

The Cultural Contradictions of Neoliberalism:

The Longing for an Alternative Order and the Future of Multiracial Democracy in an Age of Authoritarianism

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Executive Summary

Neoliberalism—the ideological, economic, and cultural paradigm that has reigned in the United States and around the world since the 1970s—is under siege. Progressives have offered a compelling alternative vision for how a post-neoliberal economy and government should work, and they have scored notable policy successes in recent years. The post-neoliberal Right, by contrast, has focused less on policy and more on culture, promoting an alternative moral order and vision of the good life that has energized a mass movement and threatens multiracial democracy in the US.

In this report, we make five connected arguments. **First, we argue that neoliberalism must be understood not only as a policy project but also—equally—as a cultural project.** The key tenets of neoliberalism—the focus on the “rational,” self-interested individual as the fundamental unit of social analysis; the idea that free markets are a panacea; a preoccupation with personal responsibility and self-reliance; and the emphasis on an individual’s “freedom to choose”—have shaped and been supported by a range of cultural practices, beliefs, and worldviews. These include “grind culture,” the shaming of those viewed as having failed to succeed in the market, and the ubiquitous, individualistic life strategies, like self-improvement, that people have adopted to try to “make it,” or at least mitigate the risks of failure.

Second, we argue that we are living in a landscape of the cultural wreckage brought about by neoliberal policies and ideology. Mounting despair, mental health problems, overwork, addiction, loneliness and social isolation, and internalized shame are some of the profound negative social and psychological consequences of the neoliberal order.

Third, we argue that neoliberalism as a cultural project is increasingly unpersuasive and unsatisfying to many people. Neoliberalism’s failures have engendered a deep longing to meet needs not satisfied in neoliberal society, such as the need for community and belonging, for safety, for agency, for understanding, and for feeling good. To meet these needs, millions of people have developed and used various life strategies, some of which reconcile them to the neoliberal order, while others offer the promise of escape or alternative social arrangements. We focus on four archetypical cultural figures who have arisen in response to the failures of neoliberalism: 1) **strivers**, who commonly participate in **wellness and self-help culture** as a way of both adapting to and finding refuge from the harsh demands of neoliberal society; 2) **innovators**, who seek and create **community-centered arrangements** that satisfy desires for the kinds of social connection that are undermined by neoliberalism; 3) **dropouts**, who **withdraw** into private worlds, sometimes ones of private pleasures and sometimes ones of privatized despair; and 4) **rebels**, who solve for the failures of neoliberalism by participating in **movements that challenge the established order**, sometimes from the Left but more often from the Right.

Fourth, we argue that, compared to the Left, the Right has been far more strategic and successful in engaging with these four cultural responses to neoliberalism. This report focuses on a specific strategic avenue embraced by the Right in its mobilization efforts: its engagement with and weaponization of cultural responses to the failures of neoliberalism as a means for shaping worldviews, manufacturing consent, and recruiting individuals into its movements, all while speaking to people’s day-to-day concerns, lived experiences, and discontents. Diverse figures and movements such as Jordan Peterson, QAnon, JP Sears, and MAGA itself address certain needs not met by neoliberal culture while recruiting people to the far-right project. By adopting a “culture-first” orientation to politics, the post-neoliberal Right has used this cultural raw material as a vehicle for socializing its political vision. By contrast—and we believe less politically effectively—the Left has taken a narrower, more technocratic approach that focuses on policy agendas as a means of mobilization and recruitment.

Lastly, we argue that progressives must meet the widespread longing for alternatives on the terrain of culture if they are to compete successfully against the authoritarian vision of the post-neoliberal Right. Progressives must understand that longing to be the energetic taproot for any liberatory politics. This will require a dramatic renovation of organizing orthodoxies, progressive policy, and cultural habits on the Left. We find signposts for a path forward in the practices of past movements and today’s progressive organizations that are charting new ways forward.

Introduction

Nearly a century ago, Italian revolutionary and theorist Antonio Gramsci famously wrote from a fascist prison: “The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear” (Gramsci 1971).

Today, though far from dead, the old is slowly dying. Its grip is formidable, but neoliberalism—the political and economic order we’ve been living with for a half century—is embattled (Gerstle 2022; [Wong 2020](#)). As a policy project, neoliberalism is taking a beating from both left and right ([Slobodian 2022](#)). Less widely discussed, neoliberalism as a cultural project is also under enormous strain.

As historian Alex Zakaras (2022) has recently argued, the core myths of American individualism—the “independent proprietor,” the “rights bearer,” and the “self-made man”—date to the Jacksonian era. But in the neoliberal era, individualism reached a kind of ideological crescendo, expressed tartly by conservative UK prime minister Margaret Thatcher’s pronouncement that “there’s no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look after themselves first” ([Thatcher 1987](#)).

Plenty of people still subscribe in whole or in part to neoliberalism’s core credo of individual effort in a meritocratic society leading to success, security, and happiness ([Morgan and Steinbaum 2018](#); Sandel 2020). But increasing numbers of people are chafing against the “cruel optimism” (Berlant 2011) of the existing system. They see that following neoliberalism’s rules doesn’t produce well-being or a sense of security for most people—or even for many of the winners—because the system is rigged. And yet, individuals remain stuck in the old, desperately trying to cope with, escape, or transcend neoliberal paradigms with the same tools and life strategies that reinforce the ideology. The new cannot be born.

In the shadow of neoliberalism’s failures, a profound longing for an alternative order has taken hold across American society, expressing itself in a range of cultural counterreactions and adaptations to neoliberalism. In this report, we focus on four of these developments and the respective archetypical figures who tend to subscribe to them. Some of these developments, like the focus on self-care, the rise of mega fandom, and the surge in privatized entertainment, are ubiquitous. Others, like the opioid crisis, collective living, and sectarian strife in progressive organizations, are less so. These cultural counterreactions and adaptations to neoliberalism are embodied by a variety of cultural figures, some of whom are more conventional, like the entrepreneur obsessed with productivity and life hacking. Others are bizarre amalgamations of seemingly contradictory elements, like the QAnon Shaman or the supplement-popping, suburban yoga mom “red-pilled” into far-right conspiracy politics and vaccine denial (with the latter proving to have empirically notable consequences [[Sun 2023](#)]).

Strivers buy into the neoliberal worldview, at least in part—but they desperately need soothing to soften its rough edges, which show up in their lived experience as a lack of time, community connections, or meaning. They most commonly resort to **wellness and self-help culture**, turning the cultural tools of neoliberalism on the project of finding solace and working even harder to discover the right combination of products, classes, gurus, self-help books, or mantras that might soothe the ache at the center of their lives. The techniques strivers adopt often act either as a portal into political apathy by focusing their attention on themselves or, increasingly, as a channel into right-wing politics. This is because striving accommodates individuals to the neoliberal paradigm; it mainly functions as a way to remake the self in service of the broader neoliberal project—by making oneself more productive, more marketable, and more self-reliant. Yet striving can include some rebellious elements as well, particularly when it turns to soothing the hurt inflicted under the neoliberal order. While these rebellious elements are not the dominant characteristics of striving, they do sit alongside its more common, conformist dimensions, making for a contradictory mix of beliefs and practices that often end up being embraced by the same individual.

Innovators turn to **community-centered arrangements** to try to craft alternative ways of living—in collective living projects, new spiritual movements, support groups, cooperatives, mutual aid, or cult-like communities, both offline and online, that provide the substance or semblance of an alternative moral order. At their most extreme and under the command of a charismatic leader, community-centered arrangements can morph into abusive cults or organized pyramid schemes, like NXIVM or the Church of Scientology. But there are far more examples of alternative communities that are less extreme and not necessarily problematic. These arrangements are growing in number and hold different orientations to politics.

Dropouts tend to take a **despair-driven response** to the injuries of neoliberalism, seeing themselves or the system as failures and finding ways to numb or extinguish the pain—through abuse of substances (such as opioids, which provide the sense of connection and safety people understandably crave), or in extreme cases, suicide (the rate of which has grown by about 30 percent over the past two decades [[Garnett, Curtain, and Stone 2022](#)]). Dropping out also has less dramatic cultural expressions of withdrawing, such as declining labor force participation among some demographic groups ([US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2023](#)), abstaining from watching the news or keeping up with current events, and the explosion of privatized entertainment, from gaming to binge-watching.

Rebels find community through **rebellious politics**, most prominently in the peculiar combination of joy and rage that characterizes the MAGA movement. On the Left, for a far smaller group of people, the rise of sectarianism and intraorganizational strife is in its own way a morbid response to these times—turning rage at systemic failures against proximate targets who are thought to have betrayed the faith, and finding community among like-minded dissidents ([Mitchell 2022](#)). (Gramsci observed similar internecine left conflict in his times as the old order crumbled: In fact, he may have used the phrase “morbid symptoms” to refer to the ultra-left turn of the Italian Communist Party, rather than to the rise of fascism [[Achcar 2022](#)].)

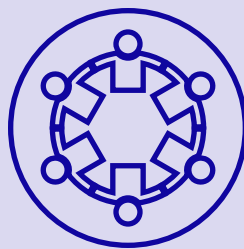
These archetypes and the cultural responses they embody are useful in understanding the impulses arising as a response to the cultural crisis of neoliberalism—but they do not describe entirely separate groups of people or cultural developments. Most individuals carry DNA from each of these breeds, and most still believe to some degree in neoliberalism’s failed promise of happiness and success through individual effort alone (even if we ideologically disagree, our everyday practices usually, and often necessarily, affirm the ideology). Some progressives regard the odd or dangerous cultish beliefs held by millions of Americans with bemusement or contempt. But all of us are cultural Frankensteins, of necessity patching together disparate cultural resources to make sense of and forge a path through these tumultuous times. While certain trends and movements must be challenged, it remains true that we need to approach the strange (sometimes morbid) subcultures that have emerged—and especially the people seeking meaning and solace in them—with curiosity. We cannot successfully engage with people whose inner lives we do not even try to understand.

Four Archetypes’ Reactions to Neoliberalism



Strivers

Wellness and self-help culture



Innovators

Community-centered arrangements



Dropouts

Despair-driven response



Rebels

Rebellious politics

At the root of much of the striving, innovating, dropping out, and rebelling is a simple and profound emotional impulse—a longing for an alternative way of being and living that is more satisfying.¹ No matter the dysfunctional, strange, or antisocial nature of some of the specific responses, the longing itself must be understood as the energetic taproot for any liberatory politics and as a potential threat to the established order. The antidemocratic Right has harnessed this longing to fuel tribal, racist, and patriarchal politics—often organizing through avenues that meet people’s social and emotional needs, such as popular culture ([Fisher 2021](#)) and religion ([Dias and Graham 2023](#); [Dias 2023](#)). The Left has, for the most part, focused its fire on the policy failures of neoliberalism and proposed credible alternatives in that realm, but has largely failed to engage with the deeper human needs and the cultural byproducts of the neoliberal project that the Right is increasingly tapping into. It is critical, however, that progressives craft responses that speak more directly to the longing itself and are grounded in an alternative vision of the good life that can be lived, at least in part, in the here and now.

I. The Cultural Wreckage of Neoliberalism

Decades of neoliberalism have produced deep dissatisfaction with the state of the world and a consequent yearning for something better. Millions of people live paycheck to paycheck, struggling to meet their basic needs, and economic insecurity has not abated despite promises that if people work hard and do their best, they’ll climb their way up the socioeconomic ladder. The failures of neoliberalism as a policy project—a shrinking middle class, the usurpation of worker power at the hands of shareholders and executives, and intensifying economic precarity—are well documented ([Konczal, Milani, and Evans 2020](#); [Hathaway 2020](#)). Liberals and progressives in politics, academia, and outside social movements have demonstrated how neoliberal policies like deregulation, slashed taxes, and privatization have undermined democracy, frayed social safety nets, produced staggering economic inequality, and—contrary to promises about unleashing the “magic of the market”—led to falling economic growth rates ([Gamble and Banerji 2017](#); [Almeida and Martín 2022](#); [Hopkin 2020](#); [Mitchell and Holmberg 2023](#)). Other work has shown that neoliberalism has, from the outset, been a racialized project—with particularly harsh consequences for communities of color ([Strickland and Wong 2021](#); [Goldberg 2008](#); [Hamilton 2019](#)).

But considerably less attention has been paid to the damage of neoliberalism as a cultural project.² As political theorist Wendy Brown explains, “neoliberalism . . . has not only produced new inequalities, but new *insecurities* through the precarity of work and life” ([Brown 2017](#), emphasis added). Rampant rhetoric endorsing individualism, competition, and personal choice have cultivated feelings of personal inadequacy and shame as people strive, but so often fail, to make ends meet and get ahead. The result has been increased psychological distress, disconnection and isolation, and social atomization ([Parramore 2022](#)).

At the psychological level, neoliberalism produces and reinforces the same tendencies underpinning liberal individualism: an emphasis on personal growth, fulfillment, and affect management for self-regulation ([Becker, Hartwich, and Haslam 2021](#)). The ideology holds that pursuit of these ideals will lead to human flourishing and happiness ([Adams et al. 2019](#); [Becker, Hartwich, and Haslam 2021](#)). But because the philosophy of neoliberalism maintains that *homo neoliberalus*, or the “neoliberal self,” is an entrepreneurial subject, personal growth and fulfillment are said to be attained through competition with others ([Scharff 2016](#); [Becker, Hartwich, and Haslam](#)

1 The desire for a more satisfying life is, of course, not unique to our present moment in time. But we believe that the acute mismatch—between this longing for an alternative way of being and the everyday reality of contemporary life—is what makes this moment in time relatively novel, and the need for a strong progressive response particularly urgent.

2 Our main focus in this report is on *mass* culture, rather than elite political culture, though it is worth noting that the latter has also suffered significant negative consequences in the era of neoliberalism’s ascendancy. In particular, neoliberal elite political culture tends to embrace an ostensibly “values-neutral” approach to policymaking, wherein policymakers are only taken seriously if they speak in the language of economics, without taking other values and priorities into account—for example, equality, fairness, or universalism (Popp Berman 2022).

2021). This positioning of interpersonal competition as a key ingredient for personal growth and fulfillment can diminish well-being because it places sole responsibility for success on individuals, while reducing broadening solidarities that might act as buffers against failure (Teo 2018; Adams et al. 2019; Becker, Hartwich, and Haslam 2021; Scharff 2016). As Rustin (2014) has commented on the self-destructive elements of neoliberal ideology and practice, “[w]here relational needs are unmet, and respect and recognition to people are denied, human capacities will be undermined. The anxieties arising from failures of dependency and trust will impact both on the most obvious ‘failures’ in competitive environments, but also on those who appear successful.”

Relatedly, neoliberalism’s emphasis on the individual—and in its purest form, repudiation of the broader, collective society—can undermine strong social ties and a sense of community, both of which are critical to maintaining mental health, combating mental disorders, and even promoting physical health (Zeira 2022; Martino, Pegg, and Frates 2017). We can see our social ties weakening in the decades-long downward trend in attachment to institutions, like church, unions, and workplaces, that once helped foster social connections (Jones 2019; Feiveson 2023). Throughout different areas of life, Americans’ sense of belonging—defined as a subjective feeling that an individual is an important part of their surrounding systems, from friends and family, to work environments, school, and community, to cultural groups and physical spaces (Hagerty et al. 1992)—is generally low. For example, 64 percent of Americans report non-belonging³ in the workplace, 74 percent report non-belonging in their local community, and 68 percent report non-belonging in the nation (Argo and Sheikh 2023). A lower but still unsettling percentage of Americans report non-belonging in more intimate circles, among families (40 percent) and friends (44 percent) (Argo and Sheikh 2023). These figures are worrisome, as it is well established that belonging is a basic human need that all people seek to satisfy (Allen et al. 2021; Maslow 1954; Baumeister and Leary 1995; Deci and Ryan 2009).

Similarly, isolation and loneliness have generally been trending upward.⁴ In 2021, nearly half of Americans reported having three or fewer close friends, compared to just over a quarter of Americans reporting the same in 1990 (Cox 2021a). The isolation spurred by the pandemic made matters worse (Kovacs et al. 2021), but even before COVID-19 changed our social worlds, 43 percent of Americans reported feeling isolated from others, and 39 percent reported feeling they were no longer close to *anyone* (Jackson and Ballard 2018). These developments are concerning because loneliness and isolation can have devastating effects on well-being (NASEM 2020; HHS 2023a; Denman 2019; Bowler 2020). Growing evidence shows that loneliness is associated with the onset or exacerbation of a range of mental health and physical problems (Meltzer et al. 2013; Santini et al. 2020; Bell et al. 2023; Hawkley and Capitanio 2015). Mann et al. (2022), for example, found that lonelier adults have more than twice the risk of developing depression, while other evidence shows positive correlations between loneliness and poor sleep quality, impaired immunity, poor cardiovascular health, accelerated cognitive decline, and impaired executive function (Hawkley and Capitanio 2015). The epidemic of loneliness is likely related to growing rates of unhappiness, which has been trending upward since 1990 (Case and Deaton 2021). By 2021, just 19 percent of Americans indicated that they felt “very happy”—the lowest level reported since 1972, when the General Social Survey began asking the question (GSS 2022).

Corporate social media has fueled the cycles of isolation and shame that the cultural narratives of neoliberalism produce. To be sure, social media usage is associated with some psychological benefits, such as increased peer support and social connections that may come from inclusion in online communities (Naslund et al. 2020). But at the same time, mounting evidence points to correlations between social media usage and a range of negative effects on well-being, particularly among young people, girls, and heavy users, including increased depression (Lin et al. 2016), perceived social isolation (Primack et al. 2017), body image dissatisfaction (Papageorgiou, Fisher, and Cross 2022), and social comparison and low self-esteem (Jan, Soomro, and Ahmad 2017). As the internet, corporate social media, and other technological developments have advanced, the attention economy has exploded. Human attention is viewed as a scarce commodity for companies to compete for and profit from, with harmful effects on cognitive function, mental health, social relationships, and privacy (Orlowski 2020).

3 [Argo and Sheikh \(2023\)](#) use “non-belonging” as an umbrella term that includes feelings of both exclusion—lacking a desired connection to a given environment—and ambiguity—feeling neither a sense of belonging nor exclusion.

4 It should be noted, however, that despite this general upward trend, loneliness levels have recently improved after reaching an apex during the pandemic ([Witters 2023](#)).

Neoliberalism has also eroded community care networks and public care systems, further adding to the crisis of isolation. Caregivers have long been undervalued both economically and socially, with notably gendered and racialized consequences. Neoliberal policies, like weakened labor protections and the rise of gig platforms, have made matters worse ([Mabud and Forden 2018](#)). Financialized capitalism has prevented care from becoming a public responsibility, with the burden of care for children, the elderly, and people with disabilities falling on communities, families, and individuals, who lack the time and resources to absorb these growing demands ([Fraser 2016](#)). From a cultural and sociopsychological perspective, the hyperindividualistic and competitive orientation of neoliberalism, paired with its concrete policy agenda, has had downstream effects on how we relate to and care for one another, fundamentally warping our outlook on humanity and our sense of responsibility to each other.

Our relationship to time and work have also become distorted under neoliberalism. The economic precarity and inequality produced by neoliberal policies has driven people to work harder and longer to make ends meet. But the ideology of neoliberalism itself also inherently encourages overwork. As Pendenza and Lamattina ([2018](#)) explain:

For the neoliberals, “freedom” is synonymous with “market freedom” and, precisely because of this, they conceive of society as a place where new individuals are shaped whose *modus vivendi* is based on self-entrepreneurship and on encouraging the acquisition of resources in the interest of personal success in a competitive regime.

Under this system, a culture of self-commodification dominates, and individuals’ worth and success are bound up with the amount of time, energy, and labor they invest in the marketplace. As a result, neoliberal “grind culture” tells us overwork is something to be proud of, praised, and sought out ([Lufkin 2021](#)). As Fleming (2019) suggests, neoliberalism has eroded employees’ boundaries between work and their private lives, virtually creating a mandatory ethic of overwork ([Telford and Briggs 2021](#)).⁵ Time poverty—a term researchers use to describe the conflicting claims on time that hamper individuals’ freedom to allocate their time toward activities that enhance well-being ([Vickery 1977](#); [Rodgers forthcoming](#); Hirway 2010)—is pervasive, as people of virtually all socioeconomic backgrounds,⁶ and women in particular ([Rodgers forthcoming](#)), have little free time (Markovits 2019). People experiencing time poverty are subject to a range of negative consequences on their quality of relationships, mental health, work performance, subjective well-being, and creativity ([Giurge, Whillans, and West 2020](#)). Moreover, the ill effects of time poverty go beyond the individual experiencing it; time poverty is also detrimental at the organizational, institutional, and societal levels ([Giurge, Whillans, and West 2020](#)).

Relatedly, burnout—a psychological experience marked by emotional exhaustion, decreased personal accomplishment, and feelings of cynicism ([Koutsimani, Montgomery, and Georganta 2019](#))—has become increasingly common ([M. Smith 2023](#); [Bocheliuk et al. 2020](#); Petersen 2021). A Gallup report found that 76 percent of employees experience burnout at work at least sometimes, and 28 percent reported “always” or “very often” feeling burnt out on the job ([Gallup 2020](#)). Growing burnout is significant because the phenomenon has been shown to contribute to a range of physical, psychological, social, and occupational problems ([Salvagioni et al. 2017](#); [Wekenborg et al. 2022](#)).

These cultural features of neoliberalism have been devastating to individuals and society at large, but with notable exceptions progressive critiques of the neoliberal order have largely focused on its *policy* failures.

5 Fleming (2019, 10-11) describes how overwork affects individuals’ lives outside of work, and how it insidiously funnels employees back into the workplace as a means of escaping the negative consequences overwork produces in their home lives:

A suicidal work ethic needs an external domain (e.g., the home, family life, friends, etc.), untouched by the formal workplace in order to absorb its shocks. A lot of unpaid labour has to occur to shore up the “official” workplace. The separation is attractive to capitalism because the boss can work you into the ground and have someone else deal with the aftermath. That’s why the crisis of work is also a crisis of the household.

As overwork transforms the home into a living nightmare (bickering about bills, unhappy children, Sky News), many react by *escaping into work*, embracing the very thing that caused the trouble to start with. The vicious cycle escalates, of course. It can go on like that for years. Now life merely consists of passing between Hell One (the home) and Hell Two (the workplace) and not much more.

6 The term “money-rich, time-poor” has been coined as a descriptor for those who, despite enjoying a relatively higher socioeconomic status, still find themselves facing the negative effects of having limited free time.

These cultural features of neoliberalism have been devastating to individuals and society at large, but with notable exceptions progressive critiques of the neoliberal order have largely focused on its *policy* failures. The right, by contrast, has been thin or incoherent in its policy response, but muscular in its use of moral panics and culture war politics to speak (usually inaccurately, but nonetheless convincingly) to the pervasive cultural sense of unease and longing for alternatives.

II. The Cultural Expressions of Longing

Longing for what exactly? The cultural destruction inflicted by neoliberalism has five main characteristics, each producing a longing for its opposite. First, detachment and isolation have made us yearn for community and belonging. Second, manufactured precarity, real and invented threats, and capitalist propaganda have bred fear, insecurity, and a consequent desire for safety (the rise in gun ownership and the desire for “safe spaces” are paradoxically part of the same trend). Third, increasingly consolidated power at the upper echelons of our society and economy has produced real and perceived powerlessness over our conditions, and people crave a sense of empowerment, agency, and control over their lives. Fourth, rapid change and the obvious failure of major institutions in society have left us questioning how the world works and fostered a desire for understanding and clear, simple explanations. And fifth—perhaps above all—we yearn to simply *feel good* in a world that so often makes us feel bad.

As the longing has grown stronger, it has fueled the growing popularity of various cultural movements and trends—essentially cultural counterreactions or adaptations (or both) to neoliberalism—that speak to the desire for something better, or at least for relief.

Five Tides of Longing



Strivers and Wellness and Self-Help (WASH) Culture

Because the feeling of longing is omnipresent throughout different substrates of society and among people from all walks of life, how it expresses itself can and does vary greatly, often by race, class, gender, and other identity markers. But our main focus is on a widespread cultural manifestation, at this point fully a part of the mainstream and embraced by strivers: the growing preoccupation with wellness and self-help, or what we call “WASH” for short. WASH consists of contemporary wellness culture and the traditional self-help movement, two overlapping trends that have amassed widespread cultural relevance as strivers look for ways to make sense of the world, assert control and agency over their lives, feel good, and find community and safety.⁷

Ironically, as the WASH response has become the cultural default of contemporary American culture, it has in some ways worked to reinforce the same, preexisting, dominant social order it was initially reacting to. The discontent fueling strivers’ embrace of WASH culture thus ends up upholding the neoliberal project. And so while WASH may appear to be apolitical, neoliberal ideology has come to insidiously infiltrate it to the point that the WASH response and the strivers who buy into it tend to reinforce individualism and deflect attention from systemic solutions.

Self-help focuses on the improvement and ultimate success of the self and presses the individual to change to thrive in the system as it is. Its appeal is significant, with the self-improvement and personal growth market in the US reaching \$13.4 billion in 2022 ([Marketdata LLC 2023](#)). Books like *Atomic Habits* (Clear 2018), *You Are a Badass* (Sincero 2013), and *The 5 AM Club* (Sharma 2018) line bestseller shelves in bookstores across the country. Between 2013 and 2019, the sale of self-help books in the US grew annually by 11 percent, with total self-help book titles nearly tripling from 30,897 to 85,253 ([Curcio 2022](#)). Similarly, podcasts that give advice on how to live your best life and bring the best version of yourself to your career and relationships regularly make top charts on streaming platforms. Self-help tells us that while each of us have a good bit of room for improvement and growth, we hold the potential to reach our highest selves. Just diligently follow the advice of self-help gurus and motivational speakers—advice that tends to be heavily centered around establishing good daily habits, a challenging exercise and diet regime, and meticulous time management skills—and things will all fall into place.

The self-help craze responds to the longing tide by promising achievement of higher functioning, a sense of mastery of the world, and order and control over one’s life. It also offers strivers a sense of safety in an uncertain world: Heed the advice of the self-help gurus, and you’ll never have to worry about money again, your relationships will thrive, your finances will improve, and your career will advance. You’ll be proud of the person you’ve become and the life you’ve built for yourself, and you’ll finally be happy and secure.

As a mainstream cultural preoccupation, self-help has cross-class appeal. For the upper and middle-upper classes, self-help culture often presents as an obsession with optimization, productivity, life hackery, and additionally for women, “#girlbossing.” The prevalence of “thought leadership,” TED Talks, motivational content encouraging entrepreneurship, routine-setting, and fitness, as well as platforms like Masterclass, is also a marker of self help’s upper and middle-upper class reach. For the middle and working classes, cultural touchstones range from the “prosperity gospel,” to participation in multilevel marketing ([Bäckman and Hanspal 2022](#)), to Rhonda Byrne’s (2006) best-selling book *The Secret*, to Oprah and her endorsement of positive thinking as the solution to struggle. (Oprah’s influence in perpetuating WASH culture is hard to overstate; for decades, the cultural icon has played a defining role in promoting and sometimes even creating a range of wellness and self-help gurus, products, practices, lifestyles, and belief systems. Her platforming power is so great that some have dubbed the boost in sales and career-enhancing influence guests on her show have experienced as the “Oprah Effect” [[Halton 2022](#)].)

Self-help has deep roots in American history. The 19th century “New Thought” movement offered an amalgam of transcendentalism, Darwinism, Christianity, occultism, and Eastern philosophy that promised to unleash, as William James put it, the “all-saving power of healthy-minded attitudes” (Horowitz 2017). In the mid-20th

7 Interestingly, the cultural preoccupation with WASH has grown as religious disaffiliation increases ([Pew Research Center 2022](#)) and church membership declines ([Jones 2019](#))—making it plausible that some of the values, beliefs, rituals, and practices of WASH culture act as something of a substitute to religion for some WASH adherents. In fact, about 22 percent of Americans identify as spiritual—arguably a key element of contemporary WASH culture—but not religious ([Alper et al. 2023](#)). But more evidence is needed to substantiate the claim that “spirituality” is replacing “religiosity,” and the two are not mutually exclusive ([Alper et al. 2023](#)).

century, New Thought's most prominent heir, the Protestant minister Norman Vincent Peale, became best known for the 1952 bestseller that summed up his message: *The Power of Positive Thinking* (Peale 1952). Peale's sunny gospel casts a long shadow over our society today. Through his friend, the billionaire John Templeton, Peale was immensely influential on the rise of positive psychology, or the so-called "science of happiness" (despite most psychologists' efforts to disavow him), as well as on less academic forms of self-help. And as the minister to the Trump family who officiated Donald J. Trump's first two weddings, Peale is also credited—or notorious for being—the man whose glorification of self-esteem "taught Trump to worship himself" (Blair 2015).

Similarly, consider the contemporary notion of the American dream and its pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps, self-starter ethos—an ethos that is not too different from the one embraced by strivers (Diamond 2018). This ruggedly individualistic, do-it-yourself attitude is emblematic of neoliberalism's affinity with the self-help movement. Indeed, while the cultural preoccupation with self-reliance and self-improvement predates neoliberalism, it works today to turbocharge the reach and promise of self-help. Self-help serves up practices that assimilate workers into capitalist society, even as its promise of mobility and success legitimize the dominant order. This has resulted in the lines between neoliberal grind culture and the self-help movement becoming so murky that it's hard to prise the two apart. The self-help guru and the rags-to-riches entrepreneur have become one and the same⁸ as neoliberalism has benefited from and reinforced self-help's functioning as a tool to hustle harder, smarter, and faster.

Wellness is related to self-help but differs in some important ways. As sociologist Stephanie Alice Baker (2022) explains, wellness has countercultural foundations in the hippie, civil rights and Black Panther, human potential, and antipsychiatry movements of the mid-20th century. (Wellness also has roots on the Right, discussed below, that are being successfully exploited today.) As a consequence, strands of wellness culture hold rebellious potential.

"Wellness" and "self-care" have today been largely reduced to marketing buzzwords, but some of these movements originally conceived of these concepts as liberatory modes of living that would advance self-preservation and quash internalized systemic oppression, down to the bodily level. For the Black Panthers and other social movements and activists during the 1960s and 1970s, for example, self-care was not merely the individual act of tending to oneself; instead, "it was a political act that sought to reclaim bodily autonomy [and] affirmed health as a basic, universal human right" (Baker 2022). And as radical queer theorist Audre Lorde wrote in the late 1980s after receiving a cancer diagnosis for the second time, "[c]aring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare" (Lorde 1988). For feminists in this era, women's health was part of the project of collective liberation. (The extraction of self-care from its original, community-oriented and highly politicized context has been damaging and confusing in movement contexts, leading in some cases to "selfish care."⁹)

Hippies, likewise, embraced a version of wellness that was more explicitly rebellious than today's wellness culture, though also more individualistic than the variants of wellness found in the civil rights and the Black Panther movements. Hippies saw self-transformation as a necessary antecedent to social transformation, and thus tended to focus on doing inner work to transform the self, rather than turning to collective political action (Baker 2022). In fact, as opposed to other countercultural movements of the time, the hippies did not subscribe to a distinct political ideology, but rather embraced a "politics of no politics" (Rorabaugh 2015). Their pursuit of self-transformation, spiritual experience, and higher consciousness (Baker 2022), paired with their practice of holistic medicine (Pruitt 2023), "clean eating" (Kauffman 2018), and environmentalism (Anderson 1996), helped shape contemporary wellness culture. Yet their rejection of mainstream authority and culture, consumerism and materialism, and endorsement of peace and nonviolence (Issitt 2009) exemplifies a more rebellious flavor of wellness, at least compared to today's iteration of the movement.

8 See, for example, [VICE 2022](#).

9 The Chinese Progressive Organization's "Operating Values and Culture Document" (2018) argues against "falling into the traps of movement martyrdom or a culture of constant urgency and crisis." But it also says that its emphasis on sustainability "does NOT put the individual at the center" because "if overemphasis is placed on simply meeting individual needs for sustainability without the overall community in mind, this may lead to what we call 'selfish-care': a practice of insuring all an individual's needs are met without other consideration. In a capitalist society, we need to constantly manage the tensions of individual and community needs; this is one of the learning edges in the movement." Excerpted from Bhargava and Luce (2023).

Drifting away from its more rebellious roots, the wellness culture found among today's strivers is heavily influenced by the materialism and individualism of neoliberalism. And yet its countercultural DNA lives on, making for a contradictory cultural movement that is simultaneously mostly conformist but also has a rebellious strand that in some important ways lies in opposition to the established order.

Mainstream wellness culture today offers a range of lifestyles,¹⁰ practices, and rituals, and a worldview that promises to provide relief from a profit-driven, materialistic society. At the same time, "wellness" has become all but synonymous with the \$5.6 trillion dollar global industry ([Johnston, Yeung, and Callender 2023](#)) that bears its name and brings to market a wide range of products, practices, and services that purport to provide the keys to holistic individual well-being. The wellness movement promotes engagement in activities and routines that are supposed to, and sometimes do, make us feel good physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually, from well-known practices like yoga and meditation to the more eccentric ones, like vaginal steaming and quantum healing hypnosis ([Cleveland Clinic 2022](#)).

These practices can be experienced as empowering because they foster a sense of individual agency and capability to take control of one's body and inner world. And yet in a country in which millions are without access to affordable health care, they are for some the only available and tangible solutions to mental health challenges and abject social conditions that impair our quality of life. In this way, mainstream wellness culture offers false utopias; the same practices that empower wellness enthusiasts all too often lead to victim-blaming and distract attention from the systems of power that necessitate self-care in the first place. In its neoliberal incarnation, wellness is shorn of its potential for social transformation—sought after states, like harmony, spiritual well-being,¹¹ balance, and flourishing, are determined by individual actions and are properties of the individual mind and body, primarily attained through market participation. In the absence of safety nets and strong and supportive community ties, participation in a culture that promises individuals control over their own well-being has exploded, cutting across race, class, and gender lines. Today's wellness movement offers an inward-focused rhetoric of self-care, pursuit of pleasure, and balance, premised on the notion that by purchasing the right products and mastering the proper techniques, strivers can improve their experience of an uncertain world.



Students practice Bikram Yoga, also known as hot yoga, in London, England. (Photo by Matt Cardy / Getty Images)

10 Featherstone (2007) defines lifestyle in the context of consumer culture as "connot[ing] individuality, self-expression, and a stylistic self-consciousness. One's body, clothes, speech, leisure pastimes, eating and drinking preferences, home, car, choice of holidays, etc. are to be regarded as indicators of the individuality of taste and sense of style of the owner/consumer" (found in Jain 2020).

11 Religious studies scholar Andrea R. Jain (2020) argues:

Spirituality is undoubtedly increasingly entangled with neoliberalism, which mobilizes entrepreneurs to enhance the market value of spiritual products . . . [F]rom the entanglements of neoliberalism and spirituality, there emerges a new subject who acknowledges and even draws attention to the contradictions of neoliberalism and capitalism and the rampant problems they produce, yet, ultimately contains protest against it. Neoliberal spirituality, in other words, is a powerhouse for discourses that colonize and contain various counterdiscourses and forms of dissent in and through its commodities. Neoliberal spiritual subjects bring attention to the problems of neoliberal capitalism only to prevent protest against them by putting the onus for their resolution on themselves and their consumer choices.

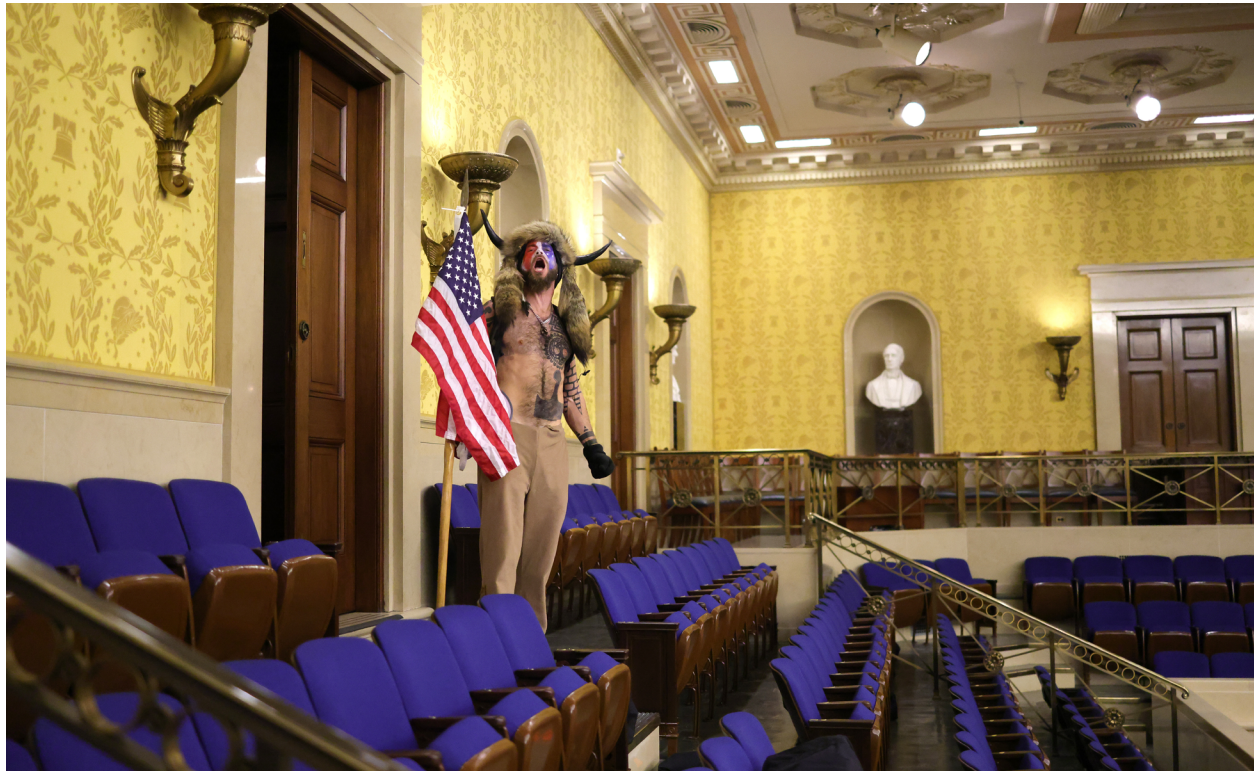
Wellness culture's rebellious elements include a deep and often justified skepticism of institutions and politics (participants in feminist and LGBTQ+ movements were right, for example, to challenge medical authorities and politicians that ignored, pathologized, or patronized them). After decades of institutional neglect and a demonstrated commitment by political leadership to prioritize corporate profits over human health and well-being, disillusionment with "the system" and a desire to change it is not only unsurprising, but perfectly reasonable. The frustrations with systemic failures that are a central feature of wellness culture make the movement fertile ground for social change by mobilizing around a shared vision of collective well-being and human flourishing.

But as its affinity with neoliberalism shows, neither wellness' radical roots nor its potential for amassing support for systemic change necessarily aligns it with progressive politics. On the contrary, and perhaps surprisingly, with all of its talk of harmony and balance, wellness can act as a vehicle for fascist indoctrination.

But as its affinity with neoliberalism shows, neither wellness' radical roots nor its potential for amassing support for systemic change necessarily aligns it with progressive politics. On the contrary, and perhaps surprisingly, with all of its talk of harmony and balance, wellness can act as a vehicle for fascist indoctrination. There is another, darker, side to the history of wellness that shows how some of its values can serve far-right political projects, converting apolitical, yoga-loving strivers into red-pilled fascist rebels. A disturbing embrace of body fascism—an obsession with body purification, biological perfection, discipline, virility and fertility, and the "natural" order—plays an uncomfortably large role in the history of wellness and yoga spaces (Beres, Remski, and Walker 2023). Various sects of the white power and fascist movement have long embraced practices, causes, and beliefs we associate with the wellness movement today. Motivated by a desire to "cleanse" the German population of "biological threats," and strengthen the "national body," ([US Holocaust Memorial Museum n.d.](#); [Bachrach 2004](#)) the Third Reich, for example, invested in medical research and instituted a range of public health measures, from cancer prevention programs, to anti-tobacco and anti-alcohol campaigns, to promotion of a whole food, natural diet ([D. Smith 2004](#); Proctor 1990). Other elements of Nazism also overlap with contemporary wellness culture, such as an embrace of alternative spiritual beliefs and practices, occultism, and esotericism (Kurlander 2017; [Spielvogel and Redles 1989](#)).

US history is not exempt from this historical alignment between some wellness values and practices and far-right extremism, from fitness and exercise culture ([Waxman 2022](#)) (since the pandemic, some online fitness groups have been used as a space for far-right recruitment [[Townsend 2022](#)]), to environmentalism ([Belew 2022](#)) (evidenced by the rise of ecofascism [[Moore and Roberts 2022](#)]), to New Age spirituality ([Asprem and Dyrendal 2015](#)) (most notably apparent today in the QAnon movement's ascent [[Meltzer 2021](#)]). And so while wellness culture characteristics like institutional distrust and a desire for purity can lend support to an inclusive multiracial democracy that prioritizes human and planetary well-being, they can also advance a political vision of ethnonationalism, ecofascism, and patriarchy.

This history helps contextualize why the wellness movement can act as a gateway to misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy (Baker 2022; Klein 2023). Some wellness adherents slip into the warped and toxic world of "conspirituality," a subculture of the wellness movement that has morphed into a new and growing "online religion" that fuses together alt-right conspiracy theories with New Age spiritual beliefs. Conspirituality experts explain the overlapping allure of both conspiracy theories—whether it's that 5G technology causes and spreads COVID-19 or that the government is using chemtrails as a form of population control—and spirituality: "People are drawn to both marginal spiritual communities and conspiracism because 1) they are attracted to the idea of knowing something necessary for survival, 2) that no one else knows, and 3) that they can share with other kindred spirits." (Beres, Remski, and Walker 2023). The longing for agency and control, understanding, and community are successfully harnessed to malign political projects.



*Jacob Chansley, the “QAnon Shaman,” broke into the Senate Chamber on January 6, 2021.
(Photo by Win McNamee / Getty Images)*

Conspiritualists see the world as divided between good forces—the enlightened few, spiritual warriors—battling evil, secretive forces, who hold control and power over society. The initiates to whom the conspiracy has been revealed must unite to awaken the unenlightened masses to the injustices perpetrated by the evil cabal. Nothing is as it seems. There are no coincidences. Everything is connected. No one in the establishment—doctors, government bureaucrats, politicians or scientists—is to be trusted. Certain figures who purport to stand against the establishment, like Donald Trump, are hailed as saviors.¹²

Conspirituality is partly a response—though a delusional and often hateful one—to some very legitimate structural failures. The disintegration of institutions and the rapid rise of corporate social media have compounded disillusionment with an establishment order that has consistently put power and profits over people. Conspiracy theories can be alluring because they offer people an understanding of how the world works; it may be frightening to know that a shadowy cabal is in control of society and the masses. But conspiracy theories at least offer simple and digestible answers as to why the world is in such disarray, and wellness helps alleviate some of the fear that comes with seeing and feeling that disarray. The evil and corruption that sit at the heart of every conspiracy theory are counterbalanced by the range of beliefs, practices, and rituals wellness offers as a means of driving out the darkness. Wellness provides “spiritual warriors” with the solutions they need to overcome the shadowy elite—solutions that are often pleasurable to partake in, that protect against the so-called evil forces, and that bring like-minded conspiritualists together in community. This seemingly contradictory fusion—between the “love and light” ethos of wellness, and the “doomsday fear” undergirding conspiracism—helps explain how an organic-food-eating, nature-loving, yoga-practicing meditator came to storm the US Capitol, shirtless, with red, white, and blue face paint, a fur helmet with Viking horns, and a mission to overthrow a presidential election.

¹² Standing up to the established order is a critical component of the appeal of someone like Trump to conspiritualists, but it's important to note that defiance alone is not enough to relate to this segment of WASH adherents, or for that matter, to most Americans. We believe that speaking to the various dimensions of longing so many people feel is equally important in garnering political support.



People pick up free food from a mutual aid–organized community refrigerator in Brooklyn, NY. (Photo by Michael M. Santiago / Getty Images)

Innovators and Community-Centered Arrangements

The WASH response isn't the only cultural manifestation of the longing tide. The renewed interest in community-centered living arrangements is an attempt to fill the cultural void of community, care, and connection. It is a reflection of the widespread desire to transcend the individualized culture of neoliberalism—an effort to craft alternative orders that more meaningfully account for the social and psychological human needs that have long been neglected under neoliberalism's reign. Innovators and the community-centered arrangements they devise manifest in a variety of ways. Dissatisfaction with the isolation and individualism of contemporary American society, for example, paired with skyrocketing housing costs ([Chang 2023](#)), have motivated some innovators to experiment with different forms of collective living. For many, co-living arrangements, like co-housing developments, ecovillages, and communes, have become an attractive alternative to single-family homes ([Hughes 2022](#)).

The number of worker cooperatives has also grown in recent years. A 2021 report by the Democracy at Work Institute found that between 2019 and 2021, worker cooperatives in the US increased by 30 percent ([Democracy at Work Institute 2021](#)). As opposed to traditional business models, co-ops tend to take a more values-based, communitarian approach to doing business, with workers enjoying ownership and decision-making power in the company and playing a role in management of day-to-day operations. The growing popularity of worker co-ops signals not only a growing desire to break free from the neoliberal shareholder model that prioritizes profit-maximization for investors, often at the expense of laborers, but also a desire for a greater sense of community and control in the workplace. As Lurie ([2022](#)) writes, “Both worker co-ops and unions¹³ foster a sense of collective belonging, which is critical in this world of alienation and isolation. Both offer means for dignity and agency at work.”

Other community-centered arrangements serve different functions, but they all offer fellowship, belonging, and refuge to innovators, and data show that these community-centered arrangements have also grown in popularity. In recent years, interest in mutual aid organizations ([Collins 2021](#)) and coworking spaces ([McCain 2023](#)) have ticked upward, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic brought to the fore our interdependence and need for social—particularly in-person—connections. Innovators' search for community is also reflected in the rise of various forms of social recreation and the arts—from the pickleball craze ([DeMelo 2022](#)) and the rise of running clubs ([Krueger 2023](#)), to Swifties' shared love of their favorite popstar ([Dellatto 2023](#)) and the “Queen Bey's” BeyHive of devoted fans ([Shand-Baptiste 2018](#)).

13 More than 70 percent of Americans approve of labor unions—the highest figure since 1965 ([McCarthy 2022](#)). Yet coordinated assaults on labor protections have led to the decline of union membership over the past several decades, with just 10 percent of wage and salary workers belonging to a union in 2023 ([US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2024](#)).

Dropouts and the Despair-Driven Response

If innovators seek out relationships with others and alternative modes of living as a means of attending to their desires for a different way of life, dropouts instead attempt to extinguish their longings by tuning out altogether. The despair-driven cultural expression of longing is most strikingly evident in the escalating mental health crisis, increased suicide rates and overdose deaths, alcoholism, and drug addiction that afflict dropouts ([McGreal 2023](#)). It has long been established that loneliness, isolation, and low self-worth—major consequences of the neoliberal culture that has dominated for decades—are significant risk factors in the development of substance use disorders and suicidal ideation, along with a host of other psychiatric disorders. A desperate desire to feel good, even if only temporarily, drove more than 46 million individuals to seek relief in the bottom of a bottle or bag in 2021, to the point that they met the DSM-5 criteria for having a substance use disorder ([HHS 2023b](#)).

More broadly, the onset of the pandemic exacerbated a mental health crisis that had been mounting well before COVID-19 changed our worlds. The number of adults who have received mental health treatment or counseling has steadily grown over the past couple of decades, from 27.2 percent to 41.7 percent ([Vankar 2023](#)). A 2022 Gallup poll found that Americans' self-reports of their mental health were at their lowest in more than two decades, with only 31 percent of adults classifying their emotional well-being or mental health as “excellent” ([Brenan 2022](#)). And for tens of thousands of Americans, the anguish and feelings of inadequacy have become so unbearable, the longing so seemingly unappeasable, that they've sought to extinguish the pain once and for all by taking their own lives, at rates 30 percent higher today than two decades ago ([CDC 2023a](#); [Garnett, Curtain, and Stone 2022](#)).

The opioid epidemic in particular has come to be a defining crisis of our times, with this class of drugs claiming responsibility for more than 75 percent of drug overdose deaths in 2021 ([CDC 2023b](#)). A common narrative surrounding the roots of the opioid crisis places the blame on a handful of bad actors—usually rogue physicians operating pill mills for personal financial gain. But a rich body of evidence points to larger, structural forces at play in the rise of the epidemic ([Dasgupta, Beletsky, and Ciccarone 2018](#); [Case and Deaton 2017](#); [Monnat 2019](#); [Thombs et al. 2020](#)), many of which can be traced to neoliberal policy decisions—like under-regulating profit-hungry pharmaceutical companies and an obsession with austerity ([Frydl 2017](#)). But the social atomization neoliberal ideology has bred, though harder to empirically capture, also surely plays a role in the opioid use surge. Many of the negative psychological effects of neoliberal culture—such as loneliness and isolation, or feelings of shame and low self-worth—can be temporarily alleviated with the use of opioids. Opioids foster feelings of love, attachment, and connection by mimicking neurotransmitters, like oxytocin, that play a central role in forming and maintaining social bonds ([Szalavitz 2021](#)). In this way, they can provide a false sense of belonging. As one opioid user shared in a *Time Magazine* interview, “Once you're into heroin, it's almost like a relationship with a person you love. And letting go of that, the thought of never seeing someone I love again—I couldn't imagine giving it up forever” ([Nachtwey and Moakley 2018](#)).

Mental health disorders, addiction, and suicide are the most extreme manifestations of the despair-driven response to the longing tide. But many dropouts express their frustration with the current order through less dramatic avenues. The despair-driven response to the cultural tide of longing also presents as disengaging from current events and news, and turning instead toward privatized entertainment. In 2022, 38 percent of Americans—up from 29 percent in 2017—chose to abstain from consuming the news, citing a negative effect on their moods and a lack of trust and concerns of undue political influence in the media ([Coster 2022](#)). Meanwhile, we are witnessing a steady increase in gaming ([Read 2022](#)), binge-watching ([Starosta and Izydorczyk 2020](#)), and social media usage ([Auxier and Anderson 2021](#)).



Terri Zaccone (2nd R) is comforted by sister Tina Rhatigan (R), as she holds a picture of her son Thomas DeVito, who passed away from a fentanyl overdose at the age of 29, during a candlelight vigil on August 31, 2017 in Washington, DC. (Photo by Alex Wong / Getty Images)

Rebels and Political Engagement

Rebels—unlike strivers, innovators, and dropouts—explicitly seek redress for their dissatisfaction with neoliberalism in the terrain of politics. Despite this important difference, the underlying impulse driving rebels is the same: an urgent need to meet longings for community, safety, agency, understanding, and feeling good.

A default mental model for understanding people’s participation in political action is rational choice. Surely, people are choosing to engage in social and political movements because they have made a calculation that doing so will advance their interests in some practical or material way? While this is undoubtedly part of the story (Black communities, for example, have been distinctively clear-headed about their interests in politics), rational choice does little to explain the political decision-making of many voters. Instead, what is notable about many of today’s rebels is their preoccupation with how the *process* of political engagement does or does not meet these very personal and emotional needs.

Participants in the MAGA movement, for example, experience what the sociologist Émile Durkheim called “collective effervescence” ([Carls n.d.](#)) in the thrill of rallies, providing a sense of belonging and agency, and a place to feel good with other like-minded individuals. Much of the appeal of authoritarians comes from their ability to rouse a sense of threat—for example, of immigrants or Leftists—and then provide false solutions—such as expelling or eradicating those threats—that provide supporters with a sense of safety. The rhetoric of grievance, blame, and revenge provides understanding of how the world works, who is responsible for what ails us, and who is “on our side”—and importantly it also expiates participants’ own failures, projecting their internalized sense of shame onto invented others who are responsible for everything that is wrong. Ashli Babbitt, the MAGA insurrectionist who was killed during the January 6th attack on the Capitol, for example, was a failed small businesswoman who was fined \$71,000 by a judge for not repaying a loan ([Jamison et al. 2021](#)). Once an Obama supporter, her personal failures fed her engagement with MAGA and immersion in conspiracy theories ([Jamison et al. 2021](#)).

Policy platforms in these emotion-laden movements are not calculated responses to make people’s lives better. Instead, policies like a border wall or Muslim ban were calculated to activate animus, engender a tribal sense of belonging, and provide a narrative with explanations and villains.¹⁴ The evil genius of authoritarian politics is to channel the organic, pre-political longings arising from the cultural wreckage of neoliberalism into a coherent, muscular movement aimed at capturing the state.

On the other end of the political spectrum, the internal turmoil in many progressive organizations has similar roots, albeit with different consequences. Many people working in left groups today are also seeking a safe haven amidst the cultural wreckage of neoliberalism—one that provides community, safety, understanding, agency, and ways to feel good every day. We believe that these impulses are fundamentally different from what drives others today and in the past who have joined progressive movements and organizations. For those others, organizations are a *vehicle* to achieve change in the world, rather than primarily a place to address unmet emotional and psychic needs. The historic ethos of left organizations was often one of self-sacrifice and discipline, a sensibility that is unattractive to many today in an atomized society where these needs feel so profoundly unmet outside of work or activism. Most organizations are not designed to address these longings, and the resulting internal conflict weakens the efficacy of many progressive organizations ([Mitchell 2022](#)). While the reactionary far right has harnessed the needs undergirding the longing tide to great political effect, in a policy-centered and rationalistic left, these rebellious impulses have often turned inward, fueling sectarianism and conflict in organizations and movements.

We explore the ways the Right has harnessed strains of mass culture to great effect in Part III and, in Part IV, explore how progressives can learn from historic and contemporary examples of successfully channeling these deep longings for progressive social change more effectively.

These four reactions to the dysfunctions of neoliberalism—WASH, community-centered arrangements, despair-driven responses, and rebellious politics—have provided fertile terrain for recruiting and winning new adherence to political visions of what society should look like. But so far, the political Right has outmaneuvered the Left in this cultural landscape.

¹⁴ The MAGA movement also taps into a deeper historical vein of resentment, hurt pride, and rebellion that goes back to the Confederate defeat in the Civil War ([Phillips 2022](#)).

III. The Political Mobilization of the Longing Tide

The cultural expressions of longing grew to prominence organically throughout American society as diffuse reactions to the cultural contradictions of neoliberalism, which promises but fails to deliver success through hard work. They are partly repudiations of the neoliberal order, including the lifestyles, values, and worldview neoliberalism endorses. But at the same time, as the hegemonic culture of the past four decades, neoliberalism continues to mold burgeoning cultural movements in its own image. In this way, neoliberal culture—the rise-and-grind mindset,¹⁵ hyperindividualism, the obsession with choice, productivity, and self-reliance—attempts to, and is in some ways successful in, co-opting the very cultures that came to prominence in protest against the neoliberal cultural project.

Neoliberalism and Positive Psychology

As the dominant cultural response to the longing tide, the WASH response has been skillfully harnessed by the neoliberal Right; in this regard, it is instructive to consider the rise of positive psychology, or the “science of happiness.” Inaugurated in 1998 by the entrepreneurial psychologist Martin Seligman, who was then the president of the American Psychological Association, positive psychology is now a quarter-century-old and has been heralded as a “paradigm shift” in the discipline. But the field has also come under fierce criticism from inside and out. It has become, in effect, the academic wing of the self-help movement—which has led, on the one hand, to professional psychologists writing for popular audiences, often at the expense of scholarly rigor, and on the other hand, to widespread scientific pretensions within self-help literature that often rehash the tired individualist prescriptions that have been hallmarks of the genre for generations.¹⁶

Historian Daniel Horowitz (2017, 215) notes that “it is possible to identify a spectrum of political positions within the field,” which includes some progressives, social democrats (Harvey 2005), and critics of capitalism. (And some of their work is, indeed, valuable in pointing the way toward a progressive, post-neoliberal order.¹⁷) But, Horowitz (2017) contends that positive psychology’s “relentless focus on individual effort, and denial that circumstances matter to happiness, has an ideological flavor to it, a kind of neoliberalism of the emotions.” Notably, positive psychology’s early development was bankrolled by the conservative, tax-evading billionaire John Templeton through his eponymous foundation. As Horowitz (2017, 261) writes, “it is hard to think of another example of a private foundation that in the late 20th and early 21st centuries played such a commanding, transformative role in the development of a field of inquiry.” Moreover, it is a field of inquiry that has profoundly influenced our culture and our politics.

¹⁵ See, for example, John and Paisner (2018).

¹⁶ One of the most celebrated and widely publicized findings of positive psychology is the so-called “40 percent solution,” expressed in a pie chart on the cover of Sonja Lyubomirsky’s (2008) bestseller *The How of Happiness*. Lyubomirsky claims to show that 50 percent of an individual’s happiness can be attributed to a “genetically determined set-point,” 40 percent to “intentional activity,” and 10 percent to “life circumstances.” Despite having been cited nearly 5,000 times in academic papers, the underlying research has been exposed as methodologically sloppy (imputing data about groups to all individuals) (Brown and Rohrer 2020) and based on cherry-picked data (Whippman 2016). Dana Becker and Jeanne Marecek (2008) rebut the notion, so often advanced by the happiness scientists and promoted in clickbait articles, that “life circumstances” do not much matter because simple tips and tricks—from accepting your feelings as they are, to making gratitude lists—are all that is needed to achieve fulfillment: “The good life is not readily or equally available to all. Disparities in status and power resulting from social class, gender, skin color, race, nationality, and caste, markedly influence wellbeing. These structural differences dramatically affect one’s access to health-care, educational and economic opportunity, fair treatment in the criminal justice system, safe and secure living conditions, a promising future for one’s children, and even mortality. What kind of fulfillment is possible in the absence of these basic conditions? To suggest that self-help exercises can suffice in the absence of social transformation is not only short sighted but morally repugnant.”

¹⁷ One of the most robust findings of positive psychology is the importance of community and strong relationships for human well-being, although often these findings are presented as injunctions directed at individuals rather than critiques of the neoliberal order’s assault on social connection (Whippman 2016). Benjamin Radcliff (2013) goes against the widespread individualist tendency, leveraging cross-national happiness data to mount a sophisticated counterargument against neoliberalism. He writes, “In the argument between Left and Right over the size of the state, I demonstrate that ‘big government’ is more conducive to human well-being, controlling for other factors. Indeed, the single most powerful individual- or national-level determinant of the degree to which people positively evaluate the quality of their lives is the extent to which they live in a generous and universalistic welfare state” (Radcliff 2013, 7).

Echoing the rise of the wellness industry, Seligman (2011), in his book *Flourish*, enjoined positive psychologists to embrace the ideal of “well-being,” and right-wing funders took notice. In a leaked audio recording from 2014, Richard Fink, the chief advisor to the Koch brothers, told a group of conservative donors that they needed an altruistic rebranding to win over the “middle third” of the electorate. “This is going to sound a little strange, so you’ll have to bear with me,” but free-market ideology, he argued, should henceforth be sold as “a movement for well-being” ([Mayer 2016](#)).

The Neoliberal Right’s Efforts

The most effective spokesman for this kinder, gentler crypto-political culture war is Arthur Brooks. From 2008 to 2019 Brooks served as the president of the American Enterprise Institute, making it, for much of that time, the most powerful conservative think tank in Washington, DC. But in 2019, he underwent what *Politico* recently called a “wild transformation,” becoming a self-help “happiness guru,” with influential posts at *The Atlantic* and Harvard, where he teaches a course on the “science of happiness” ([Ward 2023](#)). Despite his insistence that he is now “not a player in the conservative movement,” it’s more plausible to view Brooks as engaged in one continuous long game, attuned to the interconnections between politics and culture. One of his core projects, dating back at least to his 2008 book *Gross National Happiness* (Brooks 2008), has been to provide people with a way of thinking about the architecture of their lives that is fundamentally congenial to a rapacious form of capitalism and a state that does little to ameliorate suffering. Brooks left the policy battles of DC to ride into American culture in a Trojan Horse, filled with a hodgepodge of neoliberal ideas, spiritual maxims, and often dubious scientific studies that amount to a worldview ([Templeton World Charity Foundation 2021](#)) in which “earned success” in the “free enterprise system” is the surest route to a happy life. As two critics of Brooks argued in a trenchant review of his career, “The most vexing question is: why are so many liberals falling for this act?” ([Johnson and Sirota 2023](#)). Part of the answer is that his occasional preaching against workaholism and status-seeking, and his endorsement of building connections and giving to charity, speak to the grind-weariness and guilty conscience of his affluent striver readers while doing nothing to challenge the myth of meritocracy and deflecting their attention away from seeking systemic solutions. His greatest coup came this past summer when he published the bestseller *Build the Life You Want* (2023), coauthored by none other than WASH queen Oprah Winfrey.



Arthur Brooks and Oprah Winfrey discuss their book, *Build the Life You Want*, in September 2023 in New York City. (Photo by Roy Rochlin / Getty Images)

And the neoliberal Right's harnessing of culture extends to efforts reaching beyond the upper-middle and upper classes. Oprah appears to have cross-class appeal, and key neoliberal players like the Kochs have also worked to socialize their vision to working- and middle-class audiences. The Koch's Libre project, for example, is described as an effort to promote "the wellbeing and self-sufficiency of the Hispanic community," and has made real headway in competing for hearts and minds ([LIBRE Initiative Action n.d.](#)). Crucially, the Libre project offers not only ideology but also community spaces and services promising individual mobility ([Valdes 2020](#)).

The Post-Neoliberal Right's Efforts

After decades of cultural and political domination, neoliberalism's grip on the public imagination has been in decline, with the 2008–09 Great Recession marking a turning point (Gerstle 2022). Since then, a post-neoliberal progressivism has emerged on the Left, focused primarily on crafting a new worldview and policy agenda wherein government functions as an affirmative actor that structures economic playing fields and delivers for the common good ([Wong 2020](#)). But a post-neoliberal Right has grown even more rapidly as an alternative. Consisting of a constellation of overlapping far-right factions, the post-neoliberal Right is similar to the post-neoliberal Left in its critique of market fundamentalism¹⁸ and its embrace of a muscular government. Yet its vociferous commitment to theocracy, patriarchy, and white supremacy pits its vision in stark opposition to the post-neoliberal Left's ([Kapczynski 2023](#)).

Since the financial crisis, the post-neoliberal Right has learned to infiltrate and influence organic cultural movements as a way to shape beliefs, allegiances, identities, and lifestyles in accordance with its vision of the good life—of an ethnonationalist, heteropatriarchal society—on a massive scale. To be sure, academics, public intellectuals, and pundits on both the post-neoliberal Left and the post-neoliberal Right have articulated their ideal vision of a post-neoliberal order. But for the post-neoliberal Left, that vision has largely remained contained among its elite ranks.¹⁹ The post-neoliberal Right, on the other hand, has extended its reach well beyond elites through the work of cultural figures who act as the foot soldiers of its vision.²⁰

This work is often done by capitalizing on and reifying social identities, most saliently gender, but also race and class. Part of the post-neoliberal Right's strategy lies in widening the on-ramps to the authoritarian project and welcoming demographically diverse members. Scholar Daniel HoSang has drawn attention to this shift, pointing out that, in contrast to the Republican Party of the 1960s, today's Right is nominally inclusive (HoSang 2023). Nowadays, groups that carry far-right, thinly veiled white supremacist agendas are, paradoxically, increasingly racially diverse, even as they remain rooted in militarism, patriarchy, and domestic hierarchy (HoSang 2023). This more "advanced" mode of far-right white supremacy, as HoSang (2023) calls it, is especially powerful because it does not succumb to criticisms that it is racist or non-inclusive. It shows the post-neoliberal Right's flexibility and ability to adapt to changing social norms; by abandoning the older far-right playbook, which demonized people of color and denied the brutal realities of racism, today's Right has opened its doors to all who wish to join its cause.²¹

18 The post-neoliberal Right's populist approach demands that certain foundational neoliberal principles, like unchecked corporate power and free trade, be condemned. Yet much of its actual policy agenda remains neoliberal, such as its support for deregulation and slashed taxes.

19 And even here, the post-neoliberal Right appears to have the upper hand, as many once-liberals in academia, journalism, and other elite spaces turn right ([Joyce and Sharlet 2023](#)).

20 See, for example, [Bensinger and Browning 2024](#), who explore how conservative sports commentators use that cultural space to air reactionary views to their audience.

21 Political theorist Corey Robin (2017) has drawn attention to the Right's malleability and its political advantages, stating that, "Unlike their opponents on the left, [conservatives] do not unfurl a blueprint in advance of events. They read situations and circumstances, not texts and tomes; their preferred method is adaptation and intimidation rather than assertion and declamation. . . . the conservative mind is extraordinarily supple, alert to changes in context and fortune long before others realize they are occurring."

Self-Help Toxic Masculinists and Conspiratorialists Weaponize WASH

One of the post-neoliberal Right's most powerful on-ramps can be found in WASH. Self-help, already intimately intertwined with the hustle mindset, is today being infused with deeply misogynistic propaganda by far-right popular culture figures like Jordan Peterson, Joe Rogan, and Andrew Tate. (Tate's influence is formidable. According to Lisa Miller [2023] of *New York Magazine*, in the "last week of August 2022, Andrew Tate was being Googled more often than Trump, Kim Kardashian, and the queen of England combined.") Through podcasts, webinars, interviews, lectures, and books, these men and others like them are using their enormous platforms to offer solutions to the so-called "crisis of masculinity"—a conservative talking point that warps the complex and legitimate social and economic issues facing men, particularly working-class men, into a rallying cry against progress and equality—in an effort to reassert male dominance, heteronormative gender roles, and traditional patriarchal family structures. To do this in a way that reaches wide swaths of people and allows for a shred of plausible deniability, they use the seemingly innocuous language of self-help and self-improvement.

There is, indeed, a crisis affecting men. But it's not a crisis of the contrived death of manliness. Instead, it's a multidimensional crisis, including economic and educational attainment, status in a world of changing gender norms, and meaning and identity. A 2017 Pew Research Center survey found that not only do American women find more meaning in their lives than their male counterparts, they also enjoy more sources of meaning ([Pew Research Center 2018](#)). Scholar Richard Reeves (2022) explains that individuals with fewer sources of identity and meaning are more likely to suffer if one of those sources is damaged.²²

Men are also afflicted by a crisis of loneliness—a crisis that is, ironically enough, partly attributable to a toxic masculinity that demands men put on a tough exterior, suppress their emotions and humanity, and exercise domination and control over others. To be sure, loneliness has affected people of all genders, prompting Surgeon General Vivek Murthy to release an advisory last May that deemed loneliness and isolation an epidemic ([HHS 2023a](#)). But men have been particularly affected by growing loneliness: In 2021, 15 percent of men reported having no close friends at all—a pronounced increase from 1990, when only 3 percent of men reported the same ([Cox 2021b](#)).

Self-help toxic masculinity weaponizes the loneliness epidemic, status threat, and questions of identity and meaning afflicting boys and men (though the self-help jargon used by these figures make them appealing to some women as well).²³ Using the language of self-improvement, it redirects attention from the structural changes that have manufactured isolation and economic precarity—like the evaporation of well-paying jobs that once provided men with a sense of belonging and self-worth—to the supposed irresponsibility of individual men for failing to improve their lot and wallowing in self-pity. With personal failure posed as the problem, self-help toxic masculinists offer strivers, particularly striver men, a sense of empowerment and control through motivational self-help lingo. Things *can* get better. But it's up to you, and no one else, to make them better.

If this shifting of blame—from systemic failures to individual failure—was the central issue with the ideology of self-help toxic masculinity, it would not be all too different from traditional and neoliberal self-help. But the toxic masculinity flavor of self-help is more reflective of the current emotional state of humanity than its traditional

22 Building on the famous insight by W.E.B. DuBois (1935) that racism confers a "public and psychological wage" to white people, in recent decades, as the wages of whiteness have been on the decline, so have the wages of masculinity, in each case compounded by purely economic wage stagnation. (The right's countermove has been to attempt to increase the public and psychological wages of both whiteness and masculinity.)

23 There is a smaller but burgeoning subcultural movement that more directly speaks to women and recruits them into far-right political formations. See, for example, the traditional wife or [#tradwife](#) phenomenon, an anti-feminist movement of women who see their roles as submissive homemakers and mothers in service to their husbands and, in many cases, to God. Beginning as an online movement, tradwife influencers are innovators who pitch to women an alternative lifestyle and moral order reminiscent of a romanticized 1950s. With its roots in Christian fundamentalism, the tradwife movement works to reinstate and solidify gender essentialism and hierarchies. The movement is also intertwined with the broader white nationalist movement. Some tradwives exhibit a sense of European pride and explicitly see their role in the larger project of white supremacy as reproducing as many white babies as possible (dubbed the "white baby challenge" by one tradwife influencer) ([Stern 2019](#)). Many tradwives have had experience in the workforce before quitting their jobs and giving themselves up to their husbands and families. Through those work experiences, they have come to reject the [#girlboss](#) grind culture of neoliberalism and the lack of time that lifestyle affords people, particularly women, to prioritize family obligations and domestic labor. Seeing neoliberalism as synonymous with feminism (because of neoliberalism's successful co-optation of feminism), tradwives bemoan feminist advances as a primary source of their dissatisfaction. Other overlapping far-right recruitment channels aimed at women include groups like Moms for Liberty, which has been instrumental in driving book bans, anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, and conspiracy theories in public schools throughout the country ([SPLC n.d.](#)).

version, the tone of which was far more affirmational and positive. There is a deep, belligerent harshness that comes through in the work of self-help toxic masculinists. They preach that society is in crisis because of weak men and call on “real” men to fix the crisis. This resonates with striver men who understandably feel a sense of profound frustration, confusion, and discontent with the world. It makes them feel seen and gives them a sense of purpose.²⁴

Much of self-help toxic masculinity’s power comes from its leveraging of traditional self-help in a way that activates sexist beliefs in strivers. It taps into the social identity of maleness while simultaneously painting feminist advances and social justice as the sources of the existential dread listeners feel. Claiming that feminism and “postmodern neo-Marxism” or “cultural Marxism” have disrupted the so-called “natural” human order, self-help toxic masculinists preach that only the reassertion of traditional gender roles and the nuclear family can fix the fallen order. Most prominent self-help toxic masculinity figures (many of them operating as part of the so-called “Intellectual Dark Web” [[Weiss 2018](#); [Farrell 2018](#)]) present themselves as neutral and disinterested, simply offering impartial facts. Some claim to be apolitical, and others even claim to be progressive. Some purport to take the contrarian role of “just asking questions” or “playing devil’s advocate” as intellectual exercises. This helps bolster their legitimacy and makes them appear reasonable, level-headed, and logical—traits that the masculinity they advance purports to hold dear.

Against this backdrop, self-help toxic masculinity works because it offers striver men a positive vision of the good life—a blueprint for feeling better that preaches responsibility, dependability, self-improvement, productivity, and, ultimately, a sense of purpose and meaning. It also offers a sense of hope and a way out of despair, acting as a portal for dropouts to convert to strivers, and sometimes to rebels. Words from Jordan Peterson ([2022](#)), who we could call the father of the self-help toxic masculinity movement, show how this segment of the right craftily blends together self-help advice, reactionary views on gender and social justice, grind culture’s obsession with working hard, and solutions to the sense of longing felt by men. Peterson argues that responsibility, as opposed to rights, is what gives life meaning, pitting the two concepts against each other:

You can’t have the conversation about rights without the conversation about responsibility, because your rights are my responsibility . . . [W]e’re only having half that discussion . . . if you only have that half of that discussion[] . . . [Y]ou’re leaving out responsibility . . . [W]hat are you leaving out if you’re leaving out responsibility? . . . [M]aybe you’re leaving out the meaning of life. That’s what it looks like to me . . . here you are suffering away. What makes it worthwhile? Rights? It’s almost impossible to describe how bad an idea that is. Responsibility. That’s what gives life meaning. It’s like, lift a load! Then you can tolerate yourself, right? Because look at you, useless, easily hurt, easily killed. Why should you have any self-respect? That’s the story of the fall. Pick something up and carry it. Make it heavy enough so that you can think, “Yeah, well, useless as I am, at least I could move that from there to there.”

This message is understandably attractive. Exerting control over your life is powerful and appealing, and it is not unreasonable or inaccurate to suggest that people find meaning in taking responsibility for their actions and the outcomes those actions produce. But Peterson goes on to pair calls for personal responsibility with patriarchal values, pointing out “biological differences” between men and women. He claims that men’s responsibilities lie in providing for their families, and then states that:

Self-help toxic masculinity works because it offers striver men a positive vision of the good life—a blueprint for feeling better that preaches responsibility, dependability, self-improvement, productivity, and, ultimately, a sense of purpose and meaning.

²⁴ The far right has been politically astute in its recognition not only of mass discontent with the current order, but of the desire for a more attractive alternative order. This approach centers emotion and lies in stark contrast with the one taken by many on the left. Political theorist Wendy Brown explains that “most liberals and leftists still believe they have reason and truth on their side, which they don’t, and that democracy lines up with reason and truth, which it doesn’t. What we have is a set of commitments. If we are going to contain the climate disaster and avoid fascism, we’d better reckon with this fast. We need to build compelling visions of an alternative political and economic order—visions based not on ‘interests’ or rationality, but which recruit popular desires and yearnings for a better world while reinterpreting or rerouting most existing expressions of those desires and yearnings” ([Steinmetz-Jenkins 2024](#)).

Women have their sets of responsibilities. They're not the same [as men's] . . . because women . . . have to take primary responsibility for having infants . . . but then also for caring for them. They're structured differently than men, for biological necessity, even if it's not a psychological issue . . . [though] it's also partly a psychological issue. Women know what they have to do. Men have to figure out what they have to do. And if they have nothing worth living for, then they stay Peter Pan . . . Because the alternative to valued responsibility is impulsive, low-class pleasure.

Throughout the same speech, Peterson notes that when he speaks to crowds about personal responsibility, the men in his audience seem to be especially excited by his advice. He also openly acknowledges that uplifting the role of personal responsibility for young men can be a winning strategy for conservative leadership—with whom he claims to be in conversation—in his home country of Canada, particularly as it relates to connecting with young voters: “[W]hat the hell are they [conservatives] going to sell to young people? They can sell responsibility. No one’s selling it. And the thing is, for men, there’s nothing but responsibility.” Peterson’s explicit call for conservatives to tap into the sense of longing young men feel offers a strong example of how the post-neoliberal Right is not only keyed into the emotional current of our times, but is able to weaponize it for political gain.

Throughout his entire speech, Peterson never mentions how factors outside the control of individuals might make all the personal responsibility in the world insufficient to bring about the transformational change so many listeners crave. But even so, the desire for agency and control over one’s life makes Peterson’s focus on responsibility especially appealing to strivers.

Over the past few years in particular, it seems that the motivational content Peterson and others like him produce often devolve into dissemination of right-wing conspiracy theories. There appears to be an increasingly thin line separating the gospel preached by self-help toxic masculinists like Peterson and that espoused by conspiritualists. Especially since the pandemic more clearly forged connections between far-right conspiracism with wellness and New Age spirituality (Klein 2023), self-help toxic masculinists have started flirting with the conspiritualism discourse, from Joe Rogan’s false claims concerning COVID-19 (Bond 2022) and climate misinformation (Berger and Richards 2023), to Jordan Peterson’s (2023) interviews with QAnon supporters and adrenochrome harvesting (Bond 2023) conspiracy theory believers. If listeners go a little bit further down the rabbit hole, they will find that they have fully entered the universe of conspiritualism, with its charismatic influencers peddling an array of spiritual teachings and alternative health advice interspersed with conspiracy theories and political hot takes.

Conspiritualism is a diffuse cultural phenomenon, but especially since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, it has been capitalized on by people like Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and lesser known influencers like Pete Evans and Lorie Ladd as a powerful vehicle for instilling far-right beliefs in WASH adherents. The bulk of these individuals’ proselytizing takes place on social media, though some of them have been banned from the big-name platforms, like Instagram and Facebook, for violating their terms of service by spreading mis- and disinformation to thousands, and in some cases millions, of followers.

Lifestyle-coach-turned-conspiritualism-comedian JP Sears shows how conspiracy theories, fascist ideology, and wellness culture can be mixed together to create a toxic stew of far-right propaganda. Sears’ website, “awakenwithjp.com,” features pages of satirical videos linked to his YouTube account, which boasts more than 3 million subscribers. The videos feature Sears playing different characters, mocking “woke culture” and in some, poking fun at stereotypical, over-the-top caricatures of wellness practitioners. And yet he himself embraces a far-right flavor of wellness and profits off of its cultural significance. Each of Sears’ videos end with an advertisement in which he pitches viewers a range of wellness products—from supplements and teeth whitening kits, to infrared lights and electromagnetic field blockers—and conspiritualism streaming platforms, like Unifyd. On his website, you can also purchase JP Sears merchandise, like shirts branding “Awake But Not Woke,” “Pfreedom” (in this style of the Pfizer logo), and “Let’s Go Brandon!” The site also includes a link to a line of CBD products sold by “Awaken CBD,” Sears’ business dedicated to providing “[t]he support you need to live free.” Insinuating that body fascist ideals are inextricably linked with freedom and living a good life, he describes on the website that, “You’re only as free as your health is strong. Supporting the temple of your mind, body, and heart is key to living your best life. I hope that CBD brings you as much freedom and support as it has for me!”

At its most extreme, conspiratoriness's connection to fascist politics culminates in the QAnon movement,²⁵ with its embrace of Trump as the leader in the “good fight” against the Satan-worshipping cabal of wealthy, Democratic, cannibalistic pedophiles. QAnon is notable because it is more than a political movement alone; it borders organized religion. QAnon offers adherents a sense of social belonging (as evidenced by one of the movement’s most popular slogans “where we go one, we go all,” usually abbreviated as “WWGIWGA”) and deep meaning and understanding of how the world works. This may be why in addition to resonating with a subset of WASH adherents, the movement can also be particularly appealing to innovators, some of whom seek out spiritual communities that sometimes devolve into cults in their search for an alternative moral order.



A woman holds a sign referencing QAnon at a gathering of Trump supporters following the November 2020 election. (Photo by Stephen Maturen / Getty Images)

But while QAnon may have started in the dark crevices of the internet as a cult-like, far-right fascination, journalist Kevin Roose (2021) explains that by 2020, “the movement expanded its reach to include health-conscious yoga moms, anti-lockdown libertarians and evangelical Christians.” Indeed, research shows how three wellness/New Age spirituality cultural entry points—yoga and wellness groups, neo-Shamanistic circles, and psychics—helped to bring the movement into the mainstream (Conner 2023). Before long, it had spread from message boards and yoga studios to the streets. QAnon supporters can regularly be found at Trump rallies (Trump himself has shown support for QAnon [Klepper and Swenson 2022]), and they were certainly present at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021. Many QAnon supporters hold Trump out as a “messianic figure,” (Gedeon 2022) and especially after his first indictment, made comparisons between the former president and Jesus (comparisons that were also made by QAnon supporter and Georgia Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene [Benen 2023]) (Klepper 2023).

The Far Right’s Embrace of Rebellious Politics

For those who are put off by the eccentricity and sham mysticism that’s central to QAnon but hold more traditional religious convictions, Trumpism is still appealing because, as Russell Moore explains, it speaks to the some of the same longings that religion does: “All it takes is substituting adrenaline for the Holy Spirit, political ‘awakening’ for rebirth, quarrelsomeness for sanctification and a visible tribal identity for the kingdom of God” (Adler-Bell 2023). Moreover, the far Right has offered a broad community through politics by harnessing the dissatisfaction and longing of millions to garner support for its cause. It speaks to these feelings viscerally and by promising security, belonging, and recognition in the mass authoritarian project. Authoritarian leaders directly tap into these feelings and blame “others” for creating the conditions that cause suffering. The fascist response doesn’t do much to materially fix those conditions, but concrete policies that ameliorate economic hardships have never been what’s given authoritarianism its energy and power. Rather, the pull of fascism comes from its appeal to human emotions. And by exploiting those human emotions, it provides rebels with a political home (Cushman forthcoming).

The Left often paints MAGA supporters as enraged bigots fueled by anger and hatred. More compassionate or sympathetic accounts will factor fear, anxiety, or recognition into the mix as well (Lane 2023; Lamont 2023). And of course, negative emotions play a large role in fascist political movements and are critical to understanding its appeal. But negative emotions alone cannot fully explain the allure of the mass authoritarian project. The sense

25 As Bernes, Remski, and Walker (2023, 44) note, “the distance between the morbid cruelty of QAnon and the pastel anxieties of conspiratoriness is only a matter of degree, and defined by social acceptability.” They go on to explain that “QAnon goes all-in on high-risk stocks, while conspiratoriness maintains a diversified portfolio. QAnon offers a dystopian endgame of fantasized public executions, while conspiratoriness radiates a world of Instagram soul journeys. QAnon is built to lurch from crisis to crisis. When its apocalyptic predictions fail to materialize, it sheds humiliated members. Conspiratoriness, however, is built for growth . . . the line between them is fluid” (49).

of belonging and camaraderie Trump supporters feel with one another is not rooted in rage or hate, but, as *New York Times* columnist David French (2023) persuasively argues, in fellowship and joy. Venues hosting Trump rallies are not packed with furious, red-faced supporters screaming with clenched fists, he explains. For Trump loyalists, they are primarily fun and festive events (Egger 2020) that die-hard supporters will travel throughout the country to attend, camping out in venue parking lots hours before the rally officially starts, enjoying music, food and drinks, and, crucially, the company and camaraderie of other like-minded Trump devotees—not unlike groupies following their favorite band on tour, or extreme sports fans tailgating from city to city (Jimenez 2019).

Taking a wider historical view, Donald Trump's greatest innovation may be the revival of the carnivalesque dimension of politics and its fusion with authoritarianism (Kennedy 2016). According to historians Peter Stallybrass and Allon White (1986), "it was only in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—and then only in certain areas—that one can reasonably talk of popular politics *dissociated* from the carnivalesque at all." From angry peasants with arquebuses, to the women who stormed Versailles, to the supporters of Andrew Jackson who thronged the White House during his inauguration, the rowdy, giddy, sometimes violent mob was once a major dimension of politics—one that elites mostly learned to tame.

As Barbara Ehrenreich (2007) has argued, the fascist spectacles of the 1930s were stage-managed, often boring, "utterly solemn events," in which the masses strove for characterless homogeneity. Trump rallies, by contrast, are spaces for wild expressiveness, a do-what-you-feel individualism. Trump on stage is one part despot, one part the key figure from European carnival: the King of Fools or the Lord of Misrule. If he is ridiculous or rambling, it only has the effect (maddening for the Left) of enhancing the crowd's love for him.

Trump rallies function like rites of passage, producing among participants feelings of equality and collective joy—what anthropologists Victor and Edith Turner dubbed *communitas*—which not only evokes a sense of personal transformation and the assumption or reaffirmation of an identity but also an exceptional degree of zeal among supporters (Turner 1977; Turner 2012). Durkheim's notion of the "collective effervescence" of ritual and its attendant affirmation of group identity as the wellspring of religion (Carls n.d.) helps explain the messianic fervor of the MAGA faithful and Trump's success, despite all of his profanity, in winning over evangelicals. In 2020, while Biden campaigned from his basement, or spoke to supporters separated, as per COVID-19 protocols, by spray-painted circles or at drive-in theaters, Trump went full death cult, stoking the fervor of maskless crowds and notoriously spreading the virus among his staff and supporters. The intensity of his base was not enough to win the 2020 election, but Trump weaponized the carnivalesque, millenarian ardor of the MAGA mob on January 6th.

If the Right has fused together culture and politics, for the Left, the two often exist in separate dimensions. A notable contemporary exception was the 2008 Obama campaign, which embraced a more charismatic and cultural politics. Obama's promise of hope, change, and progress mobilized millions and generated a great deal of inspiration, participation, and excitement among broad swathes of the electorate, not only progressives. But once in office, the schism between politics and culture reappeared, as he exhibited a complete lack of interest in building progressive power to meaningfully alter power relations (Bhargava 2020). Opting for more technocratic policy solutions, rather than transformative change, the Obama administration assimilated into liberal elite culture—a reality that was reflected in his neoliberal policy agenda. Mixed with intense racial backlash and savvy and strategic conservative organizing, these realities were significant contributing factors to the rise of Trumpism and his communal politics.

The same miscalculations of the Obama administration persist today on the Left, and they continue to be a critical strategic mistake; politics has always gotten its energy from culture, rather than policy. The Left has not paid much attention to the specific cultural contradictions of neoliberalism, nor to the cultural movements and adaptations that have arisen in its wake. But if we are serious about defeating authoritarianism and offering a compelling vision of the future, it is crucial that we pay attention to and engage with what people care about, interact with, and take pleasure in on a day-to-day basis. We'll need to pay attention to culture.

IV. The Challenge for the Left

In contrast to the Right's skillful surfing of the cultural currents of neoliberalism and its discontents, the Left's response has been thin and inadequate. To defang authoritarianism, the Left will have to engage with the tide of longing and its cultural manifestations directly—rather than continue to exhibit contempt for them and (unsuccessfully) attempt to turn public attention back to policy alone.

Policy is not a master turnkey of politics, and by relying too much on policy, progressives have narrowed the terrain of their engagement and focused on elite policy discourse at the expense of engagement in mass culture. Following Stuart Hall (1988) and other cultural theorists, we believe that culture, politics, policy, and economics mutually influence and shape one another over time. For example, while economic conditions of deprivation will certainly have consequences for politics and culture, people's responses are not automatically predetermined; they are mediated and shaped by politics and culture. As we have argued elsewhere, “delivering” on policies that offer tangible economic benefits to people does not necessarily (or even usually) produce political support ([Bhargava, Shams, and Hanbury 2023](#)).

It is important to note that a bloodless, cerebral, policy-centric approach has not always been dominant on the Left, and we can learn from historical and contemporary examples of different approaches.

Feminist, queer, and Black organizing at its finest has braided thick social and cultural elements with explicitly political activity. While changing oppressive systems and structures provided a galvanizing focus, these intersecting traditions have developed theories and practices that center human needs for love, pleasure, connection, and fulfillment in the here and now, seeing the dimensions of work in the realms of politics and community building as mutually reinforcing.

In her 1978 essay, *The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power*, Black feminist writer and activist Audre Lorde wrote that “The principal horror of any system which defines the good in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need, or which defines human need to the exclusion of the psychic and emotional components of that need—the principal horror of such a system is that it robs our work of its erotic value, its erotic power and life appeal and fulfillment” ([Lorde 1978](#)). Lorde used the word “erotic” to mean the creative life force that she saw as essential to our humanity, and as a necessary source of energy for transformational social change. Neoliberals make a fetish of profit to the exclusion of other ends, but neoliberals' antagonists on the Left sometimes define “human need” narrowly, to the exclusion of the psychic and emotional components of that need. In recent years, the post-neoliberal Right has spoken more effectively to the psychic and emotional needs that Lorde draws attention to.

Scholars like Aldon Morris (1986) and Charles Payne (2007) have highlighted the pivotal role of the Black church, which provided a vision of transcendent meaning, undergirded by ritual and practices that evoked joy and a deep sense of belonging. They show how these preexisting structures of solidarity provided a strong foundation for organizing and social movements. These structures were not created to achieve a narrow end, such as winning an election, shifting public opinion on an issue, or passing a policy, but rather nurtured relationships and met needs for community whether or not external circumstances were favorable to achieving social change. Other structures, like unions, have also at times created these kinds of thick social bonds, involving people not only in fights at the job, but also nourishing social ties and providing mutual aid.

What might progressives, learning from these examples, do today to engage more deeply in culture? While it is beyond the scope of this paper to offer a full alternative roadmap, the cornerstone of any strategy will be to address the deep longings for community and belonging, safety, agency, understanding, and feeling good that strivers, innovators, dropouts, and rebels are in different ways seeking to satisfy. Progressives can do this by: 1) engaging in mass culture, and especially the attention economy, in which people increasingly seek meaning, craft identities, and forge community; 2) building mass organizations that meet people's emotional needs and offer collective care; and 3) expanding the policy repertoire to address non-economic issues that are deeply felt and contesting the battle of ideas in a way that speaks more directly to the deeper longings driving our politics.

Engaging in Mass Culture and the Attention Economy

Progressives can build cultural infrastructure that supports progressive values. That infrastructure should be designed to reach diverse audiences and should work to socialize a progressive politics and vision of what it means to live well. It should include public cultural figures and influencers who persuasively speak to the longing tide and offer people tangible solutions for working through their struggles and empowering them to achieve their hopes and dreams. It will be important for these figures to clearly demarcate the difference between hyperindividualism (which places all responsibility for everything in one's life on the individual, while ignoring how external factors like poverty, racism, and sexism, determine our ability to respond to hardships) and personal agency and autonomy (a natural, human desire to shape the trajectory of one's life and make choices for oneself).

For example, rather than shaming or dismissing strivers because they contribute to neoliberal culture, progressives must recognize and honor the erotic impulses, in Lorde's formulation, that so many feel to create, achieve, and excel in different areas of life. These are not inherently negative or conservative desires; on the contrary, we believe they are important aspects of what it means to be human. The problem arises when individuals' survival is primarily dependent on their ability to get ahead in a system that is set up against them.

Musicians, artists, actors, reality television stars, influencers, comedians, authors, chefs, and athletes who already use their skills and talents to spread joy and create community play an essential role in meeting people's desire to feel good and can help people make sense of their personal challenges in a larger, more justice-oriented framework. Examples of thinkers and creators who are already doing this work exist—musician and actor Janelle Monáe ([Mackey 2023](#)), physician and writer Gabor Maté ([G. Maté and D. Maté 2022](#)), YouTuber and ex-philosopher Natalie Wynn ([Marantz 2018](#)), influencer Shabaz Says ([Hardcastle 2023](#)), and actor and comedian Amanda Seales ([BET 2023](#)) are just a few such names. Popular name recognition is less important than the depth of the ties people have to cultural figures and influencers, who help them make sense of the world. These influencers listen to their audiences as well as shape meaning. The Left needs far more people who blend a progressive worldview into their crafts if we are to meaningfully rival the Right in the cultural and political realms. For example, an abuela teaching cooking classes on YouTube, affirming her audience's worth while dispensing advice that involves both individual strategies for survival and the need for collective action, could be a powerful force. Successful efforts will foster a sense of agency, create bonds of community, and nurture identities that shape how people engage with public issues. There is no reason why this crucial landscape of meaning-making should be left uncontested to right-wing figures like Jordan Peterson and Andrew Tate.



Janelle Monáe performs onstage at the 2023 Soul Train Awards. (Photo by Paras Griffin / Getty Images for BET)

Building Mass Organizations

Rebuilding mass membership organizations—unions, community groups, and other kinds of institutions—is the essential step for progressives to defeat authoritarianism and to win progressive policies that have broad public support. There are many reasons why these organizations are in decline, including strategic attacks from the Right (as on unions) and an erosion in the craft of organizing. But strivers, innovators, rebels, and even dropouts freely join and participate in and pay for all kinds of things—evangelical and other churches, wellness and online communities, gaming and streaming, and Beyoncé and Taylor Swift concerts. Why might they not be joining progressive organizations with such zeal?

There's a cultural orthodoxy among many organizers that is not serving progressives well. The view that people join and stay for the long term in organizations because they "get stuff" through their participation—higher wages or better housing, for example—is only part of the story. Working-class people are usually sober about organizing and politics—they tend not to believe that big change is easy, because they have firsthand experience of how entrenched imbalances like employer power are. They may be disappointed that a particular campaign fails, but they are usually not shocked. And most have complex, ideologically inconsistent views about specific issues that often differ in important respects from the organizations they are part of. So what keeps them in organizations for the long term when they do stay?

To succeed, mass people-powered organizations in the 21st century will need to not only address people's material needs through campaigns on issues but also build thick social ties that can address people's longings for community and belonging, safety, agency, understanding, and feeling good.

People stay when their longings—for community, safety, agency, understanding, and pleasure—are met. Sociologist Ziad Munson (2008) shows that nearly half of the people entering the anti-abortion movement in recent decades were not anti-choice when they attended their first anti-abortion event; instead, they joined the movement because they felt welcomed, connected with others, and seen. Their views on abortion changed *after* they joined—they did not join because of their views. As scholar Hahrie Han (2017) explains:

They stayed [in the anti-abortion movement] . . . because at [anti-abortion] events, they found things we all want: friends, responsibility, a sense that what they are doing matters. By finding fellowship and responsibility, these people changed not only their views on abortion, but also their commitment to act.

By these standards, many progressive organizations are not especially attractive. The feeling of care may be absent, or there can be a harshness in the way people relate or disagree with each other that feels like an extension of, rather than a refuge from, the dominant culture. And who would want to spend precious free time in a space like that?

By contrast, and as mentioned above, the Right has become more inclusive and accepting of people from a range of backgrounds, while reactionary giants like Leonard Leo have made an explicit turn to broader cultural issues as a means of broadening the conservative movement (Kroll, Bernstein, and Marritz 2023). Meanwhile, the Left's impulse to purify movements—to expel heretics who hold incorrect views on certain issues—has a paradoxical effect (Giridharadas 2022; Smucker 2017). It makes participants in the "in-group" feel safer and more loyal, because they are united in their fight against "outsiders." But such insularity also makes the possibility of building groups large enough to win impossible. This is why sectarianism is both so seductive and so dangerous.

To succeed, mass people-powered organizations in the 21st century will need to not only address people's material needs through campaigns on issues but also build thick social ties that can address people's longings for community and belonging, safety, agency, understanding, and feeling good. There are many contemporary examples of organizations that combine work on issues and politics with community-building. WV Can't Wait, for example, is a statewide grassroots organization that seeks to win a people's government in West Virginia—a hostile terrain for progressive causes in recent years. WV Can't Wait takes a multipronged approach to delivering on its mission. One part of the organization's mission focuses on recruiting, training, and backing candidates for political office and helping them govern once elected.

But its model and theory of change go beyond electoral change alone. WV Can't Wait also invests in recruiting, training, supporting, and nurturing individuals who are working to bring about grassroots change throughout the state, but who are typically kept out of the political process, creating, in the organization's own words, a "Home for the People Who Do the Work Government Fails to Do" (S. Smith 2023). Practically, this means that WV Can't Wait goes beyond programming and provides members with a robust mutual aid and movement safety

network, trainings and mentorship, free mental health services, and fiscal sponsorship.²⁶ The organization's "Hometown Heroes" program provides stipends, training, mental health services, personal security—and perhaps most crucially, recognition—to local leaders who are doing vital mutual aid work, while Citizen Media Makers get seed funding to create blogs, podcasts, and videos, supporting the need for creative individual expression through collective effort (S. Smith 2023). In a survey administered to over 200 WV Can't Wait members last year, respondents were asked what they most appreciated about the organization. The most common answer was the sense of belonging or "home" that the organization provided members (S. Smith 2023).

It is not surprising that these offerings help to generate a sense of belonging among WV Can't Wait members. When genuine human well-being is prioritized above all other organizational goals, it seems predictable that individuals will be satisfied and feel cared for. This requires an organizational model that is flexible to changing circumstances and needs. For example, with the onset of the pandemic during the first campaign cycle in 2020, WV Can't Wait pivoted from its get out the vote efforts to crisis response and management, creating the Neighborhood Captain program—an effort to provide community members with information on how to access their basic needs at a time when the pandemic upended day-to-day life. Consisting of several hundred WV Can't Wait volunteers, neighborhood captains were asked to check in with 100 voters who lived near them on a weekly basis, to ensure they had access to food, medicine, unemployment benefits, coronavirus resources, and absentee ballots (Chávez 2020). While neighborhood captains also introduced voters to WV Can't Wait's slate of candidates, their outreach was far from transactional; rather, they maintained regular contact and attempted to craft real, personal relationships with their neighbors by asking them questions about their lives (Lauer, Smith, and Huston 2020). And critically, the program sought not to simply increase voter turnout (though analysis by WV Can't Wait shows that the Neighborhood Captain program did outperform other successful voter turnout programs) or even to only help individuals through the COVID-19 crisis, but to build new and enduring political relationships that could last beyond the pandemic and the election (Lauer, Smith, and Huston 2020). Many other organizations across the country are experimenting with new forms of organizing that emphasize belonging.

Expanding the Policy Repertoire and Contesting for the Battle of Ideas in New Ways

Progressives will also need a much broader policy agenda, one that moves beyond economic issues alone and helps to tackle the social and cultural consequences of the neoliberal order. Senator Chris Murphy (D-CT) (2023) has framed the challenge well:

America feels like it's unraveling at the edges. You can feel the spiritual disintegration everywhere, from our hollowed out postindustrial towns to our retreat into our electronic devices to the fracturing of our social and religious institutions. Americans are less hopeful and less happy than ever before in our history, and many are fumbling around in the dark, searching for a politics that will align with their plight.

Policies that speak directly to the various dimensions of the longing tide can help abate its negative influence on our culture and politics. Here, too, there is already important work underway. The past two decades have seen advances in mental health and drug policy, for example. The Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act of the Affordable Care Act (2010), for instance, made it a requirement that insurance companies cover mental health and substance use disorders as they would other medical conditions. Similarly, many states have taken steps away from criminalization and punishment and instead toward a more compassionate and effective means of dealing with drug use and addiction, from the rise of drug court programs to the more nascent creation of safe injection sites—important if imperfect interventions aimed at addressing some of the needs facing dropouts in the here and now. Despite these advances, these policies are forced to operate as part of a patchwork system in which individualism still dominates.

²⁶ Over the past two years, WV Can't Wait has provided a fiscal home for small organizations and working-class organizers throughout the state, raising more than \$1.8 million through a combination of direct grants, grassroots fundraisers, coaching, and co-grantwriting (S. Smith 2023).

Other social policies are also gaining traction and show how certain wellness values lend themselves to a progressive vision of the good life and could be supported through policy. In a blow to neoliberal orthodoxy, care, rest, and leisure time are gradually entering the policy discourse on the Left. Calls for a four-day workweek, for example, have become increasingly prevalent across the globe, with trials led by economist and sociologist Juliet Schor showing promising results ([Zomorodi, Geiran, and Meshkinpour 2023](#)). These shifts are also reflected in calls for investment in social infrastructure like libraries, parks, and childcare centers (Klinenberg 2018), adequately valuing the care economy ([Dresser 2015](#)), and greater funding for arts, recreation, and public spaces, all of which would contribute to the holistic well-being and human flourishing that wellness culture claims to endorse.

A new policy agenda that takes the cultural consequences of neoliberalism seriously is necessary, but insufficient. Delivering more leisure time or funding for mental health services is important, but there is no reason to believe that it will necessarily produce more political support than classic “bread and butter” issues, such as tax rates or inflation. We live in an atomized society in which most people are not part of mass membership organizations, institutions, or dense communal networks that could help them make sense of policy debates. They do not sit at home calculating the costs and benefits to themselves of various policy platforms. What matters is not only, or even mainly, the content of policies but how we fight for them and whether people’s longing for agency, safety, understanding, and belonging are met in the process ([Jacobs, Lerner, and McCartin 2023](#)). The technocratic bent of most liberal and some progressive politicians—“vote for us, and then leave it to us to do policy because we know best”—is a dangerous soporific. The result is the anemic public response to Biden’s impressive list of legislative domestic accomplishments. This contrasts with the “call and response” cycle that has characterized successful relationships between mass movements and political action throughout history. When you feel that you and your neighbors have been part of the struggle to address a policy issue, you have a wholly different relationship to it than when you are simply a consumer ([Kahn 2022](#)).

Progressives could also emphasize policy frameworks that support community action, without replacing the role of the state. For example, community sponsorship plays a big role in the Canadian immigration system—and builds greater support for immigration by forging deep bonds of solidarity. Imagine a response to the current wave of people seeking asylum in the US in which local politicians did not only petition the federal government to provide resources (an uncertain prospect), but also called on the public for a large-scale civic response in the meantime that mobilized institutions like churches and people of good will to help. Such a response would foster both a sense of agency and connectedness between new immigrants and receiving communities in a way that would over time reduce the gravitational pull of nativist policies.

One simple yardstick by which to measure interventions at the level of mass culture, organization building, or policy is whether or not they address people’s longing to feel good in the here and now. We face a host of intersecting crises that throw our collective future into question. It is easy to become overwhelmed and slip into hopelessness and despair. Tuning out or focusing on the privatized solutions that dropouts and strivers pursue is an understandable response. There will inevitably be long stretches of time when we cannot easily address substantial problems, from climate disasters to economic precarity, through large-scale public action on policy. In such periods, the alternative to individual action cannot only be changing systems through policy in the future. A credible alternative will create spaces in which people feel connected, seen, and supported, and where they can find safety, agency, and understanding in mutual care rather than in individual effort alone. This is especially important in periods during which prospects for rapid, large-scale policy change are slim, but crucial at all times.

Conclusion

The reigning conceit of neoliberal ideology for decades has been that “There Is No Alternative”—that other approaches to organizing society and the economy are proven failures. A key rallying cry of the Left in response has been that “Another World Is Possible.” One of the tragic ironies of this period is that many everyday people have taken both messages to heart—seeking another, better world by turning inward, away from systemic change by participating in WASH culture, through despairing acts of self-harm or dropping out, or finding solace in insular communities (Smucker 2017). The Right is mobilizing this deep longing for alternatives for political purposes; their “culture-first” approach to politics and policy has created a strange new landscape, characterized by the morbid symptoms Gramsci saw as evidence of a dying social order.

The longing for alternatives to everyday life under neoliberalism is driven by deeply human desires. Many of us would call these desires spiritual. Progressives in recent years have been strong on analyzing structures and interests, but weak on culture and spirit. To succeed in the face of a post-neoliberal Right that is mobilizing emotions and surfing the cultural contradictions of neoliberalism, progressives will need to reorient toward the deeper longings finding expression through culture in the preoccupations of strivers, innovators, dropouts, and rebels. The cultural contradictions of neoliberalism do not guarantee the success of far-right, authoritarian politics. Progressives can harness the rebellious strands of our culture to build alternative political and cultural homes that meet needs in the here and now, build power, and demonstrate that another world is actually possible.

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