet is a PsyOp[30] playground. Vibe consciousness is an evolutionary adaption to the cartoonish gaslighting levels we face. Rules like “No Thoughts, Just Vibes” stop any tacit agreement to cohere on what is real via propositional knowledge, allowing one to sink into non-propositional knowledge, betting on trusting the vibes instead.

This is not an unproblematic strategy, as it could lead to naive spiritualism or reverse gaslighting. Yet, practicing such tactics will provide one with what cybersecurity professional Patrick Ryan[31] calls “psychosecurity[32]” (PsySec)—protecting one’s mind against mental malware. While Stoicism is an old PsySec that bets on trusting the primordial vibe of “the daemon,” the likes of Fiona’s bimboism show new flavors of vibe-trusting PsySec are emerging.

All forms of PsySec encourage a bounded distrust[33] of anyone privileging the mind to make sense of the world. A bounded distrust of the mind is the basis for a bountiful trust of the body.

**Sensefulness > Making Sense**

In her *The Hollow[34]* series at The Stoa, organizational futurist and

philosopher Bonnitta Roy[35] introduced the phrase “sensefulness.” She argues that we are moving away from the myth of being in an information commons, with shared explanations with our minds via propositional knowledge, toward a shared understanding with our bodies via relational intimacy, or what she calls “senseful co-presencing.” Those following The Stoa for the last three years should not be surprised by this prediction: *a sensefulness movement will supersede the mindfulness movement.*

If my read of the nascent “wisdom commons” - a place that attempts to make wisdom more common - is accurate, sensefulness-based practices focusing on the sensate body over the construal mind are gaining traction and will soon surpass mindfulness-based practices in popularity. An argument for sensefulness-based practices is that they provide all the benefits of mindfulness-based interventions[36] while avoiding the top-heaviness of being *mind-full*, embodying the truth that we are animals with “bodyminds[37],” not mind’s with a body.

The move from mindfulness to sensefulness will occur because a *full-bodied* experience is needed to be a whole human animal. Like most things, divides such as sensefulness and mindfulness will blur with more practical interaction. The overarching movement with

such interaction, to quote Bonnitta, is that we will be “putting the mind back in the body and the body back in nature.”

This focus on sensefulness will also help our “sensemaking,” in ways that initially may not make sense. Sensemaking or sense-making[38] is a term that originated in organization studies, effectuating different schools, such as “Naturalised Sense-making” from Cynefin Framework[39] creator Dave Snowden, who defined sense-making as: “How we make sense of the world so we can act in it.” It makes sense to want to make sense of the world; to do that, we need the capacity to make sense of what is relevant for us in the *here and now*, and for that, sometimes we need to allow things not to make sense.

Corecore, a phenomenon happening on TikTok right now, is not trying to make sense but is something to be sensed. The genre consists of a compilation of random clips invoking various feelings. The naming of the genre is a response to the many microgenres employing the suffix “core”: cottagecore, cabincore, bloomcore, dreamcore, normcore, which appear on hashtags across the internet. These microgenres have a particular aesthetic, displayed through images and videos, focusing on the innermost essence of “something.” In contrast, corecore lacks a “core”

and carries no intrinsic meaning. No thoughts, just vibes.

Kieran Press-Reynolds muses in his investigation[40] that corecore is an anti-trend:

“The rise of corecore makes me think about trend exhaustion, how people are losing faith in fad forecasting and glossy media trend pieces. Whether intentionally or by accident, corecore is an anti-trend: it doesn’t ask anything of you; it’s simply a montage of random vibes. Yet there is still a kind of haphazard communal aspect to it, with dozens of viewers leaving comments about how they love corecore, how they relate to these videos like nothing else.”

As Kieran reports in a follow-up piece[41], corecore has taken a darker turn, with nihilistic overtones and discussions surrounding the genre’s political potential. A tendency I see with many cultural commenters’ is their viewing of cultural phenomena through a political lens. This is misguided. We should not be scrutinizing culture by seeing ourselves as what Aristotle refers to as “political animals,” but midwifing culture by taking seriously German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk’s intimation that we are “practicing animals.” We are both, of course, but seeing ourselves practicing *toward* something rather than gaining power for something will offer freeing insights.

Looking through Sloterdijk’s practicing animal lens, what are corecore artists practicing? They are not practicing mindfulness or sensemaking, but a primitive form of collective sensefulness. Unlike other “core” microgenres that cultivate specific, describable vibes, corecore’s “random vibes” put our focus on nothing in particular beyond vibe consciousness itself. Without the guardrails of a descriptive suffix, corecore artists attune their bodies to whatever vibes are at the core, increasing their senseful capacities.

Those familiar with emotional integration work know that fully experiencing emotions is required to release their power over us, moving toward greater individuation[42], which Jungian therapists consider a whole state. When doing “the work[43],” a gravitational pull toward “unmet” emotional states (or “subpersonalities[44]”) occurs, and these states are often unpleasant, with no home to express in polite society. I chalk up corecore’s dark turn to a senseful orientation toward wholeness. If the work continues, the “good vibes” will come, and any expressed vibes need not be shamed, with Carl Jung’s proclamation needing to be heeded: “I would rather be whole than good.”

Corecore may unfold toward greater wholeness or fade in shamed vibes. A genre name or style is not what is essential. What is being

practiced is. It would be a mistake to see corecore simply as a practice of DIY art therapy because something more senseful is happening. To make another prediction: the practitioners of corecore are creating the “cave art” of Marshall McLuhan’s foretelling of a post-literate society[45].

This will not be a non-literate society but a society with an additional “literacy” of vibes—a literacy needed for a new type of tribe to emerge.

#### Vibe Tribes > Memetic Tribes

In 2018, I co-authored a philosophical report with Conor Barnes titled “The Memetic Tribes Of Culture War 2.0[46],” where we explored “memetic tribes”: living philosophies online. We tracked 33 of them, and for many, the highlight of the paper was an embedded spreadsheet that looked at the “philosophical anatomy” of each tribe: *telos*[47], *sacred values*, *master status*[48], *existential threats*, *combatants*, *campfire*, *chieftains*, *mental models*[49], and *forebears*.

[Click here\[50\]](#) to view the full chart.

I have had countless requests to update this spreadsheet. There are too many tribes forming, meshing, and bifurcating for me to want to do this, and tracking memes is now the wrong move. While my noosphere cartography days are over, I stay sensefully attuned to new and

emerging living philosophies. A new one worth attuning to is TPOT, short for “This Part of Twitter.” They are also called the “ingroup” (with no clear “out-group”), a homage to Scott Alexander’s article “I Can Tolerate Anything Except the Outgroup[51].”

Unlike Scott, whose views normally pattern-match him as a “rationalist,” TPOT is often pattern-matched as “postrationalists,” or postrats. The philosophical influences of postrats come from blogs such as Venkatesh Rao’s  *Ribbonfarm*[52] and Dave Chapman’s *Meaningness*[53]. A good explanation of those drawn to postrationality comes from TPOT-habitué QC[54]: “the esoteric meaning of “postrationalist” is a person recovering from the totalizing memes in the rationalist ecosystem.”

The rationalist project prioritizes the refinement of one’s “epistemic rationality” (improving accurate beliefs) and “instrumental rationality” (achieving your values) through being “less wrong[55]” (e.g., being *mind-full* of one’s cognitive biases) or how Eliezer Yudkowsky describes at the start of his “Sequences[56]”: “rationality is about forming true beliefs and making winning decisions.”

The rationalist tribes’ heavy focus on propositional knowledge is the cause of fatigue for many postrats initially drawn to them. My postrat friends are some of the most inter-

esting people I know. They have incorporated the best of “applied rationality” and are experimenting with non-propositional ways of knowing through intersubjective practices like Circling[57], psychotherapeutic modalities like Internal Family Systems[58], and Buddhistic meditations that focus on the Jhānas[59].

It is no surprise to me, given their sensitivity to non-propositional knowledge, that TPOT is one of the healthier tribes on Twitter. Like Dimes Square, bimboism, and corecore, TPOT is a “**vibe tribe**” rather than a memetic one. It has a distinct vibe, with a definite sense of “ingroup.” However, with no clear memetic borders of what represents them, they do not have a clear “outgroup,” contributing to their eluding of the culture war.

Brooke Bowman helped organize Vibecamp[60], an in-person gathering of TPOT. As Brooke retells in her session[61] at The Stoa, the event received lots of buzz through memes on Twitter, with many wondering if the event was even real. Adding to the intrigue, there were very few phones out and very few pictures taken during the event, presumably to respect the attendees' anonymity, many of whom tweet pseudonymously. As previously mentioned, vibes are about experiencing, not replicating, and experiencing requires

greater relational intimacy, hence privacy, than memes allow.

A photo from Vibecamp. From Brooke's "Vibecamp: Looking Forward[62]" presentation at The Stoa.

While memes have vibes, vibes have memes and antimemes—a term from qntm's book *There Is No Antimemetics[63]* *Division[64]*, referring to memes with self-censoring properties, discouraging their spread. Those sensitive to vibe consciousness, like the attendees of Vibecamp, can weave between memes and antimemes, sensefully discerning when to share something and when not to. Vibe tribes will shapeshift with a protean quality, not staying too long with any one memetic attractor, using antimemes to connect directly into vibe consciousness, leading to cohere IRL with senseful discernment.

In Monahan's piece on the vibe shift in *The Guardian[65]*, he articulated the sentiment those drawn to vibe tribes feel after the Covid moment ended: *The internet is mundane. Real life is where the action is.* Like with TPOT's Vibecamp, the natural movement with those connecting through vibe consciousness is to relate IRL intentionally. The internet allows many to “find the others[66],” finally allowing them to cohere with those they vibe with. To make one more prediction: vibe tribes will be a vanishing mediator[67] between

memes and bodies, sensefully leading to bountifully trusting *embodied tribes*.

Those reading this essay who feel pulled bidirectionally - vibing IRL and memeing AFRL - can consider the following question...

*Will we continue to be gaslit by bots and sociopaths while senselessly trying to make sense, or will we free the mind, feel the body, and find the others?*

If we choose the latter, vibing wisely will be needed.

Wise Vibes > Good Vibes

*Good Vibes Only.*

This is the motto for “toxic positivity,” a dysfunctional emotional strategy that ignores, and worse, shame, depressive states, and aggression-inducing emotions like anger. Toxically positive people maintain “good vibes” without emotional integration and do not receive the wisdom of socially unpleasant feelings.

A “bad vibes fallacy” then forms. Those with “bad vibes” must be wrong because they are not positively presenting their claims. This is a fallacy because the vantage point with dark and depressive states can afford one to see aspects of reality that would otherwise be missed by those doped up on good vibes.

Inverse arguments against toxic negativity and a “good vibes fal-

lacy” are also true. People can glamourize their dark and depressive states, projecting them on others with sophisticated political and philosophical argumentation, unfairly insinuating that anyone “too happy” should be dismissed because they appear cult-like or lamely wholesome.

Those with good vibes shame those with bad ones, and vice versa. To end the shaming, a temptation to define the terms might arise, which will prove controversial, putting one in the propositional realm without definitional consensus. It could also inspire the postmodern move to do away with the notions of good and bad altogether. I suggest we do neither of these moves and honor our *sense* of good and bad vibes instead, without defining them, as we will not readily cohere propositionally. And our sense of good and bad will not go away by arguing the categories of good and bad are not real. There is a third attractor, which relates artfully to all the vibes.

If a “vibe episteme” is forming, as Robin James suggested, how will a “**vibe teche**” form? *Episteme* is the Greek word for knowledge, and *teche* means art. To have artistry with vibes, one must work with all of them. Findings in “emodiversity[68]” research show that those who experience diverse emotions predict mental and physical health, which maps over to the

experiences of those doing emotional integration work and other sensefulness-based practices. Similarly, we can surmise that a “vibe diversity” is equally desirable. Experiencing diverse vibes presumably allows one to weave between them, affording greater discernment to know what vibes are wise to navigate life with. This is the art of a vibe teche.

All else being equal, good vibes may be more desired than bad ones, but wise vibes are the best. In psychologist Igor Grossman’s wisdom research[69], he defines wisdom as the “meta-value that adjudicates between all other values,” and “navigating life well” is the definition of wisdom I am presently vibing with. Wise vibes are the meta-vibes that have access to all the vibes, adjudicating between and navigating with the ones that present themselves to our bodies.

For successful navigation, aspirational directionality is needed to orient one’s body sensefully. For this, spectrums of intrasubjective states that psychotherapeutic and meditative practitioners use could prove helpful. Here is a simple one that metamodern philosopher Daniel Görtz introduced at his Philosopher-in-Residence[70] series at The Stoa...

From Daniel’s “Metamodern Deep-Dives: Spirituality[71]” presentation at The Stoa.

Those uncomfortable with the Buddhistic or Christian framing at the top or bottom of this spectrum may consider spiritual north and south stars from different traditions or be spiritual entrepreneurs and create their own. The Stoic bias is toward “eudaimonia[72],” which translates to “good daemon” or “being in a good relationship with the primordial vibe of the daemon.” A modern translation of eudaimonia could also be used, such as happiness.

Since wisdom does not stay in the propositional, I will shift the vibe of this report and share a personal perspective. As a weird Stoic[73], I vibe with people by asking philosophical questions at random times. A question I asked my barber Sebastian recently afforded me insight into happiness. The question was this:

*Who is the wisest person you know?*

He paused upon hearing my question, then said his mother. He told me she had a difficult upbringing in Chile and was not formally educated, but she was the happiest person he knew. In her twenties, she chose to be happy, which improved her life, leading her to a wonderful husband and a beautiful family. His answer took me aback because I realized I had never made this choice myself.

Like many people, sometime during my late teens, I associated happiness with something uncool and

untrustworthy, which I now know came from a deeper sense of being unworthy. When Sebastian told me about his mother, I thought about the happiest people I knew, and one of them was Sebastian. At that moment, I felt the wisdom of his mother vibe through him to me.

It's simple, really: developing a vibe teche starts with a choice.

Conclusion: Go on a Vibe Diet

To summarize the central premises of this report...

- The use of vibe words is a lay phenomenology of an emerging vibe consciousness.
- The vibe shift is a cultural shift from meme consciousness to vibe consciousness.
- Vibe consciousness leads to three goods: PsySec, sensefulness, and vibe tribes.
- PsySec helps you free the mind.
- Sensefulness helps you feel the body.
- Vibe tribes help you find the others.
- Wise vibes are superior to good and bad ones.

I will commit to one more premise: ***a vibe diet is a way to form a vibe teche that will afford sophistication with vibe consciousness.***

There are no epistemic authorities on vibe consciousness. There are no technical authorities either. Those of us shifting the vibe are in the wild west of the noosphere, co-discovering the frontiers together. Experimentation is needed.

I have been focusing on a vibe teche over a vibe episteme, thanks to my Stoic bias for practice over theory, and experimenting with the Stoic heuristic *via negativa* - studying what not to do - has led me to go on a “**vibe diet**.” A diet refers to the entirety of food one chooses to consume and is colloquially understood as restricting one’s *dietary choices*. In contrast, a vibe diet can be understood as the entirety of the vibes one chooses to experience and a restriction of one’s *vibrational choices*.

By restricting my engagement of the three sins of meme consciousness: zombie scrolling, doom-scrolling, and pornification, I have been making more room for the three goods of vibe consciousness: PsySec, sensefulness, and being with the vibe tribe forming at The Stoa. I have noticed increased happiness during my vibe dieting—the practice of saying no has led to a greater agency to say yes.

\*\*\*

To conclude this report, I will address those with a philosophical orientation.

Despite my criticism of the overdependence of propositional knowledge, and my advocacy of non-propositional knowledge, I think being coherent with one's propositions is essential. Those like me who are sticklers for having their premises coherent and correspondence amongst premises and actions will not be happy with the "be happy" gesture in the previous section.

Why be happy? The answer will seem like common sense to many and will not need a response, or they will give a muddled answer along the lines of "because it feels better than being unhappy." If we stay within the propositional realm, we will eventually bump into David Hume's "is-ought problem," which states that you cannot make claims about what you *ought* to do solely based on claims of what *is*.

Hence, even if we developed a body of propositional knowledge through a verifiable vibe episteme or a body of procedural knowledge through a validating vibe teche, if the "is-ought problem" remains unsolved for you, the gap between is and ought will be unbridgeable through propositions alone, resulting in core premises not being ac-

tuated. Responses to this problem exist. Alasdair MacIntyre has a good one[74]; Sam Harris has a scientism-flavored one[75].

Philosophy is an intimate practice, and I sense it is wisest for you not to borrow the conclusions of another person's inquiry, and engage in your own, because wrestling with philosophical problems builds character. It might lead you to some dangerous *mind-full* territories, which it did for me, but if your inquiry gets you to the other side of the gap, something meaningful awaits. While I will not share the specific conclusions of my inquiry, I will share the following...

**\*\*\*PHILOSOPHICAL SPOILER ALERT\*\*\***

After your inquiry is exhausted, you will get to the bottom of all propositional knowledge and will be left with vibes and a choice. Your choice.

If you sense it is wise to make a vibrational choice, subscribe to this Substack [76]for an upcoming announcement...

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**LINKS**

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# How to Repair a Spaceport: A metaphor for our technological present



Folklore

~16 MIN READ



Welcome to Folklore, a community exploring the labyrinth of networked worlds. In this newly-commissioned essay, Kei Kreutler[2] reflects on standardization and technological interoperability through the metaphor of the fictional spaceport. Kei's work explores how cultural narratives of technology shape what worlds we can build.

No one knows how to repair a spaceport.

This is because spaceports primarily exist as a fiction. Spaceports imply the existence of inter-Solar System, if not intergalactic, infrastructure. Our existing international infrastructure already strains under its own weight.

Existing space stations have a varied history. The Soviet Union launched the first space station in 1986 with the name Mir, which some translate as peace, world, or in pre-revolutionary times, society.

They assembled it in orbit, and in its later life, it hosted several international visitors. Over a decade after the launch of Mir, five countries and a number of intergovernmental treaties oversaw the launch of the currently active International Space Station (ISS) in 1998. The ISS makes sixteen earth orbits per day, with peak visibility during twilight.

Like Mir before it in 2001, the ISS is set to meet a managed end. By 2031 its remnants will share their final resting place in the South Pacific Ocean's so-called "spacecraft cemetery." The countries involved in its launch have not yet planned any international infrastructure to replace it.

After its descent, the Chinese Tiangong will be the only remaining space station in orbit.

## STANDARDS ALSO UN-MAKE A WORLD

Unlike space stations, perhaps spaceports don't need to manifest beyond their fictions. Plain old ports exist because they fulfill a need. Marking the passage of a resource moving, from land to sea, sea to land, or embarking into the air, ports facilitate movement across terrains, sovereignties, and engineered environments.

But spaceports do more than that. As fictions, they facilitate move-

ment that more explicitly bridges *worlds*. Worlds that could have wholly unknown ecologies.

While the term "worldbuilding" enjoys cyclical revivals in the popular imagination, a different definition of worlds could be offered here (a definition intended to be neither definitive nor canonical, but instead to be a temporary guide). We regularly think of worlds operating with specific external boundaries, which contain relative internal coherence despite the occasional leak.<sup>(1)</sup> The Victorian fascination with terrariums demonstrates this well. But what if the opposite were true, and unstable boundaries are precisely what constitutes worldness? Its contradictions exceed it. A world is so much a world that its boundaries cannot entirely be certain, with constant leaks into other worlds or further recesses into its own. With unstable boundaries, its relationships can be symbiotic, predatory, or, as more often happens, a mix of both. Ultimately in this understanding, a world confounds expectations of agency for those meeting it.

Do you think today we could build infrastructure that bridges worlds? There's a joke that the most fantastical thing in the Star Trek universe is not the worlds they encounter, but the fact that intergalactic video calling actually works.

Standardization is one strategy for cross-world interoperability. Historically, standardization often comes from sovereignties wanting to consolidate. An early example: the first Chinese emperor sought to standardize measurements in the second century B.C.E. Other needs for standardization came from crises, like during the early twentieth century when a fire broke out in Maryland, United States, and firefighters arriving from other states could not connect their fire hoses to the fire hydrants. Many large-scale efforts at manufacturing standardization across sovereignties, though initiated before World War II, came to pass after its wake.

In the insightful essay “Standards Make the World,” David Lang writes about an approach to standardization that he calls “disruptive standards-making,” illustrated by influential groups rallying around engineering that *just works*. He cites the development of the internet as a chief example. TCP/IP, the computer networking protocol that facilitates the internet today, came from applied, practical development of the technology. The publicly lesser known Open Systems Interconnection (OSI) is a theoretical framework for computer networking largely developed by the International Standards Organization (ISO) at the same time as TCP/IP but with the stated intention to

create a standard. TCP/IP, however, ultimately won out because it *just worked*. Lang writes, “Disruptive standards-making falls somewhere on the spectrum between *de facto* and *voluntary-consensus*—elements of both strategies mixed with heavy doses of entrepreneurial hubris. It’s an attitude of ‘we’re doing this—are you coming?’”<sup>(2)</sup> Though disruptive standards-making doesn’t begin with consortia, Lang concludes, standards usually survive in the longer term through consortia management.

Typically at a confluence of influence, capital, and institutional might, plus a little lucky timing, the documented history of standardization naturally favors the large-scale. However, one might wonder about standards that escape explicit formalization: cases in which there is *just enough* interoperability. One could argue that regions with differentiated linguistic dialectics might be examples of this. Just enough may be understood, and differentiation can multiply.



Philippe Parreno, “AC/DC Snakes”, 2010, Serpentine Edition

Still, none of these approaches explain how the Star Trek video calling conundrum could be solved (as long as we momentarily suspend our belief in Star Trek's solution: the existence of a universal translator and "subspace" communications.<sup>(3)</sup>) This type of standardization implies coordination across entities that can already communicate with each other or which have at least some form of sufficient discoverability between them. Interpretability becomes central.

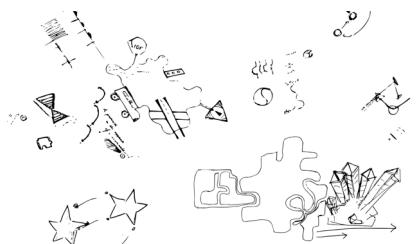
To explore the intergalactic video calling conundrum, we could understand protocols in contrast to standardization, though of course many would not make this separation in practice. For our purposes, we could define protocols as systems that prioritize interoperability over formal standardization, with spaceports acting as their central metaphor. Spaceports take the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF) line further, to establish "rough consensus and running worlds."

So while strictly speaking there might be no need to build intergalactically just yet, spaceports evoke a vital attitude toward infrastructure, as the sense that our technologies exceed our understanding as humans increases. Spaceports are a metaphor for our technological present. They represent infrastructure that adapts to plurality, or in other words, adapts

to the proliferation of technological uncertainties: other worlds. To imagine what that means, first you can close your eyes.

Now imagine what a protocol looks like. Any protocol, just as an idea. What are its contours? Does it have a direction? A feeling?

A group of us tried this experiment, which resulted in the humble sketches below. Across all of the sketches, our visualizations of a protocol had a few commonalities. One of the most striking sketches resembled a crystal: the idea of the inorganic growing within a set of rules but without precisely predictable offshoots. Most of our sketches included infrastructures with a solid core, a means for free floating agents to interact around the solid core, and a directional arrow in time, as though simple operating instructions allowed these infrastructures to continue indefinitely. In short, we concluded, our collective subconscious had decided that protocols look like spaceports.



Nahee Kim, Kei Kreutler, Aaron Z. Lewis, Toby Shorin, Venkatesh Rao, Composite Sketch, In Protocol Visualization Workshop, Summer of Protocols, Seattle, WA, 2023

The thing about spaceports, however, is that they're janky. They're not going to maintain perfect operation over time. One must imagine every cable connector ever designed in the past, plus the thousand more cable connectors that will inevitably be designed in the future despite our best attempts at standardization, all lined up irregularly on a wall. That, rather than the sterile operating room of HAL 2000, is the aesthetic of spaceports.

Spaceports defy the dominant aesthetic narratives of technology. Given to us by *2001: A Space Odyssey* and other media, these lingering science fiction imaginaries suggest that a technologically advanced future implies minimalism. Other popular science fiction imaginaries like *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* suggest that technological collapse and earthly decay go together. Spaceports sit somewhere dynamically in-between.

## HETEROGENEOUS DEVICES AND CROSS-WORLD MEDIA

The research and development company Xerox PARC is best known for creating our modern personal computing paradigm. Additionally, beginning in the 1970s, Xerox PARC supported initiatives by social scientists to produce ethnographic studies of emerging

technologies that would influence how we understand them today.

A classic paper from this initiative, “Reconstructing Technologies as Social Practice” authored by Lucy Suchman, Jeanette Blomberg, Julianne E. Orr (Work Practice & Technology Associates), and Randall Trigg that American Behavioral Scientist published in 1999, summarizes some of their work on human-machine communication over previous decades.(4)

This research group conducted case studies of technologies, including a new, “feature-rich” photocopier that consistently received complaints from those trying to use it. In this case study from 1981, Suchman explored why these difficulties arose despite users having a detailed instruction manual for the photocopier. From observing its use in several different contexts, Suchman concluded that no matter how “self-evident” designers tried to make a new device through things like instruction manuals establishing interaction patterns, users could not escape some level of contingency as they interpreted its functions. She reframed the task of designers from creating a device that acts nearly like a human, in the sense that it should be able to fully explain itself, to creating a device that requires writing, reading, and interpreting with the ambiguity that entails, because interactions with devices lack the

“subtle, emergent, and highly contingent courses of collaborative sensemaking that characterize interactions among humans.”(5)

It’s also interesting here that Suchman implies designers considered instruction manuals part of a “self-evident” device. Today we might be more inclined to think of instruction manuals as separate from a device. Even consulting them might be considered a sign of failure of a device’s explanatory power. This could be for multiple reasons, one being that we have much more established interaction patterns to rely on when interpreting devices. As devices become more agentic through artificial intelligence, however, this point should be revisited. What happens to interpreting devices when the instruction manual speaks back?



Bakin Takizawa (Kyokutei), Toen shōsetsu, 1825: “Sometime in the early months of 1803, an alien ship came ashore on the coast of Japan... This ut-suro-bune (hollow or vacant ship) appears in at least twelve literary sources from the late Edo period.”(6)

In subsequent work by Blomberg from 1987 to 1988, she expected to

find a correlation between the number of service calls a photocopier required and how users perceived its reliability. She was surprised to find none. Instead, she inferred, it depended on not the number of service calls, but their helpfulness in problem resolution.

In 1991, a larger scale ethnographic study by Orr was initiated in response to “corporate concern” over how to train service technicians. Orr concluded that rather than “the rote repair of identical machines,” repair work “was better characterized as a continuous improvisation with a triangular relationship of technician, customer, and machine.”(7) Maintenance, Orr argued, is inherently idiosyncratic, and narratives, it seemed, proved the best compensation for this idiosyncrasy. As this research group writes in the paper, “Storytelling is the principal medium available for technicians to share their knowledge and stay informed of subtle developments in machine behavior.” Responding to “subtle developments in machine behavior” requires technical skill as well as narrative skill.(8) The Star Trek video calling conundrum may only be tractable through open improvisation. With artificial intelligence, agentic devices might be interestingly understood as teaching machines to improvise (machine improvisation).



Thomas Baldwin, *Airopaidia: containing the narrative of a balloon excursion from Chester*, 1786

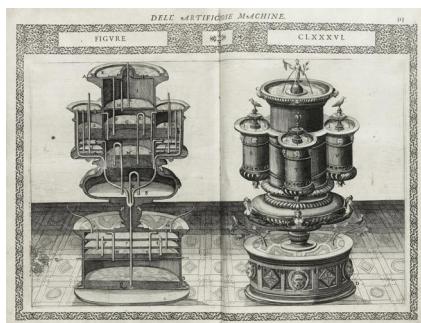
At the time of this research group, nowhere embodied the dynamic, idiosyncratic nature of maintenance better than airport operations rooms. For two years in the late 1980s, the researchers visited one such place. Summarizing their experience, they immediately mention how the airport operations room challenged the dominant science fiction imaginary:

*Where on the deck of the Starship Enterprise [in Star Trek] it appears that all the artifacts were created at a single moment, the operations room presented us with a kind of archaeological layering of artifacts acquired, in bits and pieces, over time. Rather than being homogeneously and seamlessly integrated, these artifacts comprised a heterogeneous collection of information and communication technologies, including telephones, radios, video monitors, networked workstations,*

*whiteboards, clocks, and a wide array of documents. The integration of these artifacts, correspondingly, seemed more a matter of string and baling wire than of design.*(9)

They also observed the social organization of the staff, a small, close group, who oriented their team toward events distant in space and time. This led the researchers to redescribe an information system, not as a clearly delineated organizational form, but instead as an “unfolding” of “partial, heterogeneous devices.”(10)

While understanding technology as a situated social practice has become familiar, this ethnographic work from the 1970s onward set precedents for how we think now. Some people might even read the emphasis on “storytelling” as part of a contentious cultural fault line in technology discourse today. However, whether overly familiar or even contentious, our aesthetic understanding of technology perhaps never took the conclusions of these researchers to heart.



Agostino Ramelli, *Theatre of Machines*, 1588

Maintaining complex technology proves inherently idiosyncratic. Standardization at scale has chaotic externalities. Rather than assuming anything other than minimalism is a design flaw, what if we were to integrate these idiosyncratic, adhoc tendencies as a sign of *just enough interoperability* in our technology, made of “archaeologically layered” “partial, heterogeneous devices”? What if we were to take these tendencies seriously as necessary marks of spaceport aesthetics, of plural, cross-world interoperability, and of worldness itself?

If even standardization can’t escape some form of idiosyncratic, adhoc storytelling, how can we think of the innovation complex technology writ large offers?

In traditional economics, organizations supposedly form because they maintain knowledge shared among their participants, processes, and tools, which should improve efficiency. In many scenarios, an employee troubleshooting a technical

error in a process created by the organization would be more efficient than outsourcing the troubleshooting to a service technician. That is, unless the troubleshooting requires specialized knowledge the organization does not maintain, in which case, the organization outsourcing the troubleshooting would lower its “transaction costs.” Referred to as Coase’s theory of the firm, this idea suggests that an organization with stable boundaries forms when it sufficiently lowers the transaction costs of accomplishing an endeavor.

Spaceports hypothetically elude this theorem, which is questionable in its own right. As we’ve conceived of them, spaceports are infrastructure designed without stable boundaries. They are meant to accommodate the fellow traveler and the unknown visitor alike. Yet this doesn’t mean they don’t imply some interpretable organizational form.

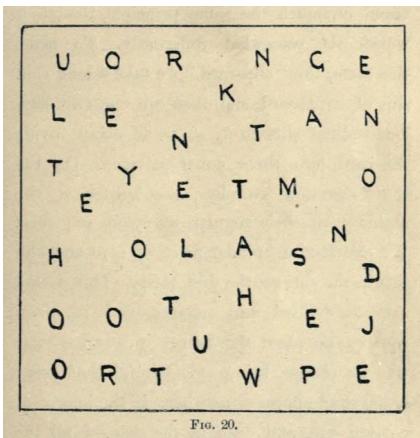


FIG. 20.

F. Edward Hulme (Author), *Cryptography: or the History, Principles, and Practice of Cipher-Writing*, 1898, The Message by "Revolving Grille"

From our protocol visualization experiment, the activity of docking came up. Before landing a fellow traveler might think, would the spaceport have digestible food? What would the cultures there be like, and if their spaceship became damaged, would the spaceport have the tools to repair it? Would the spaceport have the right connector cables? Some unknown visitors would not have any questions like these. Spaceports are organized adaptations to these uncertainties.

What I'm getting at, then, is that spaceports demonstrate the concept of infrastructure as organization. For spaceports to exist, they would need to be built for *just enough interoperability*. Their infrastructure would have to substitute for the shared, maintained knowledge of an organization, making it worthwhile to land. The needs that

couldn't be anticipated technically would have to be met with practices of improvisation.

Current software experiments in cross-world media like the Autonomous Worlds Network[3] can be seen through the lens of infrastructure as organization. Building "autonomous worlds," which can be understood as media, game, and cryptographic environments, they make their software protocols public, intending their operating rules to maintain consistency *plus* discoverability akin to digital, Newtonian physics.(11)

The game *This Cursed Machine* is one example from the Autonomous Worlds Network. In a 2023 talk, game developers ARB and Agnes Cameron presented their work in the context of developing "composable game loops."(12) They suggested questioning the assumption that, in the context of public block-chains, a game is meaningfully composable simply because its game states, rule sets, and objects are on-chain and therefore readily available data. Instead, they set out to create composable game loops, that is, small, simple mechanisms that facilitate technical as well as narrative composability. In the case of their game, as they explicitly point to in their talk title "Bugs In, Sludge Out" (you'll get it if you play the game), participants can think of the technical and narrative output of one game loop as an input for

another game loop, which participants can then build themselves. From these integrated, composable game loops autonomous worldness can grow.

Autonomous Worlds Network is a nascent, playful example that, in some cases, intentionally embraces spaceport aesthetics from the start, whereas other established examples, including photocopiers, instruction manuals, and operations rooms, have incorporated it over time. We will likely see many changes to these examples, both new and old, as agentic devices develop further.

Understood this way, complex technology innovates through infrastructure as organization, providing *just enough interoperability* on which improvisation can build. Such approaches will be vital as our technology tends toward the agentic unknown.(13)

Spaceports do not represent a will toward homogeneous, globalized standardization, but neither do they represent a will toward borderization. They exist in the protocolized, permissionless mess in between. They attempt to articulate a vernacular without walls: welcome to fellow traveler and unknown visitor alike.

Ultimately, repairing a spaceport involves storytelling as well as technical skill. While no one knows how to repair a spaceport, after this thought experiment, one could

imagine a manual fragment captured from the training data set of an old agent 2.78 AUs away. It might read:

- Just enough interoperability
- Computer says maybe
- Aesthetic pluralism
- Iterate on one mechanism at a time
- Liability should not exceed agency
- Vernaculars without walls
- Agnostic infrastructure, opinionated implementation
- Theater of all possibilities, not performances

The rest of the manual fragment would be illegible and unknown, lost somewhere in the inorganic yet decomposing spaceport cemeteries of the future. We do know for certain that if spaceports exist, they will definitely need repair.



1. ludens, “The Case for Autonomous Worlds.”
2. Lang, “Standards Make the World.”
3. Ursula K. Le Guin’s faster-than-light communication device the Ansible might be the subject for another essay.

4. Suchman et al., “Reconstructing Technologies as Social Practice.”

5. Ibid, 395.

6. Ibid, 396.

7. “Unidentified Floating Object.”

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid, 397.

10. Ibid, 399.

11. ludens, “The Case for Autonomous Worlds.”

12. “Bugs In, Sludge Out: Production Circuits As Composable Game Loop ♦ Agnes Cameron & Arb ♦ Assembly.” November 15, 2023.

13. Someone may deem it pertinent to write *The Cloud of Unknowing*, but instead of how to relate to God in the fourteenth century, it describes how to relate to technology in the twenty-first century.

“Bugs In, Sludge Out: Production Circuits As Composable Game Loop ♦ Agnes Cameron & Arb ♦ Assembly.[4]” November 15, 2023.

Lang, David. “Standards Make the World.[5]” Summer of Protocols. Accessed August 26, 2024.

ludens. “The Case for Autonomous Worlds.[6]” Autonomous Worlds Network, August 9, 2023.

Suchman, Lucy, Jeanette Blomberg, Julian E. Orr, and Randall Trigg. “Reconstructing Technologies as Social Practice.[7]” American Behavioral Scientist 43, no. 3 (November 1999): 392–408.

The Public Domain Review. “Unidentified Floating Object: Edo Images of Utsuro-Bune.” [8].

Cover image: Ismail al-Jazari, *Book of Knowledge of Ingenious Mechanical Devices*, 1206.

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## LINKS

[1] [publicdomainreview.org/collection/utsuro-bune/](http://publicdomainreview.org/collection/utsuro-bune/)



[2] [keikreutler.net](http://keikreutler.net)



[3] [aw.network/](http://aw.network/)



[4] youtube.com/watch?v=xmsmfFybfIo



[5] summerofprotocols.com/standards-make-the-world-web



[6] aw.network/posts/the-case-for-autonomous-worlds



[7] doi.org/10.1177/00027649921955335



[8] publicdomainreview.org/collection/utsuro-bune/



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## TITLE IMAGE ATTRIBUTION

"An alchemist hunched over his crucible; an assistant reads him a recipe, watched by an onlooker; the alchemist's wife weeps in the dim background, a baby clasped to her breast. Engraving by J. Boydell, c. 1760, after J. Steen." Source: Wellcome Collection (Public Domain).

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