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Getting Paid to Talk: The Market & Public Discourse

by Benjamin M. Studebaker

Liberalism was not designed with political professionals in mind. In the vision of Adam Smith or Benjamin Constant, liberal citizens are meant to focus most of their time and energy on their private business. Kant argued that man – or at least, the 18th century liberal man – possessed an "unsocial sociability." He writes that "man has an inclination to associate with others" because in society "he feels himself to be more than a man." But, at the same time, he has the unsocial characteristic of "wishing to have everything go according to his own wish." This leads him to regard other men as his competitors, and this competition leads all to further develop their capacities. But, for most liberals, this competition is meant to occur mainly in the private sector, in civil associations and in business. The state is meant to preside over free associations and over a free market. It is not meant to itself become the arena through which human capacities are developed in competitive struggle.

And yet, many of us seek to make a living by writing and speaking about politics. For political professionals, our private business is public business. If you are a journalist, a civil servant, a politician, or an academic in the humanities or social sciences employed by a university or think tank, the private and the public are always already intertwined. Public discourse in liberal democracies has, for a long time now, been dominated by these political professionals. For those who run businesses or work outside these sectors, it has long been difficult to make oneself heard. To make any kind of political intervention, it's necessary to hire these political professionals. Labor unions, lobbying organizations, and NGOs employ political professionals to engage in forms of political activity that workers and employers lack the time, energy, or expertise to perform themselves.

The result is that most political interventions are made not by classically liberal subjects or even by the proletariat, but by these political professionals. It becomes impossible to speak, politically, except through these people. All political discourse is mediated by them.

The political professionals think of themselves as experts. They resent the fact that they have to work for somebody. They think they can and should run the state themselves. But because they rely on other people to pay them, they are always restrained by the need to keep their patrons happy. The way the political professionals earn a living is therefore enormously consequential – it determines their constraints.

The Rise of the Playpen

In the post-war period, political professionals were constrained by what we now refer to as a set of "legacy" institutions. If you wanted to be a political professional, you had to work for a university, a labor union, a political party, or for a major newspaper or television network. These organizations rewarded certain kinds of thinking and punished other kinds. Many political tendencies found this post-war monoculture stultifying. Efforts were made to open it up, to widen the set of ways political professionals could earn a living. In the 1970s, there was an explosion of lobbying organizations and think tanks. Then, in the 1980s, there came the cable news networks. Finally, in the 1990s, the internet arrived, and as it developed it

became possible to launch viable digital publications. Over the course of a roughly 50-year period (1965-2015), the monoculture cracked open and a "playpen" was constructed.

The playpen widened the set of ways political professionals could earn a living, allowing political professionals to adopt political positions that were previously financially unsustainable. Both the left and the right benefitted from this, in different ways. The universities expanded and huge numbers of posts were created that were highly attractive to progressive and post-Marxist academics. At the same time, the growth of lobbying organizations, NGOs, and think tanks proved generative for libertarians and neoconservatives. For quite a while, all professionals benefitted from a greater level of intellectual freedom. And, at the same time, many interest groups that were previously shut out during the post-war consensus found ways to hire professionals and make themselves heard.

The only losers were the workers – their labor unions declined, and they increasingly struggled to find ways to pay professionals to speak for them. With no media organizations or political parties of their own, workers increasingly fell into conspiracy

theories and down internet rabbit holes. Unable to construct their own narratives of events, they became fodder for ethnonationalist and religious cults. With the workers increasingly underrepresented in politics, the state became unresponsive to their interests, and this lack of attention allowed their condition to worsen. Many of them have been swept up in addiction. Alcoholism, opioids, obesity, gambling, pornography – the traditional vices are all over the place. The poor condition of the workers makes it easy to rationalize their continued exclusion, and the exclusion of the workers allows their condition to further deteriorate.

In the 2000s, the social media companies formed – Facebook, YouTube, Twitter. Through social media, it became possible for the people who had been made crazy by decades of neglect to find one another. It even became possible for some of them to make a living by shitposting online. Now, you could earn a living with a YouTube channel, or a blog, or a podcast. All of the sudden the workers were back – but they were also crazy, and the political professionals who agreed to work for them began churning out crazy stuff.

Some political professionals on the left tried to organize the crazy stuff – to use it to bring back the labor unions, to make the Democratic Party into a workers' party, or to start media organizations that could give workers more reliable information. These political professionals wanted to work as labor organizers, party bureaucrats, and journalists. Some academics in the humanities and social sciences tried to wade into this, to pull it in a constructive direction.

But these people were opposed from two directions. They faced competition from nationalists who hoped to turn the workers toward the right. But they also faced opposition from political professionals in the center, who worked for universities, newspapers, TV networks, NGOs, lobbying organizations, think tanks, and the Democratic Party. These organizations and their backers had made off quite well over the years, and they were in no hurry to make compromises with an organized working class.

The Barbarization of the Web

Since the mid-2010s, the nationalist right has captured most of the digital energy. The establishment has responded by working to

diminish the ability of political professionals to make a living through online political work. The algorithms have changed, and it has become much harder to make money by posting about politics on YouTube, on a blog, or through a podcast. It has also become harder for independent digital publications to distribute their work through social media. The existing publications of the anti-establishment left and right are stagnating, and new publications are poor business propositions.

During the 2000s and the 2010s, many young political professionals planned their careers around the new online ecosystem. But it isn't holding up. As it fades away, no new paths are opening up for these people. They find themselves unable to find a home in the establishment institutions, and they find that the new digital institutions are much weaker than they had planned. They resent this situation and they are becoming increasingly desperate.

Two paths are open to them. They can accept proletarianization – they can admit that they have failed to become political professionals and take regular jobs. Perhaps they can even try to organize their workplaces. Some of them are doing this and will do this. But they can also learn from those who

have succeeded. As the digital scene becomes more competitive, savvy professionals prevail in this competition by generating strong emotional responses. They exploit the weaknesses the workers have developed over the past half century. They exacerbate those weaknesses and capitalize upon them.

We see this in both the woke and the anti-woke strains of online culture war politics. Both the left and the right are encouraging their viewers to think of themselves as part of groups defined by race, religion, ethnicity, nationality, gender, and sexuality. These groups are pitched in friend/enemy terms. Whoever disagrees with you ostensibly threatens your way of life. You must have them fired, doxed, incarcerated, or, at the very least, referred to human resources. In recent years, this culture war framing has been exported to foreign policy. People are encouraged to identify with Israel against Palestine, with Palestine against Israel, with Russia against Ukraine, or with Ukraine against Russia. Its effect is to make everyone, on all sides, less capable of working for peace, of thinking clearly about what's going on. But it drives clicks and subscriptions to the dwindling set of commercially viable political

professionals online. From a market standpoint, it succeeds.

As this competition for dwindling market share intensifies, the remaining sober professionals within the left and the right increasingly highlight their own worst examples. Engaging with the crazy stuff is the only way to get the clicks and the subscriptions. These professionals don't want to be counted among the crazy, but they know they need to talk about the crazy stuff to stay afloat. So, they spend more and more of their time criticizing their own lunatic fringe. The left goes after its Stalinists, Maoists, and third worldists – authoritarian state socialists who view the United States as a settler colonial imperialist state. The right goes after its race realists, eugenicists, and misogynists.

By continuously centering their most viral voices rather than their most insightful, the left and the right have only succeeded in spreading this outrageous stuff. The internet is now awash in this sewage. The zoomer generation is the generation the online left and right have had the greatest opportunity to shape, and yet both the left and the right are completely unsatisfied with the varieties of zoomer subjectivity that are now emerging today.

In place of Kant's unsocial sociability, there is now a kind of social unsociability – a subject that grew up consuming digital content on social media, that is more at home on the phone or on the laptop than at school or at the office. This digital subject spent a year or more away from school during the pandemic. Their politics doesn't come from school or university or from participation in associations – it comes from hours upon hours of scrolling.

We want political professionals competing with each other to be insightful, not viral. But because we have marketized public discourse and made the online political scene hypercompetitive, political professionals are increasingly stuck in a clicks arms race, a race to the cultural bottom. This even afflicts centrist professionals. Ten years ago, the internet was home to a thriving world of wonk bloggers. But today, these people spend more time making fun of one another than they do trying to get to the bottom of anything.

Often competition is thought about in purely economic terms. Either there is competition, or there is oligopoly, monopsony, or monopoly. But there are also multiple different kinds of competition that are possible. When we make one

kind of competition too intense, it crowds out other kinds.

Barbarization, Literally

In 2019, the historian Walter Scheidel published [a book](#) called *Escape from Rome: The Failure of Empire and the Road to Prosperity.* In that book, Scheidel argues that in most parts of Eurasia, state formation was overdetermined by the need for settled populations to compete with nomadic tribes. The nomadic tribes of the Eurasian steppe would overrun small states. They would repeatedly plunder them, extracting tribute and making development impossible. The only way to compete with the nomads in the near-term was for these settled populations to come together to form vast empires. With enough scale, these unproductive ancient and medieval settlements could defend themselves against the vast hordes.

These large traditional empires ran on patronage networks dominated by small numbers of elite families. These elites had little interest in change. The stronger they were, the more they crushed innovation. But the stronger they were, the better they were at protecting the borders against the hordes. When they weakened and there were

opportunities for internal dynamism, the nomads of the steppe would descend upon them.

In China, Persia, and the Eastern Mediterranean, continuous pressure from steppe empires run by Huns, Mongols, Khazars, and Turks forced empires to recur again and again. When one dynasty would fail, another would rise to take its place. If there was no local dynasty capable of running the show, a nomadic tribe would invade and set up a dynasty of its own. The Byzantine Empire gave way to the Turks. Persia was run by Turks and Mongols. China was run by Mongols and Manchurians. But always the same kind of state prevailed, because always the greatest threat to the settlers came from the next group of horse lords.

Only in Western Europe did one of these traditional empires die without reconstituting itself. When the Western Roman Empire fell, dozens of smaller states arose to take its place. Western Europe lacks the vast plains necessary to sustain a large horde. When Atilla the Hun came to Italy and Gaul, he found these places too inhospitable. His army sickened with disease, and he was forced to rely increasingly on local infantry, whose loyalty was questionable. Eventually, he withdrew of his own

accord. Attila weakened the Western Roman Empire. By displacing many border tribes into Roman territory, he caused the Romans enormous problems. But after the Western Empire fell, few horse lords followed so far west. This left the settled states of Western Europe free to compete with each other instead of with the tribes of the steppe. It became possible for them to operate sustainably at smaller scales. Instead of centuries of peace under strong dynasties, Western Europe endured endemic warfare among small states. Over time, this pushed the Western European states to develop their militaries, their economies, and their political institutions. Protected from one kind of competition, they were free to engage in another.

Today, the political professionals find themselves in the cultural equivalent of medieval Asia. They are too exposed to too much competition from the barbarians. The competition for clicks and subs prevents them from competing in an arena where political and cultural innovation are rewarded. It narrows and empties them.

Over time, this makes alternative ways of writing and thinking about politics seem like quixotic pipe dreams. Few in imperial Rome imagined there

would ever again be republics or democracies. How could such small states survive in a world where vast empires clash with one another and with the nomads of the steppe? These political forms and the kinds of competition associated with them could only remerge when this other kind of competitive pressure subsided.

Better Kinds of Competition

Political professionals need some protection from market competition to compete in a more intellectually generative way. I see three broad ways of doing this:

1. An effort might be made to expand the set of paid posts in the establishment institutions. The state could increase funding for public universities, or wealthy individuals could found new private political and cultural institutions, as they did in the 1970s and 1980s.

2. An effort might be made to make the playpen more vibrant, by making it easier for political professionals to successfully monetize their digital content. If it's easier for them to make money online, they won't have to focus so much on maximizing clicks

and subscriptions, and the quality of the online content will improve a bit.

3. Without #1 or #2, increasingly proletarianized political professionals may begin founding their own institutions. This could be facilitated with public policy more friendly to labor unions.

There seems to be reluctance on the part of wealthy elites to do #1. There's a lack of trust in public institutions, and private organizations can only do so much. If there were sufficient private will to create new political and cultural institutions, we wouldn't have this problem in the first instance.

The experience of the 2010s also makes many reluctant to do #2. There's a feeling that the playpen facilitated the rise of Donald Trump, that the only solution is to slowly starve the digital scene to death. But the median newspaper reader or TV news viewer is now pushing 70 years old. The digital isn't going away, and the attempts to kill it have only made it worse. Rather than try to prevent young people from becoming digital subjects, it would be much more helpful to create secure digital jobs that give political professionals the freedom to think independently.

If elites are unable or unwilling to grant #1 or #2, that will leave the political professionals with no alternative but to try #3. And if elites obstruct the formation of these labor unions and give political professionals no viable way of earning a living by talking, what happens then?

In recent years, the resentments of unsuccessful political professionals have been increasingly expressed in nationalist and racist terms. This will continue to fuel a political right that is deeply hostile to any effort to proactively manage the global economy. It will also generate a left that is increasingly Stalinist, Maoist, and third wordlist in character, that thinks of the world in terms of national peoples, races, and in terms of the settler/indigenous distinction. This kind of left will lose any interest in trying to improve the global economic system – it will instead follow the right in committing itself to rollback.

The political professionals perform their roles best when they are rewarded based on their ability to publish insightfully on the state of the world. When they are instead rewarded based on how many clicks and subscriptions they get, they pander to those who are depressed, anxious, and desperate for

a quick fix. Over time, this salesmanship degrades their ability to think. It forces them to go places they never would have ventured if they were truly free to think for themselves.

Liberals dislike bureaucracy and the administrative state in large part because these organs require creating political professionals. But despite extensive efforts to find a way to govern without political professionals, no one has yet succeeded in finding a way to manage public affairs without them. If we cannot do without this class, we need to think much more carefully about the way its members earn a living. We need to create conditions in which the right kinds of competition structure its incentives. The cost of neglecting this task is already evident – and it's extraordinary.

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