The Rise of Demagogues and Tyrants

in Democracy:

Predicted, but Ignored

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Table of Contents

Introduction

We were warned, but we did not listen. Several conditions have converged to create the perfect seedbed and fertilizer for demagogues and tyrants to spring forth and flourish in modern western democracies, while we seem to have passively expected that our civic institutions would be strong enough to resist or contain them. And, despite growing evidence to the contrary, many well-educated experts continue to assure us that existing tools to collectively prevent the sabotage of democratic civil society remain potent. But this essay proposes that such mechanisms and institutions are in fact not strong or potent enough – and predictably so – while also offering possible escape hatches from what has become a dire and accelerating downward spiral.

As a starting point, the explanations, accusations, and insights about what swayed the outcome of the U.S. 2024 Presidential election have been plentiful. They are wide-ranging, but include:

- The stoking of grievances and anxiety about an inflation economy that weren't adequately addressed by Democrats.

- The unexpected but potent rise of podcast influencers and "Bro" culture.

- The electorate's craving for simplistic, black-and-white solutions to complex problems.

- Frustrated finger-pointing at Joe Biden's resistance to an open Democratic primary.

- A well-worn trope that the U.S. electorate is "just not ready" for a female president…let alone a woman of color.

- A lack of cogent response from the Left to the Right's campaign against transgender rights.

- A bizarre confidence that Donald Trump's policies will somehow be more favorable to the working class that Kamala Harris' would have been.

- The clear observation that Harris did not sufficiently differentiate herself from an unpopular incumbent, or adequately appeal to working voters.

- The fundamental reality of worsening income inequality….

Are these explanations valid? I think a persuasive case can be made that each of them had a measurable impact on 2024 outcomes. But none of these can be singled out as the primary cause of Trump's victory. In fact, even in combination these simplistic factors are a distraction from what should invite much more concern and scrutiny – and it is this larger, considerably darker storm that we'll be exploring. It is storm that has been decades in the making, with a force and scope that might have been delayed, but not countered, by this or any other single national movement. I would even speculate that, with so many threads of history coming together at once, and with so much accumulated energy and momentum behind them, those conditions made the outcome of the 2024 U.S. elections inevitable.

What are those historical threads, then, and why have they converged right now? Here is a quick summary of those threads, each of which will be explored with more depth before weaving them into what has become a toxic whole.

1. Erosion and rejection of the rule of law

2. Celebration of greed, selfishness, and opportunism as acceptable cultural norms

3. Confusion about the nature of liberty, equality, and justice

4. Pervasive isolation, disconnection, and alienation across society

5. Cultural strife, discord, and division

6. Economic stress and worsening inequality

7. Willfully persistent ignorance

Although all of these influences have existed in human civilization for millennia, it is critically important to appreciate just how carefully, deliberately, and successfully they have been engineered and amplified over the last few decades. The amplification was the result of well-funded and coordinated efforts that were not arbitrary or accidental. And although many technological, cultural, and ideological developments could have lent themselves to any cause, it was one synthesis in particular that seems to have taken greatest advantages of these tools in current times: the marriage of free market fundamentalism, cultural conservatism, Christian nationalism, pro-white racism, and neoliberalism. This synergy has generated one of the greatest deceptions ever perpetrated on the U.S. electorate – and others around the globe. Our hypothesis is that as these destructive conditions were carefully cultivated through methodical and sustained right-wing messaging and activism, they contributed to our cultural susceptibility, en masse, to the emotional appeals, deceptive manipulations, and empty promises of demagogic would-be tyrants – eventually coalescing in our current global reality as an unstoppable storm.

The through line of the underlying causality has become obvious, reinforced by the repeated warnings from both advocates and critics of democracy itself, and illustrated by unmistakable patterns in history. It seems, however, that we are an inattentive and forgetful folk, and have become acclimated over successive generations – like the metaphorical frog in a pot of boiling water – to adverse and degrading influences. Despite a chorus of reminders, we have relaxed our vigilance, and that is what allowed the opportunists first to plot, and then to strike.

This leads us to an obvious question: *what is the best strategy for an effective and comprehensive response?* We will aim to answer that question as well, not only addressing effective forms of resistance, but offering a path forward to building a stronger democratic civil society – on foundations of truth, justice, kindness, and caring – that can resist future storms and return a modicum of sanity to our world.

The Great Deception

First, how about a snapshot of this essay in one graphic? Well, that's probably too ambitious, but my wife Mollie has helped me capture the spirit of this essay in illustrating one of its key points below. It expresses an important theme: replacing the great deception with *organic truth,* which acts as both balm and antidote. This is just the tiniest glimpse of the bigger picture explored in the following pages, but perhaps it can inspire hope that there are concrete, achievable solutions to our modern dilemma – and that we just need to take some initial steps to begin fully comprehending our situation, formulating a plan, and engineering meaningful and enduring change.

	INPUTS	OUTCOMES
The Great Deception a conservative antisocial program A carefully crafted ILLUSION of having rational justifications, certainty about contributing causes, free choice, personal agency, collective agreement, and democratic will.	50 years of well-funded, coordinated effort from right-wing news media, talk shows, think tanks, celebrities, politicians, pundits, lobbyists, and activists to "sell:" • Neoliberal ideology • Fabricated supporting narratives • Misattributed causes for every problem • Logical fallacies (straw man, red herring, etc.) • Illusory truth effect (repetition makes it true) • Science skepticism • Demonizing opposition • Conspiracy theories and bogeymen • Infantilizing voters and consumers • Stoking anger and resentment • Tribal pressure to conform • Elaborate self-victimization	The great deception results in: • Self-reinforcing echo chambers • High tolerance for cognitive dissonance • Hatred and violence against the "Other" • Restriction to black-and-white thinking • Reflexive rejection of contrary information • Sacrifice of personal values for ideology • Unquestioning, lockstep conformance • Voting against own best interests • Giving up personal agency and freedom • Perpetuating suffering and poverty • Enabling neoliberal status quo
Organic Truth a prosocial response AUTHENTIC free thought and personal agency, a more accurate perception of causes, less biased collective discourse, and more dynamic democracy.	Without the right-wing sales job, and with training on how to research complex issues using reliable sources, we can promote and refine: • Independent individual inquiry • Evaluating critically and skeptically • Vetting and verifying sources • Consulting multiple perspectives • Gradually evolving our understanding • Embracing nuance and complexity • Grounding our process in empathy	Organic truth results in: • Vigorous debate prior to consensus • Low tolerance for cognitive dissonance • Compassion for multiple perspectives • Acceptance of subtlety and ambiguity • Ability to hold and integrate opposing views • Actualization of personal values • Voting for the common good, including own • Vigilant, persistent questioning • Celebrating personal agency and freedom • Relieving suffering and poverty • Ending neoliberal status quo

Of demagogues and tyrants

The word "demagogue" spans the history of western civilization. In ancient times, a demagogue was someone who championed the cause of the common people with persuasive speaking skills. Morally, this was initially a neutral descriptor – a demagogue was simply "the leader of the masses." By the time of Plato and Aristotle, this term began to take on a more sinister meaning: a demagogue became someone who manipulated those "common people" with flattery, to enable more nefarious and self-serving ends. Eventually, our modern definition of demagogue came to mean someone who uses emotional appeals, false claims, and expansive promises – often ornamented with rhetoric appealing to popular prejudices – in order to gain personal political power.[1,2,3,4] According to both ancient and more recent thinkers, these proclivities then lead demagogues to eventually become tyrants in order to amplify and sustain their own power and wealth.

And while a demagogue manipulates and subverts the will of the people to fulfill what they have pandered as the good of all, as tyrants the common good is forgotten, subsumed by a compulsive need to preserve power and impose their own will on everyone else. But how can a demagogue succeed at tyranny in a constitutional democracy? This is what writers have been observing, debating, and speculating about throughout ancient and more recent experiments with democracy over the past 2,400 years. As we will see, each of these writers identified conditions that seem to support – and even spontaneously initiate – a demagogue's rise to power, and often the inevitability of their transformation into an oppressive tyrant.

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[1] https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/demagogue
[2] https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095709183
[3] https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/demagogue
[4] https://oxfordre.com/classics/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.001.0001/acrefore-9780199381135-e-2082

Erosion and rejection of the rule of law

To more clearly see historical patterns in the present, it is helpful to sample the perspectives of those who have written about democracy over time.

Plato

In Book VIII of his *Republic*,[5] written between 380 and 375 BCE, Plato seems inherently suspicious of democratic government, finding many faults with it. But he has specific concerns with how tyrants emerge in democracy, building his case on the excesses of "popular liberty," where citizens conceive of perfect freedom as a *lawless life*, concluding: "…See how sensitive the citizens become; they chafe impatiently at the least touch of authority, and eventually they cease to care even for any laws, written or unwritten. They will have no one over them…Such, my friend, is the fair and glorious beginning out of which springs tyranny."

Aristotle

Some twenty-five years later, in *Politics*, Book IV, Aristotle expands on the consequences of a similarly "lawless" democracy (my emphasis in **bold**): [6]

> "Another kind of democracy is where all the other regulations are the same, but the multitude is sovereign and not the law; this comes about when the decrees of the assembly override the law. This state of things is brought about by the demagogues. For in the states under democratic government guided by law a demagogue does not arise, but the best classes of citizens are in the most prominent position. **But where the laws are not sovereign, then demagogues arise;** for the common people become a single composite monarch, since the many are sovereign not as individuals but collectively….
>
> A people of this sort, being like a monarch, **seeks to exercise monarchic rule through not being ruled by the law** – they become despotic, so that flatterers are held in honor.

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[5] Excerpts are adapted from B. Jowett's translation of 1888, see: https://archive.org/details/a604578400platuoft
[6] Adapted from Tufts Perseus Digital Library, see:
http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0058%3Abook=4. Under
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/us/

And a democracy of this nature is comparable to the tyrannical form of monarchy, because their spirit is the same, and both exercise despotic control over the better classes, **and the decrees voted by the assembly are like the commands issued in a tyranny, and the demagogues and the flatterers are the same people or a corresponding class,** and either set has the very strongest influence with the respective ruling power, the flatterers with the tyrants and the demagogues with democracies of this kind. **And these men cause the resolutions of the assembly to be supreme and not the laws, by referring all things to the people; for they owe their rise to greatness to the fact that the people are sovereign over all things while they are sovereign over the opinion of the people, for the multitude believes them.**"[7]

Notice that, in essence, Aristotle attributes the rise of demagogues in a democracy – and their ability to sustain political power – to a pervasive usurping of the rule of law by the collective sentiments of the people, *even as those sentiments are controlled by the demagogue himself*. According to Aristotle, when the rule of law is strong, demagoguery can be contained; when the rule of law is weakened or discarded, demagogues are free to run roughshod over democracy to impose their will.

Alexander Hamilton

Jumping forward over 2,000 years, we see a similar sentiment revisited by one of the Founding Fathers of the United States, Alexander Hamilton: "…**A dangerous ambition more often lurks behind the specious mask of zeal for the rights of the people than under the forbidden appearance of zeal for the firmness and efficiency of government.** History will teach us that the former has been found a much more certain road to the introduction of despotism than the latter, and that **of those men who have overturned the liberties of republics, the greatest number have begun their career by paying an obsequious court to the people**; commencing demagogues, and ending tyrants."[8] – *Federalist Papers No.1*, 1787

By setting up a contrast between a "zeal for the rights of the people" (populism) and a "zeal for the firmness and efficiency of government" (devotion to the rule of law), Hamilton indicates how frequently he feels these forces are in natural opposition to each other – and how easily that tension can be exploited.

Alexis de Tocqueville

Some 38 years later, Alexis de Tocqueville echoes Hamilton's concerns in his observations about fledgling democracies in Europe: "But the demagogues of Europe have made strange discoveries. **A republic is not, according to them, the rule of the majority, as has hitherto been**

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[7] Adapted from Tufts Perseus Digital Library, see:
http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0058%3Abook=4. Under
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/us/
[8] https://guides.loc.gov/federalist-papers/text-1-10#s-lg-box-wrapper-25493264

thought, but the rule of those who are strenuous partisans of the majority. It is not the people who preponderates in this kind of government, but those who best know what is for the good of the people. A happy distinction, which allows men to act in the name of nations without consulting them, and to claim their gratitude while their rights are spurned. **A republican government, moreover, is the only one which claims the right of doing whatever it chooses,** and despising what men have hitherto respected, from the highest moral obligations to the vulgar rules of common sense. It had been supposed, until our time, that despotism was odious, under whatever form it appeared. **But it is a discovery of modern days that there are such things as legitimate tyranny and holy injustice, provided they are exercised in the name of the people.**" – *Democracy in America,* 1835

Tocqueville artfully captures how demagogues will claim to be acting on behalf of the people, even as they disregard the established norms that *preserve* the rights of those same people. This rule of law is then ultimately rejected so that these "strenuous partisans of the majority" *can simply do whatever they choose*.
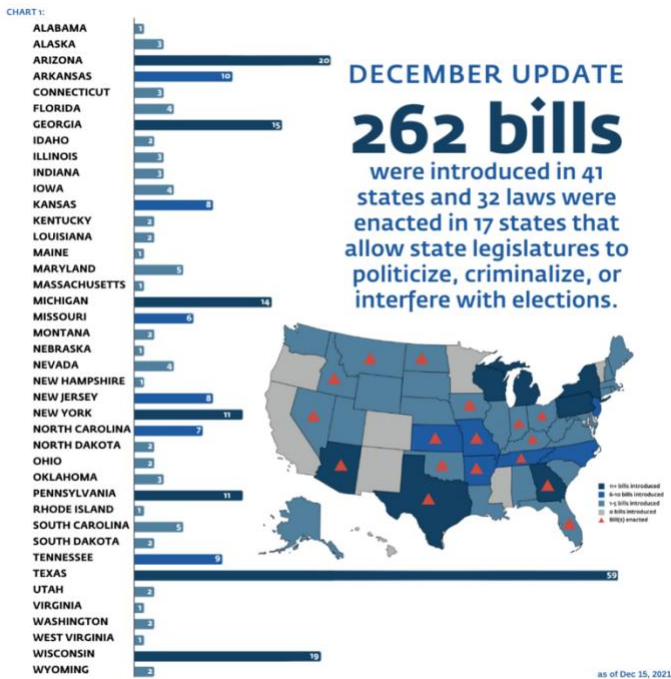
Returning to Plato: "they chafe impatiently at the least touch of authority, and eventually they cease to care even for any laws." Do these words have a familiar ring? We've heard such complaints for decades from right-libertarians, free market fundamentalists, Ayn Rand objectivists, neoliberal think tanks, right-wing media celebrities, far-right militia groups, and Russian propaganda spread by conservatives on social media. Those who have followed U.S. politics over the past fifty years should recognize a well-documented movement within conservative-leaning American politics that advocates for this impatient chaffing, eroding or rejecting the rule of law at every turn, even as its proponents are indicted, tried, and imprisoned for walking their talk. Highlights of this movement over the past fifty years have included, among other things:

- An endless drumbeat from conservative media, politicians, and think tanks to eliminate government regulations that "interfere with free market competition" and reduce corporate profits – even as those regulations protect workers, consumers, and the environment.[9,10]

- A methodical sabotaging of the functions of state and federal legislatures, from a long history of conservatives rubber stamping legislation written by corporate lobbyists (see ALEC); to the implementation of the Hastert Rule by Republicans in the U.S. House of Representatives, so that unfavorable legislation that could receive a majority bipartisan vote can be blocked by a "majority of the majority" when the GOP has that majority; to the underhanded smear campaigns and systematic and enduring destruction of bipartisan cooperation by Newt Gingrich.[11]

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[9] https://daily.jstor.org/why-reagan-became-the-great-deregulator/
[10] https://www.epi.org/publication/deregulation-year-in-review/
[11] https://thehill.com/opinion/campaign/3609952-did-newt-gingrich-wreck-american-politics/

CHART 1:

DECEMBER UPDATE

262 bills

were introduced in 41 states and 32 laws were enacted in 17 states that allow state legislatures to politicize, criminalize, or interfere with elections.

as of Dec 15, 2021

- A similarly persistent effort from conservatives to neutralize or capture regulatory agencies, rendering them either ineffective or subject to the prevailing political winds of the moment.[12,13]

- Relentless attacks on voting rights and the voting process from Republicans at the state level, so that elections favor the shrinking percentage of a conservative electorate – with tactics that include partisan gerrymandering, arbitrary voter or voting restrictions, refusals to secure elections, assertions of non-existent "voter fraud," destroying ballots or disrupting ballot counts, and refusal to limit corporate campaign contributions. A detailed 2021 report from the United States Democracy Center detailed hundreds of Republican multi-pronged efforts to undermine elections and voter confidence across the U.S. in just one year.[14]

- A pervasive effort across conservative media, and within conservative social media echo chambers, to amplify debunked conspiracy theories *despite their routinely provoking conservatives to violence and even insurrection* – conspiracies regarding criminal immigrants, "Deep State" collusions, Jewish globalists, voter fraud, scheming Muslims, liberal pedophile rings, scientific facts as "hoaxes," government agencies like FEMA systematically denying aid to Republicans, and of course the 2020 presidential election being "stolen."[15,16] Further, a concerted effort by Republicans to disallow fact-checking across all media – including social media – claiming it to be partisan "censorship" or promoting an anti-conservative bias (when in reality this was just content flagging, not censorship, of a considerably higher volume of untruths and misinformation propagated from right-wing sources).[17,18]

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[12] https://www.theregreview.org/2016/06/13/rooting-out-regulatory-capture/

[13] https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5922215/

[14] https://statesunited.org/resources/decupdate/

[15] https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/conspiracy-propagandists

[16] https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/11/08/unique-role-fox-news-misinformation-universe/

[17] https://bhr.stern.nyu.edu/quick-take/more-evidence-that-conservatives-are-not-unfairly-censored-on-social-media/

[18] https://www.theguardian.com/media/2021/feb/01/facebook-youtube-twitter-anti-conservative-claims-baseless-report-finds

- Stacking the judiciary with extreme rightwing activists who ignore longstanding rulings (*stare decisis*) and interpretations of the U.S. Constitution, recently resulting in a conservative-majority U.S. Supreme Court (SCOTUS) undermining or overturning established civil rights and protections – such as minority voting rights, women's reproductive rights, and worker rights.[19]

- Fabricating justifications for the Iraq war, in violation of international law.[20,21]

- Routine disregard for the rule of law that has resulted in a disproportionate number of conservative politicians receiving criminal convictions – at a ratio of 97 Republicans to 1 Democrat in presidential administrations alone over the last 50+ years (and this does not include Donald Trump's own felony convictions).[22,23]

- Some 57% of domestic terrorist attacks in the U.S. since 1994 have been perpetrated by right-wing extremists, over twice the 25% of attacks committed by left-wing extremists.[24]

- And we cannot forget the penultimate affront of Republicans to democracy and the rule of law: the January 6th riots at the U.S. capital, intent on preventing the peaceful transfer of presidential power after free and fair elections, resulting in the assault of some 140 police officers, five deaths (1 on the day of the riot, and four more within 36 hours), and hundreds of criminal convictions and jail sentences – all because Donald Trump could not accept his verified electoral loss.[25]

In the same vein, conservative think tanks (Heritage Foundation, Heartland Institute, CATO Institute, Competitive Enterprise Institute, et al), generously funded by large corporations and wealthy pro-corporate interests (Koch brothers, Scaife Family Foundation, Bradley Foundation, Mercer family, Searle Freedom Trust, etc.), have worked tirelessly to stir up public sentiment that questions the "firmness and efficiency of government," oppose regulation, oppose unions and worker rights, rebel against public health mandates, reject public policy more generally, equate soulless corporations to human beings under the law (i.e. the concept of "corporate personhood"), and challenge foundational assumptions of civil society itself. Indeed, some of these efforts have urged the public to reject fundamental scientific facts used to support critical government policies that protect U.S. citizens – as illustrated by the graphic on the next page.[26] More recently, the same model of conservative activism has focused on changing foreign policy[27] – undoubtedly driven by same aim of using cherry-picked data to support conservative agendas, and so further undermine the established rule of law on an international scale.

[19] https://nysba.org/6-to-3-the-impact-of-the-supreme-courts-conservative-super-majority/

[20] https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199781577.003.0008

[21] https://archive.globalpolicy.org/security/issues/iraq/justifindex.htm

[22] https://www.motherjones.com/kevin-drum/2017/06/our-score-so-far-republicans-89-democrats-1/

[23] https://www.axios.com/2024/03/07/trump-associates-prison-sentence-crimes-list

[24] https://www.csis.org/analysis/escalating-terrorism-problem-united-states

[25] https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-J6-REPORT/pdf/GPO-J6-REPORT.pdf

[26] https://level-7.org/Challenges/Neoliberalism/Attacks_On_Science/

[27] https://www.politico.com/news/2020/02/13/charles-koch-grants-foreign-policy-think-tanks-114898

The Neoliberal "Self-Protective" Anti-Science Propaganda Process

(often utilizing the same players & resources...funded by the same individual & corporate stakeholders)

Threats Issuing From Scientific Research

- Tobacco Products Cause Cancer
- Fossil Fuel Emissions Are Creating Catastrophic Global Climate Change
- Acid Rain & Acidification of Soil & Water Are Harmful
- Some Pesticides (DDT, Neonicotinoids, etc.) Are Too Dangerous To Use

Change Agency

- Discrediting Science
- Changing Narrative (i.e. "government overreach," "liberal scare tactics," "socialist interference with markets," etc.)
- Winning Elections
- Defeating Legislation
- Dismantling or Capturing Regulatory Agencies

Neoliberal Strategies

- Heritage Foundation
- Competitive Enterprise Institute
- American Enterprise Institute
- George C. Marshall Institute
- CATO Institute
- Heartland Institute

Funding Sources

- ✓ Donors Trust/Donors Capital Fund
- ✓ Scaife Foundations
- ✓ Bradley Foundation
- ✓ Koch Brothers
- ✓ Howard Foundation
- ✓ Pope Foundation
- ✓ Searle Freedom Trust
- ✓ Mercer Family

Marketing, PR & Spin

- Hill & Knowlton Inc.
- APCO Worldwide/TASSC
- Edelman PR
- Fleischman-Hillard

Propagation to Win Public Acceptance

- Conservative News Outlets (FOX, Drudge, Blaze, Breitbart, Hannity, etc.)
- Social Media Campaigns (Cambridge Analytica, etc.)
- Conservative Lobbying Groups (A.L.E.C., State Policy Network, Global Climate Coalition, FreedomWorks, American Petroleum Institute, etc.)
- Conservative Political Candidates
- Astroturfing

Fake Scientific Research & Authorities

- Bill Nierendberg
- Robert Jastrow
- Fred Seitz
- Fred Singer
- Steven Milloy
- Theodor Sterling
- API "Smoke & Fumes Committee"
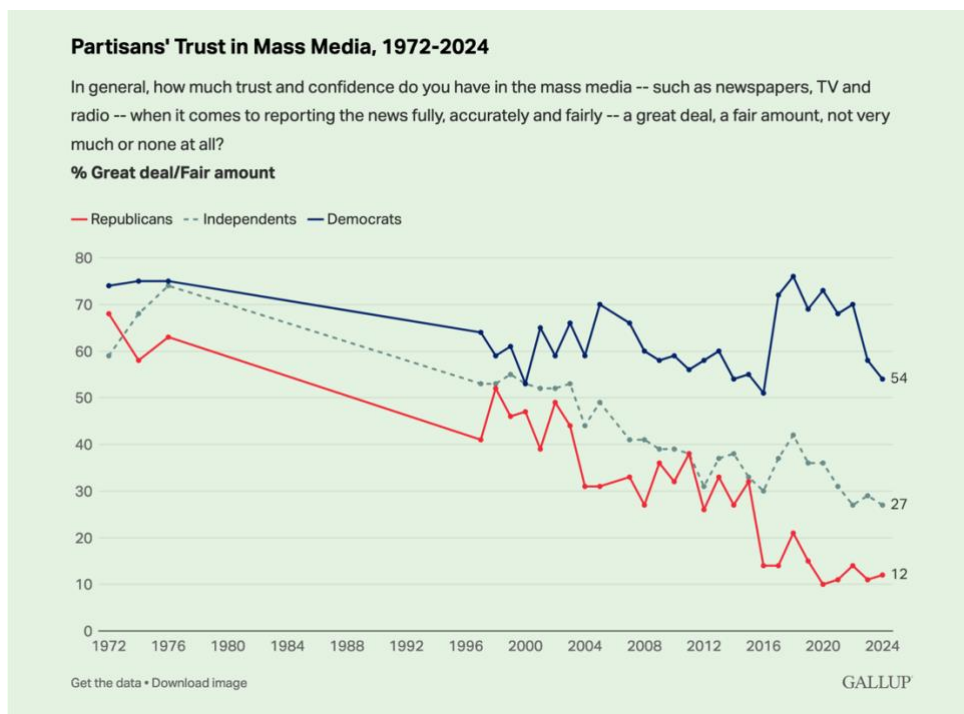- Stanford Research Institute

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We should also touch upon the intentional corruption and evisceration of the Fourth Estate. That is, the GOP's careful and methodical undermining of journalism's role in exposing political corruption and corporate malfeasance, accurately representing events and information to the U.S. electorate, and as a balancing force against well-funded special interest influence. Here are just a handful of the tactics employed to destroy ethical, truthful, independent, and effective journalism:

- Opposition to and elimination of the Fairness Doctrine, which had been effective at reducing hate speech, shameless propaganda, disinformation, and misinformation from U.S. broadcast media in the decades prior to 1987.[28]

- Escalating hostile rhetoric about news media stoking anti-conservative bias, producing "fake news," being "enemies of the people," and so forth – the point where journalists are being harassed, threatened, and physically assaulted.[29]

- Lobbying against journalism shield laws, which protect journalists from government surveillance and disallow government from forcing disclosure of journalists' sources.[30]

And the result of this sustained effort from conservatives has been predictable: as confirmed by research from both Pew Research and Gallup, trust in the media has declined precipitously, especially among Republicans.[31,32]

Partisans' Trust in Mass Media, 1972-2024

In general, how much trust and confidence do you have in the mass media -- such as newspapers, TV and radio -- when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately and fairly -- a great deal, a fair amount, not very much or none at all?

% Great deal/Fair amount

— Republicans - - Independents — Democrats

Get the data • Download image   GALLUP

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[28] https://www.britannica.com/topic/Fairness-Doctrine

[29] https://www.city.ac.uk/news-and-events/news/2024/november/republicans-attack-free-press

[30] https://idahocapitalsun.com/2024/11/22/dc/trump-tells-u-s-senate-republicans-they-must-kill-journalism-shield-law/

[31] https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2020/01/24/u-s-media-polarization-and-the-2020-election-a-nation-divided/

[32] https://news.gallup.com/poll/651977/americans-trust-media-remains-trend-low.aspx

Returning to SCOTUS, many other rulings by the current conservative Supreme Court majority have contributed to a condition of lawlessness. Take for example the July 1st 2024 decision to provide very broad presidential immunity to Donald Trump and subsequent presidents, which has no basis in the Constitution, but effectively undermined the many state and federal charges against the former President. Donald Trump, in turn, would then pardon the violent thugs who converged on the U.S. capital on January 6th 2021 and were jailed for crimes ranging from assault on law enforcement to seditious conspiracy. In political parlance, SCOTUS has created a cascading "permission structure" for Donald Trump and his supporters to entirely disregard the rule of law and wreak havoc on our nation.

So as not to ignore the left-leaning end of the political spectrum, Barak Obama infamously authorized the assassination of an American citizen without due process, and Bill Clinton appeared to lie under oath when testifying before Congress. In their much-favored tactics of whataboutism and false equivalence, conservative pundits will declare that liberals have perpetrated gerrymandering, passed lobbyist-authored legislation, stoked voter fears, committed crimes in office, and so on. And while data confirms this is partly true, it also confirms that Democratic lawlessness is miniscule in comparison to Republican offenses. In fact, for the decade between 2010 and 2020, the total interference with free and fair elections were five instances from Democrats compared to *39 instances from Republicans*.[33] As mentioned previously, other disregard for the rule of law has had similar ratios (right-wing violence to left-wing: >2 to 1; Republicans vs. Democrats criminally convicted for crimes while in office: 97 to 1; etc.). Now, in the first weeks of his second term, Donald Trump has pardoned 1,500 convicted January 6th rioters, attempted to deny birthright citizenship in violation of the 14th Amendment, halted all Justice Department civil rights cases, unconstitutionally shut down USAID, *and the list goes on.* As U.S. District Judge John Coughenour said during a recent hearing: "It has become ever more apparent that to our President, the rule of law is but an impediment to his policy goals. The rule of law is, according to him, something to navigate around or simply ignore, whether that be for political or personal gain." So equivalence here is simply not valid.

The relentless focus on undermining the rule of law in the United States over many decades also correlates with a precipitous decline in citizen confidence in government. According to Pew Research, only 20% of Americans trust the federal government overall to "do the right thing," a skepticism that has persisted since the George W. Bush administration.[34] Gallup reports that trust in various branches of government has declined some 20-30% since 1972.[35] And Pew Research reports that favorable views of the U.S. Supreme Court are at an historic all-time low, with 51% holding an unfavorable view.[36] As a factor in hastening the opportunistic rise of demagogues and tyrants in a constitutional democracy, *this mistrust has consequences*. Again, as Aristotle so succinctly put it: **"where the laws are not sovereign, then demagogues arise."**

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[33] https://realmajority.us/files/stacks-image-d301f1f-1142x1600.jpg
[34] https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2022/06/06/americans-views-of-government-decades-of-distrust-enduring-support-for-its-role/
[35] https://news.gallup.com/poll/402737/trust-federal-government-branches-continues-falter.aspx
[36] https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/08/08/favorable-views-of-supreme-court-remain-near-historic-low/

Amplification of greed, selfishness, and opportunism as acceptable cultural norms

But why would the people want to push back against government or the rule of law? What is the impetus to become so dissatisfied and rebellious?

In Book VIII of his *Republic*, Plato elaborates on how "idle spendthrifts" elevate themselves to become the ruling political class in democracy, **a class which "deprives the rich of their estates" and shares it with poorer members of society, while keeping the lion's share for themselves** (read about how this kind of political corruption has progressed here, here, and here). This, Plato asserts, creates escalating division and strife, setting economic classes against each other, which eventually results in a demand for *a champion protector of the people* who can defend the working class: "The people have always some champion whom they set over them and nurse into greatness…This and nothing else is the root from which a tyrant springs: when he first appears, he is a protector." So Plato draws a direct line between the hoarding of wealth and economic inequality and the discord that leads to resistance and rebellion.

Two millennia later, Thomas Hobbes affirmed how demagogues capitalize on a similar tendency to enrich and empower themselves: "But in a democracy, look how many demagogues, that is, how many powerful orators there are with the people (which ever are many, and daily new ones growing), so many children, kinsmen, friends, and flatterers are to be rewarded. **For every of them desire not only to make their families as potent, as illustrious in wealth, as may be, but also to oblige others to them by benefits for the better strengthening of themselves.**" – *The Citizen*, 1642

The relevance of class conflict was most famously extended by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels as a justification for revolution against a wealthy ruling class (bourgeoisie) by the poorer working class (proletariat), as the authors wrote in the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848: "Hitherto, every form of society has been based, as we have already seen, on the antagonism of oppressing and oppressed classes. But in order to oppress a class, certain conditions must be assured to it under which it can, at least, continue its slavish existence. The serf, in the period of serfdom, raised himself to membership in the commune, just as the petty bourgeois, under the yoke of the feudal absolutism, managed to develop into a bourgeois. **The modern laborer, on the contrary, instead of rising with the process of industry, sinks deeper and deeper below**

the conditions of existence of his own class. He becomes a pauper, and pauperism develops more rapidly than population and wealth. And here it becomes evident, that the bourgeoisie is unfit any longer to be the ruling class in society, and to impose its conditions of existence upon society as an over-riding law. It is unfit to rule because it is incompetent to assure an existence to its slave within his slavery, because it cannot help letting him sink into such a state, that it has to feed him, instead of being fed by him. Society can no longer live under this bourgeoisie, in other words, its existence is no longer compatible with society."[37]

We can readily see how greed, selfishness, and opportunism exemplified in the ruling class was characterized as a strong motivator for those being ruled to question both the rule of law and those who govern. But what if it permeates *all* of society? What if the selfish acquisitiveness of individualistic materialism is celebrated as a moral victory, where "greed is good," and the sole measure of well-being is the gratification of impulses centered around *I, me, and mine*? Can we see how this degrades our social contract, weakens the rule of law, and invites a populist champion to not only punish the ruling elite for keeping us down, but also demands that champion *reward us* with the comforts and largesse to which – as fixated as we have become on our own self-interest – we think we have become entitled?

More recently, who have been the greatest, most reliable advocates of greed, selfishness, and opportunism as beneficial traits? One of the least known, but most influential conservative thinkers, James Buchanan, was convinced that self-interest should be the organizing principle for both economic and political society. As he wrote in *Calculus of Consent*:

> "The market order is founded on the empirical reality that not all men renounce self-interest, and that, because of this, the pursuit of private gain should be put to social use where this is possible. The question that we have posed in this work concerns the possibility of extending a similar approach to political organization."

After his publication of *Calculus of Consent* with Gordon Tullock in 1962, Buchanan's thinking had a pronounced influence on conservative agendas around the globe that sought to degrade democratic institutions and weaken any government constraints on the profit motive.[38,39] Milton Friedman – who once quipped "What kind of society isn't structured on greed?" – also became a popular proponent and architect of market fundamentalism and right-libertarianism in the U.S. Additional popular sentiment is attributable to Richard Dawkins' 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*, which argued that human evolution centers around savage competition, deceitfulness, and ruthless exploitation. And, of course, the catchphrase "greed is good" entered popular discourse through the character Gordon Gekko in 1987's *Wall Street*, a film which captured the de facto culture of American corporate capitalism during that period.

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[37] https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Manifesto.pdf
[38] https://www.monbiot.com/2017/07/21/missing-link/
[39] https://www.ineteconomics.org/perspectives/blog/meet-the-economist-behind-the-one-percents-stealth-takeover-of-america

Since at least the end of the 19th century, many writers have chronicled how the captains of industry, political conservatives, cultural conservatives, free market fundamentalists, and ultimately neoliberals have advocated for sustained inequality and a wanton moral self-centeredness in service to capitalism. Such writers include Thorsten Veblen, Noam Chomsky, David Graeber, George Monbiat, David Holmgren, Peter Pogany, Amartya Sen, Naomi Klein, Thomas Picketty, and of course Karl Marx. I would encourage readers to consult each of these authors to more deeply appreciate the depravity of what right-wing rhetoric, policy, and politics is really promoting in the U.S. and around the world.

Specifically, though, we can easily discern that the chief architects and defenders of the right-wing's great deception were informed by the socioeconomic visions of the Austrian School, Chicago School, and Virginia School – and further influenced by the egoic excesses of right-libertarianism and Randian objectivism. These are the primary historical sources of what became the delusional, non-evidence-based spell that eventually enraptured nearly half the U.S. electorate. To appreciate the underlying motivations of the conservative movement – the fearful doubt at the core of right-wing ideology regarding democracy itself – here is what the Austrian School contributor Friedrich Hayek wrote in his 1944 *Road to Serfdom*:

> "It is not difficult to see what must be the consequences when democracy embarks upon a course of planning. The goal of the planning will be described by some such vague term as 'the general welfare.' There will be no real agreement as to the ends to be attained…with the result that they may all have to make a journey which most of them do not want at all. Democratic assemblies cannot function as planning agencies. They cannot produce agreement on everything – the whole direction of the resources of the nation – for the number of possible courses of action will be legion. Even if a congress could, by proceeding step by step and compromising at each point, agree on some scheme, it would certainly in the end satisfy nobody."

Perhaps most ironically – because he is so often quoted by proponents of free market fundamentalism – Adam Smith himself painstakingly described the dangers of unrestrained greed and the consequent need for "good government" in his 1776 *Wealth of Nations*. In fact, in that work Smith captured the essential characteristics of the worst antagonists to society, exemplified today by conservative elites: "All for ourselves, and nothing for other people, seems, in every age of the world, to have been the vile maxim of the masters of mankind."

After many decades of concerted effort to laud and magnify the profit motive and unrestrained free markets, it should come as no surprise that, as of 2015, 68% of Americans viewed their fellow citizens as "selfish;" and that, as of 2020, 71% of Americans are less confident in each other than they were 20 years ago – *with selfishness, greed, and dishonesty the leading reasons why*.[40] Collectively, our trust in each other is eroding. But what else is working alongside this descent into selfishness, greed, and disregard for the rule of law that further energizes opportunistic demagogues and tyrants to become our champions?

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[40] https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/07/22/the-state-of-personal-trust/

Confusion about the nature of liberty, equality, and justice

Returning to Plato's *Republic* and Book VIII, there is one particular description that Plato expresses as an important precursor in the making of a tyrant: "**He is drawn into a perfectly lawless life, which by his seducers is termed perfect liberty.**" I think this is one of the most profound statements Plato makes as he assembles a narrative about tyrants. The same confusion about the nature of liberty, equality, and justice that he identifies has been artfully perpetuated by well-meaning "seducers" over countless generations. And, as all the thinkers and observers we're exploring here elaborate upon, that seduction ultimately results in a tyranny that disregards the common good, deliberately tearing down a government intended to preserve the social benefits of society, and facilitate public interest.

Recalling Tocqueville: Demagogues "act in the name of nations without consulting them, and…claim their gratitude while their rights are spurned." The anointed protector will promise the moon – greater equality, security, freedom, opportunity, and wealth; to *make America great again* – even as they engineer an actual attenuation of liberty, equality, and justice while enriching themselves. And although this sleight of hand eventually becomes obvious, the recognition arrives too late.

It is indeed seductive to think that we can do whatever we want, and that this is somehow free, equal, and just. Such a viewpoint has been magnified by countless self-ascribed "defenders of liberty," and especially those who have contributed to a dominant neoliberalism in the United States and Europe. Their well-worn talking points include:

1. That only unregulated markets are "free."

2. That seeking profit is the only reliable motivation for innovation and effective services or products.

3. That a just society considers massive corporations to be "people," with the same protections of liberty (like freedom of speech) as an individual person, and with equal or *preferential* treatment under the law.

4. That allowing workers the right to organize and bargain will inevitably sabotage the economic success and global power of nations.

5. That any attempts by government to ensure the rights, freedoms, and equality of disadvantaged groups (the poor, people of color, women, etc.) – or to protect consumers and workers from corporate malfeasance, mismanagement, and harm – will result in tyrannical oppression of everyone else.

6. That the incompetence and inefficiency of government is the greatest impediment to our success and thriving, and must therefore be done away with.

7. That attaining power and wealth in society have absolutely nothing to do with inherited money or social capital, racial privilege, gender bias, access to education, or dumb luck – and that all failures to succeed or thrive likewise have nothing to do with these capricious, unmerited, and arbitrary conditions.

8. That, therefore, any attempt to level the playing field across all of society, so that everyone has effectively equal access to opportunities, must be opposed as inherently antagonistic to the status quo from which the elite currently benefit.

9. That speaking truth to power must be inherently wrong – if wealthy owner-shareholders are the ones being criticized.

10. That wealth and privilege provide unassailable proof that anyone who has achieved them is intrinsically superior to everyone else – certainly poor people and the working class.

11. That private property rights and purely transactional relationships and contractual agreements are the preferred basis for civil society and its governance.

The conservative perspective thus redefines "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" as a purely individualistic and materialistic cost-benefit analysis, completely ignoring public goods and shared social benefits. Together, such lies, faulty assumptions, and distortions quickly snowball into a central tenet of the great deception: ***that lawlessness equates freedom, and lawless freedom is the most just*** – the very same depraved misconception that Plato described.

Having written extensively about both the nature of verifiable liberty[41] and how neoliberalism and right-libertarianism effectively undermine it,[42] I won't delve too deeply into those concepts here. Suffice it to say that the economic and political approaches and ideologies that have risen to greatest prominence in western democracies over the past half-century have ardently promoted principles of freedom that place selfish opportunism, expansion of personal wealth, unfettered markets, and wanton disregard for both human beings and the planet above any and all efforts that promote government regulation, civil rights, environmental protections, worker and consumer rights, or other components of the rule of law that are perceived to interfere with material profits. This has resulted in ***conceptions of freedom that inevitably result in acute and enduring injustices***.

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[41] https://www.academia.edu/19895834/The_Goldilocks_Zone_of_Integral_Liberty_A_Proposed_Method_of_Differentiating_Verifiable_Free_Will_from_Countervailing_Illusions_of_Freedom
[42] https://level-7.org/Challenges/Neoliberalism/

Among the most influential contributors to these distortions of liberty, we again find the Austrian School, Chicago School, Virginia School, and other proponents of laissez-faire economics – including the champions of right-libertarianism and Randian objectivism. So when we hear accomplishments and pronouncements of Milton Friedman, Ludwig von Mises, James Buchanan, Murray Rothbard, Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, or Ayn Rand being touted as a "true path to perfect justice and liberty," we are essentially witnessing the success of Plato's seducers in modern times, with demagogues like Donald Trump simply riding on their coattails. Here are just a few samples of that bilious stream of seduction (my emphasis in **bold**):

> "On the one hand, freedom in economic arrangements is itself a component of freedom broadly understood, so economic freedom is an end in itself. In the second place, economic freedom is also an indispensable means toward the achievement of political freedom….
>
> The citizen of the United States who is compelled by law to devote something like 10 per cent of his income to the purchase of a particular kind of retirement contract, administered by the government, **is being deprived of a corresponding part of his personal freedom**." – Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, 1962

> "**The organization of collective action through simple majority voting tends to cause a relative overinvestment in the public sector**….This is because the majority-voting rule allows the individual in the decisive coalition to secure benefits from collective action without bearing the full marginal costs properly attributable to him." – James Buchanan, *Calculus of Consent*, 1962

> "*What* **is the public interest? No specific definition has ever been or ever can be given by anyone.** Since the concept is not used in its literal meaning, to designate the personal interest of every citizen of a country, but is used to imply and establish a *conflict*, the opposition of *private* interests to *public* interest — its use can convey only one meaning: the right of some men (those who, by some undefined criterion, are the *public*) to sacrifice the interests of other men (of those who, for unspecified reasons, are *not* the public)." – Ayn Rand, "Have Gun, Will Nudge," 1962

> "**In a truly free society, a society where individual rights of person and property are maintained, the State, then, would necessarily cease to exist**. Its myriad of invasive and aggressive activities, its vast depredations on the rights of person and property, would then disappear." – Murray Rothbard, *The Ethics of Liberty*, 1982

> "Democracy is less a system of government than it is a system to **keep government limited, unintrusive**; a system of constraints on power to keep politics and government secondary to the important things in life, the true sources of value found only in family and faith." – Ronald Reagan, Moscow State University, 1988

The fundamental problem here is defining liberty as maximizing individual freedom above the common good, while ignoring or dismissing the consequences of such freedoms on everyone else in society. Why? Because for individual freedom to exist or have any real meaning, everyone in society has to *collectively agree* on what "maximizing liberty" means, and then voluntarily abide by that agreement, so that such freedoms are just. We cannot individually decide what our own personal freedoms should be, and then expect everyone else to simply accept our choices and make room for the consequences of our actions. Because the consequences of our actions can interfere with the liberty of others, whether we intend them to or not – *and whether we recognize this interference or not*.

An excellent illustration of some cognitive errors around this topic is the assertion right-libertarians like to make regarding natural rights and the *labor theory of property*. First made popular by John Locke in his *Second Treatise of Government* (1690), a concise summation was offered in a 1744 pamphlet entitled *Essential rights and liberties of Protestants*: "Every man having a property in his own person, the labour of his body and the work of his hands are properly his own, to which no one has right but himself; it will therefore follow that when he removes anything out of the state that nature has provided and left it in, he has mixed his labour with it, and joined something to it that is his own, and thereby makes it his property." This is a lovely seduction, isn't it? Elegant in its simplicity. But there are substantial flaws in this proposition.

The main problem with the labor theory of property is that, over the intervening centuries since it was proposed, it has ended up excluding far too much from that simple equation. For example, who provided the raw materials or technology being used to alter this property from its natural state? Who transported them to the maker? What publicly funded roads, airports, and tunnels were used? Was the U.S. Postal Service involved? What about the water and electricity required for production? Was government-funded research used to inform the design? What about information from the Internet? Did the maker receive Divine inspiration for their creation, or was there some training and education involved? If so, did the maker attend a public school or community college to obtain the requisite knowledge and skills? And did they live in a community free of conflict, war, and rampant disease – consequences of the fortified civil society in which they lived? Did they have convenient access to food, tools, and even a helpful hand in their efforts because of a supportive family or community? What about the maker's affluence, social capital, inherited wealth, and personal freedoms? Ultimately, wasn't the maker's very ability to source, design, and build this new property the result of the infrastructure, education, rule of law, resources, available research, cooperative community, and innovations provided by their society, *with their only truly original addition being the execution of an idea at a particular moment within that greater context?*

The presumption of one's own labor being a primary or significant factor in justifying ownership in this more nuanced and comprehensive context is, frankly, absurd. Yet not only right-libertarians, but nearly all market-fundamentalists, neoliberals, Randian objectivists, and Christian conservatives defend this concept of private property – and the contractual agreements and transactional relationships around that property – as the most coherent basis

for civil society and its governance. Despite its grounding in a woefully incomplete definition of ownership, support among such groups for this position is widespread and often unquestioned. (For any right-libertarian who requires further convincing on this topic, I recommend the essay "Private Property as Violence.")

Further, a definition of liberty that allows people to *do anything they wish, as long as it doesn't harm someone else or interfere with their freedom or property*[43] is simply unworkable anywhere large numbers of people with divergent personal priorities, values, and aspirations must live together in harmony while sharing resources. It is inherently unjust and exclusionary to focus solely on harm and non-interference. Much more complex agreements are required that include *personal sacrifice* regarding "doing whatever we want," specifically so that *collective benefits* can be realized. Yes, we must still aim to avoid oppression, coercion, and any onerous pressures on individuals to conform. But that is really what democracy was conceived to be: it is supposed to be participatory and inclusive, not dictatorial and authoritarian, in how its collective agreements are reached and enforced. This is the bedrock of democratic civil society, *and how every good citizen contributes to the freedoms of every other.*

Here is a cogent observation and caveat on this topic from Jean-Jacques Rousseau, where in his 1762 *The Social Contract*, Book 1, Chapter 6 he writes (my emphasis in **bold**):

> "Each of us puts his person and all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will; and in our corporate capacity we receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole. The general will is always right and tends to the public advantage; but it does not always determine what is right. **The judgment of the general will is based on the common interest, and it is in its essence that it aims at the good of the whole, not of a particular group or individual.** But if it is constantly divided into factions, and if the will of the people is corrupted by particular interests, then the true and legitimate will of the people cannot be understood. The general will, therefore, can only be expressed when the people are united in a shared vision of the common good."

Along similar lines, in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VIII, he discusses various forms of reciprocal relationship, and characterizes these friendships as the building blocks of civil society (my emphasis in **bold**):[44]

> "In tyrannies there is little scope for friendship and justice between ruler and subjects; **but there is the most room for them in democracies, where the citizens are equal and have many things in common**….

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[43] See *Second Treatise of Government* by John Locke (1689), and *On Liberty* by John Stuart Mill (1859)
[44] Adapted from Tufts Perseus Digital Library, see:
http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0058%3Abook=4. Under
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/us/

The objects and personal relationships with which friendship is concerned appear to be the same as those which are the sphere of justice. For in every partnership we find mutual rights of some sort, and also friendly feeling: one notes that shipmates and fellow-soldiers speak of each other as 'my friend,' and so in fact do the partners in any joint undertaking. But their friendship is limited to the extent of their association in their common business, as are their mutual rights as associates. Again, the proverb says 'friends' goods are common property,' and this is correct, since community is the essence of friendship. Brothers have all things in common, and so do members of a comradeship; other friends hold special possessions in common, more or fewer in different cases, inasmuch as friendships vary in degree. And the claims of justice also differ in different relationships: the mutual rights of parents and children are not the same as those between brothers; the obligations of members of a comradeship not the same as those of fellow-citizens; and it is similar with the other forms of friendship.

Injustice therefore also is differently constituted in each of these relationships: wrong is increasingly serious in proportion as it is done to a nearer friend. For example, it is more shocking to defraud a comrade of money than a fellow-citizen; or to refuse aid to a brother than to do so to a stranger; or to strike one's father than to strike anybody else. **Similarly, it is natural that the claims of justice also should increase with the nearness of the friendship, since friendship and justice exist between the same persons and are parallel in range.**

But all associations are parts of the association of the State. Travelers, for example, associate together for some advantage, namely to procure some of their necessary supplies. But the political association too, it is believed, was originally formed, and continues to be maintained, for the advantage of its members: the aim of lawgivers is the good of the community, and justice is sometimes defined as that which is to the common advantage. Thus, the other associations aim at some particular advantage. For example, sailors combine to seek the profits of seafaring in the way of trade or the like, comrades in arms the gains of warfare – with their aim being either plunder, or victory over the enemy or the capture of a city. And it is similar for the members of a tribe or parish...**But all these associations seem to be subordinate to the association of the State, which aims not at a temporary advantage but one covering the whole of life….**

A citizen who contributes nothing of value to the common stock is not held in honor, for the common property is given to those who benefit the community, and honor is a part of the common property. For a man cannot expect to make money out of the community and to receive honor as well. For nobody is content to have the smaller share all round, and so we pay honor to the man who suffers monetary loss by holding office, and give money to the one who takes bribes. **This is because compensation in accordance with loss restores equality, and is the preservative of friendship**…."

And, centuries later, Alexis de Tocqueville would artfully add his insights in *Democracy in America*, Book 4, Chapter 2 (my emphasis in **bold**):

"It is difficult to draw a man out of his own circle to interest him in the destiny of the State, because he does not clearly understand what influence the destiny of the State can have upon his own lot. But if it be proposed to make a road cross the end of his estate, he will see at a glance that there is a connection between this small public affair and his greatest private affairs; and he will discover, without its being shown to him, **the close tie which unites private to general interest.** Thus, far more may be done by entrusting to the citizens the administration of minor affairs than by surrendering to them the control of important ones, towards interesting them in the public welfare, and convincing them that they constantly stand in need one of the other in order to provide for it…Local freedom, then, which leads a great number of citizens to value the affection of their neighbors and of their kindred, perpetually brings men together, and forces them to help one another, in spite of the propensities which sever them."

We can conclude, therefore, that the "general interest," "common good," "public advantage," "the good of the whole" – or whatever else we might choose to call it – is both a) not all that difficult to formulate, and b) not all that difficult to reconcile with personal freedoms and interests without oppressive exclusions. We can arrive at both by:

- Relaxing petty grievances and divisions, and encouraging collective unity through higher-order ideals, so that there is greater agreement around values and vision;

- Envisioning and actively promoting effective equality between all members of society, through both cultural norms and the rule of law, so that our shared experiences reinforce what we all have in common;

- Encouraging closer connections and meaningful relationships between all citizens, so that nearness to each other ignites our mutual concern and civic responsibility; and

- Delegating decision-making for local issues to those living and working in that locality.

Throughout different periods of history and in various systems of political economy – including in the U.S. – where these prerequisites have been embraced and advocated by both society and government, we can observe real and rapid advances in individual and collective flourishing. But when they are sabotaged with hateful and divisive rhetoric, disrupted by the elevation of profit over people, or systemically undermined to ensure a particular group retains power, the difficulty of balancing the good of the whole with individual interests is nearly impossible.

For demagogues, despots, and would-be tyrants, the concepts of friendship, equality, virtue, neighborliness, and mutual aid are mostly irrelevant to any vision of the State – and are often as distasteful as democracy itself. For them, the only bonds that matter are transactional ones, and the only viable and trusted reciprocations are devoted loyalty and obedient conformance. What is "the common good" to a self-obsessed, greedy megalomaniac? What is "collective will" to a solipsistic tyrant? The gap between sensible and workable conceptions of liberty, equality, and justice and the outdated convictions of conservative thought is simply too vast to reconcile; but the gap between *the good of all* and a tyrant's egotism is greater still.

Pervasive isolation, disconnection, and alienation across society

According to the 2023 Surgeon General's rigorously researched advisory, "Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation," decades of decline in social engagement – with friends, family, romantic partners, and community – has resulted in the highest levels of social isolation and loneliness ever recorded in the U.S.[45] Although such feelings had been improving after the COVID pandemic ended, the most recent survey, conducted by Gallup in 2024, indicated 20% of Americans experienced feeling loneliness "a lot of the day yesterday" – an increase over the previous year.[46] More generally, between 33% and 58% of Americans have reported experiencing serious loneliness and social isolation, with certain groups – such as teens and heavy users of social media – experiencing it more acutely.[47,48] Globally, some 25% of people across 140 countries surveyed in 2023 felt "very or fairly" lonely.[49] And along similar lines, a 2022 study from Public Agenda found 25% to 34% of Americans felt completely alienated by U.S. politics, and up to 60% of workers globally felt emotionally detached from their jobs.[50,51]

Why is this relevant? Because feelings of separateness, isolation, alienation, and disconnection from society are potent contributors to a number of responses toxic to democracy and civil society – and in fact further enable the tactics of demagogues and tyrants to empower themselves. For example, consider these correlations:

1. Because it can result in increased fear, anxiety, and hypervigilance, persistent feelings of isolation, loneliness, and separateness can lower our resistance to extremist propaganda, manipulation, and conspiracy thinking.[52]

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[45] https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf

[46] https://news.gallup.com/poll/651881/daily-loneliness-afflicts-one-five.aspx

[47] https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7321652/

[48] https://newsroom.thecignagroup.com/loneliness-epidemic-persists-post-pandemic-look

[49] https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/512618/almost-quarter-world-feels-lonely.aspx

[50] https://publicagenda.org/wp-content/uploads/Alienation-Barometer-Report_HR_FINAL.pdf

[51] https://countercurrents.org/2022/10/extensive-survey-brings-out-high-levels-of-alienation-and-stress-of-workers/

[52] https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9650276/

2. Persistent dissatisfaction and alienation can likewise fuel anger and rejection of the status quo – and consequent openness to a demagogic "champion" who promises relief, just as Plato predicted.

3. In particular, right-wing populism appears to benefit the most from a weakened sense of social belonging.[53]

One writer who delved deeply into the linkage between isolation, alienation, and susceptibility to demagogues was Hannah Arendt. In her 1951 book, *The Burden of Our Time,* [54] Arendt described the condition of "Verlassenheit," a state of being abandoned so that one's identity revolves around being only a "mass man," a loneliness historically manipulated by demagogues to foster violent nationalism. She writes (my emphasis added in **bold**): "The truth is that the masses grew out of the fragments of a highly atomized society whose competitive structure and concomitant loneliness of the individual had been held in check only through membership in a class. The chief characteristic of the mass man is not brutality and backwardness, but his isolation and lack of normal social relationships. Coming from the class-ridden society of the nation-state, whose cracks had been cemented with nationalistic sentiment, **it is only natural that these masses, in the first helplessness of their new experience, have tended toward an especially violent nationalism, to which mass leaders have yielded against their own instincts and purposes for purely demagogic reasons.**"

Arendt continues that "Nazi propaganda was ingenious enough to transform antisemitism into a principle of self-definition, and thus to eliminate it from the fluctuations of mere opinion. It used the persuasion of mass demagogy only as a preparatory step and never overestimated its lasting influence, whether in oratory or in print. **This gave the masses of atomized, undefinable, unstable and futile individuals a means of self-definition and identification which not only restored some of the self-respect they had formerly derived from their function in society, but also created a kind of spurious stability which made them better candidates for an organization.**"

Then, driving her final observations about Verlassenheit home, Arendt concludes: "What makes loneliness so unbearable is the loss of one's own self which can be realized in solitude, but confirmed in its identity only by the trusting and trustworthy company of my equals. In this situation, man loses trust in himself as the partner of his thoughts and that elementary confidence in the world which is necessary to make experiences at all. Self and world, capacity for thought and experience are lost at the same time." And this condition, she says, results in a dire outcome: "Just as fear and the impotence from which fear springs are antipolitical principles and throw men into a situation contrary to political action, so loneliness and the logical-ideological deducing the worst that comes from it represent an antisocial situation and harbor a principle destructive for all human living-together. **Nevertheless, organized loneliness**

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[53] https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/pops.12827

[54] Later released under a more familiar title of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* – see https://archive.org/details/TheOriginsOfTotalitarianism

is considerably more dangerous than the unorganized impotence of all those who are ruled by the tyrannical and arbitrary will of a single man. Its danger is that it threatens to ravage the world as we know it—a world which everywhere seems to have come to an end—before a new beginning rising from this end has had time to assert itself."

In essence, then, Arendt helps us appreciate that the very conditions that lend themselves to both demagogic manipulation of the masses and violent nationalism *also contain the seeds for a much more pervasive destruction of civil society*. But what she likely could not have anticipated was that a very similar flavor of Verlassenheit that existed under totalitarian regimes of the past has – as indicated by an increasing body of research – also manifested in our current era of commercialism and advanced communications technologies. That toxic isolation has come to permeate U.S. culture in particular seems obvious – as are the ever-increasing levels of anxiety, depression, and loneliness that accompany it.

It seems equally clear what has led to these deleterious conditions in society. Our attachment to digital devices isolates us from each other, as do lifestyles grounded in online purchases delivered to our homes, streamed infotainment, a prioritization of materialistic self-indulgence over both community and real intimacy, and our casual embrace of countless other antisocial behaviors. A reflexive consumer mindset has been conditioned into us by an unquestioned commercialistic culture, shifting what should be diverse modes of nourishment into a narrow band of vapid, inherently lonely self-gratification. And because this atomistic commercialism-materialism prepares us perfectly for ad campaigns that sell all sorts of products and services that fulfill our every want and need, it also seems to prepare us perfectly for political persuasion and unquestioning belief in flattering promises. Our culture has made itself into a demagogue's paradise.

We have effectively engineered the very conditions Hannah Arendt (and Plato, Aristotle, Adam Smith, Karl Marx, et al) so carefully warned us against, conditions which make us much more vulnerable to demagogues and their "othering" scapegoat rhetoric, more eager to engage in nationalistic violence, and more capable of ravaging our world in an "organized loneliness" that abandons both reason and compassion. If Verlassenheit increases our vulnerability to these destructive impulses, then we should be that much more vigilant regarding the weaknesses of democracy. In the context of increasingly unstable and unpredictable patterns – within local and global economics, politics, climate, civil rights, the rule of law, social relations, and so much else – conditions have become exceedingly ripe for demagogic exploitation and the inevitable downward spiral that follows.

These isolating and alienating conditions cannot, however, be laid solely at the feet of neoliberal policies, right-wing think tanks and media, or nationalistic extremism. We can say with certainty that capitalism has accelerated these conditions with relentless enthusiasm, as it has reinforced a self-isolating consumerism and alienation to serve the profit motive. Karl Marx famously described the process through which capitalism entices us to imbue the commodities we create and consume with lifelike characteristics – and then, fantastically, empower those

products to represent our social relationships.[55] This, in turn, contributes to the very same isolation from each other and alienation from society that Arendt describes in her work. For his part, Marx blames alienation on the commodification of a capitalist system that inherently distances people from the fruits of their own labor, the labor itself, their own human nature, and other people. But apart from their support of unregulated capitalism in general, we can't really blame conservatives, followers of Ayn Rand, or right-libertarians for what has occurred. It's only that they have – just as warnings during the past 2,400 years have indicated would happen – unabashedly exploited these conditions to serve their own ideology and economic interests.

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[55] *Capital*, Chapter 1, § 4, "The Fetishism of Commodities," see
https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch01.htm#S4

Cultural strife, discord, and division

Well this is an easy one. We've already outlined some of the pointedly lopsided causes of cultural and political strife, discord, and division in the U.S. But let's recap and expand those that can easily be identified:

1. 57% of domestic terrorist attacks in the U.S. since 1994 have been perpetrated by right-wing extremists, over twice the 25% of attacks committed by left-wing extremists.[56]

2. Opposition to and elimination of the Fairness Doctrine, which had been very effective at reducing shameless propaganda, disinformation, and misinformation from U.S. broadcast media in the decades prior to 1987, was engineered in largest part by a Republican administration and a conservative Supreme Court.[57]

3. The vast majority of media outlets that promote disinformation, misinformation, hyper-partisan hate speech, counterfactual reporting, racist dog whistles, and divisive propaganda – and which have the largest combined share of U.S. audience as of this writing – are right-wing. The ratio of these right-wing media outlets to similarly extreme left-wing outlets is also about 8:1.[58,59,60,61] It should also be noted that the only left-wing talk show host who approached the soaring confrontational vitriol of a Rush Limbaugh was Alan Berg, and he was gunned down by white supremacists in his driveway in 1984.

4. Although a significant resurgence occurred in the 2016 and 2024 Trump campaigns, hyper-partisan hate speech, conspiracy thinking, and "othering" accusations and attacks on perceived opponents and scapegoats have been a staple of right-wing political attitudes and campaigns for a long time. This goes back to the Red Scare tactics after World War I, the "witch hunt" persecutions of the McCarthy era, and the caustic paranoia of the Nixon years. But what really escalated this hateful, fear-inducing rhetoric in recent history was the rise of pedantic and sensational conservative talk shows like Rush Limbaugh's, the ardent fear mongering of conservative televangelists

[56] https://www.csis.org/analysis/escalating-terrorism-problem-united-states
[57] https://www.britannica.com/topic/Fairness-Doctrine
[58] Searches on https://mediabiasfactcheck.com/ accessed December 2, 2024
[59] https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/article/2024/jul/02/sinclair-tv-disinformation-conservative-news
[60] https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2014/10/21/political-polarization-media-habits/
[61] https://www.cjr.org/analysis/breitbart-media-trump-harvard-study.php

like Pat Robertson, and the underhanded divisiveness in campaign tactics from folks like Newt Gingrich – all of which widened and deepened existing cultural and political divides in the U.S., and created some new ones as well.[62,63,64,65,66]

5. A 2024 YouGov survey found 75% of respondents in the United States were frightened about the way things are going in the world today – though Republicans and Democrats are, generally, scared about very different things.[67]

6. A constant drumbeat of untruths from Republican political candidates – a tendency that far exceeds lies from the Left – has further stoked strife, division, and discord in order to garner votes and win elections by demonizing the opposition.[68]

Those on the Right will frame cultural tensions and divisions very differently, pointing to things like the Black Lives Matter movement, DEI initiatives, gender-affirming care, transgender bathroom choice, abortion access, liberal cancel culture, liberal media bias, left-leaning bias in educational institutions, and efforts perceived as promulgating "wokeness" in America. One problem with this framing is that being provoked or irritated is very different from being oppressed, deprived of basic rights, threatened with mortal harm, or bullied to the point of suicidal despair. It calls to mind a sermon I heard years ago where the speaker clarified the difference between "causing your brother to stumble" and "causing your brother to grumble." The first may place a fellow believer's faith in peril, while the second merely irritates them – but these were often conflated to pressure churchgoers into embracing *cultural preferences*.

And that is the substantive difference between nearly all rightwing grievances with liberal aspirations, and leftwing concerns about conservative activism. Advocating for police not to disproportionately mete out violence on minorities, or for women to have control over their own bodies, or for someone suffering from gender dysphoria to receive appropriate medical care, are all concerns about ***fundamental safety, well-being, and survival***. Advocating for the freedom to own a gun without a background check, or keep transgender people out of public restrooms, or have school curricula reflect more conservative views, are all about ***cultural preferences and privileges***. It's not the same. Here again, we can see false equivalence at work.

Regardless of framing, excessive cultural tumult foments rebellion and opens the door to opportunistic demagogues. When people feel fearful, angry, and disconnected from each other, they will empower bloviating champions to save them from their perceived bogeymen.

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[62] https://www.history.com/topics/cold-war/red-scare

[63] https://www.historynewsnetwork.org/article/how-paranoid-was-nixon

[64] https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/otm/articles/how-conservative-talk-radio-came-to-dominate-the-airwaves

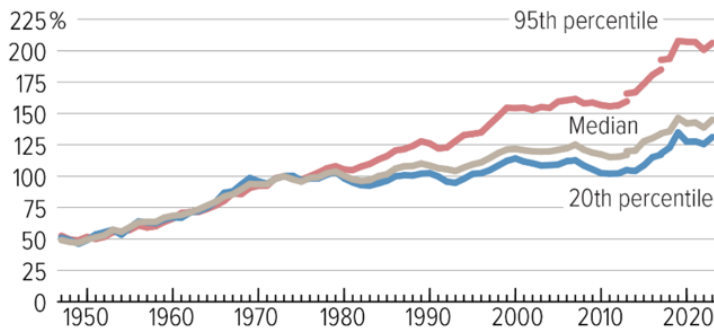[65] https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2020/01/24/u-s-media-polarization-and-the-2020-election-a-nation-divided/

[66] https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/rush-limbaugh-dead-trump-ruined-america-1129222/

[67] https://today.yougov.com/politics/articles/50817-republicans-democrats-scared-about-world

[68] https://www.the-independent.com/news/world/americas/us-politics/republicans-democrats-lies-bill-adair-fact-check-politifact-trump-b2631493.html

Income Gains Widely Shared in Early Postwar Decades — But Not Since Then

Real family income between 1947 and 2023, as a percentage of 1973 level

[Chart: Real family income 1947-2023 showing 95th percentile, Median, and 20th percentile lines, percentage scale from 0 to 225%, years 1950-2020]

Note: Breaks indicate implementation of a redesigned questionnaire (2013) and an updated data processing system (2017).

Source: CBPP calculations based on U.S. Census Bureau Data

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Economic stress and worsening inequality

In addition to cultural and political machinations, we must also return to increasing economic stress and inequality as fuel for discord and division. From Plato to Marx, that is also a core precursor to civic unrest and the overthrow of governments. And the verdict is definitely in that we have been living through continuous increases in both economic stress (as a consequence of stagnant real wages) and economic inequality (as a consequence of U.S. productivity benefiting the rich more than anyone else) for several decades now – all the way back to 1972. These trends are captured in the charts in this section, and by data from Pew Research that indicate among the increasing number of Americans who viewed U.S. economic conditions as "poor" over the past four years, most point to high inflation, the high cost of living, and lack of good-paying jobs as their primary reasons.[69]

Americans' paychecks are bigger than 40 years ago, but their purchasing power has hardly budged

Average hourly wages in the U.S., seasonally adjusted

[Chart: Average hourly wages showing Constant 2018 dollars (from $20.27 to $22.65) and Current dollars (from $2.50 to $22.65), with recessions marked, years 1964-2018]
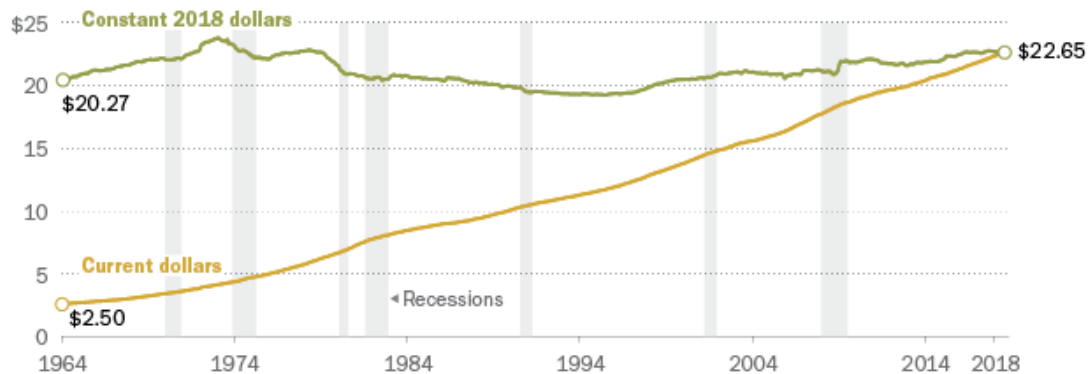
Note: Data for wages of production and non-supervisory employees on private non-farm payrolls. "Constant 2018 dollars" describes wages adjusted for inflation. "Current dollars" describes wages reported in the value of the currency when received. "Purchasing power" refers to the amount of goods or services that can be bought per unit of currency.
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

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[69] https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/01/25/views-of-the-nations-economy/
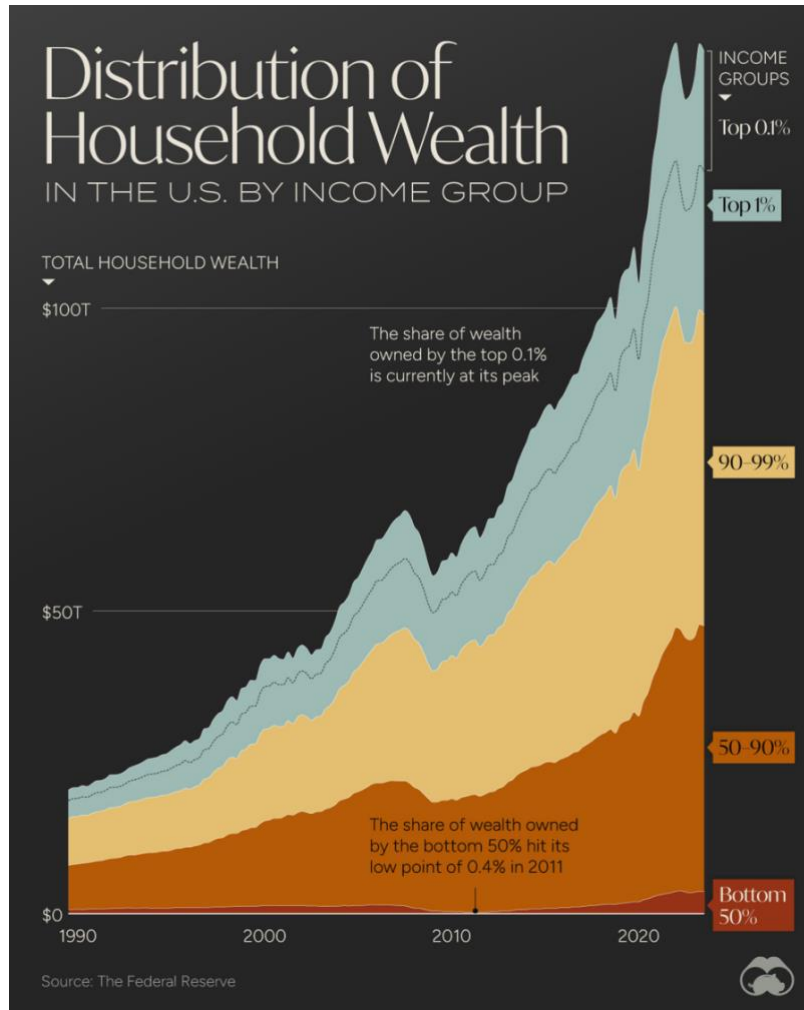
I'd now like to depart from the format we've used in the other historical threads in this essay. Instead, I'll offer a more focused snapshot of just how depraved and destructive right-wing political praxis has become – not only to democracy, but also in its departure from many of the core values it has traditionally espoused. In particular, we will take a look at the right wing's relationship with evangelical Christianity.

We'll be drawing on points covered in my 2020 essay "Christianity, Neoliberalism, & Right-Wing Populism: A Faustian Bargain." To begin, please take a moment to absorb the gist of the **Praxis Comparison of U.S. Political Movements** chart on the following page. In the "Faustian Bargain" essay, I describe how the evangelical Christian Right, neoliberal crony capitalism, and right-wing populism began to intersect in the late 1970s, and then grew increasingly cozy with each other over the following decades, finally converging around Donald Trump. In the chart from that essay, the correlations between political praxis of those three groups are outlined, contrasting them with the primary tenets of Christianity found in the New Testament. In the final column, we can see how progressive political praxis conforms much more closely to New Testament Christian values.

Praxis Comparison of U.S. Political Movements

Central Christian Values & Ideals	"Christian Right" Political Praxis	Right-Wing Populist Praxis	Neoliberal Political Praxis	Progressive Political Praxis
Guiding Value/Ideal: Loving God with all our heart, soul and mind	1978 - 2020	2014 – 2020	1980 – 2020	2008 – 2020
AGAPE — **Inclusive and unconditional love, kindness, respect, and forgiveness towards all** (neighbors, enemies, other races, Christians, non-believers, sinners, the poor, the unclean, outcasts, etc.) **Caring and advocating for those who are vulnerable or in need** (women, sick, injured, disabled, orphaned, widowed, victimized, etc.)	• Oppression and persecution of GLBTQ • Opposes women's and minority equality/rights • Hostile to other religions - tribalistic • Opposes federal programs to help sick, disabled, poor, elderly	• Active exclusion, vilification and hostility toward vulnerable • Hate speech targeting victims, "liberal elite," Muslims, outcasts • Authoritarian persecution and oppression of immigrants	• Disregard for plight of poor and vulnerable • Disregard for well-being of workers and consumers • Exclusion/suffering for everyone except wealthiest • Dismantles or defunds social safety nets	• Safety nets for poor, sick, disabled and vulnerable • Protection and advocacy for victims/outcasts • Equality/rights for women, minorities • Collectively shared burdens and benefits - nontribal • Inclusion, diversity
TRUST — **Worshiping only God** **Renunciation of worldly wealth and materialism, and practicing unconstrained generosity** (commons-centric model within Church) **Submitting to secular power** (leaders/justice/taxes) **Seeking out God's will instead of our own**	• Prosperity theology, wealth-worship, acquisitive, proprietary • Disenfranchises voters of color • Hostile opposition to secular power; attempts to capture/coopt it	• "Strong man" leader-worship • Weakening of democratic institutions • Emphasizes individualistic liberty (anti-tax, anti-government) and materialism • Proprietary	• Celebrates avarice/wealth • Crony capitalism/ regulatory capture • Voter suppression • Economy-over-people (anti-tax, anti-government) • Market worship • Proprietary	• Willing sacrifice (taxes and submission to government) to help others • People-over-economy (anti-greed/plutocracy) • Pro-voting and pro-democracy • Commons-friendly
PEACE — **Having contentment and joy in all situations** **Seeking peace, cooperation, and reconciliation – and relinquishing anger and vengeful desires** **Exercising patience, gentleness, humility, acceptance, and self-control**	• Stridently critical of "liberal" economics, media, science, evidence, education, etc. • Violent/lethal confrontations with opposition • Willing pawns of gun lobby • Pro-military/war	• Generates conflict and division • Violent/lethal confrontation with opposition • Impatient and arrogant rhetoric • Seeks vengeance on detractors • Willing pawns of gun lobby	• Competition and winning more important than cooperation • Increases class conflict and wage/ debt slavery • War profiteering • Divisive polemics promoting agenda • Pro military/guns	• Pursues cooperation, reconciliation • ==Stridently critical of status quo and far Right opposition== • Aggressive defense of the vulnerable • Anti-war • Gun control advocacy
RIGHTEOUSNES — **Living an honest, moral, upright, honorable life that is "beyond reproach"** **Avoiding hypocrisy, arrogance, and self-righteous self-importance** **Restraining from imposing Christian standards of conduct on non-believers, lording it over others, or judging others** **Being humble and not seeking personal gain, status, or reward** **Developing discernment through practice**	• Aggressive imposition of pseudo-Christian ideals on non-believers • Stridently self-righteous and judgmental • Frequently seeking personal gain/status • Not discerning of deception and falsehoods (Reagan Cheney, Cruz, Gingrich, Trump) • Malicious propaganda	• Persecution of Muslims and poor immigrants • Aggressive imposition of individualistic liberty on others • Excessive corruption • Profound lack of discernment about effective policies and actual threats (e.g. fascism) • Personal gain and status are critical • Malicious propaganda	• Self-serving ends justify any means • Strong-arming the privatization of public assets • Controlling capital flows at all costs • Personal reward/ gain is central • Imposes economic will on others • Arrogantly self-important • Excessive corruption • Deceptive manipulation	• Advocates for fairness and justice equally for all • Less judgement about cultural and religious differences • Less corruption and deception • More discerning about effective policies, evidence, and metrics • Expects Christ-like standards from Christian Right • Evidence-based flexibility

Please consider one of the chart's rows in particular: the "Trust" row. As with the other rows of the chart, it becomes obvious that what right-wing America – including many evangelical Christians – exemplifies in its political policies and actions is simply antithetical to the central values, ideals, and tenets of Christianity. And in the "Trust" row, we see that instead of prioritizing renunciation of worldly wealth and materialism, submitting to secular power, worshipping only God, supporting peace, and seeking Divine will, the objectives of this conservative alliance have pointedly *striven for the opposite*.[70,71] Instead, they consistently:

- Advocate for personal property, personal prosperity, and personal wealth accumulation, while elevating economic policies benefitting the rich above caring for people in need.

- Resist, undermine, or capture secular government in service to "Christian Nationalism."

- Venerate (and indeed often worship) tyrannical "strong-man" leaders, violent extremism, gun ownership, and war-mongering militarism.

- Prioritize self-righteous individual freedom and materialism over generosity and collective well-being.

- Disenfranchise, ostracize, vilify, and oppress those who have the least power in society (women, people of color, LGBTQ+, etc.).

The impact of these actions on economic stress and worsening inequality cannot be overstated, nor can the excesses of this bald hypocrisy. It illustrates just how *energized and relentlessly devoted* to individualistic materialism, personal wealth accumulation, and willful selfishness the "Christian Right" has become, even to the point where right-wing policies that overtly oppress or persecute the most vulnerable members of society are vociferously endorsed by evangelicals. The deluding influence on rightwing Christians has become so complete that they have utterly abandoned the foundational values of their own faith – which, as originally intended (by any thoughtful interpretation of scripture), would navigate economic stress and inequality with compassion, self-sacrifice, generosity, and rejection of avarice. But not only has caring for widows, orphans, the poor, and the sick been thrown out the window, these Christians have enabled "idle spendthrifts" to become the ruling political class…*where they keep the lion's share of the wealth for themselves*. And in the 2016, 2020, and 2024 elections, Donald Trump's tyrannical threats and demagoguery received overwhelming support from white Christian evangelicals. There could be no clearer illustration of Plato's warnings.

Although I introduced this discussion as a detour away from historical literature, it seems appropriate to quote the New Testament to reinforce some of the claims about evangelical Christianity's relationship with the great deception. In particular, I think it is helpful to contrast the moral instruction of scripture *specifically for Christians to follow* with the words and deeds of Donald Trump, who says he is a Christian (quotes and adaptations rely on the English Standard Version of the NT, with my emphasis in **bold**):

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[70] https://www.salon.com/2021/07/17/how-evangelicals-abandoned-christianity--and-became-conservatives-instead-3/

[71] https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2024/01/evangelical-christian-nationalism-trump/676150/

"**If we confess our sins**, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us." – *1 John 1:9*

- In 2015, when pollster Frank Lutz asked Trump if he asked God for forgiveness, Trump replied: "I am not sure I have. I just go on and try to do a better job from there. I don't think so. I think if I do something wrong, I think, I just try and make it right. I don't bring God into that picture. I don't."[72]

"**Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling**, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing. For whoever desires to love life and see good days, **let him keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking deceit**…"
– *1 Peter 3:9-10*

- During his first four years as POTUS, Trump escalated his lies to the American public every year he was in office – from 6 per day in his first year, to 16 a day in his second year, to 22 per day in his third, to 39 a day in his fourth, **for a total of 30,573 untruths over four years**.[73]

- Trump's endless rants on Twitter that angrily defamed those he disagreed with were [chronicled by the New York Times](). Hundreds and hundreds of vile accusations that just kept coming.

- Trump has repeatedly threatened the perceived adversaries he feels have done him wrong with retribution – the press, Joe Biden, Barak Obama, Kamala Harris, Nancy Pelosi, Adam Schiff, Liz Cheney, Michael Cohen, Letitia James, Arthur Engoron, Jack Smith, Alvin Bragg, Mark Milley, James Comey, Mark Zuckerberg, Peter Strzok, Lisa Page, Mark Pomerantz, Jamaal Bowman, Michael Byrd, the January 6th select committee, liberals, and countless others – *and done so over 100 times*. [74,75,76] Echoing the language of Adolf Hitler, Trump has even called his opponents "vermin."[77] It goes without saying that all of Trump's impassioned accusations and retaliatory rhetoric are signature characteristics of many demagogues and tyrants throughout history.

"I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I am writing to you **not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual**

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[72] https://www.businessinsider.com/trump-on-god-i-dont-like-to-have-to-ask-for-forgiveness-2016-1

[73] https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2021/01/donald-trump-thirty-thousand-lies/

[74] https://www.citizensforethics.org/reports-investigations/crew-investigations/trump-has-threatened-dozens-of-times-to-use-the-government-to-target-political-enemies/

[75] https://www.politico.com/news/2024/11/06/trump-retribution-enemy-list-00187725

[76] https://thehill.com/homenews/campaign/4966421-trump-revenge-tour-threats/

[77] https://www.npr.org/2023/11/17/1213746885/trump-vermin-hitler-immigration-authoritarian-republican-primary

immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. **Purge the evil person from among you.**" – *1 Corinthians 5:9-13*

- The documented confirmation of Donald Trump's long history of sexual immorality, along with his extensive record of swindling people, boasting about his own wealth, and never-ending habit of reviling others, should provide Christians with serious pause – and indeed persuade even the least pious not to associate with Trump at all, *since he claims to be a Christian*.

"Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." – *1 Peter 5:5*

- Donald Trump's utter lack of humility and zealous boasting about himself is…*breathtaking*. According to his own accounts, everything he has accomplished is greater than anything anyone else has ever done; he is smarter and knows more than people who are lifetime experts in their fields; he gives himself an "A+" for things he was *objectively disastrous* in handling, like the COVID pandemic; he has "the best words," "the best brain," and "the largest crowds;" he's always been "a winner" and "won trophies in everything" he's done; and so on ad nauseum.[78,79,80] It should be noted, though, that he did say Abraham Lincoln was one POTUS "more presidential" than himself.

What all of this points to is the fact that most evangelical Christians in the U.S. have been unreservedly devoted to a man who, although he claims to be their brother in Christ, is a glaringly obvious example of a *lying, adulterous, boasting, reviling, vengeful son of lawlessness*. Trump is the very sort of Christian that other Christians should distance themselves from, but, contrary to the scripture that should inform their conduct, they don't hesitate to have meals with him, praise him, cheer him on at rallies, vote for him – or, even if they do question his unsavory words and deeds, still believe he is "anointed by God" as their champion, like King Cyrus of the Old Testament.[81] He has sold himself a defender and protector of white Christian men across America who feel left behind, whose ways of life have been decimated by lost jobs and stagnant wages. And there it is again…the echo of Plato's warnings about how tyrants arise.

In the context of this section, then, what has Donald Trump's first presidency – the champion demagogue who promised to help the folks who have felt left behind both culturally and economically – done to improve economic stress and inequality? Not a lot. In fact, his performance mirrors other Republican presidents in worsening things for the working class and the poor. Here some comparative statistics for recent folks who occupied the Oval Office[82]:

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[78] https://www.minnpost.com/eric-black-ink/2016/06/donald-trump-s-breathtaking-self-admiration/

[79] https://www.axios.com/2019/01/05/everything-trump-says-he-knows-more-about-than-anybody

[80] https://www.cnn.com/2020/09/21/politics/donald-trump-coronavirus-grade/index.html

[81] https://www.economist.com/united-states/2024/10/22/the-americans-who-think-trump-is-anointed-by-god

[82] https://www.jec.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/democrats/2024/10/the-u-s-economy-performs-better-under-democratic-presidents

1. *Total job growth*

Job Growth Is Greater Under Democratic Presidents

Total job gains by president, in thousands, 1981-present
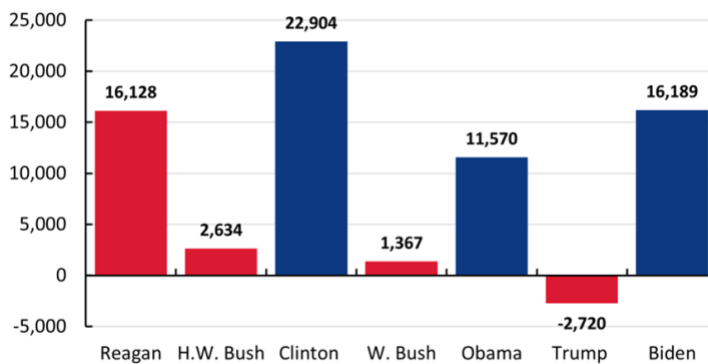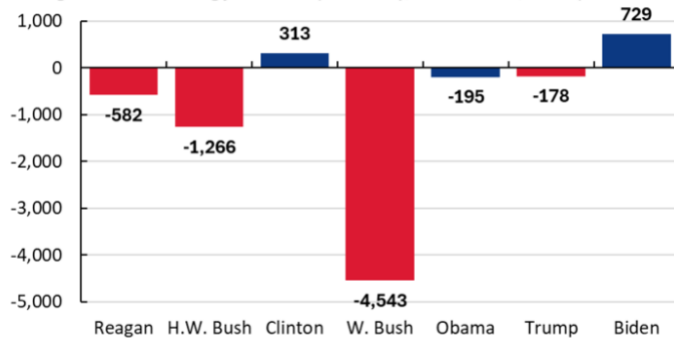

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics
Note: Total for Biden goes through September 2024.

2. *Manufacturing job growth*

Manufacturing Jobs Have Increased More Under Democratic Presidents

Change in manufacturing jobs across presidency, in thousands, 1981-present
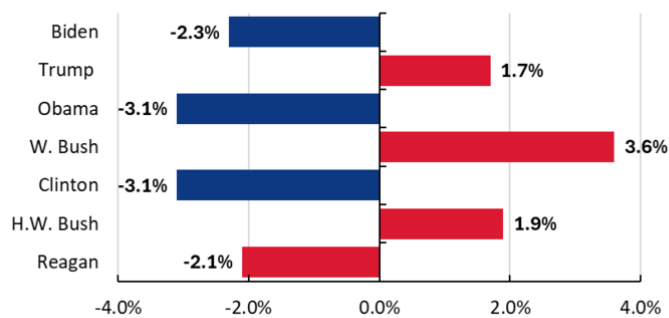

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics
Note: Data for Biden are through September 2024.

3. *Unemployment rate*

The Unemployment Rate Is Lower at the End of Democratic Presidencies and Higher at the End of Republican Ones

Difference in the unemployment rate at the end of presidency compared to the beginning; a negative number indicates a lower unemployment rate, 1981-present
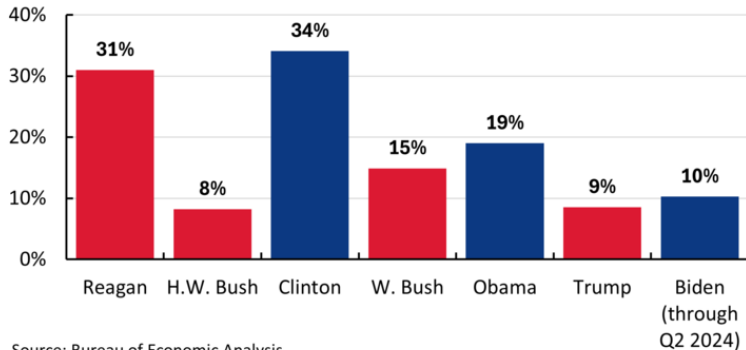

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics
Note: Data for Biden go through September 2024.

4. Total GDP growth

The Economy Grows More Under Democratic Presidents

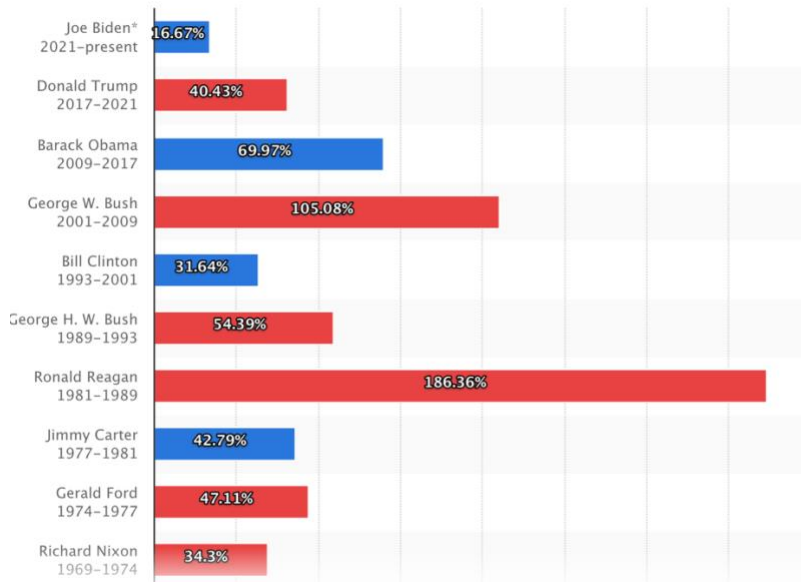Change in real gross domestic product by president, chained dollars, 1981-present

Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis
Note: Data show GDP in billions of chained 2017 dollars.
Data for the Biden administration go through Q2 2024.

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5. Percent growth in national debt by president[83]

Although the focus here has been on right-wing evangelical Christianity and neoliberalism – and the short-term impacts of their policies on various economic metrics – in fairness we should note there have been prominent neoliberals on the Left who have contributed to long-term economic stress and inequality in the U.S. as well. Bill Clinton ran and was elected POTUS as a liberal Democrat, but was responsible for both NAFTA – a "free trade" agreement that was devastating to U.S. manufacturing wages and jobs[84] – and the equally destructive "Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act." Often referred to as "Welfare to Work" legislation, this act reflected conservative views about who was deserving or undeserving of financial assistance. As it turns out, long-term studies have shown that Welfare
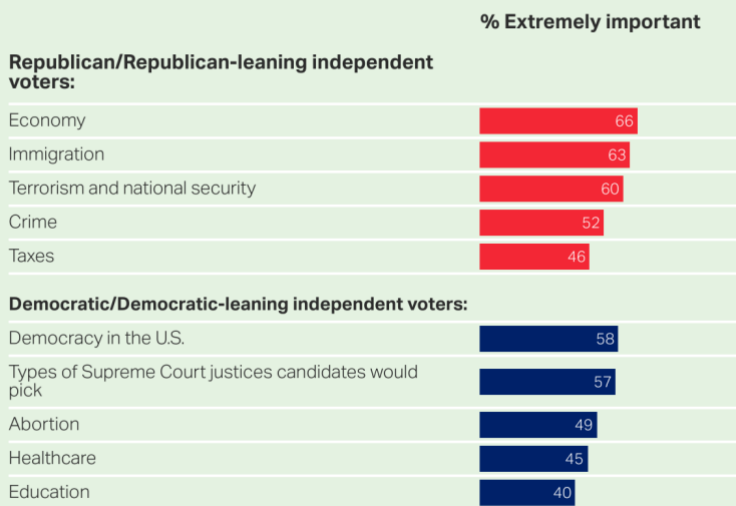
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[83] https://www.statista.com/statistics/1366899/percent-change-national-debt-president-us/
[84] https://www.epi.org/blog/naftas-impact-workers/

to Work substantially increased food insecurity among poorer single-parent households with children, as well as the homelessness of poorer children who attend public schools (which, in turn, strongly correlates with reduced graduation rates).[85] Although many could point to Clinton as simply making deals with a GOP majority in Congress – and having his ear bent by Wall Street economic advisors – the reality is that he is responsible for two of the worst economic policy decisions of any POTUS in recent history – right up there with the "trickle-down" economics of Ronald Reagan in terms of their negative impacts on the working class, overall poverty, and lessening of economic mobility in America.[86]

Republican and Democratic Voters' Top Five Voting Issues

Now I am going to read a list of some of the issues that will probably be discussed in this year's presidential election campaign. As I read each one, please tell me how important the candidates' positions on that issue will be in influencing your vote for president -- extremely important, very important, somewhat important or not important.

% Extremely important

Republican/Republican-leaning independent voters:

Issue	%
Economy	66
Immigration	63
Terrorism and national security	60
Crime	52
Taxes	46

Democratic/Democratic-leaning independent voters:

Issue	%
Democracy in the U.S.	58
Types of Supreme Court justices candidates would pick	57
Abortion	49
Healthcare	45
Education	40

Sept. 16-28, 2024

GALLUP

In the 2024 elections, there was also prevailing narrative that Joe Biden's economic policies were solely responsible for rampant inflation in the U.S. But this is not accurate. As I've written about previously, post-pandemic inflation was the consequence of a perfect storm of additional factors – including the CARES Act stimulus spending approved by Trump in 2020, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, supply chain disruptions around the globe, labor shortages in the U.S., corporate opportunism, the Federal Reserve's slowness to react to warning signs, and the rebound of economic demand after COVID. And this is only a partial list. It is critically important to appreciate, however, that the economic landscape that led to populist reactions like the Occupy movement, enthusiasm for Bernie Sanders presidential bid, and the MAGA movement can be traced back to trends beginning in the early 1970s.

Ultimately, we have witnessed how the conditions of economic stress and increasing inequality made U.S. democracy ripe for demagogues and tyrants. In 2024, a majority of the voters who supported Donald Trump cited economic issues as their primary concern.[87]

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[85] H Luke Shaefer, Kathryn Edin, Vincent Fusaro, Pinghui Wu, The Decline of Cash Assistance and the Well-Being of Poor Households with Children, *Social Forces*, Volume 98, Issue 3, March 2020, Pages 1000–1025, https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/soz020

[86] https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/reagans-real-legacy/

[87] https://news.gallup.com/poll/651719/economy-important-issue-2024-presidential-vote.aspx

Willfully persistent ignorance

Many of those who have written about democracy emphasize the need for a well-educated and well-informed populace in order to preserve this form of government. Here are just a few highlights of those opinions, beginning with the Founding Father who was perhaps the most vociferous advocate of public education (my emphasis in **bold**):

Thomas Jefferson

"I think by far the most important bill in our whole code is that for the **diffusion of knowledge among the people**. No other sure foundation can be devised for the preservation of freedom, and happiness." – Letter to George Wythe, 1786

"Experience has shown that, even under the best forms, those entrusted with power have, in time, and by slow operations, perverted it into tyranny; and it is believed that the most effectual means of preventing this would be, **to illuminate, as far as practicable, the minds of the people at large**..." – *Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge*, 1778

"Above all things I hope the education of the common people will be attended to; convinced that on their good sense we may rely with most security for the preservation of a due degree of liberty." – Letter to James Madison, 1787

"Education is here placed among the articles of public care, not that it would be proposed to take its ordinary branches out of the hands of private enterprise, which manages so much better all the concerns to which it is equal, **but a public institution can alone supply those sciences which, though rarely called for, are yet necessary to complete the circle, all the parts of which contribute to the improvement of the country, and some of them to its preservation.**" – *6th Annual Message*, 1806

"Enlighten the people generally, and tyranny and oppressions of body and mind will vanish like evil spirits at the dawn of day." – Letter to Dupont de Nemours, 1816

"I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, **the remedy is not to take it from them but to inform their discretion.**" – Letter to William Charles Jarvis, 1820

John Dewey

John Dewey is another great thinker famous for elevating education as a critical building block of democratic society. In his 1916 *Democracy and Education*, Chapter 6, he writes (my emphasis in **bold**):

"The devotion of democracy to education is a familiar fact. The superficial explanation is that a government resting upon popular suffrage cannot be successful unless those who elect and who obey their governors are educated. Since a democratic society repudiates the principle of external authority, it must find a substitute in voluntary disposition and interest; these can be created only by education. **But there is a deeper explanation. A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. The extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own, is equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory which kept men from perceiving the full import of their activity. These more numerous and more varied points of contact denote a greater diversity of stimuli to which an individual has to respond; they consequently put a premium on variation in his action…**.

The widening of the area of shared concerns, and the liberation of a greater diversity of personal capacities which characterize a democracy, are not of course the product of deliberation and conscious effort. On the contrary, they were caused by the development of modes of manufacture and commerce, travel, migration, and intercommunication which flowed from the command of science over natural energy. **But after greater individualization on one hand, and a broader community of interest on the other have come into existence, it is a matter of deliberate effort to sustain and extend them.**"

Paulo Freire

As to the quality of education required to build and maintain a just and free democratic society, I think Paulo Freire's 1970 work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* deserves a special mention. Here are excerpts of some of Freire's guiding principles in Chapter 2:

"Education as the practice of freedom – as opposed to education as the practice of domination – denies that man is abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world; it also denies that the world exists as a reality apart from people. Authentic

reflection considers neither abstract man nor the world without people, but people in their relations with the world. In these relations consciousness and world are simultaneous: consciousness neither precedes the world nor follows it....

Problem-posing education affirms men and women as beings in the process of becoming – as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality. Indeed, in contrast to other animals who are unfinished, but not historical, people know themselves to be unfinished; they are aware of their incompletion. In this incompletion and this awareness lie the very roots of education as an exclusively human manifestation. The unfinished character of human beings and the transformational character of reality necessitate that education be an ongoing activity....

This movement of inquiry must be directed towards humanization – the people's historical vocation. The pursuit of full humanity, however, cannot be carried out in isolation or individualism, but only in fellowship and solidarity; therefore, it cannot unfold in the antagonistic relations between oppressors and oppressed. No one can be authentically human while he prevents others from being so."

Plato

Lastly, we can also return to Plato's *Republic* for some elegant arguments about how education is essential for successful and thriving society.

In *Republic* Book VII, Plato presents his famous allegory of the cave, from which we understand education to be leading those whose understanding has thus far been restricted to viewing mere "shadows on the wall" out into the bright sun of enlightened day. As Plato elaborates:

"The power and capacity of learning exists in the soul already; the role of education is to bring it out, to facilitate its growth. Just as the ability to see exists in the eye, but it can be impeded by something, so the ability to learn exists in the soul, but it must be awakened and developed. The philosopher's role, then, is to guide the soul out of the shadows and into the light. The task of education is to bring the soul from the darkness of ignorance to the clarity of knowledge, starting with the shadows and gradually moving into the light of truth."

And the context for this story – and indeed the entirety of Book VII – is the education of rulers in society. It is such a critical consideration for Plato, he says:

"All these things, then, will have to be carefully considered by us. And if only those whom we introduce to this vast system of education and training are sound in body and mind, justice herself will have nothing to say against us, and **we shall be the saviors of the constitution and of the State.** But, if our pupils are men of another stamp, the reverse will happen, and we shall pour a still greater flood of ridicule on philosophy than she has to endure at present."

If those who emerge from Plato's civic training remain sound of body and mind, *they will preserve the constitution and the State*. That's a fairly profound declaration, isn't it?

Later in Book VII, as he rounds out the complete education of an ideal leader, Plato summarizes the desired outcome of that lengthy and multifaceted education this way:

> "When they have reached fifty years of age, then let those who still survive and have distinguished themselves in every action of their lives and in every branch of knowledge come at last to their consummation: The time has now arrived at which they must raise the eye of the soul to the universal light which lightens all things, and behold the absolute good. For that is the pattern according to which they are to order the State and the lives of individuals, and the remainder of their own lives also. **They make philosophy their chief pursuit, but, when their turn comes, also toil at politics and ruling for the public good – not as though they were performing some heroic action, but simply as a matter of duty. And when they have brought up in each generation others like themselves, and left them in their place to be governors of the State, then they will depart to the Islands of the Blessed and dwell there**."

In Plato's mind, the objective is to gain sufficient wisdom, knowledge, and experience to actualize absolute good in society – and then train others up to do the same. That is the essential grounding of all leadership. For Plato, this critical aim of education is for those who have the capacity and temperament to lead. But isn't this equally true *for every citizen in a democracy*, where we are all responsible for a government "of the people, by the people, for the people...?" Plato then asserts in Book VIII that "as the government is, such will be the man," and that the disorder and ruin of both oligarchies and democracies originate in "bad education and bad government." Surely these are insights we should heed.

Departing from the historical discourse Plato, Dewey, Freire, and Jefferson, let's consider the present day. How is our modern Republic faring in the education of its citizens – both in terms of leading them out of the cave, and instilling a desire to shepherd the common good for all of society?

Well, there are those who seem overtly committed to antagonizing this noble aim, desiring instead to keep the voting public both poorly educated and poorly informed. Here are just a handful of efforts that social and political conservatives have employed to undermine, distort, and defund public education:

- Crippling K-12 public school funding and corroding standardized curricula, either directly or by diverting taxpayer dollars to private charter schools through school voucher legislation. [88,89,90]

- [Attempts to defund](#) the "Head Start" program – one of the [most successful](#) in helping poor children improve their educational outcomes and overall behavioral development.

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[88] https://www.nsba.org/advocacy/federal-legislative-priorities/school-vouchers
[89] https://progressive.org/latest/republican-war-education/
[90] https://democrats-appropriations.house.gov/news/press-releases/house-republicans-try-eliminate-public-education-makes-american-dream-possible

- Censorship of any and all information and ideas they do not want to be taught in public K-12 education, often while promoting counterfactual or highly biased alternatives. [91,92,93,94]

- Advocating for *ending any and all government involvement in public education*, including dissolving the Department of Education itself.[95,96]

A parallel strategy has been extended to higher education as well, with a drumbeat of right-wing propaganda that colleges and universities in the U.S. are "too liberal" or "too woke," resulting in falling confidence in those institutions among Republicans.[97]

To further deepen the potential of a poorly informed public, we have already touched upon the overwhelming prevalence of biased, counterfactual, and actively deceptive information from right-leaning media sources, think tanks, talk show hosts, and political candidates – as well as the political maneuvering, like eliminating the Fairness Doctrine, that facilitated this endless peddling of untruths. And then we have the further erosion of both useful information and truth across social media platforms that seem unable to effectively identify or countervail counterfactual content, and whose algorithms sometimes tend to amplify it instead.[98] Most recently – seemingly in response to a drumbeat of conservative outcries that their content was disproportionately targeted – Meta announced it is even discontinuing the fact-checking system it has used to flag potential disinformation and misinformation on Facebook.[99] And so we arrive at a devastating epidemic of willfully persistent ignorance in American society, and epidemic that promises to get worse if we do not try to repair what is broken.

Consider these statistics:

- In January of 2024, after extensive debunking of "the big lie" in the press and courts over the previous three years, **67% of Republicans still believed that Joe Biden was not the legitimately elected President of the United States**.[100]

- In a 2021 POLES survey, **those who approved of Donald Trump were twice as likely (or more) to believe in disproven conspiracy theories**, e.g. that scientists had exaggerated COVID dangers, that vaccines implanted microchips in people, and that NASA didn't land on the moon; *they were even more likely to believe the Earth is flat*.[101]

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[91] https://americanoversight.org/investigation/right-wing-attacks-on-education-and-student-expression/

[92] https://www.thirdway.org/memo/project-2025s-attacks-on-public-education

[93] https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/texas-students-may-soon-be-reading-bible-stories-in-english-classes/2024/11

[94] https://www.npr.org/2022/03/28/1089221657/dont-say-gay-florida-desantis

[95] https://edpolitics.org/the-rights-long-game-to-end-public-education/

[96] https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c79zxzj90nno

[97] https://news.gallup.com/poll/216278/why-republicans-down-higher.aspx

[98] https://today.usc.edu/usc-study-reveals-the-key-reason-why-fake-news-spreads-on-social-media/

[99] https://apnews.com/article/meta-facts-trump-musk-community-notes-413b8495939a058ff2d25fd23f2e0f43

[100] https://www.msnbc.com/rachel-maddow-show/maddowblog/republican-support-big-lie-moves-wrong-direction-rcna131911

[101] https://carsey.unh.edu/publication/conspiracy-vs-science-survey-us-public-beliefs

- In 2012, Kaiser Family Foundation conducted a poll that found **36% of respondents still believed Obamacare had authorized "death panels"** that could decide who would receive care – again despite reputable organizations like Politifact debunking this claim years earlier.[102]

- **Despite overwhelming scientific evidence to the contrary,** over half of the tweets on Twitter between 2017 and 2019 asserted climate change wasn't real…that it was just a "hoax."[103] **As of March, 2022, only 23% of Republicans believed climate change was a serious threat** in a Pew Research survey.[104]

Continuing to embrace and promote beliefs that are questionable to begin with – after years of widely available and credible research that disproves them – is, I think, a clear indication of what differentiates simply not knowing something from *willfully persistent ignorance*. The conservatives' great deception has effectively returned the Republican faithful to Plato's cave, where they remain chained by their beliefs, with their faces to the wall, the only remaining reality a shadowy play of puppets acting out an endless farce of callous lies.

A few final points. First, a primary characteristic of all disinformation and misinformation is the distortion of *accurate causality*. This can be accidental misattribution, a deliberate concealment of the truth, a deception that redirects responsibility, or a combination of all three. This results in potent constructs that have bolstered the propaganda of conservatives and external state actors very effectively over the past few decades. And, of course, blaming the wrong bogeyman for the cause of our problems is also a favorite tactic of demagogues and tyrants. You can explore this concept in more depth in my essay "The Problem of Virtual Causality."

A second point is the power of the "illusory truth effect." An unfortunate capacity of the human brain is to begin believing that something is true just because we hear it repeated frequently. This even occurs when we actually *know* a truth which contradicts the falsehood beforehand! We'll discuss some ways to counter this effect later on, but for now just know that it doesn't matter how smart we are, how critically we assess new information, or how well-educated we may be – we are all still susceptible to the illusory truth effect. Which is why it is constantly in use by purveyors of disinformation and misinformation. And throughout the conservative's great deception, the illusory truth effect has been put to work…over and over again.

And finally, we have the enduring influence of logical fallacies. This is a topic that deserves its own essay, but the list of logical fallacies is long, and here again no one is immune to their persuasive deception. Certain fallacies – like the ad hominem attack, straw man argument, bandwagon effect, hasty generalization, and red herring – are so common in modern cultural, political, and commercial discourse that our best hope is to educate ourselves about them in the hope of diffusing their power over us. Here is a detailed overview and exhaustive list.

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[102] https://www.kunc.org/health/2012-06-18/study-death-panel-myth-persists-one-third-of-americans-still-believe-false-claim

[103] https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/feb/14/americans-believe-climate-change-study

[104] https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/08/09/what-the-data-says-about-americans-views-of-climate-change/

A convergence of antagonistic conditions in current times

With such relentless consideration of demagoguery and tyranny arising within democracy – over so many centuries – it seems foolish not to anticipate it, and even more foolish to completely ignore these warnings. This is especially true in an era when so many separate historical threads have converged in to the present moment. And yet that is precisely what we have done here in the United States of America, beginning in 2016 and then doubling down on that same foolishness in 2024. And, unfortunately, we have seen similar trends in other democracies around the globe as well, with far-Right populist parties gaining power across Europe, as well as in Australia, Turkey, India, Israel, and Brazil.

But what comes next?

Returning to Book VIII of Plato's *Republic,* Plato asks and answers an essential question: "How then does a protector change into a tyrant?...Having a mob entirely at his disposal, he isn't restrained from shedding the blood of his kinsmen; by that favorite method of false accusation, he brings them into court and murders them, making lives of men disappear, with his unholy tongue and lips tasting the blood of his fellow citizens. Some he kills, and others he banishes, at the same time hinting at the abolition of debts and partition of lands…."

Notably, Plato observes, "Then some of those in power who joined in setting him up speak their minds to him and to one another, and the more courageous of them reproach him for what is being done. And the tyrant, if he wants to rule, must get rid of them; he cannot stop while he still has a friend or an enemy who is good for anything. He must look about himself and

determine who is valiant, who is high-minded, who is wise, who is wealthy. **That happy man is the enemy of them all, and must attack them whether he wants to or not, until he has completed his purging of the State.**"

Ultimately, Plato concludes that the tyrant who began as a champion and protector of the people will ultimately be despised by them, writing, "And the more detestable his actions are to the citizens, the more people he will gather into his orbit, and the greater devotion he will require from them…these are the new citizens whom he has called into existence, who admire him and are his companions, while the good hate and avoid him."

Again…does this sound familiar? Aren't these the bully tactics that Donald Trump – like other would-be tyrants of past and present – has either already employed or threatened to employ? And isn't this why so many Republican lawmakers cower in lockstep conformance? Isn't this the same flavor of "revolutionary" narrative that hawkers of MAGA like Steve Bannon have ceaselessly promoted? Isn't this the drum beat behind conservative think tank proposals like Project 2025? Surely these are more warnings for us not to ignore. We have unquestionably arrived at a powerful convergence of all those carefully planned and executed conditions that soften democracy to demagogues and tyrants. The great deception has succeeded.

> "I'm not a journalist. I'm not in the media. This is a military headquarters for a populist revolt. This is how we motivate people. This show is an activist show. If you watch this show, you're a foot soldier. We call it the Army of the Awakened." – Steve Bannon, NY Times interview, July, 2024

> "The 'electoral autocracy' that is Viktor Orbán's Hungary has been long revered by Donald Trump and his 'Make America Great Again' (MAGA) movement. Now admiration is turning into emulation." – Guardian article, February, 2025

Donald Trump

> During the January 6, 2021 U.S. capitol riot, multiple accounts confirm that Trump approved of the rioters' intent to hang Mike Pence.

> "Elizabeth Lynne Cheney is guilty of treason. Retruth if you want televised military tribunals." – Truth Social post, June, 2024

> "I think the bigger problem are the people from within. We have some very bad people. We have some sick people. Radical left lunatics. I think it should be very easily handled by, if necessary, by National Guard, or if really necessary, by the military, because they can't let that happen." – Fox News interview, October, 2024, and echoed in speeches

> In response to Joe Biden pardoning his own family: "I went through four years of hell by this scum that we had to deal with. I went through four years of hell…. It's really hard to say they shouldn't have to go through it also." – Fox News interview, January, 2025

What, then, can we do?

Over many years of contemplating this question, I've arrived at a few conclusions about how positive change can be achieved when facing such complex societal challenges. Much of what we'll discuss here is derived from concepts found in my 2013 book *Political Economy and the Unitive Principle*, and further expanded upon at the www.level-7.org website. I'll provide some additional writings and sources of these ideas in this essay's conclusion.

To begin, I contend that the substantive basis for any enduring change in society is its current level of moral development. Without sufficient moral maturity permeating our culture as a whole, we simply won't be able to sustain any new, higher-order level of democratic civil society. A new set of rules, expectations, and laws for a supportive and sustainable political economy will not enable success by themselves. I believe this is why we so often observe the same cycles occurring over and over again throughout history, with available metrics revealing a painfully slow progress; human civilization cannot outpace the lowest-common-moral-denominator that holds a majority within its population. This is especially true in a democracy, where the will of the majority reflects that moral baseline. Added to the reality of inertia – where individual, collective, and institutional habits will always want to return to the well-worn ruts of the status quo – and the ability to change those habits becomes Sisyphean, regardless of how destructive or unsustainable they may be.

We'll further explore what is meant by "moral maturity" in the coming pages, but the basic idea is to both individually and collectively nudge our thoughts, intentions, attitudes, decisions, and actions away from antisocial patterns into prosocial ones. Part of this is a shift in our sense of identity. When we define ourselves (or allow ourselves to be defined by our peers, tribe, or prevailing culture) as only an isolated individual – an impulsive, self-centered, ego-driven island of *I/me/mine* – whose primary interface with society is oriented around how to satisfy our own wants and needs, then we inevitably fall into *antisocial* habits. That is, we might only care about what others can do for us, and very little about the impact of our attitudes and actions on them. Antisocial thoughts and behaviors begin with a lack of basic empathy, and end in choices that disregard the well-being of other people. In contrast, prosocial territory begins when we define ourselves as part of a larger, integrated whole – a responsible and caring member of society, as opposed to just an isolated individual. As part of this whole, we then choose to value

our contributions as a kind, compassionate, generous, caring person, a person who both empathizes with others and moderates our own wants and needs with concern for the well-being of everyone and everything else. This shift in self-concept naturally tends to correspond with a similar shift in moral consciousness, where honoring the wellness and happiness of others and the world at large becomes intrinsic to our own primary motivations.

As helpful shorthand, we could say that:

- "**Antisocial**" traits prioritize self-interest to the exclusion of everyone and everything, without regard to the negative impacts of our choices on others, while

- "**Prosocial**" traits prioritize the good of all – of everyone and everything – above our own self-interest, while still placing our own well-being within that larger, all-encompassing frame.

This conception of moral development and maturity is not an arbitrary invention on my part, but a consequence of researching the work of psychologists in this field of study, examining how the world's spiritual and philosophical traditions grapple with morality, and drawing conclusions from my own lived experience and observations about the human condition. Much of my other writing explores different facets of the topic, but again, in the context of this essay at least, the most relevant is likely the book *Political Economy and the Unitive Principle*. For a quick overview of the core assumptions and outcomes of this particular theory of moral development, please consult this chart, which is also included in Appendix D of this essay: Integral Lifework Developmental Correlations. For a more in-depth, philosophical examination of the underlying principles informing that moral evolution, consider this essay: "Managing Complexity with Constructive Integralism."

However, I can't emphasize enough that without the fundamental evolution of moral maturity in the underlying culture, any proposed evolutions toward a more idealized political economy are destined to fail. The social norms of the prevailing culture will always dominate – they are more powerful than ideology, religion, politics, education, or economic system. Nearly without exception in human history, every newly introduced concept or practice will conform itself to the existing cultural beliefs and practices *before it has a chance to transform existing social norms in substantive ways*. And if primitive vestigial impulses like hate, greed, selfishness, envy, and fear remain dominant cultural memes – or, as is the case under our own neoliberal crony capitalist political economy today, those toxic cognitive and behavioral patterns are constantly reinforced to maintain a self-serving status quo – any movement towards a more morally evolved position will be buffeted by those prevailing winds.

As you can see, these are big, sticky, intractable problems – *but they are not impossible to solve.*

Moral maturity and prosocial behaviors

Let's begin to break this down with a continued examination of moral maturity. At a cultural level, moral maturity is, essentially, a consistent elevation in the importance of prosocial behaviors as a social norm, and the consequent expression of that conviction in a range of prosocial motivations and habits. There are a number of ways to define what constitutes a prosocial behavior, so let's expand on that as well. In the context of social norms, prosocial attitudes and behaviors:

1. Embody empathy, compassion, and concern for the well-being of other people that results in actions that benefit those people.

2. Are inherently generous, forgiving, and tolerant towards others – whether those others happen to friends, neighbors, or strangers.

3. Exhibit a strong desire to be cooperative, helpful, sharing, and supportive to those in need.

4. Do not expect specific reciprocation or reward for any of these attitudes and behaviors – except for the general anticipation that they are a cultural standard for everyone.

5. May involve self-sacrifice and relinquishment of individual possessions, status, and ego-gratification for the common good.

6. Seek a highly developed theory of mind regarding what others are thinking, feeling, and experiencing, so that helping, sharing, and supporting them can be skillful and effective.

7. Are sincerely motivated by love – rather than by guilt, fear, coercion, or a duty to conform.

Remember Aristotle's discussion of civic friendship in *Nicomachean Ethics*? I think he was speaking to the necessity of a prevailing prosociality within civil society for it to function – and that is really what we're alluding to here. Purely transactional relationships alone do not create strong civil societies – we actually need to care about each other. And of course, in terms of core values, that is what both religious traditions and secular humanism teach us: to be generous, kind, forgiving, caring, just, and compassionate towards others. None of this is new, and prosociality is not a foreign reflex to most people around the world.

However, in modern U.S. culture – and perhaps especially in densely populated urban areas – it may be more selectively exercised within smaller circles than "society at large:" perhaps with our family, friends, apartment complex, or neighborhood; or with fellow members of a community organization. Additionally, although the stories of America's past document profound acts of collective self-sacrifice for the common good, there are less attractive counterpoints that persist in American culture as well. These include a drumbeat of capitalist competition and exploitation; deeply held racism and sexism; fear-mongering about the threat of less-accepted groups; and ideological or religious purity tests used to qualify those privileged to receive goodwill. All of these tend to counter the best prosocial examples with callous – and sometimes even heinous – antisocial oppression. As an evolving culture, America echoes the discord of other cultures during periods of being at war with itself. In addition, the rapid pace of change in both technology and culture over that past few decades has intensified those cycles of societal tension. In light of this, the deliberate efforts of American conservatives to further dilute and divide democratic civil society have, I think, created the proverbial straw the broke the camel's back.

So how do we calm our antisocial demons? How does the "good wolf" of prosociality within us win, both individually and across all of society, in the hopes of mending these precipitous divides? I think there are two primary tasks involved in this effort, which can be implemented in parallel. One is to stop reinforcing antisocial patterns – in ourselves, our families, communities, institutions, politics, media, default communication styles, and so on. The other is to begin nourishing and amplifying prosocial patterns in the same arenas. *Pretty simple, right?* Let's examine some next steps.

Proposals for the positive transformation of society

To frame these ideas, let's recall that we want to remedy those seven historical threads that are so disruptive to democracy. Once again those are:

1. Erosion and rejection of the rule of law

2. Celebration of greed, selfishness, and opportunism as acceptable cultural norms

3. Confusion about the nature of liberty, equality, and justice

4. Pervasive isolation, disconnection, and alienation across society

5. Cultural strife, discord, and division

6. Economic stress and worsening inequality

7. Willfully persistent ignorance

The following are strategic proposals that foster positive societal transformation, and are intended to heal and reverse these degrading influences. Moving beyond idealistic visions, these are concrete, pragmatic actions we can take to build the foundations of enduring prosocial evolution. They span grassroots activism, cultural shifts, political reforms, and the development of new systems that align with the empathy, compassion, cooperation, and justice that fortify democratic civil society. To be successful, all of these approaches support each other either directly or indirectly, and likely must be implemented in parallel.

1. **Promoting ethical, nuanced, truthful, prosocial media**

    Thriving, independent, accurate, and ethical news media is both an essential component of a functional democracy, and a potent preventative to the decay of civil society itself.

    - **Supporting high quality independent media**: Investing in the growth of independent media outlets that practice journalistic integrity, are willing to investigate and report on complexity and nuance, and are free of wealthy owner-shareholder influence. This would include supporting local reporting, controversial topics, investigative journalism, and representation of viewpoints that challenge dominant narratives and encourage prosocial behaviors. Some examples of current and past news organizations that have offered such high quality, independent, insightful journalism are ProPublica, Vice News Tonight, The Guardian, Ground News, Politico, The

Economist, and The Atlantic. National Public Radio has been a preeminent example of reporting that reinforces prosocial narratives.

- **Media literacy programs**: Educating the public on how to critically engage with media. Media literacy programs in schools and communities can equip people with the skills to identify logical fallacies, bias, misinformation, disinformation, and false narratives – empowering them to build up cognitive resistance to falsehoods and make better, more informed decisions for themselves and their community.

- **Media accountability**: Advocating for stronger regulations that ensure accountability among mainstream news outlets and social media. This would include reconstituting the Fairness Doctrine, which required broadcasters to present contrasting views on important public issues. Also promoting regular use of fact-checking services like Politifact, Snopes, and Factcheck.org, and media bias and truthfulness sites like Mediabiasfactcheck.com. In addition, AI algorithms and fact-checking services could be used to scrub news content on source sites, all social media, in emails, etc. for credibility and verifiability, and flagged when they are false. This way, alternative views are not censored, but factuality can be supported.

- **Public Information Clearinghouse**: This is an idea proposed on www.level-7.org where information critical to broad public understanding is aggregated and evaluated for veracity and relevance to help folks make informed decisions. One evaluation method is provided by established experts in the relevant field who have a public reputation for being unbiased and free of ideological conformance. Another evaluation is provided through crowdsourcing. And another evaluation is provided by professional fact-checkers and fact-checking algorithms. The assessments of each of these evaluation sources would then be clearly identified.

2. **Grassroots education and activism around prosociality**

Energizing and sustaining a more prosocial society requires individuals and communities to more actively engage with and prioritize empathy, cooperation, and collective well-being.

- **Community groups for change**: Create community groups that meet regularly to promote prosocial transformation of local neighborhoods, businesses, schools, and governments. For example, a local "league of voters" to help inform the community and lobby for positive change. Another small group approach is discussed here.

- **Volunteerism and civic engagement**: Promote volunteerism and service in communities and local non-profits – through existing organizations or by creating new ones. Civic engagement can also be fostered through encouraging people to vote and to attend local government meetings.

- **Community-based learning**: Start or expand local initiatives that foster moral development, civic engagement, and sense of collective responsibility in young students. This could include educational programs on empathy and other prosocial traits, conflict resolution and nonviolent communication, cooperative problem-

solving, community volunteerism, and active participation in democratic processes and local government.

- **Restoring respect for government, science, and civil society:** This intends to combat the anti-government, anti-science, individualist right-wing propaganda campaign with high-intensity messaging around the tremendous benefits of scientific research, a government strong enough to regulate commerce and stand up to special interests and wealthy elites, and a vibrantly cooperative civil society than exists for everyone. For more on specific techniques, see "Countering the Illusory Truth Effect" in [this article](#).

3. **Top-down systemic reforms**

   These include structural changes to institutions, laws, and policies that support moral evolution by targeting entrenched power that perpetuates an oppressive status quo. As with all of the outlined approaches, systemic reforms at the political and institutional levels can – and likely must – happen in parallel with everything else.

   - **Restoring the stability and integrity of democratic institutions, and expanding civic engagement**: This involves restoring and strengthening the rule of law across all levels of government. For example, ensuring the quality and independence of the judiciary, preventing the erosion of voting rights and election security, and combating gerrymandering ([algorithmic](#) redistricting being one possible solution). Electoral reforms such as ranked-choice voting, universal voting access, and the restoration of voting rights for disenfranchised citizens will be critical. Providing more avenues of direct democracy is also an important option for more vibrant representation and civic engagement. [Switzerland](#) is one example of how this can be accomplished. Additional options are citizens councils and assemblies, juries and panels, "planning cells," direct polling. You can learn more about many of these approaches [here](#).

   - **Legislative reforms for [economic justice](#)**: Rebuilding a more just political economy requires policies that challenge systemic inequality – both in terms of opportunities and outcomes. Examples include single-payer universal healthcare, no-cost higher education, living wages and wage equality protections, and more robust support of worker self-organizing and bargaining. Economic policies that reverse decades of exponential wealth inequality, such as progressive tax reform, are critical to mitigating concentrations of power in the hands of a few wealthy elites. And we must address the disproportionate influence of wealth in politics as well, curbing special interest lobbying and [unrestricted dark money](#) campaign contributions via super PACs. Eliminating the legal fiction of "[corporate personhood](#)" altogether would also be prudent, replacing it with another definition that facilitates contracts, etc. – but does note provide the same protections and privileges as people.

   - **Restoring regulatory power and civil rights**: To tackle everything from environmental destruction, to inequality, to caustic media bias, to corporate malfeasance, to consumer protection, we must restore the regulatory power of

agencies like the EPA, FCC, FTC, FDA, OSHA, CPSC, and CFPB; restore and strengthen the protections of the Social Security Act, Medicare Act, Civil Rights Act, Voting Rights Act, Clean Air and Clean Water Acts; reinstate *Roe v. Wade* protections for women's reproductive rights; reconstitute the 1984 Chevron doctrine so that the courts will once again defer to regulatory expertise; and reverse any other corrosions to the rule of law resulting from conservative SCOTUS rulings.[105]

- **Implementing Freire's "Pedagogical Love-in-Action" across all levels of public education:** Paulo Freire has specific proposals for creating empowered, fully emancipated citizens whose critical consciousness make them the best possible supportive contributors to a constitutional democracy. See Appendix A for an abbreviated representation of his praxis.

- **Restoring the "halo effect" of governmental programs, policies, and services:** This includes artful and carefully targeted government messaging around the effectiveness, dignity, honor of service, essential needs being met, and dependability of government work. This aims to restore pride in America's essential institutions and programs, and – as one example – echoes media campaigns and political rhetoric generated around U.S. military service. In the past, trust, respect, esteem, and admiration for many of these institutions – the Postal Service, FEMA, CDC, EPA, NASA, National Parks Service, etc. – were high. Now, after decades of conservatives tearing them down, we need to build them back up.

- **Guaranteed Basic Income (GBI or UBI)**: As more and more jobs are lost to automation, artificial intelligence, off-shoring, and industry consolidation, GBI/UBI is a proven solution and safety net for those unemployed or underemployed as a consequence of these innovations – along with other groups who need retraining, housing assistance, or to be liberated from severe poverty.

- **Electing responsible and courageous politicians who can undo previous damage**: It will not be possible for individual elected officials to reverse decades of destruction during their time in office – not even as POTUS. The extent of that damage is just too great, and continues under the newly elected Trump administration. But, in combination with all of these other efforts, courageous politicians can perhaps keep those conditions from getting worse…and hold the line until we begin to turn things around through the more comprehensive, multifaceted approach outlined here.

4. **Small, incremental personal habits that lead to larger impacts**

Gradual changes in individual behaviors will be key. Small, everyday actions can have ripple effects, shifting cultural norms toward empathy, cooperation, and energizing a sense of political obligation.

- **Building local relationships**: Engage with neighbors and local communities through activities like regular neighborhood walks, having neighbors over for a meal or social gathering, participating in local governance, organizing community service projects,

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[105] See https://www.aclu.org/news/civil-liberties/a-radical-supreme-court-term-in-review

joining local organizations, or participating in small community groups. These personal commitments to engagement can help foster a sense of belonging and mutual support that strengthens civil society over time.

- **Mindful consumption and fasting from the spectacle**: Take regular breaks from social media, text messaging, news feeds, video games, audio and visual entertainment streaming – and engaging in "analog" activities instead. This will help people reconnect with themselves, their communities, and the real-world relationships that are often overtaken by self-isolating habits, artificial intimacy, and dependence on technology. Along similar lines, schedule periods of fasting from alcohol, drugs, impulsive purchases, dining out, escapist hobbies, and anything else that prevents us from being fully present to ourselves and each other.

- **Personal transformative practice**: There are countless existing paths up this particular mountain – meditation, mindfulness training, spiritual practices, tai chi, yoga, etc. – that enhance compassion, caring, empathy, generosity, and other prosocial traits. All that is required to experience positive change are commitment consistency. One such path, "Integral Lifework," is described [here].

- **Exercising vigilance in information exposure, verification, and sharing:** As alluded to in the previous section on "willfully persistent ignorance," we must maintain constant vigilance around the presence of logical fallacies, incorrect attribution of causation, the illusory truth effect, and the quality and veracity of information we are consuming and sharing with others. This is a lifelong discipline, with the model of **"organic truth"** at the very beginning of this essay a worthy objective.

5. **Socially engaged art and visionary art**

Art and culture are also essential to sustained societal transformation – as both a vision and a mirror. They not only inspire individuals to reflect on their own values and share them, but also serve as powerful tools to challenge dominant antisocial narratives and offer new visions for a kind and just world.

- **Visionary storytelling**: Art that reimagines society and demonstrates the benefits of prosocial behaviors. Novels, films, plays, music, poetry, video games, and virtual worlds that depict the triumph of compassion, collaboration, and justice over hatred, greed, and division. Art that challenges the status quo, expose injustices, and provides aspirational models of harmonious and thriving civil society.

- **Public art and engagement**: Interactive art installations, theater productions, and other public art forms to engage communities directly in conversations about social justice, empathy, and collective responsibility; public art that serves as civic dialogue, reminding us of our shared humanity and the need for cooperative action.

- **Cultural institutions and initiatives**: Cultural organizations that support exhibitions, performances, and collaborations exploring prosocial values – and funding projects that advocate for systemic change, provide platforms for marginalized voices, and educate the public about all of the strategic proposals discussed here.

6. Recruiting elite change agents

This is mainly a consideration for those in positions of privilege who see the value of a strong democracy and thriving civil society, and want to help nudge their peers in a supportive direction. This ranges from the small-scale and interpersonal – establishing relationships, planning groups, small organizations, charitable foundations centered around restoring prosociality across society, etc. – to much larger scale and even international, such as founding think tanks that research and promote prosocial praxis, or even creating an antidote to the Bilderberg Meeting. More quietly supporting any of the efforts described here while persuading others to join in the cause is another option; as is wading into the political or media arenas directly. The choice to personally model prosocial habits in highly visible ways, with the hope that others will imitate them, is yet another avenue. Taking stock of conservative tactics in this arena can also be instructive, as they have included:

- Designing and promoting educational retreats for Supreme Court Justices.
- Funding supportive academic research, PR campaigns, and political candidates.
- Creating educational materials for K-12 and Higher Ed curricula.
- Coordinating and directing professional and grassroots lobbying efforts at all levels of government.
- Funding public art and entertainment media that align ideologically.
- Supporting documentaries, social media influencers, and celebrities that promote specific narratives and talking points.

It is difficult to imagine a spontaneous multifaceted approach that is as well-coordinated and well-funded as the conservative great deception of the past five decades. But to whatever degree we can excite individual, community, institutional, and cultural transformative currents with persistent intensity, we will begin to shift our society toward a more morally mature, prosocial future. Over time – and with necessary patience – we can effectively restore democracy, strengthen civil society, and elevate the priorities of kindness, justice, and collective well-being for all.

For additional resources supporting many of these avenues of activism, please visit the "Action Guide" at www.level-7.org.

How to counter the right-wing antisocial program

In studying mass movements throughout history that resulted in the outcomes that were articulated and prioritized, one pattern becomes clear: **the means to the ends matter**. If we merely imitate our oppressors and employ the same discordant and cruel attitudes and actions they have employed in order to overtake or resist them, we essentially replicate that oppression in a new form, inhabiting nearly identical roles under new political, ideological, or sociological labels. The same old wine in a new wineskin, as it were.

An example I often use is the similarity between Russia's governments over the last few centuries. Despite internal upheavals arising from a shared spirit of reform, Russia's leadership has persistently been reconstituted as a domineering and murderous strong-man dictatorship – regardless of the philosophy of government advocated during a given uprising. Has there really been much qualitative difference between the basic governance styles of Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great, Anna Ivanovna, Vladimir Lenin, Joseph Stalin, and Vladimir Putin? Does it really matter that each respectively reigned over feudalism, state communism, or mob-boss capitalism? Or that each had a different title: tsar, party chairman, premier, or president? They all either came to power and/or held it in a very similar fashion – through coercive brutality and control, installation of loyalist supporters throughout the rest of their government, and the methodical murder of anyone who opposed or even questioned their authority. Russian culture just seems to have a strong affinity for this style of leadership.

Of course, the prejudice that significant change will be disruptively chaotic or inherently violent is not restricted to Russian society. Many of western culture's mythological narratives involve a necessity for violent rebirth: ancient Greece's Phoenix rising from the ashes, Christianity's crucified messiah and other dying-and-rising-god narratives, the extreme ordeals of "the hero's journey" (Campbell), God's rationale for the Great Flood in the Old Testament, and so forth. And human history echoes this pattern in cycles of domination and subjugation as well. So it is easy to fall into a pattern of expecting that substantial discord and disruption is necessary before any substantive leaps forward in changing the status quo can occur – in the example of the MAGA movement, a "burn-it-to-the-ground" disposition regarding existing norms, standards, and institutions is considered by supporters to be a valid precursor to change.[106] But, for many reasons – and for any movement – I think this assumption is a mistake.

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[106] https://www.nationalreview.com/2016/03/donald-trump-2016-voters-above-burning-system-down/

After considering how powerful humanity has become – both individually and collectively – in our ability to impact the world around us, the massively interdependent complexities of our modern systems, and the proposals of other thinkers in this arena, I arrived at the term "revolutionary integrity." As I wrote about this at https://level-7.org/Philosophy/Integrity/:

> "Many influential activists throughout history, from Mahatma Gandhi to Paulo Freire to Martin Luther King, have expressed the intuitive logic of embodying the values one desires for the future in the current modes of revolutionary action. Carl Boggs, Wini Breines and others have written extensively about this idea with respect to sociopolitical movements of the sixties and seventies, describing it as prefigurative politics. Ralph W. Sockman famously said this about the issue: "Be careful that victories do not carry the seed of future defeats." And long before this, a rebel from Nazareth told his overzealous disciple: "Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword." So this is really the core of what revolutionary integrity is about: we are just amplifying the assumption that, if we don't embody our values in a transformational process, we will in fact sabotage the outcome. The means must embody the ends."

We must embody the ideals and values we want our revolution to make real throughout the revolution itself. Even so – and this is a difficult and inherently risky balancing act – I strongly suspect that disruptive, nonviolent forms of resistance are still necessary to diffuse and disable systematic conditions that glorify antisocial patterns in society. As with any countervailing of a toxic status quo, such resistance is, after all, a healthy mechanism in a vibrantly alive society…*as long as it is not taken too far*. It is a bit like a teenager rebelling against parents to individuate themselves – there is tension, and push-back, and disobedience, but not lethal violence.

To that end, even as I've explored forms of change-inducing individual and collective action (the aforementioned "Action Guide"), *there are also some forms of activism with a discomposing flavor described there*. These include:

- Exposing and disrupting "business as usual" neoliberal disinformation, misinformation, and PR campaigns – through multiple avenues of resistance.

- Hacktivism of the most nefarious actors (i.e. those who promote a neoliberal, pro-corporate, deceptive, destructive, or self-serving commercialist agenda) – and those media who refuse to moderate the amplification of neoliberal propaganda on their platforms.

- Temporary disruption of commerce (retail boycotts, production and distribution interruptions, etc.) that target products or services with a perverse utility antagonistic to civil society.[107]

- Other nonviolent acts (198 Methods of Nonviolent Action).

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[107] See https://level-7.org/Solutions/L7-Property/

- Countering the illusory truth effect by actively and persistently promoting fact-checking and "prebunking," and creating "truth sandwiches" to share instead. You can read more about these techniques [here](#).

- Introducing major system-wide disruptions like David Holmgren's "[Crash On Demand](#)."

Exploring the links above will help flesh out the details of these more confrontational approaches to civic activism, but the basic idea is that we simply *must* end the disproportionate representation of right-wing antisocial influences in our culture as quickly as possible – along with the pervasive conditions that have enhanced their success – even as we introduce a more positive, prosocial vision for society at the same time.

Finally, there is a more nuanced framing of what is at work here, and that is akin to casting out the evil spirits so that we can invite good spirits in. What we are really disrupting, countervailing, and vanquishing here is "the spectacle." It is, I believe, a necessary prerequisite to change, mainly because that spectacle has such a powerful medicating, distracting, and mollifying effect on all of us. With the spectacle in play, we may find we are still unsettled, anxious, depressed, and even angry about prevailing conditions of our own oppression, but are nevertheless *not motivated to do anything about it*. Here is how I describe this conception of spectacle at https://level-7.org/Challenges/Spectacle/:

> "The spectacle is a coherent body of false beliefs and practices that presumes (consciously or unconsciously) that individualism, materialism and jockeying for dominance are the only guarantors of prosperity and freedom, and must be secured and aggressively defended across all institutions and activities in civil society. Further, these false beliefs and practices conspire (again, consciously and unconsciously) to promulgate this worldview with evangelical fervor and by any means possible; and, in service to the spectacle, all methodology is then cast as morally neutral. Methods include deceptive manipulation through mass media marketing, economic and social status enticements, oppressive social controls and political force, relentless conditioning towards externalized dependency on commercial goods and services (i.e. objectification and commodification), cultural isolation and separation of the individual, anesthetizing social and moral development with lowest-common-denominator animalistic titillation and satiation, and inducing sociopolitical apathy or ineffectiveness with confusion, distraction and misinformation. As a memetic engine in modern society, the spectacle relies on both tacit and unexamined acceptance of values hierarchies that undermine prosociality, cooperation, compassion and self-nurturing, and on a deliberate shaping of groupthink and recruitment propaganda to further its aims. But rather than securing prosperity and freedom for any majority, what the spectacle actually ensures is that worker-consumers will sacrifice their own freedoms, health, well-being and prosperity so that a small number of owner-shareholders can reap these benefits in excess. Hence the falsity of all spectacle-enshrined beliefs. And what makes the spectacle so spectacular is just how pervasive this ironic and destructive self-sacrifice has become in service to individualistic economic materialism."

This conception was not invented from whole cloth, but relies on the work of many previous insights and ideas. Those include the bread and circuses of ancient Rome, Guy Debord's commodification of all existence (the diffused spectacle), Herman and Chomsky's manufactured consent of mass media, Hegel's alienation of unitive awareness and spirit, Thorstein Veblen's conspicuous consumption, Umberto Eco's reflections on the 14 features of ur-fascism, Geoffrey Miller's consumerist fitness trait display, and modern definitions of false consciousness.

It would be easy to say that "the spectacle" is precisely what the conservative antisocial program – the great deception – has helped construct and maintain. And that is part of the truth. But nearly everything in modern society has come to facilitate the spectacle, whether intentionally or not – it has become the ocean we are swimming through. If we are not careful, even some of the prosocial activism proposed in the previous section could inadvertently become just another facet of distraction and self-mollification. A potent illustration of this principle was the Occupy movement. Initially, it was a powerful collective awakening to the spectacle itself, its validity immediately recognized and endorsed by people who may not have been thinking about socioeconomic issues or political activism at all. But what was the result? Primarily, it became just another cathartic release – another self-soothing distraction that ultimately diffused revolutionary sentiment and short-circuited substantive change. I am not implying this was the intent of Occupy, but it is what occurred because, although it correctly identified many pervasive grievances, the Occupy movement did not have a clear set of pragmatic actions to achieve specific, clearly defined outcomes. It was a potent surge of mass sentiment without clear demands – a rebellion without a clue.

In contrast, the conservative antisocial program has had a clearly defined and pragmatic outcome in mind: retaining concentrations of wealth and political power in the hands of a few owner-shareholders, at any cost. In short, embodiment of Adam Smith's warning: "*All for ourselves, and nothing for other people, seems, in every age of the world, to have been the vile maxim of the masters of mankind.*" So any prosocial response to the great deception should have an equally clear destination in mind. We'll touch on that in more detail in the conclusion of this essay, but for now we could summarize the basic idea as **"achieving the greatest diffusion of power and wealth possible, for the good of all."**

Additional considerations for the encouragement of prosocial behavior

It should be noted that encouraging prosocial behavior is influenced by a large variety of intersecting factors – some of which may be highly variable from one region to the next, one community to the next, and even one person to the next. It seems obvious that even the most carefully engineered, evidence-based formula will not be successful without careful observation, thorough analysis metrics, rapid feedback loops, and agile adjustments over time.

Some examples of important variations in any target population include:

1. Individual genetic variations that influence prosocial behavior and conformance to social norms – particularly variations in the OXTR oxytocin receptor gene and the DRD4 dopamine receptor gene, but also other genetic factors.[108,109]

2. Whether experiential priming (religious, cultural, familial, peer group, educational) has already occurred that affirmatively conditions prosocial reflexes and readiness.

3. The level of preexisting "moral creativity" already pervasive within society at large or within a given subculture – essentially, what routinely encountered environments that support and reinforce prosocial values, choices, and habits are widely available.

4. Conditions of poverty and interference that impede the freedom to explore prosocial modes of being. There are many such forms of poverty – including not having sufficient education, being deprived of justice and equality, experiencing poor mental or physical health, encountering barriers to economic freedom, and so on. A full list of these interfering poverties can be found here.

To explore activism that addresses many of these challenges more fully in the context of an alternative political economy – and to consult the latest updates on these topics – please consult the www.level-7.org website and its "Action Guide."

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[108] Christ C., Carlo G., Stoltenberg S. (2015). Oxytocin receptor (OXTR) single nucleotide polymorphisms indirectly predict prosocial behavior through perspective taking and empathic concern. *J. Pers.* 10.1111/jopy.12152
[109] https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S2352250X17301616

An important caveat: Time

As evidenced by the election of a blustering demagogue to the most powerful office on Earth, the spiraling crisis has now become more urgent than ever. At the same time, fundamental changes to social norms require time. In fact, it can be argued that Lewis Powell's 1972 conservative call-to-action entitled "Attack on the American Free Enterprise System," a reaction to the social consciousness and alternative culture of the 1960s, is what launched the firestorm of conservative activism in the following decades. And it has taken an army of well-funded conservative think tanks, PR firms, media outlets, politicians, lobbying organizations, right-wing talk show hosts, sympathetic Christian activists, and other willing cohorts some *fifty years* to bring us to the low point we are now experiencing in the United States.[110] The great deception took a lot of money, effort, and time…and profound levels of conviction and commitment.

As alluded to previously, self-described liberals have also contributed to the decline of U.S. democracy and government – from the steady degrading of the U.S. Postal Service through bipartisan votes in Congress, to the consequences of Bill Clinton's signing NAFTA into law, to Obama allowing the extrajudicial execution of a U.S. citizen with a drone outside of a war zone, to the Democratic National Committee sabotaging the populist rise of Bernie Sanders in the 2016 election (and conspiring to do so again in 2020 in the event of a brokered convention), to myriad other missteps by progressives. Disinformation and misinformation campaigns orchestrated by nefarious state actors outside of the U.S. – past and current Russian state media propaganda in particular – have also contributed to our decline.[111] And the storm of profit-seeking social media "engagement algorithms" has also inadvertently amplified propaganda techniques to more rapidly energize the great deception and other misinformation – to the point where regional and national movements and election campaigns can be effectively molded and launched in mere days or weeks.

Critically, as a consequence of a current nexus of both deliberate and serendipitous factors, all the historical warnings regarding the frailty of democracy as civil society is degraded have finally come to fruition. So…if we want to reverse the dominant narratives in our culture to

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[110] https://level-7.org/Challenges/Neoliberalism/
[111] https://level-7.org/Challenges/Opposition/

strengthen civil society and democracy by encouraging prosocial norms and countervailing antisocial habits, we can learn from all of the successful methods and conditions that have so effectively steered us away from positive moral growth. At the same time, we must accept that change will not be immediate. This will be almost certainly be a lengthy, sustained, and arduous effort. The good news, in my view, is that we have some distinct advantages that may accelerate our counterrevolution. We have endless creativity and advanced science on our side. We have persuasive evidence and compelling truths. We have educated and articulate thought leaders. We even have a few charismatic and persuasive politicians. And, perhaps most importantly of all, we have love, kindness, and empathy.

So…how about we get started?

Conclusion: The road forward

There are reliable countermeasures to restore what is destroyed by demagogues, and secure what is put at risk by them. And there are preventative bulwarks that can be erected against their seemingly inevitable rise to dominance in the future.

Despite the decades-long efforts of American conservatives and their economic and ideological allies of convenience to undermine our constitutional democracy, all is not lost. By revisiting the historical threads that many important writers have warned us about for 2,400 years, we have not only identified what the nefarious destroyers of democratic civil society have been up to, but have also formulated ways we can bring an end to their unfortunate success. I have no doubt we can restore our democracy, and equal certainty that it will require a level of commitment, endurance, organization, resources, and skill that matches or exceeds the right-wing antisocial program.

Recalling those historical threads, our proposed mission is to reverse conditions that undermine democracy in order to restore prosocial civil society. We will:

1. Restore and strengthen the rule of law at all levels of government

2. Replace greed, selfishness, and opportunism with kindness, empathy, and cooperation as our dominant social norms

3. Clarify, venerate, and enhance the authentic conditions of liberty, equality, and justice

4. Repair isolation, disconnection, and alienation with authentic friendship and fellowship, meaningful community, and inclusive participation in democracy

5. Encourage cultural peace, harmony, and unity as a perpetual commitment and privilege

6. Create economic abundance and equality for all members of society

7. Embrace knowledge, education, edification, and verifiable information as an immutable standard across all of our media and institutions

The final aim is to restore prosocial civil society and achieve **"the greatest diffusion of power and wealth possible, for the good of all."** But what does this really look like?

A detailed proposal of an alternative political economy – one that expands voter power, softens the obsession with private property, and democratizes industry management and ownership – is offered at www.level-7.org. As more of a snapshot overview of Level 7, I wrote the essay Reframing Profit – and have included a summary of the essay's key points Appendix B. But again, the chicken-and-egg dilemma of prosocial evolution is that we cannot sustain a new system that exceeds our current level of moral maturity. The two advancements must go hand-in-hand. Personally, I am skeptical that any system that preserves the profit motive and enshrines private property will succeed in the long run – even Europe's social democracies. It may be a necessary baby step to first redefine how risk and reward are framed and regulated within western capitalism. Honestly, we'll just have to try to move forward in any way we can.

Now those in opposition – the architects and unwitting proponents of the great deception – will undoubtedly invoke the historical evils of socialism and communism to reflexively reject any and all objectives of a more prosocial society. So, very briefly, I think it is important to debunk their primary claim: that socialist and communist political economies have either always failed, or become murderous authoritarian dictatorships.

Simply put, this is classic "cherry picking" of historical realities, with a singular focus on state communism like that of Soviet Russia. It is true that communist experiments that began as violent dictatorships basically continued in that vein (illustrating the principle of "revolutionary integrity" discussed earlier). But left-anarchist experiments had very different outcomes. Left-anarchism, which is also called *libertarian socialism*, steers away from both private ownership and centralized state authority, instituting various methods of bottom-up consensus for decision-making, and shared ownership of the means of production and its outputs. I've included a list of these successful experiments on various scales, some of them quite large, in Appendix C, and additional resources about left-anarchism are available here and here.

There are also democratic socialist proposals, which have not yet been tried on a large scale, but seem promising. It should be noted, however, that right-libertarianism has also never been tried on a large scale, and that laissez-faire (i.e. unregulated capitalism – a popular neoliberal, market fundamentalist, and Randian objective) though it has repeatedly manifested around the globe, always results in the same outcomes: high concentrations of wealth for an elite few, with increasing poverty and degradation of civil society and civic institutions for everyone else.

Tools to assist

A framework for how we can best accomplish prosocial objectives has bubbled to the surface over the past twenty years of my own work. The previous section summarized some specific forms of action available to us, but you may also want to delve more deeply into the underlying concepts – the assumptions and design principles behind those proposals. You can find an overview of some central ideas in "The S.A.P. Hypothesis: Restoring Prosocial Society."[112] More detailed discussion and resources that have been alluded to or discussed so far include:

- Defining prosocial, morally advanced economic and political systems, which is covered in more depth in the book *Political Economy and the Unitive Principle*.

- Working towards a Level 7 political economy, which correlates with proposed next steps in the development of our political and economic systems.

- Appreciating and actualizing "The Goldilocks Zone of Integral Liberty" in society,[113] which defines what authentic individual and collective freedoms look like.

- Examining underlying assumptions around values structures and moral development in the essay "Managing Complexity with Constructive Integralism."

- Learning about Integral Lifework transformative practice, which encourages personal moral maturity through holistic approaches to healing, wellness, and wholeness.

- A summary of Integral Lifework Developmental Correlations (Appendix D), which describe some proposed personal and collective stages of moral development.

- In order to gain clarity around what is reliably true for us, exploring a more conscious navigation of our own epistemic assumptions in "Sector Theory 1.0 – Todd's Take on Epistemology."[114]

One certainty that has been driven home repeatedly over the course of my personal and professional life is that *we must all work together, deliberatively and collaboratively, to meet these challenges*. This means others will have additional and important perspectives on how to

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[112] Also available at https://www.academia.edu/38432659/The_S_A_P_Hypothesis_Restoring_Prosocial_Society
[113] Also available at https://www.academia.edu/19895834/The_Goldilocks_Zone_of_Integral_Liberty_A_Proposed_Method_of_Differentiating_Verifiable_Free_Will_from_Countervailing_Illusions_of_Freedom
[114] https://www.academia.edu/32747714/Sector_Theory_1_0_Todds_Take_on_Epistemology

mend our broken society – as well as new tools and metrics necessary to evaluate and adjust our trajectory, so that we don't just end up repeating the same mistakes over and over again. This is particularly important in revitalizing moral evolution across our entire culture, meeting people wherever they are, *and not leaving anyone behind*.

Here is a quote that touches on the participatory process. It's from Jürgen Habermas, who in his 1962 book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* wrote:

> "The public sphere is the realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. It is the medium of discourse through which citizens engage in reasoned debate and deliberation about common issues. A democratic state must therefore guarantee the existence of a space where individuals can come together, discuss freely, and form judgments based on rational-critical debate rather than merely on political or economic interests. **Public discourse, in this sense, is not merely an exchange of opinions, but a deliberative process that leads to the formation of a will that is in the best interests of the community**."

This is therefore one final principle applied to formulating and actualizing "the common good" explored earlier: beyond a tacit assumption to do so, collective participation in deliberative processes must be explicitly encouraged and facilitated to "lift all boats in the rising tide" in a truly inclusive and effective way.

What likely won't work

As of this writing, there is tremendous hope that Artificial Intelligence (AI) will help us solve some of modernity's stickiest problems. But unless the development and applications of AI shift radically away from the direction they are moving now, I believe this hope is misplaced. As a former Information Technology consultant, it is tempting to spend more time on this – but I suspect that might turn into another essay. So instead I'll offer some brief, hopefully salient insights about why AI cannot be fully trusted to help us out of the most fundamental of our current predicaments:

1. The current applications of AI are focused on replacing human jobs, with the hope of offsetting displacement with retraining for "digital labor." But past retraining efforts

have [a very poor track record](#), and reliance on AI will decimate many different fields and increase overall unemployment by a staggering degree in the coming years.[115,116]

2. The programming culture behind AI has resulted in a classic "garbage in, garbage out" scenario. There are many reasons for this – such as a belief that all available information on the Internet has equal authenticity and relevance for generative AI, the deployment of highly discriminatory algorithms and biased datasets, poor training or oversite for a given AI model, etc. – but the results are things like AI output categorized as "hallucinations" completely disconnected from reality; antisocial, inappropriate, and harmful interactions with users; the propagation of utterly false information presented as credible, believable, and true; a lot of dangerous errors that had negative impacts on people's lives, and so forth.[117,118,119,120]

3. Just like crypto before it, AI server farms are exponentially increasing humanity's carbon footprint, beyond our ability to offset this demand with green power generation. And this adds to increasing greenhouse gas emissions at a time when, for the sake of the planet and future generations, we really need to be moving in the opposite direction.[121]

4. Based on AI's real-world performance, the list of additional pitfalls is growing.[122] For me personally, AI's impact on a decline in what we perceive to be our own *agency and competence*, as well as our desire to make decisions at all, is particularly concerning.[123]

5. Escalating worry among technology professionals – including those involved in AI development – has been intense enough that they have urged pauses in AI development.[124] With the possibility of fantastic profits in view, however, the AI revolution shows no signs of slowing.

I do think AI can have a positive role in humanity's future, but not if its use is primarily molded and expanded by an antiquated profit motive as it is today. That said – and this is the seductive reality of AI's influence on my own work over the past year – the images in this essay were generated by Adobe Firefly. Given my indictment of this technology, is its use here mere irony, creative laziness on my part, the exception that proves the rule, or outright hypocrisy? I'll let you decide.

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[115] https://seo.ai/blog/ai-replacing-jobs-statistics

[116] https://www.techtarget.com/whatis/feature/Will-AI-replace-jobs-9-job-types-that-might-be-affected

[117] https://www.livescience.com/technology/artificial-intelligence/32-times-artificial-intelligence-got-it-catastrophically-wrong

[118] https://www.ibm.com/think/insights/ai-misinformation

[119] https://www.ibm.com/think/topics/ai-hallucinations

[120] https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11076802/

[121] https://www.imf.org/en/Blogs/Articles/2024/08/15/carbon-emissions-from-ai-and-crypto-are-surging-and-tax-policy-can-help

[122] https://builtin.com/artificial-intelligence/risks-of-artificial-intelligence

[123] https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-023-01787-8

[124] https://futureoflife.org/open-letter/pause-giant-ai-experiments/

Some other proposed avenues of resolution that that echo concerns about having more weaknesses than strengths are:

- Innovating our way out of this conundrum with a new technology.

- Relying on free markets to fix any of society's fundamental challenges.

- Believing that conservatives will "come to their senses" once conditions go from bad to worse to utterly desperate.

- Hoping political, corporate, philanthropic, scientific, religious, or academic benefactors will arrive on the scene to save us all from ourselves.

- Somehow finding a way to consume, work, or entertain ourselves out of our self-destructive downward spiral.

Okay then, that's all for now. Hopefully we've covered enough here to see through the current deception, emerge from our cave, and formulate a plan for moving beyond it into the full light of day. In the meantime, *blessings upon you in all your endeavors for the good of all.*

Appendix A: Paulo Freire

A Generative Model of Paulo Freire's
Pedagogical Love-in-Action

(Derived from Smith-Campbell and Littles article at http://www.praxisuwc.com/smithcampbell-et-al-141)

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5) OUTCOME OF PEDAGOGY OF LOVE

A more authentic, fully humanized and empowered being,
whose understanding of values, the nature of knowledge, and
sociopolitical realities *are rooted in pedagogical love*

(i.e. egoless agape; Kohlberg's "justice;" Kierkegaard's "love thy neighbor as thyself")

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4) PEDAGOGICAL LOVE-IN-ACTION

As a continued part of an
education based on dialogue and
critical consciousness that moves
learners toward a self-liberating
form of critical awareness *,*
which in turn leads to praxis
(action & reflection)

3) PEDAGOGICAL LOVE-IN-ACTION

As the engine that generates an
ongoing, continuous, enriching
educative process of dialogue,
that leads to personal critical
awareness & critical
consciousness

2) PEDAGOGICAL LOVE-IN-ACTION

As a prerequisite for
educational dialogue to
empower and emancipate
learners

1) PEDAGOGICAL LOVE-IN-ACTION

As the educator's personal,
epistomological, axiological
& sociopolitical
groundings and beliefs

Modified chart of original taken from Smith-Campbell and Littles (2015) http://www.praxisuwc.com/smithcampbell-et-al-141

Appendix B: Reframing Profit – Overview

Nature of Profit	Level 7	Traditional Crony Capitalism
1) As a reward for...	- Demonstrated Creativity - Demonstrated Complex or Demanding Learned Skills & Abilities - Demonstrated Innate Talents - Demonstrated Knowledge - Enhancing or Strengthening Civil Society - Innovations & Research that Benefit Health & Well-Being - Reviewed & Validated Scientific Discoveries - Demonstrated Self-Sacrifice for the Betterment of Others - Demonstrated Endurance (Longevity) and Effectiveness in a Social Services Roll *Technocratic Expertise* - Exceptional or Unusual (Outlier) Contributions to Particular Field - Demonstrated Efficiencies or Lowering Overhead within Ostrom's Common Pool Research Management Schema - Solutions That Demonstrate Long-term Viability & Sustainability *Increasing Market Share through Competitive Differentiation/Improvements* *High-Risk Startup Investment*	- Increased Efficiencies of Production or Lowering Overhead (automation, reducing wages, outsourcing to developing economies, etc.) - First-To-Market Innovations - Top 5% of Exceptional Creativity/Skill/Ability *Increasing Market Share through Competitive Differentiation/Improvements* *High-Risk Startup Investment* - High Pressure Sales & Persuasive or Deceptive Advertising/Marketing - Creating Consumer Dependency & Addiction - Coercing Maximum Labor Output - Disregard for Worker Safety - Reckless Natural Resource Extraction & Depletion - Monopolization - Price-Fixing & Anti-Competitive Practices - Disregard for Negative Externalities - Disregard for Consumer Safety - Conspicuous Consumption Coupled with Price-Elastic Demand - Engineering of Artificial Scarcity - Rolling Back Regulations - Lowering Business Tax Rate - Socializing Risk While Privatizing Profit - Encouraging Consumer Debt - Encouraging High-Risk Speculation (Gambling) - Overcharging, Excessive Fees, Interest Gauging, Hidden/Undisclosed Costs - Planned Obsolescence - Bait & Switch - Delivering Illicit Products/Services - Aggressive Self-Promotion & Political Cleverness *Technocratic Expertise* - Zero-Value-Add Rent-Seeking Activities
2) To be shared by...	All Workers and Member-Shareholders of a Cooperative, Democratic Enterprise	Select Owner-Shareholders & Senior Executives in A Command-Style Enterprise
3) With *holistic valuations* margins to be influenced by...	- Self-Managed Workers - Community Organizations - Citizens Councils - Direct Democracy Referenda	Owner-Shareholders, Executive Board Members & Senior Managers
4) With standardization & regulation of for-profit enterprise via...	- Elected Technocrats with Specialized Expertise - Direct Democracy Initiatives & Referenda - Co-Created Legislation (Technocratic Initiatives Approved by Direct Vote) - Citizen's Councils	- Corporate Lobbyists - Career Politicians Who Often Have Little-to-No Specialized Expertise

Appendix C: Successful Left-Anarchist Experiments

While not an exhaustive list, these represent examples of left-anarchist principles put to test in the real world. In cases where these experiments ended, it was nearly always the consequence of violent oppression by a more dominant military power at the time.

Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, or "Rojava" 2012-Present (Syria)

Zapatista Autonomous Municipalities 1994-Present (Chiapas, Mexico)

Tolstoyan Agricultural Communes 1927-1939 (Russia)

Revolutionary Catalonia, and the Regional Defense Council of Aragon 1936-1937 (Spain)

Korean People's Association in Manchuria 1929 – 1931 (Korea)

Free Territory of Ukraine 1918-1921 (Ukraine)

Constitution Protection Region of Southern Fujian 1918-1921 (China)

Paris Commune (France) 1871

Appendix D: Integral Lifework Developmental Correlations

Moral Function, Political Economy & Self-Identification (November 2014)

The following chart is a consolidation of developmental themes recurring throughout my writings on Integral Lifework. Some of the definitions and terms have been updated to reflect an evolving understanding and should replace previous iterations. Although important elements of the idea have been identified as part of a progression inherent to mystical gnosis (see *The Vital Mystic* and *Essential Mysticism*), "Unknowing Emptiness" is formally identified as a strata of moral valuation here for the first time; importantly, in more brief and diluted forms it is also a transitional component between the other strata. Within the chart are terms and concepts that are more thoroughly defined and attributed in the course of the works referenced in each column heading. Some of the principles of development covered in those works include:

- For development to occur, all dimensions of being as they are defined in Integral Lifework (see the Integral Lifework Nourishment Assessment for a summary, or *True Love, Integral Lifework Theory & Practice* for an in-depth description) must be consciously nurtured, harmonized and progressively integrated. This nourishment creates the supportive structures – both individually and collectively – that stimulate and support a moral maturation process.

- It is not possible to fully and consistently operationalize next-level moral valuations without first experiencing the intentions, habits and consequences of previous orientations.

- Development is not uniform, orderly or irreversible. Instead, each dimension of being may advance independently of the others, so that imbalances in nourishment tend to be reflected in lopsided maturation. Consequently, the resulting evolution is more like a dynamic dance than a linear progression.

- Compassionate integration of earlier values orientations does not preclude abandonment of certain elements of those previous orientations; in other words, as moral function evolves, some attitudes and priorities may become vestigial, subordinated or sloughed off entirely. It is important to differentiate this process from repression; instead, this is more of a de-energizing of unskillful or antagonistic concepts, relationships and patterns.

- The maturation of our values system – and inhabiting the moral strata as they are defined here – has consequences for both our Functional Intelligence, our ability to manage complexity, and our capacity for sustaining advanced civic ideologies and systems.

Self-Identification (*Memory : Self*, 2010)	Strata of Moral Valuation (*True Love, Integral Lifework Theory & Practice*, 2009)	Level of Political Economy (*Political Economy and the Unitive Principle*, 2013)
Unitive Infinite Self Equates both Being and Non-Being (or Non-Identification, "No Self") and Compassionate Integration of All That Is, Including Previous Self-Identifications	**Applied Nonduality** This is an expression of mystical, nondual consciousness as a supremely unfettered existence where intuitions of universal freedom are fully realized. There is a certain irony that the autonomy one's ego so craved in earlier strata is now readily available through the absence of ego. The lack of a distinct sense of self in some ways eradicates any sort of identification at all - so non-being is equivalent to being, and self is equivalent to both nothingness and previous conceptions of "the All." Here inexhaustible loving kindness is conclusively harmonized through advanced forms of discernment. An enduring all-inclusive love-consciousness integrates all previous moral orientations, current intentions and actions into a carefree - but nevertheless carefully balanced - flow; a flow into what might be described as "ultimate purpose." Previous orientations are then viewed not as right or wrong, but as a spectrum of imperfect expressions of that ultimate purpose. In this final letting go of self-identification, all nourishment is love, all love is nourishment, and all values hierarchies are subordinated to skillfully compassionate affection. At the same time, this realization and any other constructs become just that: constructs, inventions of the mind. Up until now, the main concern of moral valuation has been the orientation of self-to-self, self-to-other, self-to-community, self-to-environment, self-to-planet, self-to-humanity, self-to-nothingness, self-to-All, etc. In other words, previous values hierarchies tended to be preoccupied with the context of the self. In this stratum, that context is no longer relevant, because there is no self, no no-self, and not even a concept of self or no-self. Along the same lines, the past/present/future construction of time dissolves into insignificance.	**Level 10** In Applied Nonduality, the concept of property and its categorizations, valuations and layers of abstraction evaporates entirely, and regression to into previous modes of exchange and valuation is inconceivable. The unending flow of an actualized, overarching purpose is all that remains here, as guided and energized by an all-inclusive love-consciousness.
Formless Infinite Self Equates Non-Being, Non-Identification, "No Self"	⇑ **Unknowing Emptiness** This mode of being has been the backdrop for all previous strata, and has woven itself into those strata at various points in the form of "letting go" of previous constructs and patterns of being – we just haven't fully comprehended the scope of that letting go until now. This is the stratum first of radical deconstruction, then chaotic revolution, a tearing asunder of the veil of certainty, challenging of self-concept and of the nature of all relationships and interdependencies, and fluid revision of the context and content of all moral strata and systems. Once again, the theme of acquiescence has always been part of previous transitions and evolutions, but here we fully inhabit that space and allow it to permeate our consciousness and interactions. This is the gap where faith and doubt collide, where rational and nonrational reconcile, where manifest and unmanifest infuse each other; this is the crucible where *agape* and emptiness forge a new alloy. As expressed in actions and intentions, this stratum frequently feels like either fragmenting disruption on the one hand, or perceived paralysis on the other: either a grenade of Light that exposes underlying stucturelessness, or the quiescent twilight of action-without-action. Ultimately, however, this is where multidialectical tensions can resolve in neutral stillness, where negation becomes the midwife of creation, and where detachment creates a fertile ground for more skillful love-consciousness. In terms of time-space, "now" still predominates, but its context dilates to encompass every point in the continuum previously considered past, present or future; the now becomes *potential* even as it ceases "becoming" anything at all.	**Level 9.5** As it manifests in a political economy, Unknowing Emptiness represents a period of turmoil and self-doubt, and has usually been a necessary component of transition from each Level to the next throughout development. Here, however, the unmaking of previous conceptions and orientations is more complete; a more vigorous annihilation of all that came before and all that as anticipated. Representations and abstractions of property may still be *sacred* (or valued), but constructs like *ownership* increasingly become erroneous to the core experience of unitive interdependency, and thus disconnected from exchanges and relations; the footing for values hierarchies evaporates. As may have been the case in previous Levels of political economy, we can experience the momentum of earlier structures, systems, valuations and purpose carrying us forward as operative habits, but we come to recognize that these, too, are nothing more than tenuous, conditional constructs. So this is the moment in the trapeze act when we collectively let go of the rope that has swung us here, without knowing for certain if there is another rope to grab on the other side.

Shared Spirit Identification with All That Is as Defined by Shared Spiritual Understanding	⇧ **Spiritual Universality** Through persistent and intimate connection with an absolute, universal inclusiveness of being, moral function is defined by whatever most skillfully facilitates "the good of All" (that is, the greatest good, for the greatest number, for the greatest duration). "The good of All," in turn, is an evolving intuition, a successive unfolding of mystical awareness in concert with dialectical cognition and neutrality of personal will. However, it tends to remain more of a felt sense than an exclusively rational construct. Skillfulness can still be refined through empirical experimentation and observation, but it is always subjected to a filter of intensified and unconditional compassion - a felt sense as well. Identification with the All is fluid and seamless, and moral thought and action flowing from this identification are also fluid and seamless. That is not to say that this stratum can't occasionally be interrupted by regressions to previous strata within one or more dimensions of being (usually as a reaction to overwhelming or stressful situations), but the contrast and incongruity of those regressions is strikingly obvious. Past, present and future become a continuum where "now" is less fixed; the experience of time itself is more relative and process-oriented. Nevertheless, "now" remains the primary reference for that process.	**Level 9** Spiritual Universality begins to revise the *common* property designation still further. The desire to elevate intersubjectivity relaxes until a more unitive perspective permeates all valuations. Now there is a shared intuition that everything that once resided in other *ownership* categories is actually *sacred*. In fact, those previous categorizations are mainly perceived as destructive and unhealthy, and so any lingering subordinate relationships with property dissolve. However, because this stratum is so fluid - and because it can still be interrupted by regression - subordinate relationships may appear and disappear as required in continuously revising contexts. Despite these difficult but sometimes necessary hiccups, the primary flow of Level 9 is that the entirety of existence has intrinsic value, and so all human activity must engage that existence with unconditional compassion. There is also a strong intuition of a shared, unifying purpose, and an increasing desire to acquiesce into that purpose. At this stage, *holistic value* becomes equivalent to the *sacred*, intrinsic value that is collectively held.
All-Being Identification with Progressively Broader Inclusions of Consciousness & Being Together with All Supportive Systems	⇧ **Transpersonal Holism** This stratum is marked by an increasing flexibility of moral orientation. For example, the realization that more than one values hierarchy can be valid, that someone can operate within multiple values hierarchies simultaneously, or that seemingly opposing values hierarchies can synthesize a new, higher order moral orientation. This intersubjective moral ambiguity is then navigated through the discernment of intentional, strategic outcomes that benefit the largest majority possible. Definition of what constitutes "the largest majority possible" likewise changes and evolves, but is strongly informed by transpersonal perceptions and experiences. In turn, identification with this transpersonal connectedness subordinates other identifications, so that, for example, experiencing a shared ground of being is indistinguishable from compassionate affection for all beings, and compassionate affection for all beings is indistinguishable from attenuation of individual ego. The relevant time-space for this stratum becomes contextual; the relevance of past, present and future shifts with current priorities, and the cycles and patterns of time begin to give way to a continuum.	**Level 8** In Transpersonal Holism, the process of commonization is now complete. There may still be pockets within the commonized architecture that hold on to previous property categorizations, but they become exceptions that are functionally and systemically isolated within the accepted status quo. Because of the intersubjective validation promoted in this stratum, systems and institutions are resilient enough to tolerate a broad diversity of moral function while still advancing a higher order moral orientation, thus the tumult we saw in a World-Centric stratum subsides. Through this stabilization, many forms of what in previous strata were considered to be *potential* property can now effortlessly be designated as *sacred*, purely to honor and celebrate their intrinsic value. In this level, the concepts of exclusion or exclusivity are so rare that even the designation of *personal* property becomes unnecessary. Thus even the concept of *holistic value* itself no longer provides significant differentiation from internalized values hierarchies or collective relationships with property. All the multiplicities of nourishment have now been integrated into a single thought field - an integral noosphere - so that *holistic value* becomes a collective experience and intuitive understanding that validates itself.

Earth Life Identification with Every Living System on Earth – All Their Individual Components & Supportive Environments	⇧ **World-Centric** At this point there is a greater appreciation and acceptance of ecologies that facilitate, transcend and include human society. These ecologies may contain biological, metaphysical, quantum or other systems-oriented constructs, with the feature that these systems are vast, complex and interdependent. Here moral function is inspired by individual and collective commitment to understanding and supporting those systems in order to support all life. Personal identification with this broader, ecological consciousness expands humanity-centric compassion and concern into world-centric compassion and concern. Values hierarchies now begin to be viewed as a primary form of nourishment, from which all other nourishment is derived. Time dilates and slows a bit here, tending to be viewed more as cycles and patterns than a linear progression.	**Level 7** In the World-Centric moral valuation stratum, all previous property categorizations dissolve into a dominant *common* property paradigm. Because of a now firmly established interdependent systems orientation, any designations of *private*, *potential* and *communal* property become increasingly non-existent. Even *public domain* property becomes a temporary holding space for transition to *common* property assignment. We also see an enlarging scope of *wild things* set aside as perpetually *sacred*, not as an investment for future utility, but because *wild things* are esteemed in and of themselves (i.e. have intrinsic value independent of human valuation). Once the commonization of property is pervasive, there is no longer an elite class to disrupt or exclude others from sharing equally in property benefits. And because there is so little *private* property, a conventional exchange economy no longer exists in the mainstream. However, until commonization is complete, other property categorizations and their resultant economies and classes can persist, creating an organic, hybrid environment that is understandably tumultuous and unstable, but nevertheless reaches onward towards Level 8. At this stage, a subtle, multidimensional and highly sophisticated *holistic valuation* is replacing *exchange value* in human relationships with property across all OSI *abstraction* layers.
Human Society Identification with All People Everywhere	⇧ **Principled Rationalism** Moral function is now defined by a rationally defined set of reasoned moral principles, principles with the unifying objective of benefiting all of humanity. For anyone operating in this stratum, empirical validation of moral efficacy is of particularly compelling interest; what really works should be embraced, and what doesn't should be discarded. There is also an additional form of individuation here, where identification with previous communities (communities whose values and goals had previously been facilitated and integrated) begins to fade, and is replaced with increasing identification with, and compassion for, all human beings. Social divisions are discarded in favor of equal status. The future can now become an all-consuming fixation that drives more and more decisions, the past becomes an advising reference, and the current moment a fleeting absorption. As a result, time tends to both constrict and accelerate in this stratum, remaining linear in experience and conception.	**Level 6** Arriving at the stratum of Principled Rationalism, the property organization of previous Tribal, Individual and Communal moral orientation is more vigorously challenged. *Public domain* property now becomes the ideal categorization, with *private* and *communal* assignments subordinated to that objective. For the first time, setting aside *wild things* as *sacred* may be considered, but mainly as an investment for future resource depletion or other *public domain* need; so, provisionally *sacred* until a scarcity crisis assigns it to *potential*. The desire to maintain an egalitarian *public domain* property categorization can, however, lead to behaviors that echo previous moral orientations; for example, a de facto elitist privatization of property "held in public trust" but controlled mainly by the most influential class, for the benefit of that class. *Holistic value* calculations now have a much more diverse and inclusive basis, as collective understanding of what constitutes nourishment and the interdependence of all nourishment dimensions becomes more sophisticated. *Exchange value* is increasingly aligned with this more complex *holistic value* across most OSI *abstraction* layers.

T.Collins Logan – Integral Lifework Developmental Correlations v1.0   *Page 4 of 7*

Affinitive Community Identification with All People Who Share the Same Values or Experience	⇧ **Cooperative Communalism** Here a communal role and collective responsibility is firmly accepted and established as part of moral function, and community is defined by shared values and experiences, rather than just shared benefits or just laws. The necessity of collaborative contribution to human welfare is understood, and the desire to compete for personal advantage fades away. A community's shared values are appreciated, integrated and supported in order to further that community's goals and collective nourishment, but without the suppression or sacrificing of personal values and identity that were common in earlier tribalism. Thus distinctions of class, caste, and social position tend to attenuate. This stratum also tends to invite preoccupation with the future, sometimes even beyond one's personal future, because we are charting a course through increased complexity. Time is experienced and conceived of as episodic.	**Level 5** As Individualistic imperatives wane, a more Communal flavor of property assignment takes hold. Initially, there will be a desire to maintain *private* property for personal gain, but eventually that privatization is understood to be collectively shared by an exclusive group, and collective advantage begins to outweigh personal advantage. Tentative *public domain* property is still assigned because of its exchange facility within the community and with other communities, but it retains its *potential* to become *communal* property, especially if other, highly valued resources become depleted. In these strata anything not perceived as having such *potential* may be relegated to *common* or *sacred* property, once again increasing prestige for the community, but this orientation is eventually held with less exclusivity, and a more generous attitude of access and benefit to other communities. A fuller understanding of interdependent nourishment processes leads to a broader, more inclusive calculation of *holistic value*. Positive and negative externalities now gain importance in that calculation as well, especially when they impact social capital within and between communities. Thus *holistic value* begins to influence *exchange value* to a greater degree.
Beneficial Community Identification with All People Who Benefit Each Other in Some Way	⇧ **Competitive Communalism** Moral function is strongly influenced by personal acceptance of the importance of participating in a mutually beneficial and lawfully just community, while still retaining individual uniqueness. However, this initial expansion into a communal moral orientation usually orbits around competition. Competition with others for personal positional power and influence in the community; competition with other moral orientations, asserting the relevance of one's own views and priorities; non-conformance with, and continual challenging of, a community's established values hierarchy; and competition for other forms of social capital. In this stratum the future gains more importance as one strategizes navigation of these competitions. The past also regains its teaching role, with emphasis on both failures and successes to inform current strategies.	
Committed Greater Self Acceptance of the Identify of "Self" as Larger Than Associations with Group(s) or Ideas	⇧ **Contributive Individualism** Now more fully individuated from the primary tribe and its social constraints, one continues to be committed to one's own well-being, freedom, wholeness and access to more subtle, nuanced and complex nourishment resources. Moral function is increasingly defined by efforts that appear "good" or helpful to others, as framed by conscience, the context-of-the-moment and interpersonal relationships. In this sense, moral relativism is derived from one's own experiences and interactions, and tends to be maintained and defended within this self-referential absorption. The present is still paramount here. This stratum is part of an individuation process from the tribe and the tribe's values hierarchy. Moral orientation may lapse into previous strata, but is otherwise centered around a sense of obligation to one's own uniqueness, freedom, well-being and wholeness. As a result, one is open to more complex nourishment that was not available within egoic or tribal orientations. Probably as a component of emancipation from tribal expectations, there tends to be minimal concern about the impact of one's individuation process on others. In this stratum, the present once again gains preeminence; the past is being left behind, and the future matters less than assertiveness in the now.	**Level 4** In Individualistic moral orientations, *communal* property becomes increasingly employed for the collective benefit of affinitive or opportunistic associations, and we might even see the first glimpses of *public domain* allocation beyond the facilitation of secure exchange, if only to be perceived as concerned about the collective good. However, even such *public domain* assignments will be tentative; in reality everything in the *public domain* is still *potential* property, only temporarily or conditionally set aside. So *private* property still maintains its principal importance in these strata, if sometimes dressed up for the constructive illusion of collective advantage. Assignments of *sacred* property are also tolerated for the same reason, but *wild things* are still viewed as *common* or *potential* property. *Holistic value* can now be calculated more flexibly, with a perceived advantage-of-the-moment in mind, along with all previous input streams. Nourishment differentiation is

Tentative Greater Self Identification with a Possible "Self" Larger Than Associations with Group(s) or Ideas	⇧ **Opportunistic Individualism** This stratum is part of an individuation process from the tribe and the tribe's values hierarchy. Moral orientation may lapse into previous strata, but is otherwise centered around a sense of obligation to one's own uniqueness, freedom, well-being and wholeness. As a result, one is open to more complex nourishment that was not available within egoic or tribal orientations. Probably as a component of emancipation from tribal expectations, there tends to be minimal concern about the impact of one's individuation process on others. In this stratum, the present once again gains preeminence; the past is being left behind, and the future matters less than assertiveness in the now.	more defined, but its interdependence is not yet appreciated, and so negative externalities are generally dismissed. Thus *holistic valuation* still has little correlation with *exchange value*.
Secure Tribal Position Identification with "My People"	⇧ **Defensive Tribalism** Here the social order and internal rules of our primary social group(s) are championed as correct and proper both within the tribe (regulation) and to the outside world (proselytization). Competition with - and subjugation of - other individuals or groups outside of the tribe (or one's class, caste or social position) becomes more pronounced. Thus moral function is defined by rigid definitions and legalistic rules (law & order, right & wrong, black & white) that justify and secure personal standing within the tribe, as well as the tribe's standing within a given environment. Now, because one's tribal position is secure, the past again dominates. Past authorities, traditions, insights and experiences infuse the present legalistic frame with self-righteous justification.	**Level 3** As moral function evolves through Tribal strata, a more *communal* categorization may take hold for a few shared resources, but the emphasis will still remain on extensive privatization and various hierarchies of *private* property. Even from a Tribal perspective, "communal" may just represent a form of elitist privatization for the most influential class, and so here, too, anything not yet privatized will be viewed as *potential* in nature, including *wild things*. *Public domain* property is only grudgingly tolerated in order to facilitate and secure an exchange economy for *private* property. *Sacred* property may be defined in these strata, but only for the prestige or perceived advantage of the tribe in competition with other tribes. Now externals begin influencing *holistic value* formation, as the tribe's priorities usurp personal gratification. However, *holistic valuation* remains fairly abstracted from *exchange values*.
Insecure Tribal Position Identification with "The People I Want to be My People"	⇧ **Tribal Acceptance** Conformance with social expectations, and approval of one's primary social group(s), governs moral function here. What is "right" or "wrong" is defined by what increases or attenuates social capital and standing within the group(s). The acknowledged link between personal survival and tribal acceptance expands self-centeredness to tribe-centeredness, but otherwise operates similarly to lower moral strata. In this stratum, one's "tribe" tends to be fairly immediate, and fairly small - a family, team, group of peers, gang, etc. Now the relevant timeframe shifts back into the immediate future, where status and influence will either be lost or realized; the past may still be instructive, but what waits around the next bend in the road is what preoccupies.	
Ego Identity Identification with Ego	⇧ **Self-Protective Egoism** Moral function is governed by acquisitive, manipulative, consumptive or hedonistic patterns that accumulate and defend personal gains (i.e. secure nourishment sources) in order to insulate the ego from risks and loss. This self-centeredness may be masked by primitive adaptive personas that navigate basic reciprocity, but is generally indifferent to other people except for the ability of others to satisfy personal demands. Now the past can actually become more important than the present, because the past is where wrongs were suffered and gains realized. Reflections on the present and future, on the other hand, tend to be inhabited by fear of risk and loss.	**Level 2** In the Egoic valuation strata, an I/Me/Mine moral orientation organizes property into the most *private*, personally consolidated state possible. Anything that hasn't yet been acquired is viewed as *potential* property, and nothing is *sacred*. Likewise, *holistic value* is generated through I/Me/Mine calculations, and there is only a vague sense of nourishment differentiation, usually derived from the current and most compelling appetite.

Formative Identity Developing Ego and Ego-Identity	⇧ **Self-Assertive Egoism** The aggressive utilization of basic tools to satisfy one's own wants and whims, usually without regard to the impact on others, is an overwhelming moral imperative here. In most situations, this imperative is only moderated by fear of "being caught" and the personal embarrassment, punishment or loss of personal nourishment that may follow. The relevant timeframe for fulfilling one's desires expands a little here, so that gratification can be delayed until the near-future. However, the past is largely irrelevant, except as a reminder of negative consequences to be avoided.	
Unformed Identity	⇧ **Egoless Raw Need** Naïve, helpless state in which volition is centered around unrestrained basic nourishment in every moment, but where the mechanisms of needs fulfillment are unknown, unskilled or otherwise inaccessible. In this stratum, the scope of one's relevant time-space for this needs fulfillment is almost always the immediate, everpresent *now*.	**Level 1** In Egoless Raw Need, property *ownership* categorization hasn't yet occurred. In a strange sense, all property is probably viewed as *common* and boundryless; it is a limitless resource existing only to service to fundamental appetites and willful imperatives. There is not yet a care for, or conception of, *ownership* assignment or exclusion. In the same way, *holistic value* is monodimensional: there is only the primary and singular raw need that subjugates all nourishment differentiation.

Elements of these progressions have been theorized and speculated about by a number of thinkers – Aristotle, Paul of Tarsus, Marcus Aurelius, Plotinus, Thomas Aquinas, Rumi, Hefez, Teresa of Avila, Spinoza, Leibniz, Hume, Rousseau, Smith, Kant, Hegel, Mill, Freud, James, Tielhard de Chardin, Jung, Piaget, Underhill, Aurobindo, Merton, Lewis, Maslow, Krishnamurti, Freire, Gebser, Loevinger, Graves, Murdoch, Fowler, Kohlberg and Wilber…to name just a fraction. And although many of these ideas can be experientially confirmed as legitimate placeholders for an emergent pscycho-social-spiritual process, it is extremely difficult to empirically validate them. So for now this is just a theory, and one that relies in equal parts on *gnosis*, felt sense, intellectual intuitions, rational dialectics and creative extrapolations; exclude any of these contributing streams from the field of synthesis and the theory will lose cohesion. I also suspect there are additional gradations to be defined. My hope is that the application of Integral Lifework's nourishment paradigm in various contexts, and by large groups of people who have committed themselves to the greater good, will produce a large enough body of evidence to either refute, revise or expand these developmental correlations.

For additional information about the larger body of my work, please visit www.tcollinslogan.com. For more information about Integral Lifework, please visit www.integrallifework.com.

Glossary and Concept Guide

Antisocial – Attitudes and actions hostile to others and harmful to society and civilization.

Chevron deference – 1984 SCOTUS ruling that courts should defer to government agency expertise regarding the scope and applicability of a particular law.

Christian nationalism – Belief that Christianity should be a dominant force in social and political life, and that American patriotism is a requisite aspect of Christian belief and identity.

Civil society – In its broadest sense, civil society is all civic activities where people work together collectively to maintain and actualize shared values for the benefit of all. "Democratic civil society" is simply a preference for all aspects of civil society to be undertaken in a democratic manor – of the people, for the people, and by the people.

Corporate personhood – The ridiculous legal fiction, invented out of thin air, that corporations have the same constitutionally protected rights as human beings.

Crony capitalism – The use of government to maintain and expand wealth and power of a select few who already have most of it.

Democratic socialism – As differentiated from social democracy, which retains capitalist enterprise and markets, democratic socialism shifts all ownership of production into worker self-management.

Economic justice – Addresses the liberating objectives, design, and function of economic principles, practices, and institutions in society, with the aim of leveling the playing field for everyone so they all have *effectively the same opportunity* and economic mobility to achieve equivalently empowered rights, freedoms, development, and aspirations.

Fairness Doctrine – FCC policy in effect from 1949-1987 that required radio and TV broadcasters to present "fair and balanced" coverage of controversial issues with equal airtime.

Halo effect – Positive bias about the whole person or organization as a consequence of select interactions with that person or organization.

Illusory truth effect – Belief that something is true only because it is frequently repeated.

Infantilization – Treating adults as perpetually dependent and needy, unable to make decisions on their own.

Labor theory of property – The arbitrary and egoic conclusion that mixing labor with natural resources somehow justifies private ownership.

Logical fallacies – Arguments that seem reasonable, but are actually misleading or fallacious.

Market fundamentalism – The mistaken belief that completely unregulated financial markets can solve all human problems.

Moral creativity – Preconditions in society that permit and encourage moral evolution.

Neoliberalism – Crony capitalism that aims to secure and increase wealth and power for those who already have it, by any means, but especially through deregulation, privatizing government

services, eliminating public safety nets, and promoting a belief that the profit motive and market competition are the only viable organizing force for society.

Non-interference – Protecting individual rights and agency by disallowing someone else to interfere with them.

Populism – Appeal to majority public sentiment, especially to counter those identified as an "oppressive elite."

Poverties – Persisting conditions that prevent effectively equal qualities of justice, opportunity, and freedom from being actualized or maintained by everyone in society.

Prosocial – Attitudes and actions that are supportive and nourishing to society and civilization.

Red Scare – Demonizing anything that empowers government, workers, consumers, or the public in general to *moderate or resist the will of the wealthy and corporations* as a "socialist" or "communist" evil.

Science skepticism – Bias, often carefully engineered through propaganda, against the scientific method and research.

Self-victimization – Propaganda technique that justifies rebellious, oppressive, or coercive responses to existing conditions by asserting that those conditions victimize the people who are just "fighting back."

The good of all (i.e. the common welfare, public good, good of the whole, general interest, etc.) – In an idealistic utilitarian sense, this is the greatest good, for the greatest number, for the greatest duration; in common practice, this is the consensus of the governed regarding what is best for themselves.

The great deception or "spectacle" – A conscious or unconscious belief, most often resulting from sustained exposure to propaganda, that that individualism, materialism, and aggressive competition are the only guarantors of prosperity and freedom.

Verlassenheit (German) – Feeling abandoned, deserted, isolated, disconnected, and alienated from society and other people to a pronounced degree, which not only has a deleterious effect on civil society and acceptance of the rule of law, but causes those who experience it more acutely to be vulnerable to deceptive manipulation from populist demagogues.

Virtual causality – Used frequently in propaganda (and abundantly in the "great deception"): Either misattributing causation without supportive evidence; intentionally hiding or "masking" real causes (usually by deliberately blaming someone or something else that has nothing to do with it); or actively *forcing* causation after-the-fact to align with previous masking (so that misdirected blame can be justified or "proven").

Wokeness – Being aware of social injustice, alert to its occurrence in the world, and caring enough about it to want to *do something* to change such conditions. This can be differentiated from "performative wokeness," which is a showy display of caring about these issues in order to gain social approval, but often with less concern about whether that display has an actual effect on the injustice itself.