

# NATIONAL AFFAIRS

## The Erosion of Deep Literacy

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THOUGHTFUL AMERICANS ARE REALIZING that the pervasive IT-revolution devices upon which we are increasingly dependent are affecting our society and culture in significant but as yet uncertain ways. We are noticing more in part because, as Maryanne Wolf has pointed out, this technology is changing what, how, and why we read, and in turn what, how, and why we write and even think. Harold Innis noted in 1948, as television was on the cusp of revolutionizing American life, that "sudden

extensions of communication are reflected in cultural disturbances," and it's clear we are stumbling through another such episode. Such disturbances today are manifold, and, as before, their most critical aspects may reside in alterations to both the scope and nature of literacy. As with any tangle between technology and culture, empirical evidence is elusive, but two things, at least, are clear.



For one, the new digital technology is democratizing written language and variously expanding the range of people who use and learn from it. It may also be diffusing culture; music and film of all kinds are cheaply and easily available to almost everyone. In some respects, new digital technologies are decreasing social isolation, even if in other respects they may be increasing it. Taken together, these technologies may also be creating novel neural pathways, especially in developing young brains, that promise greater if



different kinds of cognitive capacities, albeit capacities we cannot predict or even imagine with confidence.

But it is also clear that something else has been lost. Nicholas Carr's 2010 book, *The Shallows*, begins with the author's irritation at his own truncated attention span for reading. Something neurophysiological is happening to us, he argued, and we don't know what it is. That must be the case, because if there is any law of neurophysiology, it is that the brain wires itself continuously in accordance with its every experience. A decade later, Carr's discomfort is shared by growing legions of frustrated, formerly serious readers.

In her 2018 book, *Reader, Come Home*, Wolf uses cognitive neuroscience and developmental psycholinguistics to study the reading brain and literacy development, and in doing so, helps identify what is being lost. According to Wolf, we are losing what she calls "deep literacy" or "deep reading." This does not include decoding written symbols,

writing one's name, or making lists. Deep literacy is what happens when a reader engages with an extended piece of writing in such a way as to anticipate an author's direction and meaning, and engages what one already knows in a dialectical process with the text. The result, with any luck, is a fusion of writer and reader, with the potential to bear original insight.

Deep literacy has wondrous effects, nurturing our capacity for abstract thought, enabling us to pose and answer difficult questions, empowering our creativity and imagination, and refining our capacity for empathy. It is also generative of *successive* new insight, as the brain's circuitry for reading recursively builds itself forward. It is and does all these things in part because it touches off a "revolution in the brain," meaning that it has distinctive and describable neurophysiological consequences. Understanding deep literacy





as a revolution in the brain has potential payoffs for understanding aspects of history and contemporary politics alike.

Deep reading has in large part informed our development as humans, in ways both physiological and cultural. And it is what ultimately allowed Americans to become "We the People," capable of self-government. If we are losing the capacity for deep reading, we must also be prepared to lose other, perhaps even more precious parts of what deep reading has helped to build.



## BRAIN REVOLUTION

Scientists continue to debate the question of addiction to technology and its effects on memory and social isolation, a question transformed anew in the dozen years since the June 2007 introduction of the iPhone. But beyond the addiction debate, few cognitive scientists doubt that so-called multitasking is merely the ability to get



many things done quickly and poorly. And no one doubts that heavy screen use has destroyed attention spans.



But more than attention spans are at stake. Beyond self-inflicted attention deficits, people who cannot deep read — or who do not use and hence lose the deep-reading skills they learned — typically suffer from an attenuated capability to comprehend and use abstract reasoning. In other words, if you can't, or don't, slow down sufficiently to focus quality attention — what Wolf calls "cognitive patience" — on a complex problem, you cannot effectively think about it.



We know that prolonged and repetitive exposure to digital devices changes the way we think and behave in part because it changes us physically. The brain adapts to its environment. The devices clearly can be addictive; indeed, they are *designed* to be addictive. Technology companies know that swiping "trains" the brain in certain ways; designers know what produces quick bursts





of dopamine and oxytocin. They also know that two-dimensional representations on a screen do not match the sensory richness of direct, unmediated experiences, and they know the implications — which is why many cyber-technologists strictly ration their use among their own children. As neurologist Richard Cytowic put it, "Digital devices discretely hijack our attention. To the extent that you cannot perceive the world around you in its fullness, to the same extent you will fall back into mindless, repetitive, self-reinforcing behavior, unable to escape."



Thanks to roughly 200,000 years of evolution, the human brain is an extremely efficient change detector. Any sudden and atypical image, smell, or sound could signal a threat or an opportunity, so the brain had always to be on alert, even during sleep. (Some refer to this evolutionary development as the brain's "novelty bias.") And we are still on alert; our brains are not

anatomically much different from what they were in Neolithic times, even if some of the circuitry is different.

Maintaining constant vigilance consumes much of the brain's power supplies, and switching attention, in particular, eats up lots of calories. Even a century ago, life was far less frenetic than it is today; more items vie for our attention in a given hour than our ancestors had to handle in a day or even a week. As Cytowic puts it,



We ask our stone-age brains to sort, categorize, parse, and prioritize torrential data streams it never evolved to juggle, while in the background we have to stay ever vigilant to change in every sensory channel....Screens of all sorts serve up rapidly changing images, jump cuts between scenes, erratic motion, and non-linear narratives that spill out in fragments....Is it any wonder people today complain of mental fatigue? Fatigue makes it even harder to sort the



trivial from the salient and navigate the glut of decisions modern life throws at us.



The knock-on issue thus becomes clear: It is hard to sustain the attention necessary for deep reading when we are distracted and exhausted from being both sped up and overloaded — what tech writer Linda Stone aptly calls "continuous partial attention." And many, particularly those who have never inculcated the discipline that comes with a serious education, have become, as Senator Ben Sasse puts it, "addicted to distraction." The neuroscientist Daniel Levitin explains it more specifically: "Multitasking creates a dopamine-addiction feedback loop, effectively *rewarding the brain for losing focus* and for constantly searching for external stimulation" (emphasis added).

A sadder and more troubling knock-on effect also reveals itself: If you do not deep read, you do not cultivate a capacity to think, imagine, and create; you therefore may not

realize that anything more satisfying than a video game even exists. Fully immerse yourself in digital "life," and timelines will flatten into unconnected dots, rendering a person present-oriented and unable to either remember or plan well. That permanently "zoned out" person will become easy prey for the next demagogue with an attractive promise and a mesmerizing spectacle.



Mediated electronic interactions also create forms of what could be called acquired social autism. Any experienced high-school guidance counselor can attest that most of their students do not have the social skills necessary to, for example, speak to college-admissions personnel one on one. There is also growing empirical evidence of social-media fatigue. Our gadgets create exhaustion, isolation, loneliness, and depression, which track with the rise of suicide rates in younger age cohorts. In a few extreme cases, when isolation sharply



diminishes the influence of peer standards of acceptable conduct, it can lead to violent anti-social behavior.



In science fiction, the typical worry is that machines will become human-like; the more pressing problem now is that, through the thinning out of our interactions, humans are becoming machine-like. That raises the possibility that the more time we spend with machines and the more dependent on them we become, the dumber we tend to get since machines cannot determine their own purposes — at least until the lines cross between ever smarter AI-infused machines and ever less cognitively adept humans. More troubling are the moral issues that could potentially arise: mainly ceding to machines programmed by others the right to make moral choices that ought to be ours.

## **HABITS OF MIND**

The human brain is genetically hardwired with the ability to understand and articulate oral language, but no gene exists for reading

and writing. Literacy is a cultural achievement long in the making, though, on an evolutionary timeline, it is a fairly recent innovation. It is a development that, by changing the very structure of human brain circuitry, "transformed the nature of human thought," as Wolf writes. What Carr detected, even before iPhone market saturation, is that the plasticity of the human brain extends well beyond childhood: We are or become, cognitively speaking, what we do with language.



There is no question that adult reading habits have changed over the past few decades. The skimming and speed-reading in Z or F patterns that is characteristic of surfing the internet — the new norm for many — does not help enable critical content, if there is any, to sink into working memory. As reading method goes, it is the anti-deep; one barely gets wet at all. Twitter, in particular, epitomizes the transition from using written language as a means to think to using language as a platform for micro-



designer spectacle — in some respects a throwback to oral culture, and certainly a far more cognitively superficial activity, as L. M. Sacasas recently argued in the *New Atlantis*. Skimming on the net also has a shadow effect: When one picks up a book for an afternoon or evening, the same pattern throws itself onto the printed page. That is what Carr noticed but did not perhaps understand.

Henry Kissinger noted one consequence of this development in the context of strategy:

Reading books requires you to form concepts, to train your mind to relationships....A book is a large intellectual construction; you can't hold it all in mind easily or at once. You have to struggle mentally to internalize it. Now there is no need to internalize because each fact can instantly be called up again on the computer. There is no context, no motive. Information is not knowledge. People are not readers but researchers, they float on the

surface....This new thinking erases context. It disaggregates everything. All this makes strategic thinking about world order nearly impossible to achieve.



Neil Postman put it succinctly, if more broadly, in 1985: Only in the printed word can complicated truths be rationally conveyed.

But Kissinger is getting at something else here: namely, the sources of original thought. The deep-reading brain excels at making connections among analogical, inferential, and empathetic modes of reasoning, and knows how to associate them all with accumulated background knowledge. That constellation of sources and connections is what enables not just strategic thinking, but original thinking more broadly. So could it be that the failures of the American political class to fashion useful solutions to public- and foreign-policy challenges turn not just on polarization and hyper-partisanship, but also on the strong



possibility that many of these non-deep readers are no longer able to think below the surface tension of a tweet?



Absence of thought as a mode of cognition

likewise stifles imagination and feeds cultural insularity. Along with the technology-enabled prevalence of mediated interactions as opposed to face-to-face ones, insularity in turn conduces to the narrow "tribal" emotions of identity politics. The "echo chamber" effect, characteristic of mediated electronic interactions, tends to truncate a person's ambit of empathy, as Senator Sasse has stressed, and not just as regards politics. It could be, in other words, that we skim now with respect to our emotions as well as our thinking — how else is it possible to degrade the beauty and difficulty of friendship into "friending" someone instantaneously on Facebook?

Deep reading, contrarily, deepens and widens our theory of mind in both its

rational and affective aspects. Fiction reading, in particular, enables us to simulate the consciousness of another person.

Indeed, our developing the ability to deep read is part of what made us human. Pre-literate cultures can be rich and imaginative without written language, but unless people capable of mobilizing their imaginations to spin wondrous stories and discover empirical truths about the world can get them written down, there is a limit to how long the power of those stories and insights can endure. The writing processes we use to objectify knowledge gained — processes that make intersubjective sharing stable and longstanding over generations — have become integral to who we are.



Literacy as a cultural achievement changed society because it enabled humans to learn from predecessors long-since deceased and to teach those who come long after, thus creating skeins of intergenerational conversation that no other animal can match. In other words, literacy enabled the sum of



education and schools, libraries and archives, research and coordinated human work to generate a reality far more massive and seemingly objective than what Kenneth Burke once called our bio-sensory bit of reality, "the paper-thin line of our own particular lives." The rewards of deep reading are cumulative over time, therefore, not only in the individual, but also in society. Deep literacy marks the birth of useful abstractions bearing profound implications for moral reasoning. As Hermann Hesse pointed out, "[w]ithout words, without writing, and without books there would be no history," and so "there could be no concept of humanity."

Those reading this essay developed these habits of mind as children who learned to read and now continue to do so as adults. In an odd way, that's the problem: We almost never reflect on how unusual, and in many ways unnatural, deep reading actually is. Consider that the only time any of us can be alone with ideas brought by others is in

reading. It is, as Marcel Proust put it in On Reading, "that fertile miracle of communication that takes place in the middle of solitude." Otherwise, we are each necessarily engaged in dialogue with one or more other in-the-flesh people: In other words, we experience the community as context, simultaneously with the ideas. Deep reading *alone* creates the possibility of a private internal dialogue with an author not physically present.



More important, when we are immersed in deep reading, we bracket our sensory surroundings and social context to become engrossed in worlds that exist only in our heads. The power of this out-of-body capacity is quite remarkable. Wolf cites research showing that when a fictional character with whom the reader has developed an affinity is running in the text, the deep reader's motoric regions activate as if he were actually running instead of sitting in a chair reading. So we can be in our heads nowhere real, but being there imaginatively

creates real effects nonetheless. This tells us, among other things, that the kind of intimate, silent dialogue that occurs only during deep reading requires a considerable capacity for abstract thought *just for it to occur at all*. In deep reading, we separate the message of the text from the author; we decontextualize it, in other words, and therefore *necessarily* abstract it.

For those who make a habit of deep reading, cognitive capacities for such abstract thinking expand to fill our appetites, or what we may call our pressing artificial needs. And those needs can become pressing because the material world, while expansive and rich, has limits that the world of the abstract and the imaginative very likely does not. So once into that world, the appetite to explore more of what we, with helpful authorial others, conspire to invent can become irresistible, at least this side of the dinner bell.

In order for deep reading to exist there also must be deep writing. The author also must abstract the message being crafted because, usually, no specific reader can be readily anticipated or held in mind. Classes or kinds of people can be identified as a writer's target audience, but that is different and that too requires a kind of decontextualized abstract thought. Thus, we have a writer privately squeezing into an artificial, decontextualized "space" in order to convey something, fictive or not, to unknown readers in unknown but theoretically very distant times who are similarly situated, so to speak, in an artificial, decontextualized space. If this is not in some non-trivial sense an unnatural act for human beings to engage in, then what is?

And yet we typically overlook how significant this act is for us as individuals and to us collectively as a society. We only feel uncomfortable when we sense, as did Carr, our earned capacities somehow slipping away — or when we worry that

cognitively sped-up and multitasking **young brains** may not acquire sufficient capacities for critical thinking, personal reflection, imagination, and empathy, and hence **will become easy prey for charlatans and demagogues.**

## **MODERN MAN**

Deep literacy has often been overlooked as a factor in history because **historians are so deeply enmeshed in a world of deep reading that they, like the proverbial fish in water, take its existence for granted. A poignant example is that of Karl Jaspers,** famous for his theory of the Axial Age. Jaspers observed that several civilizational zones with little to no contact between them nevertheless developed several philosophical themes seemingly in common at around the same period, between the eighth and third centuries B.C. Why this was so constituted a mystery for Jaspers and the many interpreters his 1949 study attracted. It seems not to have occurred to them that the advent of literacy for a critical mass of

people during the period in question might account for the commonalities Jaspers observed.

What Jaspers saw was less the similar *content* of the formulations of different ancient cultures and more the similarity of the *level of abstraction* at which those formulations took shape by dint of the cultures having recently become literate. In other words, phenomena that many saw as *causes* of the Axial Age were actually *consequences* of something else that went unremarked: the spread of deep literacy in a still-small but critical share of the population.

Understanding deep literacy can also take us from Jaspers's Axial Age to the modern age. The rise of individual agency — one of the hallmarks of modernity — depends on the development of a refined sense of *interiority* in a person: that sense of the inner conscious being that defines one's individual, essential self. In short, very likely, *the advent of deep literacy, by enabling a new sense of*

*interiority, is the proximate source of modernity via the rise of individual agency that it allowed.*

Unless provoked to think about it, we usually assume that this sense of interiority has been an invariant aspect of being human. But that is not obvious. The growth of our inner voice to articulate maturity probably depends on our developing language capacities, from that of the child before he develops a theory of mind to that of the adult capable of seeing the self as an object — capable in other words of asking the first question of philosophy: Who, or what, am I? After all, what need has anyone for a particularly articulate inner voice if that voice never has anyone else to "talk" with, which is an activity done silently only in reading? Thus, our adult sense of interiority seems closely linked, perhaps inextricably so, to our gaining literacy competence.



The mature "narrator" likely arises from the aforementioned complementary pairing of unnatural acts, as the necessarily dialectic

reading/writing process that defines deep literacy continues over time. The mature narrator in our heads is thus a cognitive artifact of culture, of the revolution in the brain, not of neurobiology alone. As Walter Ong put it, "[o]ral communication unites people in groups" whereas writing and reading "throw the psyche back on itself" and thus cultivate individuality.

So the silent narrator in the minds of non-readers must be, at least in some ways, a narrator different from our own — and societies made up of the latter must, at least in some ways, differ from societies made up of the former. The slow movement from oral/communal to written/private uses of narration has indeed ultimately been epochal. It is hard to disagree with Ong's conclusion that, "without writing, human consciousness cannot achieve its fuller potentials."

In this light, consider a typical child in a society with widespread deep literacy and the development of the relationship of



narratives to thinking in his mind. The process starts when books are read to a child before he can decode them, creating a link between the written word composed of morphemes, the phonemes the words make when the morphemes are sounded out, and the symbolic meaning carried by them. (As far as we know, this link can be created only by shared attention between at least two human beings; it cannot be fashioned between a child and a television set, an e-reader, or any other machine. That is one main reason why the best predictor of eventual reading proficiency is how many hours adults spend reading to young children.)



Then a child learns to decode writing and pronounce it, but usually only aloud. As decoding matures into true reading, a child will still usually not be able to read silently; there is often an intermediate stage on the way to deep literacy when a child is whispering or moving his lips while reading. (Some adults who have yet to achieve full

deep literacy do this, too, as can sometimes be observed on buses, trains, park benches, and so on.) Only later can the more mature child advance into truly silent reading, and gain the ability to meet an author halfway in the complex dynamics of deep literacy common to adults. Only then does the child's narrator develop into a mature form.

This development is true on the historical scale as well. Ponder the language of prayer and ritual over the millennia. Ancient prayer was and most ritual prayer is still communal, so liturgy is meant to be spoken aloud, chanted, or sung. But even individual prayer, whether it takes place in a group setting or alone, is not usually supposed to be completely silent even today; lips need to move. This tradition, at one point itself a novelty as illustrated by the exchange between Hannah and Eli at Shiloh in I Samuel, is a remnant of an earlier time when truly silent prayer, and silent reading, was all but unknown — a time when nearly all



writing that went beyond mere lists was integrally related to and arose from within religion.

The rise of Protestantism has everything to do with Martin Luther's key insight that the essence of a person is the soul within. Hence his view that the priestly rituals of the Church were in vain because they could not penetrate into the interiority of the soul — could not directly engage the inner person, could not converse with the narrator. In his view, the ritual was functionally mute and thus useless. But (probably) unbeknownst to Luther, his own deep literacy likely formed the portal of his sense of interiority, and therefore presaged his theological discovery. Protestantism's focus on scripture in the new theological dispensation was not coincidental, to put it mildly.

The rise of deep literacy in enough people in early modernity — mightily aided, of course, by Gutenberg's invention of movable type — was a precondition of Protestantism's firm establishment and rapid



growth, and its establishment was in turn a major accelerator of deep literacy in the societies in which it became the principal faith community, in large part because Protestants ordained compulsory schooling for all children. The Reformation found a very powerful engine in the establishment of these schools: Wherever Protestant beliefs spread, state-mandated education soon followed, each reinforcing the other.

This rendered the Reformation a twin theological-political movement, based on the idea of "conscience" as the fulcrum. Conscience was central to arriving at theological truth through reading Scripture, and theological truth led to a social consensus on the importance of conscience in the political arena as well. The simple understanding here was that the capacity for moral reasoning is essential for an individual to come to religious truth, and moral reasoning collected into a social ethos is the only foundation for a morally just political

order — the individual and socio-political facets of conscience reinforcing each other in a virtuous cycle.

The eventual consequences of this development, for the West and in due course for the world, have been huge. The Protestant way of thinking about the relationship between the individual and society is quintessentially modern because it starts with individual, not corporate, agency. As far as political thought goes, this is the origin of our "We the People": God's will is implemented upward through popular sovereignty, not downward from the divine right of kings. This is where the moral basis for modern liberal democracy comes from, and without the spread of deep literacy, it likely doesn't come at all. It is simply not possible to build a bourgeois economy and society without enough people who are literate and numerate to operate them.



## LITERACY AND POPULISM

The capacity for abstract reasoning, too, is integral to liberal-democratic politics: The concepts of representation; the virtues of doubt, dissent, and humility; and the concept of a depersonalized constitutional order are all very abstract ideas. Is it possible that an emotionally more volatile *post-deep-literate* society may at a certain tipping point regress to accommodate, and even to prefer, less-refined and -earned forms of governance?

We know what such a regression would basically look like: a less abstract, re-personalized form of social and political authority concentrated in a "great" authoritarian leader. On the left, that looks at the extreme like a brave new world order that enforces diversity and radical, undifferentiated egalitarianism from above by dint of brainwashing and coercion. On the right it looks like an extreme form of conservative nationalism, the nation defined as white Americans and tolerated non-whites, in which the state provides social and economic security to the



Volksgemeinschaft while strictly policing both its literal and figurative borders. In any event, neither dispensation can stand too much liberalism, and possibly not much more democracy either.

We know that a significant decline in a society's deep literacy can matter because **it has happened before**. Thanks in part to the revolutionary impact of the codex, male literacy rates in the Roman Republic and then Empire were probably in the 30% to 40% range, at least in urban areas. We even have records of slaves knowing how to read and write. **After the collapse of the Western Roman Empire in 476**, literacy rates quickly dropped below 5%, and did not regain their previous levels until the 16th century at the earliest. Until they did, the advent of liberalism as we understand the term could not happen.

One could argue that **American history is replete with majorities of non-deep-literate people** in virtually every decade since 1776, and democracy endured and populist surges

were rare. And surely, whatever the recent decline in deep literacy, more Americans are deep-literate today than in 1919 or 1819. But this overlooks the fact that, at its 1776 birth, independent America probably constituted the most mass-literate society in world history, notwithstanding the number of slaves and indentured servants. Such a high rate of literacy was the consequence of the highly scripturalist nature of Protestantism and the deeply religious character of most colonial-era American settlements.

Furthermore, populist surges were not rare; they merely expressed themselves most often in religious culture as Great Awakenings rather than directly in politics — but the bleed-over from the former to the latter was hardly trivial. Besides, throughout most of American history, politics has been an elite affair despite its ever-growing egalitarian pretensions. That was true before the Jacksonian era, but it was basically true long thereafter, as well. Most people showed a natural deference to educated folk, and the



further back one goes, the higher the percentage of educated men (it was mostly men) who went to divinity school. Protestant scripturalists showed particular reverence for well-educated clergy, especially in "high church" circles.

Literacy rates in 19th-century America, notably female literacy rates, register a near continuous rise, and the correlation with democratic participation is arguably positive. All three major American antebellum social movements arose from this development: abolition, temperance, and female suffrage. But rising literacy rates did not bring unvarnished blessings because too much democracy driven by scantily educated people rarely does: It constitutes a distributed mob, potential or extant, more or less of the kind the ancient Greeks warned against. For example, higher rates of literacy and democratic participation in the 1850s correlate with the brittle, abstract forms of



para-theological, Second Great Awakening reasoning that infested political discourse and helped bring about the Civil War.

A kind of sine wave seems to run through American history, with each step-change upward in literacy associated with a Great Awakening, and each one rotating around an emotionally evocative and encompassing central idea. There was George Whitefield's Awakening of the 1740s, with its core idea of God, part rediscovered and part redefined from the days of the Puritan pioneers. Then came the Second Great Awakening of the 1820s through the 1840s — the camp-meeting Awakening associated with Charles Grandison Finney, Methodist circuit riders, and the rise of the Baptists. The core idea was the nation, under the aegis of the further-redefined, far-more-democratic Protestant God. Then came the Third Great Awakening, which spanned the 1880s through 1910s: the Awakening of the Chautauqua movement, William Jennings Bryan's Populists, and the Social Gospel.



The core idea was the Whig understanding of progress as annealed in the spreading Industrial Revolution.

Now, arguably, we behold a fourth Great Awakening, which began in the late 1950s — just as the television entered every home and commenced the draining of Americans' capacity for deep reading — and continues today. Its core idea is radical (and sometimes global) egalitarianism. It is roiling American politics with what we conventionally call the culture wars, but it obviously also affects a host of policy zones, including immigration and education.

Each successive Awakening wave has moved further from viewing church clerical leadership as its explicit font of authority. Each has been more democratizing in various ways and less deferential to established hierarchy. Each has increasingly infiltrated and reified political discourse to one degree or another — the moral fervor of the Second Great Awakening that helped produce the Civil War was preceded by the

moral fervor of the First Great Awakening that arguably led to an earlier civil war, which Americans call the Revolutionary War. And now, unsurprisingly given the history, we live amid a (mostly) cold civil war.

Put in the idiom of literacy, it could be that, all else being equal, literate people are less deferential to authority, and that would make some contemporary Americans inclined to demand freedom from the state and others to demand equality enforced by the state. This sounds self-contradictory because it is. Maximum freedom, or liberty, and maximum equality are in tension. Thanks to "the natural aristocracy of talent and virtue," as Jefferson put it to Adams, unconstrained freedom will produce economic, social, and usually political inequality. Attempts to enforce equality will put a crimp on freedom. In a sense, the populist, Awakened energies in American politics today are twinned, with populist demands for equality of outcomes, not just opportunity, coming



from the left, and populist demands for freedom coming from the right. The challenge is to figure out ways to reconcile these two fundamental demands. But we will have a difficult time doing that if the process is driven more by emotion than by thought — especially at a time when deep reading, and all that flows from it, has gone out of fashion.

## CONCRETE THINKING

As it is, we now have greater levels of at least superficial participation in political discourse, if not in politics itself, thanks in part to social-media technologies. Vast numbers of people contribute scantily supported opinions about things they don't really understand, validating the old saw that a little bit of knowledge can be a dangerous thing.



A greater percentage of Americans may be deep literate in 2019 than in 1819 or 1919, but probably not than in 1949, before television, the internet, and the iPhone. We

have reached a stage at which many professors dare not assign entire books or large parts of moderately challenging ones to undergraduates because they know they won't read them. And while more Americans are graduating from four-year colleges than ever before, the educational standards of many of those institutions, and the distribution of study away from the humanities and social sciences, suggest that a concomitant rise in deep literacy has gone unrealized as the degree factories churn.

The decline of deep literacy, combined with the relative rise in status of the superficially educated, may well be the main food stock for the illiberal nationalist forms of the contemporary populist bacillus not just in America, but in much of the world at large. If so, it endows Ortega y Gasset's 1930 radio-era observations in *The Revolt of the Masses* with new import. The common, not particularly well-educated person, Ortega y Gasset argued, has ideas in his head but did not produce those ideas:

He wishes to have opinions, but is unwilling to accept the conditions and presuppositions that underlie all opinion....To have an idea means believing one is in possession of the reasons for having it, and consequently means believing that there is such a thing as reason, a world of intelligible truths. To have ideas, to form opinions, is identical with appealing to such an authority...and therefore believing that the highest form of inter-communion is the dialogue in which the reasons for our ideas are discussed. But the mass-man would feel himself lost if he accepted discussion, and instinctively repudiates the obligation of accepting that supreme authority lying outside himself.

And this, he continued, gave rise to both the right-wing and left-wing extremists of his day: "The Fascist and Syndicalist species...characterized by...a type of man who did not care to give reasons or even to be right, but who was simply resolved to

impose his opinions. That was the novelty: the right not to be right, not to be reasonable: 'the reason of unreason.'"

The very notion of a right not to be reasonable is predicated on a discourse, if one can even call it that, of untethered emotion that rules out that mode of activity that enables reasoning: deep literacy, and what follows from it. Indeed, amid all the recent confusion about what populism actually is, the deep-literacy prism in the light of history can help achieve some definitional precision: Populism of the illiberal nationalist kind is what happens in a mass-electoral democracy when a decisive percentage of mobilized voters drops below a deep-literacy standard.

Perhaps *any* literacy overshadows *deep* literacy in democratic political life. Adults who haven't read a book since high school tend to become mobilized to vote for reasons that differ from those of more literate voters. This is not a new observation; political scientist Philip Converse wrote of



this phenomenon in 1964, a time when social science was just beginning to penetrate the mythology of a "pure" American democracy:

[M]oving from top to bottom of this information dimension, the character of the objects that are central in a belief system undergoes systematic change. These objects shift from the remote, generic, and abstract to the increasingly simple, concrete, or "close to home." Where potential political objects are concerned, this progression tends to be from abstract, "ideological" principles to the more obviously recognizable social groupings or charismatic leaders and finally to such objects of immediate experience as a family, job, and immediate associates. Most of these changes have been hinted at in one form or another in a variety of sources. For example, "limited horizons," "foreshortened time perspectives," and

"concrete thinking" have been singled out as notable characteristics of the ideational world of the poorly educated.

Could it be that the masses, referred to by Hamilton as a "dreadful monster," are composed in the main of "concrete thinkers," who think concretely because they lack a facility for, or a habit of, deep reading? After all, deep readers at least may know what they don't know, and hence are better able to deploy shields of skepticism against all forms of advertising, including the political kind that enchants populist mobs into being. Those who lack a reading habit may be locked in perpetual intellectual adolescence, but they can still gather in the street, shout, and even shoot. The 16th-century English bishop John Bridges wrote that a fool and his money are soon parted. He might have said the same about a non-reader and his political agency.



The phenomenon of deep literacy can be a powerful explanatory factor for a range of theoretical and practical questions. No single



factor explains anything entirely when it comes to the spiraling universe of social and political life, and it would be a stretch to claim that any of the above arguments amounts to a proof. But to omit deep literacy from the range of considered variables seems unwise. We should continue to generate new and more interesting questions to pose about deep literacy, and the meaning of its possible erosion, or transformation by novel means, in our own country and beyond.



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