Politics After Literacy

BY
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Postliteracy won't replace reason with madness, but it might give us madness of a new and different type.

In 1931, the Soviet neuropsychologist Alexander Luria traveled to the foothills of the Alay Mountains, in the barren borderlands between Uzbekistan and Kirghizia, to find out how the locals thought. He was trying to prove the theory that "mental processes are social and historical in origin" — that the *way* we think, not just the content of our thoughts, is determined by the kind of society we live in.

The society he found in the Alays was very different from his own back in Moscow. In the dry hills, illiterate pastoralists kept cattle; in the green valleys that jeweled the hillsides, illiterate peasants grew cotton. For centuries, essentially no one who lived here had been able to read or write. But that was changing. When Luria arrived, the Soviet government was busy forcing herders and peasants into collective farms, where large numbers of rural people were being taught, for the first time, to read. He spent the next year among these people, bothering them with a series of annoying tests.

What Luria found was that just a few years of basic literacy education in an agricultural school had massive cognitive effects. In one of his early experiments, he showed people a group of geometrical figures: complete and incomplete circles and triangles, squares, and rectangles drawn with straight or dotted lines. He asked them to group the shapes together. Even if they didn't have any training in geometry, nearly half of the peasants who'd learned to read sorted the shapes geometrically: squares with other squares, circles with other circles. Meanwhile, none of the illiterate subjects considered the shapes geometrically at all; they related them to objects.

One subject, Khamid, a twenty-four-year-old woman from an isolated village, insisted that nothing could be grouped with an incomplete circle. “That should go by itself. That’s the moon.” When Luria tried to suggest that she group a square and a rectangle, she refused. “That’s a glass and that’s a drinking-bowl, they can’t be put together.” Other subjects described the shapes as tents, bracelets, mountains, irrigation ditches, and stars.

When sorting objects, collective farmworkers put a saw with a hammer, because they’re both tools, while peasants put a saw with a log. “The log has to be here too! If we’ll be left without firewood, we won’t be able to do anything.” Luria tried presenting them with syllogisms. “In the Far North, all bears are white. Novaya Zemlya is in the Far North. What color are bears there?” Every single person who had received any literacy education at all, even the ones Luria described as “barely literate,” could easily answer this question. But people who hadn’t been exposed to the written word simply refused.

They consistently explained that since they’d never been to Novaya Zemlya, they couldn’t say what kind of bears they had there. One middle-aged villager named Rustam said, “If there was someone who had a great deal of experience and had been everywhere, he would do well to answer the question.” Eventually, after repeated prodding, he said that while he’d never personally been to Siberia, “Tadzhibai-aka, who died last year, was there. He said that there were bears there, but he didn’t say what kind.” Others, like thirty-seven-year-old Abdulrakhim, grew angry. “I’ve never seen one and hence I can’t say. That’s my last word. Those who saw can tell, and those who didn’t see can’t say anything!”

The most upsetting of Luria’s puzzles was a mathematical problem. He told his subjects to suppose it took three hours to walk from their village to Vuadil, and six along the same road to Fergana. How long would it take to walk to Fergana from Vuadil? Again, every single one of the collective farmworkers solved the problem, but the illiterate villagers knew very well that these distances were inaccurate and refused to answer. Luria kept saying that it was just a scenario, but the villagers kept insisting that they couldn’t entertain a scenario that contradicted reality. “No!” one exploded. “How can I solve a problem if it isn’t so?”

Luria took pains to point out that these people weren’t remotely *stupid*. They were perfectly capable of thinking rationally and deductively, and they could make “excellent judgments about facts of direct concern to them.” But they lived in an incredibly conservative world, with its walls built tightly around direct sensory experience. Meanwhile, even a cursory exposure to writing produces an entirely different kind of thought. It lives in a spooky realm of ideal objects and useless categories, where you can speak confidently about invisible bears and measure distances even when they contradict reality. But what we think of as politics, and revolutionary politics in particular, seems to depend on this stuff.

The experience of poverty or oppression isn't enough; you need to be able to situate your own life in terms of something bigger and imagine an entirely separate way of living that doesn't currently exist. In 1919, launching the Soviet mass literacy program, Vladimir Lenin had declared that "without literacy, there can be no politics. There can only be rumors, gossip, and prejudice." Any transformative politics is, in some sense, the art of solving a problem even when it isn't so.

Like a lot of his contemporaries, Luria had a basically progressive model of psychological development: thinking based on abstractions is more advanced than thinking based on direct experience; as time moves on, the advanced way of doing things will obviously overtake the more backward. This is why he had to go to the farthest barren fringes of the old Russian Empire to find people who had never been exposed to writing. But the villages he visited hadn't always been a backwater. A thousand years ago, during the Islamic Golden Age, this land in the foothills of the Alay Mountains had been one of the great centers of world civilization. In his notes, he mentioned that he was walking in the homeland of scientists, astronomers, mathematicians, and poets like Ulugh Beg, al-Biruni, and ibn Sina. The illiterate herders and peasants were living in the ruins of a sophisticated literary culture that had, for the most part, vanished from the world.

Now the same thing seems to be happening to us.

The kids can't read. I don't mean that they're incapable of sounding out letters and forming them into words, although an increasing proportion of them can't do that either. In the United States, literacy peaked around 2014 and has been sliding since. Today 40 percent of fourth graders have "below basic" reading abilities, which means they struggle to extract any meaning from a written text. But even when students *can* perform the mechanics of reading, doing so no longer seems to make their minds start working in textual ways. It's an entirely different set of technologies producing their mental processes, and when they encounter the written word, they come to it from the outside.

This is not just happening to the impoverished or the disenfranchised. Professors at elite universities increasingly report that their students are no longer capable of reading an entire novel, or even a thirty-page extract; some of them have difficulty making it through a single sentence. Instead of reading and understanding anything, they're willing to pay $300,000 in tuition for the privilege of dumping an entire text into ChatGPT and submitting its response as an essay.

Probably the most alarming index of this was a study in which a group of English majors at two well-regarded public universities in Kansas were asked to read the first seven paragraphs of *Bleak House* by Charles Dickens and explain after each sentence what they thought was happening. Only 5 percent of the students could produce a "detailed, literal understanding" of the text. The rest were either patching together vague impressions from a bunch of half-understood phrases or could not comprehend anything at all.

One particular stumbling block was the novel's third sentence, which describes London in December: "As much mud in the streets as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill." The students found this figurative language impossible to parse; they could only read the sentence with the assumption that Dickens was describing the presence of an actual prehistoric reptile in Victorian London. One respondent glossed it like this: "It's probably some kind of an animal or something or another. So, yup, I think we've encountered some kind of an animal these characters have met in the street." The study assessed this person as a "competent" rather than a "problematic" reader, because they'd at least managed to form an idea of what the text meant, even if it was wrong.

Bleak House is not an elitist text — not so long ago, it was mass entertainment. When Dickens visited the United States in 1867, more than one hundred thousand people paid to see him speak. Delighted crowds mobbed him in the streets. Today a person studying English literature in college responds to his work in essentially the same way as an illiterate Uzbek peasant in the 1930s, incapable of thinking outside of immediate sensory reality.

The situation is not likely to get better. Every advance in communications technology creates a new generation of people progressively more divorced from the abstractions of writing. In the late twentieth century, television was bad enough to inspire jeremiads like Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. Now it seems almost benign; our supposed cultural elites keep congratulating themselves on their ability to watch an entire episode of a prestige drama without distractedly poking at their phones, as if *Mad Men* were a kind of penitential mental gruel. I'm old enough to remember the first time I ever went online, and a lot of my contemporaries seem to have the same story. They loved to read as children, but they mysteriously lost interest in books around the time that permanent broadband connections started appearing in every home.

Today's undergraduates, meanwhile, were born around the same time the iPhone was released; they were approximately twelve years old at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and fifteen when ChatGPT launched. They can't parse complex sentences, but at least they can identify words. What

about the cohort that doesn't have a gaping hole in their education at age twelve but at six? What happens when the babies currently being raised by AI-powered dolls grow up and it's their turn to govern the world?

This is not a society we're prepared for. Modern democratic politics assumes a literate population: people who are willing to think in abstract terms about the kind of world they want to live in. Without that, democracy risks becoming a kind of tribal head count or a struggle for state resources between competing patronage networks. This is what lies behind much of the liberal panic over the decline of literacy. For a growing chorus of people who write in the *Atlantic*, we're recoiling into pre-Enlightenment conditions of absolute domination. A population that can no longer think for itself will end up voluntarily ceding power to strongmen or demagogues. The end of literacy is the end of public reason. A postliterate world will be unreasonable and irrational, full of anger and madness and people eating each other in the streets.

Meanwhile, many Silicon Valley ideologues agree that this is a good thing. In their ideal future, the vast majority of people will be wireheads, hooked up to an AI-powered pleasure machine that will keep them in a state of permanent hedonic bliss — at which point democracy becomes impossible, the masses are evicted from history, and a natural elite emerges to rule the world. The reactionary ideologues assume they'll be part of that literate elite, not plugged in to the infinite porn machine. Given how many of their leading lights have already developed AI-induced psychosis, I wouldn't be so sure.

I don't think people are *wrong* to fear an undemocratic postliterate future. You can already see it taking shape, and it isn't pleasant. For a while, in an earlier phase of social media, it looked like everyone would be shaping their worldview from frantic six-second sound bites. What's actually happened is much worse. The most influential political figures among young people are now streamers: people like Nick Fuentes who talk extemporaneously about politics into a webcam, sometimes for sixteen hours a day. It doesn't matter if you notionally agree with one of these people; if you're accustomed to the written language, everything they say will sound aggressively stupid.

Streamers repeat themselves. They are incapable of saying anything once; they have to rhythmically fixate on the same phrase six or seven times before moving on. As Walter Ong points out in *Orality and Literacy*, this is normal in illiterate societies. Unlike writing, "the oral utterance has vanished as soon as it is uttered. . . . Redundancy, repetition of the just-said, keeps both speaker and hearer surely on the track." It doesn't seem to matter that on a stream the utterance doesn't truly vanish; you *can* go back and hear what was just said again. Clearly, no one does. Without text to structure it, we revert to mindless repetition, which is "in a profound sense more natural to thought and speech than is sparse

linearity." Relatedly, oral discourse tends to be low resolution. Like epic poets four thousand years ago, streamers rely on formulas. "Not the soldier, but the brave soldier; not the princess, but the beautiful princess; not the oak, but the sturdy oak." There's nothing in the world that isn't already known, that can't be made instantly legible by assimilating it to some stereotype. Postliterate culture is deeply incurious.

Still, as miserable as this stuff might be, it's strange that a lot of liberals tend to automatically associate literacy with careful, judicious, reasonable politics, and nonliteracy with arbitrariness and unreason. In fact, the written word is a kind of madness. It tears you out of your actual context and deposits you in a world of bodiless abstractions. Lewis Mumford called it the "general starvation of the mind," in which actual sensuous knowledge of the world is replaced by "mere literacy, the ability to read signs."

In late medieval Europe, the printing press and the beginnings of mass literacy didn't produce an age of sober reason but an enormous explosion in all forms of mysticism and esotericism: astrology, divination, witchcraft, Neoplatonist sects, and charismatic religious cults; some of them peaceful, some of them murderous. It's not hard to see why. These doctrines usually centered around the idea that material facts are just an echo of mental processes; they would have made a lot of sense to people who'd recently been traumatically ripped out of physical reality by the strange magic of the written word.

At the same time, as large numbers of people started to read the Bible for themselves for the first time, there was a wave of mass insurrections. These were revolutionary responses to the deeply unjust feudal and clerical system of the time, but they were also deranged. After radical Anabaptists seized Münster in 1534, they abolished money and socialized all private property. They also gave political power to whoever could most convincingly claim to have received a revelation from God. Eventually one of these people was declared king, at which point he started renaming the days of the week and other people's children, enforcing polygamy on pain of death, and trying to bring about the end of the world.

Even once the initial shock of expanded literacy faded, it could still produce bizarre and destructive ideologies. Modern nationalism would have been impossible without the dislocation of the written word. Your community is no longer made up of the people who surround you; it's an entirely virtual construct, consisting of people you've never met in your life but whose spoken language has been similarly homogenized by the mass production of printed texts.

When Alexander Luria traveled to Uzbekistan, something terrible was happening just over the border in the Kazakh Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. The Soviet authorities had decided to liberate the Kazakh people from feudalism by confiscating their cattle and forcing herders to join collective farms in lands entirely unsuitable for agriculture. As a result, in the three years between 1930 and 1933, around one-third of the Kazakh population died — some of starvation, some while trying to flee across the desert, some shot by border guards or the police. It was a disaster of a kind that could never have been produced by the backward peasants and herders Luria interviewed. They didn't have the necessary abstractions; they were too blinded by how things actually are. Only the highly advanced and literate people who had sent him there could have imagined such a hypothetical reality and tried to bring it into being.

One result of the Soviet Union's mass literacy campaign is that today Russians are seemingly the only truly literate people left. The vast majority of Russians read regularly, more than most people in the world. Reading rates are lower among young people, but not by much. Nearly everyone in the country is intimately familiar with the great works of Russian and world literature; they can all talk for hours, with sensitivity and insight, about the genius of Alexander Pushkin and Anton Chekhov. But somehow, political culture in Russia is even less sane and democratic than in the mentally enfeebled West. It's possible that great works of literature don't actually do anything political at all — that they don't make us better people or freer citizens, that their value exists in an entirely different world.

Postliteracy won't replace reason with madness, but it might give us madness of a new and different type. Marshall McLuhan imagined a peaceable "global village" in which electronic technology gently snuffs out all the constant ideological warfare of the Gutenberg age, integrating the entire world under "the spell and incantation of the tribe and the family." It hasn't quite worked out like that. He thought electronic media would be primarily tactile, which is understandable; he was writing in an age when a computer was made of punch cards and magnetic tape. He couldn't have known how aggressively audiovisual computers would end up being.

Our illiterate future is unlikely to be peaceful. But political and ideological conflict is already waning, being replaced with something much more intimate. In every developed country, the last few decades have seen a massive political polarization along gender lines. Young women are swinging hard to the left; young men are swinging to the right. A lot of people seem to think this is because we disagree more about politics than ever before, but it's the opposite. Politics is losing its content; "being on the Left" has come to mean "being a girl," and "being on the Right" is just another way of saying "being a boy." Teenage boys watch esoteric Nazi edits for the same reason they used to pull girls' hair: as a way of working through the ambivalence of the heterosexual relation. Right-wing economic policy is now framed as a way of punishing women, reducing their social status until they're willing to turn back the

clock on liberation. In some parts of the Left, anything can be justified as long as it seems to reduce the power of men. When we can no longer conceive of a political whole, this is what will be left: all struggles will be powered by outright sexual sadism.

Still, I think McLuhan was right that the postliterate age will have more in common with primitive society than it does with the industrial modernity that produced it. After writing, we will once again live in a world defined entirely by our direct sensory experience. Our direct sensory experience, though, won't be of the things that physically surround us but of the *images* streaming through our phones. It's likely that before very long, absolutely all of those images will be generated by AI. In the same way that a Tolstoyan peasant has a deep spiritual knowledge of the land, we will have a deep spiritual knowledge of Tung Tung Tung Sahur. The politics of the future will be cautious, conservative, pragmatic, and unadventurous, grounded in empirical experience instead of fanatical ideologies. We will no longer try to think beyond the things we can see. It's just that nothing we see will be real.

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