

The Dictatorship of the Young

The end of every semester confronts the college instructor with an indignity: reading student “evaluations” of his performance. While the principle of student feedback is sound in theory, the execution exposes the embarrassing frivolity of American culture. Highlights from my literature courses include, and I quote verbatim:

“There was too much reading.”

“He should not assign *Leaves of Grass* because it makes no sense.”

“I didn’t like the class because it has nothing to do with my major, but the professor was pretty good. He wears cool boots and shirts!”

Far be it from me to argue with any endorsement of my sartorial sense, but these evaluations are not merely for the instructors’ enlightenment. Jason Brennan and Phillip Magness report in their recently published book *Cracks in the Ivory Tower* that university administrators are increasingly reliant on student evaluations to make hiring, firing, and promotional decisions, even as all of the available research indicates they have no effect on the quality of teaching in the college classroom. To argue against student evaluations, at least as they exist now, according to consequentialism, is an error. The more profound question is: why are educational institutions inflating the egos of teenagers by encouraging them to give their approval or condemnation of a professor? Furthermore, why are they able to issue judgments of Walt Whitman as if their inability to comprehend his masterpiece is somehow his fault and not their own?

Wendy Williams, a professor of Human Development at Cornell University, [claims](#) that the growth of student evaluations in the 1990s coalesced with dramatic increases in tuition. This

applied pressure on colleges to “seek consumer satisfaction.”

A successful business must placate, even coddle, its customers. Education has an altogether different mission and standard. Edward R. Ward, a Catholic priest, author, and personal friend, began all of his university philosophy courses for freshmen with the words: “I’m not here to nurture you. I’m here to strengthen you.”

Ward’s pedagogy is woefully anachronistic in our culture of raw nerves. Student evaluations prioritize the likes, dislikes, whims, and feelings of students over any aim to strengthen young minds. They are also a small illustration of youthocracy – a dictatorship of the inexperienced and immature that exerts an insidious influence over American culture.

Like student evaluations, youthocracy did not begin in the 1990s, but that was when it grew dominant. Pop culture was the first pillar to fall, as marketing specialists discovered that America’s shopping mall teenagers had large amounts of disposable income, and were likelier to spend their money on entertainment than their working parents. The teenage and 20-something demographics became the ultimate prizes for any commercial venture in film, television, and music. As a result, adult complexity in cinematic plot, chord progression, and song lyrics became financial liabilities, at least in the mainstream. (Fortunately, there was a backlash on television with programs like “The Sopranos,” “Mad Men,” and “The Wire” that appealed to adults. Older viewers tended to stay home for their entertainment even before the rise of streaming services.)

A cursory glance at any suburban movie theater is sufficient to demonstrate the rule of youthocracy. The Marvel Universe, scatological comedies, and slasher bloodfests in which different pitches of screaming qualify as dialogue triumph at the box office. Serious and thoughtful films, like *The Highwaymen* and *First Reformed*, go straight to a streaming

service, or have theatrical runs so limited that they barely register.

In *The Disappearance of Childhood*, prophetic social critic Neil Postman wrote that the ubiquity of mass media was robbing children of an essential sense of “wonderment” and dangerously bridging the information divide between them and their parents:

As media merge the two worlds, as the tension created by secrets to be unraveled is diminished, the calculus of wonderment changes. Curiosity is replaced by cynicism or, even worse, arrogance. We are left with children who rely not on authoritative adults but on news from nowhere. We are left with children who are given answers to questions they never asked. We are left, in short, without children.

Postman did not predict that the disappearance of childhood would mean that children function as young adults, but rather that adult and child would blend together, creating a worst-of-both-worlds mutant. The “adult-child,” Postman wrote, is a “grown up whose intellectual and emotional life is not significantly different from a child.”

The consequences of youthocracy – a culture under the rule of teenagers, twentysomethings, and middle-aged people who think and act like children – go far beyond dumb movies and silly songs.

Youthocracy has poisoned American politics. Donald Trump is the epitome of the “adult-child,” a prankster-bully who has traded policy rigor for whiny finger pointing and name calling, most of it on his favorite medium, Twitter.

Meanwhile, the Democratic Party, media companies, and public figures are increasingly deferential to the hysterics of the Twitter mob. Publishing companies have [delayed and canceled the release of novels](#) due to preemptive objections from

Twitter brigades. Candidates for the Democratic nomination for president are constantly recalibrating their positions to avoid outrage from social media obsessives. And journalistic coverage of significant issues looks to Twitter for direction.

The Pew Research Center recently revealed that Twitter, for all of its power, represents very few actual Americans, something that the most prestigious people in media, publishing, and politics are too insulated and onanistic to realize. Only 22 percent of Americans use Twitter; even more significant, the most prolific 10 percent of Twitter users are responsible for more than 80 percent of total tweets. The majority of users engage with the medium [only a handful of times per month](#) and rarely tweet about politics.

Hardly to anyone's surprise, Pew also found that "Twitter users are much younger than the average U.S. adult." Given the data, one could view the social media mob as the youthocracy's cultural military – the rank and file fighting battles on behalf of the dictatorship of the adult-child. Because major corporations and political officials overestimate the size of the army, much of American culture now caters to a youthful and overly sensitive set who have turned panic into a lifestyle.

As the youthocracy amasses power and influence, previously reliable criteria for the investment of trust and confidence – such as maturity, wisdom, and accomplishment – are undesirable and often subject to ridicule.

Politico [reports](#) that the endorsement of first-term congresswoman and media sensation Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is "one of the most important in America right now." Ocasio-Cortez's ascension from bartender to federal representative captures the spirit of American democracy and makes for an inspiring story. Even still, she is not responsible for the passage of a single bill in Congress. No one with so little experience should gain such authority. While it is important

that young people, who bring great enthusiasm and boldness in thinking, have some influence, it is even more essential that they advance in a dialogue with a wiser, older generation. The youthocracy, from student evaluations to party politics, is increasingly insistent on a one-way process: youthful demand and elder appeasement.

Rarely, if ever, does the “woke” cadre cite the insight of someone like Noam Chomsky, who, regardless of what anyone thinks about his politics, might know more about leftism and history than someone driving on a learner’s permit.

Mature adults recognize nuance and contradiction as unavoidable elements of a life moving towards death. Children, or those with the attitudes of adolescents, believe in absolutes, unable to see complexity and unwilling to compromise. Ocasio-Cortez has condemned Democratic frontrunner Joe Biden based on a rumor that his climate change policy will be “middle of the road.” The words are not Biden’s, and the former vice president has neither confirmed nor denied the story. But the search for truth requires patience – another virtue unwelcome in youthocracy.

A far worse political descent into simpleminded immaturity is the adult-child Donald Trump’s apparent belief that “supporting the troops” means pardoning war criminals. Something even as massive and multifaceted as the world’s largest military is either good or bad. There can be no in between.

It is dangerous to allow people who have not yet had formative experiences to gain such strength in a society.

I can already hear a popular rebuttal to my argument. Someone will compare me, at 34 years old, to an “old man” yelling “get off my lawn.” The “get off my lawn” insult is an example of the pervasiveness of the cultural reach of youth-oriented language. Criticism of youthful behavior sets one up to be

called a “dad,” which is now a pejorative (“dad music,” “dad clothes,” etc).

I look forward to the day – probably many years from now when I actually am elderly and proudly warning neighborhood kids to leave my property – when “adolescent” becomes a term of derision. Until then, the rule of the youthocracy drags on.

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