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SOCIETY OF STRANGERS

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Editorial Note

When considering what to use as the theme for this year 's journal, a common string joined our ideas: isolation and separation. The term used in the title, Society of Strangers, first emerged in the 18th century in Britain and described the remoteness and loss of community as people transitioned from small close-knit towns to larger urban cities. Today, the term still strikes a chord but in a different way. In a world defined by hyperconnectivity and constant digital presence, the paradox is striking: individuals have never been more accessible, yet many have never felt more alone. This sense of division is both a cause and a symptom of so many issues faced today.

Throughout the journal, our authors have used the title as a jumping off point to explore the theme in different ways. The sheer breadth of article content demonstrates that this sense of remoteness permeates all aspects of politics, philosophy and economics. Throughout the eight articles in this volume, our contributors interrogate estrangement from different perspectives. From exploring how previously social endeavours have become transactional and cold, to discussing governance and legitimacy in the face of disconnect as well as accounts of how the internet has affected how we connect; this journal aims to show how deeply connectivity affects our society.

Talia Kennedy, VOX President

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Bilingualism or Bust

The Illusion of Modern Language Education

Language learning has traditionally been a deeply social and immersive experience involving cultural engagement and interaction with native speakers. However, with apps like Duolingo and Babbel, the experience has become isolated and transactional, providing quick lessons that fit seamlessly into our daily lives but often providing little beyond basic vocabulary and phrases (Blog, 2022). Whilst convenient, accessible and, most importantly, free, apps do not provide the same value in terms of cultural context and social interaction that characterise language education. This begs the question: Are we gaining anything by trading rich cultural history for a gamified experience? This essay will explore the shift in modern language learning and its implications for cultural identities and global economies.

Traditionally, gaining proficiency was an active, social endeavour. Students frequently travelled to places where the language is spoken, which immersed them in the culture and engaged them in daily conversations. For example, a student learning French might spend time in Paris or perform exchanges, learning not just vocabulary but also subtleties like intonation, body language, and cultural nuances. This form of learning is deeply rooted in experience, allowing students to understand the language not only through words but also by observing how language is tied to use. Philosophically, thinkers like Vygotsky argued that language acquisition is social by nature, a process that occurs by 'doing' (Tomasello, 1996). In these settings, learners were able to not only speak the language but also live it. Cultural references, humour, and social etiquette are intrinsic to mastering a language. Therefore, these traditional methods facilitated not just linguistic fluency, but a deeper understanding — a bond between cultural education, language and identity that cannot be replicated through an app.

The dominance of English in global communication reflects a broader trend, where English-speaking nations like the U.S. and the U.K. exert influence worldwide. Apps like Duolingo and Babbel have revolutionised language learning, particularly in the West (reflective of our wider trend of social disengagement through solitary learning). Instead of engaging in dynamic conversations with local speakers, our culture has shifted to parroting pre-recorded phrases. Although these apps can teach the basics, they don't provide the necessary context that helps learners understand how words function in real-life: spontaneous exchanges. Apps teach sentences like "I am learning Spanish," but lack the nuances needed to have a genuine conversation, such as casual chat, cultural idioms, or regional dialects. This absence of social learning—what Vygotsky might call the zone of proximal development or collaborative activities—leads to surface-level language acquisition and a limit to what the individual can talk about. Additionally, many people are motivated by purely short-term purposes, like holidays, rather than a genuine desire to understand culture or communicate more deeply. For example, tourists might learn basic phrases like "How much does this cost?" to get through their trip but not progress beyond the surface level. This transactional approach to picking up a language encourages culture as a tool for convenience rather than an important part of identity, history, or development. In social contexts, learners would be more likely to invest in a language if they had a personal connection to the culture or community, but the digital shift often reduces it to a mere game or task.

The global spread of English can be seen as a form of linguistic imperialism, where non-English languages are not just marginalised but actively suppressed, creating a power imbalance between linguistic groups. Although apps give the impression of progress, they often only lead to superficial fluency. The gamified structure encourages learners to continue completing lessons, earning points and badges for improved scores. This makes it difficult for learners to engage in genuine conversations with local speakers, which require more than just memorised phrases. As a result, learners may feel accomplished in completing the app's modules but then struggle to understand or speak the language in authentic, real-world situations. There is a growing expectation for other countries, who notably learn through traditional methods, to fill in the gaps and learn English rather than English-speaking countries going deeper than surface-level language. These are significant concerns because language is more than words; it is a manifestation of culture. Without this social engagement, we create a cultural disconnect. Furthermore, as learners focus on English as a global lingua franca, they often neglect the languages of their heritage, leading to the gradual loss of linguistic diversity. This shift toward English-based learning is not just about convenience; it is also a reflection of the erosion of global cultural identities, as smaller languages—such as Māori in New Zealand or Quechua in Peru—continue to face extinction (Christopher Moseley, 2010).

The shift towards app-based education and English dominance has long-term implications. Linguists warn that as smaller languages, such as Kiche in Guatemala or Aymara in Bolivia, lose speakers, entire cultural legacies are at risk of disappearing (Christopher Moseley, 2010). When a language dies, it takes with it centuries of history, practices, and worldviews that are passed through generations. A language is not just a tool for communication; it's a living reflection of a group's identity. By prioritising English or widely spoken languages, society risks erasing the richness of linguistic diversity, which weakens global cultural identities. Additionally, this creates political and economic consequences, as places that are not proficient in English are increasingly marginalised from global economic opportunities. The widespread adoption of English also fosters linguistic imperialism, where the domination of one language leads to the suppression of others, undermining the principles of cultural equality.

In conclusion, language apps offer quick learning but only a superficial understanding that neglects cultural and social elements critical to true bilingualism. The digital shift represents a broader trend toward individualism and disengagement from social interaction. This lack of cultural immersion risks not only linguistic fluency but also the loss of cultural identities and heritage. If we continue to prioritize convenient, screen-based learning, we risk erasing the deep connections that make languages so powerful. To preserve languages and cultures, we must resist shortcut learning and embrace immersive, culturally rich language education. Only by doing so can we ensure that future generations not only speak a different language but live it, truly engaging with the history, culture, and people that make it unique.

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A Society of Strangers in a Familiar Land

Once the cultural capital of the Middle East, Lebanon is now a country of jarring contradictions. Elegant and blessed with a rich intellectual and artistic heritage, it remains deeply divided. Its politics are dominated by sectarianism, and a system of social order is based on corruption and patronage, which operates to entrench divisions rather than unity.

I. Historical context of the division

We must look into Lebanon's history and geography to understand the division. Lebanon was part of territories belonging to various civilisations, such as the Phoenician, Roman and Ottoman empires, which helped form its modern ethnic and religious composition. With 18 officially recognised religious sects, the most dominant among them being the Maronite Christians, Sunni Muslims, Shia Muslims, and the Druze, religious diversity tends to create tension in day-to-day lives, especially once sectarianism was introduced into its politics. The Ottoman millet system ensured that multi-faith communities in the empire were semi-autonomous, hence accorded some liberty in their internal affairs, such as education, taxation, and most prominently, religion. Each sect had separate millets, institutions and leaders (Braude & Lewis, 1982).

When Lebanon gained independence from French colonial control in 1943, an unwritten agreement, known as the National Pact, established a power-sharing system based on the country's traditional social cleavages. The presidency was allocated to Maronite Christians, the prime ministership to Sunni Muslims, and the speaker of parliament to Shia Muslims. Theoretically, it was conceived to bridge the interests of different communities; however, sectarianism, which was entrenched into the political system, made it difficult to visualise a shared sense of identity. It is further compounded by the fact that Christians dominated parliament following a 1932 census where they were granted a 6:5 proportion. By the 1960s, Christian representation outweighed its actual portion of the population. The allocation of political power was not reformed until after the civil war with the 1989 Taif Agreement, when the percentage more closely represented the population and was enshrined in law as a 1:1 ratio.

II. The 1975-90 Civil War

The Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) further deepened divisions within the country. The violence and destruction of the civil war left deep psychological wounds on the people, eroding trust among communities and forging a perception of Lebanon as a nation of strangers. External pressures played a role in shaping Lebanese identity. Being neighbours to countries such as Israel and Syria, Lebanon became a battleground for geopolitical struggles as part of the larger Cold War from 1947 to 1991. For instance, Hezbollah, a Shia Islamist resistance group in the eyes of its supporters but a terrorist group for its critics, aligned itself with Iran. By contrast, other factions have sought support from Western or Arab states. These external alliances further polarised the Lebanese population as different groups identified more with their foreign patrons than their fellow citizens.

The causes of the civil war are mainly attributed to the sectarian tensions stemming from the National Pact of 1943 and the arrival of Palestinian refugees after the expulsion of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) from Jordan in 1970 under Black September. The 1969 Cairo Agreement also furthered tensions between

the Christian and Muslim sects, giving Palestinian guerillas legal control over the 300,000 refugees living in camps, as well as holding the right to launch attacks against Israel from Southern Lebanon. In 1987, the contract was annulled by President Amine Gemayel, signifying the end of Palestinian control in Southern Lebanon.

The war developed into different key stages. Clashes first began between Christian militias such as the Phalange and Palestinian factions, where revenge killings quickly escalated, drawing in other sectarian groups. This led to Israeli and Syrian intervention, where Israel supported Christian militias in the south, such as the South Lebanon Army. Israel invaded Lebanon in 1978 and again in 1982, occupying the South until 2000 and removed the PLO from Lebanon, however, their invasion led to further chaos and war crimes such as the Sabra and Shatila massacre in 1982, killing an estimated 1300-3500 civilians, most of them Palestinians and Shia Muslims (Fisk 2001). The civil war was turned into a proxy conflict by the two remaining superpowers, with the Americans allying with the Christian militias and the Soviets with the Syrians.

The civil war ended with an estimated 150,000 deaths and over a million displaced. The population was left with psychological scars which eroded trust between different sects of the country as people relied on their religious communities for protection, which remains the same today. Infrastructure was reduced to rubble, including roads, hospitals, and schools.



Image showing Phalangists arresting Muslim civilians in Beirut.

III. Recent Events

The Lebanese-Israeli conflict that started in October 2023 further revealed Lebanon's political vulnerability. The assassination of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah in an Israeli airstrike in September 2024 stunned the Shia community and generated fear of a new comprehensive war in Lebanon. Thousands were murdered and displaced throughout this period, predominantly Shias, who evacuated to areas run by other sects. While there was an initial welcome for the displaced, it was later followed by acts of violence in towns such as Marjayoun, where displaced Shias, whether or not linked to Hezbollah, were forced out of the area. While supporters of Hezbollah view the organisation as a protector of Lebanese sovereignty, its critics claim that it is leading the nation into wars of choice for Iran's interests, mainly because of their foundation and their allegiance to Wilayat al-faqih. (Saab, 2023).

Events during and after the war brought about significant changes in Lebanon's political life, particularly with the appointment of Nawaf Salam as Prime Minister, who assumed the premiership on February 8, 2025. Not affiliated with the status quo, he was elected in under his previous achievements as the Lebanese ambassador to the United Nations and president of the International Court of Justice (ICJ). Unlike his predecessor Najib Mikati, who represents the traditional ruling elite, Nawaf Salam's appointment represents a shift from conventional sectarian politics since Mikati operated within the sectarian framework in Lebanon. (Bassam and Perry, 2025) Although Suleiman Frangieh was the favourite candidate for presidency before the war, ex-general Joseph Aoun was ultimately appointed president with a stunning 99/128 votes in parliament, showing that Hezbollah's grip on the state has fractured after the events of the war.

Lebanon's youth also pushed for a search for a national identity, which was most notably seen during the 2019 October Revolution, also known as the Thawra. Protests against government corruption, the rise in essential services, and a proposed tax on WhatsApp calls demonstrated a great desire among the youth to move beyond the sectarian divisions. Regardless of religion, people united to protest against the elite, leading to Prime Minister Saad al Hariri's resignation in October 2019, two weeks after protests began. Unfortunately, these efforts quickly fell through as they failed to gain momentum, leading the same people to fall back to their sectarian roots, mainly attributed to the sectarian leaders fearing a loss of control, resorting to intimidation tactics and bribery, and rekindling sectarian tensions. The Beirut Port Explosion of August 4th 2020, which saw over 200 dead and thousands injured, saw a brief reunification of protesters. However, political parties exploited the disaster to advance their agendas, preventing reform and further entrenching sectarianism (Makarem 2021).

IV. Cultural Identity

Despite these challenges, there are still many symbols of a collective Lebanese identity through culture and education. Lebanese literature, music, and art have widely reflected a shared heritage that exceeds the country's sectarian lines. Figures such as Fairuz or the poet Khalil Gibran have expressed the commonalities of Lebanese culture, promoting unity. However, even within education, discussions of politics within schools are often frowned upon to prevent violent clashes between people.

The education system also needs reform as it still follows the old "Brevet" system left by their former French administrators. The Civil War is left out from the history curriculum since different sects have different narratives on how events unfolded, preventing a unified national view on one of the most critical events in the country's history. Teachers also experienced a severe wage decrease, with the average public sector salary dropping from roughly $2000 to just over $100 monthly (UNESCO, 2023).

Conclusion

Lebanon remains a nation of strangers divided by its internal ethnic and religious differences. Corrupt institutions and constant foreign intervention have hindered the development of a cohesive national identity. Instead, communities strengthen ties within their sectarian groups rather than building broader connections. Even though the October Revolution dissolved back into partisan loyalties, it showed that the Lebanese people could overcome their differences to challenge the traditional elite. The embracement of Lebanese art and musical heritage shows we share cultural commonalities. With the Middle East experiencing significant political changes, the question is whether Lebanon can use this unstable time to move away from its polarised past and redefine its national identity for a more harmonious future.

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Don’t be a Stranger

The Hyperreal, the Internet, and the Absurd

From Albert Camus’ absurdist philosophy emerge two symbolic individuals: Sisyphus and the Stranger. They recognise the dilemma at the heart of the human experience, yet their reactions differ. The Stranger reacts with indifference, which dooms him. Sisyphus draws happiness from the absurd condition. Camus defines the absurd as human desire contrasting against an intractable universe. Camus refers to the search for meaning, but the notion of the absurd is applicable elsewhere. The increasingly untrustworthy Internet information space may be such an instance if our desire for contact with reality wrestles with an environment of information which seems indifferent to reality — an Absurd contrast. Jean Baudrillard’s hyperreal and simulacra also describe the mechanics of this phenomenon. The argument takes shape as follows: the Internet is hyperreal, and extensive engagement with hyperreality is absurd; therefore, we must adopt an absurdist response to it to liberate ourselves from becoming the Stranger.

Baudrillard defines the hyperreal as generating “models of a real without origin or reality” (Baudrillard, J., 1994) – an interaction wherein false signs are treated as real not because they are convincing but because the subject is indifferent to their relationship with reality. Signs are engaged in their reference to other symbols rather than their proximity to reality.

We should first identify whether the Internet risks fit this definition. Aided by AI, misinformation renders social media platforms like Facebook or TikTok vulnerable to spreading untrue information. Algorithms intensify this, creating echo chambers fueling a distorted view of reality based on preferred social media content – building online “pockets” of hyperreality. These communities prefer information not because it is likely to be true, but because it fits with some socially-originated criterion of legitimacy, such as ideology. Signs reflect that symbol rather than reality, so subjects become inadvertently indifferent to reality; they engage with the hyperreal.

To illustrate this, consider the 2022 Ofcom study, which found that many overestimate their ability to detect AI (Ofcom, 2022). Since then, AI’s realism has only improved, likely amplifying this issue. In 2023, an ONS survey reliant on people’s own beliefs nevertheless showed that only 1 in 6 adults were confident in their ability to identify AI (ONS, 2023). Examining social media reflects these results: AI Instagram accounts can outcompete human accounts (Park et al. 2024), and AI Facebook spam and scam accounts are adept at generating engagement (DiResta and Goldstein 2024). If the difference between our reactions to reality and unreality is shrinking as suggested, the Internet will become increasingly hyperreal.

Ideologically-charged echo chambers of hyperreality were already developing a decade ago on Facebook (Vicario et al. 2016). AI has been used to accelerate this by writing effective propaganda (Goldstein et al., 2024), fueling political campaigns (Jingnan, 2024) (Spring, 2024) (Adami, 2024), and powering the algorithms with which social media tailors an individual’s recommended content, resulting in the exacerbation of the polarisation and heterogeneity discussed by Vicario et al. (Berg et al., 2021).

Baudrillard’s simulacra are representations which replace reality in hyperreality, categorised in four levels defined by their relation to reality and the subject:

Level 1: Faithful depiction: an accurate representation of reality

Level 2: Distorted representation: an untrue reflection of reality intended to deceive the subject

Level 3: The representation which does not correspond to anything in reality and masks the absence of a true reality

Level 4: Pure simulacra in which no attempt is made to correspond with reality or pretend to. Signs reflect other signs, and refer only to symbols which exist only culturally. In the hyperreal, there is no difference between simulacra and reality

In the context of Instagram:

Level 1: A real person's photo is posted

Level 2: A photo is edited to increase engagement

Level 3: An account posts an AI image

Level 4: An account run by AI posts and comments as though it were a real account. It gains real followers and real users like its posts and comments.

At Level 4 people interact with the simulacrum like it were real. This is the hyperreal. While Level 3, the post intends to replicate reality without representing any real thing, to mask reality, Level 4 serves to displace reality. As technology like AI improves, it will become more difficult to avoid hyperreality.

An example of how simulacra displace reality for communities engaged in hyperreality is the Springfield pet-eating hoax of 2024:

Level 1: A news report says that locals in Springfield, Ohio, have spread rumours about Haitians eating pets based on prejudice towards them.

Level 2: A resident's Facebook post making those allegations based on untrue information

Level 3: Donald Trump repeats a version of the claim to propagate negative beliefs about immigrants (Thomas and Wendling, 2024)

Level 4: The House GOP Judiciary Committee posts an AI image of Trump protecting animals online (Thomas and Wendling, 2024)

The Level 4 simulacrum is a reference to the symbolism of Trump protecting animals. The post did not pretend to be a real image, but supporters would have engaged with it the same way regardless: real or not, it carries the symbolic content that Trump is protecting animals against immigrants, a symbol originating in people's prior exposure to lower-level simulacra which has convinced them of that distortion of reality. Engagement with this post is entirely indifferent to its reality. Signs refer only to symbols — the hyperreal.

In knowing that interaction with social-media simulacra is likely, and that they are increasingly difficult to detect, we gain awareness that we may be engaged in hyperreality. It is insufficient to try and verify information, as we may not know whether our methods of verification, even where they do exist, correspond to reality; it is as hard to verify our methods of verification as it would be to verify disputed information itself. In politics, fact-checking sources like Snopes or Reuters are often dismissed by those conditioned by hyperreality to reject conflicting information. Recognising this epistemic flaw in others forces us to acknowledge our own susceptibility. This obstacle is especially true for non-political examples, such as Instagram AI influencers, where no method exists for the average user to verify an account or post's correspondence with reality.

Therefore, we must accept that if we receive any information from the internet, we are uncertain that it relates to naïve reality. Crucially, this contrasts with the human desire to experience reality.

In Camus' novel *The Stranger*, Meursault is indifferent to his awareness of the pointlessness of his actions. This indifference alienates him from society and his existence and leads to his demise. Those choosing to engage in hyperreality are indifferent to its unreality and will be like Strangers, believing on impulse and thinking every sign to be equally credible.

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus articulates three responses to the absurd dilemma:

1. Remove oneself from the absurd condition entirely; for us, this means avoiding all social media
    - This is undesirable because it involves sacrificing the benefits of social media for communication, entertainment and education
2. The leap of faith; is picking a belief system arbitrarily for the sake of finding an artificial reality though it is impossible to verify.
    - This is undesirable as it is an inauthentic choice which still dooms the individual to indifference about some hyperreality
3. Embrace the absurd; constantly seek reality even though it is impossible to verify
    - This is the only option which maintains our authenticity, while allowing us to be happy.

Therefore, we must see social media as Sisyphus sees his boulder, with reality as our unattainable peak. We must investigate everything as far as we can, knowing that we might never find reality. What matters is the search, not the finding.

Only then can we escape the fate of the Stranger.

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Gen Z Loneliness

The Interplay of Mattering, Perfectionism, and Online Dating

We are currently witnessing a significant shift in the dating landscape, with the rise of a "dating recession" marked by a decline of dating in all forms. (Aggeler, 2024) Notably, platforms like Tinder and Bumble have seen a decrease in active users, with Tinder losing 600,000 users and Bumble declining by 368,000 since 2023. (Milmo, 2024) Meanwhile, alternative forms of dating, such as speed dating, run clubs, and niche singles events (like those catering to Black lesbians or divorced professionals), have gained popularity. (Vinter, 2023) At the same time, Gen Z—a generation already grappling with loneliness—seems ambivalent about traditional in-person interactions, disconnected from the skills of face-to-face flirting and romantic encounters. (Aggeler, 2024) This paradox highlights the complex intersection of technology, perfectionism, and loneliness, where social media and dating apps not only contribute to a sense of disconnection but also entrap users in a cycle of unattainable standards and validation-seeking behaviour.

The loneliness experienced by Gen Z in dating is intricately linked to the pressures of perfectionism, particularly in transitional stages of life. Perfectionism can be broken down into three main categories:

1. Self-oriented perfectionism: the need to self-evaluate against unrealistically high standards.
2. Other-oriented perfectionism: the demand that others meet similarly high standards.
3. Socially prescribed perfectionism: the belief that others have unrealistically high expectations of you and the need for their approval. (Ali, 2024)

Research has shown a significant connection between perfectionism and loneliness, particularly socially prescribed perfectionism. (Piko et al., 2025) This type of perfectionism is tied to the feeling of "mattering"—the belief that we are important to others. Mattering is made up of three key components:

1. Awareness: having people who pay attention to you.
2. Importance: having people who invest time in you.
3. Reliance: having people who depend on you or whom you depend on. (Ali, 2024)

When young people feel as though they do not matter, it often leads to feelings of loneliness and social disconnection. In the context of dating, this is especially pronounced. Dating apps and social media, while designed to foster connections, instead often promote an environment of isolation, as they feed into perfectionism and erode the feeling of mattering. Active and passive social media use intensifies socially prescribed perfectionism. (Roberts, 2024) Social media creators engage in this cycle by presenting their ‘best selves’ while consumers expect perfection in others. This dynamic leads both parties to elevate their self-imposed standards, perpetuating a cycle of dissatisfaction. Furthermore, these platforms diminish meaningful face-to-face interactions, decreasing the importance and reliance of in-person moments that often characterise deep connections. The result is a sense of disconnection, where individuals may feel more "known" online than in person, yet simultaneously feel isolated and unseen.

This phenomenon is particularly evident in the dating app industry, where users are bombarded with idealised versions of potential partners. People are constantly exposed to images of others on vacation, at the gym, or out with friends, reinforcing the idea that they are always

competing with these "best versions" of others. The validation provided by matches on these platforms only exacerbates the awareness gap—users feel noticed but not truly known or appreciated.

Another significant aspect of online dating is the role of gamification, which refers to applying game-like features in non-game contexts to increase user engagement. (Jadamba, 2024) In dating apps, gamification takes advantage of the internal motivations of mattering and perfectionism, particularly the desire for attention and approval. Through features such as "swiping" on Tinder or profile boosts, apps encourage users to engage in a 'dating game' that often leads to temporary gratification rather than lasting connection. Many apps further encourage users to 'improve' at this game with tools like Bumble's chat prompts, which direct users on how to keep the conversation going. This gamified approach makes dating feel like a series of small wins and losses, with each match leading to either further disappointment or shallow validation.

Moreover, the advertising strategies employed by dating apps often evoke feelings of passion and freedom, playing into the idea that singlehood should be celebrated. For example, Tinder's "Single, Not Sorry" campaign targeted young women, promoting singlehood as a desirable lifestyle rather than a transitional phase. Campaign slogans such as "Single never has to go home early" and "Congrats on your big breakup" positioned singlehood as rebellious and liberating. (Morris, 2023) While this message appeals to a sense of independence, it can also amplify the disconnection and loneliness that many people feel in a world where relationships are commodified.

However, while dating apps use marketing to promote freedom, they also face increasing scrutiny for enabling harassment, online abuse, and unsafe behaviour. (Gillett, 2023) Disabled users report ongoing mocking, while tragic incidents—such as the murder of Grace Millane by a man she met on Tinder in 2019—highlight the dark side of online dating. (BBC News, 2022) These issues, combined with the addictive nature of gamified apps, have led to what many now refer to as "dating fatigue." Dylan Freeman-Grist has described dating apps as "algorithmic doom barrels," where the more users engage, the more difficult and frustrating the experience becomes. (Vinter, 2023) As wins are met with even greater losses, optimism fades, and the entire process begins to feel like a never-ending cycle of disappointment.

This growing sense of disillusionment with online dating has contributed to the rise of movements like voluntary celibacy and the "boy sober" movement. (Demopoulos, 2024) The term "boy sober," which gained viral popularity in 2024, was coined by comedian Hope Woodward to describe a conscious decision to distance oneself from the harms of modern dating. The movement is not about abstinence for religious reasons but rather about reclaiming control over romantic outcomes and avoiding the emotional toll of endless, ambiguous relationships. Celebrities like Julia Fox, who has publicly declared her celibacy for over two years, have endorsed the movement, showing that it is acceptable and beneficial to reconnect with oneself and step away from the pressures of dating. (Febos, 2024) For many, this represents a shift away from socially prescribed perfectionism and a rejection of the constant pursuit of approval from others. These movements are



Mobile, I. (2019).

having a clear impact on dating app culture, as seen by Bumble's recent marketing campaigns, hiring celebrities with a Gen Z audience like Barry Keoghan and running a highly criticised anti-celibacy campaign. This campaign used quotes such as “Thou shalt not give up on dating and become a nun”, mocking the rising trend in voluntary celibacy. (Cohen, 2024) Alongside this the new CEO altered their founding premise in which women must message men first, feeding further into concern for women’s safety on these platforms. (Elsesser, 2024)

In conclusion, this evolving dating culture reflects a broader societal issue where technology and perfectionism converge to foster loneliness and disconnection, particularly among younger generations. While dating apps and social media promise connection, they often create an environment of unrealistic expectations, superficial engagement, and constant comparison, leading to growing feelings of isolation. Movements like voluntary celibacy and the "boy sober" trend represent a growing desire to escape the toxic cycle of modern dating and prioritise self-investment over external validation. The rise of these movements and the changing preferences of users highlight the need for a shift in the way we approach relationships—one that values authenticity, emotional well-being, and deeper human connections over perfection and fleeting digital validation.

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Governing a Society of Strangers

Democratic Legitimacy in an Age of Polarisation

Democracies become dysfunctional when their established institutions can no longer mediate the sociopolitical demands of the citizenry. (Horonizak, 2022) Globalisation and economic crisis have worked in tandem to fundamentally change the sociopolitical demands of the people internationally. External changes have outpaced social mores to the extent that we are witnessing the most significant revolt of our time. A reactionary wave has swept through established democracies. Citizens are electing far-right populist parties to lead an ever-expanding coalition of illiberal states that reject the fundamental principles underlying democracy. However, I firmly believe in the power of human agency. Social forces do not fully determine our collective outcomes. This age of autocratisation may be a harmful wave, yet all waves eventually break to retreat into the sea. All liberal democracies operate under the assumption that every decision can and should derive from a consensus-based deliberation. However, consensus is more difficult to reach when a society is politically polarised, and deliberation is almost impossible. Every democracy naturally engenders a degree of partisanship and political polarisation. We continually witness greater polarisation in democracies with majoritarian electoral systems. This makes sense, as majoritarian systems consist of two parties under the winner-takes-all principle. It is, by nature, adversarial. By contrast, proportional systems often require governments to be formed of a coalition of parties, necessitating compromise. In small doses, polarisation is necessary to maintain a functional democracy. A diverse and sometimes conflicting set of views among a citizenry will likely result in better decisions. However, polarisation becomes 'pernicious' once the in-group and out-group view each other as existential threats to their security and prosperity. (McCoy et. al., 2019)

Explaining the two forms of political polarisation is crucial: Affective and Ideational. Affective polarisation represents the presence and severity of an 'us versus them' mentality. The supporters of an incumbent party view themselves as a virtuous in-group, while the opposition's supporters are demonised as an actively hostile out-group and vice versa. Ideational polarisation represents the ideological differences between the in-group and the out-group. The defining boundaries between both groups can be based on traditional social cleavages like ethnic, cultural, and religious differences or on novel, artificial cleavages that are self-imposed. We see the latter kind in Hungary, where the main post-communist transition parties have purposefully exaggerated their differences to give themselves a distinct identity. An increase in political polarisation always foreshadows an autocratic turn. It is deliberately stimulated by a populist party to make its supporters more receptive to the erosion of democratic institutions once in power.

The most popular explanation for political polarisation is "echo chambers." (Sunstein, 2001) The theory is that because an increasing amount of the population obtains their news from social media, their intake is skewed by an algorithm. These algorithms suggest posts and stories depending on which posts you've liked

and which accounts you've subscribed to. This leads to a feed almost exclusively made up of ideationally congruent material, reinforcing the user's pre-established beliefs rather than challenging them. Therein lies an endogeneity problem: Do echo chambers cause pernicious polarisation or vice versa? Of course, the two leading social media platforms used for news, Facebook and X (formerly Twitter), operate under different constraints. We understand the inner workings of Google's PageRank algorithm better than we do those for Facebook or Twitter, whose designs are more closely guarded as trade secrets. (Barberá, 2020)

Social media is often the favoured dead horse to beat and blame for our current intra-society hostility. Surprisingly, no academic consensus exists on the relationship between social media use and polarisation. One can find as many journal articles suggesting a positive relation between the two as much as the opposing view. However, suppose we camp under the most popular banner (i.e., social media use reinforces polarisation). In that case, the natural response is to suggest that these algorithms be changed to offer more diverse views, even if they may be challenging. However, Bail et al. (2018) provide reasonable evidence to prove that exposure to dissimilar views reinforces polarisation. They created an experiment where randomly selected Twitter users were sorted into three test groups: A conservative group, a liberal group, and a test group. They then had every participant follow a bot, which, for two months, would exclusively show them content from proponents of the opposite ideational view. After the two-month exposure period had elapsed, the participants were asked to fill out the same survey as the one at the start of the experiment. The results were unique: Both the conservative and liberal groups had become more ideologically firm in their beliefs after the prolonged exposure. However, the conservatives displayed a much more significant impact than the liberals. Unfortunately, insufficient research has been done to understand this "backfire effect" (Bail et al., 2018). Evidently, the relationship between political polarisation and social media use is unclear.

It is not enough to point out the current problem(s) facing our society; one must also suggest potential solutions. The source of political polarisation is the party elites who have something to gain from our division. Through speeches and ideationally aligned media, they play on social cleavages to ensure loyalty from their supporters and to prime them for when they eventually erode democratic institutions, reduce executive checks, and trespass legal norms. One avenue of remedy would be institutional reform. This would include legislation to break up political authority and give it clear boundaries. The electoral change would be an additional boon. If we convert a majoritarian system to a proportional one, parties will reorient themselves to work together over time. In such a case, they would realise that the prizes to be won by the exclusion of the opposition don't meet the social punishments that will be meted out for doing so. We can also pass legislation to restrict media bias. However, it is more difficult to convince people of the merit of passing media restrictions. The suggested change risks igniting debates around freedom of speech. Nonetheless, it could be a fruitful avenue to examine. Executive checks, electoral reform, and media restrictions are all short-term solutions; we must also transform the population's minds over the long term. This requires us to rekindle public trust in our neighbours and government and expose ourselves to dissimilar views. We could create community-level organisations to do this and more, like using these institutions to garner a greater interest in local politics by encouraging engagement with regional issues. Our present challenges necessitate firm and ceaseless pressure for the reforms mentioned above. However, to some extent, we are subject to

greater social forces; in that sense, some waiting is inevitable.

Pernicious political polarisation represents a clear threat to democratic legitimacy: If one group of people is excluded from deliberations that will affect them purely because they are not supporters of the incumbent party, then there is no democracy but a tyranny of the majority:

"At what point, then, is the approach of danger to be expected? I answer, if it ever reaches us, it must spring up amongst us. It cannot come from abroad. If [the] destruction [of our democracy] is our lot, we must ourselves be its author and finisher. As a nation of freemen, we must live through all time or die by suicide." (Lincoln, 1838)

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The Masters of Perception and the Masters of Reality

The revolutions of 2016 revealed a new set of divisions between globalists and nationalists, unlike the old divisions of left and right. While often framed in cultural or ideological terms, this division has profound economic foundations that reveal deeper class distinctions in modern societies. At its core, the globalist-nationalist divide reflects a separation between workers in tangible production sectors and those in intangible economies—a rift that shapes political alignments across the developed world.

The Material vs. Immaterial Economy

The Ukraine war provided a stark revelation: Russia's industrial output exceeded that of Western nations combined, producing shells and tanks at a far greater rate than economies supposedly much larger. Western commentators, confronted with this reality, lamented the decline of industrial capacity. As economist Noah Smith (Smith, 2023) pointedly observed on his Noahpinion blog, "the Arsenal of Democracy is gone." This moment crystallized the divide between nationalist and globalist factions, revealing in concrete terms what each represents.

How could a nation once dismissed as "a gas station with nukes" (McCain, 2014) outproduce the industrialized societies of Western Europe and North America? The answer lies in a fundamental transformation of Western economies. The ruling elite of the advanced world allowed their manufacturing base to be eroded under the globalisation that defined the 1990s and 2000s, yielding benefits for consumers but at the cost of the industrial working class. Simultaneously Russia renationalised large parts of its industrial base to protect it from foreign competition (The Moscow Times, 2014). This political divergence led to the creation of a new binary between the ‘real economy’ and the ‘unreal economy’, which was reflected in creation of a new class division.

The "real economy" encompasses the remaining industrial proletariat—those who work in factories, mines, and shipyards. This class also disproportionately fills military ranks, fighting wars determined by the ruling elite. In contrast stands the "unreal economy", defined by services including professional and financial sectors, arts industries, journalism, and politics. These sectors tend toward cultural liberalism, political interventionism, and cosmopolitanism (Digital Humanities Institute, 2002).

Class Formation Around Production Types

These economic realities have fostered distinct class identities. The intangible economy has produced a professional-managerial class spanning national boundaries, sharing educational backgrounds, cultural references, and consumption patterns. This "globalist class" includes technology professionals, financial services workers, academics, creative industry participants, and corporate managers. Their skills are portable, their networks international, and their economic interests align with open borders and the free movement of capital (Koopmans and Zurn, 2019).

Meanwhile, workers in tangible sectors—manufacturing, construction, resource extraction, transportation, and place-based services—form a "nationalist class" whose economic security depends on local control of resources, protection from foreign competition, and the stability of geographically-bounded communities. Their skills and livelihoods remain tied to specific locations and cannot easily relocate in response to global economic shifts.
The cultural divide is also plainly a class divide. University-educated populations in major

metropolitan centers increasingly occupy the immaterial economy, while workers, generally without college degrees—from manufacturing to agriculture—find themselves concentrated in the material sector (Goodhart, 2019).

The Postmodern West vs. the Modern East

Western states have become increasingly postmodernist, their politics defined by consumptive ideologies, production of political myths, and the dominance of media and entertainment sectors. As Joe Biden noted in 2012, television played the dominant role in shaping and moderating opinions toward gay marriage in America (Biden, 2012). Politics is therefore primarily shaped by the media.

This mirrors Western economic structures, which no longer generate large quantities of manufactured goods, but instead produce cultural products, intangible services, and communications technologies. They no longer compete with developing nations in mass production of tangible goods.

Meanwhile, the "ultimate states of modernity" continue in China and the Far East, prioritizing matter and intensifying control over the material world. This has culminated in automated industrial economies combined with rationalised, systematized forms of energy production and population regulation (China Briefing, 2023).

Political Alignments Reflecting Economic Division

This economic division manifests in political alignments that transcend traditional left-right categories. The intangible economy class generally supports political movements favoring open borders, free trade, multiculturalism, andinternational governance structures—the "globalist" position. The tangible economy class gravitates toward parties advocating trade protection, immigration restrictions, national sovereignty, and preservation of traditional industrial bases—the "nationalist" position.

These political orientations reflect rational economic self-interest. Intangible economy workers benefit from global talent pools, cross-border investment flows, and integrated markets. Their career advancement often depends on international mobility. Tangible economy workers, conversely, face competition from foreign labor and benefit from policies that privilege local production and restrict the movement of both people and capital.

This realignment disrupted traditional political coalitions. Working-class voters who once reliably supported left-leaning parties shifted toward nationalist movements, while educated professionals form the base of parties advocating globalist positions. Within western societies, the political division increasingly separates people who make things from people who do not. The left is increasingly dominated by the managerial class and university-educated people, while the right represents groups that generate tangible commodities.

The Crisis of the Postmodern

The binary between modern and postmodern also extends into the world of foreign policy. Zbigniew Brzezinski was one of the first to argue in favour of a postmodern approach to foreign policy. Instead of classical strategy, based on indexes of national power like productive output, energy generation, and military force distribution, he favoured the effective use of soft power to influence the perceptions and opinions of the enemy, as well as to control the domestic public mind. Meanwhile, traditional powers like Russia and China continued to utilise traditional mechanisms of national power such as armies and fleets, which, whilst impressive on paper, were far more expensive than newspapers and television broadcasts. They had armies, fleets and the ability to destroy the world. What they did not have was the ability to define reality itself (Brzezinski, 1970).

The effectiveness of this approach was in evidence early on in the Ukraine conflict. The American media effectively controlled the morality of the conflict, turning Zelensky into a hero, and Putin into the reincarnation of Adolf Hitler. Whilst other discourses have been able to

disrupt this perception, America is still generally able to shape the public mind more effectively than other societies, with Russian and Chinese media far less persuasive in general.

The Future of the Divide

This binary division appears likely to persist, and to become the central political division around which our world pivots. Sectors dealing with the material world—manufacturing, trades, and other "real economies"—will continue moving rightward politically. Sectors dealing with abstraction, creativity, and immaterial production will increasingly align with the left, or at least against nationalism and conservatism. Manufacturing-dominant economies like China and commodity-focused economies like Russia will remain dominated by socially conservative and nationalist politics, while Western societies become increasingly postmodern in their political discourse and social organization. This again reflects a class division between societies depending on their position in the global economic class structure. At the summit are the consumption economies which rely on openness, increasing production of new desires, and forms of consumer fulfilment; at the base, production economies based on mastery of the material world and productive forces, with hard and tangible relationships with their immediate environment.

The globalist-nationalist divide represents not merely different policy preferences but divergent experiences of economic reality. As political scientist Michael Lind argues in his work "The New Class War" (Lind, 2020), this conflict stems from a "managerial overclass" that has separated itself from place-bound production workers. Similarly, economist Branko Milanović has documented in "Global Inequality" (Milanovic, 2016) how this division creates winners and losers within national economies. As the separation between tangible and intangible economies deepens, so too may the political polarization that reflects it—unless we find new ways to bridge the growing chasm between those who shape matter and those who shape information.

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The Downfall of the Small Favours Economy

How Economic Pressures are Degrading Communities

The small favours economy is a term that describes gift exchange and typically occurs reciprocally within a community (Williams, 2008). Over the years, the phenomenon has been described via a variety of names, beginning with Mauss' work in the 1920s on what he termed 'gift exchange' and culminating in the academic discourse today which terms it a 'favour economy' which features 'community exchange'. I argue, building on work that frames favour exchange in game theoretical terms, that current stringent economic pressures are preventing engagement in the small favours economy and, therefore, degrading community bonds. I identify two reasons for this: first, that the barriers to entry of participating in the game are too high for people to afford and second, that financial pressures make people more risk averse to the initial gamble of future reciprocation.

It is also worth noting that there is a specific difference between gift exchange and favour exchange. Namely, the circumstances for reciprocity of a gift are fully at the hands of the initial gift recipient; in contrast, the circumstances for reciprocity of a favour occur exogenously, a favour depends on the needs of whomever you provide a favour to, not when you decide to reciprocate (Neilson, 1999). Whilst much of my analysis is still relevant to gift exchange, I specifically focus on favours.

The favour economy and community exchange sit on the periphery between unpaid domestic work and the formal paid economy (Bulmer, 1989, p. 253). Whilst there is no official exchange of money, the assumption of reciprocity indicates a value exchange of goods or services that leaves it on this edge. The concept of reciprocity has been central to anthropological analyses of social interaction for a long time (Narotzky, 2015). It is the core concept necessary to help us understand transfers that are embedded in social and cultural domains. Reciprocal transfers, such as gifts, care and charity, are supported by previously existing social bonds that they, in turn, strengthen (Gregory, 1982).

The favour economy exists with the implicit expectation of reciprocity – if you buy a round of drinks at the pub, the expectation is that your drinks will be purchased for you in the form of rounds by the other people you initially purchased for. However, there is an implied gamble in doing a favour, and so it relies on trust (Bellafante, 2013). It is entirely possible that having bought a round of drinks for six other people, including yourself, you do not receive an equivalent number of drinks or equivalent value of drinks in the rounds that follow. There is an argument that there is a legal course, in the form of binding contracts, to enforce these kinds of arrangements, thus formalising them. However, given the specific discussion of the small favours economy, this is largely insignificant because of the outsized transaction costs of enforcement. There are interesting applications of this model for larger 'favours' which cannot be formalised for legal reasons, for example, corruption and favour agreements in politics, for which there is a plethora of literature, however, this is outside of the scope of this article. Within the small favour economy and how it relates to community, it is the nature of this gamble that is what facilitates favours as something which strengthens community ties, when a favour is reciprocated, trust is proven, and a community becomes stronger for it.

Neilson (1999) presents informal favour exchange as an infinitely repeated prisoner's dilemma; similarly, Jackson et al. (2012) build on this work to explain the social enforcement of

reciprocal favour exchange. Using this established game theoretical framework, I argue that economic pressures prevent the beginning of the game to begin with. The initial cost to enter the game with the first move is too high a barrier to entry particularly for young people, and is preventing the strengthening of community ties that humans rely on. Essentially, the socially efficient outcome may not be consistent with an equilibrium because some favours are simply too expensive to perform. This prevents the future exchange of a different favour in return and acts to degrade the bonds that served to be strengthened by this form of community exchange. Although favour exchange is efficient in the long run, high initial costs create a barrier to entry, preventing community formation.

These barriers to entry and willingness to participate in the favour economy exist in two forms: firstly the literal cost of entering an arrangement – six beers is of course more expensive than one, so regardless of trust individuals cannot participate in the arrangement if they cannot afford the requisite amount of drinks necessary for a round; secondly economic pressures are affecting willingness to participate as individuals are more risk averse given comparatively scarce resources. This is a continual cycle as without building trust through community exchange, the trust necessary to participate in future exchanges is never built. The short-term cost and loss potential prevent individuals from being able to access the long-term gains of the community.

The inability to participate in this kind of community exchange isolates individuals and decreases efficiency. Human beings rely on cooperation with others for survival and growth, with community exchange as part of household coping practices (Komter, 1996). The reciprocity of favours extends beyond simply swapping paying for meals but also dealing with emergencies. The person you call when you have a flat tyre or to pick you up from the airport could either be a member of your community that you exchange favours with or someone that you have to compensate monetarily. A lack of participation in the favour economy could eventually cost more financially. However, even though it may be more efficient in the long run, the initial cost is too high a barrier for entry.

This idea can also be extended to ideas surrounding childcare. Birth rates are falling, and one of the most common reasons cited for this change is the increasing costs of raising children. The phrase 'it takes a village' more intimately refers to the necessity of leaning on communities to curb some of the worst economic costs of childrearing. Whether that be for old clothes, emotional support or babysitting in an emergency, community helps to level out the massive initial expenses of social reproduction.

It is becoming abundantly clear that a lack of community poses a significant issue for efficiency and dealing with disasters or crises, however, it is important to note that poorer people depend on community more. Whilst richer people can fill in the gaps created by a lack of community by paying for rendered services instead of exchanging for them, poorer people do not have the necessary capital. This highlights how economic pressures weigh harder on poorer people, not just in literal financial terms but also in terms of their community.

In conclusion, the favour economy exists to not only provide Pareto-improving efficiency for its participants but also to strengthen bonds within a community. As economic pressures rise, exclusion from favour economies erodes both efficiency and community ties. The breakdown of informal exchanges isolates individuals, weakening social cohesion and reducing collective resilience.

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