

defiance would have made the ban impossible to enforce. Solidarity is the most effective antidote to efforts to suppress it.

ALIENATION AND LONELINESS

Some of the most effective weapons in the long war on solidarity are the most subtle. Since the dawn of industrialization, social critics have warned of the destructive effects of alienation and loneliness, with the understanding that these emotions are simultaneously personal and political. Alienation is estrangement from a group or a purpose; it is a kind of severing or un-belonging that produces feelings of disconnection and despair. Similarly, the modern definition of “loneliness” began to develop in the nineteenth century, evolving from what had been welcome and often religiously inflected periods of solitude into the prolonged and involuntary experience of isolation.^[66] Though the Industrial Revolution is now long behind us, these feelings remain defining features of life under digital capitalism. The more pervasive alienation and loneliness become, the more difficult it is to unite people to constructively push for change, and the more likely it becomes that reactionary, fear-driven movements will flourish.

As Karl Marx recognized nearly two centuries ago, alienation is one of capitalism’s defining characteristics: work under capitalism alienates us from our innate creative capacities and from one another. Capitalism began by uprooting communities and pushing subsistence farmers and skilled artisans into factories, where they found themselves performing a new, debased form of work to survive. Instead of tending fields as the seasons turned or deftly creating an entire object of craftsmanship, earning a living suddenly involved performing repetitive, discrete tasks day in and day out, with no sense of a larger purpose and no stake in the final outcome. Standing at a machine on an assembly line, human beings were transformed into widgets, each person interchangeable and replaceable, their labor commodified. With no control over the process, they became alienated from their own work and the products they produced.

Though Marx was writing in the days of coal and waterpower, when mechanical looms and steam engines were still novel inventions, he made astute observations about technology that still hold today. Machines, he noted, are a “powerful weapon for suppressing strikes, those periodic revolts of the working class against the autocracy of capital.”^[67] In other words, employers invest in technology not only to make production more efficient, but to further alienate workers and weaken their bargaining position. Today’s workers are forced to compete with not only each other but also with machines themselves, which they are told will soon make their jobs obsolete and render them superfluous. Thus, we hear that self-driving vehicles will soon displace Uber drivers (who are currently displacing taxi drivers) and that journalists and paralegals will be replaced by AI chatbots, and that demands for better pay will lead employers to invest in robots that will work for free instead of humans who need wages and demand benefits: former McDonald’s CEO Ed Rensi, for example, blamed the movement to raise the minimum wage to fifteen dollars an hour for his company’s adoption of self-service kiosks.^[68] In reality, however, automation rarely replaces workers outright. Rather than substituting machines for people, employers tend to make strategic investments in tools that de-skill, degrade, and devalue human labor. The plutocrats’ scythe, used to divide and conquer and cut solidarity off at the root, has been digitized.

Seeking to suppress solidarity and keep workers in line, Silicon Valley companies rely on many of the techniques developed by their “traditional” business counterparts—dividing the workforce by creating competition for a limited number of full-time high-status jobs, hiring union-busting law firms to squash dissent, and the like. They have also devised ingenious ways to keep solidarity at bay using new technologies; consider, for example, how the internet allows employers to track employees who are not in the same physical space. Drivers and shoppers for companies including Uber, DoorDash, and Instacart interface solely with a digital platform via their phones; constantly in transit, they never meet their boss and rarely interact with fellow workers, which makes it difficult for them to share grievances, create camaraderie, and get organized. Getting organized is always

challenging, but especially when you never interact with your human colleagues and an app effectively acts as middle management.

Lukas Biewald, the CEO of Figure Eight, formerly known as CrowdFlower, has said that companies like his bring “opportunities to people who never would have had them before...where anyone who wants to can do microtasks, no matter their gender, nationality, or socio-economic status, and can do so in a way that is entirely of their choosing and unique to them.”^[69] Despite corporate claims that “gig work” is liberating, platforms can be harsh taskmasters, ranking and rating workers and automatically setting wages and performance targets. These workers endure mental stress and physical injury as they scramble to meet the demands of their virtual overlords. Indeed, that was a huge part of what motivated Amazon workers in Bessemer to try to unionize. They were tired of ever-rising productivity quotas enforced by unrelenting, unforgiving algorithms and digital surveillance systems that crushed their bodies and spirits. On the defensive after the campaign, Jeff Bezos wrote to shareholders, assuring them that employees were not “treated as robots” before announcing a new high-tech system to monitor their movements.^[70] Aggregating power in the hands of owners, managers, and developers, these kinds of digital systems make money by disregarding working people’s need for predictable incomes, schedules, meaning, and connection.

Connection, of course, is what many Silicon Valley companies promised us. For years, “making the world more open and connected” was Facebook’s de facto motto. Now that we’re fully immersed in social media, something has clearly gone awry. The rise of networked communications technologies has coincided with what some sociologists have described as an “epidemic of loneliness.” Growing numbers of people report being lonely. In 2018, a third of Americans polled felt they sometimes or always had no one to turn to; 43 percent said they were sometimes or always isolated from others.^[71] Also in 2018, the BBC released the results of a global survey of nearly 50,000 people living across 237 countries, which found that loneliness was higher in “individualist” as opposed to “collectivist” societies.^[72]

In *A Biography of Loneliness*, the British historian Fay Bound Alberti investigates the conditions that foster loneliness, which she defines as “a conscious, cognitive feeling of estrangement or social separation from meaningful others; an emotional lack that concerns a person’s place in the world.”^[73] The word “loneliness” rarely appears in English texts prior to 1800, when it began to be used with increasing frequency and shift meanings. Before then, it was exceedingly difficult to actually be lonely, to live without regular contact with others. As family structures, housing patterns, religious affiliations, and economic incentives changed, however, loneliness became a feature of modern life. Before the twentieth century, only 5 percent of the population lived alone; now, about one in four people do, and in big cities, that number is much higher.^[74] The rise of the nuclear family helped precipitate this shift while also putting a new burden on the elderly—as children left home, and one spouse passed away, older people came to live by themselves in increasing numbers. Today, one-fourth of people over sixty-five are considered socially isolated, a condition defined as “the objective lack of (or limited) social contact with others,” which is associated with a significant increased chance of premature mortality.^[75] Social isolation is correlated to higher risks of dementia, heart disease, and strokes, in addition to depression, anxiety, and, as Émile Durkheim noted, suicide.

Loneliness can be dangerous, and not just for individuals. Diminished social bonds—and the foreclosure of solidarity such absence portends—imperils society writ large. In her formative work on violence of the twentieth century, Hannah Arendt described totalitarianism as a kind of “organized loneliness.” Careful to distinguish loneliness from both isolation (“I can be isolated—that is in a situation in which I cannot act, because there is nobody who will act with me—without being lonely; and I can be lonely—that is in a situation in which I as a person feel myself deserted by all human companionship—without being isolated”^[76]) and solitude, a state essential to artistic expression and intellectual, political reflection, Arendt saw loneliness as a uniquely corrosive condition. “What prepares men for totalitarian domination in the non-totalitarian world is the fact that

loneliness, once a borderline experience usually suffered in certain marginal social conditions like old age, has become an everyday experience,” she warned.^[77] In Arendt’s analysis, loneliness is the antithesis of political belonging; it is a symptom of what she called worldlessness or world-alienation, a state that arises when people’s full humanity cannot be expressed in community with others. The lonely person is caught in a world where no one can be relied upon, and collective action appears futile. Feeling cut off and deserted, even in the physical presence of others, they are susceptible to propaganda.

Recent events lend credence to Arendt’s view, revealing an alarming correlation between loneliness and support for far-right parties and political views. A recent study by the European Social Survey revealed that it was not basic demographics—age, race, occupation—that distinguished people with extreme anti-immigrant views, but financial insecurity, low levels of trust in their fellow citizens and government, and social isolation.^[78] Echoing a finding made by a 1992 study of France’s Front National, a 2016 poll by the Center for the Study of Elections and Democracy revealed that Donald Trump supporters reported having fewer close friends and spending less time with them than Democratic voters.^[79] Authoritarian politicians reach this atomized audience by speaking to people’s anxieties and grievances, offering a sense of belonging based on cultural resentments and opposition to racialized others. Echoing Nixon’s earlier indulgence of the “forgotten man,” today’s right-wing populists present themselves as fighting for the “real” Americans who have been left behind.

Recent research has also shown a connection between loneliness and susceptibility to the conspiracy theories that flood our communications channels. In 2020, when the coronavirus pandemic evaporated millions of jobs overnight, hucksters hit pay dirt. The clickbait economy launched the careers of an astonishing number of “conspiracy entrepreneurs” in the vein of Alex Jones and Stefanie MacWilliams, who grew a vast audience spreading the false “Pizzagate” scandal, which maintained that Democratic Party elites tortured and molested children in the basement of a popular Washington restaurant. While conspiracy theories have long been a feature

of American political life, recent years have seen shockingly hateful and outlandish ideas elevated to the halls of power, aided and abetted by social media companies that circulate disinformation. Plutocrats will promote paranoia as long as it is profitable, as evidenced by Mark Zuckerberg's refusal in 2019 to ban political ads that contain blatant lies on Facebook.

While people on the political Left are not immune to misinformation, this kind of belief in conspiracy theories is more endemic among the right wing, where powerful political figures spread conspiracies that paint themselves and their followers as victims. Many do this deliberately and cynically, while others seem to genuinely believe the drivel they spread.^[80] The same election that evicted Trump (a man whose political ascension began with the lie that Barack Obama was not a true U.S. citizen) from the White House secured victory for two congressional candidates who publicly supported QAnon, an anti-Semitic mash-up that names Satanic pedophile agents of the "deep state" as the nation's true enemies. The lies peddled by a growing number of leaders in the Grand Old Party are just the latest iterations of the solidarity-destroying, state-building ideologies of yore: anti-Indigenous and anti-Black white supremacy, Islamophobia, and Red Scare anti-Communism. Falsehoods offer useful cover, distracting the public from unpopular policies (tax cuts, attacks on unions, a decimated safety net), just as obsessively naming enemies (Black Lives Matter activists, immigrants, feminists, Democrats, the press, communists, socialists, antifa, anarchists, trans people, the woke mob, and so on) deflects responsibility and blame for people's ills. In the memorable words of Steve Bannon, conservatives counteract the allegedly liberal media by "flood[ing] the zone with shit."^[81] The goal is not to manufacture consent but to promulgate confusion, and digital capitalism expands the arsenal used to assault our senses, stoke alienation and resentment, and encourage scapegoating to squash transformative solidarity.

The precarity of people's lives ensures a receptive audience. "We will not be a less paranoid country until we are a fairer one," Anna Merlan correctly observes in her insightful book *Republic of Lies: American Conspiracy Theorists and Their Surprising Rise to Power*.^[82] Conspiracism

may never be entirely stamped out, but it can be diminished if we deprive it of the inequality, instability, and isolation on which it feeds. By destroying the social connections and class-conscious worldview that a robust, organized Left helps provide, ruling elites have created a vacuum in which alienation and loneliness enable unhinged conspiracies, and division, to fester.

BREATHING TOGETHER

In a striking contrast to her description of totalitarianism as “organized loneliness,” Hannah Arendt described her ideal democracy, or polis, as a space of “organized remembrance.” Historical memory, she insisted, is central to political belonging, a means of fortifying a common world and setting a stage for future action, and thus a way to return individuals from the experience of loneliness and disconnection. Remembering can help us reconstruct our divided, dismembered social body and construct new connections, new selves, new solidarities.^[83]

Arendt reminds us that the erasure of historical truth is another method by which the powerful suppress solidarity. Selective amnesia—the whitewashing of troubled legacies and disavowal of responsibility—enables both willful ignorance and a naïve faith in progress. Nowhere is this more clear than in the United States, where the right wing shores up power through the enforcement of strategic forgetting. Those who honestly recount the bigoted and brutal origins of the United States are denounced, Confederate memorials are defended, and school textbooks and classroom debate are censored. In the wake of the George Floyd uprisings, states where Republicans control the legislatures rushed to pass bills criminalizing the teaching of the truth. For example, in 2021 Tennessee announced a plan to begin levying fines between \$1 and \$5 million on school districts each time a teacher is found to have “knowingly violated” state restrictions prohibiting discussions with students of systemic racism, white privilege, and sexism. According to a report in *Education Week*, “Teachers could also be disciplined or lose their licenses for teaching that the United States is

inherently racist or sexist or making a student feel ‘guilt or anguish’ because of past actions committed by their race or sex.”^[84] In recent years, federal, state, and local governmental agencies have introduced hundreds of similar measures aimed at outlawing “critical race theory” in the country’s classrooms.^[85]

Advancing the struggle for justice requires looking back. We need organized remembrance to strengthen organized resistance. That means memorializing the countless people who risked everything pursuing justice and harshly assessing the powerful who thwarted them. We must recall the striking workers shot by Pinkerton guards, the radicals exiled during the Palmer raids, and advocates of racial equality lynched by angry mobs. We can’t forget the fervid tenure of J. Edgar Hoover, who directed the Federal Bureau of Investigation to surveil and sabotage citizens exercising their basic civil rights through programs such as COINTELPRO, which, as one official memo put it, aimed to “enhance the paranoia endemic in [dissident] circles” and convince activists that FBI agents lurked “behind every mailbox.” The CIA abetted the cause with Operation CHAOS, initiated by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1967 and expanded by Richard Nixon, which “infiltrated antiwar groups, black power organizations, and even women’s consciousness raising sessions.” State officials sent letters to Martin Luther King Jr. pressuring him to kill himself, and police assassinated twenty-one-year-old Black Panther Fred Hampton in his bed for organizing poor people into a “rainbow coalition.” If we expand our scope beyond U.S. borders, the picture is even more distressing. Though there has never been a definitive final tally, millions of people have died as a result of pro-corporate policies, their deaths often justified under the banner of anti-Communism, and they too deserve to be remembered.

Today, those who seek to counter greed with solidarity remain in harm’s way. During a single night of the protests against the murder of George Floyd—May 30, 2020—eight people were blinded or partly blinded by rubber bullets.^[86] Accounts of infiltration of the movement were widespread, and soon verified; it was revealed that the Philadelphia Police Department, which is legally restricted from using its own officers to spy on

activists, enlisted federal drug agents to do just that. In response to the uprising, Republican-controlled state legislatures introduced a spate of anti-protest bills, including increased penalties for activities ranging from damaging monuments to obstructing traffic. Something similar happened after the Standing Rock encampment against the Dakota Access Pipeline. Lawmakers working at the behest of groups like ALEC and the fossil fuel industry ratcheted up punishments for trespassing on “critical infrastructure” facilities (pipelines, refineries, and other oil and gas equipment) while offering new protections to the opposition. A Texas law that went into effect in 2019 declared that activists with “intent to damage or destroy” pipelines could face a third-degree felony charge on par with attempted murder. In 2023, police shot twenty-six-year-old Manuel “Tortuguita” Terán fifty-seven times while he was peacefully protesting Cop City, a \$90 million Atlanta police training facility set to be built in an urban forest. Local law enforcement went on to charge over forty protesters under Georgia’s domestic terrorism law.^[87] Or consider animal rights activists, who have long faced exceptionally harsh sanctions for their solidarity with the more-than-human world. The Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act of 2006, backed by biomedical and agribusiness lobbyists, prohibits activists from “interfering with” business, a worryingly vague accusation, while so-called ag-gag laws impose substantial fines and jail time on people who simply document animal abuse. Standing up to injury and oppression is treated as the crime, while perpetrators of violence at scale are treated as victims.^[88]

An honest appraisal of the past reminds us that, rather than being aberrations, these offensives epitomize a current that has coursed through U.S. history since the colonial period, carried across the Atlantic via British common law all the way to the present—a disastrous determination to stamp out transformative solidarity and stymie social change. “Conspiracy theories, especially right-wing conspiracy theories, do not exclusively populate the extremist margins of American politics and history,” Michael Mark Cohen writes in *The Conspiracy of Capital*. “Rather, the most dangerous conspiracy theories in American politics emerge from the very

center of power, in which white supremacist, anticommunist, and anti-terrorist ideologies, each defined by shifting fears of subversive conspiracies, are promoted and enacted by presidents, business leaders, military men, judges, prosecutors, police, and vigilantes.”^[89] In other words, officials who hold positions of influence cynically trade in damaging lies to ensure the ongoing exploitation of humanity and nature. They are fully aware that their continued dominance depends on the disorientation, distraction, demoralization, and disorganization of millions of others. They are conspiring against the public good.

It will take a conspiracy of epic proportions to counter their efforts. According to one modern dictionary, a conspiracy is “a plotting of evil, unlawful design; a combination of persons for an evil purpose.” If we go farther back, however, we’ll find that the word *conspiracy* also has a different, more profound and positive meaning: it comes from the Latin *conspirare*, “to accord, harmonize, agree, combine or unite in a purpose”—or, literally, “to breathe together.”^[90] It is the kind of collaboration and combination the conspiracy doctrine was designed to squelch.

Breathing together is what the more powerful segment of society, the scythe-wielding plutocrats and their enablers, have never wanted the rest of us to do—to come together as allies and, god forbid, form unions. We are all living amid the wreckage of a long, ongoing, and intentional war against progressive collective action: an economy in which the majority of people have negative assets, a profit-driven health-care system that leaves millions uninsured, the most crowded prison system in the world, a misinformation-addled corporate media sphere, and runaway global heating that’s threatening the planet’s future. Our inability to openly and truly conspire is why so many people are struggling to breathe today: why people of color are regularly suffocated to death by police; why communities are engulfed by the black smoke of forest fires and threatened by sea-level rise; why poor and working people are drowning in debt and struggling to keep their heads above water.

Despite all that is at stake, too many liberals hold on to false hope that we can fact-check or vote our way out of these problems. But you can’t

fact-check people out of a problem that requires clearheaded strategy and collective action to solve, and a change of leadership at the top is not enough to address deep, systemic problems that ail us. We need a credible vision of a better society and the resolve to build mass movements grounded in transformative solidarity that can bring that world to birth.