

DISPUTATION CLXXXVI

September 13, 2018

Dear Peucinians,

A big shoutout to the diehard fans who are staying up for the mid-night release (not to be confused with a *midnight* release) of the weekly Peucinian email. To the rest of you, good morning. If you're confused about what the heck this email is: (1) thanks for signing up for Peucinian at the activities fair, we're psyched to have you join us; and (2) read on!

Thanks again to everyone for being so cool about the craziness with the storm last week. If you missed our disputation because of that, I'm sorry, and I hope to see you this week.

Last week we discussed whether we should strive for a life of leisure, ultimately deciding in the negative. This week we face a more provocative, incensing proposition, one that any citizen of any country immediately has an opinion on. With primaries and midterm elections on the horizon, we cannot leave this question for the next class or for office hours: we must confront it now.

RESOLVED: THE WELL-INFORMED SHOULD HAVE A GREATER VOICE IN GOVERNMENT

Affirmative: Elie Wiesel '21

Negative: Olympe de Gouges '21

Why is it that in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, most of you first-years couldn't vote, but people who (a) think the Earth is flat, (b) can't point out Russia on a map, or (c) think the moon landing was faked all could? Is this right? Why do we have such laws—are young people undeserving of representation in government? Are young people unable to make intelligent choices at the ballot box? What the hell even is an “intelligent choice” at the ballot box?

While maybe we shouldn't exclude some minors, on what basis do we allow the uninformed and delusional to vote? There are millions of citizens whose comprehension of politics, international affairs, domestic issues, the Constitution, etc., is so abysmal that no one in their right mind would let them anywhere near a government office. Then why do they get a say, or at least as much of a say as the well-informed? If we want policy-makers with intelligent policies, voting must be restricted to the well-informed. After all, voting isn't just a way to kill time on a Tuesday—it's an incredibly powerful political institution, one that allows us to wield power over other people and society itself. We require licenses to drive a car ([but not a sandwich](#)), SCUBA dive, practice medicine, and give massages. Why is voting different? If we limited voting powers to the well-informed, citizens would have an incentive to educate themselves about current events, history, and civics—and the voting population would make decisions on accurate information. Government is not a low-stakes game; every decision has consequences, and it will be to everyone's benefit for the well-informed to have a greater say.

Is America's history of racial disenfranchisement popping into anyone's head? Restricting the right to vote, for any reason, has an indisputable nexus to taking representation away from people of color, women, and the poor. Why should we have any confidence that enlightened, 2018 “informed citizens” tests would be any different from the literacy tests of the Jim Crow American South? The right to vote would inevitably be another privilege for the powerful and yet another political institution dividing our nation's people. Furthermore, there isn't necessarily good reason to think that “experts” are better at decision-making than large

groups of normal people. Recent research has shown that “swarms” of people using their intuitions can make far more accurate predictions than experts about [horse racing and the Oscars](#); why not for politics? The 5th century Athenians understood that the *demos*, the body of people (i.e., land-owning men), possessed a deep intuitive wisdom as a group that individuals lacked. Might the same be true today of America’s diverse population?

Peucinians, Wiesel proposes a fascinating, tantalizing, but possibly dangerous idea. We owe it to ourselves and our political moment to ask: what will make our democracy healthier? Is democracy something we want? Should we build a political system out of respect for *rights* or should we orient it to produce *good outcomes*? Join us this Thursday to discuss these questions and more—any and all are welcome.

Thursday, September 13th

7:45 PM

Third Floor of Massachusetts Hall

Semi-formal attire encouraged (see postscript 1)

PLSH,
Jean-Jacques Rousseau
President, Peucinian Society

POSTSCRIPT (1)

Why do we dress up?

Although our dress code can seem uninviting at first glance, we use it as a way to distinguish our discussions from the rest of the week’s activities. This marks disputations as something special and worthy of our attention. In choosing to dress ourselves differently, we convey respect for the event and for each other, much in the same way one would for a *capella* or mock trial. If you choose to attend a disputation, feel free to dress in a way that is special and comfortable for you.

POSTSCRIPT (2)

I’d like to give a hearty congratulations to Susan Sontag ’21 for winning our special election last week. She will serve as Impresario for the remainder of the 2018-2019 academic year.

A heartfelt goodbye to Girolamo Savonarola (Adrianna Siwady ’21) is in order. She has transferred from Bowdoin to ESADE Law School in Barcelona, Spain. We already miss her greatly and wish her all the best.

A temporary farewell to the Peucinians abroad this semester: Ilana Olin ’21 (Argentina), Mark Felt ’20 (Budapest), and Saul Bellow ’20 (Athens). Have fun!