

Chapter 17. —*How To Barbell The Soccer Mom*

*Where is the next streetfight? How to decommoicize, detouristify
— Faneur as options*

THE ECOLOGICAL AND THE LUDIC

Let us continue with teleology —in private life and individual education. ^{cxiv}

There are two domain, the “ludic” (from the Latin name for games, i.e., set up like a game, with its rules supplied in advance in an explicit way) and the ecological, where we don’t know the rules and cannot isolate variables, as in real life. Seeing the non-transferability of skills from one domain to the other led me to skepticism in general about whatever skills are acquired in a classroom, anything in a non-ecological way, as compared to street-fights and real-life situations.

It is not well advertized that abilities in chess do not lead to better reasoning outside the chessboard —even those who play blind chess games with an entire cohort can’t remember things outside the board better than a regular person. We accept the domain-specificity of games, the fact that they do not train you for life. But we find it hard to apply it to technical skills acquired in schools, that is, the crucial fact that what is picked up in the classroom *stays* in the classroom. Worse even, the classroom can bring some detectable harm: there are results from Laura Martignon showing that children’s ability to think degrades right after they are taught arithmetic. When you ask children how many intervals there are between fifteen poles, those who don’t know arithmetic figure out that there are fourteen of them. Those who studied arithmetic get confused and often make the mistake that there are fifteen.

THE TOURISTIFICATION OF THE SOCCER MOM

The biologist and intellectual E.O. Wilson was once asked what represented the most hindrance to the development of children; his answer was the soccer mom. He did not use the notion of Procrustean bed, but outlined it perfectly. His argument is that they repress children's natural biophilia, the love of living things. But the problem is more general; soccer moms try to eliminate the trial-and-error, the antifragility from children's lives, move them away from the ecological, and transform them into nerds working on pre-existing (soccer-mum compatible) maps of reality. Good students, but nerds, that is like computers except that slower than the machines. Further, they are now totally untrained to handle ambiguity. As a child of civil war, I disbelieve in structured learning —actually I believe that one can be an intellectual without being a nerd, provided one has a private library instead of a classroom, and spend time as aimless (but rational) “flâneur” benefiting from what randomness can give us inside and outside the library. We need randomness, mess, adventures, uncertainty, self-discovery, near-traumatic episodes, all these things that make life worth living, compared to the structured, fake, and ineffective life of an empty-suit CEO with a preset schedule and an alarm clock. Even their leisure is subjected to a clock, squash between four and five, as their life is sandwiched between appointments. It is as if the mission of modernity was to squeeze every drop of variability and randomness out of life —with (as we saw in Chapter 5) the ironic result of making the world a lot more unpredictable, as if the Goddesses of chance wanted to have the last word.

Only the autodidacts are free. And not just in school matters —those who decommo-ditize, detouristify their lives. Sports try to put randomness in a box like the ones sold in aisle six next to canned tuna —a form of alienation, like many modern things.

If you want to understand how vapid the current modernistic arguments (and understand your existential priorities) consider the difference between lions in the wild and those in captivity. Lions in captivity live longer; they are technically richer, and they are guaranteed job security for life, if these are the criteria you are focusing on...

As usual, an ancient, here Seneca, detected the problem (and the difference) with his saying “We do not study for life, but only for the lecture room” , *non vitae, sed scolae discimus*, which to my great horror has been corrupted and self-servingly changed to fit the motto of many colleges in the United States, with *non scolae, sed vitae discimus* as their motto meaning that “We study [here] for life, not for the lecture hall”.

To summarize this subsection, there is in us a profound ecological understanding of antifragility, expressed in the way we naturally do things, and the rest of the book will show how what we call organized “learning” makes us unlearn it —and fragilizes us. Most of the tension in this book will be when the one who fragilizes (say the policy maker) invokes rationality.

AN ANTIFRAGILE (BARBELL) EDUCATION

Something has cured me of the effect of education, and made me very skeptical of the very notion of standardized learning.

For I am a pure autodidact, in spite of degrees.

My father was known in Lebanon as the “Intelligent Student Student Intelligent”, after a play on words as intelligent student (or scholar) meant “Taleb Nagib” and his name was Nagib Taleb, as the newspaper published his name for having the highest grade in the Lebanese baccalaureate, the high school exit exam. He was a sort of national valedictorian and the national newspaper announced his passing in 2002 with a front page headline “The Intelligent Student Student Intelligent is No Longer”. His school education was harrying though, as he had attended the elite Jesuit school. The Jesuits had for missions to produce mandarins who run the place, by filtering and filtering students after every year, and they were successful beyond their aim, as besides having one of the highest success rate in the world in the French baccalaureate (in spite of the war) —one single class for those born around 1948, produced Carlos Ghosn current chairman of Renault, the writer Amin Maalouf who although Lebanese became member of the French Academy (one of the “fifty immortals), the musician Gabriel Yared, and another collection of businessmen in Europe. They also deprived pupils of free time, with a harrying schedule and many gave up voluntarily. So one can surmise that having a father as national valedictorian would definitely provide me with a cure against school, which it did. And my father himself did not seem to overvalue school education, since, instead, he did not put me in the Jesuit school to spare me what he went through. But this clearly left me to seek ego fulfillment elsewhere.

So observing my father made me realize what being a valedictorian meant, what being an *Intelligent Student* meant. First, he had a systematic way of viewing things, so I immediately realized, when I was about ten, that school grades weren’t as good outside school as they carried some side effect with them. They had to correspond to a sacrifice, an intellectual sacrifice of sorts. Actually my father kept hinting to me the problem of getting good grades himself: the person who was at the exact bottom of his class (and ironically, the father of a classmate at Wharton) turned out to be a self-made

merchant by far the most successful person in his class (he had a huge yacht with his initials prominently displayed on it); another one made a killing buying wood in Africa, retired before forty, then became an erudite (mostly Mediterranean history) and a politician.

~~I was also foolishly snobbish. There was also some kind of social signaling: the upper class had culture, the nouveau one needed school and technical skills. So this made me focus on what an intelligent but antistudent was going to be: an autodidact —or a person or knowledge compared to the students called “swallowers” in Lebanese dialect, those who “swallow school material” with their knowledge derived from the curriculum. The edge, I realized, isn’t in the package of what was on the official program of the baccalaureate, which everyone knew with small variations multiplying into large discrepancies in grades, but exactly what lied outside of it.~~

Again, I wasn’t an exact autodidact, since I got degrees, rather a barbell autodidact as I studied the exact minimum necessary to pass any exam, overshooting accidentally once in a while, and only getting in trouble in few times by undershooting. But I read voraciously, wholesale, initially in the humanities, later in mathematics and science, and now in history —outside a curriculum. I figured out that whatever I selected myself I could read with more depth —there was a match to my curiosity. And I could take advantage of what people later pathologized as ADHD by using stimulation as a main driver. The minute I was bored with a book I moved to another one, instead of giving up on reading altogether —when you are limited to the school material and you get bored, you have a tendency to give up and do nothing out of discouragement. The trick is to be tired from a book, not the act of reading. So the volume of pages absorbed could grow faster and faster than otherwise. And you find gold, so to speak, effortlessly, just like rationally undirected trial-and-error based research.

It is exactly like rational options, trial and error, not getting stuck, bifurcating when necessary but keeping a sense of broad freedom. Trial and error is freedom.

(I confess I still use that method at the time of writing.)

My parents had an account with the large bookstore in Beirut and I would pick up books and not pay for them, in what seemed to me unlimited amounts. There was such a difference between the shelves of the library and the narrow school material; so I realized that school was a plot designed to deprive people of erudition by squeezing their knowledge into a narrow set of authors. So, when in high school, around the age of thirteen, I started keeping a log of the number of hours I read, shooting for sixty hours a week, a practice I’ve kept for a long time. So read the likes of Dostoyevsky,

Turgenev, Chekhov, bishop Bossuet, Stendhal, Dante, Proust, Borges, Calvino, Schultz, Zweig (didn't like), Henry Miller, Mac Brod, Kafka, Ionesco, the surrealists, Faulkner, Malraux (along with other wild adventurers such as Conrad and Melville, my first book I read in English was Moby Dick) and similar authors in literature, and Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Marx, Jaspers, Husserl, Levi-Strauss, Levinas, Scholem, Benjamin, and similar ones in philosophy because they had the golden status of not being on the school program and managed to read *nothing* that was prescribed by school so to this day I haven't read Racine, Moliere, Descartes, Anatole France, Milton, Romain Roland or other (then) standard ones and don't believe I ever will —actually many fell into oblivion as European school programs have fads. One summer I decided to read the twenty novels by Emile Zola in twenty days, one a day, and managed to do so at great expense. Perhaps joining a secret underground Trotskyist cell motivated me into Marxist studies, and picked up the most about Hegel indirectly, mostly through Alexandre Kojève.

When I decided to come to the United States, I repeated, at the age of nineteen, the marathon exercise by making a list of two hundred books in English (with authors ranging from Trollope to Burke, MacCauley and Gibbon, with Anais Nin and other then fashionable authors *de scandale*), not showing up to class, and keeping the sixty hours discipline.

In school, I had figured out that when one could write essays in French or Arabic (later, English) with a rich, literary but precise vocabulary (though not inadequate to the topic at hand), what one writes about becomes secondary and the examiners get a hint about one's style from that. And my father gave me a complete break after I got published as a teenager in the local paper —just “don't flunk” was his condition. It was a barbell —play it safe at school and read on your own, have *zero* expectation from school. Later, after I was jailed for assaulting a policeman in a student riot, he acted scared of me and let me do whatever I wanted. When I reached the “f*** you money stage” in my twenties, at the time when it was much, much rarer than today, in spite of a war raging in the home country, he took credit for it by attributing it to the breadth of the education that he allowed me to have and how it differentiated me from others like him.

Later when, at Wharton, I discovered that I wanted to specialize in a profession linked to probability and rare events (I will disclose it later), having a probability and randomness obsession forming in my mind. I also smelled some flaws with statistical stuff that the professor could not explain, brushing them away. At some point I realized that there was a fraud somewhere, that “six sigma” events (measures of rare events) were miscomputed and we had no basis for their computation but I could not

articulate it clearly, and was getting humiliated by people who started smoking me with complicated math. So I went to the bookstore and ordered (there was no web at the time) almost every book with “probability” or “stochastic” in its title. I started reading them in bed, jumping from one to the other when stuck with something I did not get immediately or felt ever so slightly bored. And I kept ordering those books. It was effortless. That was my best investment as it turned out to be the topic I know the best. For five years later I was set for life and now I am making a research career out of probability.

One day, in the 1980s, I had dinner with a famous speculator, a hugely successful man. He muttered the hyperbole that hit home: “much what other people know isn’t worth knowing”.

So, to this day I still have the instinct that the treasure, what one needs to know for a profession is necessarily what lies outside the corpus. But there is something central in following one’s one direction in the selection of readings: what I was given to study in school I have forgotten; what I decided to read on my own, I still remember.