Twitter Thread by Eve Fairbanks



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1/36 A thread on Alana Newhouse's Tablet essay. I'm sorry to criticize an essay framed around a writer's ill child.

But my dream for the 2020s is to read big, serious essays whose premises aren't "everything is broken," & that don't say "how to fix

2/36 The writer rightly laments the "flattening" of thought to appeal to algorithms.

But the essay itself commits that sin. We can't observe *something*--problems in medicine--without expanding it to *everything*; & we can't observe *anything* without saying we can "fix it."

3/36 Two weeks ago, I saw a magazine at a cash register: THIS CHANGES EVERYTHING, its cover said, quoting Naomi Klein.

I looked inside.

The cover was an ad, and the "thing" that changed everything turned out to be a Dolce & Gabbana-branded Smeg toaster.

4/36: Obviously, we--businesspeople, writers, editors, academics--feel we can't claims unless it's about "everything"--to be big enough, bold enough, attention-grabbing enough.

This is a really bad problem, though, not just the minor price of admission to public life.

5/36: Trump talked up this philosophy--hyperbole. "The key to the way I promote is bravado," he said in the '80s. "I play to fantasies"--even dark fantasies. "A little hyperbole never hurts."

I say "philosophy, not "tactic," b/c if we use it enough, it becomes a mindset.

6/36: The hyperbolic philosophy collapses history. It suggests we're living, literally, at the worst time in civilization and produces "ideas" like "America has the worst laws."

Is it different to claim "everything is broken" than it is to say "the world fell apart under Obama"?

7/36: This hyperbolic apocalypticism—the claim *now* is a fulcrum of history—isn't Newhouse's. So much writing is so hyperbolic--The Atlantic runs "The Pandemic Is Ruining Your Body" (yours!); TNR, "Simply Talking About the Pandemic the Right Way Can Rebuild American Democracy."

8/36: We do damage through this hyperbolic writing unless it's very careful. We deepen our readers' sense the only worthy lives are those that grandiosely “rebuild American democracy" or prevent total "ruination" of their bodies. We sow paranoia and a sense of helplessness.

9/36: On to the essay. Newhouse insists it's NOT hyperbolic and that "anyone" who doesn’t believe “everything is broken” in America is "privileged." These are ppl who “enjoy college,” get any job and spouse they want, and “float through one millennial pink space after another.”

10/36: But I've actually found some of the world's least privileged people have the greatest understanding that very few human beings entirely escape suffering.

This is a privileged fantasy.

11/36: More than that, some of the most privileged Americans are the ones who believe "everything is broken" most strongly In part b/c those who truly have to depend on “farming” or “cities”—things she says are “broken”—just can’t afford to believe they’re irreparably broken.

12/36: Sometimes, “everything is broken” can be the statement of a person who still believes they have the means to escape most things.

13/36: I live in S. Africa, and after the Capitol riot, I couldn’t stop weeping. “The USA has been trashed,” I said.

Some SA friends gave me side-eye. They would move to the US.

"They don't look like they're suffering like my family is suffering," one said bluntly.

14/36: Things were better once, Newhouse says. After 1946, cultural life was produced by "institutions—universities, newspapers—that reflected diversity … a jazz band of disparate elements that together produced something legible, clear, and at times even beautiful."

15/36: Is she kidding? Which institution was like this? Which American family’s experience was this?

16/36: Here was my family’s postwar America: my Dad—a southerner—had to leave university due to relentless bullying by northerners; my grandfather, a physicist, couldn’t get a good job because he was a Jew; and my mother dropped out of college due to lack of support as a woman.

17/36: Then she says neoliberalism—union-busting and offshoring jobs ruined this utopia, but also Communism, via a modernist “flattening” aesthetic. Interesting observations.

But then she backtracks--or forward-tracks and traces the bad things to the Obama administration.

18/36: Bad things happened when we started to have to use the term "BIPOC," when there became "numerous genders," when it became "normal" to have Tinder hookups, and when Obama could "swiftly overturn" newspapers' holy foreign-policy consensus and call Iran "trustworthy."

19/36: Are we so sure newspaper reporters and academia were so trustworthy prior to a few years ago?

Institutions on which we could depend?

I remember academia touting Communism for seven decades, and the NYT stating in 1954 that Ho Chi Minh was "over."

20/36: "Instead of reflecting diversity," recently "institutions have been repurposed as instruments to instill the narrow and rigid agenda of one cohort of people."

Honestly, this sounds like a description of the academy and the NYT 1946-2000 to me.

21/36: There are a lot of other fantasies embedded in this article—like that an "Ivy League student parroting intersectional gospel" can easily get "an entry-level job at a Washington think tank or [magazine]."

The US economic system retreats to being the elephant in the room.

22/36: And we end up with the claim that that the main problems we face are psychosocial or ideological. People will "see their careers crushed … for daring to stick a toe over the ever multiplying maze of [left-wing ideological] red lines."

23/36: The underlying assumption is that people who currently "toe lines" on race, etc are smothering their souls to be conformist. It echoes '60s critiques of a dominant culture--that housewives were "dead inside," etc. But it's as impoverished a critique of now as that one was.

24/36: Any concrete examples of contemporary US culture tend to cut against her sweeping claims. She suggests "firing squads" succeed in annihilating things like Gone with the Wind. But "when HBO removed Gone with the Wind, it became the #1 bestselling movie on Amazon."

25/36: The problem, Newhouse clarified, is not that views like Gone with the Wind is bad or that people should be called by their pronouns are widespread, but that they are "culturally mandated."

Mandated by whom? Amazon is no less of a "cultural vehicle" than HBO.

26/36: When we get to "how to fix" "everything" being broken, it's a demoralizing word salad. "Speed, accessibility, portability" but not "frictionlessness and the allergy to excellence. We should hunt for complexity; [do] tight circles and adventure and creative waste."

27/36: "Build new things," she tells us. "Create great art! Do things that generate love and attention from three people you actually know instead of hundreds you don't. ... Start a publishing house that puts out books that anger, surprise and delight."

28/36: Okay--this might seem sour. But the rest of the essay lays out a strong argument that the conditions for doing these things have already vanished, *particularly* economically.

There's a reason economics is avoided after halfway--investigating it would upend the advice.

29/36: There are so many straw men and vagaries in the article, first, because of its unwillingness to look squarely at the economic structure that creates the conditions Newhouse laments.

30/36: It's not impossible to do this--John Gray in the UK writes similar essays, but with a clear eye to money's warping influence--but Americans don't like to do it.

31/36: More than that, though, there are so many straw men and wooly claims because she's promised to write about "everything."

Unless you're really careful and do an exceptional job, you have to erect a false world to describe "everything" about it in a few thousand words.

32/36: I don't blame Newhouse. This is so American. I just got an email ad from some coach named Mandy Morris promising: "Imagine this ... what normally takes people decades ... you can do in days! Whether its healing or transformation ... OR attracting abundance and love ..."

33/36: Imagine this. What normally takes historians decades ... we can do in days! What normally takes philosophers whole books ... we can do in an article.

34/36:
It's the known way to cut through noise. Most of my editors now title my articles "The Key to X" or "Everything Is Y." The more hyperbolic, alarmist, or sweeping magazine articles get, the better they do, financially--and they're struggling.

35/36: We're all part of this system of hyperbole-flogging. It's no one person's fault.

But I've seen this essay already touted as 2021 awards material.

It's not.

36/36: The more we traffic in these kinds of essays, the more helpless our readership will feel--even if we use pretty words; even if our ending sections appear to uplift.