

Does the Decline of the Humanities Track the Decline in Civil Society?

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Figure 1: This picture was taken by NASJ Editor Andrew Majeske at approximately 7.30 pm on January 11, 2020 at the MLA Annual Convention in Seattle, Washington, 15 minutes into the session. The special panel was entitled "The Future of the Humanities" and included very prominent speakers.

The following conversation took place on January 28, 2022 in Davis California between Margaret Ferguson, David Simpson, Andrea Ross, and the interviewer, NASJ editor Andrew Majeske (AM). Margaret Ferguson (MF), Professor Emerita at UC Davis, is author of *Dido's Daughters: Literacy, Gender and Empire in Early Modern England and France*, as well as other books and numerous articles. She is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, she is past president of the Modern Language Association, and she was co-editor for the 6th and most recent edition of the *Norton Anthology of Poetry*. Margie's husband, David Simpson (DS), Professor Emeritus at UC Davis, retired from there as G. B. Needham Endowed Chair in English. He also is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, as well as a

former Guggenheim Fellow, and is a past president of the Wordsworth-Coleridge Association. He is author of many books, most recently of *States of Terror: History, Theory, Literature* (U of Chicago P 2019), and *Engaging Violence: Civility and the Reach of Literature*, forthcoming later this year from Stanford UP. Andrea Ross (AR) is the author of *Unnatural Selection: A Memoir of Adoption and Wilderness* and teaches in UC Davis' University Writing Program.

I.

AM: Margie, I contacted you a while ago when I was contemplating a fairly narrow interview addressing the future of the humanities. This “conversation” with both you and David will be much more wide-ranging, but I suspect we will actually address that narrower topic from various directions. To get us started, I wanted to mention that you drew my attention to our local newspaper last week, in which [your photo appeared at a voting rights demonstration](#), and that photo was in close proximity on the page to [a letter to the editor](#) I had published on a climate change topic. We all seem to be doing things to try to help address the situation in the world, in our country. But what ultimately are we aiming at? What are we progressing towards? I'm really struggling with the idea of progress right now. There's scientific progress leading towards controlling and harnessing nature. Many point towards some political and social progress, at least on the left, a progress that leads toward what I describe as the universally peaceful and prosperous society of free and equal people. Does that goal seem right to you?

MF: I think one reason why I demurred at first is that I'm skeptical right now about the very idea of progress, although I would certainly agree with your general description of our political goal. To restate slightly, however, I dearly wish I knew how we could move peacefully toward a society in which all people were free, equal, and had the material support for a good life. In my view, that would inevitably mean that there would be a much more equitable distribution than there is today of what some but not all of us perceive as a finite set of the material goods that we need to sustain our lives and those who come after us—as well as the other living creatures with which we share the planet. So long as a powerful fraction of the world's human population chooses to see our material resources as potentially *infinite* and as including an imagined ability to expand our environment by colonizing other planets when we have spoiled or used up what this one supplies, we will continue to be governed by an ideology of progress that tolerates, indeed arguably thrives on, enormous inequities in material well-being among the peoples of the world as well as among the people who live in a given nation state, often without much political representation.

The flaw at the heart of what I see as the ideology of progress is dramatized in a film that David and I were recently watching called [Wild River](#). Directed by [Elia Kazan](#) in 1960, the film centers on how the federally owned [Tennessee Valley Authority](#)—operated today, against Franklin Delano Roosevelt's initial vision for utility companies serving the public good—as a private, for-profit company—fulfilled its plans to build a flood-controlling and hydro-electricity generating dam in a very poor region of Tennessee. The film shows most people accepting the government's modest compensation for their homes and the argument that people will all be

better off with the dam in place; but one old woman refuses to leave the island where she has lived all her life. The brash young TVA official (played by [Montgomery Clift](#)) eventually persuades the Black workers on the old woman's island to leave for better paying jobs (the local white farmers are enraged by the liberal idea of a rise in wages). In the end, the old woman is forced to leave too, with her heartbreak—followed soon by death—sentimentally offset by Montgomery Clift's romance with her granddaughter. The film suggests that there is a human cost to "progress" but offers no political counter to the inevitability of modernization. The TVA supported unionization and the use of fertilizers for better crop yields. In many ways, its ideas inspired those of the so-called [Green Revolution](#) that faculty members in the School of Agriculture at our home institution, University of California at Davis, helped to develop and also helped to export to Mexico and other places around the world during the 1960s. As someone who has talked to colleagues about some of the unintended but bad consequences of what looked like great progress in the use of nitrogen-based fertilizers, pesticides, and the replacement of traditional seeds and practices of crop rotation with high-yield monocultures, I feel that experts in first-world countries are rightly debating how to go forward with more humility, and greater awareness of the earth's limited fresh water supplies, than many of the scientists associated with the Green Revolution displayed.

I think that questioning the idea of progress in the spheres of science and politics has been a large but necessary setback, in psychological terms, for liberals like me who were formed intellectually in the 1960s. Progressive politics depends on hope for productive improvement in the human condition. But maybe a better term for the experience of questioning the possibility of progress would be a necessary *reset*, that is, a recognition of the critical need for a kind of change that couldn't be encompassed by nineteenth-century or even mid and late twentieth-century notions of progress. We glimpsed the possibility of meaningful social change that would have brought a check to carbon-fuel greed when Al Gore ran for President, though it's important to remember that he didn't run as the environmentalist he later became. Nonetheless, there's no question that his and his party's policies on energy and social welfare would have been radically different from those of George W. Bush and his party. The fact that the outcome of that election was decided by [a 5-4 vote of the Supreme Court](#) continues to threaten my faith in political actions of the kind you began by mentioning, Andy. I'm sorry to be starting out on such a gloomy note.

DS: Yes, I agree. Short-term disasters and long-term disasters seem to be the choice we have, and it's not necessarily one or the other. The short-term disaster is the imminent loss of democracy. And the long-term disaster is the death of the planet, or at least the human part of it. And I think the academy [the higher-education community] is coping in its traditionally thoughtful way with both. I mean it. Although I think, funnily enough, the long-term is easier to command intellectually than the short-term. I've puzzled long and hard about what makes Donald Trump viable and I still don't have an answer. I've read a lot about it by people who think they have an answer, but I'm not convinced by them either. Something is going on that I don't understand. And I find that very threatening. As an analytical person and a professional intellectual, it's my job to know these things. I don't, and I find this very scary. Though it doesn't make me lose faith in teaching and writing, because I think in some ways what we do becomes

more important as more and more information goes around the educational system rather than through it. It is not helpful to look at institutions like the university as only and always simple replicators of dominant ideologies, which a certain subsection of leftists thought that universities were doing. We who teach and write can still offer a plausible alternative to those ideologies, and I think that's got to be really worked, worked over and cherished and preserved and developed. We give the kind of information that isn't given by social media, by Facebook and Twitter, and the radio talk shows so many people listen to ...

MF: They have such outsized power...

DS: And I think, insofar as education can do anything, it's probably being done. The concern is that the schooling system isn't enough. And that's what's depressing to me.

MF: I think we can still model slow reading, slow thinking, and, in that sense, counter the kind of bilious, quick response typical of some social media and talk show exchanges. I don't know how your son is dealing with this, Andy, but my twin daughters already seem to be skeptical about Twitter, and Instagram, partly because they don't have time to be curating their personas in the way that they did as teenagers. They're now in their mid 20s. But I feel that the kinds of things that I want to teach my students, and continue to teach former students and others even in retirement, include strategies for communicating about our modes of thinking as citizens, as members of a body politic who should be able to discuss issues of basic concern to us all such as our rights to vote, to have housing, to have enough to eat, and to have access to healthcare. And I think that despite my very great dismay about the phenomenon of Trump and his continuing popularity, and about the citizens and legislators who seem to believe that the Biden victory was a fraud despite the many court cases that said it was not. Nonetheless, there were more people who exercised their right to vote in Georgia in 2020 than there ever had been before: Secretary of State Brian Kemp, who earned Trump's ire for not overturning the state's election results, announced that Georgia ["set an all-time record in number of votes cast"](#) with over 4 million votes. So even as I fear that Republican efforts to maintain their power as a minority party may succeed, by their new state laws designed to narrow the franchise, I still have hopes, and am willing to work for, grass roots groups that attempt to register new voters. In 2020, I spent a good deal of time making calls for groups inspired by Stacy Abrams' attempts to contact people of color who want to vote but may have been dropped from the rolls. But how I correlate what I do as an individual political activist with what I do as a member of an academic institution is a puzzle.

AM: Can I follow up on a couple of things? I am going to jump around a bit, but so much is implied in what you were saying. The first is, what to teach and how, in this moment when we seem to be moving in the direction of plural truths, and where each person in some sense defines truth for themselves, and also decides for themselves how to be and become authentic as an individual. I'm doing a deep dive into Hannah Arendt right now, and in her view you enter the public space and debate it out, each person defending and advocating for their own viewpoint. It's going to be messy, she acknowledges, but get used to it. You can't and shouldn't

expect clean solutions in liberal democracy. But I just don't see Arendt's suggested way of proceeding working in the age of social media.

Switching our focus somewhat, is the democracy we are advocating for, and trying to defend, ultimately reliant upon capitalism for its survival? Liberal democracy certainly seems to have grown up together with capitalism, and something about a kind of growth, of progress of this sort, is necessary for both. And if climate change is going to be handled, you can't act along the lines of capitalism as it has developed in its primary form, the answer is not in the direction of continuing to grow, in whatever sense.

I need to qualify this somewhat: [some piece of this problem of growth/progress may take care of itself, since humanity seems to be having a fertility issue; so maybe population is leveling sooner than predicted](#). Or some say it might even be starting to crash, if Shanna Swan's 2021 book [Countdown](#) is any indicator--and I found the book very compelling. Swan reports that the numbers for male fertility, in terms of sperm count, shows it zeroing out around 2050, if things continue on their current apparent trajectory. Of course, technology can help to alleviate a complete crash of population, as the booming business of providing assisted fertility treatments indicates. But who can afford such interventions, and how much in the way of money and resources can societies afford to devote to this--and what about considerations of equity? I guess we will find out, one way or the other. But I think a paradigm shift is in order--we have to recalibrate our political and economic systems to expect a declining population, to anticipate and work with decline rather than growth. Regarding population reduction or adjustment, whatever you want to call it, in order to address this key component of the climate change crisis from a sustainability standpoint, the topic is almost hopelessly fraught in terms of equity, especially from the perspectives of the Global South. The issue is so fraught that it is a challenge to discuss the issue directly, or sometimes even to employ a term like "overpopulation." Andrea and I recently listened to a great summary of the issues involved on a New Hampshire Public Radio show called [Outside/In--the title of that particular episode was "The Problem with the Concerns about Overpopulation."](#)

DS: Well, the deliberative democracy tradition, which has been alive and well for 30 or 40 years in American political science, has certainly taken a knock. I mean the idea that a few people talking together and articulating their differences, and learning to care for one another, despite the differences, is not really working. Margie, what was the name of that project that we saw featured on *60 Minutes*?

MF: ["One Small Step."](#)

DS: Yes, that's it.

MF: It's very germane to your new book on civility.

DS: The man who started Story Corps, which produces the ["One Small Step"](#) exchanges, all of which have been archived in the Library of Congress, [and a few were turned into videos](#), is

David Isay, and his idea was to get people to talk to one another from different class backgrounds, people who have different political convictions. But in order to make that work, and make it a positive experience, first of all, he made people apply for it. Then he vetted them, and then he made them agree they wouldn't talk about politics. How could you not get along if you talk about your kids, you talk about gardening, you talk about baseball, we can all do that. But there isn't a forum in which it's possible to engage the political differences that we're living with now. And that is very scary.

MF: Maybe shows like *60 Minutes* are a very formal way of staging such a forum? And I wanted to add that the idea of living productively with plural truths is really a function of what we call modernization, although some ancient philosophers both Greek and Chinese articulated conspicuously non-dogmatic sets of beliefs: Pyrrhonism and Buddhism are examples. But I would say nonetheless that the question of toleration of other belief systems comes to the fore in new ways, historically, during the Protestant Reformation in England and Northern Europe and in the lands in Western Africa and the New World that old world powers were encountering and exploiting from the 1450s onward. Thomas More, Michel de Montaigne, and John Milton are only a few of the early modern thinkers who reflected intensively on questions of toleration, religious and secular both, with Montaigne famously introducing a critical perspective on Europeans by comparing their interpersonal practices with those of indigenous people alleged to be barbarian “cannibals.” It does seem to me that Max Weber was right to posit an important ideological connection between Protestant habits of thought and behavior and those upon which capitalism, in its early modern phrase, relied on: he emphasizes the significance of “delaying” gratification, for instance. His thesis has been widely criticized, but not in ways that make me feel that our modern forms of capitalism can tolerate radical ecology’s call for a lessening of growth in profits or in population. How does Elon Musk live with the idea that the planet’s economic pie is not going to get bigger? He fantasizes about settlements on Mars or elsewhere. And about scientific ways to extend the natural life of humans, or at least of a few rich humans, as the satirical film [Don’t Look Up](#) suggests in its depiction of a Musk figure’s escape from earth’s extinction-event.

I think that both liberal and conservative political thinking have been premised on the notion of progress and economic growth for a very long time, at least since the 16th or 17th centuries.

AM: And there's no economic growth without population growth—I mean, I've heard it's very difficult, in the long term at least.

MF: You know, Marx's dream was that there would be more and more work that would not be done by slave labor, by grunt labor, and it would be replaced by technology. But I think that the skepticism that you're pointing to about capitalism and democracy is linked to another skepticism about how much technology can do to improve the quality of life for fewer people. I think most of us agree with [Bill McKibben](#) and other ecologists that population growth contributes to the interlocked disasters of climate change; McKibben’s book [Maybe One](#) makes the case for smaller family size in countries like the US. At the same time, it’s important to remember that decreasing the rate of global population growth—if you agree that is a goal—

is only one and arguably far from the most important factor in reversing rising rates of carbon emissions and the famines and huge migrations that climate change is causing today. The wealthiest 1% of the world's people cause more than twice the carbon emissions than do the poorest 50%, according to [studies by Oxfam](#). So, as McKibben argued in a still-relevant exchange with Adam Schill in [The New York Review of Books](#), reducing the growth of population in poorer parts of the world such as Africa will not change the carbon-consumption habits of the wealthy minority

AM: I agree on your points relating to population, and the 1% who are responsible for the emissions. But as a practical matter I fear the public discussion at present may need to focus much more on who is responsible for emitting so much, rather than the population piece. The issue of overpopulation is so politically charged, and historically sensitive, that I don't know whether there can be productive conversation about it right now, as shown by the fact that it was not even on [the agenda at Cop26 in Glasgow](#).

DS: Returning to the question of improving quality of life for people around the world, the idea of a positive technological fix that goes all the way back to William Godwin, and is also articulated by Engels and Marx in the *German Ideology*, is that the access to mechanized assistance would produce a shorter working day and more fishing in the afternoon...

AM: More time to be a critic...

MF: And more time to think...

DS: A number of us actually have achieved that, at the expense of many, many millions more who haven't. Those whose working hours have gotten longer, and are even more poorly paid, and the work they are doing more menial. And, you know, I've had a very good life by working basically with complete Flexi time. I mean, it isn't that I haven't worked hard, but I worked no harder than I wanted to, when I wanted to, most of the time. Obviously, you can't fudge the grading deadlines. But I have an enormous amount of choice about when I do things, or if I do them.

AM: And *what* you choose to do, the things that make you happier presumably...

DS: Yes. And, you know, you were asking about the humanities; I mean, our trade is actually in some part pleasure. And it's not very easy to talk about that kind of pleasure in any new way. I think it's been talked about in very traditional ways, but I think those ways still remain important. One of the ways that people can be persuaded to keep an open mind is through the provision of certain pleasures that they might not otherwise get. [Gayatri Spivak](#) has a wonderful phrase in her book, which is mostly quite gloomy about our future, but nonetheless very interesting; the book is called [An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization](#). The phrase she has for our primary task as teachers is "the uncoercive rearrangement of desires."

MF: As one of the goals for every humanities' education.

DS: It's what every literature teacher wants to do, but Spivack and we are also very aware of all the ways in which that's going to become harder and harder.

MF: But let's think a little bit more specifically about capitalism. Because it seems to me that what our colleagues are calling "extraction capitalism" is at the center of debates about what can be done, if anything, about the processes we've set in motion for making our environment unlivable for us as a species and for many other creatures as well. There have been a whole series of essays in [The New Yorker](#); one is by Joshua Yaffa, about [permafrost](#), and what's happened to it. I mean, things that ecological activists have been defining as irreversible changes since the 80s. A lot of it has to do, as David said earlier, with short-term and long-term and how we try to adjudicate between panic and postponing until some future time. But I do think that projects like [Hannah Nicole Jones's 1619 Project](#), ...

AM: I would love your opinion about this.

MF: Obviously it's causing a huge backlash at the level that Republicans have been extremely good at since 2010, especially in taking over school boards and City Councils, and thereby banning books from elementary, middle, and high school libraries and English curricula.

Andrea Ross: [The banning of *Maus* this week in that Tennessee school district.](#)

MF: Yes! That's right. And, you know, many other books are getting banned, books that my children read in the Davis schools, because these books make some white people feel uncomfortable, or the parents project that feeling onto their children. That part of it is really just mind boggling to me because you can't have a functioning democracy without people who think that you should read even about experiences of people who are unlike you and whose experiences might well make you think in new perhaps uncomfortable ways about your own life. And it does seem to me that the reaction against [The 1619 Project](#) is a threat to our democracy. But I think books like [Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother*](#), and other works of Afro-pessimism I know, make it clear that what we call capitalism couldn't have begun to occur without the conquest of the New World and the simultaneous evisceration of Africa. That evisceration occurred, of course, in part through African participation in selling family members. As Hartman says, it's not as if there is innocence; but there is a huge asymmetry among countries and peoples who profited from the slave trade—and those who were enslaved or, if they remained in Africa, saw the whole country's maps drawn in ways that reflected the extraction of its human and natural resources. In short, as Hartman insists, there are some people who got richer than others, and there were people who were enslaved in still hard-to-imagine numbers, and via a type of chattel slavery that we hadn't seen in history before.

DS: Margie, you and I have talked about this, and I've gotten to a stage where, and I don't mean this aggressively Andy, where when I hear the word capitalism, I start to go to sleep.

MF: I don't, I wake up!

DS: I've thought about capitalism so hard for so many years. I don't think we have an easy conceptual mechanism for making the term readily intelligible to people in a way that is anything other than sloganeering. But as humanities teachers, as literature teachers, what we do have available is a commitment to what I take to be "fact," that unfashionable word. Our American literature chronicles a long history of violence and brutality, which people have written about. [Leslie Fiedler](#) wrote about it in the 50s during the Cold War, the height of the Cold War, and [Ronald Takaki](#) wrote about it, and now Nicole Hannah Jones and others have reemphasized it and it's now being heard by a lot of people for the first time. That's part and parcel of what makes capitalism work.

MF: I don't think Hannah Nicole Jones is claiming to see it for the first time.

DS: No, not at all, but I the media has caught her up as if this these things are being said for the first time. And they're not, it's just that nobody was listening before, or not enough people were listening in the right way. But you know, the opposite of pleasure is, is unpleasure and cruelty. And we have a long history of unpleasure, and it's all in the American novel.

MF: And in poetry.

DS: Right. And, that's one way to get to people who perhaps are not able to grasp what capitalism may or may not be about, and after all, most economic theorists don't even agree about what it is. It is a structure, not an entity. What we can talk about is what happens to Black people, what happens to indigenous Americans, what happens to working class women, all of those things. It's right there on the page in these books, and I think that what people do with that is something that you probably shouldn't try to control, at least I don't feel I should. But I absolutely think they should think about it.

AM: With respect to *The 1619 Project*, I'm thinking again of the future of the humanities, but also the bigger problem of education. Do we need to incorporate or somehow reanimate what used to be a fairly standard civics component in education, teaching everyone how to function in a democracy? And if the humanities are to have a viable future, do they have to connect themselves closely to such a move?

DS: Oh, I have a little speech for you on that subject.

AM: I'd really like to hear it.

DS: I have just finished composing [a book on the relationship between violence, civility and literature](#). And I've been thinking about civility for a long time, in fact, since the 1990s, when it was the chicken soup of political discourse after the collapse of the Russian Empire. And everybody thought civil society was the way to go. And everybody thought that the root of civil society was civility, people being nice to each other. There's a whole history to civility, and the

debate continues today. You can open the *New York Times*, I guarantee you, and once a month there'll be something in there about how we don't have any civility anymore. The education into civility was largely founded through literary reading in the 16th century, and beyond into the 18th century, through an expanded notion of *belles lettres*, which included philosophy and criticism and history...

MF: And the novel...

DS: Yes. And then again through the pedagogy in the 20s and 30s, through [the New Criticism](#). But you have a situation now where civility is being constantly touted as the thing we need at the exact moment when humanities education is having funding taken out from under it. And people need to see that the one has actually sustained the other for a very long time. There's a connection here that we shouldn't lose sight of. If you want a civics education, the English class is the place to go. Not the civics class, actually, not even the political science class, but the English or literature class. Because that's where, as I.A. Richards and others so eloquently said, you can have debates about things that arouse people's passions, without them being real life scenarios, and without them causing any irreversible violence, any loss of life, or anything like that. And that's a tremendously important component of what we do in literature classes, and no one else in the academy does it in quite the same way.

AR: So the literature classroom is the flight simulator.

MF: I love that metaphor! It brings out both the safety of the “simulated” phenomenon and its potential for having real-life effects. I'd carry on the point by saying that that literature classrooms are a major but not the only pedagogical site for the important training in civic debate that I.A. Richards was envisioning (under the rubric of what he called the “pseudo-statements” of poetry and fiction) and that David was just discussing. I think that such training can and does occur in classes that focus on teaching writing and rhetoric, using literary examples or other kinds of cultural documents including films and works of visual art; and it also occurs in history classes in which students debate the merits of multiple narratives about a given historical event. I think humanities classrooms, as well as those in what I'd call the “interpretive social sciences,” can help us develop the arts and modes of thinking—and feeling--necessary for working cooperatively to make good flight simulators, as Andrea suggests. And then perhaps to fly better across different parts of the world.

It seems to me that the turn you were mentioning, Andy, towards a pedagogy of personal authentication in the literature and writing studies classroom, invites more discussion. It sometimes happens that the act of sharing and analyzing different kinds of texts brings students to the idea that their personal truths are truth-claims, statements that take certain rhetorical forms and that have to be publicly defended even if the public is a small class (or a small discussion group in a large class: I don't think that serious training in rhetoric, tolerance, and self-awareness happens easily in large groups). Through debate and discussion of stories and at the same time of what might be called facts—or what others might indeed define as widely-accepted truth claims, some of which have changed over time through the process of

paradigm shifting that [Thomas Kuhn](#) hypothesizes—we can come to agree that some claims are truer, even if they are rarely absolutely true, than others. I am not a pure relativist: I believe in provisional truths that can be tested and modified both by persuasion and by correlation with what we know of the world outside (and in some sense always beyond) us. Historical narratives about deeply contentious topics such as the U.S. forms of chattel slavery are stories that some people give ear to and some people don't; that's why there's such a debate about *The 1619 Project*. What merits attention in a classroom and what is passed over in silence? I could go through an entire K-12 education in Delaware, Ohio, in the 50s and early 60's, and never hear anything about the Delaware or the Mingo indigenous peoples. There was nothing, they just weren't mentioned. And so, I'm saying that I don't draw a clear line between the teaching of texts that openly reflect on their fictional status, and the teaching of historical narratives where they have to *compete* for readers and for credibility.

AM: Ok, let's take a short break, and consider Margie's insightful analysis.

II.

[Editorial Note: During the break the conversation transitioned away from education and the significance of *The 1619 Project*, and returned to an analysis of contemporary political issues. The transcript picks up in the middle of this discussion]

DS: Federalism has really broken apart in the last 10 years. I think actually since the Obama election, which was such an optimistic moment, but it also created such panic, even though Obama was such a mild-mannered, middle-of-the-road, liberal bureaucrat. His election was enough to scare the pants off the white supremacists. And it's been a relentless race war since then. But what I was going to say is that if you look at all of this in a good mood, and from a long-term perspective, it would seem to be impossible that this minority government, this minority political class, can continue to perpetuate itself. As Andy was saying, more and more people will vote. You may need 10 million more Democrats than Republicans, or more than voted in the last election, voting together to get a Democratic president elected, but maybe with the demographic shifts, we'll get that 10 million. Or maybe not.

MF: But then, to descend to the nitty gritty level, where I live a lot of the time because I'm a member of Indivisible, and they send out demographic facts, and try to get people to run for local offices, I have a great deal of admiration people who do run for local office. They put their time and energy into being a politician at the community level. In Texas, [where they added 1.8 million new voters between 2016 and 2020](#), the impact of a changing demography [has been blunted successfully by gerrymandering plans](#) enacted by the Republican-majority legislature and governor. Although, I have to say on the side of potential progress, that in my horrible home state of Ohio, which has had eight very undistinguished presidents, the Ohio Supreme Court [has thrown out the Republican led legislature's recent gerrymandered map](#). And, I went to a school named for [Rutherford B. Hayes](#), whose election in 1876, really was the end of the hopeful part of [Reconstruction](#).

AM: But are we just grabbing at the couple of things that have been going in a progressive direction, but most of what has been going on has not been going in a contrary direction...

MF: I absolutely don't disagree with that...

DS: That's why I was saying that it's harder to think about what's going on in the short term than it is to think about climate change, which has a scientific kind of language we can all talk or accept. But there's a way in which the absolute transparency of Donald Trump, as a villain, liar, rogue, cheat and scoundrel ... there's not even a veneer of pretense that he's anything other than a scumbag. What does that tell you, that he can be so overt about who he is and pick up votes?

AM: He can reliably pick up the votes of 30 to 40% of the population...

DS: I'd love to think the Trump phenomenon is the Titanic going down. That people who think of Trump as the future, literally haven't got a clue about the world they're living in...

MF: But it's fascist...

AM: Or they don't care...

DS: The only reason we don't have fascism is because Trump didn't have the military.

AM: You are right, absolutely right.

MF: With what's coming out now, with the [January 6th Select Committee](#) which the Republicans did not want, is that there were [alternative elector slates submitted by seven states](#), including New Mexico, which I would not have believed. I mean, a lot of this is just coming out now. The lengths to which Rudy Giuliani and others went to [try to] make this overturn of a democratic election happen! They were really convinced that they could undermine that election despite the [more than sixty court judgments against lawsuits claiming election fraud](#).

AM: So we're hopeful, in the short term, that these revelations which are coming to light will lead to action by the January 6th Committee. But at the same time, you have [Gingrich saying this week, we're going to put the January 6th Committee members in jail](#) after we take back Congress. Is that where we're at?

AR: And we are only a year out from an attempted coup ...

AM: And the midterms are less than a year ahead of us...

Margie: I am focused on that constantly...and I wrote a [short](#) essay on my experiences of participating in phone banks for Indivisible and the Georgia grassroots group "Reclaim Our Vote" last fall into early January: the temporarily successful work for the Georgia elections stopped, ironically, the day before the January 6 attack on the Capitol.

DS: What is on the table now is the notion that this is a totally corrupt and dysfunctional political system, that so-called representative democracy is in fact completely unrepresentative, and more and more people [are learning this everyday]. How does that fall out? Well, we don't know. It could fall out through the installation of a dictator. Someone who could whip up the people and make them think that there's some awful threat that he, and he alone, can protect them from. Or it could result in the pro-democratic collapse of the Electoral College, the end of the Supreme Court, and a whole lot of things. Maybe even a case for the abolition of the Senate.

AM: I wrote a letter to the [editor](#) last week, in which I suggested our last best hope was the republican form of government guarantee in the Constitution. In [Article IV, Section 4](#), there is a

clause which states: “the United States shall guarantee to every state in the union a republican form of government.” [But the Supreme Court has decided that guarantee is not justiciable, it's not something upon which we can decide cases.](#) I am thinking this is our backstop—the court has to use it, and use it to reign in these attempts to dilute and restrict the franchise. [Senator Charles Sumner](#), before the Civil War, said this guarantee is “the sleeping giant” of the Constitution. Well, let's wake it up! Time to dump the filibuster, pack the supreme court. Use that thing. If not now, when? After November, it will probably be too late...

MF: Wait, why does the Supreme Court say it's not justiciable?

AM: They think it is unwieldy. They don't know how to apply it. But, how tough is it? One person one vote, right...

DS: It's so interesting. I have been reading a lot of Jeremy Bentham this week. It's a cold shower for how we use language. Saving the democracy is a phrase that we all bandy about because Joe Biden talks about it, and Chris Hayes talks about it. But there's never been a serious democracy here. So how about creating it? That's what *The 1619 Project's* message is. Never mind America collapsing into violence. America has been violent from day one, right? It has to get out of it.

MF: But, for a long time I think people said it's the best we've got. Well, compared to Italy, and I spent a lot of time as a young adult in Italy.

DS: Better food, better wine...

MF: But not a not a representative democracy by any means.

AM: A new government every year or two...

MF: And total corruption at the top. But are they now handling things with regard to vaccination better than we are? I would say so, though they had a terrible, terrible time at the beginning. The pandemic may sort some things out. I don't know, it's a very odd moment. But I'm glad you're writing these letters to the editor. And I do think that as writers and thinkers we have some power. I mean, I'm trying to get an editorial into the *Guardian*, and I don't even know how to do it. I don't know if they take unsolicited things anymore. It's not that easy, but you can usually get a letter into the *Davis Enterprise*. And then who reads it? I don't know.

AM: You can then easily share the on-line version, which is one reason I am doing it that way.

MF: Yes, sharing it. And it does seem to me we can teach our students that they can do this too. And that's one of the things my daughter [Susanna](#) is doing. She's given up having final papers for one of her classes, and is instead asking them to do projects that involve communicating with people about Middle Eastern history beyond their normal circle. And in one case, this involved a girl talking to her mother about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Her mother was way

beyond the circle of people to whom this girl usually talked about politics, and I thought that was such an interesting idea. We retired just before the pandemic so we're watching with admiration at you who are teaching under these difficult conditions; hearing about innovative teaching strategies during the pandemic has given me some hopes that the humanities teachers I know have a certain kind of flexibility and creativity to try—not simply to make a virtue of necessity, but instead to use the occasion to try to do something new even when the students are in Zoom classes. Some of the ways in which the work of teaching has seemed to involve thinking about how your students live. One of our new graduate students who was teaching remotely told me that all but one of her students [had their cameras turned off] on the Zoom, because the teachers are not allowed to look into their students' home spaces. Whereas in my daughter's experience at Smith [College], which has a privileged student body, everybody's cameras are on whether they're in Timbuktu or Vacaville. They all want to be seen. But that's because they have rooms where this can be done. So I think the pandemic teaching protocols are giving humanities educators at a whole range of institutions, privileged and less privileged, some insights which they likely didn't have before into their students' lives. If part of our job is to try to help our students become citizens, and this is how I thought about and practiced my own teaching, then this is a good expansion of professors' experience of communicating with their students.

AR: And it's another step towards melding civics with the humanities.

MF: Which is a way of thinking about the current moment that counters my tendency to find it breathtakingly depressing...

DS: Many days it is for me.

MF: I was reading the Facebook page of one of our former colleagues here who was a very brilliant theorist. I'm not going to mention his name because he's written a number of books and he's not teaching here anymore. But his Facebook page was about the total demise of civic culture in this moment of postmodernity. So I wrote back to him and said, "Well, what about the optimism of the will? You've got the pessimism of the intellect down pat." He said, "Well, I don't do *those* things." Well, how many of our colleagues are involved politically at the local government or national party level or as participants in grassroots organizations? I don't hold that out as a moral question, just as a question of different kinds of work, and how we write, and who we address when we're writing.

AM: Is this something we should be pushing our students in graduate school to do—to be more engaged in this way?

AR: I want to add to what you just said about the pandemic causing us to have a window into our students' lives; I would take it back even a year earlier than the pandemic to the terrible wildfires near Davis in November in 2018. The [Camp Fire](#) burned the town of Paradise. All UC Davis classes, including the ones I was teaching, got canceled for a couple of weeks around Thanksgiving. And there was something about getting through the smoke emergency with that

group of students that opened up my relationship with them in a way that doesn't usually happen. We were living on the edge of climate disaster together, instead of, well, in the basement of [Shields](#) library.

MF: Yes, that's very interesting, Andrea.

AM: This ties back to something that I was thinking of starting this conversation out with. There is something about moments of crisis that reveals the roots of things, and you can suddenly see, for instance, what the students' lives are like, but what also becomes visible are the fundamental questions, and then the few competing possible answers to those questions become clearer than they would at other times, when they're covered over ...

AR: Yes, covered over by the professor-student relationship. And not just the fundamental questions get revealed, but also the fundamental human needs.

AM: The human condition...

AR: Yes, that's right.

AM: Margie, since you started us going in a gloomy direction, I was going to take that a bit further. I would like to turn our attention to power, which I hazard to guess is one of David's "hot button" words. I wonder about the *idea* of power, and how our current understanding of it seems to come from the scientific enterprise, which I'm going to define as the project to exert control over nature, which began roughly 400 years ago, and continues apace. I have been working on [Francis Bacon's New Atlantis](#), in one way or another for 25 years now. And I'm fairly convinced that Bacon saw very clearly where "natural philosophy," what we now call science, was headed. He was focused on the big picture and strategized how to sell this enterprise, how to get people to support it, and encourage it to develop, or at least not hinder its development. And he came up with three basic persuasive elements. First you promote it as improving people's health. Second, you show it will increase their lifespans. And third, you show it will provide additional comforts and conveniences. As long as the scientific enterprise can persuade the public that it is providing these three things, it will generally get the public support it needs. Of course, it persuades the political elite with additional arguments, and dangles the bait that military technology can provide. Swift critiques this in *Gulliver's Travels*, a century after Bacon. Bacon's text is not taken very seriously unfortunately. But if we take it seriously now, where does it lead, if we emphasize better health, longer lives, and greater comforts? I found out the answer to this in Owen's high school Physics textbook at DaVinci High School, [Conceptual Physics, by Paul Hewitt](#). This text is the best-selling, most used Physics textbook of the past 40 years, and it is still #1 worldwide, and not just in the US. This textbook, at the end of the Introductory chapter, identifies the ultimate objective of physics. Physics will give people the power to leave the Earth behind. Hewitt calls the Earth our cradle, and calls upon us to grow up, get out of the cradle and leave it behind. Humanity's destiny is going to the stars...

MF: Elon Musk.

AR: Yes! He must have had that book for his high school physics course.

AM: How many scientists in the world have to take high school physics? A lot for sure, if not most. How many of what must by now be a good proportion of the world's scientists read this passage, and possibly agreed with it? Or if they disagreed with it, they have never registered their disagreement strongly enough to cause this language to be modified in 12 editions of that textbook published over 40 years. The power of physics, of the scientific enterprise, gives us control over our own destinies, and by this narrative, seems inevitably to lead to leaving-the-Earth-behind scenario, and moving to new worlds somewhere else. This ties back to our earlier discussions about growth and progress—and provides a different kind of answer to the question of “growth towards what objective?”

MF: Science fiction.

AM: But the scientific enterprise also has products and byproducts—Hannah Arendt talks about it in these terms in *The Human Condition*. One of the byproducts clearly is climate change. The scientific enterprise, its products and byproducts, are using up the Earth's resources at a seemingly ever-increasing rate, resulting in the polluting and despoiling of the planet. This is the real reason you need a narrative in which you have to leave the Earth eventually. The enterprise has succeeded tremendously in terms of increasing population (better health, living longer), and it is providing these people with ever more comforts. If the enterprise is what is driving the consumption, degradation, and warming of the planet, should we at least discuss whether it is in our best interests to rely upon this enterprise to save the planet? Does science, its core movements, push against the planet-saving scenario? Yes, many scientific disciplines are working hard to slow, stall and/or reverse climate change. But, in a way could they be considered to be doing so as a “Plan B” option, in order to buy time for “Plan A,” which is to leave our cradle, the Earth, behind? I know they don't consciously think of it in this way, but is this the underlying reality?

DS: I don't think there's unanimity among scientists. Moreover, I don't think that whatever emerges as an event, is a function of rational decision making. It's the Oppenheimer syndrome. You know what you're doing, but you can't stop doing it because it's knowledge. And because it does have a positive potential, and because if you aren't doing it, you know, somebody else will be.

AR: And because it's intellectually compelling.

DS: Exactly.

MF: Knowledge/Power.

DS: That play *Copenhagen* is very good on this. I think scientists, as I understand them, and as I have known them, many are just as skeptical and critical of the of the institution called sciences

as we are. But they do not individually have the power to reorient it. That power is driven by our old friend money.

MF: The way the funding system works.

AM: And the funding issue raises the question, should politics ultimately be in control of what goes on in science?

DS: Well, that's a huge problem for practicing scientists and the sciences because the only funding, the funding that's easiest for them to get, is the funding that's already tracked by grant giving traditions and government priorities...

AM: And if you actually dig down, the military is behind the bulk of that grant funding.

DS: Yes, a lot of it is.

AR: Andy, you talked to [Lloyd Knox, an astrophysics professor at UC Davis](#) who is a friend of ours—what did he say about this?

DS and MF: Yes, we know of him.

AM: He recognized it was a problem. And he said that the prior semester, he had talked to one of his graduate students who was about to take a job offer with a defense contractor, and it was clear the sort of work he would be doing there. Lloyd recognized that the way the education system worked, the graduate physics students he was teaching were inevitably being funneled in the direction of developing military technology. And implicitly, he was complicit in this. And no one was discussing it, either the professors among themselves, or the professors with their students, as far as he could see. We talked about how grant-getting is simply considered a “good” in academia, a necessity in many disciplines. Who is funding the grant, and what their motives might be, does not really get discussed much.

AR: Lloyd is a member of Indivisible, right? So he is dealing with both of those realities at the same time.

MF: But you know, when UC Davis scientists were leading the [Green Revolution](#) charge to make more food grow per acre in Mexico, they weren't questioning whether a [monoculture](#) was going to arise.

DS: Those were all industry funded.

MF: We don't know what harm the GMO crops will do, but they were immediately able to demonstrate that they are more efficient.

AR: We have known for a long time that mono-cropping was not a good idea.

MF: [We've known that for maybe 15 years, and I think that the knowledge is that it is always harmful is not certain](#), that it's still being played out in countries like India, where the monocrop looks very appealing. And certainly, the mono crop pays more...

DS (jokes): So we place our hopes in the declining sperm count.

AM: But with companies like Monsanto pushing these mono crops, with things like "[Roundup ready](#)" products, there is cause to worry.

DS: What is dangerous about the sperm-count argument is that it suggests the idea of [nature's self-regulating economy](#) which will simply take care of itself.

AR: Right. And that is a big problem, very problematic

DS: It is. It's right up there with the people who say we don't have climate, we have weather.

AM: Right.

DS: Or that we will have another cold cycle, and the methane will all go away by itself,

AR: Or that the advances in technology will...

MF: Be afoot...

AR: Or solve the problem.

AM: Margie, relating to David's point, I was looking at the book [Countdown](#) that [made headlines last May](#), to the effect that male sperm counts were falling drastically worldwide. And then the book suddenly dropped out of the news, after three or four days. I wondered, why did that disappear so fast? It seemed to me like there were huge, even existential implications to this news, if what the author Swan was reporting really was happening. When I looked into the disappearance, I found that there was a [critique of the book's research](#) that had been quickly circulated. It came from, of all places, the [Harvard GenderSci lab](#). [The critique](#) essentially said, we can't tell if the book's research is right or not, because you need data from over a long period of time to see if this sort of drop in sperm count has happened before. That stopped me cold. How can that logic persuade so easily? There is no possibility of getting a data set from before the time sperm could be accurately counted, and if the sperm count had gone to zero before, we simply wouldn't be here.

MF: if that particular argument is going to be compelling...

AM: And when you read the rest of [the lab's critique](#), it's clearly very ideologically based.

DS: But if you're being a [Malthusian](#) about this, (which is far too simple), you would say leave it alone. In order to feed our booming population, we're feeding them more shit. And if we feed them more shit, they become infertile. The problem will take care of itself in a kind of cyclic self-regulating system. Not my view, but you can hear it.

AM: 2022 is the year in which [Soylent Green](#) is supposed to take place—just throwing that one out there.

MF: But just to go back to our science colleagues, you can say that more of them need us when they're students, when they're beginning their intellectual formation and could perhaps benefit from more courses in which they were asked to simulate flight, to go back to Andrea's interesting metaphor for what humanities courses do at their best. You can also say that if you are looking at [global statistics about university ratings](#), which I was when I was working for the [MLA](#), the statistics that count do not even include humanities departments.

AM: Right.

MF: Were not even on the radar. Statistics that are used in Singapore, and other places to measure the quality of a country's universities. The humanities don't count very much in that set of tests that is given to 15-year-olds, the [PISA \(Program for International Student Assessment\)](#), on which our students do so poorly. We're in the middle of the [rankings for the 65 countries](#) in which the tests are given by the [Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development](#)—we came in behind Ireland and Poland, quite far below Hong Kong, Japan, Singapore, and South Korea.

DS: The testing system is suspicious...

MF: Well, it is—it measures math, science and what they call “reading,” which does not include what we would call subject-content in humanities or interpretive social science fields, but the question remains, what is our U.S. public educational system, our K-16 system including the fantastic system of almost [free community colleges in California](#), doing? It's not teaching the students necessarily to read. It's not teaching them foreign languages. What is it that we are actually doing?

AM: And what do we need the education to do? You see the often stumbling attempts of Dr. Fauci trying to communicate with the public (including his [admitted employment of “noble lies”](#)), and the rest of the federal health bureaucracy, the [CDC](#) etc., doing no better. And, we're seeing our Covid efforts fail spectacularly—even if there is no correlation, though I suspect there is to some extent, the science behind the public health efforts, and the trust in the public health system takes a hit. They don't seem to have the rhetorical ability to communicate on that level. And is that an education failure? Or is there some rhetorical incapacity on the part of many scientists that lurks in the background here, some problem that embeds with an education consisting overwhelmingly of [STEM](#) coursework? If there is a simple curricular fix, we

need to find it, and quickly, and I suspect the fix must be located on the Humanities side of the academy.

MF: I wonder, though. I read the comments in the *Washington Post*, though various of my friends say “don't”. And there are *Washington Post* articles that say that CDC Director Rochelle Walensky only creates confusion by what she said, that her directions are incoherent about what to do. And the people who write in with their comments, say “No, I understand perfectly well what I'm supposed to do. I know I've got three things to do: wear a mask, be vaccinated, and don't go out in big groups—I'm not confused.” And the *Post* is ramping this up in order to make Fauci and Walensky look bad. It's similar to what we see in today's *New York Times* in which a headline trumpets “5.8 growth rate highest growth rate GDP rates since 80s: Why are so many voters are negative?” Who and where are they getting these statistics from? Do we really have a grasp on what our educational system is doing that might be causing this? Or contributing to the situation without being the only or even the major cause?

DS: The vaccine thing is very interesting, because I think that before this phenomenon, you had a very stable situation in the developed countries, whereby everybody more or less realized that vaccination was a good thing for polio, for measles, for diphtheria, for tetanus, etc.

Everyone: With a few exceptions...

MF: On the left as well as the right...

DS: Yes, there are a few exceptions. But by and large, there's a huge majority of people who passively accept that the government is right, supported by medical science, to say it is in everybody's interest that you do get vaccinated for these diseases. And for decades we have done it. Now suddenly, not just in the US, but all over Europe, and in Australia, and in a number of other places, there's this huge anti-vaxxer movement, which is demographically much bigger than the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Orthodox Jews, and others with legitimate religious objections. Where is that coming from? Now that's interesting. And this has to do with the globalization of charismatic autocracy, with Orban-like figures.

[Short Break]

[Editorial note: We picked up the conversation in the middle of discussing the American anti-vaxxer movement]

III

AR: I wonder whether anti-vaxxing didn't happen until recently because we all thought that we had to do it. It was never really an option not to get vaccinated, but now suddenly it is.

DS: That's exactly the position the anti-vaxxers are in now—they are told, "you don't have to get vaccinated, but we recommend you do it for everyone's good."

AR: But I think the new phenomenon is that these adults are saying, "No," I choose not to be vaccinated. And it's a different equation, a different calculus.

MF: So what has happened to the idea of the common good?

AR: Exactly!

AM: It's atomized ...

DS: What seems to have happened is the displacement of the experience of choice to politically irrelevant and even self-destructive spheres, which actually masks a situation which is that people have no real choice at all about very much in their lives. But if I can choose not to have a vaccine, whoopee, this is my moment in the sun. Proving my freedom to everyone and shouting "I'm not going to have the vaccine" ...

AR: Right, and people are grabbing their moment.

AM: David this seems like your "Trump moment," where it's really hard to get your mind around what is going on. But is one piece the problem of not everyone "believing" in the science, the underlying fact that the scientific enterprise, to be supported, needs to promote health and increase longevity? And in the developed West, both of those things have started to stall out, at least longevity has done so in many places, [including here in the US](#). And the promoting and improving health piece is becoming harder to believe in when you have doctors and on YouTube saying they don't believe Dr. Fauci.

MF: There are some incredibly influential doctors out there with very large platforms that have no criteria...

DS: Yes...

AM: Given all of this, the mantra of just “believing” in science becomes a really tough sell. [Arthur C. Clarke](#), said something like “any sufficiently advanced science,” these CRISPR-based mRNA vaccines for instance, “will appear to the general public as though it is “magic.” And when science is unable demonstrably to deliver magical or miraculous results immediately, when there are hesitations, miscommunications and setbacks, or when a vaccine does not provide bulletproof immunity, rather than a statistically significant reduction in the severity of symptoms, it becomes impossible to get a substantial portion of the population to continue simply “believing” in science.

DS: That then does bring us back to the role of humanities education, in a compulsory education.

AM: Yes, right!

DS: You should not be able to dodge this by going and being taught at a fundamentalist school, or some madrassa or synagogue....

AM: Or some special charter school...

DS: This may be where we have to take our stand. Governments have to do that, they have to say that this humanities component is going to be part of your education whether you like it or not.

MF: But if the minority party takes control of all three branches of government, what we’re considering as the civic benefits of humanities education starting even in elementary school—the benefits of practicing tolerance, learning about rhetoric, gaining experience from fictional scenarios, thinking about different beliefs and peoples’ different pasts—will be challenged by the America First and Best ideologies that Republicans want to promote through the public educational system, and are already doing in some states by banishing the discussion of any topic that adults imagine could make a child “uncomfortable,” History is to be taught as patriotism. And indeed the [Supreme Court has just ruled](#) that an agency like OSHA [Occupational Health and Safety Administration], which depends on gathering robust information about working people and on keeping them safe, has no authority to require workers in companies that employ over 100 people to get vaccinated or tested for the common good. According to [the Wall Street Journal report on the ruling](#), the majority ruling included the remarkable argument that while OSHA is authorized to regulate “work-related dangers,” Covid 19 is “not an occupational hazard in most” workplaces; instead, it’s a “hazard of daily life,” and evidently, large employers’ policies do not affect their employees’ “daily life.”

DS: The Republicans want to get rid of that agency altogether...

MF: But they have effectively weakened it already under a Democratic administration through their control of the Supreme Court, which Justice Barrett insists is an institution that operates above the roiled crowds of “partisan hacks.”

[Editorial note: There is a brief interruption at this point in the conversation while two hummingbirds do battle over a feeder above Margie and David]



Figure 2: The hummingbird feeder mentioned in the text, with one of the hummingbirds carefully watching out for its rival.

MF: David, I really have great hummingbird feeder envy here. I really want to get one of these.

MF: But I think when a government agency is drained of its authority, as the Supreme Court did in that decision limiting the Labor Departments' "vaccine or test" rule, I don't know where we go after that. Because I feel that we have a Supreme Court as an institution that even Republicans recognize as totally politicized. Which is why the way in which [Amy Coney Barrett](#) was brought in was so bad for the court. And why [Ruth Bader Ginsburg](#), who was a hero of mine, is now a *bête noire*, that she was so vain. That she was willing to risk the court. And she did. She single-handedly did more damage to the court than anybody in living history. Or going all the way back to, you know, racists on the court ...

AM: Do you know the history behind the Supreme Court's power to judicially review acts of Congress?

MF: Only a little bit--bits and pieces.

AM: This power is not provided for in the Constitution or any of its Amendments. Then in 1803, John Marshall, the first important chief justice of the Supreme Court, engineered a power grab in the case of [*Marbury vs. Madison*](#). In effect, Marshall proclaimed that the Supreme Court had the power to review even congressional acts at the federal level; that is, the Supreme Court and not Congress was the final arbiter of what was to be considered constitutional. But the Supreme Court didn't end up using this self-declared power in this case. And while people in Congress and the Jefferson Administration (which still included many of the founders) didn't agree with Marshall about the existence of this power, they didn't challenge the Court about it at that time, since the decision was in their favor. And then the Court sat on this purported power for 50 years, and guess what case it was in that they first exercised judicial review of an act of Congress?

MF: I don't know...

AM: It was the [*Dred Scott v Sanford*](#) decision! This the first was in which the Supreme Court overruled a federal law judicial review case.

MF: Wow, that is amazing!

AM: No, what is amazing is the line progressives take who tout this power as a force for good. They point for instance to [*Brown v Board of Education*](#), or to [*Roe v. Wade*](#), but they forget or never know the murky origins of the review power, or its earlier abuse, and are therefore unaware of its perhaps even greater potential to produce evil results. Which is especially worrying at present, the way the court is constituted.

MF: That is very interesting to me, and generally I'd like to learn more about the history of the Supreme Court right now.

AM: Just today [in the New York Times there was an article](#) noting that other countries' Supreme Courts do not possess this power—the US Supreme Court is an outlier.

MF: But to your question about the idea that we have this separation of powers, that can also be abrogated, at certain moments...

AM: The emergency power...

MF: Yes. What shocked me was when realized that the [Oklahoma National Guard was not going to heed the command of the Department of Defense to vaccinate the enlisted people](#), I mean, I thought if there's any place where they obey commands, and that we depend on them obeying commands, it's on the military side. Especially, since it was so important that the military be on the sidelines in order to foil the takeover of what we call our democracy. That was just shocking about the Oklahoma National Guard and it dropped out of the news after about four days. I've

often had this experience of trying locate the follow up on a story, and find nothing, even on Google.

AM: Is the underlying question here, is there such a thing as the “common good?”

MF: That will be the last question, I think.

AR: Ha-such a tiny question!

MF: The public education system in California, the visionary “Master Plan” of the 1960s, was developed on this basis...

AR: I think you're right. Elementary school, the model in this country, places heavy emphasis on being a good citizen. We all got graded on “Citizenship.”

MF: Yes, in the public education system. I wonder if the number of children going to private schools including religious ones has increased in this time of political polarization, and especially since 2016?

DS: We live in a culture of rampant and ruthless individualism and entrepreneurship, but if you do a project in school now, you often can't do it on your own. Cooperative learning looks like a great thing, a modeling of a certain kind of citizenship—carrying others with you, and a willingness to deal with people who may be not as smart as you, or vice versa, smarter than you. School is modeling something, and some workplaces do as well. But that's not what this culture operates by. And we're getting schizophrenic, we're getting split messages, the kids are getting split messages.

AR: Right—they are subject to “21st Century Learning,” but, Margie notes, they also learn that they have to be first in all sorts of competition to get rewards!

DS: When they found their start-up company, it's not going to be “collaborative learning,” it's going to one or two other nerds running things...

AR: Yeah, you and [Mark Zuckerberg](#)...

MF: Right or [Theranos](#), your blood testing company... you're just going to make it up!

DS: And people also do collaborative learning exercises at the university ...

AR: We certainly do in small classes ...

DS: But even as it is valuable, it's so important to say, “what are we doing as we do this”?...

AR: And why are we doing it?

DS: Are we really instilling democracy and tolerance and compassion and cooperation? Or are we actually producing a facsimile of a world that you will never see again once you leave this classroom setting? Maybe it's not clearly either/or?

AR: Interesting! I was just thinking about this. We're going back into the classroom in a few days, and I told my students on Zoom that I'm really looking forward to seeing them all—at least seeing the upper half of their faces because we will all be wearing masks. I told them that is how we will take care of each other, how we respect each other. It's how we will function as a little society in our classroom.

MF: Good for you! I'm grateful for it. But you're right that the classroom is modeling a notion of the common good, one that the grading system counters completely.

DS: But the common good is an idea that seems absent from so many tense situations today: who can enforce a mask rule in the mini-society created temporarily by an airplane flight? Even the airline's employees can't always persuade passengers to keep their masks on; and some passengers, who clearly aren't worried about catching Covid, seem unable to imagine giving it to someone else. And as a society, we lack the means to track those who deliberately risk spreading the virus—there's no way to foster personal accountability.

AM: But there is no Covid, it's a hoax to them. There is, according to this view, nothing to be accountable for and no one to be accountable to.

DS: Well, there you are...for some of these people you are right...

AR: Not all of them think that. On the other hand, some of them think it's just a cold...

AM: If I can circle back to the common good again for a second. Lincoln said that there is really only a common good when you (the people) have an external threat to unite against. So after September 11, we suddenly had this rally around the flag unity. But this sort of unity or notion of the common good seems very different from the sort required by our progressive goal of a universal society. A common good deriving from a nation-based patriotic unity when under attack, this sort of idea of the common good seems to flow in a different, even directly opposing direction from the idea of a common human good, or common planetary good, if we take global warming as an example. What sort of idea of the common good will help us to get to a goal of the universally peaceful and prosperous society of free and equal people? And what kind of education do we need to nurture such a sense of the common good? Or is this something that needs to be created? We must be on the right track focusing on education to the extent we have been, and the sorts of social values we need to instill through education.

DS: But I think if you rephrase the common good as a highly disputable and difficult concept, rather than as a moral incentive, that's what we as critics can do; such a discussion or debate

would help get rid of the coercive moral incentives and acknowledge the idea as itself complicated and flawed and imperfect. And that...

AR: Would help...

DS: Get rid of the moral incentives ...

AR: And to acknowledge it as complicated...

DS: Flawed and imperfect.

MF: But it's nonetheless something that one would like to be able to bring up with the non-mask wearer, if there were an opportunity or circumstance that wasn't fraught. Which goes back to that "[One Small Step](#)" venture: could you talk about a mask? Maybe you could talk about a novel? We don't have very many of these normal circumstances in which such things can be brought up.

AM: It seems education is the only place where making connections across this divide could happen, where you could compel disparate people to be together, and not talk about politics.

DS: Well, you do talk about politics, but you do it in such a way that there is a slowing down in any enactment of any conclusions you come to. People get all fired up about novels, and whether so and so has a bad character, and whether x is a good poem, and all that, and they fight over it, but fundamentally they're dealing with what [Richards](#) calls "pseudo"—by which he means fictive—statements, and if you can remind them of that, it lowers the temperature. And also, I think, obviously, helps the intellectual focus. And because the question of exportation of any of this to the world outside the classroom is always still to be decided; there's never a straightforward move from A to B. For many years, I thought that was teaching's limitation. Now I've come to feel it's the opposite! It's the only thing we've got to stop people pulling guns and killing each other. Now how you handle that in the classroom in Texas, where you've got guns in the classroom, I don't know. Or the parents coming in with their guns...

MF: With "[open carry](#)," I'm glad I'm retired.

DS: The most interesting recent resuscitation of civility theory comes from [Étienne Balibar](#), who has this notion of what he calls inconvertible violence. It's very difficult to get straight and he's not entirely clear about it himself, and he says so. But the notion is that you cannot think civility without thinking violence. And in particular, inconvertible violence; that is, a violence that cannot be whisked away, cannot be magicked out of the picture. Civility and violence have gone together since the beginning, as civility becomes a form of oppressing people who are said not to have civil standards.

AM: Part of the Trump problem.

DS: Barbarians are just imaged as rude people.

AM: So called “deplorables.”

MF: Right.

DS: But that you can finesse, you can say we can accept each other despite that potential incivility, produce it in a marketable form of politeness. But Balibar says no. The violence is inconvertible, there is something there that cannot be thought away, cannot be transformed. And if you forget that, you've missed the point. And that of course, is the history of human cruelty and brutality, and oppression and everything else.

MF: The relation to the barbarians, to the “other.”

DS: And so it goes back to what we were saying earlier about civil behavior or civic behavior being a problem and not only an ideal, *because* we don't know what that behavior is. We mostly haven't asked, for instance, an, unemployed black person, or a person in prison, what they would regard as civil behavior from us. That's a real discussion: how to keep an open mind in the face of what seems uncivil.

AM: How do we handle something like [the rally in the Davis' Central Park and the march to the police station](#) in the wake of the George Floyd killing? The party line of the speakers there was “no justice, no peace.” I don't agree with this, I think rather the opposite, “no peace, no justice,” but I didn't challenge it, nor did anyone else at the rally challenge it, and then, after the speeches, I marched through downtown along with everyone else. Do I support this uncivil rallying cry by remaining silent and not challenging it? In those circumstances, the stage is set for incivility, and the rally promoters could feel justified in promoting or condoning violence rather than dialogue.

DS: Civility is what Bentham called a fictitious entity: a word that should only be invoked as an incentive to further and closer specification. I'd say the same for peace, violence, dialogue and so on. And democracy. These words should not be produced to end discussion, but to begin it. What is civil or uncivil, and who makes the call? As I've said, democracy is mostly invoked to stop discussion of bringing about change, as if we have it already and just need to preserve it. It's the same with civility. Insisting on looking harder at these words is what a humanities pedagogy can do. It is important to stop people running away with assumptions about what is good and bad here.

AS: This is a distraction.

DS: Yes, the Democrats have been so poor at this. They need some English Professors.

AM: They need rhetoricians as well.

MF: Right.

DS: Trump was able to get away with MAGA, make America great again. How hard is it to stand up and say, “What about making America great for the first time?”

AM: Which should have been the portion of the title after the colon for *The 1619 Project*!

MF: It should have been, absolutely.

DS: Once we’re encased in a headline we've got no comeback. We were talking about defunding the police. That is not the phrase you want! Maybe “reform the police,” or “redesign the police,” or “reconceive or reimagine the police.” Anything other than “defund.”

MF: It was totally ridiculous. This may be a coda, but I am so interested that National Guard members are being called in to teach primary school right now because there are not enough teachers, because too many of them are sick. Now, I think a National Guard member could be a very good primary school teacher.

AM: With the education going both ways in this case.

MF: Absolutely. I mean, I've seen my about to be 25 year old daughter learning a lot from her kindergarten parents who are brown and black and live between 150th and 180th streets in Manhattan. These are people who desperately want their kids to succeed. They are getting up early to take their kids to what is called the [Success Academy](#). It's a public charter school, it's free. And she says many of the parents, for many reasons, don't support their kids at home enough, and the kids don't succeed unless they have the education at home as well as at school.

DS: I'm sure there's a measure of truth to this, but it is only a measure of truth. For decades, educational pessimists have used home environments as an excuse to explain student failures.

MF: But if you have a National Guardsmen as your kindergarten teacher, who happens also to be your father or mother at home, there might be more ways of bridging that gap, because teachers in this country, all the way from K through 16 and beyond, are part of an underpaid profession, except for a few superstars at the private university level. And the military is also not very well paid compared to people in business. And this takes me back to why the term capitalism has some legs to it. It has to do with economic inequity of such a grotesque order that I think I could probably agree with my Trumpist neighbor, who is also a fundamentalist Christian, that there's something wrong with a multi-billionaire making so much more money than the school teacher around the corner, or the sergeant in the Army, or a pilot in the Airforce stationed at [Travis](#), just down Interstate 80 from here. My neighbors and I can agree that there is something really bizarre about that. But we don't agree what to do with it, because at least according to the polls (about which I have a lot of skepticism), there's no outcry that the multi-billionaires should be taxed more, or even at all. If the billionaires were taxed, we could

fund Biden's bill for "[build back better](#)"; that was Bernie Sander's argument, and it's also the argument of the Columbia University economist [Joseph Stiglitz](#), who wants a global minimum tax on the very rich. Why is this not something that red-blooded Americans from various parts of the spectrum could agree on?

AM: Margie was my dissertation director, and in the "afterward" to [the book version](#) that resulted from the dissertation, I reproduced [an advertisement](#) that I spotted in the *New York Times* from an organization called [Responsible Wealth](#), a group of multi-millionaires who proposed to increase the estate tax. They basically said "our society needs it, there's too much inequity, the gap between the rich and the poor is too large, and we're open to helping to solve this." This ad tied together a number of threads of what I had developed tracing the history of the idea of equity. One way both Plato and Aristotle discussed equity (*epieikeia* in Greek) was in terms of solving the problem of gross inequality in society. If your society's ratio between the richest and poorest segments rises to more than about five or six to one, you need to take equitable action to reduce it. Once you move beyond this ratio, what you're doing is unsustainable--it will lead to political collapse in the long run. It seems to me that this 2500-year-old analysis of inequality in society is still remarkably relevant.

Can we end with one final question? Let me state it as provocatively as I think it needs to be. We're running out of time to address climate change. And in order to address the problems of climate change, we need a global solution, one that will need to impose certain lifestyle changes upon a large part of the world's population: the well-off Western nations will need to downscale. Any solution will almost certainly somehow need to involve the impossibly fraught issue of overall population size. Can these sorts of things be accomplished, or even productively discussed in liberal democratic societies? Or is democracy or what we call liberal democracy somehow reliant on compromise amongst competing factions who are eternally arguing for what the common good should be, and achieving at best a bare middle-ground compromise? And if that's the case, do we need to think through from first principles what we have for a couple of centuries at least considered to be the solution to the political problem? This solution posits that the only legitimate government is based on the consent of those who are governed. But we find ourselves in a situation where achieving compromise will not be good enough, it will well-nigh be impossible to get people to consent to downsizing, and the problem is existential. We're at a point where we at least have to consider the seemingly unthinkable: our very survival may require us to consider a more authoritarian type of regime, and the nature of the problem demands it would need to be a global authority--or an authority with global reach, as a short-term option, and possibly a necessity. We need to be thinking and debating about this, and we need to be thinking about the ways such a regime can be made as beneficent as possible, and the ways in which power can be wrested back from it, and democratic government restored, after the emergency is over. The ancients (especially the Greeks) thought productively about such things; modern and contemporary thinkers do not.

MF: While I don't agree with Winston Churchill very often, I do agree with him that democracy is the worst form of government except for all the others. In truth, Andy, I'd respond to your

provocative line of thinking by arguing that if we were to have a robust Democratic majority in the Senate right now, Biden could be doing something much bigger than Joe Manchin will allow on climate matters and especially carbon emissions; Manchin is deeply invested in fossil fuel production. Biden himself just a year ago was imagining leading reforms on climate, on health care, and on economic equity along the lines of [FDR's New Deal](#)—and while many New Deal projects, like the TVA I mentioned early on in this conversation, relied on ideas of scientific progress that we now know to be environmentally untenable, there's nothing I know of to suggest that a Democratic party led by its progressive wing, including some Senators and Congressional Representatives who have non-Ivy league backgrounds and useful experience in organizing unions, could not be educated on legislating toward significant ecological reforms that could be enacted immediately, as [Bill McKibben](#), Kim Stanley Robinson (in his wonderful new novel [Ministry of the Future](#)), Greta Thunberg, and many others have been specifying for some years now. It may be that the moneyed interests in having the citizens of this relatively privileged country ruled by a Republican minority are just too strong to allow any kind of “democratic” election system to bring climate-activists effectively into the government in the next few years; but I'd infinitely prefer such a path to the enormously risky one of imagining that we as a nation-state could find much less elect a “benevolent” authoritarian leader who would use her/his power to decrease our reliance on carbon-based fuels and offer leadership—and financial aid—to other nations trying to do the same. It's hard for me to take the ancient Greeks or Romans as guides in our current dilemma because all of the versions of government they debated and tried out assumed the presence of slaves and a gender hierarchy in the governed population. But I do remember that [Cleisthenes](#) of Athens, supposedly the founder of democracy in that city and its chief magistrate around 525 BCE, allied himself with the popular Assembly against the aristocracy not because the Assembly was truly representative of the “demos” (which of course excluded slaves, women, and the large population of resident aliens in the city); instead, Cleisthenes's allied with the demos to promote an idea of citizenship as something more important than membership in a family or clan. As we swing back to a nationalist white version of clannishness, maybe we can keep talking—and I'm very grateful that you've given us the chance to hold part of the conversation at your house today—about *creating* democracy as well as preserving what parts of it we have had so far in this country's history.

DS: On the climate front many think it is already too late. My guess is that the only hope for global coming into line to solve the climate crisis is to begin with national exceptionalism. Major economies like ours, or like Germany, or maybe even China, are going to have to say, we are going to stop churning out our methane, and our fossil fuel pollution. And that we are going to have to adjust our economies in the best way we can and, in our case, as quickly as we can, and as equably as we can. This might weaken us in some imaginary global power structure. But we in this way model a way for other populations to handle making a contribution to climate control. And this takes the pressure off the less developed countries which are still modernizing and still desperate to feed their peoples and provide electricity to them, etc., India, for example. This modelling approach takes the moral burden away from these still developing countries, and allows them to follow our lead or not, and to take what they want from the model they see before them. The US is always touting its exceptionalism. I think the US needs

to cash in on its promise and say, we're going to be exceptional in this respect, and we're going to make a difference to our contribution without insisting that other countries come to agreement before we make a move. We can afford to do this. We are one of the few countries that can afford to radically restructure its energy system and not collapse. We've been more than willing to mount unilateral invasions! How about unilateral ecological revolution?

MF: And we are the biggest polluters.

AM: Per capita.

MF: On the planet. And there's just no question that we could do this. There is also no question that if we elect a Republican majority in Congress in 2022, and/or a Republican president in 2024, we will not do that. I don't think the stakes could be any higher. And I agree with David that the US has to lead on this because this country is the biggest climate polluter now.

[end]

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