

Living in Neoliberal America: Extremism, Pauperization, and Negative Solidarity

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This paper illuminates some of the main effects that neoliberalism has on the psychological and socio-economic profile of Americans. It outlines the structural processes that produced the groundwork for today's enormous popularity of right-wing extremism in the USA. America's middle-class has turned right-wing extremist during the Trump years and this trend has continued to dominate American politics today. While populism mobilizes feelings of injustice and grievances, the source and commencement of these grievances is the centerpiece of this article. The paper does so by applying Rodrigo Nunes' (2020a) analysis of the effects of Bolsenarismo in Brazil to the American society. The paper differentiates between the effects of individualism, punitivism, and the valorization of order *above* the law and shows how these trends have influenced preponderant identity traits of Baby Boomers and Generation X. Secondly, the paper focuses on the concept of "negative solidarity" which is one direct consequence of the worldview produced by successful indoctrination of neoliberal values and goes hand in hand with the consequent pauperization of the American worker. The preponderance of negative solidarity remains a key handicap for a democratic future and for any social mobilization efforts within the USA.

Keywords: neoliberalism, right-wing extremism, USA, pauperization, negative solidarity

Introduction

Right-wing extremism has hijacked the American middle class. Researchers such as Robert Pape and colleagues (2022) depict the storming of the Capitol on January 6, 2021 as a middle class phenomenon. Studying the profile of the 700 people who were arrested for that insurgency, Pape et al. (2022), emphasize that over 50% of those who have been arrested belong to the (upper) middle class. They are business owners, CEOs, doctors, lawyers, and architects and only 13% belong to a declared extremist group, such as the Oath Keepers or Proud Boys. Two-thirds of those arrested for the January 6 events were over the age of 34, however, Pape et al. (2022) emphasize that the average age of right-wing extremists is usually under the age of 34. Among the January 6th arrestees, 25% have a college degree, which is close to the national average (30%) of the U.S. electorate. However, the percentage of college educated members in right-wing extremist groups in the U.S. has traditionally been much lower, at around 10%. The majority of insurrectionists live in states and counties which have seen a decrease in white population segments and an increase in minority residents.

Pape et al. (2022) emphasize that it is fear of and anxiety about the influx of non-white people into their neighborhoods that drove many of these Americans to storm the Capitol and engage in an insurrection. In many

ways, the European-coined conspiracy theory, claiming a great replacement of whites by non-whites is taking place, has become the dominant rationale for extremist policies and actions in the USA.¹ Students of history have noted that these patterns are familiar. With the cooperation of the army and conservative elites, it was the social anxiety of the middle class that drove Weimar Germany to Nazism. Scholars who have studied the Nazi ideology—driven by Anti-semitism and racism—have pointed at obvious similarities to the ideology that mobilized millions of Americans. This notion of replacement, which is sometimes referred to as white genocide, has echoed throughout the rhetoric of many anti-migrant far-right movements in the West—such as by neo-Nazi protestors in Charlottesville in the USA in 2017.

Pape and colleagues' study (2022) focuses on only those 700 people who were arrested after the January 6 events. The arrested constitute fewer than one third of those who entered the Capitol on January 6. The FBI claims that about 2,500 people who entered the Capitol on that day, are under investigation. An estimated 120,000 people protested in Washington DC in the first place. More than one year after the events of January 6, the key questions remain: Why were these people there? What were their driving motivations? Who are they? And how representative are they of the 70 million Trump voters in the country? While these are so far largely unanswered questions this paper seeks to begin to connect the anger and frustrations of the American population with their political and economic experiences in the past 50 years.

Most participants thought of themselves as being patriots seeking to topple a “corrupt order”, an “illegitimate tyranny”, whose agents were perceived to have “stolen” the presidential election. Much of the current popularity of the extreme right in the USA is based upon the articulation of grievances by shrewd political actors that cultivate an “appetite for action” (Aslanidis, 2017, p. 307). Populism mobilizes feelings of injustice and grievances (Demertzis, 2006). The origin of this grievance is the centerpiece of this text. Once they arise, these grievances usually remain latent until they become subject to a process of “strategic interpretation” by “politically savvy movement entrepreneurs” who sense a ripe moment for their agenda (Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Benford 1986).

Populism and the Aggregation of Grievances

In the USA, people have felt insulted for decades, but nobody listened. Independent of the party in power, the state has failed to respond to and mitigate these grievances. With the help of movement entrepreneurs—such as Pat Buchanan, Newt Gingrich, Stephen Bannon, Charlie Kirk, Candice Owens, Georgia Representative Marjory Greene, and many more—these resentments are now discursively aggregated (“the Big Steal”, “Let’s go Brandon”) and collectively articulated, mostly on social media, as outcomes of an underlying social division between the good people and the corrupt elites (Aslanidis, 2017, p. 108). Greene stated that the January 6 insurrectionists were simply doing what the Declaration of Independence tells true patriots to do, in that they were trying to “overthrow tyrants”. The real threats to democracy, she added, are Black Lives Matter protesters and Democratic “Marxist-communist” agents.²

¹ The Great Replacement is a white nationalist conspiracy theory. The phrase was initially coined by the French author Renaud Camus and the theory states that, with the complicity or cooperation of “replacist” elites, the white French population—as well as white European populations at large—is being demographically and culturally replaced with non-European peoples—specifically Arab, Berber, Turkish, and sub-Saharan Muslim populations—through mass migration, demographic growth, and a European drop in the birth rate (Camus, 2010; 2011; Feola, 2020).

² Greene and North Carolina Representative Madison Cawthorn have referred to the few incarcerated insurrectionists as “political prisoners” (Kilfore, 2021).

Populist discourse is powerful at the micro level mobilizing individuals by activating a myriad of united personal resentments, eventually nudging them to join a populist movement (Aslanidis, 2017, p. 311). More than one year after the January 6 events and as a consequence of discourse fabrications and aggregations, millions of Americans are armed to the teeth and ready “to take back” their country—openly advocating for a civil war.

How did we get here? Beyond the analysis of populism and right-wing extremist discourse and ideology, focusing on militarism, racism, and white supremacy, little work has been done in order to discover the extremist acolytes underlying worldview and identities. However, we can trace a process that connects the current middle class right-wing extremism rigamarole to its roots which lies in the neoliberalism of the second half of the 20th century. Analyzing similar trends in Brazil, the political theorist Rodrigo Nunes (2020a) is one of the few scholars who studies linkages between the rise of right-wing populism, the politics of neoliberalism, and identity formation. Nunes (2020a) uses the concept of “moral grammar”, in order to explain the development of far right extremism as the latest stage of neoliberalism. Differentiating between the grammars of individualism, punitivism, and the valorization of order *above* the law, Nunes’ analysis focuses on the structural features of neoliberalism that influence the daily lives of individuals. Individualism, a tendency to punish the poor, and the existence and rising popularity of an order *above* the law, have also influenced Americans identity formations and worldviews in the 21st century. Where possible in what follows, Nunes’ concepts developed to explain Brazil’s current ideology of Bolzenarismo are adapted to explain the popularity of right-wing extremism in the USA today.

Politics has become irrelevant in people’s lives today (Monbiot, 2016).³ Political debate has been reduced in the minds of many American citizens to the babble of a remote corrupt elite. President Biden’s dilemma represents a good example for this: despite enacting popular policies, including a big stimulus plan to fight the COVID-19 economic slump and a bipartisan infrastructure bill, he is not a popular president. His approval ratings hover around 45%, and he is generally seen as a weak president (Cohn, 2021). People have turned to a virulent extremist anti-politic in which facts and arguments are replaced by slogans, symbols, and sensation (Monbiot, 2016).⁴

Naked, Hungry, and Alone: Life in Neoliberal America

Society and community has long been declared as “non-existing” and “dead” by key advocates of the neoliberal ideology such as Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan (Corbett-Batson, 2013). The average American looks at community, with the exception of church and family, with suspicion and mistrust because neoliberalism has rendered extreme individualism as a natural key precondition to socioeconomic success. This particular interpretation of individualism includes a strong notion of self-reliance and the need for an entrepreneurial spirit that long ago has become part of the American culture. But today, in the USA these values are represented as quintessential and as absolutely necessary preconditions not just for economic success but also for plain survival. In neoliberalism, workers—especially the largely unprotected but essential workers

³ Since the 1980s, the neoliberal hegemony has produced massive tax cuts for the rich, the elimination of welfare policies, the crushing of trade unions, deregulation and privatization of public companies, outsourcing, and competition in public services. Neoliberalism precluded governments from instituting social policies that could improve socio-economic condition of disadvantaged populations. In the thrall of neoliberal restructuring and tax cutting, for decades, governments have not responded to the needs of the electorate.

⁴ George Monbiot (2016) observes that the real triumph of the extreme right is its colonization of the neoliberal ideology with those principles that Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman and other fathers of neoliberalism detested.

in the service, food, and health care sectors—found that safety nets had shrunk or disappeared, and uncertainty and isolation had grown even before the pandemic, but became the preponderant feature of life when the COVID-19 pandemic began ravaging their cohorts.

Americans have internalized the trope of the self-made millionaire, believing that they as individuals, are solely responsible for their own fate. Nunes (2020a) explains that by rendering invisible both the existing but often indiscernible “interdependencies that sustain individual trajectories and the structural constraints that hold them back, this individualistic grammar voids the notion of a social space beyond the immediate private sphere.” The fable that structure and structural constraints and advantages do not exist promotes extreme individualism. Self-responsibility, hard work and—in case of failure—self-loathing are key to this ideology, whereas structural handicaps, such as social policies and class background are not taken into consideration when evaluating one’s successes and failures.

This is also true for young people who live in precarity today. Wealth has become more unequally distributed in neoliberal America. Young Americans who do not hold a bachelor’s degree have experienced economic decline if compared to older non-college educated generations and to their generational cohorts with college degrees (Bialik & Fry, 2019). Jennifer Silva (2013) who studied 100 young service industry workers in their mid-twenties to early-thirties shows clearly that these cohorts lack social trust toward any form of community, yet frequently express loyalty toward their employers and generosity to coworkers. Economic restructuring and the deepening social inequalities have shaped these young peoples’ lives, but they remain unaware of these larger trends. Instead, Silva (2013, p. 10) characterized these modern workers as people with “low expectations of work, wariness toward romantic commitment, widespread distrust of social institutions, profound isolation from others, and an overriding focus on their emotions and psychic health.”

A strong disillusionment with governmental institutions is one defining characteristic of this group—however, rather than to turn to politics to address the obstacles standing in the way of a secure adult life, these individuals internalize much of their struggle. Many young members of the “pink-collar” (i.e. service industry) cohorts are not concerned with class and economic justice or diversity, representation, and a politics of recognition. Instead, they are deeply grounded in individualism. Neoliberal ideology defines their lives which often produces a peculiar self-loathing. It is therefore not surprising that the majority of people who Silva (2013, p. 10) interviewed express anxiety and elaborate on deeply *personal* stories, focusing frequently on their journeys of recovery from their individual painful past experiences—“whether addiction, childhood abuse, family trauma, or abandonment and forging an emancipated, transformed and adult self.” This notion of individualism deprives people of the perception necessary in order to see the existing structural injustice. Members of this cohort also lack the language to address structural repression and inequity. Instead neoliberal indoctrination prompts them to interpret positive changes in their economic environment as their own achievement, and the structural demands of others as a pleading for special hand-outs.⁵ One of Silva’s (2013, p.

⁵ Of course, this neoliberal feature of overestimating the power of extreme individualism and disregarding societal opportunity structures is not only dominant among young pink-collar workers. Indeed it is also very prominent in mainstream academic journals, universities, and research facilities (in part because they are often funded by big corporations, such as the Carnegie Corporation). A current example is the work of Elizabeth Suhay (American University), Marko Klačnja (Georgetown University), and Gonzalo Rivero who sampled the top 5% of the U.S. income and wealth distributions and elicited views about dispositional (intelligence, hard work) and situational (family, luck) causes of success as well as explanations for why success-linked traits vary (people’s choices, environments, genes). The authors did not include any structural variables, e.g., access to educational and job opportunities in their study (Suhay, Klačnja, and Rivero 2021).

150) interviewees claimed that if they have to battle through life alone, then everyone else should too. Neither the state nor society has any part in their self-conceptualization and the understanding of the life trajectories of this generation.

The precarization of life associated with the high degree of self-responsibility/-loathing was brought about by neoliberal policies, by for example, the crushing of unions and informalization of work. Workers were forced to develop a particular entrepreneurial mindset—the notion that one has to “hustle to survive”—which has become so ingrained in career experiences, that workers see it as the “logical order of the universe” (Nunes, 2021). The mindset that one needs to be competitive and hustle in order to succeed on a personal level usually also forecloses any systemic critique of oppression, exploitation, and other systems of broader domination (Needham, 2004, p. 43).⁶ In the low-income workers’ experience their individual daily hustle to survive comes hand in hand with the successful redistribution of wealth from the bottom half to the top one percent⁷ and, with it, a world haunted by a climate catastrophe, a stagnating economy, the lack of democratic oversight, and a global pandemic.

The internalization of Ronald Reagan’s mantra “Government is not the solution to our problem, government is the problem” (Reagan Foundation, no date) is complete and has resulted in the broad acceptance of the abolition of welfare programs and the promotion of small government and right-to-work states. This neoliberal rationale remains deeply engrained in everyday life, especially for young service-industry workers, resulting in epidemics of anxiety, stress, depression, social phobia, eating disorders, self-harm, and loneliness. However, other generations of Americans, such as the Baby Boomers, who might not be experiencing the same level of precarity that many service workers live with, often have feelings of socioeconomic anxiety and grievances as well.

The Decline of Fordism, the End of White Men⁸, & the Rise of Punitivism

William Davies (2016) suggests that a new phase of neoliberalism has emerged in the post-2008 period “which is organized around an ethos of punishment”—punitivism.⁹ Davis argues that austerity and social policies have become punitive in nature, and so have prison, immigration, and food production, and distribution industries. In contrast to the younger generation of pink collar workers who are the most disadvantaged by neoliberalism because of the fact that they were born into it and lack the experience of life in a different ideological system, e.g., Keynesian capitalism, the cohort that experienced the decline of personal living standards most severely are members of the non-college educated white middle class, born into the Boomers and Generation X, roughly born between 1946-1980. For many members of this group, Fordism provided a stable economic base that enabled them to form single-income households, marry, and raise families at a young age, move to the suburbs, and live a relatively prosperous, consumer-driven life. Of course this did not last.

The assembly-line manufacturing of standardized goods, pioneered by Ford Motor Company often referred to as *Fordism*, provided good jobs that paid higher wages for workers. Workers therefore usually could

⁶ As a consequence, in one sense, the dignity of the individual in such precarious situations often comes from the capacity to consume. The substitution of consumerism for citizenship is one ramification of the individualization of politics in neoliberalism (Couldry 2004).

⁷ A recent study by the conservative think tank Rand Corporation found that since 1975 America’s top 1% has taken \$50 trillion from the bottom 90%.

⁸ White men still dominate the power positions in politics and transnational corporations and women’s entry into paid work in large numbers has not ended occupational sex segregation or the glass ceiling.

⁹ For example, Bill Clinton’s welfare reform included the first punitive elements for welfare recipients.

afford to buy and consume the products they made. Fordism rested on a system of mass production that dominated economic growth during the first half of the 20th century and the associated political and social order in capitalist societies. Ray (2020, p. 44) shows that Fordism was not just a feature of the capitalist economy but it simultaneously also reinforced patriarchy—“the idea that one income alone, the man’s income—could support the entire family” assumes a certain division of labor within the household. Furthermore, the rise of Fordism allowed for a certain American lifestyle that was not, as the trope of the American Dream promised, the result of individual hard labor of mostly male workers, but rather a result of governmental subsidies and suburbanization for deserving white families (Ray, 2020, p. 46). These policies, while “maintaining the most powerful of all ideologies about meritocracy, the American Dream” (Ray, 2020, p. 46), divided the American population into the deserving, usually white, poor who received subsidies, unemployment, and other welfare benefits, and the undeserving poor—e.g., migrant field hands and African American service workers—who did not receive any government subsidies.

Hand in hand with the rising hegemony of neoliberalism and the accompanying redistribution of wealth from the bottom to the top came the collapse of Fordism. The second half of the 20th century brought the decline of the single-wage income households and the rise of dual-earner families. With the decades-long stagnation of real wages for workers beginning in the 1970s, the “two-earner” families became the norm even for middle-class families. At the same time the New Right (composed of social conservatives and evangelicals) began to develop an exclusionary ideology which turned wage workers against the very poorest of the poor, black women, who were characterized as those who took advantage of the system (Ray, 2020). With the decline of Fordism came what journalist Hanna Rosin (2010) called the “end of men”—referring to white working-class men who lost their jobs and with that they lost their sense of masculinity, their control over women, and some of their previous advantage over people of color—the race advantage that prevented them from really being poor (Ray, 2020, p. 47). Ray (2020, p. 47) states: “They lost who they thought they were, not just their jobs.”

Highly-funded movement entrepreneurs of the extreme right stressed these frustrations and transformed them into a popularly accessible narrative—from a politics of envy to the politics of resentment: resentment of immigrants, refugees and other nonwhite groups who can only make it with the state’s help, resentment of women, especially those who appear to be making it, and resentment of the state that has once again turned its back on them (Ray, 2020, p. 50). Extreme-right politics is a perfectly rational response for members of the Boomers generation and Generation X, who live in a world of diminishing returns and who are inundated with this narrative through social and corporate media alike.

Diminishing Expectations and Punitive Methods

Today, people are told to “tighten their belts with only the faintest prospect of their ever being loosened again” (Nunes, 2020b). Sacrifice was once presented as a means to a better life, for example, in the trope of the American Dream. Today, instead, it increasingly appears to be an end in itself—“the naked imperative to adapt to diminishing expectations” (Nunes, 2020b). This aspect reached a culmination with the pandemic, when officials began to ask citizens to sacrifice their life for the economy. The Texan Lt. Governor Dan Patrick claimed that old people, for example, those most at risk, should volunteer to die to save the economy, and President Donald Trump advocated that we should end this social-distancing business sooner rather than later in order to “save” the economy from the coronavirus (Levin, 2020).

Punitive neoliberalism is the defining feature of migrant detention centers. Studies (Patler & Saadi 2021) have shown that, even under normal circumstances, the incarceration conditions in these centers are conducive to the rapid spread of infectious diseases through overcrowding, poor ventilation, inadequate sanitation, frequent contact with staff, and lack of healthcare services. COVID-19 wreaked havoc in immigration detention centers, which are usually run by private for-profit companies (Benshoff, 2020, Cuauhtémoc, Hernández, & García, 2020).¹⁰

If not incarcerated, many migrants work in America's essential industries. On April 28, 2020, President Trump invoked the Defense Production Act and ordered meatpacking plants to stay open as a means of protecting the food supply. The act, which classifies these plants as critical infrastructure during a national emergency, was invoked just as plants for beef, chicken, pork, and turkey were closing as a result of their workers falling victim to COVID-19. In fact, on the same day that Trump ordered the plants to remain open, a Smithfield food plant in South Dakota reported that more than 800 of its workers had COVID-19 (Di Nuzio 2020). While these punitive policies appear diverse and seemingly are focused at various groups—the elderly, immigrants, workers—they have one thing in common: the main objective of these policies is to increase corporate profits without any concern for human lives.

Along these lines, Nunes (2020a) finds that these punitive methods have become more stark, “even as—or precisely because—the normative claims behind them have become more suspect”—e.g., the trope of the American Dream. When the loss of certain privileges (white, male, heteronormative, etc.) is associated with the conquest of rights by others (women, minorities, immigrants, LGBTQ+ rights, for example), the desire to see the status quo restored—with perhaps the proclivity to believe in special privilege—finds a natural ally in the rejection of redistributive policies. The slave-holding structure of America's plantation economy not only divided society into individuals endowed with rights and those defined as property, but also meant that even free men often owed their fortunes to attracting the favors of the property-owning elite (Nunes, 2020a). Even after the abolition of slavery, the permanent and assured exercise of one's rights was a privilege reserved to those of a certain social standing, from which for large stretches of history women, non-white population cohorts, and minorities were largely excluded. The mindset of many of the January 6 insurrectionists is based on a vague recognition that their particular privileges—that traditionally have been based on race and gender and that exist above the law—appear to be threatened.¹¹

Belonging to the Privileged Few—The Valorization of Order Above the Law

Extreme right acolytes understand these privileges very well. The realtor Jenna Ryan, after flying on a private jet to the January 6 insurrection and live streaming her participation in the Capitol insurrection, was arrested and tried. After her deposition, she tweeted on March 26, 2021: “Definitely not going to jail. Sorry I have blonde hair white skin a great job a great future and I'm not going to jail. Sorry to rain on your hater parade. I did nothing wrong.” Looking at the court sentence, Ryan got it almost right. She was sentenced to only 60 days in prison, and a fine of USD 1,000 (CBS Local, 2021). Ryan apparently has gotten away with a

¹⁰ In these centers, more than 60% of the incarcerated immigrants have no criminal convictions, nevertheless most remained detained during the pandemic.

¹¹ One example for this attitude is the chant “Jews will not replace us”, that demonstrators shouted at the Unite the Right rally organized by armed white nationalists in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August 2017, in order to stop the removal of a statue dedicated to Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee.

slap on the wrist. Her attitude is by no means unique because it demonstrates a new conceitedness among those who believe they deserve special privileges. Other such recent examples include: Republican Senator Ted Cruz took his family on vacation in Cancun, Mexico, in February 2021, while his state of Texas was suffering from one of the worst winter storms in its history. Or, the British prime minister Boris Johnson who did apparently not mind attending numerous parties in Downing Street 10, in the spring of 2020, when the rest of the UK was in strict COVID-19 lockdown¹². Novak Djokovic, the Serbian tennis super star, claimed a medical exemption from receiving a COVID-19 vaccination, in order to travel to Australia to defend his Australian Open title in the 2022 games (Purnell, 2022). Privilege seemingly is reserved for those people who believe that due to a certain social standing they are exempted while everybody else is expected to follow the often draconian rules.¹³ This is where many of the American middle class sit, or at least expect to be located.

Nevertheless, those privileged who see their own existence as being above the law, seem sometimes surprised when others express outrage over these exceptions that are granted to privileged individuals. After losing power in his house, Cruz decided to take his two teenage daughters on vacation to Cancun, Mexico. At the same time millions of his fellow Texans froze because of historically low temperatures, experienced power outages, but they lacked the funds to go on a quick mini break in the Caribbean. Boris Johnson partying with his staff while British citizens lived extremely isolated lives during the early days of the COVID-19 lockdown, allowed to only meet one person at a time in an outdoor setting, might eventually cost him his job. Social media exploded with fury and mockery about the Texan senator Cruz who was photographed with his roller suitcase at Houston's George Bush Intercontinental Airport. Similarly, the majority of Australians were furious about Djokovic who had won 20 Grand Slams. The hashtag #DjokovicOut was the most trending topic for days and a local poll reported a staggering 83% of 60,000 respondents were in favor of Djokovic's deportation (Das, 2022). Djokovic's visa was eventually revoked, and he was deported from Australia, a country that limited its citizens' travel severely since March 2020 due to the federal government shutdown of international borders and a border shutdown between individual Australian states. These are three rare instances where the public learned about individuals' exceptions that they ought to be treated according to an order that is above the law. All occurred in societies that de jure guarantee equality before the law. The demand for privilege as an order above the law is usually not about applying the law, but about revoking the rights of those who do not "deserve" these privileges, and the granting of special treatment to those who do. This understanding of rights as a privilege—is at the crux of the current Republican effort to limit the voting rights of minorities. It also goes hand in hand with the rejection of climate change legislation, other movement restrictions, or mask enforcement during the pandemic.¹⁴

Normalization of Precarity

Punishment, conversely, is certain for those whose status does not exempt them from observing the same rules as everyone else. Penalty strikes preferentially at groups located at the bottom of racial and class

¹² PM's "partygate": Timeline of a very British scandal, 2022, December 1, France 24.

¹³ After a four-day long standoff between Australian authorities and Djokovic's lawyers, during which Djokovic was confined in an immigration detention hotel, officials rejected his exemption to Australia's strict vaccination rules and canceled his visa.

¹⁴ The extreme right addresses this "atmospheric dread" by at once recognizing that the country—and with it the world—is facing a catastrophe, and at the same time "fabulating an abyss that is less traumatic than the one we actually face"—one whose causes and repair, though painful, are depicted as comparatively simple (Nunes, 2020a).

hierarchies.¹⁵ For example, in 1996 Bill Clinton signed a welfare reform act that ended “welfare as we know it” by shortening the allotted time that people can stay on welfare and introduced mandatory workfare for individuals in need of assistance.¹⁶ The objective of the act was to transition the non-working population to become workers; de facto the act resulted in—what Loïc Wacquant (2014) calls the “post-industrial precariat”—the expulsion of the poor from the welfare rolls and their punishment for their marginalized status. Based on the need to shore up an eroding racial cleavage (seen e.g., in the persistent myth of black welfare queens), movement entrepreneurs reiterate the continuing difference between the people who are identified as white and deserving of welfare and privileges (labeled “rights” in the prevailing rhetoric), and those who do not deserve it (generally labeled “privileges”). This logic goes hand in hand with the rejection of distributive policies because of the propensity of certain (white privileged) groups to hold on to their existing exclusivist status quo.

The prevailing underlying assumption is that life is a “dog-eats-dog fight” in which the canny hustler, admiring Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk and seeing himself as a lone ranger, will defend his barren plot of land against newcomers with guns and fences. The absence of community, society, and the state in this logic leads to the Hobbesian interpretation of the state of nature, “war of every man against every man”, and life as being “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” (Hobbes, 1982, p. 107).¹⁷ This story effectively makes sense to a lot of people because it corresponds clearly to the world as most people encounter it daily—in many ways it resonates with lived experience:

For a lot of people, being told that life is a series of dark trade-offs in a deadly struggle over finite resources does not sound far-fetched at all. What is more, it resonates with the disciplining effect that these experiences actually have: the deeply entrenched feeling that this is all that is possible, that the fundamental facts of how we live could not change. (Nunes, 2020a)

Neoliberalism’s success lies exactly in that the ideology has eradicated community and solidarity in the minds of the majority of American citizens. It also eliminated our creative thinking—about potential alternatives to the current way of life. Thus, life in precarity is experienced as extremely lonely, fragile, and anxiety-producing. Individuals hold the justified assumptions that the system is rigged and that “our lives” are in the hands of a corrupt elite and of technocrats who have no concern for common folk. Within late neoliberalism and with the momentous popularity of social media, it is not surprising that community is understood as dead and feelings of solidarity are rare and frequently misdirected toward managers and proprietors.

¹⁵ Punishment has become the response not to criminality but to social insecurity that is generated by the precarization of wage labor and the resulting mass anxiety. More than 1.2 million people were imprisoned in the U.S. in 2020 (Duffin, 2021). This number exploded from about 300,000 imprisoned persons in 1980 (Carmichael, 1991).

¹⁶ The welfare reform act’s title is Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWOR), which created Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). PRWOR mandated work requirements after two years of assistance, instituted a five-year limit, created state controlled funding, rewarded work with performance bonuses, and required participation in unpaid work (APSE).

¹⁷ Regarding future scenarios and the pending global climate crisis, the extreme right’s arguments focus on resource wars and the notion that we can protect ourselves by barricading ourselves into our fortresses, purging them of those who are unwanted—foreigners, LGBTQ+ residents, and communists—and securing us from the influx of migrants and refugees. Consequently, even if resources are dwindling, we will be able to sustain our lifestyle and defend it a bit longer, no matter the costs. It is indeed a “soft landing” (The Dig, 1:04) into the state of nature, that the extreme right is promising, albeit one that is a fantasy.

Negative Solidarity

To the extent that we can speak of solidarity today it makes more sense to speak of negative solidarity, a resentful reversal of the original where potential allies (e.g. workers, minorities, the disenfranchised) are seen as free-loading liabilities, and rights turn into costly privileges for others because they are seen as distorting the iron laws of supply and demand (Vrasti & Michelsen, 2017). Jason Read (2013) defines negative solidarity as “an aggressively enraged sense of injustice”, committed to the idea that, “because I must endure,” for example, increasingly austere working conditions with wage freezes, a loss of benefits, a declining pension pot, the erasure of job security and increasing precarity, so must everyone else, too. In labor policy terms, this is often expressed through the articulation of frustration with existing rights often defined as privileges, e.g., regarding affirmative action, pensions, or health care. Curiously, it becomes an argument against those who—despite the odds—have been able to hold on to such basic standards of living.

In her case study of Louisiana, Arlie Hochschild (2016) describes this phenomenon as the “Great Paradox”. The downwardly mobile members of the white middle class, while experiencing corporate economic and environmental exploitation, feel cheated by the government that, they feel, seeks to support other groups, rather than them. The Louisiana residents she describes are triply marginalized by flat or falling wages, rapid demographic change, and liberal culture that, they feel, mocks their faith and patriotism. What unites Hochschild’s subjects is the powerful feeling that others are “cutting in line” and that the federal government is supporting people on the dole—“taking money from the workers and giving it to the idle”. What is typical for negative solidarity is the affect of resentment, the distinct sense that someone somewhere is benefiting at one’s own expense. Negative solidarity is a concept that is based upon the chimera of extreme individualism and total self-reliance, and encapsulates the logic that in times of neoliberal precarity, people who lack access to certain social and economic benefits, begrudge those who have access to these, and want them to lose these benefits. Income is flowing up, but the anger aims down. This unlearning of solidarity diminishes the possibilities of the social-democratic workers’ movement in the USA and it also reveals the blow which democracy has received under neoliberalism (Vrasti & Michelsen, 2017).

Thus, for many, community and solidarity have become irrelevant in their daily hustle for survival. Instead of standing for everyone and to strive for solidarity with other workers, the right to unionize, consequentially to have a say in labor negotiations, in states such as Illinois and other right-to-work states Americans articulate strong opposition to health care for all, pension benefits, longer, more substantive unemployment benefits and so forth. Jason Read (2013) summarizes this phenomenon in the following way: “There is no aspiration, no hope for a better condition, the only way we can collectively move is down.”

Negative solidarity comes naturally to a society enthralled in extreme individualism, punitivism, and the valorization of special privileges above the law, where social institutions are distrusted and the middle class has experienced a long process of pauperization over the past 50 years. During the Trump years, however, the negative solidarity that has been cemented in the American psyche became in many ways the prevailing view of how the neoliberal order functions.

Conclusion

Although neoliberal rhetoric revolves around extreme rugged individualism (from the self-made millionaire to the daily hustler), neoliberal policies, such as favoring corporations and the super-rich in the

American tax code, and subsidizing mortgages for the upper middle-class while cutting welfare programs for the working poor, remain the most apparent instruments of wealth redistribution from the bottom to the top. The opportunity structures and structural restraints have been made invisible and thus are no longer grasped by most Americans. They have been concealed and deemed irrelevant by decades of preponderant rhetoric by neoliberal economists and other pundits who have chronicled the rise of American hegemony as a product of the Americans rugged individualist drive to succeed, American ingenuity, consumerism, and wealth, rather than a product of cooperation and community.¹⁸

As we've discussed, individualism in neoliberal structures fosters social atomization, which, in turn, leads to the disappearance of social solidarity and the metastasization of egoism and distrust. Building on Rodrigo Nunes' convincing case that the hegemony of neoliberalism is producing right-wing extremist acolytes, this paper has specifically emphasized the grammar of individualism, punitivism, and the valorization of order above the law as key features leading to today's atomized and angry individuals who experience life through a free market-capitalist lens. The importance of society and community is entirely negated, and individual worth is often exclusively measured in consumer goods. In a world perceived as dog-eats-dog, in which individuals hustling to make ends meet no longer recognize the structural handicaps they face, personal successes are seen as exclusively based on self-reliance and entrepreneurial spirit, and personal failures produce misdirected blame. This blame may take a number of forms. Young pink-collar workers may blame themselves. Older-generation angry resentful (white) male workers and their wives experience lives of diminishing returns, have seen the post-Fordist stripping of their privileges, and may scapegoat and feel contempt for poor (often non-white) people because the latter are perceived to have received privileges from government institutions, or to have taken advantage of the system. Some who have listened to right-wing news sources may blame their situation on a mythical "Deep State". Normative claims such as fairness and the sanctity of life (the lives of the living, not the unborn) have long lost their leverage, as, for example, most accepted Patrick's logic that the elderly should sacrifice themselves during the pandemic.

In the Louisiana town studied by Hochschild (2018), where white workers blamed ethnic minorities, such as Mexicans and other Latin American immigrants, and institutions of the state (the so-called "deep state") for their diminished lot, neoliberal corporations were responsible for many of the community members' severe health problems, yet were actually seen as their saviors; many individuals had more loyalty to these corporations than to the institutions of the state (Ray, 2020). These frustrations, of course, are picked up and highlighted by movement entrepreneurs on the extreme right. Thus forms of extreme anti-government politics emerge. This paper has argued that this is an utterly rational response for a population that has been exposed to right-wing disinformation, neoliberal rhetoric, and structures without alternatives, and whose members have been experiencing diminishing economic returns.

The January 6, 2021 event was just the latest expression of the widespread public distrust in the country's democratic institutions. The protestors and insurrectionists of that day are but one small cohort of a much larger group that has been fed a diet of fabricated news by Breitbart, Fox News, and various groups on YouTube, WhatsApp, Facebook, and other social media platforms. While many of the grievances that the members of this

¹⁸ This goes hand in hand with the beliefs of American evangelicals who hold that their Christian God has given the earth and everything living upon it to them for their use; that they are to have dominion over the earth; that everything on earth is given to them by God for their use and benefit, and that God's grace shines upon those evangelical individuals who are the most economically successful.

group have are legitimate, their anger and fury, fueled by crafty movement entrepreneurs, is misdirected against the most fragile and marginalized in the country.

In order to overcome this quagmire, some progressive voices have suggested that a federal program be created that strongly encourages individuals, through financial incentives, to engage with others who are clearly outside of their in-group. Such programs might include volunteer work, for Habitat for Humanity, adult literacy and ESL teaching or to help the newly arrived Afghan refugee families, Guatemalan migrants, or Haitian asylum seekers figure out how to register children for school and kindergarten, find and make appointments with doctors, or get a driver's license. All of these activities expose individuals to prolonged engagement with people they would not meet in their normal everyday lives.

These activities could all be part of a federal program that consists of a service year for young people (not unlike conscription service in the army in countries such as Israel), frequent service activities (not unlike the National Guard) for mid-career individuals, and age-appropriate service and humanitarian activities for retired cohorts (who already give a lot of their time for special causes but might receive additional incentives, as might be the mid-career volunteers, through tax breaks). While the costs of this program would be minimal, its effects on the American public, if continued for a couple of decades, could be enormous.

Both the media landscape and especially public and higher education need to be restructured in order to provide venues for genuinely educating the public. Adult education programs that target overcoming the current influence of conspiracy theories and "alternate facts" could be promulgated. Only an educated public can identify and see through the work of skilled movement entrepreneurs. Of course, in a world where hustling to survive is seen as natural, it might be difficult to get much traction for such programs, but incentives, such as offering extra days off from work, or more days to work from home, could encourage people to participate. In addition to providing the American public with a much needed opportunity to learn about the prevailing landscape of disinformation, this might also give people the space to begin to imagine alternatives to the current neoliberal system, that in many ways has been labeled as immutable, all-encompassing, and supreme.

None of these programs will be easy to implement. A large, vocal, and voting cohort of the American public opposes redistributive policies (unaware that current policies redistribute to the wealthy and corporations) and would rather hold on to older special privileges that are based on race and gender; this perspective is exemplified by January 6 rioter Jenna Ryan's tweet about being blond and white and not having done anything wrong. Diminishing returns even for the middle class have created a world in which the dog-eats-dog fight is perceived as the natural order of things. Extreme individualism fosters social atomization, which, in turn, leads to the disappearance of social solidarity and the dominance of egoism and distrust. But there is a way to counteract this: Humans are, above all, social beings, and, given the opportunity, would be happy to leave their isolation and engage with others in order to broaden their horizons and life experiences.

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