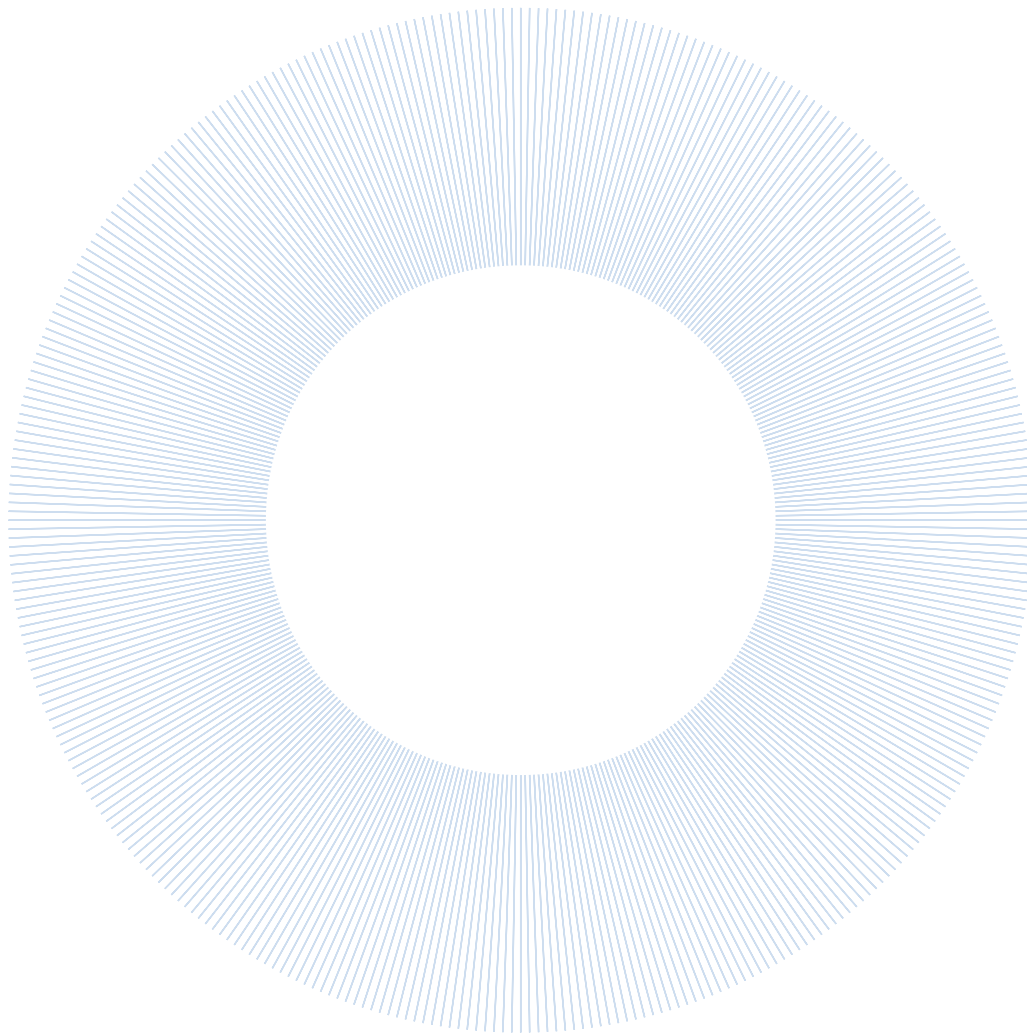


Democratic Stupidity



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DEMOCRATIC STUPIDITY

Ascriptions of stupidity have become common in US political discourse. I argue that the ascriptive practice reflects a democratic predicament of having to obtain solidarity with strangers through the use of speech. Stranger relationality generates both norms of rational argument and frequent breakdowns in intentionality. Thus, democracies have a structural tendency to produce antagonistic forms of populism and rationalism. Once polarized, enforced solidarity and critical reason become communicative habits that can each lead to bad judgments. This paper reviews representative ascriptions of stupidity as well as the discourse of anti-intellectualism, sets out my theoretical argument and analyzes a characteristic exchange on the Internet to suggest how habitual responses can be negotiated more effectively.



At the end of the twentieth century, everyone involved in politics in the US could feel smarter than someone else. Progressives knew that they were smarter than liberals, who could not see the full implications of their principles. Liberals knew that they were smarter than moderates, who made a virtue of mediocrity. Moderates knew that they were smarter than conservatives, who sacrificed intelligence for conformity. Conservatives knew that they were smarter than the far right, who were dominated by religious zealots. And the far right knew that they were smarter than progressives, who made decisions in this world that would send them to hell for all eternity. Despite all other differences, one could bank on this uniform distribution of smugness.

Perhaps one reason the system worked so well is that these judgments were largely kept within the fold. One felt superior to others but would only say that they were stupid when among one's own kind. Sometimes one's own kind included a large audience, as with conservative talk radio, but that nominally public forum was ignored by everyone else most of the time. Democracy forced one to negotiate with idiots, but they were only called idiots when letting off steam in private.

Sometime during the eight years of the presidency of George W. Bush, stupidity became a public epithet. People started to call others stupid in online public forums, to use 'stupid' and its synonyms to describe political leaders and their policies, and to claim that American culture was experiencing a precipitous decline in intelligence. Indeed, resorting to such insults could be taken as another sign of that decline. Likewise, the election of Barack Obama could be taken as a righting of the ship of state, with top-tier educations, expertise and all the other features of a meritocracy being restored to power. Instead of anti-intellectualism, the Ivy League; in place of cronyism, a wealth of talent and experience; in place of fractured syntax, a genuinely eloquent president. Problem solved.

Although not denying that the Obama administration represents a political sea change, I want to suggest that the recent history of 'stupidity' reveals a fundamental predicament in democratic public culture. Individual democracies develop historically as very specific cultural practices, yet they will also contain common tendencies and tensions. The discourse of stupidity in US public culture is not merely a left-wing reaction against the Bush administration or a form of

American exceptionalism, but rather one example of any democracy's tendency to produce competing forms of populism and rationalism. More to the point, each of these polarized attitudes generates a characteristic form of stupidity. They can do so because they share a common failing: once polarized, both enforced solidarity and critical reason can become communicative habits that deny the perspective of the other.

This polarization is always possible in a society that depends on impersonal communication to secure agreement among a community of strangers. This stranger relationality creates both the condition for explicitly rational speech and deep anxieties about social trust. As democratic debate seems to operate independently of any one social structure or moral order, it becomes easy to see both reason and the people as antagonistic principles for anchoring judgment. If so, promoting reason alone will no more solve the problem than would a demand for conformity. Although I happen to believe that ascriptions of stupidity can be useful elements of healthy public debate and that education and expertise are better than ignorance and cronyism, the larger lesson is that intelligence alone will never be sufficient to sustain democratic polity.

To make these claims, I need to define my terms. Stupidity is acting on the basis of mistaken judgments contrary to available resources and one's best interests. It is not simple error but rather a more willful denial of available means for avoiding error, and it is assessed not in terms of narrow expediency but rather in terms of one's optimal development in concert with others. If someone refuses to consider a reasoned argument, that is being stupid; if someone refuses to maintain relationships that they may need later, that also is being stupid.

Populism is a discourse of political affiliation based on the belief that the possessions, values or sovereignty of a people are being subverted by elites and those outsiders or intellectuals who work on their behalf.¹ This model of society defines homogeneous social affiliation (family, village, ethnic group) against heterogeneous civic association (strangers, polity, civil society). In the US, it also aligns with rural vs urban, South vs North, Midwest and West vs East, and native vs immigrant. Populist appeals emphasize the primacy, authenticity, commonality and moral superiority of the people, as opposed to usurpation by an artificial minority who are alien and immoral. The people are 'real Americans' and a 'moral majority' having 'family values,' and they are being preyed upon by 'liberals' advocating 'special rights' and 'relativism.'

Rationalism is the belief that reason should be the sole basis for directing individual and social development (Oakeshott, 1991). Reason is the coordinated use of veridical reference and logical inference to know what is the case, and it is defined in opposition to emotion, social bias, ideology and any other means for distorting representation. Scientific, technical and instrumental reasoning are deemed the only or the best forms of cognition, and there is a corresponding emphasis on norms of neutrality and objectivity. Thus, for public policies to follow rational criteria, decisions should be made by those who have the cognitive ability and education to do so. Not surprisingly, rationalism is not a popular movement within the US but instead operates as a primary discourse for modern institutional legitimacy. It is grounded in the Founders' celebration of the Enlightenment, the Progressive movement and the universities, and it has been the characteristic mentality within political science and most criticisms of public speech and especially of populist rhetoric.

My argument develops in four stages: first, I illustrate recent use of the term 'stupid' in US public media; then I review the discourse of populist anti-intellectualism that often provokes ascriptions of stupidity; next I sketch a theoretical account of this basic predicament within

democratic speech; finally, I analyze several examples of how ordinary citizens negotiate the predicament.² Obviously, this argument is normatively freighted from start to finish; I do not believe it should be otherwise. Perhaps I also should be clear that, while not endorsing stupidity, I am more critical of rationalism than populism, but only because the faults of the latter are widely recognized and readily disparaged by educated people. Indeed, because I believe the two attitudes are each yoked to the other, I hope that by correcting rationalism, populism might also be moderated on behalf of a more genuinely democratic community.

The Discourse of Stupidity

You do not need a PhD to become aware of stupidity. At an early age everyone becomes acquainted with terms such as idiot, fool, dimwit, bimbo, airhead, dolt, boob, moron, clod, ditz, dunce, blockhead, cretin, yo-yo – and others as well. Vernacular speech clearly provides a rich repertoire for knocking sense into people. Elites do just about as well, although the verbal techniques typically are more sophisticated than merely hurling a noun at someone. Ascriptions of stupidity extend across classes and domains: there are social, professional and political codes disseminated across popular and refined cultures by means of both verbal and visual media.

Popular icons of stupidity in the US include Archie Bunker of the famous sitcom 'All in the Family.' Archie saw it a bit differently, as he was continually exasperated by the idiocy of his son-in-law, 'Meathead,' who was, of course, an intellectual. More recently, 'The Simpsons' TV show does the motif one better, as son Bart – no rocket scientist – has to deal with the perpetual idiocy of his father, Homer. (The longest running sitcom, animated production and prime-time series in television history, 'The Simpsons' was voted by *Time* magazine as the best television series of the twentieth century (Wikipedia, 2009). Homer's signature phrase of 'D'oh' continues to be an all-purpose marker of both obviousness and error in everyday life.

Another example of the vernacular discourse in the US is the 'I'm with Stupid' T-shirt. These shirts, which typically are worn by working class women when walking with their husbands on holiday, are examples of both class affiliation and political artistry. The shirt both accepts and resists the pre-given status hierarchy that places manual labor below cognitive labor: he is 'stupid' but she stands beside him. Within that space of resistance, stupidity is marked but not defined explicitly, managed through a relational claim (she is *with* him despite his deficiency), and used both to distinguish her in terms of her intelligence rather than lesser attributes of femininity and to counter the imbalance in power characterizing sexual difference in a patriarchal relationship. 'I'm with Stupid' demarcates a miniature polity, one defined by both reason and affiliation, and one in which public humor is a rhetorical resource for checking power. This design gets a similar inflection in its other typical appearance, when it is worn by adolescent boys at family gatherings. Because the young man is not part of a pair, everyone but the cocky adolescent is labeled 'stupid,' which makes him a continual source of characteristic irreverence while also flaunting his relative exemption from adult norms of propriety, deference and discipline. They are 'stupid' because they are unable to think playfully as he does, while he is actually free to do stupid things like wear that T-shirt. Of course, this performance of his identity is only possible because he remains largely unformed; the shirt is a license that comes from having no authority.

By following a trail of such visual signs, one can begin to trace the emergence of the political discourse of stupidity during the Bush years. T-shirt designs provide a number of examples, including shirts that said 'I'm with Stupid' alongside Bush's face, or Bush and Cheney side

by side and each wearing the 'I'm with Stupid' T-shirt, or a shirt bearing 'I'm with Stupid' alongside Uncle Sam pointing at the reader, or shirts saying 'Bush: like a rock, only dumber,' 'Stupidity, The New Virtue,' and other variants on this and other stock T-shirt slogans. There were also buttons such as 'Uncurious George,' 'And You Thought Reagan Was Stupid' alongside Bush's face, and 'Intellektuels is Stupid!'; a *Mad Magazine* cover of Bush as Che titled 'Viva la Stupidity'; and many posters with Bush and the term 'stupid,' not least among them one of Bush and McCain hugging that said 'I'm with Stupid. 2008 Republican National Convention.' Cartoonists also got into the act, as when Tom Tomorrow penned a strip entitled 'The Rise and (Relative) Fall of Stupidity in America.' And when a demonstrator was photographed holding a misspelled sign saying, 'Get a Brain! Morans,' the image flew around the Internet as a near-perfect example of stupidity in action³ (Hariman, 2008).

These visual gags accompanied a long succession of verbal assertions. The nomination of Sarah Palin provoked, for obvious reasons, a festival of derision, including articles such as 'Just How Stupid IS Sarah Palin?' and 'Sarah Palin Sounds Stupid (And Talks Funny),' along with websites dedicated to cataloging her gaffes. Comments in online newspapers, magazines and blogs regularly made intelligence or the lack of it the definitive criterion for judgment. When one reader defended Palin, responses included:

steve // Sep 18, 2008 at 3:49 pm. Wow, Victor...you are stupid. Sorry, that was the first thing that popped into my head when I read your comment. Are you serious?

Taylor // Sep 29, 2008 at 6:30 am. Gee Victor, you must have a lower IQ than Palin. What's your take on the Couric interview? Underestimated brilliance on Palin's part or was Couric ridiculing her too?

She's a moron. Anyone who could not see that simply saying 'I don't have much foreign policy experience, that's not what John wanted me for' would be better than Putin flies over Alaska (which by the way, he doesn't...they fly over the Atlantic when he comes here) is just moronic. God help us all⁴ (Granby01003, 2008).

Reader comments could be taking their lead from online pundits.

Somehow, in Sarah Palin's brain, it's a threat to the First Amendment when newspapers criticize her negative attacks on Barack Obama. This is actually so dumb that it hurts (Greenwald, 2008).

Judgments were not limited to Palin. When Victoria Jackson, an actress who used to play a dumb blond on the comedy show Saturday Night Live, denounced Obama by calling him a Communist, there were 40 pages of comments, most of them like this:

I always thought the dumb and ditzy blonde thing was an act. Guess not.

Birds of a feather, flock together..stupid loves stupid

Once again, Ms Jackson proves there's nothing dumber than stupid (*Huffington Post*, 2008).

Although Jackson appears to be a bona fide 'ditz,' the full (and disturbing) significance of these ascriptions was brought out in another comment:

The tag below her should have read 'Victoria Jackson - Former Human Being.'

If these examples seem too characteristic of the blogosphere, consider these items from the *New York Times*:

Republicans blow off the smart cities with the counterargument that they win the exurbs – the frontier of new homes, young families and the fresh middle class. [...] That will not happen this year. Polls show McCain is losing 20 percent of self-described moderate

Republicans. [...] But in the kind of pattern that has held true since McCain went over to the stupid side, his brother recently referred to suburban northern Virginia as 'communist country' and a top adviser, Nancy Pfotenhauer, said it was not 'real Virginia' (Egan, 2008).

The McCain campaign is so dumb that it bought into the press's confirmation of its own prejudices (Rich, 2008).

Opening for a McCain rally in North Carolina last weekend, Representative Robin Hayes said he wanted 'to keep the crowd as respectful as possible.' In order to pursue that goal as efficiently as possible, Hayes then announced that 'liberals hate real Americans that work and accomplish and achieve and believe in God.' This was an especially unfortunate turn of phrase given the fact that he had begun his remarks by saying he wanted to 'make sure we don't say something stupid' (Collins, 2008).

It has not stopped following the election: 'People are stupid, and they're going to get a lot stupider. Pardon my grammar, but that's my take on the two blockbuster news events of last week' (McCarron, 2008). These and hundreds of examples like them suggest that 'stupidity' has become a public epithet and, with that, a criterion for judgment of people and policies. The term is not limited to the *hoi polloi*, or to less regulated media such as the blogs, or to the most egregious examples of incompetence. Nor is it limited to Americans: 'As an expat Brit, all I can say is that we get her [Sarah Palin], we just don't understand why so many Americans are so stupid as to think that what she has is worth getting' (Stelzer, 2008). Add to this 'Stupid!', a recent BBC sitcom, and magazine covers featuring titles such as 'Dumb' (*THE*, 2008) and 'The Folly of Growth,' (*New Scientist*, 2008) and it becomes clear that stupidity lurks within the political vocabulary of the UK as well.

The stakes seem to be a lot higher in the US, however. So it is that US public culture has included a spate of books decrying stupidity. Whereas once Barbara Tuchman's Vietnam-era book *The March of Folly* stood alone, now books on stupidity are a cottage industry in the US. Recent titles include *Just How Stupid Are We?*; *Why Smart People Can Be So Stupid*; *The Age of Unreason*; *The Assault on Reason*; *The Anti-Intellectual Presidency*; *The Myth of the Rational Voter*; *Dumbing Down*; *Dumbing Down or Smartening Up*; and *The Dumbest Generation*, among others, as well as the movie *Idiocracy*. Although skewed to the left of center, such cultural commentary includes a distinctively conservative strain, one that typically sees every progressive policy as another assault on Western civilization achieved by pandering to the emotions of the masses rather than respecting tradition, authority and a more hardheaded view of human nature. Yet this contestation is among elites, whereas the real standoff cuts deeply through the entire electorate.

The Discourse of Populist Anti-Intellectualism

When Adlai Stevenson was running for president, a supporter once called out, 'Governor Stevenson, all thinking people are for you!' Stevenson replied, 'That's not enough. I need a majority' (Caplin, 2007, p. 1). Stevenson never obtained that majority and his words still ring true. It is difficult, for example, for any liberal not to hear their echo when reading reports such as this:

Hart, the Democratic pollster, believes there is one good sign for McCain in the poll: The Arizona senator is holding on to the GOP base. McCain has a sizable advantage over

Obama among evangelicals (76 to 20 percent), small town/rural voters (53 to 40), and those living in the South (54 to 40) (Murray, 2008).

This base, of course, was that last reserve of support for the McCain/Palin campaign. Not only had the center of the electorate rejected them, but conservative newspapers, pundits and members of the commercial establishment were abandoning the ticket in droves. Those who remained had a clear demographic and cultural profile. They stayed true to their convictions largely because of their fear of liberalism and love of Sarah Palin's folksy appeal to the 'real America' that is supposedly found only in small towns and continually maligned by elites. These were the people who sang along to songs such as this:

I'm just a common man drive a common van
My dog ain't got no pedigree
If I have my say, gonna stay that way
Cause high-browed people lose their sanity
And a common man is what I'll be (Conlee, 2008).

The tendency to choose identification with the people over individual distinction runs very deep in American society. Note, for instance, this example of ordinary self-description by a newspaper columnist for the *Indianapolis Star*, a typical (and conservative) middle-American newspaper:

Matthew Tully has covered government and politics since 1992. He started his career at the Gary Post-Tribune, later covered the U.S. Senate for Congressional Quarterly, and has worked for The Indianapolis Star since 2002. [...] Tully graduated (barely) from Indiana University in 1992. A lifelong fan of Elvis Presley and the Chicago Cubs, he lives in Indianapolis with his wife, Valerie (Tully, 2008).

Only very few Americans have the opportunity to speak through the public media every week, much less get paid for it. Indeed, Tully could be labeled as the 'media elite' frequently mentioned in defenses of right-wing populism. Not likely, however, as he makes sure that we know that he 'barely' graduated from college. Surely it is odd to advertise that one is only barely qualified for a position of responsibility. Not to worry, however, as his devotion to Elvis, now the epitome of working class kitsch, and the Cubs, a professional baseball team famous for *not* winning the World Series, along with his heteronomic marriage all assure the reader that he is one of the common people.⁵

This intentional 'dumbing down' has been a persistent feature of American public life. As Alexis de Tocqueville observed: 'In the United States the more opulent citizens take great care not to stand aloof from the people; on the contrary, they constantly keep on easy terms with the lower classes: [...] in democratic times you attach a poor man to you more by your manner than by benefits conferred' (de Tocqueville, 1995, p. 104). This tendency toward rhetorical leveling is evident in content analyses of presidential speech. Using an index of complexity, presidential addresses have dropped from college level in 1790 to 8th grade or lower in the present. Likewise, the length of the sound bite in TV ads has dropped from 42.3 seconds in 1968 to 7.8 seconds today, and it is unlikely that nothing was lost with that much compression. Curiously, these changes have occurred as the general population has received more education, not less. Perhaps it is telling that appeals to 'common sense' have increased from 1 to 50 per year in the public papers of the presidency since 1900; the emphasis must be more on 'common' than 'sense' (Lim, 2008).

It is no mere coincidence that public speech has become less complex as the electorate has become more democratic. Presidents once spoke to a legislative elite, but now the 'rhetorical presidency' speaks past the congress directly to the people (Tullis, 1987). Moreover, American speech has changed for other reasons as well and now is more informal, more standardized,

and less associated with social mobility. But greater use of, say, personal pronouns by a president is not the cause of 80% of Americans *not* knowing that the US Senate has 100 members (Schenkman, 2008, p. 20). The shift from a 'thick' political culture of partisan solidarities to the 'thin' culture of liberal civil society (Bender, 2003) also accounts for some of the change, but that does not explain why college students typically fail basic civics surveys. And so changes in education also have to be figured in, and, of course, the media are the primary culprits in virtually every public commentary and many academic accounts. While its citizens are 'amusing ourselves to death,' democracy self-destructs (Postman, 1985).

There are several problems with this pattern of explanation, however. One is that it ignores comprehensive changes for the better in politics and society alike. The media, and particularly the visual media, that are blamed for the decline in citizenship were also the same media that made the civil rights and environmental movements two of the great success stories of our time. Likewise, the changes in educational and political institutions have produced a society with far more liberty, equality, justice and shared prosperity than before. Rolling the argument back to the supposed golden age of public discourse at the time of the Lincoln-Douglas debates is to overlook the failure of that culture to solve the most pressing and explicit political problem of its time. And recurring to the civic republican aristocracy of the founding period is to overlook not only slavery but explicit antipathy to democracy itself. Few go there, however, and all the current accounts of 'dumbing down,' by focusing on more modern changes and technologies, give democracy itself a pass. But democracy is the problem. Democracy creates characteristic forms of stupidity, which can be reduced but never eliminated without destroying democratic polity itself.

Richard Hofstadter knew as much. His study of *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* was prompted by the Red Scare of the 1950s but provided convincing demonstration that the tendency toward a right-wing tyranny of the majority was deep set. 'Anti-intellectualism [...] is founded in the democratic institutions and the egalitarian sentiments of this country. [...] Intellectuals in the twentieth century have thus found themselves engaged in incompatible efforts: they have tried to be good and believing citizens of a democratic society and at the same time to resist the vulgarization of culture which that society constantly produces' (Hofstadter, 1963, p. 407). The term 'vulgarization' speaks volumes – see Susan Jacoby's *The Age of American Unreason* for the most recent reaffirmation of this attitude – while also giving the game away. There are far more cultural institutions in the US today than in 1790, but intellectuals are in fact 'of necessity an elite' in their 'manner of thinking and functioning.' The charges of liberal or media elitism do have something to them, no matter how hypocritical their use by well-educated and wealthy right-wing demagogues. However deeply egalitarian and patriotic a liberal intellectual may be – and most of them are both – they will always be at odds with the right-wing rhetoric of faith, flag and family.

Hofstadter is at his best when documenting the convergence of egalitarian and evangelical forces that coalesced in the rebellion against modernization. One can draw a straight line from the language of the Know Nothings and anti-immigration nativists in the late nineteenth century to the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s to the America First movement in the 1940s to McCarthyism in the 1950s to the Silent Majority in the 1970s to Reagan's Morning in America in the 1980s to the McCain/Palin campaign that put 'Country First' in 2008. So it is that this statement by Klan leader Hiram W. Evans seems timeless:

We are a movement of the plain people, very weak in the matter of culture, intellectual support, and trained leadership. We are demanding, and we expect to win, a return to power into the hands of the everyday, not highly cultured, not overly intellectualized, but entirely unspoiled and not de-Americanized, average citizen of the old stock. Our

members and leaders are all of this class – the opposition of the intellectuals and liberals who hold the leadership, betrayed Americanism, and from whom we expect to wrest control is almost automatic.

This is undoubtedly a weakness. It lays us open to the charge of being ‘hicks’ and ‘rubes’ [...]. We admit it. Far worse, it makes it hard for us to state our case and advocate our crusade in the most effective way, for most of us lack skill in language. [...]

Every popular movement has suffered from just this handicap [...] (Hofstadter, 1963, p. 124).

Sinclair Lewis knew as much when he had his character Babbitt remark, ‘The worst menace to sound government is not the avowed socialists but a lot of cowards who work under cover – the long-haired gentry who call themselves ‘liberals’ and ‘radicals’ and ‘non-partisan’ and ‘intelligentsia’ and God only knows how many other trick names!’ (Lewis, 1923, p. 187).

One could see this populist appeal and the lack of ‘skill in language’ in Sarah Palin’s public performances, as with this remark:

We believe that the best of America is not all in Washington, D.C.... We believe that the best of America is in these small towns that we get to visit, and in these wonderful little pockets of what I call the real America, being here with all of you hard working very patriotic, um, very, um, pro-America areas of this great nation (Kurtzman, 2008).

Of course, the lack of facility with language is not merely a deficiency: it is a proven means for fostering identification with the populist audience. This is the mentality that had been successfully mobilized by Republican political strategists for the last twenty years. One of the sure distinctions of the 2008 election was that the gambit was played one too many times while the left was fighting back with far more intensity than before and with a powerful new array of weapons provided by the digital media. The combination pushed traditional media to become more serious, candid and critical when reporting and interviewing the candidates. Sarah Palin provided the perfect occasion for all of the elements of the new system to converge, as she was an emotionally resonant orator and profoundly ignorant. Once past the scripted speech at the Republican national convention, Palin’s lack of education, ability and concern was exposed repeatedly. Unable to name a newspaper, not knowing the duties of the vice-president, clueless about both Bush’s and McCain’s policies, refusing to answer basic questions in the vice-presidential debate, and repeatedly garbling logic, syntax and sense, her public performances were, in the words of one ordinary citizen, ‘like watching a train wreck.’ Yet none of these problems diminished her enthusiastic support among the populist core of the Republican party.

To understand better this standoff between populist rhetoric and ascriptions of stupidity, one has to step outside of Hofstadter’s framework, for at least two reasons. First, his account reiterates a doctrine of American exceptionalism. The conjunction of egalitarian and evangelical forces does not characterize other modern democracies, but anti-intellectualism is not limited to the US or to modernity. (Books were burned in classical Athens, and Indian democracy is a success story that includes a powerful right-wing populist movement.) Second, Hofstadter sees (American) democracy creating anti-intellectualism but does not seriously consider how intellectual activity is similarly deformed by the same forces. That is, Hofstadter identifies one characteristic form of democratic stupidity but misses how it provokes its mirror image. Note, for example, that US political culture produces not only anti-intellectualism but a defensive hyper-intellectualism, as with the ‘Brights,’ a group of academic high achievers who campaign for increased respect and influence in public life on the basis of their cognitive

abilities and rational world view (Brights, 2009). The Brights are a few bricks short of a load politically, but they are representative of that side of the spectrum that includes howstupidblog.com and similar denunciations of populist idiocy. In every case, it is clear that political equality should be trumped by cognitive superiority. (To consider what is at stake, substitute 'financial' for 'cognitive.')

Thus, Sarah Palin and the Brights are equally symptomatic of a profound polarization that affects everyone within the political culture.

To summarize thus far, political discourse in the United States today includes frequent ascriptions of stupidity, and even when the word is not manifest speakers often are negotiating a status hierarchy based on perceived intelligence. That ranking does not reflect a shared commitment to cognitive achievement, however, but rather a deep antagonism between the public use of reason and social solidarity, each of which can subvert the other. This stand-off between populism and rationalism produces distortions on both sides. While populists deride 'elites,' 'evolution' and 'big government,' those calling them stupid can become equally incapable of understanding their fellow citizens.

The Democratic Predicament

Because it is a community of citizens having equal rights, free association and voluntary commitments, democracy continually reproduces the antagonism between reason and populism. The natal scene of Athenian democracy provides a good case in point, particularly if one sees how it was relatively 'modern.' Here, I am following Josiah Ober's recent emphasis on how the Athenian political system forced political affiliation across family, clan and community boundaries (Ober, 2008). In a nutshell, by organizing representation across rather than according to traditional identities, Athenian democracy ensured continual interaction, deliberation and agreement among strangers. Despite demographic clustering, that is the legal basis and daily experience of American democracy as well.⁶ The corresponding awareness that one depends on the kindness of strangers creates distinctive tensions within public speech.

As Michael Warner has observed brilliantly about modern 'stranger relationality,' in public discourse and civic interaction one not only interacts with strangers but also understands that one is a stranger to others (Warner, 2002); ultimately, one even is a stranger to oneself. This redefinition of social identity requires a corresponding – and monumental – restructuring of speech from mythopoesis to deliberative rhetoric. (The mythopoetic function will remain within public speech, but the fundamental code shifts from poetic narrative to argumentative prose.) Speech among strangers has to seem to stand on its own rather than be the direct expression of a shared social structure. Moreover, collaboration depends not merely on activating pre-given roles but rather on appeals to a shared capacity for decision-making.

This condition of public discourse can be labeled a democratic predicament. One's private interests now depend on collective support by people you do not know, and more of them than you can influence personally. Nor are these specific individuals you do not know – a distant lord, for example – but rather people all around you. The trafficking in interests thus is shifted from the ordinary distributions of a fixed social structure – say, according to one's place in a clan hierarchy – to the communicative practices of the community of strangers. Instead of being the medium for reporting a prior distribution of goods, speech becomes the mechanism of distribution. In short, everyone becomes dependent on the communicative practices and media that disseminate information and shape opinions throughout the city. This vortex of discourses is not the provenance of an organic community; indeed, it is the very means for

overruling that community. Nor is it a systematic ordering of reasoned arguments; instead, the strategic contestation by a plurality of interests ensures continual disruption. No wonder that populists and rationalists agree that public media are the cause of any cultural decline.

In other words, the characteristic communication practices of democratic debate interpolate citizens as strangers. Within the circle of democratic citizenship, the organic unity of language, society and power is displaced by a new, dynamic regime of political contestation, interpersonal civility and verbal craft. In this setting, reason provides the most reliable basis for agreement but little basis for trust. Because democracy forces people to be reasonable by making them strangers in their own land, anyone can feel that both reason and affiliation are continually at risk of dissolution.

This process has specific implications for the distribution of stupidity. When one is no longer living within a traditional, enclosed community, neither wisdom nor foolishness can be localized. Within the traditional community, one learns who is wise and who is foolish, and how individuals vary in their capability depending on a wide range of contingencies – so and so is fine except when drunk; someone else is irritable except when playing a game; etc. Living amidst a swirl of discourses that will one way or the other determine public policy, it is no longer so clear where wisdom might be found. Likewise, it becomes increasingly difficult to rely on in-group/out-group patterns of ascription – most notably, according to race, ethnicity, gender, class and so forth. Even ascriptions of nationality break down under conditions of globalization.

This inability to use easy markers of character will be exacerbated by modern media and particularly the Internet. A letter to the editor in the newspaper places the writer only by name and city, and Internet discussions can provide even less information. It seems plausible that one cause of a rise in ascriptions of stupidity is that intelligence becomes almost the only available code among complete strangers who have no visual or auditory cues for social placement. Nothing can be inferred about the interlocutor's dispositions beyond what is in the small scrap of text that they provide, and the most evident features of that text are likely to be its educational level and cognitive complexity. This often is for the best, as it precludes stereotyping while reproducing key features of the ideal speech situation for deliberative rationality. At the same time, it puts all the labor of interpretation on a single code representing only one dimension of judgment. One is more or less intelligent or educated, or more or less on topic, etc., but one cannot be directly representative of more complex experiences, perspectives or conditions. Thus, the enhanced stranger sociality of the Internet would encourage both focused discussion according to norms of public deliberation, and also use of ascriptions of cognitive capability to rank, dismiss or otherwise dominate anyone whose speech was easily faulted for being substandard. 'Stupidity' emerges as a significant marker of this tradeoff: on the one hand, it is an assertion of the value of reason in democratic deliberation; on the other hand, it is a misrecognition of social, cultural and emotional differences endemic to democratic polity. One literally cannot see where interlocutors are coming from, and so they are assessed in terms of their cognitive ability alone. Needless to say, this, once again, encourages anti-intellectualism as a mode of resistance.

The problem, however, is not Internet or modern media per se, but the experience of living amidst delocalization. By delocalization, I mean the experience of having one's identity redefined outside of a fixed social locale or social structure to become distributed across a wider terrain of reference that includes people and events one cannot know directly. Democracy depends on mass media – say, public oratory and writing in Athens, and print, televisual and digital media today – in order to create collective agreement among voters whose votes all

have the same weight regardless of social standing. One builds assent by spreading the word to as many voters as possible, and spreading the word simultaneously ties people to others they do not know while making their local knowledge and status less relevant to the outcome. This creates the conditions of emergence for a distinctive form of public reason that can be idealized as a 'republic of letters,' 'public sphere' or 'national conversation.' It generates norms of civility, reasoned argument and political pragmatism. It also, however, substitutes an abstraction for more situated, embodied forms of identity.

Note how both the religious right and the academic left have developed strategies for relocalizing meaning with respect to democratic media. Biblical literalism localizes meaning within the medium of print. Whereas printing in fact spreads words promiscuously across multitudes and so unleashes a myriad of interpretations (need we say relativism?), Biblical literalism anchors verbal meaning in the fixed typography of a single book. Thus, the isolated individual can secure her identity in a single text, which in turn is the conduit to the transcendental anchor of all things. Corresponding tendencies include the high anxiety about the electronic media, which by their nature cannot ever provide a single, fixed text but instead funnel society's destabilizing vortex of discourses into the home.

More sophisticated strategies eschew literalism and instead resituate reason and virtue alike within the personal space of a conversation. Discourse is anchored in this immediate exchange where meaning seems to be secure because it is authentic, individuated and subject to immediate correction and mutual agreement. The paradigmatic case is Socrates' insistence that dialectical conversation is the only medium for rational inquiry. Habermas has the modern public sphere emerge from coffee shops and salons, and liberal theorists such as Richard Rorty ground political judgment in 'conversation' and 'dialogue,' not circulation and mass movements. Critics of populism emphasize its dependence on pulpit oratory and the mass media; the irrationalism of charismatic speakers is exposed through documentary interviews.

There is nothing wrong with pulling meaning closer to the text, or speech back to the accountability of face-to-face interaction. The point is that this need for relocalization is an inevitable product of democracy's reliance on public discourse to form judgments and share power among strangers, and that the desire for locality can produce unrealistic ideals and systematic distortions even while being expressed in very different ways.

Whatever the strategy, however, rationalism and populism will be regenerated, each the oppositional twin of the other, because of the fundamental conditions of democratic identity. Thus, the ascriptions of stupidity that have come to the surface in contemporary public discourse are symptomatic of one phase in a continual oscillation within democratic polity. Democratic speech is reasonable precisely because it has become relatively anonymous, which places a premium on cognitive and communicative skills. That anonymity undercuts all other social relationships while those skills become the basis for acquiring power over others. One sure result is resentment and resistance that becomes organized around more familiar forms of sociality and against the institutions of reason. Everyone comes to live in a world of 'morons' and 'elites.'

This is a small world. The constriction results, paradoxically, from expanding political participation and relying on media that disseminate messages widely. Effective communication requires being able to understand the perspective of the other, but interaction among strangers can, at least initially, lead to misrecognition, breakdown and retraction into more limited conceptions of self and other. Whether using an ethnic slur or calling someone a moron, the

result can be the same: a stupid refusal to see the other as a potential source of knowledge or support.

Negotiating Stupidity in Public Conversation

One aspect of this ongoing negotiation is that writers will continue to iterate the discourses of populism and rationalism. In like manner, those texts will be read according to rationalist and populist templates for interpretation: typically, readers will be disposed to see others as either stupid or elitist. What is needed is a more nuanced reading strategy that can identify both how populists can be arguing legitimately, and how those voicing the norms of rational discourse can be enacting social divisions. Those populists' arguments can still be poor arguments, and the 'liberal' segregations can still be relatively benign, but I hope it becomes clear that the negotiation of stupidity can lead both sides to become blinded to common dependencies.

Despite the Obama victory, populist reactions did not disappear and ascriptions of stupidity hardly became passé. In the run-up to the Inauguration the papers were full of stories and opinion pieces on the Obama administration's appointments, and particularly on how they represented a sharp turn from cronyism to education, experience and expertise. Following a story on the selection of the education secretary, which was entitled 'Smart is Cooler Than Ever,' one reader commented:

#1. January 13, 2009 11:37 am [Link](#)

puleeeseeee...one realizes one has to sing praises of the boss, but such salivatory sycophancy is laffable..

May be DUncan should talk to real people to find out Barry ain't that smart and the Only reason he is up there is cuz of his skin color (just aks Hillary)

and smart was always cool (until nerds became somewhat smart as well)

PUMA

— Nam (Dillon, 2009)

All the marks of the populist writer are there: Obama is an imposter who has benefited from progressive policies that disenfranchise real people who are not 'nerd' smart but always valued common sense. The class position is revealed immediately by reference to praising 'the boss,' and the many errors in usage provide ample evidence of a poor education. Note also that the text carries a theory of rhetoric consistent with this standpoint: public speech is something used disingenuously to curry favor and further demeans the speaker who has to sing a tune commanded by those in power. (This theory might extend to his use of an explicit pseudonym.) Every element of the text is pathetic, including the peculiar arrogance of one who cannot write a correct sentence in his native tongue and yet would debunk the intelligence of the individual who became the first African-American president largely by force of intellect.

It did not take long for another reader to respond strongly:

#10. January 13, 2009 1:33 pm [Link](#)

Ah, post number one—fittingly, comes from a conservative defender of dumb—unrepentant in the face of a world, a nation and economy that are a reeling from the damage done when a C-student is put in charge.

As for the suggestion of ‘Nam’ that the President-elect ‘..ain’t that smart...’?

And that the sole reason he’s about to become the President is because of ‘...his skin color...’?

I think we should call that post for what it is: right-wing, anti-intellectual, racist drivel from somebody who’s poor grammar is surpassed only by their poor spelling.

— Don Duval (Dillon, 2009)

This is the tit-for-tat reply: How can ‘Nam’ assess intelligence when he lacks the ability to use his own language competently, is merely voicing racial prejudice and right-wing ideology rather than independently reasoned judgments, and does so in defense of an administration that was incompetent and predictably so for being headed by someone who lacked educational ability and commitment? The text also carries a corresponding theory of public discourse, which should be reasoned, unbiased, skillful and transparent. (Note also that the writer signs what we assume is his real name.) Most tellingly, the text leads with ascription of stupidity – here through the phrase ‘defender of dumb’ – which in turn matches the prior focus on whether the president is ‘smart.’ The exchange is negotiating stupidity in a political context. On the one hand, a political leader claimed to be smart is not so smart and so has set himself above the people on false pretenses; on the other hand, a citizen judging intelligence is obviously too unintelligent or uneducated to be qualified to be making political judgments.

Although I have no doubt whom I would side with in the argument, this exchange merits a second look. Note, for example, that there are both errors and defensible assumptions all around. The second writer’s endorsement of good grammar and spelling is marred by the misspelling of ‘whose.’ More worrisome, his criteria for dismissal would seem to be categorically exclusionary and so somewhat undemocratic, as it is not likely that ‘Nam’ can acquire the intelligence or education that he lacks. Although ‘Nam’ has a lot of problems, his sense that Obama is being over-praised was hardly unreasonable at the time, and his attribution of motives was certainly true in respect to some (many?) of those in the media chorus. His claim that ‘smart was always cool’ is additionally interesting, as it can challenge the stereotype of the working class while marking levels of appreciation that are distinguished, not by degree, but by the type of intelligence that is being valued.

My point is not to set the record straight but rather to identify a reciprocal breakdown in communication. Both ‘Nam’ and Duval are not able to hear the other. ‘Nam’ clearly cannot see the real differences in discourse, reasoning and values between the new administration and its predecessor. This inability to learn from those who are reasonable, thoughtful, pragmatic and eloquent can only keep him stupid. Duval is equally hamstrung, however. There is more in ‘Nam’s’ discourse than bigotry and ideology, and in any case he is a fellow citizen addressing the explicit topic of the newspaper discussion. In both cases, however, there has been a breakdown in the capacity to understand the position of the other. ‘Nam’ cannot see past his resentment toward those who succeed in conditions of supposed equality (and Obama’s having to contend with explicit inequality only makes the comparison worse for those who have not done well). Duval cannot see past ‘Nam’s’ populist rhetoric to appreciate how he is voicing a class position and habitual skepticism that would serve democracy well if decoupled from racism and right-wing ideology.

To get a sense of the middle ground that has been lost in this typical exchange over stupidity, we can look to another comment in the thread following the article.

#6. January 13, 2009 1:05 pm [Link](#)

Puma nam 11:37

Smart is cool is perhaps better than dumb is good enough?

Good riddance Bush the Moron in Chief.

Make no mistake, I respect the office, I just wish that Bush had respected it.

— rmc (Dillon, 2009)

Although the comment fits directly into the negotiation of stupidity under way in the thread, 'rmc' did not get much uptake subsequently, perhaps because this is the most tolerant response of the three. That tolerance includes the shift in mood signaled by ending the first sentence with a question mark. The speaker is recognizing the other as a legitimate interlocutor and offering a provisional basis for agreement. The sentence content ties both sides together while 'perhaps' signals that the statement is pending consent of the other. The shift from both Obama and 'Nam' to Bush is another achievement of sorts, as it focuses on actual governance (Bush can be evaluated in terms of his decisions) rather than Obama's potential or 'Nam's' rhetorical failings. Most important, however, is the claim 'Make no mistake, I respect the office.' The distinction between the office and the office holder is an important little piece of political thought in the Anglo-American tradition, but this is not merely an exercise in conceptual clarification. 'Rmc' is addressing 'Nam' directly – witness the opening flourish of 'Make no mistake,' which refers to the other's likely interpretation of the speaker's statement. Furthermore, (s)he then speaks to a value likely to be important to someone of 'Nam's' political persuasion: respect for authority. The conflation of dissent against the official with disrespect of the office is a particularly strong habit in right-wing populism, and 'rmc' is addressing that likely misreading directly and respectfully.

In short, 'rmc' is doing something neither of the other two interlocutors attempted, which is to imagine the perspective of the other. Once that is done, tact becomes possible – and possibly effective. The significance should not be minimized: whereas the other comments are likely to harden each other's position while vying for the favor of an audience, 'rmc's' remark just might be capable of producing mutual agreement. Thus, amidst democratic debate, a thoughtful attempt at persuasion may be the beginning of wisdom.



Notes

¹This definition does not apply to all versions of populism. The most notable exceptions would include some populist movements in Latin America. Likewise, my definition is limited theoretically to democratic practices and not to the definition of the political generally. For the latter argument, see Laclau (2005). My frame of reference is closer on all counts to Kazin (1995).

²Another middle step in the argument is missing from this paper: I revisit the trial of Socrates in classical Athens to identify populism and rationalism as ideal types, and to account for a reciprocal deformation that has developed by virtue of being born out of the struggle in Athens and the effect that had on Plato and thus the history of political thought. In that history, there persists a traumatic memory that refuses to moderate reason with compassion. See also 'Being Stupid, Seeing Suffering,' (Hariman, forthcoming).

³'Morans' is not the name of an American political group. The photo supplies the poster boy for this paper: with his working class clothing (flag bandana, pro sport logo), patriotic slogan ('Go USA') written in the idiom of a stadium cheer ('go team'), accompanying family members, and misuse of his native language, he is a model of populism; by ascribing stupidity to his political opponents, he is imitating the discursive habit and norms of rationality employed by the 'elites' he otherwise would resent. Both his display and the circulation of the photo exemplify how ascriptions of stupidity are a salient feature of contemporary political discourse in the US.

⁴I am not marking compositional errors with 'sic' in the Internet quotations as there are so many of them across the political spectrum. Irony aside, I believe they reflect the compositional habits of the medium and genre as much as individual capabilities.

⁵Within Chicago, Cubs fans are more likely to be on the North side of the city and the high side of the socio-economic divide, while the White Sox are the team for 'Southsiders,' who are more likely to be working class, but that distinction would be lost on most readers outside the metro area.

⁶Democratic government can be limited to small villages where one does not have to negotiate with strangers, but such small-scale democracies are not as productive as those that are large enough to include strangers. I am using the term 'democracy' to refer to the large-scale polities characterizing modernity.

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