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When the Machine Stops: What a 1909 Book Can Teach Us About Technocracy and Human Agency in the Age of AI

Paula Ungureanu[1]

Edward Morgan Forster's The Machine Stops (1909) is a dystopian tale about a future society that lives entirely underground, dependent on a vast technological system simply called "The Machine." People inhabit isolated cells where all their material and intellectual needs are met through mechanical provision. As all forms of social organization are technology-mediated, face-to-face contact is rarely sought and often discouraged. Travel across the Earth's surface is forbidden, as direct experience of the world has come to be seen as dangerous and unnecessary.

The story centers on the relationship between Vashti, an ideal typical citizen of the society who fully embraces the Machine's authority, and her son Kuno, who rebels against it. Kuno summons Vashti to visit him in person, an unusual and arduous journey within this society, and pleads with her to recognize that life under the Machine has drained humanity of vitality, freedom, and dignity. Their conversation is tense and painful: Vashti defends the Machine as the guarantor of civilization, while Kuno insists that human beings are losing the very capacity to live without it. Vashti listens to her son's story but considers the implications of his rebellion to be unthinkable, akin to dangerous madness. She dismisses his perspective and returns to her part of the world. The narrative then traces the fate of this civilization, culminating in the collapse of the Machine and the helpless destruction of the population that had become entirely dependent on it, as witnessed by Vashti and Kuno.

Forster's story reads less as a cautionary tale about malfunctioning machinery than as a meditation on political order in technological societies. Few texts speak to our present as uncannily as The Machine Stops. Written in 1909, long before Orwell's 1984 or Huxley's Brave New World, Forster sketched a world where human life is entirely mediated by technology, where dependence on an all-encompassing system erodes freedom, intimacy, and ultimately democracy itself. In many ways, he anticipated not only the better-known dystopias of the twentieth century, but also our own contemporary struggles with AI, surveillance, and technocratic governance. As today's debates on artificial intelligence oscillate between promises of rapid progress and fears of domination, Forster's little book feels less like speculative fiction and more like a guide to understanding the tensions our societies now face: how to live, think, and decide for ourselves in a world increasingly ordered by machines.

It is interesting to understand what Forster's story can bring new to our current debates on democracy and AI. In the story, the vocabulary of democracy such as participation, dissent and freedom, has been rendered obsolete. The Machine is not merely a socio-technical apparatus; it is culture, creed, and the very constitution of humankind. It governs not only by habituating citizens into passive compliance or replacing deliberation with doctrine, but by shaping humanity itself—becoming a hybrid condition of our species, a new stage in the Darwinian trajectory of evolution, where technological adaptation supplants natural selection and defines the future of mankind.

From such standpoint, Forster's story also speaks directly to a century of sociological and scientific inquiry into the role of technology in shaping society. Scholars such as Jacques Ellul, Langdon Winner, and Shoshana Zuboff—alongside many in science and technology studies—have shown that technologies are not neutral tools but deeply social systems that organize behavior, embed power, and reshape cultural meanings. What Forster anticipated with startling clarity is precisely this—the tendency of technical systems to evolve into comprehensive frameworks of order, prescribing not just what people do but how they live, relate, and even imagine freedom. However, The Machine Stops is much more than a prescient allegory with anticipatory value. The text proposes a profound meditation on technocracy as a condition of life itself, reaching beyond social and cultural constructs to probe its intimate entanglement with some of humanity's most fundamental experiences: faith, intimacy, birth, and death.

By capturing the interaction between Vashti and her son Kuno, Forster underscores the role of immediate experience and agency in sustaining human freedom. Forster describes a society governed not only by rules and institutions but by a profound reorientation of the senses. The Machine shapes how people move, perceive, and even tolerate the presence of others. In this, Forster anticipates a profound democratic concern: without embodied agency, without citizens who encounter one another in vulnerability and plurality, democracy itself atrophies. AI systems that structure human interaction by curating what we see, hear, and value risk turning citizenship into

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an unrecognizable, narrowing what counts as experience and choice.

When Vashti undertakes the unusual journey to visit her son, she is confronted by elements of the world her society has repressed, such as movement, touch, smell and the proximity of strangers. These are no longer mundane aspects of life but sources of unease. The simple fact of walking toward an airship, of being glanced at by fellow passengers, is experienced as destabilizing. Even the accidental dropping of a book unsettles travelers who have exited the comfort zones of their "cells", because such irregularities cannot be absorbed within the seamlessly mediated environment to which they are accustomed. In this way, the fear of direct experience becomes a mode of social organization, as powerful as law or ritual: it defines what counts as comfort, as security, as the proper boundary between self and world.

Forster emphasizes that this estrangement is not only circumstantial but institutionalized as cultural progress. The very desire to "look direct at things," he notes, once existed but had been overcome. "*When the air-ships had been built, the desire to look direct at things still lingered in the world. Hence the extraordinary number of skylights and windows, and the proportionate discomfort to those who were civilized and refined.*" (p.8). Even a sliver of dawn filtering into Vashti's cabin is disturbing, a reminder that light, air, and nature no longer belong to civilization. To encounter the world directly has become regressive, a mark of backwardness against the "natural progress" achieved through the Machine.

The same holds for human contact, whether visual or physical. Embodiment is no longer the ground of human solidarity but a breach of social order. When one passenger instinctively helps another from falling, she is reprimanded: "'*How dare you!' exclaimed the passenger. 'You forget yourself!' The woman was confused, and apologized for not having let her fall. People never touched one another. The custom had become obsolete, owing to the Machine.*" (p.9)

Most striking is the ritualized denial of the Earth's landscapes, which the Machine's passengers glimpse only to disavow. "*Those mountains to the right — let me show you them... They were once called the Roof of the World, those mountains.*" (p.9). But Vashti and others respond only with formulaic praise which they repeat endlessly: *"How we have advanced, thanks to the Machine!"* When asked about the *"white stuff in the cracks,"* Vashti cannot remember the word for snow. A similar gesture repeats as she hides Greece, the cradle of democracy, behind a blind, whispering: "*No ideas here.*" (p.10). Through this immemorable journey, Forster suggests how, with time, technology mediation can reduce nature and history to meaningless fragments, stripped of connection, then actively erased. In such setting, technocratic progress is affirmed in chorus, even as the very capacity to recognize what has been lost disintegrates.

This same principle governs knowledge. In one of the story's most mordant passages, a lecturer warns his students: "Beware of first-hand ideas!" exclaimed one of the most advanced of them. "First-hand ideas do not really exist. They are but the physical impressions produced by love and fear, and on this gross foundation who could erect a philosophy? Let your ideas be second-hand, and if possible tenth-hand, for then they will be far removed from that disturbing element — direct observation. Do not learn anything about this subject of mine — the French Revolution. Learn instead what I think that Enicharmon thought Urizen thought Gutch thought Ho-Yung thought Chi-Bo-Sing thought Lafcadio Hearn thought Carlyle thought Mirabeau said about the French Revolution. Through the medium of these ten great minds, the blood that was shed at Paris and the windows that were broken at Versailles will be clarified to an idea which you may employ most profitably in your daily lives".(p.18) Thus, Knowledge is celebrated precisely when it has been filtered through layer upon layer of commentary, until even the French Revolution can be known only as a purified abstraction: "a generation absolutely colourless, a generation 'seraphically free / From taint of personality,' which will see the French Revolution not as it happened, nor as they would like it to have happened, but as it would have happened, had it taken place in the days of the Machine."(p.19).

The echo with contemporary debates about AI is unmistakable. Generative systems, trained on vast corpora of pre-existing texts, excel at producing second- and tenth-hand syntheses, but often at the cost of flattening difference and erasing the unruly vitality of experience. Like Forster's Machine, they risk transforming knowledge into a seamless circuit of processed information, endlessly recombined but increasingly detached from lived reality. The danger, Forster suggests, is not just epistemic but political: when citizens defer to machine-generated interpretations, democratic deliberation gives way to technocratic mediation. The authority of "first-hand ideas" is lost, and with it, the plural, contested, embodied experiences on which democracy depends.

In stark contrast to the tightly mediated and ritualized society of the Machine, the encounter between Vashti and her son Kuno stands as an anomaly—a liminal event that breaches the carefully maintained boundaries of an almost forbidden order: that of kinship. Their meeting exposes the fragility of human connection in a world dominated by technological authority, revealing the residue of intimacy, emotion, and bodily presence that the Machine cannot fully erase. In this sense, their interaction is not merely personal but profoundly subversive, a fleeting rupture in a system that has sought to regulate and ultimately replace the fundamental ties of family. Yet, they are also living proof that authentic human connection has become impossible in the age of The Machine.

The two live on opposite sides of the world. Vashti is content with her life, which, like most inhabitants of Foster's society, she spends producing and endlessly discussing second-hand 'ideas'. She enjoys talking to friends but uses her work to defend herself against their invitations to be more social, remaining in her 'room' where all her basic needs are met. Her son Kuno, however, is passionate, free spirited and a rebel. Kuno insists that true life requires risk, exposure, and the unpredictability of direct encounter—precisely the elements the Machine eradicates. His rebellion is not only against mediated existence but against the very redefinition of the human that the Machine enforces.

If *The Machine Stops* is a meditation on technology, it is also unmistakably a meditation on faith. Forster shows us how the suppression of transcendence, myth, and religion does not abolish humanity's inclination to worship but redirects it. The Machine becomes the object of veneration, first silently and then explicitly, as its followers transform its technical operations into sacred ritual. As Forster explains, "*The second great development was the re-establishment of religion. (...) Those who had long worshipped silently, now began to talk. They described the strange feeling of peace that came over them when they handled the Book of the Machine, the pleasure that it was to repeat certain numerals out of it... the ecstasy of touching a button, however unimportant*." What had once been considered superstition now re-emerges in mechanical form: the Machine is omnipotent, eternal, the giver of life and meaning. "*The Machine*," they exclaimed, "*feeds us and clothes us and houses us; through it we speak to one another, through it we see one another, in it we have our being*." (p.19). The rhetoric of progress merges with the language of gratitude: "*Night and day, wind and storm, tide and earthquake, impeded man no longer. He had harnessed Leviathan. All the old literature, with its praise of Nature, and its fear of Nature, rang false as the prattle of a child*." (p.7).

Vashti herself embodies this faith. Again and again, she praises the Machine's perfection, and finds its sameness more consoling than her son's physical presence: "She might well declare that the visit [paid to Kuno] was superfluous. The buttons, the knobs, the reading-desk with the Book, the temperature, the atmosphere, the illumination—all were exactly the same. And if Kuno himself, flesh of her flesh, stood close beside her at last, what profit was there in that?" In this passage, Forster warns us that even human intimacy pales before the reassurance of ritual repetition, as the tactile familiarity of buttons and books may win against the intimacy of a mother-son conversation.

Here Forster reveals something crucial: the Machine's authority is not only technical but spiritual. Citizens no longer worship gods, but they worship nonetheless, and this worship is more totalizing precisely because it masquerades as rationality. The Machine is celebrated as "the enemy of superstition," even as it becomes the object of a new superstition. This displacement of religion into technocracy resonates with contemporary debates on AI. The rhetoric surrounding artificial intelligence often echoes theological registers: AI is cast as an omniscient system, capable of feeding, guiding, and even "knowing" us better than we know ourselves. Yet the political consequences of such faith are profound. To worship the Machine—or to treat AI as destiny—is to remove it from the realm of contestation. What is worshipped cannot be debated; what is sacred cannot be challenged. In Forster's dystopia, the Book of the Machine replaces civic discourse, becoming a scripture of encoded rules. In our own time, algorithmic systems risk acquiring a similar aura of inevitability, presented as neutral and objective while silently displacing the plural, embodied, and conflictual practices that sustain democratic life. Forster's insight is thus not only cultural but constitutional: once technology becomes an object of worship, democracy has already given way to technocracy.

In sum, what Forster anticipated more than a century ago —long before debates about technology and society had even begun to interest scholars—is the insight that sociotechnical change is first and foremost a revolution within us: a hybrid force that gradually and imperceptibly transforms who we are, reshaping our desires, perceptions, and very modes of being, rather than merely imposing an external regime of social control.

Noteworthy, in the world of the Machine, the material and the spiritual are no longer distinct: they coincide and dissolve into the apparatus itself, which becomes at once provider, environment, and destiny. This is above all a bodily experience—one of immediate gratification and long-term security, but also of isolation and impotence. Kuno, in his dialogue with his mother, seeks to unsettle this habitual order by introducing doubt, uncertainty, and the embodied critique.

At first, Vashti insists that her son's restlessness is "contrary to the spirit of the age." When Kuno asks, "Do you mean by that, contrary to the Machine?" her silence and sudden sense of loneliness reveal how unthinkable such separation has become. Loneliness itself is now a rare and abnormal emotion: the Machine has "isolated" it from ordinary life. To be outside is to be "homeless," and homelessness is defined as death. "I have been threatened with Homelessness," said Kuno. She looked at him now." I have been threatened with Homelessness, and I could not tell you such a thing through the Machine." Homelessness means death. The victim is exposed to the air, which kills him."I have been outside since I spoke to you last. The tremendous thing has happened, and they have discovered me." (p.10)

At this point the reader, like Vashti, assumes the threat is simply that he went outside. But Forster slowly discloses the true scandal: not the act of leaving, but the way it was done. Vashti protests: *"It is perfectly legal, perfectly mechanical, to visit the surface of the earth ... one simply summons a respirator and gets an Egression-permit."* Kuno interrupts: *"I did not get an Egression-permit."* She presses him: *"Then how did you get out?"* His answer unsettles her world: *"I found out a way of my own."*

Here Forster pauses on Vashti's inability to comprehend: *"The phrase conveyed no meaning to her, and he had to repeat it. 'A way of your own?' she whispered. 'But that would be wrong.'"* The transgression is revealed not as movement through space but as movement beyond control—the discovery of "a way of one's own." For Vashti, this is irreligious, shocking beyond measure. *"You are beginning to worship the Machine," Kuno says coldly. "You think it irreligious of me to have found out a way of my own."* (p.11)

This slow unmasking shows how deeply the Machine has redefined freedom, religion, and even morality. The suppression of movement is not the main issue; what must be eliminated is vitality itself, the possibility of unpredictable forms of life.

By showing the impossibility of movement in the characters' relation Forster's narrative is uncompromising about the irreversible consequences of technological progress. The Machine does not simply fail; it reshapes humanity into creatures incapable of feeling, thinking and living without it. In democratic terms, this suggests a point of no return: once agency is fully ceded to technological infrastructures, it may not be recoverable. It is important to notice, however, that his sense of irremediableness is an intimate human experience whereby man gradually loses the habit of first-hand sensations and inquiries. From such standpoint, the human-machine hybridity is conveyed as a prosthetic relationship marked by a gradual and irremediable depotentiation of human vitality and agency.

The theme of vitality merits closer attention, as it occupies a central role in Forster's work. As Forster explains: "By these days it was a demerit to be muscular. Each infant was examined at birth, and all who promised undue strength were destroyed. Humanitarians may protest, but it would have been no true kindness to let an athlete live; he would never have been happy in that state of life to which the Machine had called him; he would have yearned for trees to climb, rivers to bathe in, meadows and hills against which he might measure his body. Man must be adapted to his surroundings, must he not? In the dawn of the world our weakly must be exposed on Mount Taygetus, in its twilight our strong will suffer euthanasia, that the Machine may progress, that the Machine may progress, that the Machine may progress eternally." (p.11). In this way, Forster dramatizes how technological order does not merely constrain action but reclassifies spontaneity as sin, strength as weakness, and freedom as irreligion. Kuno's rebellion terrifies not because of what he did, but because it exposes the possibility of doing otherwise.

As Kuno explains, the crucial transformation is not the one wrought by technological progress on the social, geographical, or cultural topography of human civilization, but the very transformation of humanity as a species—mediated through its capacity to perceive, move, and interact with these topographies. The shift is therefore not an external imposition, as often depicted in science fiction where advanced machines become literal cages for humanity. Rather, it is a subtler, alienating evolution: the senses and bodies of men have gradually dulled, leaving only faint traces of how space and time once "felt." In the narrative, these traces are interpreted either as the proper experience of being alive, according to Kuno, or as a misalignment with life itself, according to his mother.

Kuno's reflections underscore the centrality of the bodily, lived experience of the world: "You know that we have lost the sense of space. We say 'space is annihilated,' but we have annihilated not space, but the sense thereof. We have lost a part of ourselves. I determined to recover it, and I began by walking up and down the platform of the railway outside my room. Up and down, until I was tired, and so did recapture the meaning of 'Near' and 'Far.' 'Near' is a place to which I can get quickly on my feet, not a place to which the train or the air-ship will take me quickly. 'Far' is a place to which I cannot get quickly on my feet; the vomitory is 'far,' though I could be there in thirty-eight seconds by summoning the train. Man is the measure. That was my first lesson. Man's feet are the measure for distance, his hands are the measure for ownership, his body is the measure for all that is lovable and desirable and strong. Then I went further: it was then that I called to you for the first time, and you would not come." (p.11-12).

"She shook her head and said: "Don't. Don't talk of these terrible things. You make me miserable. You are throwing civilization away." "But I had got back the sense of space and a man cannot rest then. I determined to get in at the hole and climb the shaft. And so I exercised my arms. Day after day I went through ridiculous movements, until my flesh ached, and I could hang by my hands and hold the pillow of my bed outstretched for many minutes. Then I summoned a respirator, and started" (p.12-13).

Here, Forster suggests that the path to regaining agency lies in retraining the dormant senses, awakening idled muscles, and inviting vitality to flow back into the body. "*Finding one's own way*" is not merely a metaphor for rebellion; it is an embodied, perceptual act that restores humanity's intrinsic capacity to measure, judge, and inhabit the world on its own terms. The following passage evokes man's difficult condition at the crossroads of a past no longer possible, and a suffocating present.

"I felt that humanity existed, and that it existed without clothes. How can I possibly explain this? It was naked, humanity seemed naked, and all these tubes and buttons and machineries neither came into the world with us, nor will they follow us out, nor do they matter supremely while we are here. Had I been strong, I would have torn off every garment I had, and gone out into the outer air unswaddled. But this is not for me, nor perhaps for my generation. I climbed with my respirator and my hygienic clothes and my dietetic tabloids! Better thus than not at all." (p.13)

After this dramatic confession, Vashti and Kuno part, and their brief encounter becomes bracketed in space and time, exerting no tangible impact on Vashti's daily life. She resumes her routines, never thinking of her son, never seeking him out.

Yet one day they meet again, and the seeds of their conversation are stirred to life by an enigmatic phrase that Kuno whispers to his mother unexplained yet resonant: "*The Machine stops*." (p.21). The phrase lingers in Vashti's mind and fills the sterile air of her accommodation. Doubt creeps in, gradually swelling into fear. Forster suggests that the very fear of uncertainty that once compelled humanity to worship the Machine is the same force capable of undermining its dominion. Notably, these cracks appear in the most mundane bodily experiences—sleeping, listening to music—the very rhythms of life the Machine was designed to regulate.
Yet the fear of the unknown proves stronger than any discomfort: humans accept the Machine's flaws, even attributing them to imagined saboteurs. "Time passed, and they resented the defects no longer. The defects had not been remedied, but the human tissues in that latter day had become so subservient, that they readily adapted themselves to every caprice of the Machine. The sigh at the crises of the Brisbane symphony no longer irritated Vashti; she accepted it as part of the melody. The jarring noise, whether in the head or in the wall, was no longer resented by her friend. And so with the mouldy artificial fruit, so with the bath water that began to stink, so with the defective rhymes that the poetry machine had taken to emit. All were bitterly complained of at first and then acquiesced in and forgotten. Things went from bad to worse unchallenged."

Despite all adaptation, something ultimately fractures and one day everything ends. Finally, the Machine collapses, bringing 'civilization' down with it.

"People were crawling about, people were screaming, whimpering, gasping for breath, touching each other, vanishing in the dark, and ever and anon being pushed off the platform on to the live rail. Some were fighting round the electric bells, trying to summon trains which could not be summoned. Others were yelling for Euthanasia or for respirators, or blaspheming the Machine. Others stood at the doors of their cells fearing, like herself, either to stop in them or to leave them. And behind all the uproar was silence — the silence which is the voice of the earth and of the generations who have gone."(p.24)

Kuno comes to Vashti's ruined room which has stopped supplying clean air, medicine, water or food and is in danger of collapse. They physically embrace one another for the first time since his childhood. Before they both perish, they acknowledge that humanity and its connection to the natural world are what truly matters, and that it will fall to the surface-dwellers who still exist to rebuild the human race and to prevent the mistake of the Machine from being repeated.

"She burst into tears. Tears answered her. They wept for humanity, those two, not for themselves. They could not bear that this should be the end. Ere silence was completed their hearts were opened, and they knew what had been important on the earth. Man, the flower of all flesh, the noblest of all creatures visible, man who had once made god in his image, and had mirrored his strength on the constellations, beautiful naked man was dying, strangled in the garments that he had woven." (p.24)

The Noise of Progress: a conversation with Mark Coeckelbergh on AI, Capitalism, and Democratic Renewal

Gislene Feiten Haubrich[2]

On June 6th, the final day of the OAP Workshop hosted at the London School of Economics and Political Science, I had the opportunity to talk to Mark Coeckelbergh, keynote of the event. Coeckelbergh is a philosopher of technology and Professor of Philosophy of Media and Technology at the Department of Philosophy of the University of Vienna. He is also ERA Chair at the Institute of Philosophy of the Czech Academy of Sciences in Prague and Guest Professor at WASP-HS and University of Uppsala.

In this interview, we dove into critical issues regarding human-technology relationships, based on Coeckelbergh's extensive work on the role of philosophy in engaging with contemporary technological and societal challenges. Drawing on insights from his recent books *Self-improvement* (Columbia University Press, 2022) and *Why AI Undermines Democracy* (Polity, 2024), we talked about the impact of the current culture and individualistic manifestations amplified by AI and capitalist dynamics, and concluded the interview with an urgent call for reimagining democracy through communication, relationality, and collective responsibility.

Throughout the conversation, Prof. Coeckelbergh emphasizes the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration, the transformative potential of narratives and cultural awareness, and the necessity of building spaces—technological, institutional, and personal—that foster listening, shared meaning, and democratic renewal. Enjoy the reading!

Gislene: Thank you prof. Coeckelbergh, for accepting our invitation to this interview for JOCO. As we briefly discussed, in these interviews, besides further understanding the author's ideas, we also want to learn a little bit more about the person behind the ideas. So, I'm curious to know when did Philosophy cross your path and what was attractive in that field?

Prof. Coeckelbergh: I guess I've always been a more reflective kind of person. During high school, I got more interested in Philosophy. I was also interested in questions related to society and its challenges. So, first, I studied political science and then, I realized that I liked theory, I liked working with concepts, I liked philosophy. Then, I went in that that direction.

Gislene: Technology has been a very important topic for you for a while already. What about technology became interesting for you?

Prof. Coeckelbergh: You know, I was always interested in technology as a kid already. After my philosophy studies, after finishing my PhD, I was looking for ways to more practically engage with societal questions and technological questions came up. I joined a project on engineering ethics and, in this way, I got kind of used to think about what philosophy could also mean for people in technical professions, for people outside philosophy. So, that was the starting of a range of jobs and pursuits that went more in interdisciplinary directions.

Gislene: This is very interesting, the importance of Philosophy in technical professions. In the common sense, we will use the word philosophy very loosely, but the way you're putting it, it really seems to be orienting practice. Can you elaborate a little bit more about this relationship?

Prof. Coeckelbergh: Philosophy is, of course, about arguments, concepts, interpretation, and discussion. But this way of approaching the world can also be helpful for people outside of Philosophy. When thinking, for example, about ethical problems raised by technology, and this was how I started, right. I believe that many of the questions that we face today, questions that are raised by technology, philosophers can help people to think more clearly about some of these issues. I think, today, for example, about AI, the ethical problems, but also problems about consciousness, authorship in writing and so on. I strive to contribute to addressing these issues through philosophy. I call myself a philosopher of technology, and by it, I mean that I do not only apply existing notions and discussions to that field, but I also use it as an opportunity to think about the major philosophical questions that we have: How should we treat our lives? How should we organize society? Also political questions: What is mind consciousness? What is language? What is writing? All these questions. I find really exciting to have these both sides. And the more practical side has also led me to contribute to policy making. For example, I was a member of the High-Level Expert Group on AI for European Commission, and in various national advisory bodies. I also have my passion for philosophy. I really like to think about the more fundamental questions and connect with other philosophers, taking part in these discussions. Thinking about technology in that way can also stimulate us to ask these fundamental questions again and maybe also contribute to more original ways of asking these questions.

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Gislene: Absolutely. I'm wondering about the spaces between these two sides, Philosophy and practice. To really grasp an idea philosophically, we need some reading, we need some thinking. Yet, as a practitioner, sometimes, we don't have that background and we don't have that time. Usually, in the world of practice, people want answers right away. How was for you to navigate these contexts? Not only with the practitioners, like the engineering team that you mentioned but also with policymakers who also have a different timing.

Prof. Coeckelbergh: Absolutely. A different timing and, first of all, the expectation of answer. As a philosopher, you're more specialized in trying to ask the right questions. In those contexts, as a philosopher, I think you can do that; you have to stimulate people to think about things harder. At the same time, you have to compromise on this question-answer dynamic. You have to say like: OK, I'm just going to try to give you some answers; some proposals for answers. And then discuss with other people. You have to give up being a 100% a philosopher and you have to become a little bit more policy maker, a little bit more engineer as well. I don't think that should be a problem. I think it's good to find some kind of middle ground with other disciplines, with practitioners. In that middle ground, you also have to be open to learn from them. We should strive to understand what the problems are they are busy with? What are the societal problems for the policymakers? What are the challenges that computer scientists and engineers struggle with? I think by engaging with that, as philosophers, we can ask better questions and have better discussion around existing problems. I think mutual learning has to take place. It's not always easy to establish this middle ground, this kind of communication. It's a challenge by itself and, although many academics and people in leadership positions would encourage interdisciplinarity, we don't often get the time and support to do it. There are still a lot of disciplinary ways of thinking and organizing. But I think things are slowly changing, and I think there's a bright future for that kind of work.

Gislene: I hope so! You touched upon a very interesting point: That interdisciplinarity takes time. We have been hearing a lot about it; that we need solutions that are really interdisciplinary; solutions that look at the problems, instead of disciplines. But they need time. However, we are also pressed by *time*: we must deliver results 'yesterday' because today is too late. Is there a way to finding a balance? Do you see any good horizon in that front as well? Like more balanced ways of experiencing time?

Prof. Coeckelbergh: I mean, it's true that there are very different temporalities. To bring things together; there needs to be efforts from both sides. In the institutional processes, in politics, and in organizational processes, of course. There needs to be a conscious effort to build these moments for reflection and trying to get into ethics, for example, into the processes and the institutional arrangements. If that means slowing down the development, a compromise must be made. Otherwise, you get problems later down the line. There needs to be an effort from that side, but also from the side of academia, particularly, Philosophy, Ethics, and so on. Efforts should be made to think about questions such as: How can insights be translated to practice? What kind of role can academics fulfill there? How can we train people to take this role? I think there's a huge opportunity also here for academics to say: let's train people to deal with interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity. Let's prepare people to go beyond academia, and link academia with practice. I think maybe this is lacking often in Humanities and Social Sciences nowadays, and it could really help people see the relevance of what they do, and it could help people outside the academia.

Gislene: This is a great point. Would you say that you are on 'the team' arguing that researchers also have to find way to communicate with practitioners? There are scholars who say the opposite, that researchers should do the research and other professionals should be experts on translating insights to practice, thus arguing that dissemination is not the role of researchers. What is your take on that?

Prof. Coeckelbergh: Well, of course, researchers should have enough time to do their research. This is, of course, a precondition. But there should be a remaining time for interdisciplinarity. I think it's important to get sort of time and get rewarded for this kind of work. In academia, nowadays, we don't always get rewarded for the right kinds of things. Of course it's important to have output. Of course, in the current situation, one needs to get an external funding and these kinds of things. But the sort of impact side, maybe it's not always easy to measure it, but because something can be measured easily doesn't mean It's not important. When it comes to impact, when it comes to bridging to practice, I think this should also be rewarded. Of course, some people are going to be better at it than others, just like with many things we do in academia. But I think it's good to reward it, to encourage it, and to train people to do it as well. Currently, only a few people have this kind of experience. When I teach my students, I see that some of them are ready to move in that direction, often those who already have some professional background, which helps. And there are those who also try, in their work, to link to relevant questions they know from their field of practice. But I think this could be done in a much more systematic way and stimulate people to do that.

Gislene: Fantastic! Great points! Now, regarding your work more specifically. One aspect that I appreciate in your work is the way you think about and use narratives. Can you elaborate on this point? Why did you decide to go to this road to reflect about the world?

Prof. Coeckelbergh: First of all, I like the arts. I like literature. I like that side of things. There is in Philosophy a huge tradition that recognizes the value of narratives. In particular, it recognizes that the way we stand in the world, the way we make sense of the world, is very much shaped by narratives. We use narratives, myths, for example, but also all kinds of stories to make sense of the world; to make sense of what we do; to make sense of ourselves. Narratives play an important and structural role in our lives and society. Once you recognize this, you also have to bring that to the more practical questions. Let's say a question such as what is meaning of technology? I wrote about the meaning of technology explaining that the meaning is shaped by narratives. I looked at several cultural narratives that shape our thinking about technologies. That's important because often people see technologies as just instruments, as these purely technical things. But technologies are always like linked to narratives and to sense-making. We can use the hermeneutic tradition, the narrative philosophical tradition to think about ethics of technology, to think about the nature of technology and the role it plays in the society.

Gislene: Can you give me an example? Maybe something that you already have in your one of your books? That or one of the cultures that you explored based on these narratives.

Prof. Coeckelbergh: Before studying on AI, I worked on the ethics of robotics *[see for example: You, robot: on the linguistic construction of artificial others]*, and there you see that the Western ways of looking at robots can differ very much from, let's say, East Asian ways, for instance a Japanese way of looking at robotics. Then you see that culture and religion play an important role. Similarly with AI. I'm now studying ways that cultural and religious patterns in our cultures, in the history of our cultures, and how they play a role in the ways we think about AI. For example, human-machine relations and the ways we think about them is very much shaped in our thinking in terms of creator and creature. That's a theme that we find also in religious writings. I find it fascinating, to go back to that sort of history of ideas and see where our thinking on human-machine comes from and what does it mean for today. If we neglect this and don't look at this more narrative and cultural backgrounds, then we cannot be sufficiently critical, and we cannot sufficiently find new ways of dealing with new technologies or even inventing new technologies. I believe we need to be more self-aware; we need to be more cognizant of this kind of background that is there, and it is not necessarily technical, but in the narrative aspect.

Gislene: Super interesting! I would love to dive more into that, but I want to talk to you about the book you published in 2022 titled *Self-improvement*. In the book, you argue that the current culture around self-improvement has become toxic. Ca you explain what do you mean by that, why is that a problem, and if is there any solution to it?

Prof. Coeckelbergh: Good questions. I mean, of course, self-improvement, in itself, it's a good thing. Since ancient times it has been a good thing, and I went back into the history of this topic to discuss it. Yet, what I'm worried about is that self-improvement, today, became an obsession, a heavy duty, something that people must do. And it becomes problematic because it is mediated by biotechnologies, for instance, by technologies that quantify the delf. But also, there is the role of capitalist culture. People feel like they have to overwork, people are burned-out and exploited. If self-improvement becomes this thing that people feel they must do, then it also becomes a way to focus too much on the self. Thus, people engage less with the world around them, engage less with other people. Self-improvement becomes this thing that is outsourced to a commercial capitalist system through the idea that you can buy self-improvement, for instance, while reading certain things, and all different practices, including wellness, and so on. The book criticizes the sector that is built upon that, a sector that is telling us: buy this because this will improve your life. I think it's good that people reflect on their lives, that people try to live better lives, but this cannot be bought. The obsession with self-improvement to the detriment of other things, I think, is problematic in many ways.

Gislene: Yes, I certainly agree. And to this point, we have been studying, for instance, work for a long time and the aspect of self-improvement is intensively there. It's interesting that you say that it may turn our focus too much into ourselves and not as much to our existence with others. How do you think that shapes the way we see the world? While engaging with this toxic approach to self-improvement, we are doing so because requested by others. How is this relationship existing and how is that shaping what we are as humanity?

Prof. Coeckelbergh: The basis of my book and the view I aim to convey, the criticism I built in the book, is that we might have forgotten that we are relational beings. Being relational means that what you are and, therefore, also your improvement, is not something that you can do alone, but that crucially depends upon other people. You cannot, in a way, self-improve in a strict sense; the improvement will always depend also on your environment. But we forget that, like with most things in our Western culture, we individualize everything, and we think we can do it alone. But what we are, and our improvement depends on others, and in the end, also depends on the improvement of society. You can do all the proposed self-improvement and wellness, and so on, but, in the end, when you live in the kind of specific capitalist society, it won't improve much because your environment will actually still have all these negative effects on you. It's very difficult to live the good life and improve yourself in this kind of environment. So, in the book, I argue that if we really want to change things, including change ourselves, we also, at the same time, have to change our environment and create the conditions at societal level for the improvements of ourselves, as persons, and also as communities.

Gislene: Does AI play a role in that?

Prof. Coeckelbergh: AI is currently used as a tool for this kind of self-improvement industry. AI is used to model us, to profile us, and to quantify us. Our data is analyzed by AI, and we are continuously compared to the numbers created by AI. We compare ourselves also on AI-based social media. So, the problem is also that in our self-improvement culture, you are never enough. You will never be enough. You can always better. You can train always harder. You're never beautiful enough. You're never good enough because there will be always people and profiles that are better. This toxic comparative process that's happening in our society anyway, is exacerbated by the use of AI in data science for commercial purposes. This doesn't really help us, and it doesn't really improve anything. It rather makes us obsessed. And, in the end, we can really suffer from this self-improvement pressure.

Gislene: I might be taking a leap here, but for me that seems to be very central to one of the topics we have been discussing lately, which is democracy. I think there's a strong relation between the toxic obsession with self-improvement and how we experience democracy. So, if democracy is about how we live with each other, about how we can exist together, how can we experience it if we are too self-centered? Do you think there is a relationship between this toxic self-improvement culture and the way democracy is now existing in our societies?

Prof. Coeckelbergh: Yes, absolutely. If we want to change society, and if we want to organize things in a more relational way, we need a different kind of democracy. And here I've argued for a more communicative version of democracy, which is about what we share and about actively making something in common. In this view, the stress is not so much on *me* as an individual, and what can *I* get out of society, how can *I* improve. Rather, it's about: how can *we* get better? How can *we* learn as a society? How can *we* improve together? In the West, we really missed that dimension of politics. And I could even argue that politics itself is in danger when we completely forget about this. If we improve on the political side, if we have more democracy, I think that can also create conditions for self-development and self-improvement. Dewey, for one, believed that democracy is not just an instrumental means to other goods, but that it is itself a form of self-improvement. Through it, we can learn from each other and become more virtuous, for example, through the democratic process. But that process needs to be more participatory, more communicative, and more socially oriented and oriented toward the common good.

Gislene: In the book *Why AI Undermines Democracy*, you propose that we should think about AI particularly in terms of how it can redirect us toward more democratic values. Now, I wonder: we are living in very odd times, and narratives around war are very strong. More than that, these narratives seem very concrete; war is happening. On top of that, there's the constant call for acceleration. We don't have enough time to digest things as they're happening. Taking this context into consideration, do you think it's really possible for us to create these democratic values?

Prof. Coeckelbergh: To have that kind of democracy, we need to get away from narratives of competition, narratives of “there's no time”; “we don't have time for anything.” This is a difficult process because it has to do, first of all, with the culture that is there already for a long time. People are being socialized in this culture. Instead, we need to educate people in a different way. More importantly, we need to change the structures of our society. Now, everything is organized in ways that promote competition and more conflictual relations among people. We absolutely need to change that. If we don't change the wider organizational and political ways of doing things, then, as an individual, it's very difficult to go against it. I mean, academia is an example of that. As an individual you can say “I don't want to live like this kind of competitive environment.” But as long as we don't change the environment, as an individual, you have very little choice, effective choice. You only have a formal choice; you can step out of it. But when you're in it, you are living in these structures, you're disciplined by these structures. So, the only way to change it is to really collectively decide to change the organizational and political structures.

Gislene: That sounds very hard.

Prof. Coeckelbergh: It feels very difficult right now, and I think collective action isn't very popular these days. But that goes against our own interests. As long as we continue to believe in these narratives and myths, that only competition benefits us, that the world is a bad place where we always have to fight, and that the other is necessarily the enemy, it will be very hard. But I think we can change our beliefs; we can change our culture. It may be slow, but it's possible. Education is one way to do that, and of course, collective political action is another.

Gislene: You published a paper in the AI and Ethics Journal last year (2024), and I separated a quote for us to discuss: "One could also discuss whether AI itself should be understood as a commons (some would say public good), or if it should rather be treated as any other commercial product regulated by the invisible hand of the free market." I find this very interesting because in a way it sounds like we have an option; we have to make a choice. But is there any way to have both? Or the only way is to make a choice and deal with the consequences?

Prof. Coeckelbergh: In the end, it is a political decision: where should the balance lie? What's now happening is that things are presented as if we don't have a choice. The individualist approach and total free market and capitalism seem to be the only options, but that's misleading. We are given the idea that the only way we can have better AI is to have the private sector develop it. I'm not against the private sector. I think that there should be both private and public initiatives and innovation. Yet, now, I think the balance is really totally on one side. Instead, we should think about these technologies considering several political questions. For example: who benefits currently from these technologies? Who has the power to develop them? Then you see this huge power asymmetry. And I think there is, rightly, more and more criticism about that. I also criticized this imbalance in my previous book *The political philosophy of AI*. Nowadays, we see many more books criticizing the power of big tech, for example. Thus, I think we need to redress the balance. Also, we need sufficient public investment in these technologies, and we should give more power to public sector, civil society, and smaller initiatives, so that we can get out of this situation of exclusive ownership and exclusive power and control by the private sector. Even within that sector there's just a very few, just a handful of companies in the game now. I think we can do a lot to change that situation. Of course, digital commons, sharing data and so on, these kinds of approaches can contribute to redressing the balance.

Gislene: And now we're going to talk specifically about the idea of Communicative AI, which is developed in your most recent book. Can you please explain what do you mean by democracy as communication?

Prof. Coeckelbergh: *Democracy as communication* is an article that I published in the *Contemporary pragmatism journal* because the idea is inspired mainly by Dewey. So, here is my argument: Normally when we think of communication, we think of this relation between a message that gets transferred from A to B, from a sender to a receiver, and, of course, many of the digital technologies do that. At the same time, if we see democracy as communication, what I mean here with communication is not so much that transfer of a message, but rather communication as having something in common and as making something common. And this idea resonates with a Deweyan and philosophical republican ideal of democracy, which I also started to develop in the book *Why AI undermines democracy*. The notion of communication, if we understand it in this more common, communal way, as something that links people, can help us to also think of AI and other digital technologies as communication technologies in this richer sense and think constructively about current AI effects. More specifically, we can make sure that AI contributes to making community, to connecting people, to building a common world. The common world that Dewey and Arendt, for example, thought is so important for democracy and politics. With this angle, AI can have a more positive political role.

Gislene: And that goes to how we use these technologies, how we relate to them and how they help (or not) to us to relate with others. And I think that goes back to your book on the self-improvement, because I think the mindset we build with the toxic self-improvement pretty much shape the way we interact with AI. In that sense, how could we develop a more communicative approach to using these tools? And could that help us be better with one another in our relationships?

Prof. Coeckelbergh: What's really needed, according to Dewey and Arendt, is that you have common experiences, and I think AI could help us to build these common experiences. It could also bring together people who have similar opinions, for example, about things, thus helping the democratic process. It could stimulate people with different opinions to talk to one another and listen to each other. And finally, I think that AI could also be communicative in the sense that the stress is not so much on authors, but on readers. I address this issue in the book

I wrote with David Gunkel, *Communicative AI*. If we look at these large language models, there's no longer a human writer, but it shifts the importance to readers. And that also has a democratic aspect because it means that you and I can also give our interpretation of the text. What matters for the meaning of a text is not just the author; we can also interpret the text. We can talk about it, discuss about it. It can also be a model for democracy, not only in spite of our differences, but also using our differences. Each person contributes to interpretations and through the communication, people can try to find what they have in common. So, finding things in common, shaping, building a common ground, building common experiences is very important. And I see this as a process. Instead of starting from a traditional understanding where you share a fixed set of views and values, we need to create a common ground. I think in the current political context, at levels of big cities, at the global level, there's a lot of diversity. But we can try to use the technologies to find these common experiences and build something in common, coming from different interpretations, coming from different readings, so to speak, of our world. But it shouldn't stop there, with the different readings. We need to get to the common.

Gislene: What's the role of difference in that?

Prof. Coeckelbergh: One problem that happens often in the current digital social media environment is that we are encouraged to stay in our own bubble, or if it's not our own bubble, we are encouraged to fight with the other person, shout at each other, without really doing effort to understand each other and to empathize with the other position and so on. But a democratic process, a communicative AI process, if we do it right, means that I try to understand your differences: where you're coming from, what your identity is, what your concerns are, what your needs are, and vice versa. I think a democratic process, potentially, can be supported rather than hindered by technologies. They can help to overcome differences, but also help us learn from each other. So, it can be that difference leads to something new, because there can be mutual transformation. This is the learning process that I talked about. Dewey suggests that we also develop ourselves as people, so we can grow from it. Your difference, in a way, can help me to change. And at the societal level, it can bring more diversity in terms of solutions, more creativity in addressing our common problems, and even in recognizing that there is a common problem, even making it a shared problem, negotiating that shared understanding. I think it becomes very difficult if we don't share the problem, if we stay too much in our bubbles, or remain stuck in that competitive, confrontational, almost fascist atmosphere.

Gislene: In fact, listening plays a key role in communication. Yet, usually, when we talk about communication, we discuss content or the message exchanging mechanism. But the listening dimension, we do not reflect on it often. Still, it's an important component on all of this. Do you think we will give us time to listen to each other?

Prof. Coeckelbergh: I think it's really something that needs to be created. For listening you need to consider the role of silence, and in in our shouting culture, silence is a very rare good. We need silence to hear the voice of the other, to hear things, and to find this common ground. So yes, at both, the level of organizations and the level of politics, we have to build silence into our processes. We need to create space for listening to one another and, of course, to educate and train people in the virtue of listening.

Gislene: To be honest, I'm not sure if I know how to be silent anymore, because even when you're silent, you're silent with your mouth, but your head is just full of things. If you try to meditate, the mind usually wanders away because your head is just full of things. I agree with you; we should create this space for listening. Yet, usually, when we create the spaces to give voices, we often use that space to producing noise. So, in our accelerated context, how do you envision we could build a space for the virtue of listening?

Prof. Coeckelbergh: Of course, as you say, in the personal level, it's it is like very hectic in our heads. And it's very hectic in our head because we are just relational beings and we are in this hectic, non-silent, screaming world. The solution is to develop our own skills in dealing with this, but also to change it in the world. One way of doing that, if you take seriously the whole message of philosophy of technologies that technology and media are not just instrumental, but also shape our thinking, our politics, and so on, is to start with the technologies. If you want to change the world, you also have to change the technologies and media. I do believe that we can intervene, that through regulation and technical interventions we can create different kind of online environments and different social media, and different AI. So, if we work on that, then it's not just about what you and I can try to do to our own minds. It's also about how we can be supported in investing in, and finding again, this commonality and listening. For this, we may need a very concrete set of material and other structural arrangements.

Gislene: Yeah, absolutely. My final question is also to help those who are reading this interview, this conversation, if we want to learn more, how to engage with philosophy, what are your recommendations? What should we do? Where should we look for inspiration?

Prof. Coeckelbergh: I think it's valuable to look at the work of philosophers who deal with these themes, those who go beyond the status quo and manage to bring philosophical discussion to the big questions of our time. There are many opportunities to engage with this kind of work. And I think, vice versa, it's also important for philosophers to look at the real problems people face, in their practices, in organizations, in politics, to better understand what people are truly struggling with. What are they worried about? Why do so many feel overwhelmed or unwell? Why do people struggle so much in both their work and private lives? I believe more and more people are beginning to reflect on these issues. This is one way, both within and outside academia, because there are also people outside academia doing this kind of work, that philosophy can contribute to improving things. And in the end, that also helps us improve ourselves.

Gislene: So, we should have hope?

Prof. Coeckelbergh: We should have hope, but we should not just rely on hope, because hope is also sometimes too much waiting for something to happen, waiting for someone else to solve the problem, and I think we should also take action to change things.

Gislene: Thank you so much, Prof. Coeckelbergh. It was a fantastic conversation!

Prof. Coeckelbergh: My pleasure.

Faces or masks? Representations of oneself and others today

Elen Riot[3]

Abstract

This article explores the conceptual and representational tensions between faces and masks in the context of contemporary visual and performative culture, and their implications for understanding presence, identity, and organization. Drawing on interdisciplinary sources—including aesthetics, anthropology, sociology, and photography theory—it examines how the face, as a site of recognition and vulnerability, is both revealed and concealed in modern practices of portraiture and image-making. The essay contrasts theatrical and photographic representation, especially in relation to authority and public image, and critiques the shift from symbolic portraiture to mediated ubiquity, as exemplified by figures like Steve Jobs. It interrogates how images, particularly photographs, construct social presence, mediate power, and contribute to the aesthetic regimes of organizational life. The paper argues for a reconsideration of visibility, resemblance, and ethical representation in contemporary visual culture, urging attention to those faces—and lives—that remain unseen or forgotten.

Keywords: Face and Mask; Representation; Visual Culture; Aesthetics and Organization; Photography; Power and Portraiture; Identity; Presence and Absence; Iconography; Organizational Imaginaries

“Masks are making a remarkable breakthrough on the dance stages of Avignon. Regularly used throughout the history of dance, and particularly in the 2000s by Boris Charmatz, Rachid Ouramdane, Christian Rizzo, and Marco Berrettini, these spectacular tools, the oldest in the world, question the face of movement by liberating the body,” " writes critic Rosita Boisseau in Le Monde on July 12, 2025, a few days after the opening of the festival. It is curious that the critic does not mention the question of the face but rather the liberation of the body, even though she refers more to choreographers than to theater performances, where facial expression may be more important in terms of the actors' embodiment of the characters.

Why masks? Are faces frightening? Do we want to make people feel the presence of those who, unlike us, do not have faces? This choice of masks seems to run counter to a recent trend of introducing cameras and screens at the heart of the stage to show close-ups of faces, whose features and expressions escape us due to the distance, for example in Katie Mitchell's production of Miss Julie (2013) or several of Thomas Ostermaier's productions, who explains in an interview with Delphine Edy the meaning behind the staging of these images: "Theater ist Denken im dreidimensionalen Raum [theater is thinking in three-dimensional space] and I like to think in three dimensions. The presence of a third person in the theater creates a triangle, which means that there is indeed a third truth in our binary system. However, the third reality is completely repressed; it no longer exists in our two-dimensional world (books, television, computers, etc.). Yet the third possibility is extremely important (...)." (2021: 41).

This third possibility—the space and time of staging a person who exposes themselves to the gaze of others—exists, and yet this aesthetic question disappears from the questions we ask ourselves about modes of presence to others, and therefore about organization. Let's say that this is the question that perspective theorists (Baxandall, 1972) asked themselves about the place of man in the world. Therefore, making room for him and giving him a little moment of attention seems important to me in order to understand our situation, for several reasons that I will explain in turn.

First of all, the question of the faces we show and the faces we encounter confronts us with prohibitions or, at least, limits that we do not want to think about but which nevertheless haunt us.

Hans Belting (2017) has shown that, in the history of representation, particularly in theater, faces and masks have succeeded one another across cultures throughout history, as if the codes governing what can be shown of the actor and the character were changing. Several anthropological questions have been raised (Lévi-Strauss, 1963; Strathern, 1979) that refer to the act of exposing oneself to the gaze of others, to embodying a role or character (other than oneself), to being represented and transformed by this staging of oneself by others, all subjects relating to being and appearing that seem to be better addressed in other cultures than our own, where it takes on a form of artificial obviousness, as Goffman (2017) points out, because what do we have more precious to lose than face (Riot, 2021), that event that occurs one day in public and haunts us?

This vulnerability to public exposure explains the iconoclasm that runs from Plato to Emmanuel Lévinas. Thus Lévinas writes that, because of the importance he attaches to the face of the other, it must not be represented, as its image would then be nothing more than a simulacrum. He thus returns to the prohibition of representation contained in Deuteronomy (Nancy, 2010: 269). Since at least the Renaissance, in the West, it has

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been the role of art to resolve this difficulty by establishing a resemblance between the model and its portrait. However, it is situated in an order of reality where, according to Lévinas (2008: 107), this order of representation is a deception through which the artistic imagination "sets itself up as the knowledge of the absolute." Critics present art as an accurate and scientific description of reality that allows us to understand it, whereas, as Levinas writes: "Is not the function of art to not understand?" (Ibidem: 111).

Masks, on the other hand, do not offer such knowledge of reality. They mark a distance from it and, in a way, claim to be its simulacrum. Belting quotes Lévi-Strauss to explain the central role of masks in resolving these taboos in cultures other than our own, an analysis that can also be read, given the analyst's culture, in the context of our social organization: "In The Life of Masks, Claude Lévi-Strauss (writes): 'Masks play an essential role in origin myths and serve as illustrations for great narratives: 'A mask never exists for itself, but alludes to others, real or potential, that could have been substituted for it. It cannot be reduced to what it represents.' It also shares itself with that which it excludes. Like myth, the mask denies the existence of other masks by reacting to them, turning competition to its advantage or fighting it. Thus, the natives use it as a means of communication capable of forging relationships with distant relatives by transposing family ties onto symbolic and collective faces." (...) "The mask is a sign, yes. A language in the strict sense, no. The function of the mask is almost the opposite of that of the word, which serves to establish direct communication between two human beings. "The mask interrupts this communication in order to establish another one that plays out between different levels, to put it very generally, between nature and culture. The mask establishes participation or correspondence, not exchange." (Belting, 2017: 61)

The mask has the ability to be both the self and the other, and it interacts with other masks, losing its meaning without them. In any case, it introduces a dividing line between nature and culture, between the lawful and the unlawful, between day and night, and sometimes, superimposing these orders, between these different realities that intersect at the same time but in other spaces designated for this purpose. This is perhaps what gives Levinas reason to reject art as a reflection of reality, insofar as, as he pointed out as early as 1958, in our organized society, art is present everywhere and at all times without the meaning of this presence, and in particular the representation of the human face, and therefore both the self and the other, being made explicit. In some cases, such as portraits of powerful figures, this question of representation is raised.

For me, unlike Lévinas, art can help us understand what the mask only shows us in a different way: the face it represents. The face reveals our organization and our society as much as it reveals us as individuals. Photography is, like the third possibility mentioned by Ostermaier, a representation whose form is chosen, and we must be attentive to what it reveals to us. The choice of its representation also deserves critical analysis.

As Pascal notes, portraits indicate social status and importance. They establish and institute, and in this sense, they are a sign of vanity on the part of those who place themselves at the center of the world. However, this vanity is illusory, as he illustrates with the famous story of the first speech:

"A man is thrown by a storm onto an unknown island, whose inhabitants were struggling to find their king, who had gone missing; and, having a strong resemblance in body and face to this king, he is mistaken for him and recognized as such by all the people. At first he did not know what to do, but he finally decided to go along with his good fortune. He received all the respect that was shown to him, and he allowed himself to be treated as king." (First discourse).

Pascal explains in another text the constructed nature of all power, which he separates from the face and body of the person who embodies only the function:

"There are two kinds of greatness in the world: there is established greatness and natural greatness. Established greatness depends on the will of men, who have rightly believed that they should honor certain states and attach certain respects to them. Dignities and nobility are of this kind. In one country, nobles are honored, in another, commoners; in this one, the elders, in that one, the younger ones. Why is this? Because it has pleased men. The matter was indifferent before the establishment: after the establishment, it becomes just, because it is unjust to disturb it." (Pascal, 2011: 252-253)

While Pascal refers in particular to the risks associated with self-representation, portraiture, Port Royal and Philippe de Champaigne (Marin, 1970) reflect on this question of figurative portraiture in relation to earthly power. They emphasize that all powerful men imitate divine power in that they too play on absence and presence. Thus, the portrait "carries absence and presence" (Fragment 15/31, http://www.penseesdepascal.fr/Loi/Loi15-moderne.php).

The king's body is represented in his absence and embodies power. In reality, Marin notes, it is in his absence that the king's power imposes itself on people's minds through his effigies, rituals and symbols, which manifest it in a form of ubiquity.

His figure is nothing more than that of a simple man, a fragile and fleeting shadow. What, then, is the meaning of the “portrait of the King” (Marin, 1981)? What, then, is the portrait of a great man if there is nothing to “show” and therefore nothing to see? Is it nothing more than the empty image of a mirage, or rather a “hidden presence” (Marin, 1995) that remains within us, commanding our respect or at least a form of mimicry, because we recognize ourselves in it as much as we see the other as ourselves (Riot, 2014)?

This question still arises today with regard to portraits of the great figures of our time (Riot and Deslandes, 2025, forthcoming), even though they no longer obey the same codes, or more precisely, even though they strive to subvert them by imposing a form of naturalness and normality on their public image. These portraits look back at us, as Jean-Luc Nancy writes: “It is not only the character (or person) represented who looks at us, but the portrait itself, the gaze in the portrait, is like a presence, a revisited legacy of the icon.” (2000: 182-183) because “in seeing, I see, for optical reasons,” writes Nancy; "in the gaze, I am brought into play. I cannot look without being looked at" (Ibidem: 75).

This reflection in the mirror, this identification with the portrait, raises questions about the attributes of power, posture, expression, and symbolic codes that today determine the legitimacy of the portrait and of the person depicted and presented to the public. They seem explicit, but this is only an appearance. Their functioning is not at all obvious from an aesthetic point of view (Taylor, 2002). These codes of presentation, defined by painting and sculpture since antiquity in the West, seem to be ignored or rather denied by social actors such as Steve Jobs. In the portraits of him that have been published, he seems to want to challenge the pose and codes of self-presentation in public (Goffman, 1977: 238). He rejects all symbols and signs of power, as if he derived it solely from himself. He stares the viewer in the eye, captured on the fly by the photographer in front of whom he did not want to pose (Studio Harcourt, 2010), like a moment snatched from those Hollywood films of artificial realism that Stanley Cavell said were "the moving image of skepticism" (Cavell, 1996: 242), the encounter between photorealism and the imagination of movie heroes, precisely what today, as yesterday, documentary realism in photography (Azoulay, 2012a/b: Lugon, 2001) questions by establishing a kind of civil contract between the one who is seen and the one who sees, which is presented to the audience (Agee and Evans, 2006). Photography has democratized portraiture, leaving an image of those whose lives were erased from society even during their lifetime (Riot, 2023). It is now commonplace to have your picture taken while posing.

Steve Jobs tears up this contract, like many others. Instead, he imposes one on his own terms, without explanation, relying solely on his personal charisma and the power that comes with personal success. In his portrait, he does not present himself, or rather, he is present only as an embodiment of the Apple brand, just like the icon and memes that circulate from screen to screen without depth, on the same level, without perspective and as if without staging. Everything seems to indicate that this image was taken without preparation, without intention, without background or ulterior motive, which makes its ubiquity even more impressive. The photographer, Albert Watson, later testified that he took this so-called “iconic” image on the fly, in an instant, as if this stolen moment were capable of revealing Steve Jobs' deep personality, in perfect transparency from self to other. He reinforces this thesis even further by pointing out that when Steve Jobs died, it was this photograph that was chosen by his family (and undoubtedly the company) to communicate about him, to evoke him after his passing. This lack of posing is also a pose, in my opinion, and it is the very device of the lack of posing and the erasure of the device specific to photography (Flusser, 2013), fragmented by digital screens (Pasternak, 2020; Rubinstein, 2020) that deserves study, because isn't this also how we share our images today, both our own and those of others? Can't we identify with this unposed figure?

This echoes Marin's observation: "The identification of the Self or the King (‘I am the King; I am the State’) occurs only through a series of glances and speeches governed by the system of representation. " (Marin, 1995: 188-189) and a new phenomenon that replaces the previous codes of representation with clothing and insignia, that of the age of mediagraphy evoked by Georges Didi-Huberman (2003), where they circulate everywhere and their dissemination seems to erase their significance.

They are now clues which, through their ubiquity, seem to want to escape the precariousness of the trace evoked by Schaeffer:

"The photographic art of the trace [...] is essentially defined as a kind of play with the indexical sign, a set of subtle variations around the quasi-perceptual field. This art gives us an image that is nothing but a photographic image and shows itself as such, that is to say, it does not disappear “body and soul” into some communicational introjection, nor does it abolish itself in some fetishism of the pure icon: an impure and precarious image" (Ibidem: 204-205).

This choice of images without perspective and infinitely reproducible encourages us to reflect on the gap between image and photography and to ask ourselves, following Mitchell (2005) and Poivert (1996), what images want (Mitchell, Boidy, Cilins, and Roth, 2014) at a time when they have multiplied infinitely and are circulating. For there is indeed a will in images that escapes us.

This reflection on images, which is transdisciplinary from the outset, combining aesthetics, social sciences, and technology, already took place when photography first appeared, replacing painted portraits and making it possible to preserve traces that had previously been erased, such as family albums and the faces of people who have changed over time, and who disappeared in eras when infinite efforts were made to keep track of and preserve the imprint of the living and pass it on to those who were not yet born (De Font Réaulx, 2012; De Font Réaulx and Poivert, 2015).

This leads us to ask ourselves in what cases, under what circumstances, can the image of faces be seen even though photography and its ubiquity are (at least in appearance) free from the frameworks of representation present in the Western tradition of portraiture?

We need to think about this framework of experience, like others, because it situates our present between the past and the present, that of collective memory and the future. It is as if we do not take the time to do so, overwhelmed as we are by the omnipresence of images and the ease of their presence, as long as we do not seek to choose either their content or their context.

However, photographic images in particular bear the traces, the imprint of the living after their death. As such, they have something sacred about them. Jean-Christophe Bailly writes about the portrait of words in L'Apostrophe muette (1997: 113), which confronts us with "a gaze that is neither question nor answer but silence and stillness, witness to what was. " It is another story of the face after death, without a mask.

Belting evokes death masks as the origin of facial portraits, the ritual portrait of death, facing disappearance and preserving traces: "The history of the face has always been that of the image of man. The best known and most emblematic lineage of prehistoric death masks is the cult of the dead as it developed in Egypt, the cradle of the first great civilizations. From the third millennium BC onwards, a rich palette of iconic practices unfolded before our eyes. From portraits to full-length statues, all forms originated in the mummy buried in the tomb, hidden from view, while images of the dead represented it on the outside. While the corpse was wrapped in bandages that concealed it rather than representing it, the position of the face was indicated by a mask fitted to the skull that seemed to look out through the eyes of the deceased. (2017: 159)

Our present has invented a different device, which has replaced the previous ones by erasing the body in favor of the image, where it is light that traces the imprint. Nevertheless, it has also inherited the previous devices, whose materiality we should not forget.

This is what Jean-Marie Schaeffer reminds us of when he emphasizes that photography is not the result of a direct imprint but requires “the intervention of an intermediate physical element: the photonic flux”: “Photography is a remote imprint; it is situated from the outset in a spatial tension that implies the absence of any direct contact between the imprinting agent and the imprint. In other words, before it is possibly a matter of mirrors, the photographic image is always a matter of distance.” (1987: 17)

This is why the question of intention and the forms it takes in the mind of the image's creator (Baxandall, 1985) takes center stage, as it establishes a form of responsibility: that of choosing the perspective. Let us remember that images bring to the present and make present those whom others have sought to erase (Didi-Huberman, 2003).

Let us consider that representations of faces should also represent the figures of those we do not see (Mann, 2024; Meiselas, 1998) and those who do not yet exist (Broome, 2012) because they matter. As strikingly illustrated by the work of Denis Roche, who “writes on the image” (Calle-Gruber, 2009), photographic portraits place us at the crossroads of several worlds, as conduits, witnesses to this passage from a book that plays on autobiography and family portraiture, in which he evokes a witness commenting on an image:

"In the foreground: Eugène and Roger, Estelle's brothers. Estelle, who gave me this photo in 1978, commented: "You see, this photo is exactly my age, it's 80 years old: everyone in it is dead, and yet I'm in it: I'm in the womb of my mother, Victorine, who's about to give birth to me. Estelle died three months ago." (1981 : 8).

This witness, who was in her mother's womb at the time the photograph was taken, has since passed away and commented on the image for the author, making him the repository of an invisible presence. Such was the vision of Lewis Hine and the pioneers of so-called social photography (Lugon, 2001). They made it a document of

Humanity. The same is true for those we don't know, or who don't yet exist. They're not indifferent to us, and as soon as we can see them, their face, present before our eyes, becomes essential to materialize the political choices we make today for tomorrow. Let's not forget that the face is the reflection of our world, which also includes our imaginary worlds.

As an exergue to Olivier Rolin's Extérieur Monde (2021), a book in which he retraces the peregrinations of a lifetime, we find this sentence by another writer: "A man takes on the task of drawing the world. Over the years, he fills space with images of provinces, kingdoms, mountains, gulfs, ships, houses, instruments, stars, horses and people. Shortly before he dies, he discovers that this patient labyrinth of lines traces the image of his face." Borges, El Acedor.

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Beyond Politus, Ordinary Democracy in Organization

François-Xavier de Vaujany[4]

Abstract

This article is a report on the 15th Organizations, Artifacts & Practices (OAP) workshop held at the London School of Economics. It looks back at three presences and one absence in our discussions on democracy in organizations. More than ever, we need to go beyond the simple posture of *politus* in democratic conversations to make differences productive. And this is a never-ending task.

Keywords: democracy; organization; organizing; work; differences; politus.

On my way back from a workshop organized at the London School of Economics on the theme of "Ordinary democracy in the making"[5], I am wondering more than ever about democracy in our societies and organizations. At the end of various presentations by experts in organizational studies, information systems, philosophy, anthropology and economics, four points seem to have emerged from the debates. More precisely, three presences and one absence were at the heart of this rich and intense event co-organized with Université Paris Dauphine-PSL and ESSEC.

The first presence is that of a necessary impossibility: how can democracy be defined without enclosing it, predetermining it, disambiguating it and thus becoming anti-democratic? Can a process of democratization be conceptualized, thought out and theorized (see Harrison and Freeman, 2004; Varman and Chakrabarti, 2004; Desmond and Wilson, 2019; Battiliana et al, 2025; de Vaujany, 2024, 2025)? Should we confine ourselves to the conditions of possibility of a democratic process? The debates clearly brought out an idea already well-known to political scientists: democracy is an eternal question rather than a clear-cut answer. As soon as individuals began to cultivate neighborhoods, as soon as it became necessary to superimpose beings and things beyond the confines of a single-family cell in the same space and along increasingly extended communication routes, the major political and democratic questions became obvious. How can we ensure peaceful cohabitation for all? How to distribute power within the "City"? How can we open up the exercise of power to the world and to the practical wisdom of citizens? Of course, the Western nature of this story is open to question. The genealogy of democratic practices and doctrines can hardly be dissociated from the Greek world, and Athens in particular. Ancient Greece was a formidable laboratory for democracy (Farrar, 1988; Bollen and Paxton, 1997; McCannon, 2012; de Vaujany, 2024, 2025).

With the move away from autocratic power, that of the tyrant or king, and the break with a theology or mythology that made the power of one or a few permanent and unchallengeable, democratic issues became unavoidable in Antiquity, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Later theorists of representative, participatory, deliberative, radical or social democracy were often drawn from the same "Western" matrix. And, of course, many practical issues need to be resolved to give democracy a framework (see the final chapter of de Vaujany, 2025). The democratic question is inseparable from the arithmetic and logic of numbers. Both the voting base and the voting process must be established. *It is easy to see how democracy has never been the power of all over all. It has required land capacity, a specific age, physical possibilities and procedures that exclude some and include others.* From a more technical point of view, it has been necessary to define democratic functions, volumes, orders and seriality. Today, these dimensions are still the subject of new experiments and active proposals, notably by colleagues at Université Paris Dauphine-PSL. All this contributes to the organization and reorganization of democratic processes.

This organizational dimension (see Battilana et al, 2025) was of course omnipresent in our first LSE debates. Beyond the institutions that guarantee the peaceful functioning of our democracies, multiple organizational processes are necessary for the democratic health of our societies. Beyond the perimeter of the state and its political bodies, the world itself is increasingly organized. Most of our lives take place in organized space-time. From the morning commute to work, through our company or administration, to all our in-between leisure and eating times, we never leave organized space-time. These are part of society, intensely producing and reproducing it. In many ways, they are moments in search of democratization. At work, democracy is often perceived by default. It's when it is missing, when it is absent or incomplete, that democracy is summoned. Silence and the ordinary experience of collective activity are then suspended. Criticism is rife: "They don't listen to me enough", "I don't have a say", "There's a real problem of listening in my company", "My manager isn't participative enough", "I'd like them to let us draw up the work procedures ourselves - I know my job".

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[5] The 15th Organization, Artifacts & Practices (OAP) workshop, organized on June 4, 5 and 6 by the London School of Economics & Political Sciences. This event brought together 85 participants from the humanities and social sciences, on the theme of "Ordinary democracy in the making".

John Dewey came up several times in the discussions at the OAP 2025 workshop, notably in Mark Coeckleberghʼs keynote[6] and several presentations in the parallel sessions. For the pragmatist philosopher, democracy is "permanent experimentation". It is a process, not a predefined norm (Lorino, 2018; de Vaujany and Heimstädt, 2022). In the course of collective redefinitions of the most commonly encountered problems, a certain openness must first be maintained, so that all individuals, all ideas, all techniques can be part of the "inquiry" carried out together. For Dewey, this process is the general movement from an indeterminate to a determinate situation. It associates democracy with collective activity. This, of course, presupposes constant care and attention, what Mukulika Banerjee called in her keynote lecture "gardening" or "cultivation"[7]. Our second guest speaker drew thus a fascinating parallel between the cultivation of agricultural fields and democratic processes. As any gardener knows, it is not enough to sow seeds once in a while (especially by voting...). In our societies, as in our organizations, we need to continually nurture democracy. We need to maintain the soil of our debates, fertilizing it from time to time, leaving it fallow from time to time, and protecting it from harmful insects and parasites.

In a complex way, management has contributed to both participatory democracy (its necessity to complement the logic of experts) and representative democracy (by systematizing questions of representation and governance at the organizational level). In the Fordist context of an assembly line, for example, it is obvious that the organization of work defines neighborhoods just as the city does on another scale. It requires open discussion, both to control and improve processes. In the final analysis, the space organized by management extends democratic questions by multiplying the public spaces juxtaposed to those of the city, or placed alongside it.

The second presence in the debates at the OAP 2025 workshop was that of the normative, in particular the *politus*. Mukulika Banerjeeʼs keynote also illustrated this tropism. The professor used two very interesting examples to show how even the most ordinary activity can induce "civic spaces" and "democratic processes". The first was a harvest in an Indian village. For three weeks, caste and status were forgotten. Caught up in the need to harvest, all individuals ended up forgetting themselves and became the diverse and sometimes interchangeable roles of field labor. The second was the London Underground. Based on a detailed and fascinating ethnography, the speaker showed how everyone managed to live together peacefully in what were sometimes difficult situations. In the experience of public transport, each person shapes and adjusts his or her own bubble to that of others. An intimacy of postures, attitudes and tactics are mobilized by users to maintain tranquillity in immobility or fluidity in movement.

Both examples troubled me (and not just because they didnʼt always reflect my experience of the Paris metro...). With hindsight, I think they illustrate issues of politeness rather than democracy. And I am convinced that it is absolutely essential to make a clear distinction between these two socio-political situations. Politeness implies the (temporary) suspension or neutralization of differences. "Poli" comes from the Latin *politus*, meaning "smooth". With polite rituals, the Romans (and many others) temporarily reduced differences in status. Politeness puts everyone on the same level, in the same ordinary moment. But like later "courtesy" or "gallantry", politeness does not exhaust tensions, divergences, differences and dominations. It merely sets them aside temporarily for the space of a public moment. Before and after, differences and conflicts remain. In the street, in a corridor, on a train journey, while shopping, strangers may have to speak to each other or speak to each other again. Politeness governs interactions. And the system of rules is often the product of a dominant social group who has a better grasp of regulations than the others.

Politeness does not necessarily imply respect (you can be polite and limit yourself to a polite relationship with someone you dislike or despise). However, there can be no City without some form of politeness. And while not every form of politeness necessarily leads to democracy, a democratic process will often induce its own standards of cordiality. But in essence, as Mary Parker Follett (1918, 1919, 1949) so aptly put it, the challenge of a democratic process is precisely to enable the expression of differences, to make them productive. Conflict is not tamed, but rather channeled. Far from a romantic vision of democracy, the pragmatist approach is not to say that it would be enough to multiply and superimpose differences for them to speak to each other and move forward together. In fact, the natural trajectory is quite the opposite. It takes a special, recurring and profound effort and care to be constantly on the path to democracy; the "demos-kratos" is a destination never reached. And it takes democratic practices to integrate differences and make them productive.

The third presence is linked to sessions dealing with digital issues, platforms, infrastructures and techniques (from social networks to AI and digitized management tools). There is an "extension", a "change of scale", a "plasticity" all particularly critical for our societies as well as our organizations. In its original, quasi-mythological version, democracy was born for cities, on the scale of neighborhood and encounter urbanism[8]. The agora is a space of continuous, ordinary conversation. It has an immediacy. Of course, all forms of urbanism have a political force (cf. notably the Haussmannian space of Paris). They are conceived, maintained and animated by the dominant. But there is a possibility of making these processes visible, from which we can also distance ourselves.

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[6] Based on his book Coeckelbergh, M. (2024). Why AI undermines democracy and what to do about it. John Wiley & Sons.

[7] This metaphor and logic are strongly present in the book she published about democracy in India (see Banerjee, 2021).

Several OAP presentations, the first panel and Mukulika Banerjee's lecture emphasized the inter-temporality at work in democratic processes. Between its great institutional moments (notably voting), democracy is above all an ordinary conversation. Today, this conversation takes place largely in the form of "posts" or "videos" on social networks, 'prompts' on generative AIs or "exchanges" on more specific platforms. And most of these events take place in spaces controlled by "big tech". As Da Empoli (2019) shows in his book *The Engineers of Chaos*, a curious alliance has recently been formed: one that reconciles populism and big business. Ultimately, it is in the interests of a certain kind of business to set up an algorithm of extremes, to encourage the development of extremes and to break down all possibilities of democratic centers and continuities. In this context, hyper-individualization flourishes, spreads and infuses. Connectivity takes precedence over community. Of course, there are alternative platforms (such as cooperatives). But they remain a minority in democratic conversations. Of course, dedicated digital techniques have also emerged over the last two decades, from online petitions to citizen citizen consultations to electronic voting and electronic participatory budgets. They have sometimes contributed to a more direct democracy, as well as to a better monitoring of public action and citizen mobilization on unprecedented perimeters. However, these intense democratic conversations remain anecdotal compared with the ordinary mass of digital conversations.

And let's be clear: the problem is not extension and scaling up as such. In the wake of the Greek world, the whole of political philosophy has been questioning and showing the possible paths to democratization beyond the city as a single place. It has proposed and experimented with an extended social contract. The contemporary problem is the (biased) mediation used to scale up: platforms. Under the guise of liberality, this mediation has become a violent, extreme space, the object of both managerial and geopolitical strategies of influence. This is certainly not where the real work of democracy lies. We can contest from the usual digital spaces, but we can hardly build a participative or deliberative framework, and it is very difficult to conduct a truly open inquiry there.

It is then tempting to limit the problem and the range of solutions to a *politus*. The reaction becomes: "They're rude, violent, vulgar... well, let's define the rules and apply them!". But as Gilles Deleuze showed in his day, this focus on the expressed, on activity (at the heart of our control societies), solves nothing. By automatically replacing vulgar remarks with smileys on Meta, by installing a "social credit" system in a country, by ensuring corrective responses to politically incorrect prompts, we no longer really educate the individual (as the panopticon cynically did). We cybernetically regulate the expressed, and abandon all hope for a better Man. Above all, we abandon collective discussion of the rules, and even worse than that, we make the rules invisible, drowning them all in lines of code and anthropomorphized mediations.

To conclude, I would like to mention an absence from our discussions in London. That of an alternative institutional imaginary. I think this fourth point is absolutely key, and completes John Dewey's concrete point, but by restoring a possible role for academics and scientists within the framework of a vast collective experiment.

In its time, the emergence of democratic ideals in Europe was intimately linked to the Scottish and then French Enlightenment. Democracy is possible when we abandon essential, transcendental, divinized authorities. Democracy is a possibility opened up by the exploration and extension of reason and reasonable abilities, nurtured and applied to knowledge. The sciences were born of this movement. As we often forget, the sciences largely post-date universities. Universities (at least in the West, since there is of course a non-Western history of universitas) were phenomena at the heart of the city. They accompanied its development. In some cases, they became the whole of their own city. Teachers in the Middle Ages wore a tonsure. They worked and taught in open spaces: in public squares, in private apartments, on the move, in buildings not dedicated to a faculty... Most of Europe's major universities took a long time to get their buildings and campuses integrated. Scholastic methods did not encourage a dichotomy between teaching and research. *Disputatio* was as much a means of disseminating knowledge as of co-constructing it. Although the university was not for everyone, it was part of a widely shared (religious) experience. Theology, the arts, law and, later, medicine, were central to the lives of men and women in the Middle Ages.

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[8] *Originally, demes, i.e. village units of around ten people.

When science developed in the 17th and especially the 18th and 19th centuries, it did so first and foremost outside the academic sphere. Idle priests, bored aristocrats and soon ambitious bourgeois and industrialists contributed to the development of curiosity cabinets, discussion salons and learned societies. Throughout Europe, science was being demonstrated as well as demonstrated. It was entirely a sensory experience, and one of its aims was not unrelated to the boredom of a privileged few.

All this is achieved by breaking with common sense, common superstitions, preconceived ideas and dominant patterns. The imaginary of this “modernity” (a notion that also came up several times in our debates) is an imaginary of rupture. In the long term, I think it has become an infinite distance from the people and, in many ways, from democratic processes. The university itself has taken a turn for the worse (fortunately, of course). In turn, it has become “scientificized”. But along the way, it has moved away from both the ordinary and the mysterious. The knowledge machine born then (and still expanding) has become a curious parallel (European?) world to which pragmatism (Dewey's in particular) proposes a response.

Two pieces of equipment are essential to this modern machinery: the encyclopedia, and scientific conversation. Encyclopedic knowledge was strongly encouraged by the philosophers of the Enlightenment. It is a utopia revived by Wikipedia and, more recently, by generative AI. The idea is to make all knowledge available to everyone. Conversations are above all mentored moments. To be enlightened or awakened, one must first pass through the hands of another. I am not trying to be a demagogue here. I think the figure of the enlightening expert can often be useful. However, the spaces and imaginaries of this support are today tragically truncated. They presuppose a *politus* that makes you feel inferior. They maintain an ultimate truth in the hands of those who master the code of the game. It favors the good at the expense of the intelligent (together).

Today, the walls of the university define the field of play, extended only by the spaces of certain platforms (and I don't think that citizen or open-source infrastructures have really changed things). Popular or open" universities do exist. But they are only moments of suspension of the game, a form of politeness allowing an expert to speak more simply. Beyond encyclopedias and enlightening conversations, what new practices and spaces could give academics a new role in democratic processes? With what continuities beyond simple courses or publication processes?

This fourth observation, made from the warmth and protection of the walls of one of the world's most prestigious academic institutions, seems to me the most relevant to my subject. Organization scholars could help reorganize public action and higher education in this direction. This reorientation is urgent. Otherwise, academics will become mere spectators, condemned to watch from their ivory towers the end of a democratic care from which they were perhaps the first to detach themselves in order to exist as individuals.

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