

# The Strangest Thing About the Debate

It struck me about one hour into what Politico [calls](#) “the snarling incoherence of the latest Democratic presidential debate” that was “painfully hard to follow.”

What precisely was so painful?

It was not what divided this gaggle of politicians vying for your affection. It was what united them. They all agree that their job is to have a plan for your life. This is the source of the pain.

How did it happen that all these candidates have come to believe that it is their job to plan the economy, manage your finances, fix your job, improve your wages, get you to the doctor, get your kids educated, keep you off drugs, make you equal to others, give you climate justice, grant you vacation time, and one thousand and ten other things?

That this is what they are supposed to do is not even questioned. And if you listened carefully, you will see that all of them agree that there is only one direction for government power: more. Everything without exception can be solved with more money, more power, more bureaucrats, more engagement, more plans, more intelligence, more focus.

No longer is the presidency the person who presides over the affairs of state. All of life has become an affair of state. The presidency is not just an administrator of things related to the federal government. He or she is the head of the whole country and everything and everyone in it, plus sizable parts of the rest of the world.

So they are all up there talking about what? They are talking about what they plan to do with your life and your money.

That's what was so painful. They have no clue about any possible limit to their planning.

All the while, every single person watching this debate has his or her own plans for life. Real people are planning their futures, navigating the job market, dealing with the boss or trying to find good employees, watching their 401ks, talking with their financial planners, figuring out whether to get another degree or go to work, wondering about partners, thinking about children, worrying about their kids' education, considering whether to raise children in a religion and which one, when to take a vacation and where, what to do about an uncle's drinking problem, worrying about aging parents, wondering whether to rent or buy, and one million other things.

We are all trying to figure it out. It's called life planning. We all do it every day. The underlying institution that makes our plans realizable is that we have freedom and the right to manage our lives and resources. This is essential to what it means to live the good life.

The trouble with the seven people on the stage last night is that they have little or no regard for our personal plans. It's their plans for us that matter. Our lives are mere abstractions to them.

We are there to be manipulated into granting them money and votes. Once they get the power via democratic means, they are done with us. Our only job is to cough up money and comply. That presumption is why the evening seemed so creepy.

They talk about clumps of voters, not real people. They talk of the "working classes," "African-American women," "minority populations," the "underemployed," the "underinsured," the "immigrants," ad infinitum but these are categories of voters, people being drafted against their will into voting blocs, not actual living, breathing, choosing individuals.

And with that comes a preposterous game of pretending that they know things that they cannot really know. The point was obvious in the question about what to do about pandemic disease should the U.S. be hit. They all strutted and pronounced on the issue as if they knew precisely the right path.

Not one person said a normal thing like: "There is a lot we do not know about the coronavirus, and we are all sifting through information as it becomes available. Each of us wants to stay safe and all of us have a strong interest in taking every precaution."

Such a statement would be a shock because it flies in the face of the ethos of this debate, which is that we are electing an all-knowing, all-powerful godlike brain rather than a mere head of state.

Where did this idea come from that the president is not just the head of the state but also the head of the whole of society and everything within it? It's been around a very long time but only recently has it been made so explicit, and become an open and conventional presumption behind all the political rhetoric.

The first time I experienced it so overtly was 2015, when I heard the second campaign speech by Donald Trump when he was first seeking the Republican nomination. He stood in front of an audience and talked as if he were running to become not a constitutional head of state in a republic governed by the rule of law. He was running to be the CEO of America. It was strange and alarming. It never occurred to him that there might be limits on his power that would be justified.

This speech rattled me. It struck me as the inauguration of a new era in politics.

Here we are almost five years later, and guess what? The Democrats speak exactly like him. They have learned from Trump

as good students. They are all running to be the new CEO of the whole country, just with a different set of priorities.

They all have a plan for your life. Their plans naturally overrule your plans because they will have the power and might of government behind them. You merely have things like human rights that are, in a country that hosts the largest and most powerful government ever, rather vulnerable to rampant violation.

Why do we put up with it? If you had a co-worker who spoke to you about your life and your plans the way members of the political class do as a matter of habit, you would avoid him like the coronavirus. You would plan your lunch hour to miss him, be on the phone when he walked by your desk, and maybe maneuver behind the scenes to get him pushed out. A person like that would be seen as threatening, even pathological.

And yet we somehow put up with it from politicians. We watch with bemusement and think: what the heck is wrong with these people? Why are they so lacking in the normal human grace of willing to live and let live? It's because they have all drunk the Kool-Aid of power. They want it desperately and will do anything to get it.

And truly, does anyone actually believe that this gang of political performers has access to some magic machine that will improve your life better than you can yourself? Some people do believe this. But fewer every day. If this political season has had any merit to it at all, it is that it has made the point that their presumption of omniscience and omnipotence is a dangerous path.

And yet, despite all their silly and potential dangerous antics, what can we do but live our lives as we always do, planning and struggling, sometimes achieving and often failing, grappling with uncertainty and opportunity, doing our best to cobble together a good life, raise our children well,

and prepare for the future as best we can? In this sense, none of these people can help. The best all of them can do is get out of the way.

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[Image Credit: New York Times Debate Highlights]