

Book reviews

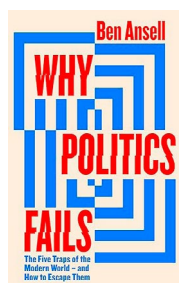
Ben Ansell · 2023

Why Politics Fails: The Five Traps of the Modern World – and How to Escape Them.

New York, NY: Viking

Reviewer **Bo Li**

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Casting a discerning eye on the intricate landscape of politics, Ben Ansell of Oxford University, in his new book *Why Politics Fails*, undertakes a pro-

found exploration of the formidable challenges and pitfalls that impede the realization of collective objectives. He dissects the traps of democracy, equality, solidarity, security, and prosperity, unveiling how self-interest often undermines these very goals. By understanding these traps, the book offers valuable insights on how to navigate and overcome them, ultimately making politics more effective in addressing the complex problems of our world.

The book is divided into five parts, each corresponding to a collective goal. It maintains a consis-

tent structure throughout, starting with a pivotal historical event, followed by the definition of the goal, an exploration of the associated trap, and concluding with strategies for escaping these traps.

In the first section, “Democracy,” Ansell uses the Brexit referendum of 2016 as a prime example to illustrate the democracy trap. After the majority voted to leave the EU, the complex task of implementing Brexit emerged. Various options and trade-offs, such as remaining part of the EU’s single market or customs union and addressing the Irish border issue, had to be considered. However, attempts to pass a Brexit bill in Parliament faced repeated defeats, reflecting the diverse interpretations of what Brexit should entail among different factions. This example highlights the challenge of translating the “will of the people” into practical policy decisions when there’s no clear majority preference among Members of Parliament (MPs). Even when MPs were asked to approve or disapprove of different Brexit options, no single option garnered a majority. This illustrates the intricacies and complexities of democracy in practice. To escape the democracy trap, Ansell suggests a multi-pronged approach. It involves the redesign of political institutions, enhancing democracy through increased participation, fostering norms of active listening and deliberation, and maintaining the stability of these institutions.

In the second section, “Equality,” the book opens with a compelling example: Jeff Bezos’s journey into space. This spotlight on Bezos’s immense wealth serves to underscore the stark disparity between his financial standing and the working conditions of Amazon employees. Ansell delves further into the multifaceted understanding of equality, emphasizing the variations among different ideologies and thinkers. Free market proponents and libertarians un-

derscore the importance of equal rights, particularly in property ownership and market transactions. However, they do not necessarily advocate for the equal distribution of resources based on factors like effort, need, or merit. In contrast, socialist thinkers, particularly in the Marxist tradition, argue for equal access to the means of production and prioritize equal outcomes over equal opportunities. The crux of this section revolves around what Ansell calls the “equality trap.” It describes the dilemma that arises when striving to achieve both equal rights and equal outcomes in society. The book posits that achieving complete economic equality might necessitate curtailing economic rights, potentially infringing on individual freedoms. Conversely, prioritizing economic freedom can lead to a society dominated by the wealthy, with limited avenues for economic redistribution. Ansell aptly dubs this conundrum a “toothpaste problem” – if we push down on inequality in one part of the tube, it tends to accumulate elsewhere. To escape the clutches of the equality trap, the book advocates for a balanced approach that considers both economic rights and outcomes. This entails addressing gender inequalities, tackling inequities within households, implementing progressive taxation policies, and making strategic investments in education and regulation.

In the third section, “Solidarity,” the book kicks off with a pertinent example: the Affordable Care Act (ACA), more commonly known as Obamacare. The ACA was a significant attempt to address the pressing issues of soaring healthcare costs and the lack of coverage for a substantial portion of the population. However, its implementation encountered significant opposition and stirred controversy. The “solidarity trap” discussed in this section is influenced

by various factors. These include the uncertainty surrounding the future, the boundaries of solidarity limited by factors such as ethnicity, religion, language, or nationality, a lack of knowledge about our fellow citizens, and the potential for individuals to exploit policies aimed at fostering solidarity for personal gain. For instance, it's often challenging for individuals to prioritize solidarity when they are currently in a comfortable position, not considering the possibility of needing support in the future. This uncertainty hampers people from fully embracing self-insurance and effectively managing their financial resources over their lifetime. The book posits that we tend to care about solidarity only when we find ourselves in need, thus encapsulating the essence of the "Solidarity Trap." So, how can we escape this trap? The author proposes a set of actionable strategies to navigate it successfully. These include bridging divisions and promoting inclusivity to cultivate a sense of shared responsibility, advocating for civic nationalism to strengthen the bonds of solidarity, enhancing transparency and visibility to engender trust, addressing credit constraints, and tackling ethnic tensions and inequalities.

In the fourth section, "Security," the book delves into the multifaceted concept of security, spanning three levels: personal security, national security, and international security. The author employs the example of a strict lockdown in Rome in 2020, demonstrating the inherent conflict between personal freedom and public health, as well as the conflict between the roles played by government enforcement and individual responsibility. Security refers to the state of being protected from harm, danger, or threats. The security trap highlights a dilemma: if you lean too heavily toward enforcing strict security and order, you run the risk of creating

a system where those in power can become oppressive and authoritarian because they might overstep boundaries and infringe on individual freedoms. Escaping the security trap therefore requires striking a delicate balance where security is ensured without sacrificing personal liberties. The author puts forth several strategies, including ongoing adjustments and improvements to institutions, as well as the creation of oversight mechanisms to prevent the misuse of power and to ensure accountability among those in positions of authority.

The final section presents the "Prosperity Trap": the idea that what appears to make us richer in the short term often makes us poorer in the long run. The author begins with the Paris Agreement on Climate Change in 2015 — an ambitious effort to combat global climate change by reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Involving more than 190 countries, including major emitters like the United States, China, India, and Russia, the Paris Agreement marked a significant step forward in global cooperation to address climate change. Nevertheless, its effectiveness and implementation have been the subject of persistent debate and challenges, such as insufficient monitoring and enforcement, divergent interests among countries, and domestic political changes. The Paris Agreement example shows the prosperity trap emerges from the tension between individual/country interests and collective goals, coupled with the temptation to prioritize immediate gains over sustainable, long-term growth. Intriguingly, the author shows that the nearsighted decisions made by nations or individuals can be very rational. For instance, politicians often prioritize short-term gains, even if they are harmful in the long run. They have plenty of incentive to do so since statistics tell them they will get more votes when the

economy grows. To break free from this trap, the author offers concrete strategies. These include investing in technology, education, and innovation, even though the results may take time to materialize, as they are essential for long-term prosperity. Furthermore, the author advocates for the design of political institutions that discourage politicians from making short-term decisions for personal gain. Drawing inspiration from successful models like the German innovation system, governments should allocate resources to long-term financial markets and vocational training systems, and facilitate cooperation between trade unions and employers' associations.

In the end, the author concludes that politics fails when we pretend that we can get along without it, when we do not take politics seriously, and when we try and repress, smother, or banish it. The author firmly counters the pervasive argument that our global challenges can be resolved by sidestepping politics, whether through overreliance on technology or markets, the pursuit of authoritative leadership, or simply striving for moral betterment. The author contends that technology is ill-equipped to address fundamental disagreements or navigate the intricate web of human behavior and societal dynamics. Furthermore, perfect markets rarely exist, and the pursuit of strong leadership often disregards the diversity of preferences held by the population at large.

A standout feature of this book that I especially appreciate is its ability to transcend the confines of dry academic prose. Instead, it artfully weaves together compelling real-life anecdotes and data, infusing a captivating and credible dimension into the author's arguments. It masterfully achieves equilibrium by seamlessly integrating substantial academic knowledge into an accessible narrative, touching upon concepts like the Robin

Hood paradox, Schumpeter's democracy definition, and even the author's own social experiments. Furthermore, the book is profoundly thought-provoking, urging readers to delve beyond the superficial layer of the five overarching themes: democracy, equality, solidarity, security, and prosperity. It invites us to revisit these ostensibly straightforward concepts, encouraging contemplation of their intricacies and implications at a deeper level. Notably, the author infuses the narrative with his unique sense of humor, elevating the reading experience to a more engaging level. In sum, this book is a remarkable and enriching read, catering to a diverse audience encompassing the general public, politicians, and academics alike.

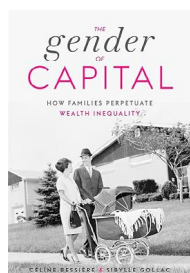
Céline Bessière and
Sibylle Gollac · 2023

The Gender of Capital: How Families Perpetuate Wealth Inequality.

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

Reviewer **Ria Wilken**

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The family might not be the first thing that comes to mind when thinking of an example of an economic institution as a “site

for production, circulation, control, and evaluation of wealth” (p. 37). Against this widespread omission, *The Gender of Capital: How Families Perpetuate Wealth Inequality* by Céline Bessière and Sibylle Gollac introduces the family as an economic institution like any other that contributes to the reproduction of wealth inequalities – especially regarding gender – in contemporary France. By deconstructing the family as the central unit of observation, the authors aim to shed light on the mechanisms through which economic domination is (re-)produced in heteronormative families. Guided by the question of how these inequalities can quietly continue despite the normative frame of a formally egalitarian civil law, Bessière and Gollac make use of a combination of various legal, ethnographic, and quantitative sources in order to make their main argument: that the family as an institution is responsible for maintaining and perpetuating economic inequalities between men and women through what the authors introduce as the concepts of family wealth arrangements and family strategies of social reproduction. The data used in their book draws on primary ethnographic data such as in-depth family case studies conducted between 1997 and 2005 and case studies on legal professionals conducted from 2008 onwards. Secondary data such as the French Wealth Survey, collected in irregular intervals and under different names between 1986 and 2020, complements the qualitative fieldwork of the researchers. Bessière and Gollac pick up on the literature of Marxist and materialist feminists which emerged in 1970s France and speak to contemporary literature in the fields of gender studies, social class analysis, economic inequalities, and to the intersection of gender, wealth and inequality research.

In the introduction, the reader is brought into contact with the concept of family wealth arrangements, which is central to the book but unfortunately not clearly defined until the third chapter as “the oftentimes laborious and or conflictual consensus-building process among family members and legal professionals over the appraisal and distribution of family wealth as well as the outcome of this process” (p. 83). These arrangements include decisions on, among others, inheritance, inter vivos gifts, liquidation of marital assets, and compensatory allowances. These formerly family matters are molded into legal frameworks by the work of legal professionals and asserted as legally binding through court decisions. Family strategies of social reproduction, are introduced to approach family wealth arrangements from a sociological perspective and to better understand the underlying decision-making processes. These strategies include all mechanisms, such as marriages, schooling strategies, and estate planning, which can be used to maintain a social hierarchy over the long run and to ensure or improve individuals' positions in such hierarchies.

In the first chapter, the reader is guided along a red line of reasoning toward the conceptualization of the family as an economic institution. Against the widespread narrative of the economy and families pursuing separate paths in contemporary capitalist societies, the authors argue that, as inheritances are a family matter, families contribute to a nonnegligible extent to class inequalities.

While the first chapter focuses on interfamily inequalities caused by differences between families in whether, how much, and when assets are inherited, the second chapter adds an intrafamily perspective on who inherits what and when within a family. In doing so, Bessière and Gollac incorporate