

This is a personal inquiry and any opinions expressed are solely my own.

tl;dr

MEV is a problem all users of any blockchain must eventually face and, as a result, MEV calls into being a public that transcends any particular ideology, a.k.a. "The Great Community"

. Working on MEV is how we participate in a public which transcends any particular political agenda such that we can maintain the meta-political agenda of permissionlessness and censorship resistance.

If we can mitigate the negative effects of MEV, this amounts to perfecting how we order our communications, which is both a necessary and sufficient condition for democracy to flourish, where democracy is the name for "a life of free and enriching communion".

## Re-membering Liberty

Some of our [greatest stories](#) remind us that, in order to understand the mysteries of the universe [we require narrative](#). In order to communicate those mysteries safely such that their value is not fully extractable by whomever is responsible for transmission, we require narratives encoded in particular kinds of ways.

Though my story does not attempt to encipher its message to quite the same degree as Yun Tianming's fairy tales, it may one day turn out to be the political soap bubbles powering the SUAVE pirate ship.

This story is really an inquiry, and it begins with a man named John Dewey and an old book surprisingly relevant to our time: *The Public and Its Problems*

(1927).

You see, there are [many kinds of decentralization](#). The kind that matters most in terms of the social fictions we agree to uphold is the decentralization of power

. As Dewey writes:

"What nonsense it is, then, to talk of liberty as if it were a happy-go-lucky breaking of chains. It is with emancipation that real tasks begin, and liberty is a searching challenge

, for it takes away the guardianship of the master and the comfort of the priest. The iconoclasts didn't free us. They threw us into the water, and now we have to swim."

Working on MEV very much feels like being [thrown into the water](#). This is because the stories blockchains enable us to share have potentially profound implications for the ideal of liberty. However, whatever liberties we may take in this regard quite literally come along with a "searching challenge".

(Dewey defines liberty as "that secure release and fulfillment of personal potentialities which take place only in rich and manifold association with others: the power to be an individualized self making a distinctive contribution and enjoying in its own way the fruits of association." That is, the old definitions are much closer to [ubuntu](#) than "don't step on me".)

## Expert citizens

Credible commitment devices (a.k.a. blockchains) can be used to coordinate effective responses to global challenges. However, the use of such devices leads us into an even deeper problem: how to communicate such that the value of what we say is not exhausted by whomever earns the right to transmit it.

This is the domain of the artists, poets, and musicians whose work continuously finds valuable (re)interpretations long after it first enters our collective records. Indeed, for Dewey, "learning how to swim" requires a kind of "collective artistry to social inquiry" that draws on the specific experiences of individuals and

expert knowledge about known facts and potential risks.

*The Public and Its Problems*

revolves around the tension between individual experiences and expert knowledge. This same dynamic exists in MEV which, in practice, results from the differences between sophisticated and unsophisticated actors. Many proposed solutions simply shift the "burden" (and associated power) of [sophistication from one set of actors to another](#).

What Dewey described in 1927, and the story I see forming around SUAVE, shares the same narrative goal: to create a larger framework for the relationship between experts and citizens that is sensitive to the problem of power and that sees citizens not merely as authorizing power, but as genuinely authoritative in decision making

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In the introduction to the modern version of Dewey's book, Melvin L. Rogers writes:

"The Public and Its Problems seeks to answer two distinct but related questions. First, what is the proper relationship between citizens and experts in the context of modern complexity, which nonetheless retains the self-governing dimension that we associate with democracy? Second, what is the proper method for helping the public emerge from its eclipse in the face of modern complexity so that it can fill the charge of self-governance?"

This describes the problem of MEV, too. We need sophisticated actors doing sophisticated things in order to keep our systems efficient and accountable. However, we don't want those actors to gain power over time due to their sophistication and thereby lose touch with problems experienced by regular people, or erode the ability of regular people to govern themselves effectively.

Dewey says it best:

"The essential need is the improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion, and persuasion. That is the problem of the public. We have asserted that this improvement depends essentially upon freeing and perfecting the processes of inquiry and of dissemination [... Most importantly] expertness is not shown in framing and executing policies, but in discovering and making known the facts upon which the former depend."

Experts tend to accrue power because the default incentive for sophisticated users is to exert undue influence in making decisions, rather than to [provide already-valuable insights](#) which help us decide things together. The issue is that it was unclear—in 1927—how we could practically improve incentive structures surrounding public communication and decision making.

SUAVE provides a narrative solution to this: public smart contracts which can express the results of confidential preferences.

Such contracts might help us, as Dewey hoped for, to [perfect the means of communication of meanings](#) so that genuinely shared interest in the consequences of interdependent activities may inform desire and effort and thereby direct action."

## Always in process

That sounds nice, but what does it actually mean to perfect the communication of meanings? In our context, it is nothing other than enabling people to make credible commitments, while crafting a system which can order responses to those commitments in ways that simultaneously create the most collective value and

distribute it in a manner that maximizes welfare.

The mechanisms that do this generally look like auctions, which discover price in uncertain environments, and result in the exchange of information ("meanings") for commitments ("payments"). Most importantly, the method that the auction uses to determine the price can be transparently and publicly encoded in a builder solidity contract, though the actual bids individual users submit need not be.

Public process with private inputs is a fundamentally democratic idea

. It may be the only concept capable of defending true democracy in the modern age: verifiable mechanisms for collective decisions; privacy for the individuals who contribute to the decision-making process. This is not a new idea. In fact, Dewey says exactly the same thing:

"By political democracy we mean a mode of government [...] that emphasizes the publicity of decision making

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By this, he does not mean the publicity of individual participants. He means that the methods by which we arrive at decisions should be public, predictable, and open to all.

If we mistakenly focus on who

gets publicity, then all we're doing is changing the name from "king" to "president" to "founder", or "aristocracy" to "congress" to "delegates", without changing anything about how power operates. If, however, we make public the process by which decisions are made—and do so in a permissionless

environment which makes it possible for anyone to improve that process, or create a different one—then the flow of value from how decisions are made can always be reprogrammed, which has a marked influence on how power accrues and who gets to exercise it under which conditions.

The focus on process, rather than personalities, is critical because it makes clear the link between political and economic power. Dewey is explicit about this:

"The same causes which have led men to utilize concentrated political power to serve private purposes will continue acting to induce men to employ concentrated economic power in behalf of non-public aims. This fact does not imply the problem is insoluble. But it indicates where the problem resides, whatever guise it assumes."

The problem resides in the economic representation of value, which is dependent on the order in which messages are communicated, because those who receive information first can benefit from acting on it before anyone else. This amounts to an asymmetric ability to influence the meaning of shared information (i.e. “state”), which is synonymous with concentrated political power.

How do we attend to asymmetric influence and how it concentrates power? We craft verifiable incentives which make it more profitable for everyone when citizens are informing experts, rather than the current default in which it is unfairly profitable for experts to manipulate citizens. As Dewey says:

“To the extent that experts guide political power without taking direction from the public in the form of deliberation, the entire decision-making process loses legitimacy.”

## Legitimate power

“Legitimate political power is not merely restrictive—that is, it does not merely constrain freedom—but more significantly, it makes freedom possible by giving citizens control over the forces that govern and enable their lives.”

The mission of Flashbots is to illuminate the methods and democratize the tools of expertise, such that value is distributed in a way that maximizes welfare. Of course, open source tools and methods do not, in themselves, make everyone an expert. However, they do act against the centralization of power through specialization because anyone who cares enough and is willing to follow their interests can always contest the powers that be. This is critical to a functioning democracy in which freedom is not an end in itself, but a means to genuine liberation. Dewey goes on to write that:

“Liberation requires an intimate and critical engagement with the problems that afflict individuals and the ways in which the potential resolution of those problems fits with the liberation of others—an engagement from which the input of individuals and communities cannot be expunged.”

This is, again, a surprisingly apt description of MEV. It is a problem that affects us all as individuals—your particular transaction could be attacked at any given time—and its solution can only be a collective one found through communal deliberation of the trade-offs involved in any particular solution, whether it is a specific “fair-ordering” scheme, or an open and contestable marketplace for mechanisms. I think that an open and contestable marketplace is a more legitimate and democratic structure, an opinion I find good support for in Dewey’s thought:

“Democracy defines members not simply by virtue of their actual participation in determining social possibilities, but also by the potential participation that remains open to them if need so arises. To the extent that power functions to determine social possibilities, those possibilities cannot be of such a nature that they preclude the future contestability and development of how power functions.”

“The legitimacy of decision making hinges on the extent to which citizens do not feel permanently bound by those decisions in the face of new and different political changes.”

Even if a limited number of builders retain market dominance despite SUAVE, their power will remain tenuous, because it can always be challenged by new and unexpected mechanisms which act to create and move value in a meaningfully different manner. The fact that such mechanisms can always be deployed without permission means that no-one is bound by the current market and remains free to suggest and implement

mechanisms with alternative political consequences, such that how power functions always remains contestable and open to debate.

## Re-cognition

“The public consists of all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for.”

MEV is the indirect consequence of the transactions we each enter into. SUAVE is a unified environment for coordinating solutions to these indirect consequences without entrenching power. A unified environment in which it is always possible to contest the mechanisms responsible for how transactions are ordered—and therefore what value is created for whom—amounts to programming money democratically, because we can always deliberate together on what those mechanisms are and inquire into their verifiable, public functions.

Programming money democratically is good for society

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Which naturally raises the question: what do we mean by ‘good’? Melvin L. Rogers writes:

“Dewey regards the good of society as legitimate to the extent that it is self-consciously recognized by the members of the community, his understanding of democracy locates itself in the freely willed actions (whether in support or contestation) of its members.”

The 'good' is not a static concept: it is a process of ongoing, self-conscious recognition of how I relate to you, the consequences this has for 'us', and the will we can each exert in order to communicate our recognitions creatively. In this sense,

"We come upon the primary problem of the public: to achieve recognition of itself [...] The prime difficulty, as we have seen, is that of discovering the means by which a scattered, mobile and manifold public may so recognize itself as to define and express its interests."

This is one reason why it is so impactful to work on mitigating MEV. Given their permissionless nature, blockchains are home to many divergent political groups. It is neither possible, nor desirable, to identify a "unified politics of blockchains". Nevertheless, MEV is a problem all users of any blockchain must eventually face and, as a result, MEV calls into being a public that transcends any particular ideology

Working on MEV is how we participate in a public which transcends any particular political agenda such that we can maintain the meta-political agenda of permissionlessness. That is, the realpolitik of the public created by MEV is just this: any power structure is potentially acceptable so long as it does not preclude the ability of anyone to suggest and implement an alternative.

Traditional politics contests power via the application of either violence or patience. Permissionless marketplaces for mechanisms which order transactions such that their indirect consequences do not result in the few accruing undue power do not require either protest or occupation. The use of any given mechanism is not determined by rhetoric or personality: it is determined by efficiency and welfare. As Dewey says,

"Democracy, then, entails a kind of openness in which its substantive meaning—that is, what concerns it addresses and what ends it pursues—is always in the process of being determined.

The public refers to a space of unity and difference that functions only if we see it as indeterminate."

## Public solutions

Defining "the public" as those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions is equivalent to saying "the public" emerges from individuals and groups that come together in the service of problem solving. Self-conscious recognition of why we have gathered is the first step towards exercising legitimate power over the decisions which affect us.

Builder solidity smart contracts allow for any solution arising from such recognition to be executed without violence or delay. This matters because as new transactions become possible, new publics are called into being as the result of new indirect consequences which affect them, and which they must find some systematic way to care and account for. This, like MEV itself, is not a phenomenon for which anyone can develop a 'final solution'.

The very notion of a final solution is—as it should be—odious. What we are concerned with here is process, and the means by which our processes might be [locked open](#) such that the way in which power is enacted is always contestable. Contestability is, in essence, a result of the way said systems either help or hinder us perfect the communication of our meanings. And, seeing as we will always mean new and different things, even perfection is not static. Perfection is a living process, which is found again in every moment our needs are commensurate with our ability to realize their creative solution.

Such solutions depend on our ability to search for, and find, others similarly affected by the indirect consequences of all our transactions. Dewey called this the Great Community

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"Till the Great Society is converted into a Great Community, the Public will remain in eclipse. Communication can alone create a great community. Our Babel is not one of tongues but of the signs and symbols without which shared experience is impossible."

This is rousing stuff, but we face one more problem, which is that the very word "community" has become overused in our time. It has been stretched so far by insincere advertisements and scammy projects that no-one quite knows what it truly means. However, we can revive Dewey's old definition to counter this slip into meaninglessness:

"A community thus presents an order of energies transmuted into one of meanings which are appreciated and mutually referred by each to every other on the part of those engaged in combined action. 'Force' is not eliminated but is transformed in use and direction by ideas and sentiments made possible by means of symbols."

Communities transform energy into meanings by virtue of how they use symbols rather than physical force. Understanding exactly how this transmutation works requires that we each:

"Get rid of the habit of thinking of democracy as something institutional and external and acquire the habit of treating it as a way of personal life, so as to realize that [democracy is a moral ideal](#)."

## Deliberate art

The mission is to illuminate, democratize, and distribute. Just like Dewey, I think that all three are critical and that our overall project fails if they don't work in harmony. As he wrote:

“Economic agencies produce one result when they are left to work themselves out on the merely physical level, or on that level modified only as the knowledge, skill and technique which the community has accumulated are transmitted to its members unequally and by chance [i.e. “illuminate”]

. They have a different outcome in the degree in which knowledge of consequences is equitably distributed [i.e. “distribute”]  
, and action is animated by an informed and lively sense of a shared interest [i.e. “democratize”]

.”

Such harmonic operation depends on the deliberate inquiry of each citizen into the kinds of transactions whose effect indirectly influences their lives, and the associated search for others similarly affected with whom it is possible to create solutions. Working on MEV—and using SUAVE—is nothing if not a deep and deliberate inquiry into the indirect consequences of transactions and a search for the others striving to defend humane and meaningful value(s).

This kind of inquiring story-telling might help us realize the ultimate vision presented in *The Public and Its Problems*

:

“The highest and most difficult kind of inquiry and a subtle, delicate, vivid and responsive art of communication must take possession of the physical machinery of transmission and circulation and breathe life into it. When the machine age has thus perfected its machinery it will be a means of life and not its despotic master. Democracy will come into its own, for democracy is a name for a life of free and [enriching communion](#).”