

THE LEMUR

Duke's Biggest Idea yet.

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THE BEST OF *THE LEMUR*

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Heard around *Town*

I have always depended on the kindness of lemurs.

I coulda had class. I coulda been a lemur. I could've been somebody, instead of a bum, which is what I am.

Luck, be a Lemur tonight.

O brave new world, that has such lemurs in 't!



Editors' Note

Letter from the Lemurs-in-Chief



The Lemur is a community for Duke students who like to continue conversations outside of class, share their wild, big ideas, and connect with others who pursue ideas for their own sake. It is also for people who like to move it, move it, or so we've heard.

We started *The Lemur* in our sophomore year. We started *The Lemur* because we had both observed that intellectual culture at Duke was not what it could, or should, be. We all know that Duke is extremely pre-professional—it's a quality that often feels intrinsic to our school culture. You can see it in our most popular majors, courses, extracurricular pursuits, and career outcomes.

That's why we were quite cautious about *The Lemur's* prospects back when we came up with the idea in fall 2023. Our experiences in our freshman year had given us the impression that the Duke community had little appetite for intellectual inquiry, and who could blame us? Within a week of stepping onto campus, our orientation leaders talked not about their personal passions, but about their internships; professors lauded the job prospects for their major; and the multitudes of clubs with "ties to industry" solicited our appearance at one of their vaunted *coffee chats*.

But there is no natural law that says Duke must always be like this.

Duke can be a vibrant place for all of us to explore our interests and passions. It can be a home for those who wish to live the life of the mind. And it can be a forum for the open discussion of big, difficult ideas—in politics, yes, but also history, religion, science, philosophy, and more.

We created *The Lemur* to help make Duke that kind of place.

We've been genuinely surprised at the depth of enthusiasm for *The Lemur* in the last three years. We now have a gang (a "conspiracy", as a group of lemurs is apparently called) of over thirty committed writers. We've published hundreds of articles which have been read by thousands of people, in the Duke community and beyond. And we are still very much growing.

What was once a mere gurgling blob of sourdough starter sitting idly in a mason jar has since risen to become a tangy, crusty loaf of intellectually-enriched educational dough. Slather some cultured butter on there and take a bite. Mmm.

We think *The Lemur* works for a couple of reasons. One is *curiosity*. At *The Lemur*, we write articles on the things that get us out of bed in the morning and the things that keep us up at night.

Editors' Note

We are also curious about each other. We edit each other's articles and debate them in and out of staff meetings (ask a lemur what these are like—let's just say, no slide presentations). We come together for evenings of discussion about French philosophers, U.S. immigration policy, *Moby-Dick*, the Age of Revolutions, and the future of AI, and whatever else we feel we absolutely cannot go another day without knowing more about.

Another thing that works about *The Lemur* is a different kind of *openness*. We are a community—open to all. Applications to *The Lemur* are not selective, because we don't believe that our college years should be defined by gatekeeping and hoop-jumping (the future belongs not to "excellent sheep," but to excellent lemurs). We're not bureaucratic and hierarchical like other student clubs—you're as involved as you want to be, and you get out what you put in. If you don't care enough, then it's not the place for you. But if you do, *The Lemur* is whatever you want to make it.

None of this means we don't work hard. That's a third cool thing about *The Lemur*: the *dedication*. We press and challenge each other, more than we are pressed and challenged in seminars, where we can often get by with just "piggybacking" off previous comments and merely pointing to page numbers in the text. Our editing process is rigorous but rewarding (I hope...).

And we also have fun—you aren't in *The Lemur* to prove yourself, you're in *The Lemur* to be yourself, when you can't find anywhere else at Duke that quite lets you do that. We have movie nights, play games, and get meals together. And, like all motley crews, we boast an impressive array of "strange bedfellows"—lemurs of all creeds, backgrounds, and talents attend our meetings, engage during our seminars, and publish on our website.

People often ask us why we're called *The Lemur*. We have a really pretentious answer: the philosopher Isaiah Berlin once wrote, in an essay on Tolstoy's view of history, about "hedgehogs" and "foxes." The hedgehog "knows one big thing," Berlin wrote, "and the fox knows many little things."

But Berlin never asked (and shame on him, really): what does the *lemur* know?

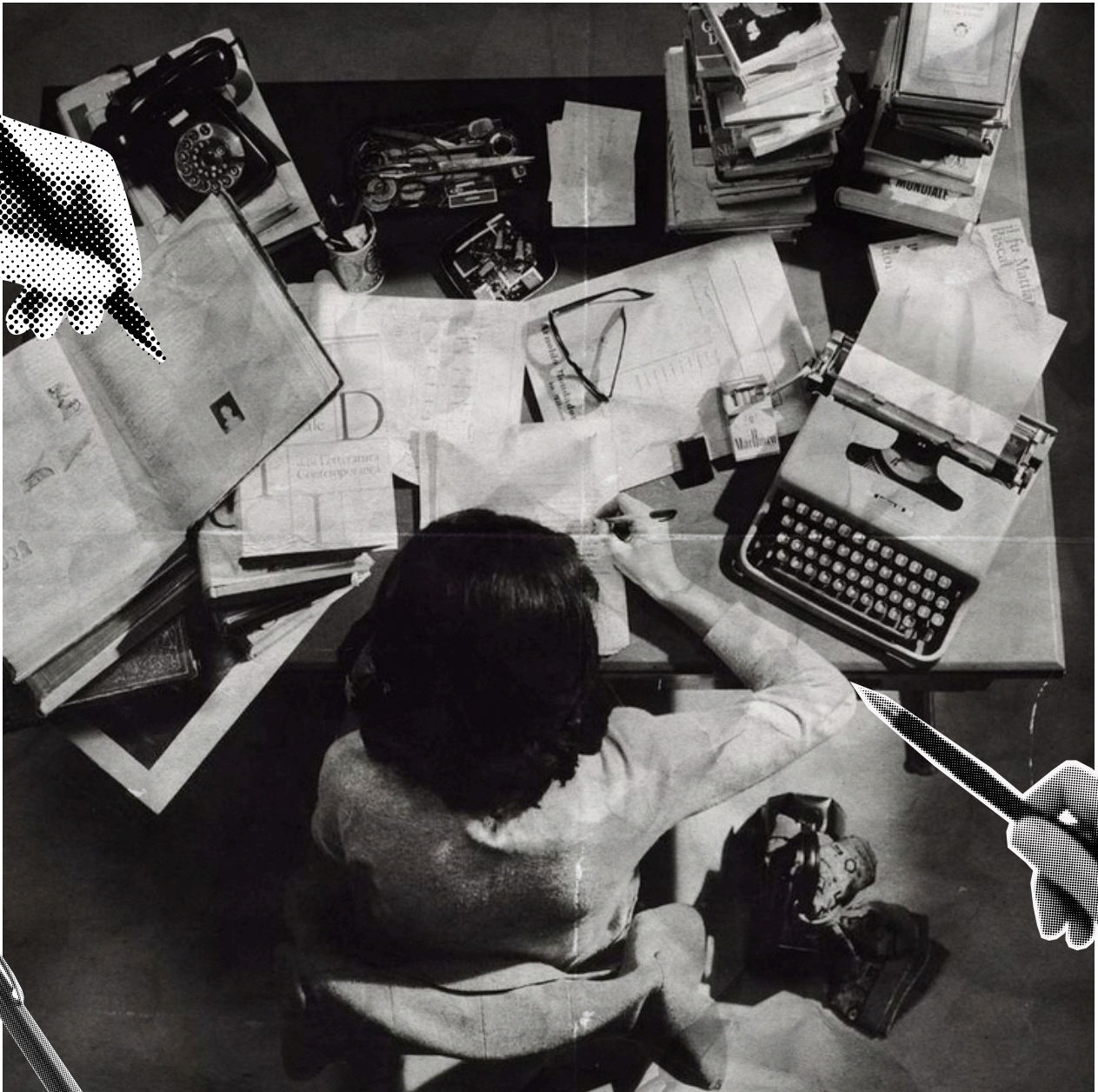
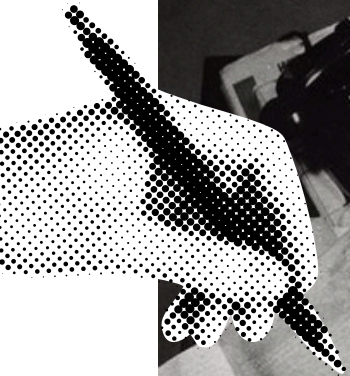
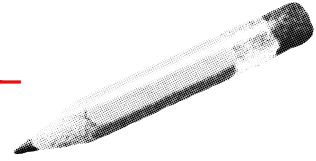
And no, we're not going to explain that.

All we can say is that we want nothing more than for our magazine to be a sanctuary for all you lemurs out there, not just the ones in Duke Forest. We hope it lasts long after we graduate.

But as a great man once said: enough of our yakking! Whaddya say, let's boogie!

—Zachary Partnoy & Sherman Criner

STOP



saying you're busy

Zachary Partnoy

How often in everyday conversation at Duke—even with close friends—do you feel pressured to prove that you are more scheduled, more stretched-thin, more tied-down by meetings, assignments, and obligations than your peer?

It feels only natural to tell others how busy we are, instead of telling them: “I’m well/ meh/not great, and here’s why.” The words come more easily—they feel like what we’re supposed to say. We want people to know how busy we are, not what emotions we’re experiencing, especially if those emotions reveal any kind of personal struggle. We actually want people to know we have no time for anything but work. Not only is not embarrassing to admit that we struggle to find time for hobbies or personal pursuits but, on the contrary, it’s the ultimate flex.

The short answer to why this is might just be, “We live in competitive times, and we go to a competitive university.” But I think there’s a deeper reason: one that gets to the heart of what doing valuable work and living a meaningful life looks like in the world today.

After years of thinking about this issue (and getting really frustrated by it!), I’ve come to believe that the most sought-after status in elite American life is that of being busy. At Duke, we are all victims of an elite culture (and if you’re here, you are an elite, no matter your upbringing) that prizes being busy over all else. This culture is preventing us from being happy. It is a culture of competition, powered by the narcissism of small differences—one which incentivizes us to prove that we are busier than our neighbor, because being busier than everyone else means being better, smarter, and, eventually, richer than everyone else. But my-house-is-bigger-than-yours materialism really only tells a very small part of the story—our warped value system is not just about conventional, material markers of status.

A society’s values, of course, are shaped by the nature of its institutions and culture: and if you look at those in our elite society, the obsession with being busy makes sense. Some of the leading institutions in corporate America, and all of elite American life, are lucrative professional services firms like consultancies and investment banks. In the public imagination, these firms are practically defined by cultures of overwork. This perception is accurate: for instance, excessive work pressure at investment banks has been linked to elevated rates of anxiety and depression. Attempts at internal reform in these workplaces have been unsurprisingly piecemeal and have been met with backlash.

Overwork culture is built on a broken value-and-incentive system. Those who toil long hours at investment banking and hedge fund jobs are the most well-compensated people in white-collar America, and among the most envied. We believe that their contributions to financial capitalism drive us forward (contrary to most histories and theories of how progress works, by the way). We believe they have it all figured out. And so we aspire to be like them: we orient our lives around the pursuit of busyness, these social leaders’ most outwardly distinguishing quality.

The fervor with which we have subscribed to this new vision of value has become religious. Colleges have become four-year ministries in evangelizing the gospel of overwork (and many acolytes are initiated even earlier). But this is not the Word; it is idolatry. Our worship at the Golden Calf of overscheduledness is obscuring our perception of how to live a meaningful life. It has prevented us from pursuing work that makes us happy and creates value for the world around us. Overwork in sectors of client-facing analytics, increasingly impossible to describe to outsiders, is starving us of meaning and connection.

“Time famine” prevents us from living well-rounded, intellectually and emotionally complete lives. I’ve observed this “I’m busier than you” paradigm at Duke for four years, and I’ve come to see it as a much larger problem than just an annoying conversational pattern. I think it’s one of the most frustrating and dangerous concepts in elite American life. Elite overwork is the least-documented, but perhaps most devastating, source of the high rates of depression and spiritual emptiness in the least materially troubled echelons of society.

This probably all sounds very frightening—very alarmist. But by the end of this article I will hope to have showed you a way out of this trap. But before we explore the problem in more depth, we should recognize that today’s elites’ work-life values stand in tragically ironic relief against the backdrop of American social history.

After all, it hasn’t always been this way.

History: Why does our society ascribe so much value to “being busy”?

The “Leisure Class” used to run America. That’s what economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen called the rich Gilded Age elites who flaunted their wealth through public enjoyment of newly available urban amenities. Think Central Park carriage rides (Veblen coined the term “conspicuous consumption”).

Veblen observed that the elites of his day showed their superiority to other elites by performing leisure. More than property even, the mark of wealth and superiority during that period was time off: if you were a manager at a major industrial



corporation, a Park Avenue heiress, a banker, or even a political figure, you showed your social equals that you had “made it” by advertising your freedom to pursue hitherto unavailable leisure and luxuries. You maximized time spent out of the office: being at the top meant having the freedom to do nothing.

Indeed, many of these elites did nothing, or at least very little, to reach success in the first place.

Gilded Age elites often cultivated enormous fortunes while working very little, although the idleness of the era is sometimes overstated. The robber barons and striving Horatio Alger entrepreneurs in the steel, railroad, electricity, and financial industries saw themselves less as Veblen’s loafing elites, and more as the apotheosis of Max Weber’s theory of the capitalism-driving “Protestant Ethic” (Weber was a contemporary of Veblen’s). The truth was somewhere in between.

But even for those “self-made” elites, life in the Gilded Age was never just about working hard: it was also about (conspicuous) enjoyment of the fruits of one’s labor. Having status, simply put, was signaling status, and vice versa. It was all about social performance, a concept we know very well in the 21st century, even if we’re performing the exact opposite values. The Gilded Age was not a paradise, and the pursuit of leisure is not an ideal North Star for a society. After all, idle aristocrats throughout history have done more damage to the world than perhaps any other class. I’m not saying that they are what we should be striving for.

The values of that society disserved not only striving immigrant industrial laborers at the bottom of the ladder but the elites, too—the era ha-

d its own sources of social pressure which engendered friction and alienation among the well-to-do (often to do with anxieties about attaining markers of social status, which Veblen categorized as “pecuniary emulation”).

But we are not better off by substituting overwork for leisure. Sure, Gilded Age elites worked less than elites today, but the sad fact is that, in terms of social value, they didn't work any less productively. The social value of work is derived not just from its profitability, but from the (perhaps utilitarian) benefits it provides for society as a whole. Veblen correctly observes that “productive work,” i.e. socially valuable work, was viewed with “odium” during the Gilded Age: the most exalted figures of the time sucked from society, rather than blow life into it. Contemporary elites are very comfortable with this idea, partially because they see it as safely the stuff of history.

They prefer to think that the lounging aristocrats of the American past were a different breed altogether, not like them, the “disruptors” and drivers of social progress at the top of the ladder today. But that's not true. *Today's elites do not, writ large, perform socially valuable work.* That's really ironic, and really sad. It means that even though elites today are busier than ever, what they do with their time spent working still produces stunningly little value for society.

The present: studies on overwork

Today's elites generally do not recognize that they don't produce value. That's the case for a variety of reasons, including the blind faith in meritocracy that still consumes elite society. But it is the “being busy” culture which really prevents contemporary elites from appreciating how similar they are to their idle forebears. Take the financial industry as a representative example. Self-delusion about producing value is particularly evident in the world of finance, although not exclusive to it.

The Wall Street wizards and “Masters of the Universe” most exalted by our socioeconomic value system actually produce very, very little value for society (there are many studies that indicate that a lot of finance today destroys value and, at the very least, the report card is mixed), even though they work brutally long hours, often much more than factory and service workers.

I am writing my senior thesis on a topic in the history of financial capitalism, and I've been thinking a lot about the link between financialization and the production of “value” for society. I feel confident enough to assert that there have been few periods in history—if any—in which finance was more removed from the creation of economic and social value than the present (weak regulation, excessive concentration, and virtually the entire private equity industry are big parts of the problem). But ask a modern finance bro why he deserves his salary and he'll provide some vague, rote answer about “efficient allocation of capital” and “long-term capital finance” that he probably genuinely believes.

I'm studying the history of financial capitalism partially to poke holes in those flimsy arguments. Yes, financial innovation often drives economic growth in capitalism, but almost never in the ways we think (for instance, it was personal credit at the most basic level which drove middle-class consumer prosperity in the 1920s, not the complex new mechanisms of Wall Street, which instead served to benefit a select few, and cause the crash).

It's important that we point this out because while there has never been a time in the history of capitalism when finance was of less significance to the production of value than today, financiers remain the most exalted, conspicuously “hard-working” figures in elite society, although many Americans might be more inclined to think of “salt-of-the-earth” farmers and small business own-

ers as the hardest-working members of society (to be fair, there's plenty of political mythmaking behind that paradigm, too).

This obvious gap between productivity and the perception of value creation is hard to understand. Part of the answer is that our woeful misunderstanding of meritocracy blinds us to the unproductive social outputs of elites. But the more powerful explanation is that most people don't acknowledge this gap exists. Why don't they acknowledge it? Because busyness has a value, or currency, of its own in elite circles.

But this is heresy, you say: how can I claim that people who work twelve hours a day in mentally demanding jobs don't have anything to show for themselves? It's because our "I'm busier than you" value culture has obscured the difference between hard work and overwork (or, in cat-poster parlance, working harder versus working "smarter"). The reason that we have a culture of "hard work" is not because we have a lot of absolutely essential hard work that needs to be done and can only be done by elites. In fact, many major corporations, Big Law firms, and financial services firms expect long hours from their employees not because the work they do is so challenging, but because of "cultural expectations of 24/7 availability," as described in a Harvard Business Review study on overwork. Quite simply, in a circular but profound way, the culture exists *because* it is a culture. ESSEC Business School economists Ioana Lupu and Shanming Liu, authors of the HBR study, posit the existence of an "entrainment cycle," which "emotionally and physically synchronizes [workers] with their organization's relentless tempo," trapping them in a culture which confers excessive value on the time spent on work, and provides extra points for personal sacrifices made in the name of work (often literally, in the form of meticulous performance evaluation systems).

Lupu and Liu offer compelling evidence that smarter and shorter schedules and shifts in organizational expectations will create happier and more productive workplace cultures. Broad adoption of these proposals would chip away at the influence of "I'm so busy" values in American work culture.

Similarities between the Leisure Class and today's "busy" elites

The culture of overwork doesn't make contemporary elites—no matter how busy they are—more socially productive than the yachting aristocrats of the Gilded Age. Hours on work don't translate to value from work because large organizational dynamics predicated on overwork often result in lower long-term innovation, productivity, and creativity and come to be replaced by cultures of burnout. The reality is that elite "overworkers" who consistently miss out on opportunities for personal growth and fulfillment become less effective workers. Beyond that, there's the problem that much of the actual work being done today in major professional services firms—the ones most likely to have "overwork" cultures—has become so abstract and downstream that its real-world impact is sometimes impossible to isolate or identify. This means that increases in absolute hours spent on work in those prestigious firms don't necessarily lead to outputs that marginally increase in value for society. Yale Law professor and scholar of meritocracy Daniel Markovits stresses this argument. The way to convince today's elites that they've got it wrong, Markovits told me, is not to argue that they benefit from "unearned advantage." It's more effective, and more truthful, Markovits argues, "to convince the rich that all their work isn't actually paying off."

So here's me making that argument. We wou-

ld be much happier if we abandoned the rat race. If we got off the treadmill. If we stopped and smelled the roses.

The following is a positive, plausible vision of a happy elite life without overwork.

You come home to your apartment—and, after a few years, hopefully, your home (you know, if we build some more)—with time to talk to your significant other, or your roommates. You have time to sit, decompress, and think for thirty minutes to an hour before maybe going out to meet someone for dinner or a fun activity, or having a restful night in, watching a great new show you actually have time to keep up with. And the work you might do will be *better* work. Sure, you might have to look at a few emails or plan out some things for the next day, but you also might have time to work on more meaningful ongoing projects. You might have more mental space for long-term projects, because you will have the breathing space to see the big picture at your job, to think more about where you want to be in six months, a year, five years—not just getting through the week. That sounds like a pretty good life to me.

So this is the great and sad irony. Veblen's theory of idle "leisure class" elites applies remarkably well, *mutatis mutandis*, to contemporary elites, people who might like to consider themselves members of a sort of "anti-leisure class." In fact, many similarities between the two classes are superficially obvious: conspicuous consumption remains fashionable, and with social media, greater access to international travel, and the importance of cultivating relationships with clients in professional services, it's arguably even worse than it once was. Emulation of social superiors remains an animating force toward lifestyle conformity, from checkout-lane People maga-

zines to subreddits on retail investing. And then there are the restrictive norms. Veblen said of the Leisure Class that "the range of employments open to them is rigidly defined." That sounds an awful lot like the experience of overly busy Duke students today—tech, consulting, and finance accounted for the post-graduation employment of 43% of the Class of 2024, the most recent class for which we have data from the Career Center.

This is my plea: We shouldn't exchange one unnecessary and unproductive set of values for another—I don't admire the idle aristocrats of the Gilded Age, but nor do I admire the eternally toiling elites of the new Gilded Age. Neither group is a force for good in its society, and both operate with value systems that make their members unhappy. The "I'm busier than you" value poisoning contemporary elites damages relationships, increases alienation and loneliness, and intensifies the most unproductive forms of social competition. And it's also just really not *nice*: after all, we are all busy. Suggesting—or outright saying—you are busier than someone else is insulting, immature, and demeaning, particularly in a small-differences university context (we all take classes, we all have internships, we all have extracurriculars).

So how do we fix this? Major changes to the shape of elite society can start with a radical transformation of what we value in early adulthood. We need to reject overwork culture in college. We should most admire our peers who tell us about their idiosyncratic hobbies or the interesting things they do with free time, not the ones who proudly show us their *horror vacui* G-cals or the "book time with me" functions in their e-mail signatures. We should push those who tell us eagerly about how busy they are to reveal more about what

more about what is actually going on in their lives, and whether they are busy with things that really interest them and make them happy.

And we should stop entering careers that aren't helping us—or society—out. I am convinced that the oversized influence of cult-like financial and corporate institutions in American professional life is the major driver of our distorted overwork value system (misapprehensions about tech entrepreneurship are also part of the problem).

Consequences

We need to get this right, because our broken busy-obsessed elite value system has political consequences, too. I believe that the increasingly nebulous nature of white-collar work is the most unpopular feature of elite society in the eyes of those who hate elites. Millions of Americans resent that the top of our society has derived its wealth from increasingly confusing places, through increasingly confusing methods—and this resentment is breeding anomie. Other theories about the sources of this anger don't quite add up. While David Brooks and other commentators have focused on the socially disuniting effect of educational status itself, I think that's diagnosing the symptom as the cause (nor is the political liberalization of higher-ed the primary problem—certainly at a place like Duke, students are bourgeois busybees, not bourgeois bohemians). Our higher educational institutions respond to trends; they don't set them, and while the simple supply problem of “elite overproduction” isn't helping, but that theory has been blown out of pseudo-intellectual proportion. The reason we have an “I'm busier than you” culture at Duke is because we have an “I'm busier than you” culture on Wall Street, in Washington, and in corporate America. And, as for any problematic value system tied to social institutions, it's a vicious cycle: the former feeds back into the latter.

So the hard work—the real hard work—really does start right here, and right now. As much as I hope that the next time you catch yourself telling someone just how busy you are will be a snap-out-of-it moment, I recognize it's much easier said than done. Being busy is a drug.. That Harvard Business Review study explicitly described it as such: “when employees fall out of sync with their companies (for example, during holidays or quiet periods), they often experience negative emotions such as anxiety, boredom, guilt, and even physical withdrawal symptoms.” It's not easy to kick addictions and bad habits, and it's not fun to be preached at about quitting by people who have never experienced the phenomenon themselves. So let me say that I get it. I sometimes feel I am only capable of being happy when I am extremely busy. I haven't taken as few as four classes in a semester at Duke since I was limited to that number in my freshman fall. I often feel that any day that goes by in which I don't produce something of value is a day wasted. Working hard fuels me with adrenaline—I'm not an ER doctor working fifteen-hour shifts, but in my own small way, I get the appeal of that rush. In fact, I've spent so much time working on this article in the wee hours of many mornings that I've lost time for sleep, exercise, and, well, leisure.

But I'm trying to break that feeling—I'm trying to appreciate leisure, without joining the Leisure Class. And, so far, I feel pretty good about it. If I'm busy, you'll never hear it from me.



From Memos



To Meditations

Why I Pivoted Toward Philosophy at

Duke

Cara Eaton

Open Microsoft Outlook. Thank you for your interest in [insert pre-professional organization here], But we do regret to inform you...Shoot. Move on, distract myself. Open LinkedIn. Immediate mistake: a barrage of posts from classmates about their checked boxes, which I have yet to check. I still need a summer internship for next year. The list of unchecked boxes grows, and I am drowning in pre-professional pressure.

Economics. Pre-law track. Consulting track. Public policy. A Wall Street hopeful here, a D.C.-bound classmate there. If I had a dollar for every Instagram post that reinforced my perceived inadequacy, I'd actually be able to afford Duke's tuition on my own dime.

Once upon a time, universities were ivy-coated institutions where intellectually curious students went to learn the secrets of the universe.

Or so I believed.

The mythos of the great American liberal arts university, producer of the zenith of human creative ability, is more than likely just that — a myth, at least for most. Financial factors have long limited the pursuit of the liberal arts to a select few, scholarships notwithstanding. And with elite university tuition steadily rising, it doesn't make financial sense to plunge headfirst into mastering the Greek classics.

My lofty liberal ideal began to drift into oblivion as a culture of prestige and profit consumed me: *adieu, l'idéal de la libre enquête.*

As I settled into Duke, reality felt different. I asked myself: Are we moving a little too far in the other direction? Should the liberal arts be reduced to a mere footnote in the ever-evolving story of the elite university? I was surprised by what I

perceived as a lack of creative, intellectual discourse among students. For many, the ultimate goal seemed to be to make as much money as possible, to the point that ambitions of wealth transgress mere return on educational investment.

The four most commonly pursued majors at Duke, according to the most recent available official data, are computer science, economics, biology, and public policy. I've met countless students in these majors (except perhaps biology) who seem to have a meager interest in their intended subject, beyond the seductive salary and lifestyle they expect at the end of the journey.

And yet, when I speak to many of these students, they do have cool intellectual interests and beliefs, as expected for anyone intelligent and attuned enough to attend Duke. They just don't pursue them.

I serve as an editor for The Chronicle's opinion section, where one of my writers wrote a brilliant piece questioning why Duke had what he perceived as a shockingly low amount of student activism, and concluded that the looming presence of corporate culture on campus curtails students from engaging not only out of fear that controversial activism will cost

them professional opportunities, but that their overwhelming focus on making money means "activism inevitably hits the backburner."

This pre-professional cultural contagion is a contagion in the truest sense, and its inescapable influence means that, like activism, intellectual activity often takes a back seat to career-oriented concerns. I was not immune.



I came into Duke wide-eyed and excited by the intellectual possibilities; the options for study seemed endless. Hell, Duke even has an individualized degree program (Program II), an initiative seemingly designed to accommodate unique academic interests.

(I know little about Program II, but it is not well-explained or advertised by Duke, which, besides being a result of the cultural issue I'm critiquing here, could point to fault with the university itself. Only a handful of students choose to pursue it. While their programs of study are fascinating, I can't help but notice that apparently only one student in my class has decided on this option.)

The student with a penchant for curriculum design may simply not attend Duke. Maybe they're studying somewhere like Brown. Not everyone needs to be one of these students, but we are certainly not evenly spread between hardline corporate hopefuls and creative individualists.

It's strange to realize that the most flexible program at Duke, which should really be the most welcoming, instead felt the most out of reach. Program II just didn't seem like a reality for me. Feelings of isolation in my longing for something different began to trickle in—and I'm aware of the air of pretension such a statement carries. It was more a matter of the theory that maybe Duke and I were just not simpatico.

Or maybe absolute intellectual freedom was generally rarer than I thought, but I wasn't content to just accept that notion.

As such thoughts bounced around my head, move-in day was fast approaching. I continued to conduct research, and even many Program I options started to fade from my view. I wanted to feel like I was doing the "right thing" (i.e., what everyone else was doing) as I rolled into Durham.

I was nervous and overwhelmed, especially since I didn't have any meaningful in-person connections with Duke alums or current students, partly due to the small student population from my home state. Instead, I was left paralyzed by the endless student profiles on Instagram, which featured those aforementioned and seemingly ubiquitous intended majors. Everyone else had it figured out. Why didn't I?

I felt adrift amidst a sea of students with clear career paths. I was faced with mounting uncertainty and felt pressure to find a sphere and stick to it. No doubt I was conforming, like many a befuddled 18-year-old before me. No doubt I should have taken an alternative route and let my passion for curiosity lead me. But hindsight is 20/20—then, public policy seemed an acceptable major, even respectable, and it felt personally tolerable, even if I had never expressed much interest in policy up to that point. So public policy it was.

Not completely satisfied with my choice, I began my intro class to public policy. I took my seat in the expansive yet crowded Old Chemistry building lecture hall and started to wonder. Was I alone in feeling discomfort?

It wasn't clear then just how many felt the same way I did, yet hesitated to take up disciplines that truly felt "right" to them, in favor of sticking to the beaten path.

This situation forced me to question what I truly valued, and I ultimately deduced that public policy wasn't for me. I found myself laughing at the idea of seriously working in policy. I knew the slightly anarchistic—or at least ideologically libertarian—views I had spent many happy hours cultivating in high school wouldn't fit neatly into the prestigious Washington D.C. internships for which my peers vied. Public policy had seemed like a safe choice, but actually experiencing the coursework confirmed that my true passions lay elsewhere.

Of course, we need public policy graduates, and now, more than ever, there is a pressing need to fight against executive overreach. The importance of the discipline is evident, and Duke's public policy programs are phenomenal. However, I wanted a stake in the ideas that form the foundation of policy, rather than the world of politics itself. And what were these ideas if not philosophy? What would be Jefferson's Declaration of Independence, if not for Locke's theory of natural rights? What would be MLK's "Letter from Birmingham Jail," if not for Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience"?

Grandiose, yes—but this realization led me to pursue opportunities where I could tangibly engage with philosophy in an environment that valued authentic intellectual exploration. Soon, the ideals of intellectual discovery in a supportive community, which I had thought unattainable amidst rushing to join various pre-professional organizations, finally began to manifest—in a more realistic, era-appropriate way. I started seeking opportunities and finding them, and discovered others who shared my frustration with Duke's corporate focus. I owe a lot to organizations like *The Lemur* (genuinely, they don't pay me for this), organizations where passion still thrives, waiting patiently for those who wish to seek it. I have not only found an outlet for my curiosity but also discovered an off-the-beaten-path side of Duke where eccentric intellectualism lives.

It didn't occur to me as a public policy major desperately trying to rush Scale and Coin that a few semesters later, I'd be in a room passionately discussing whether Burke or Paine got it right on the French Revolution, the clock rolling past our 6:30 pm endtime, but no one leaving because we all really love the debate.

Of course, I want to make money (and I find it hard to fully bash anyone unapologetic about this desire).

I am not so above it all to deny that I'd like to own a Mercedes-Benz 380 SL at some point, and philosophy is a degree that doesn't so neatly fulfill that goal, at least in the short term. (It helps to have a sense of humor about it, by the way. When people ask what I plan to do with a philosophy degree, I like to smirk and tell them that I want to live in a barrel on the street, like Diogenes.)

In all honesty, I feel incredibly fortunate that, in this era in which the liberal arts are in decline, I can still experience the spirit of intellectualism on which I'd pinned my college aspirations.

It just takes a little effort. I've come to understand that meaningful engagement with the liberal arts doesn't just happen. Robin Williams isn't going to pop out of nowhere, stand on my desk, and tell me to *carpe diem*, as in my pre-college dreams. It's up to me. I learned that if I wasn't happy floating about campus, living from one pre-professional rush event to another, I had to *carpe diem* in a way that aligns with my vision of college.

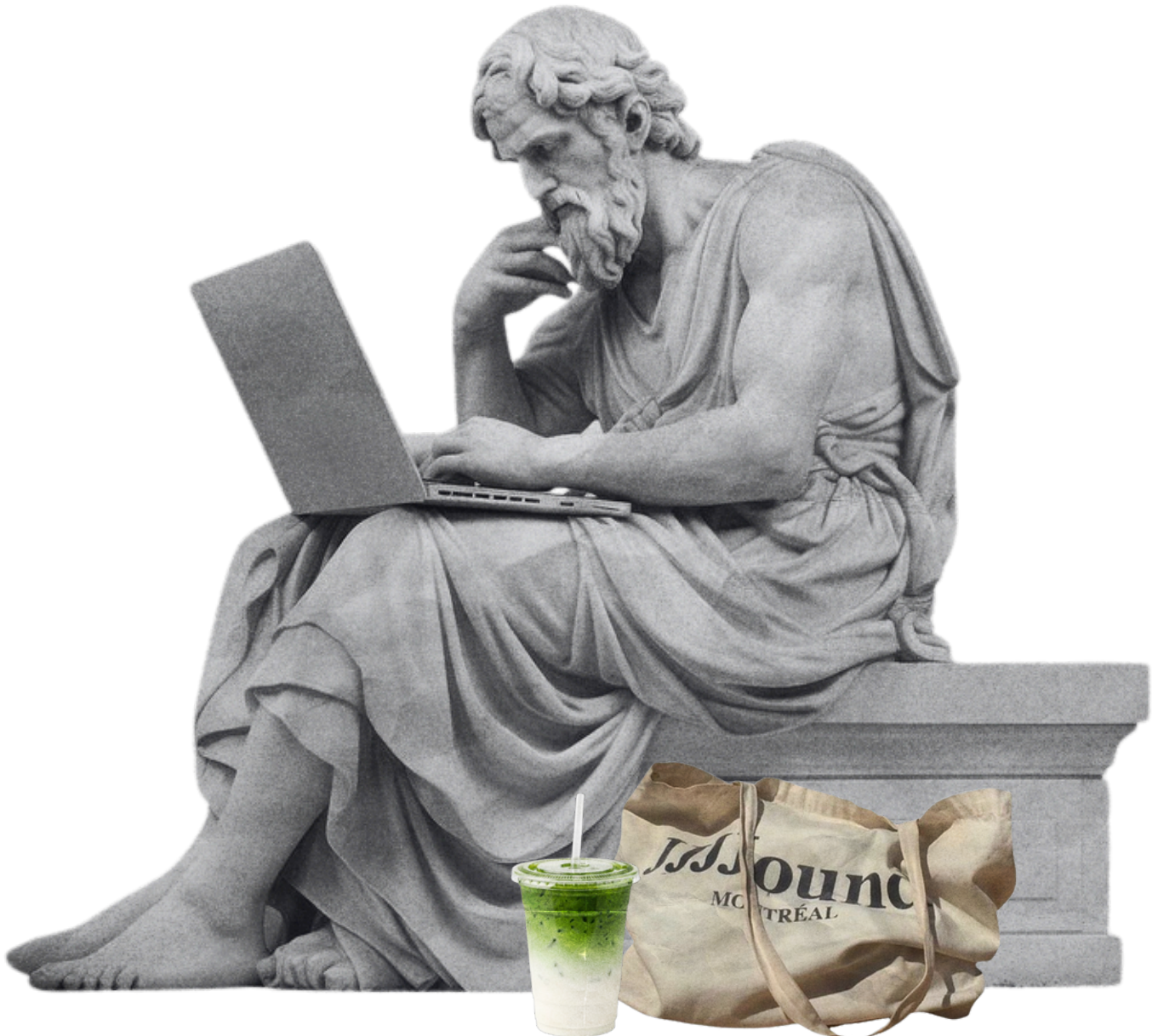
Jerry Garcia once sang, "You just got to poke around." The Grateful Dead, as philosophically astute as ever, got it right. You just got to poke around. Join an organization that actually excites you, meet that professor for coffee, read a ton of Kant, and submit your ramblings to that magazine you found.

You poke around enough, you get it down to a science, and you're empowered to take even more intellectual risk. You find opportunities that feel authentic to yourself, your mind, and your values. "Poking around" isn't the most eloquent term, but it's the best way I can express this attitude of unbridled curiosity. I believe it would serve Duke well if more of its students adopted "poking around" as their watchword, instead of the all-pervasive concept of "networking."

Using this mindset, I've launched into surprising and exciting places that disillusioned and bored first-semester me could never have envisioned. This summer, I decided to take my studies of philosophy to a different place, literally. I had initially enrolled in a "Duke-In" study abroad program simply because that's what everyone else was doing, and it felt like what I should be doing. However, it didn't offer the philosophy courses I precisely wanted. Almost on a lark, I started to research the best international philosophy schools, and (expecting absolutely nothing) sent in applications. And hey, I haven't conquered Duke, but two years ago I was in hour five of a rush event for an organization I didn't want to join, and this fall I'll be at Oxford. So, risks do sometimes pay off.

I pivoted to philosophy at Duke, the proverbial road less traveled, and it really has made all the difference. If I can impart one piece of advice from someone who was too risk-averse for too long, it would be to take that intellectual risk, then deal with the background noise later. When you find others who share your authentic interests, that background noise will fade—maybe even completely.

*adieu, l'idéal de la libre
enquête!*





*Illustration by Rachel Hudson, in collaboration with the Duke Lemur Center.
Ms. Hudson is an award-winning wildlife illustrator based in the UK.*

Non performative reading

Lauren Vandivier

On “Performative Reading”

Lauren Vandivier

The much-feared performative male, a prominent archetype among Gen Z men, has taken our culture by storm. On August 1st, a crowd of 300 gathered in Cal Anderson Park to judge Seattle’s first performative male contest, in which contestants ironically donned jorts, sipped matcha, and discussed third-wave feminism in hopes of being crowned the “most performative.” These displays embodied the essence of the performative male: someone who attempts to attract female attention by putting on a facade they believe women will enjoy.

With contests poking fun at performative males from Chicago to New York, we are seeing a new consciousness of performative behavior emerge with criticism in tow. For years now, harmful behaviors like performative activism and performative accountability have rightfully come under fire, with public figures often causing more damage to marginalized communities through empty words and emptier actions. In recent years, AT&T elected to sponsor LGBTQ+ nonprofits to exhibit its inclusiveness, while also financially supporting homophobic legislators through its PAC—a phenomenon all too common with corporations during and outside of Pride Month. Performative males also deserve their fair share of criticism; they present women with a false and sometimes predatory image of themselves. However, in recent years, the scope of criticism has widened, now including much more than just explicitly bad behavior. A major catalyst of the performative male contests was a collection of TikToks recording men in public who appeared intensely engaged in advanced classic literature, accusing them of pretending to read for attention.

And what started as a means of teasing seemingly pretentious men has spread to any readers caught with a print book in hand, leaving them subject to internet scorn for reading in public. Over time, this supposed performative behavior earned a name: performative reading. While I believe that criticism of performative activists and corporations has merit, what happens when the same performative lens is applied to reading? How much of performative reading is really performative? And how can we know for sure where to draw the line?

Categorizing reading as performative or nonperformative implies that we can know the intent behind someone’s actions just by looking at them, and that once we have determined their intent, we can be sure of the outcome of their actions. Everyone absorbs literature in a different way, just as one can either memorize flashcards or practice problems to study for an exam and still effectively absorb content.

Reading is similar; some people need to engage physically with the text, while others can skim a page and still understand what they have read. Believing that the only way to truly appreciate a book is in the privacy of your own home with highlighters and sticky notes assumes that everyone reads the same way and requires the same level of engagement with a text to understand it. If someone can read at a café table on a busy street, perhaps they aren’t reading performatively. Maybe they have no issue reading amid distractions. Moreover, even if someone is reading partly for attention, who is to say they aren’t assimilating what they’re reading?

When reading, the brain isn't distinguishing between a "pure" or performative motivation, and though a "performative" reader could be more distracted by their surroundings, this doesn't prevent them from being able to process the words in front of them. They might just be reading to be seen reading, but they are still reading.

There is certainly a line where reading becomes purely performative. Out of a hundred people reading on the subway, at least some of them are probably

The popularity of short-form content has conditioned us to make assumptions based on a five-second video

pretending to read for public validation, but I'm not willing to define where that line is. I can't be sure that the person with a book open in their lap, doing everything but reading it, isn't a literature professor who intended to read but has instead chosen to people-watch.



The popularity of short-form content has conditioned us to make assumptions based on a five-second video, but making assumptions about people's reading habits specifically can be performative in and of itself. If you are choosing to record and post someone reading in public, you are either asserting that you always engage with literature at a higher level and can thus recognize when others aren't, or that you would never stoop to the low of performative reading.

In this way, critics of performative reading are often performing themselves. A performative reader and someone who shames performative readers are both attempting to appeal to the same group of intelligent readers, but only one can be seen reading.

I don't believe that humans are meant to act performatively, constantly watching over their shoulder to see if others approve, but the act of performing for others is not bad on its own. It is once performative behaviors begin to have a negative effect on others—such as in the case of performative activists robbing support from those making a real impact—that they become harmful. Reading for public validation, however, does not seem to have any real effect on my life or anyone else's. In fact, labeling reading as performative or nonperformative in the same fashion as performative activism is only making reading a less desirable and accessible activity. "Performative" readers are pushed out of online literary communities, like BookTok or Bookstagram, as they see themselves being looked down upon for trying to appeal to a public that they potentially haven't even thought about. The rise of negative performative behaviors has put every community on edge, leading many to believe that any performative behavior is ill-intentioned. Though

reading to be seen rather than to truly absorb a book may defeat the purpose, I just don't believe it is more harmful than the judgment being introduced in literary communities by criticizing "performative reading."

This topic is of personal significance to me, as I have always been an avid reader. The Little Golden Books hooked me, and I've been reading anything I can get my hands on ever since. For a brief stint in middle school, I concluded that I had better things to do than read, and settled for reading just one book that made me the most insufferable person ever (*The Catcher in the Rye*); but for the most part, I abandoned reading for about two years. In high school, I got back into reading with a passion, feeling all the more enlivened by the welcoming spaces online that allowed me to interact with other readers. If I had tried to get back into reading with the culture the way it is now, I would have had very little desire to join online reading communities. Not only is there heavy criticism of performative reading, but also judgment of which books people read—whether they are culturally significant or intellectually stimulating enough—which goes much beyond the usual debates surrounding controversial books. Many friendly and welcoming virtual communities don't act this way, but when videos mocking performative readers become more widespread, fewer people will want to engage in these spaces, or even read. By policing each other's reading experiences under the guise of protecting literary culture, we risk losing not just "performative" readers, but also genuine ones who may never discover their love for books.



“By policing each other’s reading experiences under the guise of protecting literary culture, we risk losing not just ‘performative’ readers, but also genuine ones who may never discover their love for books.”

The Lemur
Duke's Big Ideas Magazine

STUDENT
GERMANIA
LECTION

DISPATCHES

Why I Ran for German Parliament at 19

*by Anna
Ortwein*

Many people think politics should be the domain of seasoned professionals in suits – certainly not the place for a 19-year-old university student. But as someone who has always believed that freedom carries with it responsibility, I refused to let age hold me back. My name is Anna Ortwein, and at just 19, as an underclassman studying Political Science and Economics, I made an unconventional decision: I ran for the German Parliament.

Ever since I was very young, I've dreamed of owning my own apartment and car—buying and

earning them myself, not depending on my family. This principle of individual responsibility and freedom is precisely what drew me to the German Free Democratic Party (FDP). We believe in empowering people to make their own choices, but also expect them to take responsibility for those choices. As a parliamentary candidate, I certainly had my own responsibilities—I oversaw a campaign team of fifteen dedicated individuals organized into specialized committees handling finances, event coordination, and social media strategy. I attended numerous discussion panels

hosted by local organizations and stakeholders within my constituency, Göppingen. One such panel was hosted by local restaurant and hotel owners, who were grappling with the effects of the economic downturn. Fewer Germans had been able to afford to dine out, and a chronic shortage of workers in the hospitality sector meant shorter opening hours and reduced services. To connect with these small business owners, I drew on insights I had gained from my aunt, who runs an inn. For instance, she once pointed out to me the strange tax inconsistency: a sausage salad bought at the supermarket is taxed at 7%, but the same dish served in a restaurant—prepared with more effort by a trained cook—is taxed at 19% (and yes, Germans really do eat sausage salad). This small detail captured a larger issue: the structural challenges facing the hospitality industry. Concerns about economic pressure and the ongoing shortage of (skilled) workers came up in almost every discussion I had throughout the campaign. Our work drew significant attention

and support to the region: the chairman of my party's parliamentary group—soon to become the party's national leader—joined me as a speaker at one of my rallies, and the former vice governor and minister of justice headlined an event on migration policy.

Migration, of course, is a difficult and divisive issue in German politics. One of the most unforgettable moments of my campaign came not from interacting with those high-profile guests, but during a school panel. A student, around 15 years old, asked me about a tragic incident in Aschaffenburg, where an Afghan migrant had killed a 10-year-old child and a kindergarten teacher. Her voice trembled—not just with curiosity, but with fear.

Germany had experienced several such incidents in recent weeks, and it was clear how deeply this one had affected her. I was able to connect with her—not only because I took her concerns seriously, but also because of our closeness in age. I responded by outlining both my party's and my own approach: to meet these challenges with empathy and democratic resolve. I believe that Germany urgently needs skilled and qualified immigrants to support our aging population. At the same time, we must regain control over irregular migration. That means centralizing deportation procedures at the federal level—because the current state-led system is inefficient and inconsistent—and accelerating asylum decisions to ensure they are handled both swiftly and fairly.

This conversation inevitably reminded me of the U.S. immigration crisis, which has many parallels with the European one: millions of people arriving, often seeking refuge or better economic opportunities, yet facing an inconsistent and out-

Migration isn't just an abstract issue—it's something that shapes our lives and our communities.

dated legal framework and a polarized political environment. I believe that just as the U.S. needs clear, compassionate pathways—both for skilled workers and for those fleeing violence—Germany must also balance humanitarian responsibilities with lawful and orderly processes. Whether in Europe or across the Atlantic, these policies aren't just about abstract statistics; they're about real people and families, whose hopes, fears, and futures are on the line. That student reminded me that migration isn't just an abstract policy issue—it's something that shapes hopes, fears, and lives in our communities. Listening to voices like hers grounded my campaign in what really matters, and deepened my commitment to responsible, compassionate l-

leadership. My age helped me listen to her, and it made me a better politician.

As a young person, education is deeply personal for me. In Germany, academic opportunities depend heavily on family background and socioeconomic status. I've witnessed friends struggle because they didn't have parental support with homework or couldn't afford extra lessons or resources. While I was fortunate enough to overcome that challenge, working hard at school,

spending afternoons as a guide at the local Jewish museum, archives, and even helped reinstate my city's youth council after it was dissolved due to a bureaucratic technicality (only 22 young people applied for 20 seats, but the rules required a frustratingly arbitrary cutoff of 30 applicants). I launched a petition, gathered signatures, and pushed until the council was finally reinstated. While I managed to succeed, I saw just how easily others were left behind.

Joining the FDP gave me the chance to address the issues that bothered me most, and that affect so many young people in Germany: why aren't schools teaching us important practical skills like how to file taxes or navigate digital spaces effectively? How can we support students whose homes can't provide extra educational resources? Of course, these aren't just educational questions—they're political ones. That's why I stepped up as a candidate to advocate for fundamental educational reforms, to ensure everyone has a chance at education and a chance through education (*"Chance auf Bildung, Chance durch Bildung"*). This later became my election slogan.

But I am also motivated by issues that have less to do with my age and generation, which might surprise those who think young people have a nar-



row set of political interests. Infrastructure is another one of the main reasons I decided to run. The "B10" road, a key transport artery for commuters and freight, is vital to the economic heartbeat of the Stuttgart region—but it's in urgent need of renovation. Bureaucratic delays at state and federal levels have turned the project into a frustrating game of ping-pong which, if left unresolved, means losing local businesses, discouraging new in-

vestment, and ultimately jeopardizing the economic stability of the region I call home. This isn't just about fixing a road—it's about securing the future of our community. It's about protecting the place where I grew up—the place I genuinely love.

I had to have these strong convictions in order to overcome the challenges I faced as a young candidate. During the campaign, I faced the harsh realities of politics, particularly at the hands of other, sometimes unscrupulous candidates trying to boost their position in the polls. At one big event, the local conservative candidate from the CDU, the conservative party, falsely blamed the FDP and its former parliamentarian for blocking the key B10 infrastructure project (the one that I care so much about!). We later found out that it was actually the Social Democrats and the Greens who scrapped the plans. What made this worse was that our former parliamentarian—who was wrongly accused—had already passed away and couldn't defend himself. That hit hard. This issue isn't just another political talking point; it directly affects the future of young people in our region, myself included. Seeing this issue get twisted for political gain was deeply disappointing. It made one thing painfully clear: for my conservative rival candidate, it wasn't about the issue at all—it was a-

I was also stunned when the AfD, the right-wing party of Germany, which also has famous right-extremist politicians in their ranks, tried to undermine me personally online, saying that “interns shouldn’t rule the country” (I didn’t have an internship at that time :(– please get me one). In my constituency, the AfD holds one of its strongholds in Western Germany. Their tactics went beyond online smear campaigns—the local chairman of the AfD began showing up weekly for lunch at my aunt’s inn, lingering just long enough to send a message. It was an obvious attempt at intimidation—not just of me, but of my family. And it hasn’t stopped – even after the election. What struck me most wasn’t just the pettiness or the brazenness of their attempts to scare me off—it was how normalized this kind of behavior has become in politics. When political disagreement turns into personal harassment, especially by those in positions of influence, it signals something deeply broken in our democratic culture, in Germany and elsewhere. But instead of backing down, these experiences only strengthened my resolve. If anything, they reminded me exactly why I got involved in politics in the first place: to push back against fear with integrity, and to prove that young voices aren’t just valid—they’re necessary.

Of course, had AfD even done a little research, they would have realized that, considering I was 17th on the list, it was highly unlikely I’d be elected this time since my party was going through a major crisis and had lost half its voters (I would have had a better chance in 2021). I came to understand that it was just reflexive propaganda on their part, so I decided to take it less seriously and responded in kind, posting comments that made it clear I wasn’t fazed: “Fake News: I’m not doing an internship.”

(For context, the low polling numbers for my party, the FDP, were largely due to the challenges of being in a coalition with two left-leaning parties—the Social Democrats and the Greens. As a centrist party, the FDP often clashed with its coalition partners, leading

to a public perception of constant infighting and political gridlock, rather than effective policymaking. After the war in Ukraine broke out, all parties in the

coalition agreed on the importance of supporting Ukraine—a commitment that required significant funding and resource reallocation. However, the coalition never renegotiated its original agreement to reflect these new priorities. As a result, disagreements over budget allocations and long-term energy policy became frequent and increasingly public. The situation escalated further after Donald Trump won the U.S. presidential election, signaling a likely reduction in American support for Ukraine. The German government recognized it would need to step up. But this raised a constitutional dilemma: Germany’s debt brake imposes strict limits on public borrowing. While the Social Democrats and Greens pushed to loosen the debt cap to increase financial aid to Ukraine, the FDP took a different stance—refusing to cross the debt threshold, and instead advocating for military support through weapons and equipment).

These experiences with intimidation and underhanded political tactics weren’t just challenges – they were wake-up calls. If young people like you and me don’t stand up, voice our concerns, and fight back against m-



information, we'll be overlooked and stuck with the decisions older generations make today. The recent parliamentary decision to take on 1 trillion euros in debt exemplifies this perfectly. Our generation will pay for this debt—we're the ones who won't be able to invest that kind of money in the future—money that could have gone toward fighting climate change, modernizing schools, or fixing crumbling infrastructure.



Those one trillion euros aren't being invested in us. You might think: "Finally! Here's funding that will benefit us, the younger generation – since we're the ones footing the bill." But you'd be wrong. It won't be spent on climate action, education, or infrastructure. Instead, it's being used to finance the campaign promises of conservatives and social democrats – everything except initiatives for young people. This isn't just about budgets—it's about whose voices get to be heard in the rooms where decisions are made. When young people are excluded from policy priorities, it's often because we're not at the table in the first place (of course, you cannot even run for Congress at age 19 in the United States). The arguments for increasing age diversity in politics are clear: only when all people are truly represented can

decisions genuinely reflect their interests. Yet when it comes to taking real, concrete steps toward inclusion, many fall short. The gender gap remains bigger than you might think in German politics. When I decided to run for the German Parliament, there was one other woman in the race to represent my party – making two of us. Both of us had impressive credentials: I was studying at Duke, and she was the Vice CEO of a medium-sized firm. Still, the president of my local party branch wasn't satisfied. Convinced that only a man could win votes, he actively searched for a male candidate to replace us. He managed to bring in his preferred candidate – a man – by the day of the nomination event. But when it came time for speeches and questions from the audience, that candidate could barely offer anything of su-

bstance. It was all empty, populist slogans—no vision, no connection to the challenges we face. It became clear that the push for a male replacement was never about competence. It was about preserving control and the status quo.

*Only then will
the prejudices
that hold us
back begin to
fade.*

This was a clear example of how diversity is celebrated in theory but quietly undermined in practice. Through his actions, I witnessed firsthand the deeply rooted, outdated power dynamics that still shape political decision-making. In his attempt to sabotage my campaign, the local party president falsely informed the board that the state leadership wouldn't support my candidacy – and even suggested announcing this publicly at the nomination event. But I refused to let that narrative stand. I reached out directly to the president of the state board – a sitting member of the German Parliament and the Secretary of Transportation and Digital Services. He confirmed that the claims were entirely untrue. Within hours, he sent a formal letter not only refuting the misinformation but offering a strong endorsement of my candidacy and sharply criticizing the local president's leadership style. Ironically, the same person who tried to silence me ended up resigning – all it took was a then-18-year-old woman standing her ground. I still smile when I think about that. We need to stand up to these local opponents of opportunity and diverse democracy in Germany.

I also encountered open sexism outside of the internal party politics, during the campaign itself.

My identity as a young woman in politics was frequently reduced to looks or mocked outright: I still remember older men saying things like, “Yes, I remember something as beautiful as you,” or “I know better places for women than politics—like the kitchen,” and even, “Before you get my vote, you could do something for me.” Many Americans might assume that Germany, having had a female chancellor for so long, is inherently progressive when it comes to women in politics. In reality, though, the country still struggles with deeply ingrained biases. The sexist remarks I encountered weren't just offhand comments; they reflected a culture that often fails to recognize young women as serious political voices. After the election, women's representation in the German Parliament fell from 35% to 32%. Only approximately 8% total are under 30 years old—despite the fact that the decisions made today will affect younger generations the most. Clearly, diversity in politics isn't something we can take for granted – it's something we must actively and continuously pursue—the root of the issue lies within German society itself, not with female candidates. When young people and women are sidelined from decision-making, their needs, futures, and ideas are too easily overlooked. If we want policies that genuinely serve the next generation and women, we need more than symbolic gestures—we need real access, real allies, and real change. It's crucial that women gain stronger representation in parliament, government, and senior leadership roles. Only then will the prejudices that hold us back begin to fade.

My journey is far from finished. I remain committed to fighting for the future of my generation, my home, and a society built on true freedom and responsibility. I will continue to put forward motions on the issues I care about—education, climate change, transatlantic relations, and infrastructure—at our national conventions. And once I graduate from Duke, I'll run for office again—this time, hopefully with a win. And I encourage you to join me. Your role as a citizen doesn't end with voting— it begins there. Inform yourself, speak out, and fight for the future you believe in.

Where David French



Goes
Too
Far

Last summer, I spent a week with David French in Washington, D.C., as part of an American Enterprise Institute-sponsored seminar on pluralism, the belief that differences do not necessitate social distance. Over long lunches and spirited conversations with students from across the U.S. and world, I found Mr. French to be a generous, well-meaning, and deeply sincere individual committed to his particular conception of American democracy. He's someone who, whether its on the Holy Post's "French Friday" segments or the *New York Times'* opinion column, wrestles openly with the tensions between faith and politics, and, more importantly does so in settings that are not always receptive to

and to view the public square as a neutral arena for what are ultimately intractable policy disagreements. French argues that Christians ought to be far more concerned with how they interact with the wider political world than with the actual content or ends of their political decisions.

This emphasis on tone over substance has drawn widespread criticism. Many, Sohrab Ahmari most prominently, have argued that French's political thought is grounded less in Christian tradition than in the secular tenets of liberalism, individual autonomy as the highest political good, the primacy of negative liberty, and a vision of government that is procedurally fair but substanti-

Where David French Goes Too Far

Sherman Criner

faithful, "little-o" orthodox Christians. Yet it was also in those conversations at AEI's historic Andrew Mellon building, and especially in reading French's much-discussed New York Times editorial endorsing Kamala Harris for president, that I came to see what I believe is the central philosophical and moral flaw of what I'll call David Frenchism:

not merely its indebtedness to liberalism, as his critics often allege, but its anxious desire to be right about a candidate, to treat political judgment as a solvable moral equation rather than a deeply limited act of prudence.

In its most charitable form, David Frenchism is a political sensibility that cautions Americans, particularly evangelical Christian Americans, to

vexily empty. While that critique is well-worn and has been litigated exhaustively, it is not, in my view, the deepest issue. Liberalism may shape French's premises, but the deeper problem is the confidence with which he believes those premises yield definitive Christian conclusions.

French seems to treat politics as a field that offers "right" and "wrong" answers, answers that can be deduced from a mix of liberal proceduralism, Christian moral vocabulary, and a heavy dose of consequentialist reasoning. This is a posture foreign to the Christian tradition, which has long understood political judgment as an exercise of prudence under conditions of radical uncertainty. And yet French repeatedly presents his political choices as if they are not simply his judgments but moral imperatives that follow from Christian ethi-

This tendency is most visible in his endorsement of Kamala Harris. French argues throughout the essay from a premise that many Christians, including myself, share: character matters in leadership, and political choices should reflect deeper moral convictions. “I believe life begins at conception,” he writes in the first sentence. a statement that both signals his pro-life commitments and sets up his overtly moral case against Donald Trump, who French later portrays as unreceptive to pro-life policies given the president’s lack of first principles.

But it is precisely this framing that makes his subsequent defense of voting for Harris, a candidate who supports abortion access far beyond what most Christians would consider acceptable, all the more perplexing. French’s central contention is that the Republican Party under

Trump, and the man himself, have abandoned their moral compass, and that voting for Trump would amount to endorsing cruelty, deceit, and a degraded political ethos. Yet he never seriously engages with the moral implications of supporting a candidate who, by French’s own evangelical standards, supports policies he considers gravely immoral. Instead, he treats a vote for Harris as primarily a rejection of Trump or as a necessary choice for preserving institutions, without grappling with the moral cost of endorsing policies that violate his own stated convictions.

But who’s to say that the moral compromise French makes is any better than the compromise made by Christians who reluctantly voted for Trump?

French attempts to resolve this tension through consequentialism: under Trump, he argues, abortion rates did not decline, and the pro-life cause suffered political backlash and cultural erosion. But once he turns to outcomes, speculative, unknowable, and notoriously slippery, his argument departs from Christian moral reasoning entirely. Traditional Christian moral teaching does not deny that consequences matter, but it insists that they cannot be the determining ground of a moral judgment. Christians are called to discern right and wrong based on what is intrinsically just or unjust, not on predictions about how events might unfold. Prudence requires acknowledging consequences, but it also requires humility, a recognition that human beings do not possess the omniscience needed to weigh future outcomes with precision.

If, as French insists, life begins at conception and

All we can say about politicians with confidence is that every human being, politician or otherwise, falls short of moral perfection.

abortion is the unjust taking of innocent human life, then it is hard to see how voting for a candidate who supports its legal expansion becomes the clearly lesser moral harm. By French’s own logic, one might say that voting for Harris “validates her cruelty.”

At best, his reasoning appeals to unknowable hypotheticals: perhaps Harris would govern more moderately than her rhetoric suggests; perhaps Trump’s election would produce even worse cultural consequences.

But we are not omniscient. We cannot know how any politician will govern, nor can we assign precise moral weights to competing potential harms. All we can say with certainty is that every politician is morally compromised.

To French's credit, he notes that abortion is a "social phenomenon," rooted in cultural and economic realities that law alone cannot fix and about which reasonable can hold differing opinions. Yet in making this point, he sidesteps the most relevant question: What does it mean to knowingly cast a vote for someone who would use state power to protect and expand what one believes is a grave moral evil? Why spend so much effort arguing, in one of the nation's largest publications, that his vote is exceedingly moral, only then to concede that reasonable people may disagree?

If Trump were truly as monstrous as French believes, if he was actually Hitler as some say, wouldn't it follow that no reasonable person could vote for him, regardless of their rationale? His own concession, "reasonable people disagree," undoes the moral determinacy he tries so hard to establish.

If it sounds like French's position is less coherent than he suggests, that is because it is. What he ultimately offers is a prudential judgment presented with the confidence of a moral command. And in doing so, he inadvertently turns extraordinarily complex political decisions, decisions that Christians have always understood to require intellectual humility, into matters of near-doctrinal significance. This elevates politics to a role it was never meant to play. It encourages Christians to see electoral choices as both more spiritually decisive and more readily knowable than they truly are. French treats the presidential ballot not as a flawed, imperfect exercise of judgment in a fallen world, but as a kind of moral equation with a single correct Christian answer.

Instead of acknowledging the limits of human reason and the ambiguity inherent in weighing imperfect candidates, French's framing suggests that faithful Christians can (and must) reach the same political conclusion he has simply by weighing the cosmic ledger of each candidate's harms and goods.

This is not Christian moral reasoning; it is an attempt to mimic omniscience. Even with a clear biblical standard, we can never fully know the consequences of our political actions. And when Christians speak as though we can know, we risk substituting the limits of prudence with the false precision of technocratic moralism.

French's mistake is not so much that he voted for Harris; it is that he framed his vote as a morally necessary conclusion rather than an imperfect, fallible judgment. By presenting the 2024 election as a clear choice between institutional preservation and moral rot, he created a false dichotomy that excluded other legitimate Christian options, abstention, third-party voting, or quiet selection of the perceived lesser evil.

The danger here is not that Christians will vote the "wrong" way, but that they will come to believe that voting *is* righteousness—that selecting the morally correct candidate purifies the conscience. Voting becomes less an act of prudence and more a litmus test of faith. And when Christians adopt this posture, we risk dividing the body of Christ over decisions Scripture does not command or forbid.

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French gestures toward this truth near the end of his essay, writing:

“We make false assumptions about a person’s character based on his or her political positions . . . We cannot write off millions of our fellow citizens who vote their consciences based on their own knowledge and political understanding.”

This admission should have been his starting point, not an afterthought. It undermines the moral determinacy of his argument and reveals what was always the case: he is offering one Christian’s limited perspective, not a doctrinal conclusion.

When we invest our electoral choices with ultimate significance, we drift into what C.S. Lewis called a “new and deadly disease,” treating politics as the natural food of the mind rather than something we consider for the sake of higher ends. The church has historically understood this danger, which is why it has avoided endorsing candidates or binding Christian conscience on matters where Scripture is silent.’

The Gospel calls Christians to uphold righteousness, justice, and peace; to defend the weak; and to seek the good of their communities. But no politician, party, or platform perfectly embodies these truths. Recognizing this should lead us to humility—a humility that tempers our rhetoric, moderates our certainty, and keeps us from mistaking prudential judgments for moral absolutes.

David French, in his earnest desire to make the “right” choice, ultimately collapses the distinction between Christian ethics and political calculation. His approach confuses piety with prudence, elevates electoral arithmetic to moral law, and risks turning the vote into a sacrament of civic religion. What Christians need instead is a chastened politics, one that acknowledges the limits of human knowledge, the fallibility of our judgments, and the primacy of the Gospel over every political loyalty.

“The Gospel calls Christians to uphold righteousness, justice, and peace; to defend the weak; and to seek the good of their communities. But no politician, party, or platform perfectly embodies these truths. Recognizing this should lead us to humility—a humility that tempers our rhetoric, moderates our certainty, and keeps us from mistaking prudential judgments for moral absolutes.”

ARTS & CULTURE



FICTION, HUMOR

ARTS & CULTURE

Dear Bespoke Halloween Animatronics, Ltd.,

Last week I received in the mail (nearly four months late) the custom “Mister Mummy, New Best Friend Edition” I ordered from your most recent catalog. In many ways, you *nailed it*: Mister Mummy’s eyes were the exact shade of yellow I specified (“Moroccan couscous”), and his arms were wrapped in the traditional white cloth bandages, just as I requested. Yes, in many ways, it’s been *great*. He helps around the house and never complains. He watches Vincente Minnelli musicals with me and laughs at all the right moments. And his stories from all those centuries locked up in the pyramids have enlivened many a dinner party. A fan favorite is the one about how damned dark it could get in there as the millennia rolled by like so many falling grains of sand. Man, that kills every time (and it’s a tough crowd, let me tell you). So that’s all been awesome. Great, really. *Stellar*.

Be that as it may, there’s been a little bit of a problem. Mister Mummy appears to be permanently stuck on the “Liable to Move of His Own Volition in a 25-Mile Radius” setting. Now, I know, I know...I requested this function during the intake. But I did so with the conviction that the function could be turned off as necessary (for example, if he attended my son Timmy’s parent-teacher conference while I was still in the shower). Indeed, it is Mister Mummy’s persistent wanderings on this impossible-to-deactivate setting that have led me to regret both the “of its own volition” and “25-mile” elements of my request.

RE: Mister Mummy

*By
William
Herff*

I won’t lie to you—at first, it was pretty fun to watch Mister Mummy hobble up and down the street. I would stand on the porch, hollering, “Later, pal! See you tonight for Negronis with the Fitzgeralds!” But soon Mister Mummy began venturing further and further out into town and, one night, he simply didn’t come home. My son Timmy and I sat there at the dinner table, staring at the cuckoo clock like a couple of schmucks while the linguine went cold. It was then that I realized that Mister Mummy didn’t feel like he had to answer to my dinner bell anymore, and that the world (that is, the world within 25 miles in any direction) was his oyster. Incidentally, I also realized that the magical scarab I had found glistening among the packing peanuts on Mister Mummy’s first day in my home was not, in fact, a “recall remote” by which I could summon him back to his waiting linguine, but rather

one might find in a vending machine at Sphinx International Airport. It was about as functional as my Vizio TV remote, which is to say, not functional at all (I had to restart the whole system three times during Meet Me in St. Louis last night!)

So I lost Mister Mummy. And what's more, I am losing my life to him. Mrs. Crabtree now cc's me, instead of him, on Timmy's report cards. Don from bridge club pointedly invited Mister Mummy, and not me, to join his new splinter club, "Gin Rummy with Mister Mummy" (he calls it that to add insult to injury, I suppose. Don, ladies and gentleman—always the asshole). And then there's Timmy, who would never play catch with me—oh no, God forbid I should ever approach you with a baseball mitt, you little snot-nosed bastard! But slap a baseball cap on a walking roll of Charmin and apparently he's as much of a father to you as the man who ejaculated you into existence twelve years ago. And speaking of my ex-wife,

whom I still do see (albeit mostly through a telescope)—when I stop by her house to pick up misplaced DoorDash orders, what do I find dangling from a rhinestone on her two-penny-hooker jeans but a familiar, shall we say, Bespoke, slip of bandage.

So, there's really no other way to say this: Mister Mummy has completely taken over my life. To tell you the truth, I was prepared to move past this dark chapter. Until this morning, that is. I was sitting in the breakfast nook admiring my bay window (which was by that point my only joy in life), when through that window crashed a construction brick that nearly decorated the opposite wall with my frontal lobe. That brick was thrown by your mummy, Bespoke Halloween Animatronics, Ltd.

up for whatever, whenever, however. But I'm just spitballing here.

And, last I checked, I don't remember selecting the "Fling a Brick at Your Owner" option on the intake form. In fact, I remember being distinctly surprised to find that option included there in the first place. Some people get off on the weirdest things (cough, cough, Don).

So now we have a problem. My social life is in tatters (bridge club is basically just me and Gladys at this point). Your Mummy is screwing my ex-wife like she's Cleo-fucking-patra (meanwhile my sex life is about as eventful as Kevin Spacey's acting career); my beloved bay window is as shattered as my ego; my son is forgetting my name and what I look like; and I haven't slept this little since I got that near-fatal case of food poisoning from Couscous Palooza 2007.

So, here's what you're going to do, Bespoke Halloween Animatronics, Ltd., and you better not fight me on this. Tomorrow morning you and your team will send me a custom animatronic for free. But this won't be another fucking Mister

Mummy, will it? Nope, this time I want something that can END Mister Mummy. For good: no canopic jars this time. Give me something that can do some real damage, like an alien with a vaporizer set to "H-Bomb Surprise." Or a Lithuanian zombie hunter—I hear they're real pieces of work. At the very least, somebody with good crossbow skills. Maybe a Lara Croft Tomb Raider type—you know, some tragic yet spontaneous little hellcat who's

I'll leave it to you to iron out the details. And while I don't know why I am vouchsafing so much trust in a company called Bespoke Halloween Animatr-

*So, there's
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ronics, Ltd., I can't escape the fact that my life has been in your hands ever since I saw that damned catalog.



With any luck, I'll get some semblance of my former life back once this new animatronic arrives. I'll finally be able to sleep at night once Mister Mummy is writhing in agony in the shadow realm, where Anubis has been tapping his feet waiting to gnaw on his well-preserved innards since the 26th century B.C.

I can't escape the fact that my life has been in your hands ever since I saw that damned catalog.

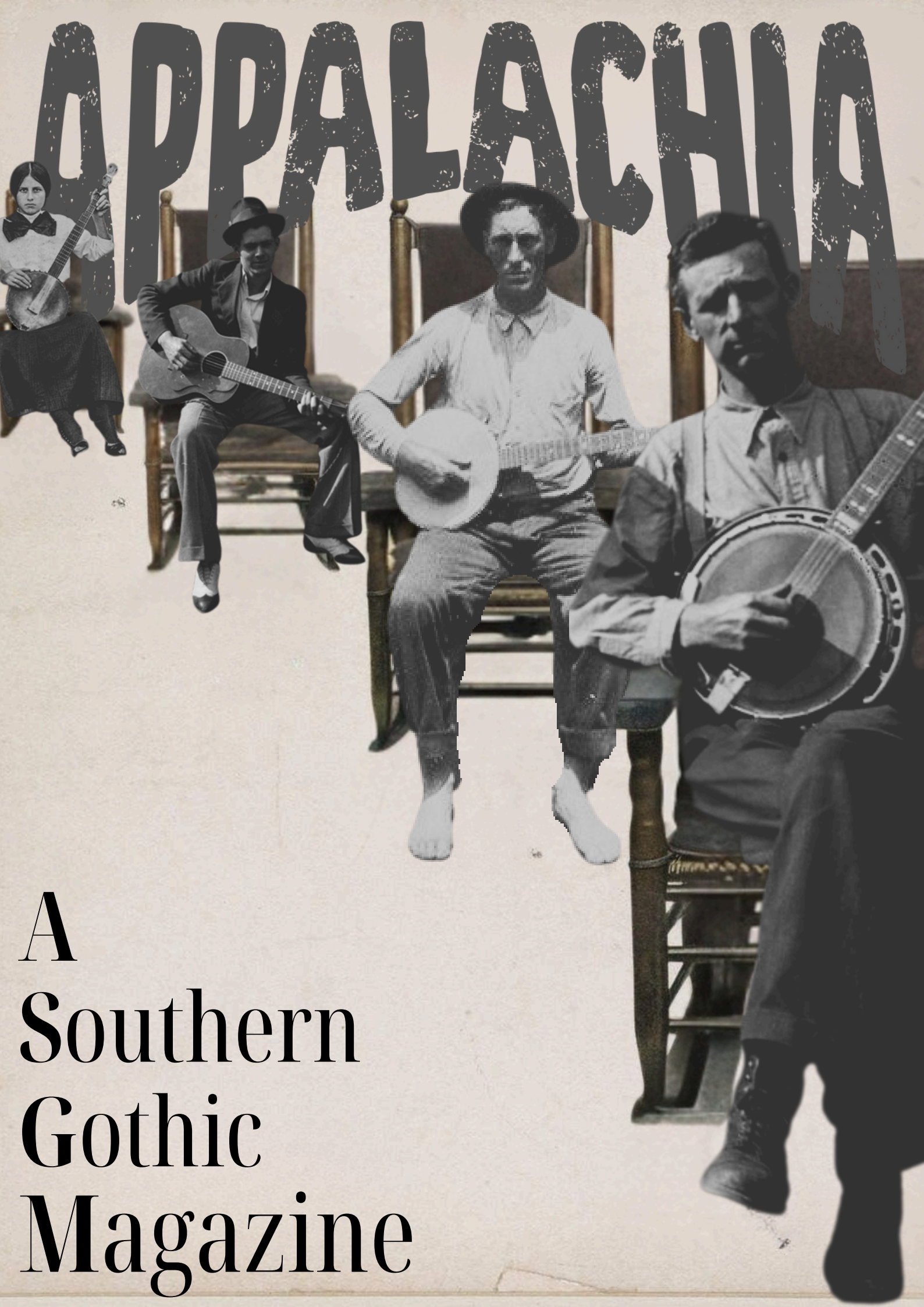
And maybe, just maybe, once Mister Mummy is gone, Timmy will realize that I am more than just that guy who watches Mommy through a telescope and buys Pizza Treatza Lunchables every now and again.

Don't let me down, guys. Please. Please God. Don't let me down.

Hoping all remains peachy with you,

— Jeremy Bobwell

Sent from my iPhone



APPALACHIA

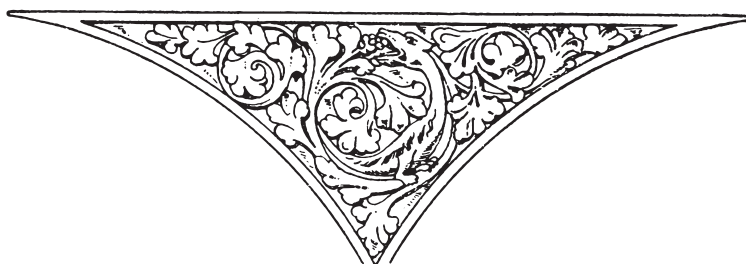
A
Southern
Gothic
Magazine

Kindness or Condescension?

The Othering of Poor White Southerners in Literary & Political Culture

By

ANNA VANNOY



A remote, seemingly desolate filling station. Trees and weeds encroach on the gas pumps and the shack. Four men—Lewis, Drew, Bobby, and Ed—exit their cars, impatient to get on with their camping adventure. The men struggle to understand the station attendant, who has an intellectual disability and thick accent. This is rural Georgia after all, they think. Lewis, Bobby, and Ed joke about him. But Drew strums on his guitar, uncomfortable with his companions' disdain and mockery for the man now filling up their cars. The sweet tones of Drew's guitar are suddenly echoed. Lonnie, a local boy, comes out from the shadows of the porch, masterfully playing a banjo against Drew's guitar. Lonnie is "probably a half-wit, likely from a family inbred to the point of imbecility and Albinism." His white-blond hair—including his eyebrows and eyelashes—and his pale, luminescent skin lend a spookiness to his demeanor. Something about him is wrong. Alien. Other. This moment, known as the "dueling banjos" scene, is one of the defining and most iconic scenes from the 1972 American thriller *Deliverance*, based on James Dickey's 1970 novel

of the same name. Lonnie, the "demented country boy," and the rest of the local people in this scene are portrayed as genetically, intellectually, geographically, and socially other to the protagonists of *Deliverance*—our four men eager to get on with their road trip. These backwoods locals become the object of ridicule, pity, condescension, and fear, for both protagonists and viewers. These are not people, after all—they are mountain people. Because of their isolation (both geographic and genetic) from the rest of America, indeed from the rest of the South, they are completely unrelatable beings to normal, sane, affluent, and liberal city dwellers—they may as well be extraterrestrials. This trope extends far beyond *Deliverance*. In a great deal of Southern literature—Gothic, Grotesque, and otherwise—poor white Southerners, especially children, are genetically, socially, and intellectually "othered." Protagonists frequently both fear and try to save these "others." When that doesn't work, they sometimes try to eliminate them. Scholar Elisabeth Aiken explored this idea in a 2020 essay, "Tacky Mountain Cousins," but this phenomenon has not

just been observed in the academy. It is part of a larger cultural and political conversation that has been relevant in mainstream elite circles since at least 2015, and maybe 2008. Of course, the people who read and write pieces about poor, white, conservative Southern folks are often educated, affluent, liberal Northerners (*New Yorker* readers and *Demon Copperhead* “discoverers,” let’s say). These elites tend to strain all depictions of poor white Appalachia through a liberal and easily digestible filter, losing realism and often empathy in the process. As a political matter, liberal and progressive intellectuals and politicians often shoot themselves in the foot as they try to ‘diagnose’ the condition of poor white southerners, inevitably alienating those they seek to help.

Aiken identifies this in her essay. She asserts that, historically, those who wrote about Appalachia from the outside characterized the place as a “strange land’... full of ‘peculiar people’— that is, people different from (and implicitly lesser than)

mainstream U.S. Society”. In the American tradition of highly regional “local color” fiction (often actually written by those not from the Appalachian region) “hill people” are depicted as ubiquitously one-dimensional: lazy, unclean, socially backward, and lacking civilized culture and education. “Local color” writers try to imbue Appalachia with the color they want to write about: one that is strange and genetically dissimilar to “the rest of us” in Northern, cultured, often liberal

America. Local color writers, Aiken’s essay asserts, are responsible for the myth-making and fictionalization of a very real region, filling it with caricatures instead of realistic characters, stereotypes instead of citizens, and fallacy-filled, half-hearted, condescending attempts at verisimilitude.

Let’s zero in on the genetic trope in this fiction. In general, because of their literary association with the fresh imprints of *genetic* inheritance, children are a popular vehicle for tropes depicting alleged incestuous tendencies in Appalachian and broader Southern culture. Children are also more powerful and empathetic subjects for urban and civilized protagonists who wish to “save” the poor white Southerners they come into contact with, even when no one is asking them to. These protagonists often express a desire to take these children out of their destructive mountain society. Both *Deliverance* and David Sedaris’ “The Girl Next Door” feature this paradigm: a protagonist who thinks of himself as a sophisticated savior, and who takes on a poor, white, implicitly inbred Southern child as a project: something to save, without stopping to consider if the child or their guardian even wants this.

In *Deliverance*, we are supposed to see Drew (the guitar player with a moral compass from the beginning of this essay) as the best of the four men. He is shown to be deeply affected by the cruelty with which the other men treat the locals. When Bobby looks around the filling station in disgust, saying “Christ, Drew. Drew, look at the junk...”, Drew admonishes him by saying “...not so loud. Let’s not upset these people.” While Drew earns points for his concern, the way he says “these people” reveals that he is not as innocent or respectful as the movie would have us believe at

first glance. There is a condescension there, an allusion to Drew and Bobby’s shared sentiments that they are superior to these people. Drew is implying not just that it is impolite to upset them, but that it is dangerous to do so, presumably beca-

“Something to save, without stopping to consider if the child or their guardian even wants this.”

use these wild local hill people are more prone to violence than civilized man. While the movie wants us to appreciate Drew's good heart, in truth, he has a superior, patronizing, and callous attitude towards the group of people who, because of their genetic differences (proven or otherwise), ultimately just make him uncomfortable.

The fact that *Deliverance* so clearly wants us to admire Drew, to see him as the best of the four men, is connected to the issue of superiority put forth in Aiken's essay and in media and politics today. Yes, Drew is kind to Lonnie and the other Appalachian locals. But it is condescension that drives that kindness. It is the belief he holds (exactly what Aiken details about the view of peculiar and implicitly lesser mountain people) that he is superior to these strange and genetically abnormal people who need his pity and quietly beg for his civilized saving, that allows and perpetuates the problematic stereotype of the genetic, social, and intellectual "otherness" of poor white Southerners.

Drew's savior complex towards poor white Southern children is echoed in "The Girl Next Door" by the humorist David Sedaris, published in *The New Yorker* in 2003. The story is about Sedaris' experience living in a cheap, junky apartment in the South, and the odd and ultimately antagonistic relationship he formed with his neighbors, a single mother and her nine-year-old daughter, Brandi. Sedaris' description of Brandi eerily echoes the genetic othering of Lonnie in Dickey's script for *Deliverance*. Sedaris writes that she was "blonde, [her] hair almost white, with invisible eyebrows and lashes... the girl appeared to have none at all." These alien features, so similar to Lonnie's, imply genetic inbreeding. Even if she doesn't have a genetic deficiency, her features render her unreadably foreign and off-putting to our narrator, and by extension, to us. Of course, *New Yorker* readers trust Sedaris as a civilized and respectable guide into these peoples' hillbilly tendencies and irresponsible lives—it is easy for readers of that magazine to adopt an even more supercilious and patronizing attitude toward Brandi than Sedaris.

But Sedaris does form a sort of connection with Brandi, a touching relationship which develops throughout the story. He fancies himself Brandi's mentor, trying (and failing) to teach her about the world to "broaden her horizons" by teaching her things she does not learn in her terrible school. He even has her make art. And while I believe that Sedaris' attempts to be a positive influence on Brandi do come from a genuinely kind and caring place, the fact that he feels the need to do so in the first place underscores how embedded the savior stereotype is in outsiders' attitudes about uplifting poor white Southerners. Sedaris displays a kind of benign naiveté about Brandi, likely informed by other depictions of poor white Southerners in media intended for wealthy educated Northerners (although Sedaris was of course famously poor at the time, he later worked his way into elite liberal circles). Sedaris is completely blindsided when he discovers that Brandi has been stealing from him and destroying the trinkets he gave her as gifts. He had a romantic notion of poor white Southerners wanting to be saved, amplified by the fact that he was dealing with a child, and a female one at that. After Sedaris confronts Brandi and her mother, the nine-year-old child begins to taunt and bully him, using slurs and intimidating tactics. When Sedaris realizes the consequences of his attempts, that he cannot and was never able to "save" Brandi, he effectively eliminates her from his life. He calls in his mother, the maternal safety net that Brandi will never have, who helps him move out of the apartment complex. He cannot confront the fact that, as Aiken shows, his schema about poor white Southerners and their need to be saved was never workable in the real world. It was only a romantic notion about a sad, difficult-to-improve reality of poverty and neglect.

I am not trying to make some sort of defense of the many unfortunate conditions of life for poor white Southerners. It's understandable why outsiders feel a desire to save children brought up in such circu-

mstances, just as we feel an obligation to help the destitute and despairing across the globe. Brandi deserves to grow up in a more stable and caring environment: the way she and her mother live is not healthy. But it is not Sedaris' responsibility to help them, especially when they didn't ask for help. Something more productive would be progressive social policies providing desperately needed support for poor white Southerners: a political solution based on hard numbers and realizable goals, not a cultural one based on elitist misapprehensions and condescension.

David Sedaris' position as someone who once lived among poor white Southerners – and at one point was more or less one himself – but now resides among and writes for the elite *New Yorker* audience gives him a unique position in this conversation. But he is still a victim of the biases and easy stereotypes of mainstream culture, despite his genuinely good intentions. In many ways, Sedaris reminds me of Jeannette Walls, whose best-selling memoir, *The Glass Castle*, centers on her difficult, idiosyncratic upbringing in shocking poverty in West Virginia with her charismatic but deeply dysfunctional parents. Walls and her siblings had to fend for themselves from stunningly young ages, as their parents prioritized their own pipe dreams and lofty ideals, choosing adventures over stability. Walls eventually left her family and moved to New York, where she attended Barnard, became a journalist, and gained entrée to the educated and affluent *New Yorker* stratum of American society. In writing *The Glass Castle*, Walls, even more so than Sedaris, had to contend with how to produce an account of her lived experience in white Southern poverty that is both digestible for the educated *New Yorker*-type reader and also something they are proud to say about their past. That is a tall order: people who didn't grow up in the South or experience Appalachian poverty might not understand how to reconcile the complex feelings of pride, community, and resolve of those living in these circumstances with the objectively sad and unhealthy lives they lead.

Drew, David Sedaris, and even Jeannette Walls have an inclination be saviors: that they want to try to save these poor, off-putting Southerners is rooted in the belief that because of their status as educated, wealthier, and liberal people, they know what's right. But this is a delicate balance to strike: though poor white Southerners, in both media and real life, often live in unhealthy environments marked by despair and neglect, no character (real or imagined) in any of these works ever personally requested help from a non-Appalachian savior.

“The current political insularity of the Democrats...has damaged the party's popularity and, in turn, its power.”

While the otherness we feel about the people of Appalachia may have some genuine root in their remarkable geographical and cultural isolation from mainstream American society, the extent to which the zeitgeist continues to traffic in tropes of inbreeding, intellectual disability, and general backwardness remains disproportionate. Its prevalence in media and culture today reveals a key reason why educated, affluent, and liberal political actors, including Democratic Party politicians and strategists, are increasingly alienating those they want to help. The current political insularity of the Democrats—who too often repeat the errors of their culturally dominant constituency, which has a weakness for condescending to those who don't share their educational privilege—has damaged the party's popularity and, in turn, its power. Democrats must stop condescending towards poor white Appalachians (among other groups)—perhaps some new voices in Southern literature can help them finally understand this demographic on its own terms.



What if the Jury

Had Already Decided
Before the Trial?

Trial by Social Media

The Future of Jury Impartiality in the Age of Information Proliferation

By

Emily McDermott

The courtroom has always been a public arena. From the world's very first courts in Mesopotamia, which held trials in public spaces, to the open-air ancient Greek courts that boasted large audiences of spectators, law has always been available to the public, and sometimes even designed for it. Law also has deep roots in performance (think of the popularity of *Law & Order*, John Grisham novels, and the television revolution spurred by the O.J. Simpson trial). The public's fascination with law has continued to develop in the modern age, accelerated by the proliferation of legal information and content on social media.

The American public has long been fascinated with

the drama of a trial, the lives of lawyers, and the intricacies of court proceedings. A cottage industry of law-themed entertainment—now driven by social media, as well as television and film—has emerged in response to that growing demand. This has had significant bidirectional consequences—just as social media increases public engagement and speculation about lurid ongoing cases (imagine the O.J. Simpson trial in the age of Facebook and X), so too can social

media fixation on a case have an influence on proceedings inside the courtroom. Fears that public-sphere pressure from social media has directly affected verdicts, argumentation, or witness testimony at scale may be overblown at this point. But social media is clearly already affecting the fairness of trials in the United States in one crucial way: influence on jury impartiality.

In our legal system, jury selection (or *voir dire*) is an onerous, multi-step process—the prosecution, defense, and the judge all have an interest in seating a fair and balanced jury. The process incorporates randomness (a feat—

ure of fair jury construction since ancient Athens) and specific tests of individual bias—jurors are first chosen from a jury wheel, respond to a qualification questionnaire, and are placed in a pool of fifty or sixty potential jurors. Jurors are then interviewed, sometimes rigorously, by the attorneys and judges involved in the case to identify potential conflicts of interest, sources of bias, or legitimate excuses to not participa-



te. In the final step, attorneys are allowed to remove unacceptable or undesirable jurors, until the pool of twelve takes shape. This process is designed to ensure that the jury is diverse, representative, and most importantly, unbiased. During a case, a jury is to be sequestered from any and all potentially influential outside information about the case: jurors should not mingle with anyone who has a stake in its outcome, nor should the jury conduct its own research or investigations into the factual and legal details of the case.

This avoidance-of-information requirement was once not too onerous for most juries: prior to the emergence of social media, legal information regarding any given case was not easily accessible. There was a delay in how information regarding the case and the public's opinion of the case could reach the jurors. Because of this, jurors had to rely exclusively on the actual evidence presented to them in the court in order to make their decisions. But as media has transformed and as technology has evolved, potentially influential information can become so omnipresent in ordinary arenas of media, culture, and daily life that even the most well-meaning and fastidious of jurors can come across it accidentally. Some, however, do find it on purpose. One questionnaire found that 46% of participants on a jury would look up the defendant on social media.

Many Americans rely on social media and search engines for news, communications, and immediate access to information, as needed or desired. This is the phenomenon of internet dependability, and jurors—representative of the broader public as they are intended to be—are not miraculously immune from it. According to a recent study, “over sixty percent of Americans rely on social media as their main source of news”. This figure includes information regarding high-profile legal cases. Americans

follow blockbuster trials (think Johnny Depp v. Amber Heard, Gwyneth Paltrow, Harvey Weinstein, and the Trump hush money trial) through social media apps. On the same apps, thousands of increasingly popular accounts are dedicated to giving legal advice, explaining basic legal proceedings, and analyzing current cases. In this ecosystem, prejudicial background on court participants and conspiracy theories run rampant. They can be recorded and published at the push of a button, with the purpose of viewer engagement, not education. These carefully curated clips are omnipresent on the web, but they come at a cost to the impartiality of those involved in legal proceedings, specifically jurors.

Illusory Truth Effect

One of the most dangerous cognitive traps produced by social media is a concept called the illusory truth effect. This phenomenon occurs when one hears the same false information repeatedly and comes to believe that it is true. People can still be vulnerable to this effect when they are sure that the information is false. The structure of social media—including the role of algorithms in encouraging rapid-fire consumption of the same or similar content—has exponentially increased instances of the illusory truth effect. Constant reinforcement of false, sensationalized information, boosted by the algorithm, can ultimately result in consumers and users coming to believe and accept that information as true. Jurors, if they are regular social media users, are not exempt from this. If content related to the trial manages to make its way to a juror's feeds, it is easy for this information to become muddled with the real evidence the jury is presented with in the trial. This is a major problem because if jurors still follow social media during the trial and algorithms present them with information related to the trial in question, the juror will be

exposed to new, often low-quality and biased information about the case. Because the courtroom demands higher evidentiary standards than social media, jurors could be exposed to flawed and dubious information about the case and could subconsciously come to treat it with the same truth value as the rigorously presented cases in court because of the illusory truth effect.

Groupthink

Another similar jury-impartiality risk posed by

social media is the concept of “groupthink.” Groupthink” occurs when a group of well-intentioned people make irrational or non-optimal decisions spurred by the urge to conform or because they think that going against the majority is impossible. Jurors on social media will easily be able to take the “pulse” of public sentiment about their case. Jurors on social media will form a picture of the kind of public outcry or scrutiny they will face for making a given decision in the case. Even if faulty or biased information jur-

ors encounter on social media does not provide an illusory truth effect and sway their opinions on the merits of the case, a juror’s knowledge of what the public perceives to be the “right” can also affect a juror’s decision. This concern predates social media and is a major part of historical debates over the integrity of juries. Judge Stuart H. Perry argued against open trial in 1931 when he noted that newspapers were “asserting their moral authority over audiences”. Social media has intensified this problem by an order of magnitude. A juror is less likely to vote for a verdict that makes them seem immoral, ev-

il, or even just out of touch in the public eye. Because social media provides a megaphone to the most extreme and emotional opinions (far more so than, say, newspapers, or even cable news) jurors who are not forbidden to follow social media may feel pressured to conform to the most widely (or deeply) held public opinion. Online jurors might embrace “group think” in order to avoid widespread anger and moral judgement. This might be a conscious decision for their own safety or another subconscious one, which cannot be teased out as a discrete effect on the vote.

“Social media has intensified this problem by an order of magnitude.”

One of the most recent examples of these phenomena—the illusory truth effect and groupthink—in action is the notorious Johnny Depp v. Amber Heard defamation trial. The trial exposed the challenges of achieving fair outcomes in an environment mediated by social media scrutiny: the case was a major trending topic on social media for months and, in turn, its proceedings appeared to be shaped by the pressures of outside actors and commentators on social media.

Social media consultant Matt Navarra commented this about the coverage of the trial: “it’s been a social media circus of commentary from creators, and influencers, and lay people. I think that the truth was lost on social media some time ago”. The frenzy of Depp v. Heard content became so extreme that even brands sought to capitalize on the attention: Milani Cosmetics created a TikTok video in which Heard’s defense team entered as evidence a color correcting kit that Heard had used throughout their relationship as proof of the abuse she suffered. The example they used happened to be produced by the company Milani Cosmetics.

The company then produced and published a video on Tik Tok showing that the compact the defense had used as evidence had not yet been sold by the company at the time they claimed Heard had been using it. This video amassed 40 million views at the height of the trial. The video essentially portrays Heard as a liar in the eyes of the public. If a juror were to come across this post, it could lead them to question the validity of all the evidence that Heard's team had presented in the case. This ties into the concept of the illusory truth effect. This video was one of thousands that questioned the truth of Heard's evidence. If jurors repeatedly saw those videos they might have started to question the veracity of Heard's defense.

Most solutions to this problem involve infringement on personal privacy and liberties. For example, one solution could be evaluating a juror's social media presence as criteria for jury selection. However, acquiring this information could lead to a lot of invasive social media searching. Maybe more drastic measures could be taken: could the United States end televised trials altogether, to try to limit public interest in celebrity court cases? According to the Federal Rule of Criminal Procedure 53, cameras are not allowed in the courtroom for federal criminal trials (this law does not apply to state courts). Judges could also impose stricter penalties, including gag orders backed up by the threat of jail time on plaintiffs and defendants who try to encourage their social media followers to ramp up pressure on the judge, jurors, or legal process. But the *Depp v. Heard* trial reveals that that is often not enough: neither of them seemed to be actively stoking the anger of their social media followers. What is to be done in that case?

The most likely solution would be adding social media restrictions to sequestered jurors—possibly having them remove the apps from their phones while they are sequestered and blocking the websites temporarily as well. Most juries, howe-

ver, are not sequestered, and where should we draw the line on sufficiently intrusive public interest? Execution of this strategy depends on individual judges to provide clearer instructions and harsher fines for violations of those instructions. That kind of juror misconduct would include seeking out or introducing outside information into the trial, such as looking up the plaintiff, defendant, or trial on social media. Typically, judges will dismiss jurors for this behavior during a trial, but this can even act as an incentive for jurors who have begrudgingly been summoned. However, raising the standard by more strictly imposing a fine for violating these rules could help provide a deterrent against vigilante juror research.

“Law is a dynamic field. It has adapted to changes in technology and the media before, and it will again.”

The effect of social media—including access to news, exposure to pressure groups like fan armies and political movements, and the proliferation of potentially unsubstantiated or biased information—on jury impartiality remains a new challenge with no widely-accepted solutions. The jury system has always been built on trust and now there is a much higher level expected. Going forward, we must decide how much we trust jurors (and ourselves) to remain unbiased and fair consumers of information in the social media age. Law is a dynamic field. It has adapted to changes in technology and the media before, and it will again.

Be good.



Faculty Note

Letter from *Lemur* Faculty Sponsor Dr. Chris Coome



When I arrived at Duke in January 2025, I had one job to do: encourage civil discourse on campus.

Donald Trump had just won his second term, Elon Musk was hacking away at the administrative state, and Israeli forces continued their march through Palestine. Universities across the country were bracing for protests, strained emotions, and classrooms devolving into shouting matches. As I began my work, I was repeatedly asked the same question: “Why would you want to do civil discourse at a time like this?” The answer was easy: because this is when civil discourse matters.

Because this is when we commit to talking to each other. Because free inquiry, free speech, and civic engagement aren’t just for when things are easy, but for when they’re hard. Because students need a forum to talk about big ideas and intractable issues. Because this is what universities are for.

Universities are weird. They’re a tapestry of ideas. A tapestry in which the brightest minds from across the country come to be woven into intellectual fabric of the modern world—to determine who they are, what life is, and how best to think about it. Universities will expose you to good ideas and bad ideas, strange ideas and inspiri-

ng ideas—you’ll come across ideas that will shape your world, upend what you thought you knew, and flip reality inside out and upside down. Hopefully, the ideas you learn will lead you to success and to virtue, to a life of flourishing and meaning—to the heights of civic responsibility and economic achievement. But to get those ideas, you have to be open to them, and the best ideas have a habit of being the most painful on the way in. This is what free speech is for. This is why we have *The Lemur*.

The Lemur was created by two undergraduates—one liberal, one conservative—who thought that Duke needed a vehicle for students to express themselves; to celebrate, debate and challenge their peers and their university. Thanks to their hard work and the students who believed in their vision, *The Lemur* is a success, and Duke is a richer place for it. *The Lemur* is where Duke students go for an unfiltered look into the artistic, cultural, political and religious ideas of their peers. It’s where all the tensions roiling America and campus life get aired out.

Alongside this hard-hitting journalism, *The Lemur* and the Civil Discourse Project put together “Foundations,” a monthly seminar on the great books of political philosophy. “Foundations” brings students together for a warm meal and

Faculty Note

and an evening spent discussing political philosophy—they leave with a complimentary book, and hopefully, a better grasp of the big ideas that shape our society.

As we stumble into the 250th year of our experimental republic—maybe tired, maybe anxious, maybe elated—just remember that we're all in this together. We're all woven into the same tapestry of ideas, and whether the American fabric holds fast or unravels depends on our best ideas winning. To know which ones those are, it's up to you to pull on the threads and see where they lead. This is what *The Lemur* is for, and this is what civil discourse is all about.

Here's to another 250, America; here's to *The Lemur*.

Christopher Coome is a postdoc in the Civil Discourse Project at the Sanford School of Public Policy. His first book, The Foundations of Re-Enchantment: Freemasonry, Theosophy, and the Occult Revival, based on his PhD dissertation, is now available from Oxford University Press. Read it.



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