

BEFORE AND AFTER SCHOOL: PRAGMATIC LESSONS IN DISASTER DIDACTICS

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Volume 4 · Number 1 · 2020 · Pages 78-95

From the coronavirus, to wildfires, hurricanes, and other climate disasters; with increasing police brutality following the death of George Floyd and America's "summer of racial reckoning"; and voting mayhem surrounding the upcoming elections—democracy is under pressure from all sides. Globalization appears to have imploded. In this essay, I will address two key issues that confront us for the foreseeable future: First, how can we constructively come to grips with and benefit from the added anxiety and stress that the current uncertainty brings? Second, how should we think about democracy under these turbulent conditions?

These are important questions that, I think, pragmatist philosophy can help us address. Pragmatic philosophy, in its different strands and influences, is a highly diplomatic and rich socially-minded orientation on one's experience.¹ The current cultural and social turmoil renders each of us bracketed by major racial, sexual, and political divides. Unquestionably, such uncertainty about the future is causing increased anxiety and panic. Rightly so, but the key question is: how will we respond? American pragmatists, like John Dewey, have insights that can help us change our thinking and practices, especially during disastrous times in the midst of panicked culture. But I would like to turn to the broader traces of a pragmatic philosophy of cultural interactions under the auspices of "disaster didactics."²

¹ Myron Jackson, "Will We Trust Institutions Again? Interality as Philosophical Diplomacy" *China Media Research* Vol. 15(4), 2019, 92-100. See, Eric Voegelin, *On the Form of the American Mind*, In *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*. Vol. 1. Trans. Ruth Hein. Ed. Jürgen Gebhardt and Barry Cooper (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995).

² This is a term I employ from Peter Sloterdijk's *Infinite Mobilization: Towards a Critique of Political Kinetics*, trans Sandra Berjan (Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press, 2020), 30-42.

The Stress of Panicked Culture

As we grapple with our current social crises, people can ill-afford to interpret the world behind a veil of any kind. Like a patient diagnosed with a terminal illness and whose life-expectancy is radically cut short, America is responding in ways similar to other people, businesses, and nations—by confronting their greatest demons. Maximal stress events have the effect of provoking us to get our house in order, both personally and socially. We reevaluate everything that we take to be essential and nonessential. It is my contention that the worldwide protests following the police killing of George Floyd and too many others, stems from this level of reaction to the culmination of traumatic stress.

The rise of Black Lives Matter (BLM) and the efforts made on behalf of social equality during the racial reckoning summer are arguably unprecedented and it has changed the sports, business, and entertainment worlds along with increased philanthropic efforts and educational initiatives. Headlines started appearing such as, “Why Are There So Few Black CEOs?” when it comes to America’s fortune 500 companies.³ I will have more to say about this in a moment. For now, it is important to grasp the role that maximal stress events play in shaping our identities and how communities forge themselves and come together. Moreover, I do not find it persuasive that this “perfect storm” of national and global crises was predestined for the year 2020. What seems more plausible is that all of these events are merging through a dynamics of collective stress.

Disastrous events lead to the manufacturing and maintenance of stress communes. As Sloterdijk points out, “the altered mode of human existence in high cultures can be explained as a result of the

³ Te-Ping Chen, “Why Are There Still So Few Black CEOs?” *The Wall Street Journal*, accessed October 5, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/why-are-there-still-so-few-black-ceos-11601302601>.

increasing stress placed on human beings by the idea of permanent external scrutiny.”⁴ Societies are far more than tribes, nations, or any group-related identities; instead, they should be “understood primarily as stress-integrated force fields, or more precisely as self-stressing care systems constantly hurtling ahead.”⁵ Media journalists understand this well. They dispatch “bad news” stories allowing each of us to form “a collective that succeeds in jointly keeping uncalm.”⁶

Stress is a motivating factor for personal and social action. It has the power to bring people together in ways that they otherwise would have enjoyed each other’s isolation and independence. One’s wedding day or commencement. A loved one’s death. A child’s birth or major automobile accident. These are not hypothetical events. Human life finds value and meaning in such highly stressful experiences. Perhaps no other feature of human physiology has been as fundamental to our cultural and civilized development more than stress.

Stress seems to be a primary motivating mood that equips us to face the challenges that arise in times of great uncertainty. It is through uncertainty, within and around one’s groups, that panicked culture arises. As synchronization of the globe accelerates, human societies begin to face calamities that extend beyond regional problems. Adam Smith’s speculator keeps getting disturbed in his sleep.⁷ There are two main responses— what I call the *before* and *after*

⁴ Peter Sloterdijk, *After God*, trans. Ian Alexander Moore (Cambridge, UK, Polity Press, 2020), 28.

⁵ Peter Sloterdijk, *Stress and Freedom*, 6.

⁶ Peter Sloterdijk, *Stress and Freedom*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Cambridge, UK, Polity Press, 2016), 6-7.

⁷ Scottish moral philosopher Adam Smith observed how humans have the ability to be undisturbed (*apatheia*) by the suffering of others, if it is surmised that the calamity is a safe distance from one’s own affairs. “The most frivolous disaster which could befall himself would occasion a more real disturbance. If he was to lose his little finger tomorrow, he would not sleep to-night; but, provided he never saw them, he will snore with the most profound security over the ruin of a hundred millions of

school disaster didactics—to panicked culture. In the next section, I will argue that the Black freedom struggle exemplifies a survivalist philosophy that finds stimulus to build alternative cultures in the disasters of panicked culture. This is a “before school” mentality relying on the Black autodidactic pedagogics at the center of all disaster didactics:

Because intelligence is not a theoretical quantity but represents a behavioral quality of creatures in an open environment, it must go through the school of fire. Without experiencing burns, you have no idea how to cope with life. The world is not always good and does not tolerate all kinds of behavior. A warning pain must be engraved in the nervous system in order to reliably embody the selectivity predetermined by the world. Human wisdom has been bound to the engrams of suffering from time immemorial. [...] Because humanity enters its path into the unprecedented as a student without a teacher, it would have to teach itself what it cannot learn from anyone else. It must endure being fated to an auto-didactics as a matter of life and death.⁸

Western democracies are controlled by elite non-autodidacts, less responsive to the “warning pains” of their environments. They have grown less sensitive to creating alternative cultures and are

his brethren, and the destruction of that immense multitude seems plainly an object less interesting to him, than this paltry misfortune of his own. To prevent, therefore, this paltry misfortune to himself, would a man of humanity be willing to sacrifice the lives of a hundred millions of his brethren, provided he had never seen them? Human nature startles with horror at the thought, and the world, in its greatest depravity and corruption, never produced such a villain as could be capable of entertaining it.” See, Adam Smith, *The Essential Adam Smith*, ed. Robert L. Heilbroner (New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 1986), 106.

⁸ Sloterdijk, *Infinite Mobilization*, 38.

overinvested in embalming their own cultural memories, identities, and heritages.

Survivalist philosophy promotes “alert intelligence,” ready to recalculate theory and practices on the basis of cultural adaptation. Compatible with Dewey, alert does not mean restless or frantic. While detailing the criteria of experience educators have to be open to, Dewey writes in *Experience and Education*:

On one side, it is his business to be on the alert to see what attitudes and habitual tendencies are being created. In this direction he must, if he is an educator, be able to judge what attitudes are actually conducive to continued growth and what are detrimental. [...] But there is another aspect of the matter. Experience does not go on simply inside a person. It does go on there, for it influences the formation of attitudes and desire and purpose. But this is not the whole of the story. Every genuine experience has an active side which changes in some degree the objective conditions under which experiences are had.⁹

For this reason, alertness is not concerned with “hero dynamics, heritage practices, or legacy tools.”¹⁰ The emphasis of pragmatic alertness stresses organic engagement with communities, through an openness flexible enough to meet the demands of uneasy times and unanticipated crises. Alertness taps into a readiness that does not fall into a heroic “emergency thinking,” as with Heidegger’s later philosophy. It is not the errancy of *Beyng*, but the possibility of experiencing the attention to register the contingencies of the situation.

⁹ John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1938), 39.

¹⁰ Christel N. Temple, *Black Cultural Mythology* (Albany, NY, SUNY Press, 2019), 83.

When the CEO of Well Fargo recently apologized for prematurely assuming that a “shortage of Black talent” was responsible for such little minority leadership in American banking and finance, we witnessed a complacency that should be alarming to any would-be-learner.¹¹ If you are satisfied with the way things are and fail to be alert to the possibilities at your disposal you cannot hear and see the situation of our times. Our current epoch is stressful driven by dissatisfaction on several fronts, not one of complacency and routine.

Before School and the Black Freedom Struggle

How seriously should we take any philosophy, in our times, failing to account for panicked culture? From a pragmatic orientation, when Peirce, James, Dewey, Mead, and others claim that experience should be the center of inquiry, what else could they mean other than that human beings are destined to learn at the time immemorial school of “worst case scenarios”? The school of “hard knocks” has, potentially, more graduates than any institution of human learning. Experience is a powerful teacher, but not just any experience. There is a difference between trivial and significant occasions. In the panic of experiencing catastrophe all things are pushed to the forefront of importance—one no longer enjoys the luxury of not having to decide and distinguish between what matters and what does not.

It is wrongly assumed that BLM is a *recent* activist movement, but its roots stretch back before the civil rights era. Black resistance has always relied upon strategies of networking and communication under systemic duress and political coercion. From Garvey’s Pan-Africanism to Pearl Sherrod’s 1930’s Detroit-based Development of

¹¹ Hamza Shaban, “Wells Fargo CEO Apologizes after Blaming Shortage of Black Talent for Bank’s Lack of Diversity,” *Washington Post*, accessed October 5, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/09/23/wells-fargo-ceo-black-employees/>.

Our Own organization, Black internationalists have always organized at grassroots levels.¹² “Utilizing diverse strategies and tactics, they articulated global visions of freedom by working collaboratively and in solidarity with Black people and other people of color across the world. BLM activists have carried on this tradition, often using social media as a vehicle to forge transnational alliances.”¹³ Black cultural experience and memory conveys a survivalist tradition of creative response, resilient intimacy, and antifragile determination. These are cornerstone principles for any disaster didactics, however I want to avoid romanticizing or idealizing the examples from which we can learn.

Pragmatist philosophy offers a useful framework in which to check such ideological impulses expressed in various nefarious ethno-narcissisms. But what is appealing about the Black freedom struggle and creative survivalist philosophy is how the “engrams” of discrimination are active and cannot be ignored. To be Blacked means one does not have the luxury to ignore how to “read the room” or take a temperature of one’s reception in the room. The stressful conditions of being a minority entail a heightened awareness for the sights and sounds by which one is being appropriated and objectified. More privileged groups can afford the luxury of ignoring or downplaying the need to exercise such intensity of personal and social awareness. The examples of Black male and female interactions with police officers are radically different, compared with their white counterparts for a significant reason.

Black and other oppressed peoples have a head start in projects

¹² Keisha N. Blain, “[F]or the Rights of Dark People in Every Part of the World’: Pearl Sherrod, Black Internationalist Feminism, and Afro-Asian Politics during the 1930s,” *Souls* 17, no. 1–2 (April 3, 2015): 90–112, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10999949.2015.998582>.

¹³ Keisha N. Blain, “Civil Rights International: The Fight Against Racism Has Always Been Global,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 99(5), September/October 2020, 176.

of disaster didactics becoming experts in crisis stress management before it became synonymous with the civilizing processes! Some of the first instances in human history of confronting apocalyptic dangers non-hysterically occurred through the supposed cursed descendants of Ham.¹⁴ In the struggle for survival by Black, Brown, and Yellow peoples “disaster-pedagogical thinking promises that even the greatest calamity can be referred to a human scale—that is, into the field of sensible measures for preventing its repetition—through subsequent learning.”¹⁵

Pragmatic knowing and practice appeals to those who recognize how easy it is to become “hearing impaired,” and hardened to the needs and interests of those around you. Cliché philosophies or popular worldviews want us to hear without much listening. For their purposes, it is more desirable to fill the mind with systems and cluttered noise. This becomes the elevator music for non-walkers. What we call social discourse in our heavily polarized times are no more than efforts to insulate further our preferred echo chambers. Disasters like the never-ending fight for racial justice, and the democratic deficit spreading across the developed world all provide the burden and opportunity of “stimulus for self-critical relearning.”¹⁶

Striving for this self-relearning is not only the basis of autodidactic strategies of survivalist philosophy, but it finds the germ for creating alternative cultures as a healthy, constructive response to panic. As Larry Hickman notes, the task of philosophers is to “alert” and “provide fresh ideas so that specialists in these fields can determine whether their cherished ideas and values are in fact appropriate to

¹⁴ “Ham (Son of Noah),” in *Wikipedia*, September 26, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Ham_\(son_of_Noah\)&oldid=980398573](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Ham_(son_of_Noah)&oldid=980398573).

¹⁵ Sloterdijk, *Infinite Mobilization*, 39.

¹⁶ Sloterdijk, *Infinite Mobilization*, 39.

their changed and changing circumstances.”¹⁷ Panicked culture and catastrophe have been normalized as a part of our daily lives. The overheating of a faster-moving world is always on the horizon. As Sloterdijk writes, “catastrophe needs less an announcement than a transcript—linguistically, its place is not among apocalyptic promises but among the daily news and committee reports. The writing on the wall appears in ordinary language and the only thing that belongs to modern doomsday prophecies (aside from a spray can) is empirical data, [...] which has already attained symbolic features with its series of fatal accidents.”¹⁸

Therefore, pragmatist pedagogies are not reducible to a preoccupation with critical thinking or a method of inquiry; their concerns run deeper and offer more survivalist problem-solving. Those overly committed to certain worldviews or theories will be those who will have to learn the hard way. Is that not the fate and destiny of learning for those who refuse to listen? An updated pragmatic method or maxim would subscribe to this value for flexibility and openness. Closed self-righteousness has permeated all of our cultural lesson plans. In the urgency of disaster those who are unwilling to budge become vicious and cruel. As a result, those who preach moral supremacy trigger attitudes of defiance and moral entropy. This creates a *stagnation* in thinking that inhibits social progress and cooperation. Such well-entrenched attitudes are counterproductive from the standpoint of democracy because it puts social policing in front of attitudes and practices of social grace.

Vulgar Pragmatism and Lethargic Democracy

What we are witnessing today, that Dewey factored into his political

¹⁷ Larry Hickman, *Philosophical Tools for Technological Culture*, 25.

¹⁸ Peter Sloterdijk, *Infinite Mobilization: Towards a Critique of Political Kinetics*, trans Sandra Berjan (Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press, 2020), 33.

philosophy, is how democracy shows its true colors once it has been challenged and tried. Democracies are tried and tested during times of social unrest and upheaval. Individuals take on identities through forming erotic-tragic stress dynamics and these get “transacted” with the social commitment to its democratic ideals and institutions. When things turn restless and uncertain, a strong need for cooperation and communication among public and private officials arises. One of the virtues of democratic government is how it establishes practices that promote flexible and adaptable leadership.

The imperative becomes to unleash “alert intelligence” in order to understand all the nuances and strategies for crisis management. As Christopher Ansell explains in his insightful 2011 book *Pragmatist Democracy*, when democracies break down, public and private initiatives become important bridges for panicked cultures to find deliberative and innovative solutions.¹⁹ But the resiliency of democracies rests in large measure on the “self-rescue agencies” relying on “a paramedic concept of reason as first aid.”²⁰ Disaster didactics prepares and teaches us an alertness that otherwise lies dormant and untapped. But it is not a brass, reckless action out of impulse but that one that allows and prepares for reflection. The stress-filled moments in life are the key drivers for active, rather than passive actions. Calmness acts as an antidote to the uncalm and catastrophic situation. It represents the calm within the storm and how one will be prepared for the unpredictable. But it is not a passive escapism, it strives to be alert and attentive to the needs and goals (Dewey’s “transactions”) that experience presents. Dewey views the precarious and unpredictable aspects of experience as built into the generic traits of existence.

As Charles Morris, one of George Herbert Mead’s influential

¹⁹ Christopher K. Ansell, *Pragmatist Democracy: Evolutionary Learning as Public Philosophy* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2011).

²⁰ Sloterdijk, *Infinite Mobilization*, 105, 121.

students, makes clear in his 1934 “policy pamphlet” entitled “Pragmatism and the Crisis of Democracy”: “The pragmatic movement reveals itself as peculiarly sensitive to value of any kind and wherever found, though somehow or other critics have usually gone to the extremes of denying this value-dimension or making it the only interest of pragmatism. Unlike most positivisms, it has not merely surrendered itself to science; it has made the further step of seeing the moral potentialities of the empirical temper.”²¹

Disaster didactics is *pluralistic* or open to “value of any kind,” which makes it sensitive to the demands of adaptability and elasticity, all hallmarks of increased antifragility during maximal stress events. The aim is to work despair, alienation, and rage into constructive projects and “stimulus for self-critical relearning.” Disaster didactics inquiry, pragmatic philosophy can teach us how to turn “separation into autonomy, fall into construction, and disaster into projects.”²² That is why Dewey’s sense of control and discipline is problematic. His emphasis on cultural orientations has waned and different times have given way to looser and freer forms of cultural practices.

Many of our practices are largely done without being deeply understood or challenged; in other words, our familiarity and interactions with other cultures is primarily outside-in. One that requires we strip ourselves of what is primary and familiar in order to surmise how we can embrace the foreign and uncanny. Dewey’s philosophy describes beauty as a natural consequence of our desire to create meaning out of our unstable and precarious existence:

Man finds himself living in an aleatory world; his existence involves, to put it baldly, a gamble. The world is a scene of risk; it is uncertain, unstable, and uncannily unstable. Its dangers

²¹ Charles Morris, “Pragmatism and the Crisis of Democracy,” *Public Policy Pamphlet*, no. 12, ed. H. D. Gideonse, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1934), 16.

²² Sloterdijk, *Infinite Mobilization*, 148.

are irregular, inconstant, not to be counted upon as to their times and seasons. Although persistent, they are sporadic, episodic. [...]. We first endow man in isolation with an instinct of fear and then we imagine him irrationally ejecting that fear into the environment, scattering broadcast as it were; the fruits of his own purely personal limitations, and thereby creating superstition. But fear, whether an instinct or an acquisition, is a function of the environment.²³

Inquiry, for Dewey, is about transforming experiences from the indeterminate to determinate situations. Out of the precarious we negotiate and make “transactions” into the “stabilities” of experience. The goal of the learning process is not to achieve objectified truth or a mastering the perfection of technological artifice. Indeed, it was the hopes and dreams of modernity’s quest for certainty largely animated the need for the disaster didactics of American pragmatism, since its civilizing process has created avalanche effects.

As cultural processes have accelerated, the need for risk protection and insurance plans has risen to unprecedented levels. Educators, for example, around the globe have been pushed into the insurance markets by the pandemic, since the new conditions demand flexible and creative efforts for building pedagogical platforms for polythematic learners—without any meaningful guide. In a certain sense, we have all been called to rethink the importance and value of comprehensive analysis. Not only has appreciating the contextual basis of knowledge become more important but having the ability to initiate backup plans and affordances has become the common standard. “The already-arrived is obliterated by the not-yet-arrived. In the process, the insatiable hunger for the future grows.”²⁴ Privileging

²³ John Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, Second Edition (New York: Dover, 1958), 41-42.

²⁴ Sloterdijk, *Infinite Mobilization*, 149.

adaptability over complacency secures a stake on the future in an ever increasingly dangerous world.

Along with the pandemic, the rise of authoritarian leaders in Western nations has rendered illusory any sense of normalcy or security. It is when these neo-liberal and neo-conservative veils are removed that one can see the lingering effects and deeper impact of systemic racism, sexism, and poverty. A commitment to eliminate systemic racism, for example, lies in one's emotional affection for the situation. Thinking and loving go together as Dewey explains:

No one gets far intellectually who does not 'love to think,' and no one loves to think who does not have an interest in problems as such. Being on the alert for problems signifies that mere organic curiosity, the restless disposition to meddle and reach out, has become a truly intellectual curiosity, one that protects a person from hurrying to a conclusion and that induces him to undertake active search for new facts and ideas." Problems have a contextual character and "pragmatists advise decision makers to take their cue from what Mary Follett called 'the law of the situation'"²⁵

The fact that much of philosophy, too, like stress-induced communes has established itself and survived by responding to the moodiness of historical epochs and other times of social crisis. Many of the grand historical accounts neglect how philosophers were responsible for many of the responses to cultural catastrophes. As the timeless saying goes, necessity is the mother of invention! "The fact that philosophic problems arise because of widespread and widely felt difficulties in

²⁵ "Taming Deep Uncertainty: The Potential of Pragmatist Principles for Understanding and Improving Strategic Crisis Management - Chris Ansell, Arjen Boin, 2019," accessed October 4, 2020, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0095399717747655>.

social practice is disguised because philosophers become a specialized class which uses a technical language, unlike the vocabulary in which the direct difficulties are stated.”²⁶

It is no big surprise that the world has recently witnessed one of these hard lessons in real time. U.S. President Trump, along with a number of white house officials, has downplayed the severity of the pandemic engaging in inconsistent messaging and offering little by way of national leadership and policy. During a March telephone interview, legendary oval office chronicler Bob Woodward asked President Trump how he would grade his administration’s response to the coronavirus. “I wanted to always play it down,” Trump responded, “I still like playing it down, because I don’t want to create a panic.”²⁷

The result has been a hodgepodge of state and local governments, along with corporate initiatives and other philanthropic projects making up for the deficit. Instead of taking *proactive* steps to follow the CDC guidelines established by his administration, the white house and Trump/Pence campaign held several super spreader events around the country, including a packed Rose Garden ceremony for Judge Amy Coney Barrett’s nomination to replace Ruth Bader Ginsburg on the Supreme Court. On October 2, Trump was admitted into Walter Reed hospital after testing positive for the virus. With over two-hundred thousand dead and one million Americans infected, while poll numbers thirty days before the 2020 presidential election show over seventy-five percent of Americans disapprove of Trump’s handling of the virus, Trump tweeted out a

²⁶ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 383.

²⁷ “Trump Consistently Bends Reality, Sells His Narrative In Interviews For Woodward Book,” NPR.org, accessed October 5, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/09/09/911138032/woodward-book-says-trump-chose-to-downplay-deadliness-of-virus-to-avoid-panic>. See, Bob Woodward, *Rage* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 2020).

rare admission: " "It's been a very interesting journey. I learned a lot about COVID. I learned it by really going to school. I get it, and I understand it."²⁸

No better words could have been spoken by one just released from after-school detention. Despite the likelihood that he does not take these hard lessons seriously—shortly after the confession, Trump went for a joyride to show solidarity with the masses of supporters camped outside of Walter Reed—the reality-TV star at least understands what is expected of a leader during a pandemic, even if it is a performance. Trump's example provides us with latent ironic questions that confront every project forged in the name of modernity: "Does this self that has attained the power to destroy nature not also happen to 'itself' like an anonymous disaster? And is this why the potent agency and ability of modernity relates to itself as suffering and powerlessness?"²⁹

Such a change in attitude and mindset (*metanoia*) is a fundamental condition for democratic institutions to hold sway in the future. "All future learning processes at the level of species will be fraught with an almost intractable problem of transmission: the question of how acquired and embodied intelligence can be transferred from one who has become wise to the unwise: more generally speaking, not individual insights can be incorporated into social institutions and technical systems. Only individuals can be wise: institutions are well designed at best."³⁰

The President is trying to project strength in the form of what I call a "vulgar" rather than a "robust" pragmatism. There is a fantasized and romantic vision of power that wants the big home run, the jackpot winner, or the miracle vaccine that will be the knockout punch solving

²⁸ "Donald J. Trump on Twitter," Twitter, accessed October 5, 2020, <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1312864232711520257>.

²⁹ Sloterdijk, *Infinite Mobilization*, 40.

³⁰ Sloterdijk, *Infinite Mobilization*, 39.

all problems. The “shock and awe” campaign to begin the Iraq War in 2003 comes to mind, but it is hardly noticed that American soldiers are still fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq today. Romanticized strength and power is too top heavy; it does not have the agility, fitness, and antifragility to meet the demands of precarious events. Such performative toughness is a façade and unwilling to take on reality as it is.

The next day after being released from Walter Reed, social media companies Facebook and Twitter blocked and censored the President’s post claiming that COVID is less deadly than the flu.³¹ Trump’s reckless behavior, a month before the election, indicates he really learned nothing from his extra lessons and will end up in detention sooner rather than later. An unwillingness to take up the responsibilities of active learning is bad for democracy. Democracies operate on a scale between lethargic, stable, and vibrant, and our time has moved in the direction of the former.

Lessons learned through pragmatism’s disaster didactics are attempting to avoid “after school” modernity, so to speak, which is the example set by those hard of hearing or blinded by grand philosophical truths who have to stay behind to make up work. Political leaders symbolize this hard-headed class of actors, along with their ardent supporters, who have largely set the fractured tone of disunity in our social spaces of dialogue and learning.

American polarization is often talked about but rarely described. It has to do with the dynamics of sterilization and an unwillingness to participate and discern the concrete details and exigencies of the situation. Any politics of traditionalism, whether neoconservative or neoliberal, renders itself immobile and incapable

³¹ Jessica Bursztynsky, “Facebook, Twitter Block Trump Post That Falsely Claims Coronavirus Is Less Deadly than Flu,” CNBC, October 6, 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/10/06/facebook-removes-trump-post-falsely-comparing-coronavirus-and-the-flu.html>.

of learning. It is often said that America's increasingly partisan political arena presents "alternative realities" among the ideological dreamers. But to break through the gridlock is to take on new kinds of alertness.

Rigid and inflexible patterns of behavior make us vulnerable and we will either be left behind or, eventually, thrown out by its cruelty and viciousness. A strong sense of denial is shaped by these lethargic attitudes within stale democracy. Complacency and toxic agitation result in conspiracy theories and the rise of distrust toward the credibility of public institutions. "But the foreign never quite wants to be the same as that which is our own and our home. [...] The way of critique passes over into a critique of the way."³²

³² Sloterdijk, *Infinite Mobilization*, 151-152.