

Nygaard Notes

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What is Stochastic Terrorism?

Back in 2016 I commented that, “When it comes to health care, there are things that we know and things that we do not know. What we know is aggregate numbers. That is, we know (roughly) how many people will have heart attacks this year. We know how many people will need surgery, how many will need prescription drugs, and how many will need physical therapy. What we don’t know—and really cannot know—is which specific people will need any of these things.”

I didn’t know the word at the time, but scientists call this a “stochastic process,” by which they mean “a system for which there are observations at certain times, and that the outcome, that is, the observed value at each time, is a random variable.”

That sounds pretty scientific, doesn’t it? I guess so, but that’s not why I introduce the word here. I introduce the word “stochastic” because it has begun cropping up in the mainstream media (not all that often, actually, so don’t feel bad if you’ve never heard the term). And the context in which it has come up is the context of hate crimes, domestic terrorism, and political violence.

The word almost never appears by itself. It usually appears as the first word of the two-word phrase *Stochastic Terrorism*. I’ve mentioned that term a couple of times recently, so I thought it was about time I explained what it means.

Going Beyond the Dictionary

On August 3 2019 a mass shooting occurred at a Walmart store in El Paso, Texas, United States. In the terrorist attack, a far-right individual killed 23 people and injured 23 others, in what has been described as “the deadliest anti-Latino attack in recent U.S. history.” The perpetrator “posted a manifesto with

white nationalist and anti-immigrant themes before the attack.”

In the wake of that attack a few big media outlets, including the Washington Post, used the term “Stochastic Terrorism” when referring to the incident. It must have struck a nerve, as the website Dictionary.com observed that “lookups for one term, *stochastic terrorism*, surged 63,389 percent on August 4, as compared to the week prior.”

El Paso isn’t the only mass killing to have been cited as examples of stochastic terrorism. It’s been applied to the March 2022 mass shooting of black people in Buffalo NY that killed 10; the March 2019 attack on mosques in Christchurch New Zealand that killed 51; the June 2016 shooting at a gay nightclub in Orlando killed 49... There are too many others to list them all. But something is going on here, and it’s worth our time to at least try to understand what it is and how it can be addressed.

I thought I would start by taking apart this trendy term “stochastic terrorism.”

The word stochastic, in everyday language, means “random.” And terrorism can be understood as “The use of violence or the threat of violence in the pursuit of political, religious, ideological or social objectives.”

So, it sounds like, for something to be considered “Stochastic Terrorism” an act has to be random and must be carried out with a larger goal in mind. But, think about that for a moment . . . If someone carries out an act with a goal in mind, it’s not random. It may be misguided, but it’s not random.

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Greetings,

Nygaard Notes readers know that I have a love/hate relationship with jargon. I hate it because so many people use fancy words to impress other people, rather than expressing themselves simply and directly. On the other hand, I love jargon because new words are fun to play with, as long as one doesn't abuse them.

In this issue of the Notes I dwell for a while on the word "stochastic." It's a word that has been in the news lately, as a part of the phrase "stochastic terrorism." At first I thought that phrase was useful, referring as it does to an atmosphere of violence that can be created by using language in a certain way. I was thinking that it begins to move us away from the Individualistic Thought System that has been dominant in the West for the past few hundred years. And that can only be good!

But, the more I thought about it, the more I came to believe that it's a risky word, one that leads to confusion in dealing with the sometimes-violent political conflicts in this country. The phrase is used in relation to hate crimes, terrorism, and political violence, and when it comes to topics like those, confusion is the last thing we need!

It's in that spirit that I offer Issue #698 of Nygaard Notes.

Clearly yours,

Nygaard

Stochastic *from page 1*

The superficial lesson here is that the dictionary can't always help us to understand what people are talking about. (There's another, deeper, lesson here, which I'll get to later.)

A Trendy New Phrase

Dictionary.com says that stochastic terrorism is "the public demonization of a person or group resulting in the incitement of a violent act, which is statistically probable but whose specifics cannot be predicted."

Then they elaborate by saying "Here's the idea behind stochastic terrorism:

- A leader or organization uses rhetoric in the mass media against a group of people.
- This rhetoric, while hostile or hateful, doesn't explicitly tell someone to carry out an act of violence against that group, but a person, feeling threatened, is motivated to do so as a result.
- That individual act of political violence can't be

predicted as such but, thanks to the rhetoric, it's much more probable that violence will happen.

- This rhetoric is thus called stochastic terrorism because of the way it incites random violence."

In 2019 the monthly technology magazine *Wired* defined stochastic terrorism as "Acts of violence by random extremists, triggered by political demagoguery." The article was headlined "Jargon Watch: The Rising Danger of Stochastic Terrorism."

In a November 2022 article in *Insider* (formerly *Business Insider*), reporter Erin Snodgrass wrote that "Stochastic terrorism is a specific type of extremist violence that occurs when an environment has 'othered' a population or individual to a significant enough extent that it results in subsequent violence against them." (That's actually her paraphrase of a point made by scholar/activist Eric K. Ward, senior advisor to the Western States Center.)

The German Max Planck Institute has a special project called *Philosophical and Public Security Law Implications of 'Stochastic Terrorism'*, and they say



→→ that the phenomenon of Stochastic Terrorism, or ST, is “an under-examined yet growing threat to public security. Here’s a bit of how they define it:

“Stochastic terrorism involves ‘the use of mass media to provoke random acts of ideologically motivated violence that are statistically predictable but individually unpredictable’”. They add that “Such speech is plausibly related to violent outcomes, and yet falls outside direct forms of incitement. The grey areas brought to light by this particular security risk raise interesting philosophical questions about language, harm, responsibility, rationality, and freedom.”

In the “I know it when I see it” category, the project discusses the well-known events at the U.S. capitol on January 6 2021, which “saw members of Former President Donald Trump’s supporter base rioting on the US Capitol building and breaching its interior. While Trump’s use of language in the days immediately prior to this insurrectionist event arguably falls short of the standard of incitement, this is likely a candidate case of stochastic terrorism with several recognisable features: incendiary rhetoric from an influential figure; an audience primed and easily

goaded into action, aligned with a conspiratorial movement; language-use which has plausible deniability; and an actual security threat as outcome.”

Snodgrass cites sociologist Ramon Spaaij as saying that “Sub-groups prone to stochastic terrorism have a strong sense of moral righteousness and have often created a strict binary between good and evil for themselves, casting their enemies as villains. Adds Spaaij “It’s a lot easier to harm someone when they’ve been dehumanized.”

Snodgrass notes, again citing Spaaij, that “There’s no one factor fully responsible for stoking stochastic terrorism. It can happen through a combination of mainstream media, polarizing political discourse, and more and more frequently via social media.”

The Planck Institute tells us that the use of the phrase Stochastic Terrorism raises “interesting philosophical questions about language, harm, responsibility, rationality, and freedom.” I agree, and I think you will, too, after we have a look at the case of a master propagandist who was recently accused of being a stochastic terrorist and who defended himself in a particular way. His name is Christopher Rufo. ♦

Accusing Christopher Rufo

If you haven’t heard of Christopher Rufo, you’re missing something important. He’s a senior fellow at a “conservative” think tank called the Manhattan Institute. He’s probably best known for his relentless propaganda campaign aimed at delegitimizing the concept of “Critical Race Theory.” (I discussed Critical Race Theory at some length back in 2021, in Nygaard Notes 672.) About a year ago the New York Times ran an article on Rufo, describing him as “the conservative activist who probably more than any other person made critical race theory a rallying cry on the right.”

The Times quoted one of Rufo’s Twitter posts from 2021: “The goal is to have the public read something crazy in the newspaper and immediately think ‘critical race theory.’” This is a genuine propagandist speaking! And recently he was defending himself

against a charge of engaging in Stochastic Terrorism, in the process offering a couple of lessons on how modern propaganda works simultaneously on more than one level.

I mention Rufo because, last November, *Scientific American* mentioned Rufo. The article that mentioned Rufo was entitled “How Stochastic Terrorism Uses Disgust to Incite Violence,” and reporter Bryn Nelson explained how disgust has been utilized for this purpose in the past. “Propagandists,” he said, “have fomented disgust to dehumanize Jewish people as vermin; Black people as subhuman apes; Indigenous people as ‘savages’; immigrants as ‘animals’ unworthy of protection; and members of the LGBTQ community as sexual deviants and ‘predators’ who prey upon children.”

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Rufo *from page 3*

Thus referencing disgust, Nelson noted that a man who recently broke into House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's house and attacked her husband was likely disgusted by his belief in "the conspiracy theory known as QAnon, which claims that Democratic, Satan worshipping pedophiles are trying to control the world's politics and media."

Nelson brings Rufo into the picture by noting that "Right-wing media personalities and activists have created or amplified conspiracy theories about Pelosi." That's the context in which Nelson mentions that Rufo had been interviewed by Fox News's Tucker Carlson on the same day as the Pelosi attack.

In the Carlson interview, says Nelson, Rufo "claimed drag queens participating in book readings were trying to 'sexualize children.' The people who support these events, he said, want to create 'a sexual connection between adult and child, which has of course long been the kind of final taboo of the sexual revolution.'" Nelson then discusses how Carlson, a powerful member of the media, amplifies the conspiracy theory, concluding with an incendiary call for "people" to "arm themselves" with ideas, ideas certain to generate disgust.

Nelson continued: "In response to Rufo's diatribe, Carlson—who has an average of over three million viewers—explicitly linked drag queens to pedophiles: 'Why would any parent allow their child to be sexualized by an adult man with a fetish for kids?' Rufo then suggested that parents should push back and 'arm themselves with the literature' supposedly laying out the child sexualization agenda. Carlson replied, 'Yeah, people should definitely arm themselves.'" Nelson then notes that "Some people have."

Toward the end of his article, Nelson asks, "What can stop stochastic terrorism and break the cycle of disgust-fueled vilification, threats and violence?" Here are his suggestions:

- "Turning off the source of fuel is a start.
- Programs to counter violent extremism, particularly those that emphasize early intervention and deradicalization, have yielded some successes in at-risk communities.
- Other programs disrupt the ideological ecosystem that creates radical conspiracies through counseling, education and other community interventions.
- Beyond understanding how our emotions can be exploited to demonize others, we can refuse to buy into "both-sides" false equivalence and the normalization of dangerous rhetoric and extremism.
- We can do better at enforcing laws against hate speech and incitement to violence.
- And ultimately, we can disengage with media platforms that make money by keeping us disgusted, fearful and forgetful of our own decency—and shared humanity."

Note that five of Nelson's six prescriptions are social, or systemic, prescriptions aimed at changing consciousness. He calls for "programs" and community-based interventions and addressing the role of profit in promoting disgust, fear, and the erosion of our shared humanity.

The one exception is Number 5, which refers to laws against hate speech and incitement. And here I will quote Thorbjørn Jagland, who, when he was the Secretary General of the Council of Europe in 2016, stated that hate speech and free speech should not be confused. He explained:

"We are free to express ourselves, even to the extent that our opinion may offend, shock or disturb others. But not everything is acceptable as free speech. The moment people start publicly inciting to violence, hostility or discrimination against a group of persons, then this is hate speech not free speech."

In the next essay I will look at how Rufo defends himself against an imaginary attack, using a straw man, and the Dominant Thought System, to help make his point. ◆

Straw Man Propaganda

The dictionary tells us about something called a Straw Man Argument:

A straw man is a fictional, exaggerated version of an opposing viewpoint, especially one that's intentionally created to be easy to dismiss or argue against and to make one's own argument seem stronger. A straw man argument is a kind of logical fallacy, which is an illogical or misleading argument. Straw man arguments can be made unintentionally, but most are made on purpose to make the other side seem evil, incompetent, or extremist.

Within days of the Scientific American article that I mentioned in the previous essay, Christopher Rufo responded in writing, publishing his defense in the pages of *City Journal*, a magazine published by the afore-mentioned Manhattan Institute, of which Rufo is a contributing editor. (Defense against what? you may ask. We'll get to that in a moment.)

Rufo's article was titled "The 'Stochastic Terror' Lie; The Left's Latest Gambit for Suppressing Speech Is Built on Preposterous Grounds."

Wrote Rufo, "In an opinion piece for Scientific American, writer Bryn Nelson insinuated that my factual reporting on Drag Queen Story Hour was an example of 'stochastic terrorism,' which he defines as 'ideologically driven hate speech' that increases the likelihood of unpredictable acts of violence."

Having thus invented an attack, Rufo then conjures a straw man argument to defend himself against it. He invents a world in which he is a victim of a "scheme" cooked up by "left-wing media, activists, and officials" in which "The statistical concept of 'stochasticity,' which means 'randomly determined,' functions as a catch-all: the activists don't have to prove causality—they simply assert it with a sophisticated turn of phrase and a vague appeal to probability."

Having thus invented an anti-free speech conspiracy, Rufo warns of the danger: "The obvious goal is to suppress speech and intimidate political opponents. 'Stochastic terrorism' could serve as a magic term for

summoning the power of the state."

"If this process is left unchecked," says Rufo, "the consequences will be disastrous. Left-wing NGOs, social media companies, and federal security apparatchiks will gain unprecedented power to police speech and criminalize political opposition." What to do? Rufo says that "Conservatives and old-line liberals who still care about civil liberties must expose the scheme and work to dismantle the apparatus that supports it." And he concludes by saying that "the politics of fighting back [against 'the apparatus'] will require dislodging a network of professionals who see the concept of 'stochastic terror' as a path to power."

Rufo states that Nelson's Scientific American article accuses him of being "responsible for the attempted murder of Paul Pelosi, husband to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi." Rufo characterizes this as "a bizarre claim that, for a magazine supposedly dedicated to 'science,' hardly meets a scientific standard of cause and effect." He goes so far as to say that, "Under the concept of 'Stochastic Terrorism,' logic, evidence, and causality are irrelevant. Any incident of violence can be politicized and attributed to any ideological opponent, regardless of facts."

In essence, Rufo's defense of himself is based on "a scientific standard of cause and effect," in which he can only be guilty of "terrorism" (stochastic or otherwise) if he himself wielded the gun that killed Mr. Pelosi—for example—or directly told someone to do so.

I say elsewhere in this issue that Rufo's defense against a charge of Stochastic Terrorism offered a couple of lessons on how modern propaganda works simultaneously on more than one level. The first level here is Rufo's claim that he has been accused of something, and that the accusation is "a crude political weapon" wielded for the purpose of suppressing the speech of not only him, but of any individual on "the right." And, since Free Speech is one of our fundamental values, he can't be blamed for expressing an opinion or, as he calls it, "factual reporting."

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Straw Man *from page 5*

Rufo's conjuring of an anti-free speech conspiracy is the first level of propaganda, the level which I call Overt Propaganda. That is, the thing we are supposed to believe, the thing that is at issue. Overt Propaganda is specific and conscious. We see it, we name it, we talk about it, and we believe it, or we don't. It's on the table.

But here's the thing about Overt Propaganda: Whether or not we believe it depends on the ideas that already exist in our heads, our ideas about how the world works. I call these pre-existing ideas Deep Propaganda. In contrast to the specific and conscious ideas that I call Overt Propaganda, Deep Propaganda is general and unconscious. Overt Propaganda is the thing you are supposed to believe. Deep Propaganda is what makes it believable.

In the current example, are people like Christopher Rufo to blame for what seems to be an alarming rise in idea-based violence and intimidation? Or does the

value we place on free speech force us to look for some other cause, for some other people to blame?

The Deep Propaganda here is so deep that it's very difficult for many people to see. It goes beyond what we think about Rufo or others like him. It has to do with a way of thinking, of a *system* of thinking, that is dominant in our culture. I'm talking about a *Thought System*, which is the sum of: 1. Certain ideas; 2. Certain ways of thinking, and; 3. The interaction between them. The Thought System that has been dominant in the U.S. since before it *was* the U.S. is simplistic, narrowly-focused, and individualistic. A different Thought System, which I call a Systems Orientation, is multifaceted, broad-based, and social.

A Systems Orientation offers a whole other way of thinking about the issue of violence in our culture. It's a way of thinking that doesn't assign blame to anyone, yet assigns responsibility to everyone. And that's where I have a problem with the term *Stochastic Terrorism*. It's a dangerous mis-naming, if you ask me. I explain in the next essay. ♦

Nothing Random About It

The increasing use of the term Stochastic Terrorism is, overall, a sign of progress in our public discourse. It's been used to help explain what we are seeing when there is a mass shooting of Black residents of Buffalo. It's been used to label the mass shooting of gay dance club patrons in Florida. It's been used to label the mass shooting of Mexican immigrants in Texas. It's been used to label the mass shooting of Muslims in Christchurch New Zealand. It's been used to label many other mass killings that have been in the news lately. It's even been used when a violent attacker goes to the house of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and attacks her husband with a hammer.

It is, as I said, a sign of progress that we are attempting to name these violent incidents that are so often in the news. But the use of this particular term—Stochastic Terrorism—both reflects and reinforces some ideas that confuse the issue in important ways.

First of all, the term Stochastic, as I've explained, means random. But in the cases I've cited, and in many of the reported cases of mass killings that come to mind, the targets were not at all random. They only appear random if we believe that the targets were the individuals who were killed or wounded by the attacker. But the targets, in each case, were not those individuals. Instead, they were the *groups* of which those individuals were believed to be a part. The attackers were aiming at *black* people, *gay* people, *immigrants*, and *Muslims*. In other words, they were aiming at *groups* of people who they believed, and wanted others to believe, were *not us*. Even in the case of the attack on Nancy Pelosi's home, which seems pretty specific, the intended target was not her personally, but rather the demonized *Left* of which she has been made a symbol. And her husband, having married that symbol, becomes a symbol himself.

Attacking The Group

Back in 2019, in Nygaard Notes #646, I published an essay called *The Sociology of Othering*. In it I talked about a 1958 essay that says we need to view racism as a *grouping and ranking process* rather than as a matter of individual emotional reactions, in order to “shift study and analysis from a preoccupation with feelings as lodged in individuals to a concern with the relationship of racial groups.”

The sociologist who wrote the article, Herbert Blumer, was talking about racism, but his points apply to the broader concept of Othering, of which racism is but one aspect.

The process by which people define social groups and their place in them has a lot to do with political leadership and media, as Blumer explains:

“A basic understanding of race prejudice must be sought in the process by which racial groups form images of themselves and of others. This process . . . is fundamentally a collective process. It operates chiefly through the public media in which individuals who are accepted as the spokesmen of a racial group characterize publicly another racial group. To characterize another racial group is, by opposition, to define one's own group. This is equivalent to placing the two groups in relation to each other, or defining their positions vis-a-vis each other. It is the sense of social position emerging from this collective process of characterization which provides the basis of race prejudice.”

I would add that “this collective process of characterization” provides the basis for the political polarization which increasingly characterizes the public discourse in the United States.

The Collective Process

Blumer speaks of social stratification in terms of race, and rightly so, saying, “The sense of group position is clearly formed by a running process in which the dominant racial group is led to define and redefine the subordinate racial group and the relations between them.” But, as you read the following two paragraphs explaining how a thought system asserts itself in a

society, consider that the enforcement of racial stratification is only one part—a humongous part, to be sure—of a larger process known as Othering. And this collective process by which some groups are defined as Us and some are defined as Them works something like this:

“There are two important aspects of this process of definition [of the relationship between groups] that I wish to single out for consideration. First, the process of definition occurs obviously through complex interaction and communication between the members of the dominant group. Leaders, prestige bearers, officials, group agents, dominant individuals and ordinary laymen present to one another characterizations of the subordinate group and express their feelings and ideas on the relations. Through talk, tales, stories, gossip, anecdotes, messages, pronouncements, news accounts, orations, sermons, preachments and the like definitions are presented and feelings are expressed.”

Blumer was writing in 1958. How the existence of the Internet affects this “complex interaction” is something that I (and 17 trillion other people!) are trying to figure out. But, whatever the technology, Blumer's description of the process holds true:

“In this usually vast and complex interaction separate views run against one another, influence one another, modify each other, incite one another and fuse together in new forms. Correspondingly, feelings which are expressed meet, stimulate each other, feed on each other, intensify each other and emerge in new patterns. Currents of view and currents of feeling come into being; sweeping along to positions of dominance and serving as polar points for the organization of thought and sentiment.”

I call this “organization of thought and sentiment” a Thought System. And this brings us back to Christopher Rufo, who defends himself against what he says is the charge of being “responsible for the attempted murder of Paul Pelosi.” What sociologist Blumer wrote (55 years ago!) tells us that Rufo is indeed not responsible for the attack on Pelosi, at least not in the sense that he “caused” it. By basing his defense on the individual right to free speech and by

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Not Random *from page 7*

embedding it in a world of Great Conspiracies, he reinforces an individualized, cause-and-effect way of thinking, two hallmarks of the Dominant Thought System. That's the Deep Propaganda that goes deeper than the Free Speech part of his defense.

The dominant Thought System in the United States leads us to believe that seemingly-random acts of violence are due to the random acts of random individuals, rather than seeing them as symptoms of an ongoing—and far from random—*grouping and ranking process* that is becoming more heated as challenges to the sociopolitical status quo become more audible and adamant.

The challenge that is becoming more audible, and which is perhaps the biggest challenge to the Powers-That-Be, is the challenge to the Dominant Thought System in the United States that is posed by the increasing adoption of a Systems Orientation. That's why I talk about Systems thinking all the time, in case you were wondering.

In a future Nygaard Notes I'll explain why the prospect of a widespread adoption of a Systems Orientation is such a big threat that it's got people talking about a new Civil War in the United States. ♦

“Quote” of the Week: “*Addressing Violence in a Holistic Fashion*”

The legal scholar Shirin Sinnar, who studies political violence and human rights, was interviewed in May of 2022 by her colleague Sharon Driscoll at Stanford University. In the brief interview, published on the science-oriented academic website *Futurity*, Sinnar made a couple of comments that summarize part of the motivation for this issue of Nygaard Notes. And—voilà!—her words become this issue's “Quote” of the Week, or QOTW.

Sinnar first mentions something called the Great Replacement Theory, which she describes as “The idea that white people are in danger of demographic replacement by immigrants and other nonwhite populations, and that ‘elites’ are driving that replacement.” This idea, she says, “is increasingly common in ‘mainstream’ discourse, such as Fox host Tucker Carlson’s highly popular cable news show.”

More on Tucker Carlson later in this issue of the Notes, but for now, here's the QOTW:

We should be deeply concerned about the normalization of not only ideas like the ‘great replacement,’ but also the willingness to use political violence in our culture. Recent polling of Americans suggest that one in three Americans think that political violence against the government can be justified, a greater share than reported in earlier polls over the last two decades. All of this suggests the importance of addressing racist and other political violence in a holistic fashion. Beyond law enforcement responses, that means addressing inflammatory political and media rhetoric, online disinformation and hate speech, the easy availability of guns, white supremacy within certain state institutions, and our insufficient national reckoning with our history of racist violence and exclusion.

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