

Jan 8

2022: A Glance at Past Writing Projects



In 2022, I had wanted to get back into writing in earnest, and while I haven't had much success on that front, I wish now to take stock of the writing projects I had pursued to varying degrees over the past year. In part, I'm trying to disabuse myself of the thought that I've written nothing and therefore have failed to write anything at all, but I'm also trying to process what I had been doing over the past year so that this year can be different. I'm not sure I've reached any conclusions about my writing yet, but I thought I'd share the projects I sorta worked on in 2022.

Reflections on Cats

I had wanted to write a little article about cats and humanity because I was intrigued by a suggestion in Abigail Tucker's *The Lion in the Living Room* about human carnivory having been born in the lair of a saber-tooth. Here's something I scribbled about that: "How unlike us cats are—yet humanity itself may have been born in the shadow of a saber-tooth. Tucker describes in her book the possibility that our erstwhile vegetarian ancestors first acquired a taste for meat by scavenging the leftover remains of felled animals abandoned by fearsome cats like the saber-tooths, whose "big teeth were good for killing but not necessarily for chewing." This newfound taste for meat, in turn, appears to have profoundly changed the human animal who acquired it, transforming even the anatomy and physiology of the species. As Tuck explains, while vegetarian primates need to have energy-intensive intestines to digest copious amounts of tough plant matter, "an animal with steady access to easy-to-digest meat may have the evolutionary leeway to shrink its guts and spend that digestive energy on something niftier: an enormous brain."

I think I dropped the project for a few reasons. First, my research on cats had taken me in weird directions, leading me for instance to Derrida's musings about being seen naked by a cat in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. And second, another, more urgent (and time-sensitive) project grabbed hold of my attention.

Survey Says: Militarism!

I had written up this article in the early days of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. I won't discuss the article too much because I eventually published it here as a [pensée](#), but I was/am very concerned about the war trumpets being sounded by the American media, and I found myself fascinated by a poll that claimed to find that a majority of Americans believed that no war would have broken out were Donald Trump still the President of the United States. Digging further into the poll suggested to me that the poll was not a representation of American public opinion at all, but propaganda intended to manufacture a consensus in favor of war and militarism.

Money quote: "This Harvard CAPS-Harris Poll, as it concerns us here, is no reflection of public opinion but an instrument of American militarism, one that works to construct out of survey responses to wildly distortive questions an ideological arsenal with which to weaponize the public sphere. Our media organs, so often doubling as the clarions of American might, have now dutifully laundered this arsenal of ideological weaponry into circulation and proffered it to us as the vox populi, thus completing the impression that the American people want war and impressing that impression upon the public so that it may learn its own thoughts and wishes."

I had pitched the article to a couple outlets but did not get any responses from them, which was a little demoralizing for me because I believed in the piece (and still do) and felt I had written something timely, interesting, and important. But it wasn't long before I would find myself whisked up in another writing project.

Who Was Callicles?

One of the most memorable Socratic dialogues I had read in college was the *Gorgias*, and the most memorable character from the *Gorgias* is Callicles. But just who was he? If such a character had really existed, it is hard to believe that such a man would not have made his presence known in the historical record, but there is scant evidence for his existence. Yet Plato was not in the habit of inventing interlocutors either, and the dialogue includes biographical details about Callicles that would be unnecessary if Callicles were a wholesale invention. I wanted to write an article looking into what could be sensibly said about the historical Callicles.

I eventually burnt out of this project, in part because I felt like I was getting lost in the weeds of an esoteric scholarly debate. Indeed, one scholar considered the matter of Callicles's historicity "a vexed question" that is at bottom "undecidable," and I suspect he may be right about that.

A Critique of Relationship Anarchism

I had read an [article](#) about a then-recently published paper on relationship anarchism (or RA for short) by Moen and Sørlie. The gist of RA is that it opposes as oppressive any norms, rules, or whatever that encourage partners in a relationship to police their partners' outside relationships with third parties; it rejects in one fell swoop conventional monogamy and the notion of exclusive poly relationships (or polyfidelity). The article discussed a thought experiment by Moen and Sørlie that I found interesting but unpersuasive, so I wanted to go to the [source](#) and see what thoughts I had about it. I intended to write an article critiquing RA on the grounds that the norms of RA can be just as oppressive as the conventional norms they seek to replace. RA, in my view, can lead to a kind of anti-policing policing of relationships, an oppressive kind of self-regulation of one's own emotions, and the denigration of the very possibility of special relationships that might make special claims on individuals in them.

I eventually burnt out on this project as well. I'm not entirely sure why, maybe I felt like I was once again getting lost in the weeds of esoteric philosophy, or perhaps I felt (rightly or wrongly) that it was a waste of time critiquing an obscure philosophical position which few know about and fewer still have tried to put into practice.

Miscellaneous Would-Be Pensées or Articles

I had a few ideas for pensées or articles over the summer; topics included the Japanese concept of ikigai, the January 6th committee hearings, the SCOTUS ruling in *Bruen*, and an article making a moral case for mischief. But my heart wasn't really into writing any of these pieces. I think I was trying to write because I felt an obligation to be writing, rather than because I actually wanted to write.

A Review of David Nibert's *Animal Oppression and Human Violence*

In the fall, I had started reading a lot about animals in war, and my research led me to Nibert's *Animal Oppression and Human Violence*, a kind of history-in-broad-strokes account of human civilization à la *Guns, Germs, and Steel* for those whose biggest beef with that book is its speciesism. *Animal Oppression and Human Violence* is a difficult book to take seriously, not least because of Nibert's habit of italicizing words as problematic as *beef* in the book (language apparently being the universal where Nibert must make into a vegan). This is something of a shame in my view, though, because I actually found the historical account the book provides thought-provoking. The book, at least in my interpretation of it, gives a rather strikingly tragic account of human civilization (one foretelling civilization's impending downfall), and unfortunately it has the misfortune of being told by a modern-day Cassandra, whose incredible moralism would keep anyone from taking the historical narrative seriously.

I eventually moved away from this project because my heart was in another, tangentially related project.

Horsepower

I'm still working on this project so I don't want to give too much of it away, but I am wanting to write an article about the war horse in human history. The very possibility of the war horse is perplexing, since the horse is commonly understood to be a prey animal. We humans like to credit ourselves for having reversed the nature of the horse from a creature inclined to run away from danger to one that gallantly rides into battle. By the story of domestication we tell ourselves, we thereby dispossess the horse of any sense of agency or power. But, I want to argue, if anything, the horse has left its hoofprints all over what we in our hubris call human history; were it not for the horse, human civilization could not have taken the directions it has taken, etc. One way of putting the point, perhaps, is that if we are to understand how the horse has shaped our shared history, the horseman needs to be thrown off his saddle. (I'm reminded here of Foucault's suggestion that to understand power one must decapitate the king).

I had set this project aside during the holidays, but I'm hoping to return to it soon.

Election Deniers

One last article I toyed with writing for a little bit concerned a spate of constitutional amendments (like one that passed last November in Ohio) restricting the franchise to citizens, effectively barring local governments from allowing noncitizens from voting in local elections. I find the overwhelming success of these amendments troubling because they speak to a widespread, bipartisan consensus view indulging in xenophobia and anti-immigrant racism. But while this project has led to some interesting research findings (apparently noncitizens can vote in elections in New Zealand, for example), I'm not sure my heart is fully into this project either.

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