

The Other American Dream: Why Thriving Communities are Essential to Individual Freedom

DISSERTATION

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Abstract

The functional decline of American communities leaves a substantial cohort of individuals far less free (in a republican sense) than they would be otherwise—an outcome notably at odds with the prevailing assumption that individual and communal freedoms exist in a zero-sum relation. More specifically, individuals who associate the “good life” with a densely integrated community are now beholden to agents and agencies whose values, preferences, and beliefs do not reflect their own; they have little capacity to exit or moderate commercial relationships that leave them vulnerable to the arbitrary will of others, rendering them all but powerless to pursue their ideals. Throughout this study, citizens who prioritize “community” are defined as those who value relationships bound by reciprocal obligations and needs, where neighboring citizens form cross-cutting relationships of both an economic and personal nature. Evidence that these citizens exist (in substantial numbers) comes from several ethnographic case-studies and first-hand accounts, which together suggest that recent populist agitations are a manifestation—if a somewhat incoherent one—of the longing to reverse certain globalizing trends regarded as an existential threat to these deeply cohesive communities. Drawing from republican theory, this dissertation argues further that communally oriented citizens are left facing a range of choices that diminishes their republican freedom on three related levels: at a personal level, at a systemic level, and finally at a “system-building” level. One reason for this outcome is that existing markets have been standardized or “rationalized” to an excessive degree. The appropriate solution, however, is not to reverse the economic achievements of the past century, but to moderate them with “pluralist” reforms that confer on communities a measure of self-sufficiency—with an initial focus on technology, infrastructure, and investment.

Dedication

To my wife Laurie

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Liberal democracies have long faced an antimony between the competing ideals of liberty and community, or between the rights and freedoms of the individual, on one hand, and groups on the other. And the response to this dilemma has in general been to reward clear precedence to the individual. Those who identify as conservative or right-wing, for instance, have invariably emphasized the importance of the “free-market” in helping self-interested actors transcend their insular environment, develop their full potential, and realize the American Dream. As they see it, the rights of individuals to advance themselves socially and economically are so “strong and far-reaching” that other groups and collectivities, including the state itself, should be forever hampered by restrictions.¹ Those who identify with the political left hold a more generous view of the state, regarding the rights and freedoms it guarantees as the central means by which citizens can counter the localized tyrants that suppress their individuality.² In neither of these accounts, however, does an emphasis on “community” combine easily with concerns for personal autonomy and freedom.

Some theorists have argued thoughtfully for a more pluralist conception of liberalism,³ but a strong perception remains, nevertheless, that individual and communal freedoms exist in a zero-

¹ Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), IX.

² A primary source for this reasoning is of course John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (London: Longmans, 1859).

³ See Will Kymlicka, *Liberalism, Community, and Culture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989)

sum relation, such that an increase in one will always come at the expense of the other.⁴ As individuals we require certain freedoms in the marketplace and the political arena to ensure we can effectively resist the strictures of hide-bound custom, particularized rules and norms, and the oppressive hierarchies that prevent us from realizing our own conception of the good life. When the rights and freedoms of the group conflict with our rights as individuals—and they regularly will—then the former must always defer to the latter. Given this basic formula, it is little wonder that liberal societies have suffered, in the view of some critics, a dramatic erosion of communal life, the ironic consequence of which is that individuals now experience a much greater sense of alienation.⁵

In this dissertation I argue that community fragmentation results not just in alienation, but also a loss in many of our personal freedoms. I argue, that is, that the functional decline of American communities has less to do with individual choice and initiative than we commonly believe; we should not assume that communal decline represents, in every instance, the triumph of rugged individuals over the provincial forces that seek to contain them. While many citizens have willingly neglected their communal attachments as a means to achieve greater social mobility, or in order to enjoy greater creative expression, it is equally the case that myriad others have watched with profound dismay as the communities that they value and love have lost any semblance of economic health and stability—an outcome deliberately pursued and publicly subsidized since at least the mid-19th century. I will argue, in short, that the creation of national (and now global) markets has

⁴ Potential “win-win” cases exist, of course, but they often mobilize a nationalistic conception of community. See, for instance, Daniel Bell, “A Communitarian Critique of Authoritarianism,” *Society* Vol. 32, No. 5 (1995): 38–43.

⁵ See, for instance, Amitai Etzioni, *The Spirit of Community* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1993); *The New Golden Rule* (New York: Basic Books, 1996); and *The Monochrome Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

severely weakened what were once self-sustaining communities, reducing their practical relevance to the lives of those who not only inhabit them but who also self-consciously identify *with* them.

The story I tell in this dissertation, to be clear, is not one of romantic nostalgia for the quaint villages and boroughs of early America, nor does it ignore the palpable gains in personal freedom facilitated by industrial, and now postindustrial, capitalism. Our market system has enabled countless individuals to rise above their petty circumstances, and in that respect, it has empowered them to resist the repressive sway of localized abuses of power. Even if it were feasible to revert to pre-industrial conditions, I believe it would be wrong to do so. My aim in this dissertation, rather, is to highlight the tradeoffs involved—the fact that market growth and concentration have promoted one kind of freedom at the expense of another. I speak here in particular of the capacity to pursue a denser or thicker form of community, with all the reciprocal obligations which accompany that. What is worrisome is how this latter freedom has increasingly become the exclusive privilege of the wealthiest classes; few individuals today have the means to prioritize “community” in this stronger and more robust sense unless they are already affluent or possess an abundance of capital.

The tension or tradeoff I am stressing here is not a new one: It has been recently described by political theorist Jacob Levy, in a detailed analysis of the past millennia of political theorizing, as that between, on one hand, “the freedom for persons as they are, living the lives they already lead, embedded in particular communities,” and on the other “the importance of free persons’ ability to transform or transcend those current lives.”⁶ What I argue in this dissertation is that in terms of *economic* relations, specifically, we have lost sight of this recurring tradeoff and now occupy an extreme position—one in which “rationalist” or “universalist” systems of production and exchange have emancipated individuals from localized authority but have reduced their capacity to oppose

⁶ Jacob Levy, *Rationalism, Pluralism, and Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 2

the self-interested whims of corporate and financial elites. What is needed, then, are basic reforms that swing the pendulum back and promote greater pluralism and diversity in the marketplace.

A stake is nothing less than the *republican* freedom of individuals—or their capacity, that is, to satisfy material and social needs without ceding their deeply held values in deference to the public and private agencies that overlook an economy increasingly monolithic and uniform. Just as individuals can suffer under the arbitrary domination of home-grown tyrants, so too can they suffer under the capricious will of detached bureaucracies, be they political or economic. This is partly what historian and social critic Christopher Lasch had in mind when, in the early 1990s, he movingly bewailed “the pathology of domination; the growing influence of organizations (economic as well as military) that operate without regard to any rational objective except their own aggrandizement; the powerlessness of individuals in the face of these gigantic agglomerations and the arrogance of those ostensibly in charge of them.”⁷ In the economic sphere today, individuals are far more likely to experience arbitrary domination from sources distant and remote than from those closer to home. More promisingly, however, this also means we enjoy a unique opportunity to promote the freedom of the individual and more cohesive communities at one and the same time.

There are obvious benefits to be reaped from the steady pursuit of market efficiency and growth, but these benefits are accompanied by pathologies and costs that are every bit as profound, many of which are becoming increasingly difficult to ignore. Those who value a denser form of community over their own socio-economic mobility will likely come to resent a system that penalizes their cherished ideals (in effect if not explicit intent) by multiplying the costs of pursuing them. Such resentment is then likely to surface in vivid and disturbing ways, erupting in populist agitations that presage a new era of demagoguery and authoritarian government. The recent

⁷ Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991), 26.

election of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency is arguably consistent with this pattern. I want to suggest, therefore, that this issue is not one we can safely ignore or play down: Even those who put little stock in the “communal ideal” have an interest in maintaining the feasibility of that option for those who do, if only because the repercussions of doing otherwise will likely be dire and lasting.

A Preference for Community

Later in chapter one I will defend the intuition that support for Donald Trump is directly related to community breakdown and is thus indicative, in particular, of the growing resentment of those who feel powerless to maintain a communal way of life. Here in the introduction, though, I want to clarify what it means in this context to *prefer* or *value* community, and I want to defend the notion that citizens should be fully at liberty to pursue decidedly *non*-individualist ways of life.

One reason for misgivings here is because highly integrated and tightknit communities often form and shape our individualized preferences, and this somewhat complicates the idea that we can freely choose them of our own accord. We might worry, in other words, that individuals who express a strong preference for community are in fact expressing a form of false consciousness, and they are also diminishing their capacity to pursue alternative preferences in the future. Why should we respect their capacity to make choices that will almost certainly frustrate their efforts to make different choices later? And why should we honor their partiality for community when the latter will, in the normal course of things, impose crucial restrictions on what they can do, say, and think?

An implicit assumption that drives this objection is that communities will tend to socialize their members into adopting certain habits and attitudes that they would never exhibit otherwise; to be autonomous and free, individuals must resist the dominant spirit and mentality of the herd, and they must learn to forge their own way in the world, undeterred by the limiting ideas of others.

It is undeniable that communities often play this socializing role, inculcating norms and values that individuals would doubtless find far less compelling in other contexts. Thus, if our driving aim is to further the cause of freedom, then fostering communal life seems an obvious step in the wrong direction; it seems antithetical to liberal values to celebrate “cultural diversity,” in the words of Amartya Sen, unless “it is as freely chosen as possible by the persons involved”—which seems to imply that any communal or cultural conformism that short-circuits rational deliberation, or that appears to have that effect, at least, is something that liberal societies should highly discourage.⁸

There is much to commend in this perspective—in particular, its recognition “that human identities can take many distinct forms and that people have to use reasoning to decide on... what significance they should attach to having been born a member of a particular community.”⁹ The danger here, however, is in thinking that processes of socialization are somehow distinctive to more integrated communities, associations, and institutions. In reality, however, even the “liberated” actor who eschews restrictive attachments and pursues only her own individualized happiness has been enculturated by the prevailing attitudes and ethos of her society, if not also by more formalized processes of instruction. We have good reason to believe, for instance, that graduate students who take advanced economics courses are more likely to avoid self-sacrificing behavior and pursue courses of actions that benefit them and them alone.¹⁰ This mode of behavior,

⁸ Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 150.

⁹ Ibid, 119.

¹⁰ See, for instance, Gerald Marwell and Ruth Ames, “Economists Free Ride, Does Anyone Else? Experiments on the Provision of Public Goods, IV,” *Journal of Public Economics* Vol. 15 (1981), 295-310; and Robert Frank, Thomas Gilovich, and Dennis Regan, “Does Studying Economics Inhibit Cooperation?” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* Vol. 7 (1993), 159-171. For a broader analysis, see Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012), 111-133.

while certainly compatible with liberal values, is no less a product of socialization than are other, more self-effacing approaches, and there is little reason to suppose it is any more “rational” or right.

At issue here is an old debate between early communitarians and their liberal detractors—a debate in which both parties often spoke at cross-purposes, ignoring many premises they held in common. Communitarians like Michael Sandel, as a case in point, repeatedly stressed that the “loyalties and convictions” we hold are “inseparable from understanding ourselves as the particular persons we are—as members of this family or community or nation or people, as bearers of this history, as sons and daughters of that revolution, as citizens of this republic.”¹¹ According to this perspective, none of us can abstract ourselves from all the particularizing conditions that not only shape our identities but also afford us a sense of dignity and self-respect. But nor is it incumbent on liberals to insist otherwise: Even supposing our moral outlook has been formed by our prior “membership in a community and culture,” we can still appropriate and creatively re-interpret this culture through careful reflection, contesting and revising it in an ongoing dialectical process.¹² Individuals, that is, can strive for a more integrated community and can do so “freely” even when, in making this choice, they reproduce (in some form) the social and cultural imaginary they inherited.

There are several remaining reasons, however, why we might hold serious reservations about the value of tight-knit communities, including their exclusionary and even racist overtones,¹³

¹¹ Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 179.

¹² Kymlicka, *Liberalism, Community, and Culture*, 1. See also Patchen Markell, *Bound by Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), chapter 6.

¹³ See, for instance, Cass Sunstein, “The Law of Group Polarization,” *University of Chicago Law School*, John M. Olin Law & Economics Working Paper No. 91; and Ryan Muldoon, ““Diversity Isn’t What Divides Us. Division Is What Divides Us,” *Knight Foundation*, https://kf-site-production.s3.amazonaws.com/media_elements/files/000/000/189/original/Ryan_Muldoon_KnightFoundation.pdf

as well as the hefty burdens they place on individuals who would rather not conform. The first “racism” worry is one I will address a bit later in this dissertation. For now, though, I would like to consider the second objection, which is that insular societies are often opposed, in the words of John Stuart Mill, to “the principle ingredients of human happiness, and quite the chief ingredient of individual and social progress.”¹⁴ We noted above that communities regularly impose restrictions (even if mostly informal ones) on individual expression—on what can be done, said, and thought—and their members are bound by reciprocal obligations and commitments that sometimes prevent them from attaining a higher status, or from acquiring talents and abilities that might otherwise enrich their lives. From a liberal perspective, then, we might question the value of communities that appear so clearly detrimental to those who, for whatever reason, feel anxious to preserve them.

In its most extreme form, this objection smacks of the very sort of paternalism that so often provokes, in a polarizing political climate, a devastating wave of populist resentment; it tacitly assumes that those who value communal obligations over their own self-fulfillment are defective human beings too stupid or ignorant to comprehend where their true interests lie. This patronizing view is rarely articulated with such blunt clarity—though it sometimes is, as I will detail later in chapter one—but it is often implicit, at least, in the prevailing worldview of the policymaking elite, who are generally perceived as having little concern for the rapid disintegration of small-town America. Indeed, for those at the top of the socio-economic ladder, rising levels of automation, outsourcing, and urbanization are hardly negative trends in and of themselves,¹⁵ for even if they

¹⁴ Mill, *On Liberty*, 102.

¹⁵ Not everyone holds this view, of course, but there is a significant number who do. See, for instance, Douglas A. Irwin, “‘Outsourcing’ Is Good for America,” *The Wall Street Journal*, Jan. 28, 2004: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB107525219024013636>; and Christopher Mims, “Automation Can Actually Create More Jobs,” *The Wall Street Journal*, December 11, 2016: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/automation-can-actually-create-more-jobs-1481480200>.

occasion a turbulent transitional period, they also signal the eventual triumph of the individual over all the parochial bonds that have prevented her, in regressive eras, from reaching her full potential.

Such a perspective is deeply out of sync with the values and preferences of those who not only face severe occupational disruptions in the short-term, but who also would happily disavow many of the supposed benefits yet to be realized in a globalizing economy. It is also one of the worst and most callous forms of paternalism alluded to above. There is, however, a fairer and more reasonable position that exudes far less condescension: Rather than assume that all “sensible” people will (or should) share their own preferences, some liberals may simply worry that stronger and more cohesive communities will end up impeding a small yet beleaguered minority from abandoning them at will, foiling their attempts to realize objectives not shared by their peers. This seems to have been one of the chief concerns that animated Mill—that originality and genius will, in such a stifling environment, be powerless to “unfold itself freely both in thought and practice.”¹⁶

This is a legitimate worry. Liberals who prize personal initiative and creativity, who value attempts to rise above the merely customary, will always feel a pressing burden to ensure that individuals can feasibly withdraw from conformist groups that smother their nascent faculties. And liberal policies will for that reason tend to emphasize the value of “exit rights” in ensuring that individuals can either leave such societies as they please, or that, just as crucially, they can exercise their “voice” more effectively in achieving vital changes.¹⁷ This goal is as sensible as it is admirable: It is necessary, in fact, to prevent localized abuses of arbitrary power, as I will reiterate later in this

¹⁶ Mill, *On Liberty*, 117. Mill also displays great disdain, of course, for those lesser souls who follow customary ways with “ape-like” docility and who purportedly fail to reason, judge, and discern for themselves. (106)

¹⁷ See Albert O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970).

dissertation. But it is also possible to prioritize exit rights to such an excessive extent that we end up punishing communities where such rights are, for deliberate reasons, more difficult to exercise.

That we often struggle to see this is partly because our individualist mindset encourages us to regard personal *obligations* as inherently opposed to our own self-interest. We often forget or fail to see at all that individuals who willingly choose “community” are expressing a strong preference for a certain range of relations in which reciprocal obligations, of one variety or another, will necessarily take center stage. Such individuals want to enmesh themselves in a denser social web; they want to bind themselves in relations of mutual dependence that are sufficiently tangled and intricate to impede, to some limited extent, their capacity to extricate themselves in the future; and they want to make these relations a central and defining feature of their identity.¹⁸ To say that individuals prefer community is to say they desire the freedom to constrain their powers in some fundamental way, and they reject, in doing so, any stark division between rights and obligations.

Is there room for this in the liberal tradition? The only appropriate answer to this question is a roundly affirmative one. If we consider legally binding marriage unions, for example, we see a clear-cut case where the individual and group, rights and obligations, exist in a kind of harmonious tension. Men and women enter these marriages for a host of different reasons. They may be motivated by religious or philosophical convictions or by an altruistic belief that strong families benefit society, or they may think that marriage is apt to benefit them physically, emotionally, and financially—a position well-supported by the available social scientific data.¹⁹ Regardless of all their reasons, however, they know that entering a marriage will encumber them with certain duties and

¹⁸ For an interesting psychological theory as to how and why individuals feel this way, see Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 256-318.

¹⁹ See, for instance, Linda J. Waite, “Does Marriage Matter,” *Demography* Vol. 32, No. 4 (1995), 483-507.

responsibilities, and it will limit some of their autonomy. But that is a feature of marriage, not a bug: That divorce is difficult or at least massively *inconvenient* serves as a form of protection for those who, contrary to their values and preferences, might otherwise abandon ship at the first sign of trouble. What distinguishes a marriage from a casual fling is the purposeful insertion of formal obligations that are legally binding—a kind of self-imposed curtailment of our individualized rights.

Divorce laws were considerably relaxed in the mid-to-late 20th century, of course, partly because women often found themselves trapped in abusive relationships, and they had little legal recourse and few channels they could pursue outside of their narrowly circumscribed domestic spaces.²⁰ The forceful arguments made by Mill and Wollstonecraft in the 19th century—that existing laws left many women abjectly vulnerable to the arbitrary cruelties of men²¹—began to command a much wider audience. The assumption behind many of these legal reforms, in other words, was that marriages were in fact much too difficult to exit; the rights and freedoms of women, in particular, were vulnerable to abuses by “the basest and most ferocious” of men who, empowered by a positively medieval system of law, could act with relative impunity and play the petty tyrant, confident that their wives lacked any real bargaining power and thus had few if any alternatives.²²

Are marriage laws still too strict and confining, or have they been liberalized far too much? On this question conservatives and liberals continue to take radically different positions, basing their arguments on the relative value they assign to the institution of marriage, on one hand, and to the freedom of the separate parties *to* the marriage on the other. My intention here is not to

²⁰ Roderick Phillips, *Putting Asunder: A History of Divorce in Western Society* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 561-572.

²¹ See John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women* (London: J. R. Lippincott & Co., 1869); and Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (London: J. Johnson, 1796).

²² Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, 63.

underplay the importance of this debate; the issues involved are monumentally important. I do want to emphasize, however, that most people still believe that marriages should be legally protected in at least a *limited* sense. Although they may disagree on how binding marriages should be, they still see value in allowing individuals to engage in close intimate relationships, often the literal birthplace of future generations, where freedom to withdraw in a cavalier fashion, without facing any consequence at all, has been willingly and deliberately curtailed. Both liberals and conservatives recognize the freedom of individuals to assume mutual obligations that impose legal penalties, of various kinds, on those who later choose to flout them. Indeed, recent debates over the political legitimacy of gay marriage have been directly premised on this essential commitment.²³

The point is that dedicated liberals can and in fact *should* affirm the value of mutual obligations that have been self-imposed and that are, by premeditated design, difficult to vacate. And we have a collective interest in ensuring that individuals can freely engage in such relations. My argument in what follows is that countless individuals are now incapable of realizing their preference for the kinds of reciprocal relations that distinguish a community from a random collection of isolated actors; they lack the material conditions necessary to realize their communal preferences, and they are often compelled as a matter of necessity to submit to the self-serving preferences of other agents or agencies. It goes without saying that this trend is deeply worrisome to theorists steeped in the republican tradition, but it should also trouble liberals who believe that, as a basic precondition of a just society, individuals should be free to pursue their normative ends.

The Argument in Brief

²³ See, for instance, Stephen Macedo, *Just Married: Same-Sex Couples, Monogamy, and the Future of Marriage* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

Although I began this introduction with a passing allusion to “liberal democracies,” the rest of this dissertation draws more heavily from republican and neo-republican thought, which naturally holds less attraction for dyed-in-the-wool liberals who still harbor serious misgivings about these paradigms—an entirely understandable impulse, by the way, given the efforts of some scholars who identify as republican to distinguish themselves from their liberal colleagues.²⁴ My invocation of republican freedom, however, does not exclude similar appeals to *negative* freedom. As I suggested above, individuals often exercise their freedom in pursuit of denser forms of community that limit their freedoms in a myriad of different ways, and liberal governments allow and even facilitate these voluntary decisions. I see no reason why this argument would not apply just as well to negative conceptions of freedom, but I leave it to sympathetic liberals to make this argument themselves, as they can almost certainly do so with far more competence than I can.

My central concern is thus republican rather than negative freedom. My line of argument should not be confused, then, with related arguments that appeal to popular conceptions of *justice*: Even if powerful forces never mistreated or harmed citizens—even if definite *injustices* never occurred—we would still have sufficient reason for opposing a system that renders certain citizens subject to an arbitrary and capricious authority, one concerned, most of all, with its further enrichment and empowerment. It is important to remember in this context that a wealthy slave is, in the final analysis, still very much a slave; he remains within the dominating power of someone else, which means he is always susceptible to future oppression, as republican theorists have long recognized. This is arguably what small-town Americans are most deeply worried about and is

²⁴ See, for instance, Maurizio Viroli, *Republicanism*, translated by Antony Shugaar (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002), 61. On the other hand, even Phillip Pettit—who is usually at pains to distinguish freedom understood as non-domination from freedom understood as non-interference, the latter of which he describes as the “liberal” view, has tentatively suggested that liberalism and republicanism are feasibly conceived as comprising a single political tradition (*Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 10. I owe thanks to Eric MacGilvray for this point.

what feeds their anxiety. They feel powerless to oppose the whims of agencies which act, not according to local interests, but for the sake of their own—powerless to resist automation, industrial outsourcing, and corporate takeovers; powerless to prevent human rights abuses perpetrated by market forces acting in their name and on their reputed behalf; and powerless to realize or approximate communal self-sufficiency. They are not free in the republican sense.

My argument in chapter one sets the stage for this argument by examining the recent populist movement that catapulted Donald Trump into executive office. This movement becomes more comprehensible when viewed against the backdrop of rural economic decline. More to the point, I argue that that highly integrated and tightknit communities have long been central to the values and identities of rural citizens but now effectively lie beyond their grasp, and their selection of Trump partly reflects their desire to reverse globalizing trends that threaten their communities.

In chapter two, I demonstrate that outcomes like this are not simple happenstance. Nor are they the consequence, strictly speaking, of a spontaneous process capable of progressing forward through its own locomotive power, heedless of larger currents and eddies in politics. Rather, this developmental process bears the signature and imprint of powerful thought-leaders in government, finance, law, and business, all of which combine resources via various public-private partnerships. The technologies and infrastructure systems characteristic of the modern world are in fact a product of political deliberation, and they express certain preferences, beliefs, and commitments. I will substantiate this point by examining, first, the mutual convergence of business and government in advancing new technologies; and second, the political decisions that ensure our infrastructure systems function more as economies of scale than economies of scope, as some economists put it.

Chapter three focuses on republican theory and argues that communally oriented citizens face a wide range of choices, and indeed are implicated in an array of infrastructure systems, that

diminishes their republican freedom; even if the choices they confront are not always “tragic” or “desperate” in the sense described more recently by political theorists Michael Walzer and Martha Nussbaum, the mere fact that they expose certain citizens to the arbitrary control of other agents or agencies is more than enough (from a small “r” republican perspective) to make them ethically objectionable, especially in light of the fact that many of these citizens lack effective “exit rights.”

One advantage in drawing from the republican tradition is its special salience for cohorts of the population that suffer under the arbitrary power of many of the exact groups said to empower them, including public-private partnerships and welfare agencies, to say nothing of the voting electorate that supports and subsidizes redistributive programs. Following Wendell Berry, I argue that racial minorities, and the African American population, specifically, have likewise been defrauded of their communal birthright through a deliberate process initiated earlier in the 20th century—a process which proved enormously profitable for agro-industrial powers, but which left their victims reliant on the obscure machinations of the marketplace and therefore powerless to achieve more self-sustaining communities. The upshot is that rural and urban citizens have more in common than first meets the eye; rather than work at cross-purposes, they have a remarkable opportunity, as they come to recognize their common needs and concerns, to combine forces in a mutually beneficial fashion. The rural-urban divide in politics is thus hardly inevitable.

The final chapter makes much of the distinction between the ancient constitutionalist or “pluralist” tradition, on one hand, and the liberal “rationalist” tradition on the other—a distinction highlighted many decades ago by sociologist Robert Nisbet, and more recently by Jacob Levy. These two traditions normally exist in a productive tension with one another, each of them securing rights and freedoms ignored by the other. But the great challenge we face today, I suggest, is that liberal rationalism largely proceeds unchecked and unopposed, lacking an effective counterweight; the

pluralist imaginary has all but faded from our consciousness, particularly in the economic sphere. Any would-be remedy thus minimally requires a righting of the balance, which is achievable, I will argue, if we initially focus on three systemic variables: technology, infrastructure, and investment.

These reforms are meant to be constructive as much as they are critical. An existing system, after all, will not simply evaporate of its own accord; it needs to be replaced by something new and different—something capable of meeting our needs and purposes in a more consistent and reliable manner. Bearing this in mind, I harbor no illusions that we can somehow alter the course of time or revert our present-day towns and villages to their early halcyon days. What is needed instead are substantive changes that empower communities and enable them to produce from the ground floor up, transforming them into genuinely productive hubs in their own right; we need reforms that counterbalance overly “rationalized” exchange systems—which promote long-haul, high-volume commodities—with what one political economist calls “regional republicanism.”²⁵ In short, we need more “pluralistic” development that can confer on local communities a measure of self-sufficiency.

²⁵ See Gerald Berk, *Alternative Tracks: The Constitution of American Industrial Order, 1865-1917* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997).

Chapter 2: Populism and Community

The political mainstream responded in profound shock and dismay when Donald Trump, a businessman and television personality, rode a wave of populist resentment all the way to the White House to earn the title of 45th President of the United States. This outcome was surprising in more than one respect. It revealed, for one thing, the growing ideological divide between the political and cultural elites, many of whom reside in coastal megacities, and the many denizens of “flyover country” who are safely distant from Beltway intrigues.²⁶ Evidence of this growing rift was even apparent in the analytical tools used to determine popular support for Trump in the few short months prior to the election. Once everything was said and done, it was clear that most of the major polls had missed the mark by a considerable margin, an anemic showing that was later repeated, strangely enough, in the 2020 election.²⁷ While explanations for this phenomenon continue to vary, one reasonable hypothesis is that left-wing pollsters are increasingly incapable of identifying with many of the voters they canvas, which hinders them from forming representative samples or from even posing the right questions. As independent pollster Richard Barris observed, many of his colleagues “profile the voting behavior of people they don’t understand and may even despise.”²⁸

²⁶ This divide has arguably been long in the making. See Charles Murray, *Coming Apart: The State of White America 1960-2010* (New York: Crown Forum, 2012).

²⁷ See David Leonhardt, “‘A Black Eye’: Why Political Polling Missed the Mark. Again.” *New York Times*: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/12/us/politics/election-polls-trump-biden.html>. Accessed December 2020.

²⁸ Quoted in Mary Kay Linge and Doree Lewak, “Why election polls were so wrong again in 2020,” *New York Post*: <https://nypost.com/article/the-real-reason-election-polls-were-so-wrong-again-in-2020/>. Accessed December 2020.

This contempt surfaced even more obviously in the immediate aftermath of the election. It was simply inexplicable, for mainstream pundits and politicians alike, that such a large cohort of voters would select a candidate who had so repeatedly discredited himself. The election results were taken as evidence of one of several possibilities, neither of which were encouraging: Either millions of Trump supporters were too ignorant and stupid to make an informed choice at the ballot box, as many political scientists have long insisted,²⁹ or else they belong, as Hillary Clinton notoriously suggested, in a “basket of deplorables” comprised of every “racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, [and] Islamophobic” voter.³⁰ More recently, sentiments like these have surfaced in alarming calls for reeducation camps to “deprogram” Trump voters of their allegedly toxic views.³¹

No doubt there is much about these voters, or certain cohorts of them, at least, that gives good reason for concern. Yet most critics of Trump have expended far too little effort endeavoring to understand what about him has attracted such staunch support. We often find it easy, of course, to paint our opponents with a broad brush and assume, for the sake of our own mental sanity, if nothing else, that every member of an opposing party, culture, or ideology is pathological or misinformed. This response is easy because it completely avoids the more difficult task of understanding what it is that motivates the actions of others, or what about their views may be admirable and true. My purpose in this chapter is to begin this more difficult investigative effort.

²⁹ See, for instance, Bryan Caplan, *The Myth of the Rational Voter: Why Democracies Choose Bad Policies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); and Christopher H. Achen and Larry Bartels, *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017)

³⁰ See Katie Reilly, “Read Hillary Clinton’s ‘Basket of Deplorables’ Remarks About Donald Trump Supporters,” *Time*, September 2016: <https://time.com/4486502/hillary-clinton-basket-of-deplorables-transcript/>. Accessed December 2020.

³¹ See, for instance, the views expressed by David Atkins, a regional director of the Democratic Party in California, twitter thread, November 2020: <https://twitter.com/DavidOAtkins>.

My aim is not to defend everything that Trump supporters think or say, much less to defend their choice of a president, but rather to clarify the moral and ethical framework that they tacitly employ. I believe this knowledge is essential for avoiding a more violent and destructive form of populism in futural cycles. What the populist movement arguably needs is thoughtful leaders who can articulate its concerns with clarity and conviction, and who are able, therefore, to champion its cause in a more legitimate manner, without the race-baiting sadly typical of many in the Alt Right.

A prominent feature of the populist movement, I argue, is a concern for local villages, towns, and a communal way of life. In the pages that follow I provide a detailed account of what is meant by “community” in this context—a conception rich enough to account for the different prerequisites that communities of varying forms and structures require. While citizens from all walks of life can (and do) embrace this communal ideal, it has special resonance for citizens in predominantly rural areas, most of whom strive to actualize it in a more rigorous and robust sense. This likely explains why we have witnessed, in the past few elections, such a stark divide between urban and rural voters. After a brief glance at this election data, I examine three separate case studies which, taken together, lend credence to this hypothesis, hinting at the exasperation that rural citizens almost invariably feel for their inability to live what they consider a good life in a globalizing economy.

What is a Community?

Communities can take a variety of different forms: They can crystallize around a particular location, shared feelings of cooperation and trust, a common store of memories and history, or a combination of such factors.³² Many communities also face distinctive constraints, and that

³² See Daniel Bell, “Communitarianism,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/communitarianism/#PolCom>. Accessed March 24, 2020.

presents us with a real conceptual challenge: Whenever we speak of so-called “communities,” how do we adequately account for their salient differences? One solution is a typology recently sketched by Stephen Marglin, a professor emeritus at Harvard University and a founding member of the World Economics Association. Marglin focuses on the material conditions necessary for different kinds of communities to function—conditions that distinguish rural communities from strictly urban ones and thus contribute to the increasingly intense acrimony across the urban-rural divide.

Marglin begins his analysis by distinguishing between communities and associations, both of which are often grouped together under a single conceptual heading. Simply put, communities impose mutual commitments and obligations on their members, whereas associations “make little claim on our loyalties and at best make minor contributions to our identities.”³³ In other words, associations are far easier to abandon and thus impose fewer obligations on those who engage in them. Using the influential formula employed by economist Albert Hirschman, we can state the difference as follows: In associations we can more easily choose “exit over voice” or “flight over fight,” thereby freeing ourselves from all the “centrifugal forces” that bind us together with others.³⁴

The difference between associations and communities, therefore, hinges first on how difficult they are to evacuate, and second on the role they play in shaping our personal identities, including our beliefs, values, and preferences. A 19th century German village, on the more extreme end, was manifestly central to the identities of those who inhabited them, and because of its insular economy and culture, it imposed stringent costs on the rare souls who chose to vacate them. Few if

³³ Stephen Marglin, *The Dismal Science: How Thinking Like an Economist Undermines Community* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 20.

³⁴ Albert O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

any “villages” today exert an equally strong hold on their residents, but in theory, at least, “leaving a community involves costs—moral, legal, psychological, or economic—that are not part of the calculus of whether one abandons one’s fellow bowlers.”³⁵ We can exit our reading group, softball league, or even business club without facing major losses to our identity and material wellbeing.

Granted, many of us seek a heightened sense of community by involving ourselves in these very sorts of groups, and it is for this reason that associations, too, deserve inclusion on the wider communal spectrum. In general, though, they present us with far fewer hindrances or obstacles to our own social mobility: In many cases they play a vital role in helping us actively *advance* our interests, be they artistic, financial, or even economic. We can see confirmation of this in the vast literature on the related concept of “social capital”—literature which often assumes that individuals who obtain this nebulous resource will also acquire more knowledge, skill, and power.³⁶ In this respect, terms like “associations” and “social capital” are more easily assimilated by a standard liberal framework, and they bypass much of the hostility that communities proper often evoke.

Even actual communities, however, can take at least one of several forms, which Marglin further classifies as *communities of necessity* and *communities of affinity*. The former such category is characterized by common or reciprocal needs. An example are the Puritan villages that rapidly emerged in early New England—villages where citizens depended heavily on one another to acquire material property, obtain social support (when necessary), and preserve their political

³⁵ Marglin, *The Dismal Science*, 21.

³⁶ For an example, see Brian Uzzi and Shannon Dunlap, “How to Build Your Network,” *Harvard Business Review*, December 2005. While sociologists like Putnam have long regarded social capital as vital to democratic *societies*, others like Bourdieu have focused on its instrumental value to those who acquire it. Compare Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000) with Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital” in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, edited by J. G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 241-258.

freedoms. In Marglin's telling, these integrated communities were bound by "neighborly reciprocity" as much as they were by commerce, and they typically ensured that "the needs of the temporarily fortunate [were] subordinated to the needs of the less fortunate."³⁷ These communities were also characterized, of course, by common norms, customs, and sentiments, but the primary adhesive that held them together were the many things their members needed of one another. At the most basic level, what members needed of each other was material or economic; they needed goods and services that only their neighbors and fellow community members could provide. Yet in providing these services, they simultaneously satisfied some richly satisfying psychological needs.

Communities of affinity, by contrast, are bound together not so much by mutual needs as by "shared affections, common goals, a unity of vision or ideology, and mutual responsibilities."³⁸ Prominent examples include religious communities and, increasingly, domestic and marriage partnerships, which today are bound less by common needs than by affective sentiments and emotions.³⁹ These types of communities are also considerably more fragile and insecure; they "run an inherent risk of dissolving into associations" because the unifying potential of sentiment alone, powerful as it may be at any given moment, is unreliable and always prone to variation.⁴⁰ Indeed, it is with this understanding that Amish communities have sought, through deliberate practices and customs, to fortify their needs and sentiments at one and the same time: They have managed to

³⁷ Marglin, *The Dismal Science*, 23.

³⁸ Ibid, 25.

³⁹ For two important mid-century perspectives on how the family lost its customary economic functions, and how family disintegration is a probable result of that, see Robert Nisbet, *The Quest for Community: A Study in the Ethics of Order and Freedom* (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2014); and Christopher Lasch, "What the Doctor Ordered," *New York Review of Books* Vol. 11 (1975), 50-53; and Review of *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978) in *New Republic* (1978), 36-37.

⁴⁰ Marglin, *The Dismal Science*, 26.

preserve “group cohesion over a long period because they are bound together by ties, such as the prohibition on insurance, that both foster mutual dependence and bolster ties of affinity.”⁴¹

It should be obvious from the preceding discussion that communities of necessity often morph into communities of affinity, just as the latter, in turn, sometimes evolve into associations. Returning to the examples cited above, families and domestic partnerships were previously bound by mutual economic needs and were rooted in autonomous households and agricultural holdings, but today they are preserved, if at all, by the force of mutual affections alone; they are now more accurately conceptualized as communities of affinity.⁴² Similarly, many religious communities in the West now function like any stereotypical club or association—a place where members can anonymously check in or out as they please, with little fear of the potential costs of “exiting” them in the future; these religious “communities” have been effectively transformed to an associational status. Thus, while it is still useful analytically to distinguish between these different variations on community, the boundary lines between them are often fluid and indistinct in actual application.

In short, these variations are best understood as existing in a continuous sequence. On one side are more integrated communities bound together by mutual needs (and often sentiments as well), where exit costs are high or even prohibitive. And on the other extreme side of the continuum are loose associations bound together by preferences, but little else besides. Between these two polarities rest communities of affinity, where exit costs may impinge on personal identity but are relatively minimal from a material standpoint. To summarize, then: Marglin urges us to visualize a spectrum that moves from denser forms of community, ruled by necessity, to less restrictive forms

⁴¹ Marglin, *The Dismal Science*, 26-27.

⁴² For a useful historical account of the changing economic utility of marriage and family since the 19th century, see Allan C. Carlson, *From Cottage to Work Station: The Family's Search for Social Harmony in the Industrial Age* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993).

of community, ruled by affinity, to associations that cater directly to the individual. Different groups may rightly belong at any one point on this spectrum, depending on their organizing principle, and they will frequently move from position or category to another as relevant circumstances change.

This spectrum enables us to appreciate the characteristic virtues of close-knit communities without making the equal and opposite error of ignoring their vices. We can better grasp why it is that communities of necessity, represented here as an ideal type, are attractive to so many people, but also why their real-life instantiations often turn grotesque: These communities are expressly designed to ensure that reciprocal relations are so necessary and binding that members have little choice but to perform the obligatory roles expected of them; furthermore, communal norms can often become so constraining that individuals have, in practice, few if any exit rights. It is easy to see why the members of such communities might end up facing the exact dilemma with which we began this dissertation, where individual and communal freedoms stand profoundly at odds.

Liberals have good reason to oppose communities of necessity when they come in this most extreme of forms—when they approximate this “ideal type” to such a degree that they impose one view of the good life on their members, severely restricting anyone who has separate preferences. We should hesitate, nevertheless, to use such extreme cases to form hasty generalizations about all communities located on the “necessity” side of the spectrum. Not all of them impose prohibitive costs on those who evacuate them. Only in the most immoderate communities—those occupying the pole positions on the spectrum—does the tension between rights and obligations begin to dissolve. While communities of necessity can sometimes turn excessively oppressive, moreover, it is likewise the case that associations, in turn, can turn so informal that they finally lose any sense of cohesion. As both cases are outliers, at any rate, we should be careful about the conclusions we draw from them. Any formal grouping of individuals is naturally prone to one or another weakness.

There are many individuals, besides, who would rather inhabit a community where they have need *of*, and are likewise needed *by*, their fellow citizens; for such as them, any system that favors “rights” while dissolving their social obligations will almost certainly provoke resentment instead of gratitude. We can easily forget this, however, whenever we focus on the most perverse communities on offer and thus disregard the wider spectrum of communal possibilities. In the following section I argue that rising levels of *rural* resentment is itself a consequence of our ignorance and apathy; we have forgotten that such communities are still vitally important to a large swath of our fellow citizens, who would willingly make any number of sacrifices to preserve them.

Communities across the Urban-Rural Divide

What it means to strive for community may differ from one location to another and is, to a degree, contingent on the *type* of community preferred. Even this latter datum is more contextual than we often imagine: The communal variant we each pursue may simply reflect our studied belief as to what is achievable or possible in the environment in which we find ourselves. Those of us who are urban dwellers, for example, may have little opportunity to actualize communities of necessity, but we can still realize communities of affinity in our extended families and churches, and we can engage more readily, often, in a rich associational life. Those of us who hail from rural spaces, on the other hand, are more likely to strive for communities of necessity—or for the continued viability of local economies⁴³—where members are bound together, not just by geography or affection, but also by personal relations in the marketplace, nested within an array of reciprocal commitments.⁴⁴

⁴³ For an artful articulation of this ideal, see Wendell Berry, “The Idea of a Local Economy,” *Orion Magazine*, January 1, 2001.

⁴⁴ Interestingly, this yearning for mutual obligations and responsibilities—which opposes the self-actualizing ethos of the so-called American Dream—is not nurtured merely by old people, or those radically out of touch

These are generalizations, of course. In reality, residents might realize a community of necessity in a metropolitan area—in a minor municipality, say, imbedded within a much larger city. There are many urban pockets where such efforts are, in the minds of those who make them, altogether feasible and desirable. But such pockets are almost certainly the exception that proves the rule. In general, rural citizens are more likely to feel a pressing need to ensure their community feels unified and cohesive or is infused with a strong sense of “togetherness,” which depends in some measure on how economically integrated it is—where individuals do not simply live with and by one another, but actually engage in face-to-face commerce and have needs that are best met by other members of the community. We should grant that not every such citizen makes this precise connection themselves, but even so, the communities they cherish are contingent on a high degree of economic interdependency, whether they fully recognize this fact or not. And for this reason, they are more likely to feel a deep sense of existential angst in the modern era, as they struggle to realize their communal ideal via the impersonal transactions constitutive of a global economy.

We might wonder why rural spaces are so heavily reliant on economic factors. If they each embody, in their ideal form, a deep sense of cohesiveness, then why depend on a cold cash nexus? To help resolve this paradox, recall how Marglin depicted settlements in early New England, where members gave of their time, effort, and property to support neighbors who were less materially affluent. According to this account, intra-communal relationships in these archetypal villages were remarkably personal and altruistic, and moneymaking activity was hardly the sole determinant of value. On the other hand, these villages were still hubs of commercial activity to some degree or

with the modern world; it appeals to young people, too, as uncovered by a recent sociological analysis of rural “young professionals.” See Anna Wolf, Laura Black, and Howard Welser, “Sense of Community and Migration Intentions among Rural Young Professionals,” *Rural Sociology*, Vol. 84, No. 1 (2019): 235-257.

another, a factor central to their functional identity; if anything, members showered one another in charity and did so with grace and ease precisely *because* they were already bound by financial ties.

Even early in the 19th century, it seems, villages in New England still possessed much of the “neighborly reciprocity” that Marglin describes with such sympathy, and their memory left a profound influence on those who once inhabited them. As late as 1860, for example, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote wistfully of the communities that dominated his early childhood, where neighbors would still freely lend their oxen or horse and would mutually harvest their crops.⁴⁵ In villages such as these, members could show clemency and kindness to a neighbor who had fallen on hard times, offering free of charge what they had once offered at expense, or extending generous lines of credit to those who severely needed it. In its most idyllic form, this is the kind of behavior depicted nearly a century later by the character George Bailey in the classic movie *It’s a Wonderful Life*—behavior that is set against the moneygrubbing actions of the antagonist of the film, Henry Potter, who could just as easily conduct his business from a coastal megacity as from Bedford Falls. As the narrative unfolds, we learn that George Bailey can support his neighbors precisely because they already share strong commercial ties, and that enables a higher degree of mutual support and interdependence.

When members of a single community experience a real *need* for one another, they can act with reciprocity and compassion across multiple spheres of life, establishing durable bonds that can better withstand the wreckage of time. Such bonds begin to fade, however, as soon as these mutual needs evaporate. In this respect, we can say that communities of necessity can only discipline the market if they first accommodate a fully functioning *marketplace* where residents can conduct a measure of business locally, rather than indirectly and at many steps removed. They require certain

⁴⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Wealth” in *The Conduct of Life* (Cambridge: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1860), 96

commercial prerequisites to ensure that commerce, or its many cares and pressures, will not inhibit their efforts to support one another in various *non-commercial* ways. In short, economic factors loom especially large for rural citizens and can make-or-break their attempts to establish an integrated and durable community, as they understand it. To safeguard the health of their towns and villages, they need to remain economically viable, using whatever means are at their disposal. In the words of agrarian writer Wendell Berry, a good community is one which “insures itself by trust, by good faith and good will, by mutual help. A good community, in other words, is a good local economy. It depends on itself for many of its essential needs and is thus shaped, so to speak, from the inside—unlike most modern populations that depend on distant purchases for almost everything and are thus shaped from the outside by the purposes and influence of salesmen.”⁴⁶

Economic factors play an outsized role in rural communities, but they also further, or in other cases undermine, groups and associations across the communal spectrum. Urban residents, too, confront their own economic obstacles, but these often take a distinctive form. For instance, individuals who are struggling to uphold familial or religious communities, or who are struggling to maintain club memberships, may discover that their own financial precarity is what prevents them from realizing their cherished beliefs, values, and preferences. A person forced of necessity to work two or three jobs may not be able to engage in her chosen association, in her religious community, or with her neighbors to the degree she otherwise prefers. A married couple that values a more integrated and tightknit family, as yet another example, may feel powerless in a market system in which two incomes are increasingly necessary. Similarly, individuals who identify as “middle class,” in a third scenario, may find that their capacity to stay within a monetarily uniform, commercially driven class depends on their aptitude at achieving a certain high standard of living; their personal

⁴⁶ Wendell Berry, “The Work of Local Culture” in *What Matters? Economics for a Renewed Commonwealth* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2010), 144.

affluence is key to sustaining their preferred group affiliation. These are but a few examples of the economic factors that further or diminish the looser “communities” that proliferate in urban spaces.

In a distinctively urbanized context, redistributive policies are sometimes an adequate solution. We can theoretically resolve and alleviate feelings of powerlessness if we implement a better safety net and reallocate wealth more equitably, as through welfare programs, for instance. This approach has its obvious drawbacks, not least of which is convincing the wealthiest actors in society, or indeed the middle class, to play along. It also does little to reduce economic insecurity over the long-term: The grateful recipients of government largess will always worry that their present benefits will be seized from them tomorrow when the political tides finally turn.⁴⁷ They may, moreover, face intensive scrutiny from officials who tell them how, or on what, they are free to spend their money, or even how they must behave in their private lives. Even the most well-intended policies may reduce the freedom of welfare recipients, subjecting them to the arbitrary whims of the petty bureaucrat—an outcome that should raise the hackles of republican theorists, in particular. These are legitimate concerns that arguably merit greater attention—and I will return to them later in this dissertation—but they say little about subjective feelings of wellbeing. Individuals who want to spend more time with their families and churches, or perhaps with their neighbors and friends, may be willing to endure even the harshest sacrifices to make that happen. For them, redistributive policies are enough, in many cases, to provide that small semblance of community they need to lead fulfilling lives, irrespective of the political costs they must face as a consequence.

We can safely hypothesize, therefore, that urban residents in search of community will often be attracted to policies that, all else holding equal, will be rejected by some if not most of their rural counterparts. The reasons for this are fairly simple. What urbanites need to live in community with

⁴⁷ I am not suggesting this happens often; my point, rather, is that recipients of welfare depend on the continued good-will of voters, which means they are ultimately reliant on the fickle preferences of others.

one another is more material resources. What citizens in rural areas need, by contrast, is more economic *productivity*. As the old proverb has it, what they need, more than a fish or two, is the wherewithal to fish for themselves and to procure enough where they can sell or share the remainder with their neighbors. But this creates an evident problem: City-dwellers will often desire policies that are diametrically opposed to the professed interests of rural residents, who may feel downright resentful of efforts to reallocate public funding, some of which is their own tax money, for redistributive ends. And in that case, citizens across the geographical divide are less likely to feel solidarity with one another or to recognize the common needs and concerns that unite them.⁴⁸

A corollary implication is that rural residents are more likely than their urban counterparts to oppose market centralization and to resent the anonymity and depersonalization of global supply chains. Meanwhile, as wealth inequality continues to rise sharply, partly in response to these globalizing trends,⁴⁹ it appears doubtful, according to this hypothesis, that members of small-town American will find any solace in redistributive solutions, which they may regard as unhelpful and even counterproductive—not only because these purported solutions fail to restore their communal self-sufficiency, but also because they may, in practice, arrogate resources from already-desperate communities in order to redress urban wealth disparities. If this hypothesis is correct, then rural citizens are far more likely to feel resentful in today’s economic and political climate, and that makes them theoretically vulnerable to the demagogic appeals of would-be authoritarians.

⁴⁸ Racial tensions often compound these tensions and prevent white and black workers from realizing their common concerns and aspirations together. This was, in fact, a central theme highlighted by Martin Luther King, Jr., in “How Long, Not Long” (speech, Selma to Montgomery March, Selma, March 25, 1965).

⁴⁹ See, for instance, Daron Acemoglu et al., “Import Competition and the Great US Employment Sag of the 2000s,” *Journal of Labor Economics*, Vol. 34, No. S1 (2016), S141-S198; and Sergi Basco and Marti Mestieri, “Trade and Inequality: The Effects of International Unbundling of Production” (2019), available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3375457> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3375457>.

I am not suggesting that communal longing of one variety or another can explain, in and of itself, why American politics is increasingly marked by a rural-urban divide, which has of course been a documented fact for quite some time.⁵⁰ No doubt there are a host of reasons why rural areas turn mostly “red” during presidential elections and why urban areas, for their part, turn “blue.”⁵¹ It does seem highly suggestive, nevertheless, that these geographical lines correlated with partisan divisions most starkly during the 2016 presidential election, when one candidate, New York billionaire Donald Trump, crafted a message calculated to stoke and exploit the kinds of resentment I outlined above. Trump’s proposal that America had to be made “great again” through, among other things, curtailment of industrial outsourcing and renegotiations of international trade deals was a message that likely resonated with many rural inhabitants, who may judge that the American economy has been gradually hollowed out and that globalization is a central part of the problem. We can see in retrospect why this message would prove appealing in communities shattered by deindustrialization, where members want, more than wealth, the capacity to support themselves.

According to William Wilkinson, Vice President at the Niskanen Center in Washington, D.C., the last few presidential elections expose deepening divisions over economic policies—divisions that tend to be geographically segregated and for that reason have not received sufficient attention. “The liberalizing material benefits of economic growth,” Wilkinson observes, “go primarily to our most vital big cities,” while larger processes of globalization have created a “politically polarizing wedge, driving town and country further apart and feeding the mutual contempt and vitriolic

⁵⁰ See Jonathan A. Rodden, *Why Cities Lose: The Deep Roots of the Urban-Rural Political Divide* (New York: Basic Books, 2019).

⁵¹ For a recent analysis that focuses mostly on class divisions, for instance, see Michael Lind, *The New Class War: Saving Democracy from the Managerial Elite* (New York: Penguin, 2020).

division of negative, affective partisanship.”⁵² As Wilkinson sees it, the most negative features we typically associate with insular communities—their migration-resistance, closedmindedness, and education deficit—directly contribute to extreme forms of populism, thereby paving the way for an eventual authoritarian backlash.⁵³ Confirmation for this inference includes the nativist rhetoric that Trump effectively employed as a means to mobilize popular support; it seems reasonable to infer, in any case, that ignorance and racism have animated at least some number of voters as they scapegoat outsiders they strongly dislike, or those they were already predisposed to dislike. In this respect, global economic growth has proven “a divisive force that intensifies the moral and political polarization of a population relatively cleanly sorted on ethnicity, personality, and education.”⁵⁴

Wilkinson thus shines a spotlight on the increasingly robust correlation between the rural-urban divide, on one hand, and conflicting assessments of economic “progress” on the other. But he also underscores, second, the sense in which populism can and indeed often does contribute to racial bigotry, which is nursed by demagogues who cement their status in politics by maligning apparent outsiders. This is not to say, on the other hand, that populism must always take this virulent form, nor is it to say that xenophobic attitudes are, without exception, the root source of populist resentment.⁵⁵ Wilkinson himself leaves considerable room for economic causation: A

⁵² Will Wilkinson, “The Density Divide: Urbanization, Polarization, and Populist Backlash,” *Niskanen Center* (2018), 73, 74

⁵³ *Ibid*, 74.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 76.

⁵⁵ See David Paul Kuhn, “Sorry, Liberals. Bigotry Didn’t Elect Donald Trump,” *New York Times*, December 26, 2016: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/26/opinion/sorry-liberals-bigotry-didnt-elect-donald-trump.html>. Accessed June 2020. For a different and more critical take, see Jonathan M. Metz, *Dying of Whiteness: How the Politics of Racial Resentment Is Killing America’s Heartland* (New York: Basic Books, 2019).

globalizing market leads to major disruptions and displacements that induce citizens to blame their travails on a readily identifiable source, which is then personified by minorities and migrants.⁵⁶

This account squares with what other researchers have similarly concluded. For example, Dani Rodrick, a political economist at Harvard, argues that populism originates, in the first place, from intense economic anguish, as it did paradigmatically in the late 19th century. The populist wave we are now experiencing arises, in this view, from a steady barrage of “globalization shocks” that stoke resentment for “immigration and refugees,” or at other times for “trade, finance, and foreign investment”⁵⁷—or some combination of the two, as we see with President Donald Trump. By implication, a populist movement may be openly racist or xenophobic and yet still “have its roots in economic anxieties,”⁵⁸ which in turn reflect deeper misgivings over communal loss. If this intuition is sound, then even friendly critics of populism have mistaken what this recent backlash is really all about: Rural communities have not fared well in an overly financialized, global economy, but this does not imply they support or would welcome an egalitarian, collectivist “solution.”⁵⁹ It is likely, in fact, that such an approach would seriously impede their efforts to recuperate their losses.

It is admittedly difficult to corroborate this intuition with direct empirical evidence. We can study generalized data on the urban-rural divide and speculate on the various causal mechanisms, but our doing so hardly demonstrates that communal breakdown is itself *the* galvanizing issue.

⁵⁶ We should not assume, on the other hand, that the primary cause of this animus is always racial rather than economic. See, for instance, Edna Bonacich, “A Theory of Ethnic Antagonism: The Split Labor Market,” *American Sociological Review* Vol. 37, No. 5 (1972), 547-559

⁵⁷ Dani Rodrick, “Populism and the Economics of Globalization,” *The National Bureau of Economic Research* (2017): <https://www.nber.org/papers/w23559>. 2.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 24

⁵⁹ This is the basic argument that Chantal Mouffe makes in *For a Left Populism* (New York: Verso, 1998).

Even individual case studies, moreover, come with their own limitations: After all, populist movements tend to further the interests of authoritarian leaders precisely because their members often have little clue as to whom they should blame for their troubles, much less *why* to blame them. They may burn with seething discontent, but they usually fail to present their grievances in a clear and actionable format, and they naturally coalesce behind the loudest voices on the block. Are they longing for sustainable communities? Perhaps in part, but it is not always easy to determine.

All such caveats aside, I will now examine two corroborating case studies, and I will also review, in between these cases, the conclusions of sociologist Robert Wuthnow, who has recently provided an extensive analysis of rural attitudes based on nearly two decades of ethnographic research. Together these studies and analyses lend further credence to this community-centered hypothesis, hinting at its relevance to recent political events. I should first clarify, however, that my intention is not to suggest that populist resentment is reducible to community breakdown, such that resolving the latter would automatically rid us of the former. Mine is not a monocausal account, nor should readers take it as such. What I *am* claiming, more modestly, is that economic dysfunction in rural townships and regions is provoking intense feelings of bitterness in a growing body of their residents. Any thorough account of populism must therefore come to terms with this reality.

Resentment in Rural Wisconsin

The first case I will cite comes from political scientist Katherine Cramer, who carefully and meticulously depicts, in a rich ethnographic portrait, the political sentiments of rural citizens in Wisconsin; hers is a detailed account of how small-town residents in this archetypal, Midwestern state made sense of themselves and others in a period spanning from 2007 to 2012. Notably, because her study utilizes extensive group interviews and conversations, it supplements the

quantitative data we already have, offering vital contextual information on the now-widening rift between urban and rural voters and the growing resentment felt by this latter cohort, in particular.

Through her interviews, Cramer discovered that rural citizens almost invariably share a common identity that transcends their political ideology and even their partisan affiliation. This identity constitutes a form of “rural consciousness” that includes, at a bare minimum, “a sense that rural folks are fundamentally different from urbanites in terms of lifestyles, values, and work ethic,” in addition to “a multifaceted resentment against cities.”⁶⁰ Residents who embrace this identity will often begrudge the comparatively comfortable lives of their urban counterparts, but they usually harbor no great ambition of residing in a larger city themselves. Most of the individuals Cramer conversed with “preferred their [own] lifestyles to rootless, fast-paced city living,” notwithstanding the many hardships of rural living, and “they took pride in the face-to-face nature of their interactions, as opposed to the bureaucracy and technology they perceived to be typical of urban life.”⁶¹ Their preferences, values, and beliefs were all tightly bound with their group identity and their implicit view of what it means, in the most practical sense, to abide together in community.

As a source of identity, rural consciousness varies greatly in intensity and in that respect comprises its own spectrum, not unlike the way Marglin describes “community.” It is “a matter of degree,” Cramer explains, that emerges most strongly “in areas with lots of green space, few stoplights, and far from an urban center,” and emerges in a much weaker form “in areas best described as nonmetro.”⁶² As one might expect, it is strongest in areas where people feel most

⁶⁰ Katherine J. Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), Kindle, loc. 238.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, loc. 211.

⁶² *Ibid*, loc. 183.

disconnected from the lifestyle and values of the megalopolis; it constitutes its own cultural and economic ethos, and it is largely severed or cordoned off from other identities geographically.

In its broadest sense, however, rural consciousness encompasses more than a modest or restrained standard of living. It invariably entails, in addition, a much wider array of assumptions about power and resources and about who or what *controls* these resources. Rural residents, that is, typically share a common viewpoint as to “who makes decisions and who decides what to even discuss,” and they generally imagine that power emanates from major cities, which means it will necessarily reflect the particular values and lifestyles characteristic of metropolitan life.⁶³ This shared perception can then trigger debilitating feelings of powerlessness in the face of impersonal, or bureaucratic, forces over which rural folk can realistically exercise but little control or influence.

Cramer demonstrates that rural Wisconsinites are, taken as a whole, left with a deep sense of vulnerability: They feel disabled by far-reaching changes in culture and economy, and worse still, they feel hostage to peripheral developments that disrupt their communal habitats. In search of someone to blame, their first impulse is to denigrate political institutions and the governing class that controls them—perhaps because a “small-government” ideology, for all its simplicity, offers a ready-made template capable of demystifying the frightening and obscure processes that weaken their communities. Many of the individuals Cramer describes, on the other hand, combine a strong distaste for government with an equally pronounced suspicion of major industries. Their common view is that “government and the private sector [are] in cahoots against ordinary citizens” and that “Wall Street and the Secretary of the Treasury [function] together as enemies of the public.”⁶⁴

⁶³ Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment*, loc. 178.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, loc. 499.

Another prominent complaint are the visible shifts in culture occurring as a consequence of economic “development,” which strips communities of their productive capacities and makes them increasingly dependent on large corporations. Indeed, a number of rural citizens in Wisconsin nurture an extreme aversion, not just for government, but also for a new and repugnant “strip mall” culture dominated by chain stores like McDonalds, Menards, Subway, and Walmart.⁶⁵ They regard large corporations with the same suspicion they harbor towards large government. And whenever they consider the plight of local farmers, they invariably criticized the agro-industrial model that has been incrementally foisted on them by a corporate-government-university complex; they lament the passing of “mom-and-pop farms” and their replacement by large industrial operations, which are more reliant on Wall Street and so less attentive to the vital needs of the land itself, much less the future generations that will depend on this land to sustain their communal way of life.⁶⁶ Rural citizens are, in short, eager to denounce any changes that dissolve the distinctive marks of what was once a local economy and culture—a recognizably vibrant and self-sustaining community.

Thus, it is external forces, both economic and political, which leaves rural Wisconsinites alienated from the traditions and way of life they consider uniquely their own, and which comprises their root identity. What replaces these traditions, in short order, is a heightened sense of powerlessness. Bit by bit, rural citizens perceive themselves as people who are “systematically ignored and left out of the exercise of power,” be it governmental or corporate.⁶⁷ They reach a firm

⁶⁵ Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment*, loc. 214.

⁶⁶ Ibid, loc. 160.

⁶⁷ Ibid, loc. 208.

conviction that “major decisions are made in the urban areas, by urban people, and dictated outward,” which means these decisions seldom reflect the ideals that they consider important.⁶⁸

Even in cases where rural areas obtain considerable financial support, as they have on more than one occasion, rural beneficiaries and recipients typically regard it with a skeptical eye; by and large, they look askance at any redistributive scheme or developmental policy that detracts from their own distinctive culture. As Cramer explains, rural Wisconsinites often consider even well-intended programs to be “a mixed blessing” that help “many people in the cutover region stay out of poverty,” but at an enormous social cost, ushering in “‘the outside world and its more strictly commercial economy’ that [makes] it hard to maintain family farms.”⁶⁹ Rural citizens likewise resent programs and policies that promote further “brain drain” or otherwise incentivize “the best and brightest youth in rural communities... to emigrate to urban areas after high school.”⁷⁰ This mass exodus of future generations undermines the long-term viability of community schools—due to an aging population—and constitutes a “loss of a very important source of community identity.”⁷¹ In other words, sustained efforts “to attract development attention” amount in practice to “a kind of loss” because they change, often irrevocably, the essential character of local cultures.⁷²

Rural folk in Wisconsin also worry about government assistance and its potentially lasting effects on individual character; they worry, for example, that a larger “‘safety net’ may not translate as ‘help’ to everyone” and may ultimately discourage hard work and personal responsibility—traits

⁶⁸ Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment*, loc. 205-206.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, loc. 307.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, loc. 303.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*

that have always been central to their identities.⁷³ According to Cramer, many of these citizens “take a great deal of pride in the idea that ‘help’ is about letting people work hard enough so that they can make it on their own,” and they envision assistance as something capable of “providing jobs, not welfare.”⁷⁴ As they see it, inequalities in power, wealth, and resources affect, not just them personally, but almost everyone they encounter in a rural setting; these inequalities demand comprehensive solutions capable of ameliorating conditions across the board, and not merely in their personal lives or private bank accounts. Their concern over the quality and affordability of health care or education, for example, is deeply “rooted in their sense of themselves as members of a rural community;”⁷⁵ it is not primarily about individual attainment or their own upward mobility.

These opinions and feelings help explain why it is that major increases in inequality have not, in general, fueled additional support for redistributive policies.⁷⁶ This is a paradox that political scientists continue to puzzle over, and Cramer, for her part, utilizes it as a framing device for her entire study: Why do disadvantaged voters not show greater enthusiasm for the social safety net when they stand to benefit, “directly in their pocket books,” from its operation? And why do “low-income voters who might benefit from more government redistribution continue to vote against it?”⁷⁷ This paradox begins to dissolve the moment we consider how rural citizens make sense of

⁷³ Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment*, loc. 236.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid, loc. 165.

⁷⁶ One of the first to observe this paradox was Thomas Frank in *What’s the Matter with Kansas? How the Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2004). Frank argues that rural citizens were, in the first decade of the 21st century, unintentionally voting against their economic interests in favor of politicians and policies aligned with their own perspective on some of the most highly contested social issues, including abortion and gay marriage. This hypothesis, while novel and interesting, does not enjoy much statistical support. See Larry M. Bartels, “What’s the Matter with *What’s the Matter with Kansas?*” *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* Vol. 1 (2006): 201-226.

⁷⁷ Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment*, loc. 33.

their losses: As they understand it, their financial insecurity is directly related to the economic and cultural demise of their community, including all the values associated with it. Their plight is not resolvable, therefore, through simple improvements in standard of living; they have little desire to become successful careerists or to embody, as solitary individuals, the promise of the American Dream. What they want, rather, is the economic wherewithal to sustain their collective way of life.⁷⁸

As rural citizens struggle to maintain their communities, however, their tendency is to seek, in far too many cases, a convenient scapegoat to hold responsible for their hardships. And ethnic minorities are disproportionately the victims of this scapegoating process. It seems doubtful, in Cramer's view, that racist attitudes constitute the root source of rural resentment, but such attitudes often surface anyway, and when they do, the results are palpable and ugly. The reasons for this are not so difficult to understand: Resentment can easily rigidify into overly simplistic verdicts on "who has power, who has what values and which of those values are right, who gets what, and perceptions of the basic fairness of all this."⁷⁹ What begins as an understandable impulse to preserve one's community can gradually transmogrify into outright antagonism toward those who, by all appearances, pose some kind of obstacle to that end. The racial "other" becomes the enemy.

Compounding these sentiments, of course, is a basic obliviousness as to why it is that rural communities are falling apart and who exactly is responsible for it. "Many people in these small towns," Cramer writes, "perceive that someone or something [is] responsible for the decline of their

⁷⁸ Importantly, Cramer's findings may not translate as readily to rural communities elsewhere in the United States. There may be regions where rural inhabitants reject government assistance for different reasons, such as their pride in enduring economic hardships and their concomitant disdain for those who do not. This seemingly applies to many rural communities in Louisiana, as documented by Arlie Russel Hochschild in *Strangers in Their Own Land, Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (New York: The New Press, 2016).

⁷⁹ Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment*, loc. 268.

communities. Someone or something [is] siphoning off their money,” but the real difficulty they face is in determining who or what that is. They are unsure of whom to blame, and their ideas about what can be done to remedy their condition likewise suffer from a high degree of vagueness.⁸⁰ In the face of so much uncertainty, the easier choice by far is to lash out in anger at groups with a markedly different identity. This is an all too human response; as a species, we often perceive our “circumstances as the fault of guilty and less deserving social groups, not as the product of broad social, economic, and political forces.”⁸¹ Resentment thus feeds, and is fed by, pre-existing beliefs about those who are different from us. The politics of resentment often takes a prejudicial turn.

It is clear from Cramer’s work that rural Wisconsinites see themselves as victims of forces they only vaguely understand—forces that are, besides, almost certainly outside of their control. Treading across new and uncomfortable ground, they reach for the false certainty that can only come by demonizing those who look, talk, or act differently than they do. This response is repulsive and in many ways inexcusable. It is not surprising, however, that a population increasingly forlorn and misunderstood would circle its wagons in reaction to what is, by any reasonable assessment, a truly existential threat to its continued viability. It is easy to denounce this reaction for its racist overtones; a more difficult and constructive task, though, is to separate the wheat from the chaff and respond with a small measure of understanding. Surely we would be better served to study, like Cramer, the many reasons why rural citizens feel indignant, and then help them discern just *why* their communities are failing, which is arguably the first step in identifying potential solutions.

In Wisconsin we learn that rural citizens feel increasingly resentful as they observe their home communities become pale, hollowed-out copies of what they once were. They watch in

⁸⁰ Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment*, loc. 260.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, loc. 47.

dismay as their once-fertile lands suffer from agro-industrial abuses, and as their resources, natural and commercial, are siphoned off to behemoth corporations headquartered at coastal mega-cities, distant and absentee. They lament even more the mass departure of their sons and daughters, who are extricated from local economies, like many other resources, right as they reach maturity. Rural citizens likewise harbor a strong aversion for the culture, impersonal and unsightly, that is foisted on them by Corporate America, and they reject, finally, any purported remedy that intensifies their reliance on vast bureaucracies operating from a great distance, well beyond their power to control.

The emotional aches and pains felt by rural folk in Wisconsin, described impartially yet poignantly by Cramer, parallels the experiences of rural citizens hailing from other heartland areas. I will close this section with a single telling example. Briefly, here is how one Kentucky farmer, renowned for his writing on the subject, expresses the challenges that he and his neighbors face:

In rural America, which is in many ways a colony of what the government and the corporations think of as the nation, most of us have experienced the losses that I have been talking about: The departure of young people, of soil and other so-called natural resources, of local memory. We feel ourselves crowded more and more into a dimensionless present, in which the past is forgotten and the future, even in our most optimistic 'projections,' is forbidding and fearful. Who can desire a future that is determined entirely by the purposes of the most wealthy and the most powerful, and by the capacities of machines?⁸²

⁸² Wendell Berry, "The Work of Local Culture" in *What Matters? Economics for a Renewed Commonwealth* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2010), 153.

“Moral Communities” in Rural America

Our next analysis strongly suggests that Wisconsin is at least somewhat representative of rural conditions elsewhere in the country, and for that decisive reason, it cannot be reasonably dismissed as a mere statistical outlier: Sociologist Robert Wuthnow has devoted an entire decade studying hundreds of small towns across America, assembling a rich compendium of cases. He has, in his own words, “conducted well over a thousand in-depth qualitative interviews” with a wide sample of “farmers, factory workers, business owners, homemakers, clergy, town managers, mayors, and community volunteers,” and he has listened attentively to “stories about what they like and do not like about their communities, their struggles and accomplishments, the issues they care about, their political views, and their hopes and aspirations for their children.”⁸³ His research findings are, in short, focused enough to reveal how strongly respondents prioritize community relative to other concerns, yet still broad enough to supply a wider snapshot of rural perspectives.

For the purpose of his analysis, Wuthnow defines “rural communities” as any of the 14,000 incorporated towns and villages of no more than 25,000 inhabitants, specifically those located well beyond urbanized areas. It is precisely these towns which have long been regarded, since the time of Tocqueville, as “the centerpiece of rural America,” and which remain vital to the predominantly agricultural base that works and tends the land in their immediate vicinity.⁸⁴ Such towns have also become largely mysterious and incomprehensible to the well-heeled residents of our coastal cities; it is only natural to wonder what characteristics define them, or to marvel at their dogged capacity

⁸³ Robert Wuthnow, *The Left Behind: Decline and Rage in Small-Town America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 3-4.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 5.

to command a small semblance of loyalty when they are, with very few exceptions, experiencing a swift and marked decline. According to Wuthnow, we cannot even begin to understand these places unless and until we view them as “moral communities,” or in other words, “a place to which and in which people feel an obligation to one another,” and in which they strive, to the best of their ability, to “uphold the local ways of being that govern their expectations about ordinary life and support their feelings of being at home.”⁸⁵ Towns like these may, at this present moment, have little to offer in a strictly material sense, but they still rank high in the affections of those who identify with them.

Membership in small towns comes with its own costs, many of which are unique to rural areas. Despite these costs, however, rural citizens, or a significant proportion of them, anyway, willingly embrace and ardently defend the particular “moral community” to which they belong; they express a strong partiality for the town or village in which they find themselves, partly because it endows them with an essential sense of belonging, and they believe that living in a “humble” way, deprived of certain material benefits enjoyed by their urban counterparts, is a good moral thing to do. Their local community expresses their fundamental beliefs and values, and it affords a vital setting where enduring interactions and obligations can progressively become a defining feature of their identity—in contrast, at least in principle, to the liberal ideal of “independent individuals who form their opinions based solely on their economic interests and their psychological needs.”⁸⁶ Rural folk often make poor neoliberal subjects yet seldom express regret for their alleged deficiencies.

Yet rural folk still qualify as “rugged individualists” in at least a modified sense of the term: They generally prefer an autonomous lifestyle, and they strenuously oppose anything that further increases their dependency on peripheral agents or agencies. A self-maximizing calculus, on the

⁸⁵ Wuthnow, *The Left Behind*, 4

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 4.

other hand, is hardly their central or defining feature. Writes Wuthnow, “Spend some time in rural America and you realize one thing: people are community-oriented.”⁸⁷ This communal orientation is central to how they understand themselves, how they interact with outsiders, and the kinds of broader aims they prioritize and pursue. Rather than regard themselves as individuals first and foremost, they tend to emphasize instead “the wider collectivity in which they live,” which includes, at a bare minimum, “their common location, their shared norms of how to behave and whom to respect, and their sense of obligation.”⁸⁸ They see their own fate as tightly intertwined with that of extended kinship networks, their immediate neighbors, and their local acquaintances and friends. Independence in this context is more a collective ideal than a personal one; it is vital that the entire community, and not just its members, can remain self-sufficient enough to preserve its character.

Rural citizens are, taken as a whole, intensely concerned with the continued well-being of their neighborhoods and towns, regardless of how steep their recent decline may be. But they are not willfully blind to their painful inadequacies. They understand all too well that their entire way of life is steadily dissolving before their eyes, and yet they continue to press forward anyway, hopeful that their efforts can somehow halt or delay the ongoing deterioration they witness and experience every day. When their efforts fall short of their most optimistic expectations, as they so often do, they then suffer a “mixture of fear and anger: Their “fear is that small-town ways of life are disappearing,” and their “anger is that they are under siege.”⁸⁹ They come by these feelings naturally—feelings which “stem from the fact that the social expectations, relationships, and obligations that constitute the moral communities they take for granted and in which they live are

⁸⁷ Wuthnow, *The Left Behind*, 4.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 78.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 6.

year by year being fundamentally fractured.”⁹⁰ Urban voters often struggle to understand these feelings and thus assume that small-town residents are simply frustrated and resentful because of their inability to achieve personal socio-economic growth. This undoubtedly accounts for the feelings of a minority of such citizens, but certainly not all or even the greatest number of them: As a rule, rural citizens express frustration, not because they shoulder obligations, but rather because they feel increasingly unable to *meet* them for the sake of their families, neighbors, and broader community. For reasons beyond their control or even their understanding, they cannot realize their ideals to the degree they once could, and that makes them at first dejected and then indignant.

It is important to acknowledge that rural sentiments reflect actual conditions; they are not, for the most part, derived from an overly sentimentalized longing for “the good old days,” or from a delusional misconstruction of a supposedly idyllic past. Indeed, one of the most vivid signs of rural decline, as we saw above in Wisconsin, are the major demographic shifts now occurring as the youngest generations relocate, for largely economic reasons, to metropolitan areas.⁹¹ The statistical evidence for this effect is as remarkable as it is undeniable, and Wuthnow, for his part, takes time to document it with brutal candor: He notes that the majority of rural communities of less than five thousand residents have experienced, between 1980 and 2010, a sharp decrease in their general population; and more than a third of communities of 10 to 25 thousand residents have likewise seen a significant reduction in their numbers.⁹² A related concern is that millions of rural folk have personally lived through this demographic reversal and, in consequence, nurse painful feelings about it: “In all, nearly fifteen million people were [in 2010] living in rural communities with

⁹⁰ Wuthnow, *The Left Behind*, 6.

⁹¹ See Patrick Carr and Maria Kefalas, *Hollowing out the Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and What It Means for America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009).

⁹² Wuthnow, *The Left Behind*, 47.

declining populations, and these towns were serving at least another fifteen million people living in their immediate vicinity.”⁹³ For millions of people, then, rural decline is a fact increasingly evident in their own dwindling numbers, a disheartening spectacle equaled only, perhaps, by the “changing nature of agriculture,” as their farming population, in particular, continues swiftly to evaporate.⁹⁴

Predictably, the national government receives much of the resulting hostility. Small-town residents convey animosity toward political officials at all levels of government, but they mainly despise those in Washington who are, in their view, “distant, yet intrusive, professionalized, yet lacking in common sense.”⁹⁵ These feelings of political alienation reflect more than geographical or spatial alienation, however; they are also a commentary on differences in municipal scale and how rural citizens, given their characteristic ideals, tend to perceive these differences. They feel certain that Washington is structurally incapable of dedicating serious time and attention to small-time interests—“not the small farmer, the small-business owner, or people living in small places.”⁹⁶ Washington itself is a place much too big “to get anything done, run by the big boys who only [know] how to talk big”; it is a system dominated by swarms of elitist bureaucrats who naturally cater to big banks, big farming interests, and big industries more generally.⁹⁷ It is not a world where “little people” can reasonably depend on having their interests or points of view considered.

All of this would be bad enough if the federal government simply “minded its own business” or restrained itself from intervening overmuch in local affairs. But that is not usually the case. In the

⁹³ Wuthnow, *The Left Behind*, 47.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 50-51.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 96.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 99.

⁹⁷ *Ibid*.

main, rural communities face a constant barrage of federal mandates, which pointedly reduce their capacity to address concerns that their own residents deem most meaningful or important.⁹⁸ The apparent inability of local citizens, acting through their local officials, to allocate resources as they see fit, in accordance with their own prevailing vision, becomes one further reason to resent a national system of government which, for ideological reasons, they are already well-primed to view with mistrust or even contempt. Washington thus becomes, in many ways, a necessary outlet for local expressions of outrage; it is regularly associated with all that is clearly wrong with the world.

At issue in particular is a conviction that surfaces often in exchanges and conversations around town—that distant organizations are by nature ill-equipped to address local matters with the necessary care and nuance. For rural folk, the national government is perhaps most emblematic of this basic truth: Its geographical and cultural distance “implies that it functions as a massive bureaucracy imposing one-size-fits-all rules on everyone without bothering to hear what ordinary people say or to understand local needs and differences.”⁹⁹ In this perspective, even if government bureaucracies were comprised of individuals with only the very best of intentions—something that rural citizens consider highly improbable—their function, scale, and detachment would still make it difficult for them, if not altogether impossible, to implement rules and procedures sufficiently tailored to local circumstances or reflective of local interests. If asked to provide specific evidence for this claim, small-town residents will often mention, among other things, national fiscal policy and deficit spending, which runs “contrary to ordinary people living within their means” and thus radiates a real “antipathy [for] home-town thrift.”¹⁰⁰ Such policies seem to validate the view that

⁹⁸ Wuthnow, *The Left Behind*, 101-102.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 106.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 111.

Washington will continue advocating the interests of gigantic corporations, municipalities, and universities, and it will do so largely at the expense of small, ordinary, and out-of-the way places.

Importantly, when rural citizens think of the influential players supposedly working the “system,” they often have more than government in mind; their negative assessment extends to commercial powers as well. Through his research, in fact, Wuthnow discovered that small-town residents often feel every bit as resentful of corporate executives as of politicians. Industries large and distant, after all, have made a regular habit of abandoning them—through strategies like outsourcing and automation—or else of reducing their self-sufficiency.¹⁰¹ Voicing a complaint that is now commonplace, and perhaps even clichéd, they express a heightened sense of frustration with, in particular, big-box outlets like Walmart, the now-ubiquitous retail giant at which most of them ironically admit to shopping, perhaps because few if any alternatives now exist.¹⁰² But they also voice disapproval for “franchise chains, the Internet, and online shopping giant Amazon,” all of which are convenient but have also devastated, in their studied opinion, the many locally-owned stores which once populated their community, thereby diminishing their collective autonomy.¹⁰³

We might assume that rural citizens must bear a generalized grudge against anyone with considerable wealth, but this assumption, as reasonable as it sounds, is in fact mistaken; more often they view affluent individuals with an exceedingly high regard, a surprisingly positive association informed by their experience living in a community where “rich farmers, business owners, and doctors... earned their money by working hard, [treating] other people fairly, and [doing] their

¹⁰¹ For a separate (informal) case study on this phenomenon, see Brian Alexander, *Glass House: The 1% Economy and the Shattering of the All-American Town* (New York City: St. Martin’s Press, 2017).

¹⁰² Wuthnow, *The Left Behind*, 54-55.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 55.

share and more to support community organizations.”¹⁰⁴ In other words, rural folk reserve their most biting criticism for wealthy actors who are located in distant regions and who thus appear detached, impersonal, or even menacing. This is not a perspective, notice, which readily lends itself to complicated redistributive schemes undertaken in the name of social justice, or for the sake of rectifying material inequities. Small-town America has no major bone to pick with wealth, per se, but rather with profit-making ventures which, in effect, reduce their local communities to a dreary and useless rubble—ventures pursued by organizations lacking any enduring interest in the natural and human resources they greedily utilize. This latter concern is not one that enhanced systems of welfare, or a stronger and more robust safety net, can meaningfully address. It is a concern, more accurately, which can only be resolved when local communities begin again to function as such.

That rural citizens oppose welfare programs, or at least view them with suspicion, is also a reflection of their understanding of what it means to help and be helped by others. As Wuthnow explains, they normally expect that “fellow citizens [will] take responsibility for themselves as best they can, and when they can’t, [that] community organizations [will] help. Their sense of moral obligations cuts both ways: don’t be a burden if you can help it, and pitch in generous when you can be of help.”¹⁰⁵ One of their most basic convictions, we have seen, is that local decision-making will naturally address local needs most effectively and without many of the evident abuses that occur at much vaster scales. They believe “that in order to fix problems, you have to know the local situation (the moral order),” and “you have to deal with people by [first] knowing their needs and their situations.”¹⁰⁶ An implication of this principle, in a welfare context, is that programs which are more

¹⁰⁴ Wuthnow, *The Left Behind*, 100.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 8.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 9.

up-close-and-personal will likely discourage attempts to “abuse” the system, ensuring those who are truly in need receive help, but in ways specifically designed to help them stand on their own two feet again.¹⁰⁷ As they see it, such assistance remains absolutely vital at a local level but can be utterly toxic at a national one, often creating dependencies and failing to address genuine needs.

Put simply, rural citizens display a healthy appetite for local autonomy, or at least for some small semblance of local self-sufficiency. They consider it preferable “to rely on their own resources—helping themselves and helping their neighbors—than to rely on legislation, funding, and programs from faraway places that [seemingly lack] an understanding of rural America.”¹⁰⁸ This posture and attitude reflect both negative and positive beliefs: They reject the notion, first, that policies initiated in major cities and intended for urban populations are necessarily suitable for their own community. But just as important, second, they place great emphasis on addressing local needs and concerns internally, without resorting to external help from Washington, D.C., or anywhere else—help which, in their lived experience, usually comes with major strings attached.

In the end, mounting problems often dispel any illusion of self-sufficiency. Rural folk adjust themselves slowly and painfully to conditions dictated in large part by the outside world, as their efforts to address everyday needs through their own dwindling resources continue to disappoint.¹⁰⁹ To their credit, many of them also identify as practically-minded realists: They understand that local concerns have grown “too big to handle alone, even though [they] would like to be self-sufficient”; but they have good reason for feeling “they are even less in control than in the past.”¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Wuthnow, *The Left Behind*, 90.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 23.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 80.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 91.

Collective dependency has become their harsh reality, and it haunts them. More than their personal failures, often, they mourn the dilapidated condition of their towns and neighborhoods and their collective inability to rectify them. This is, in their view, an existential problem, which is why they cling so desperately to any lingering sense of their past identity: A “way of life that is no longer as self-sufficient as they thought it was feels like a loss of control over their communities.”¹¹¹

If rural citizens reject redistributive solutions, however, they also have but little regard for the top-down models of economic growth increasingly thrust upon them by “economists who think they know best.”¹¹² They believe, not without warrant, that “development” will increase their bottom line over the short-term, but at the cost of their long-term ability to meet and supply their material needs. More than anything, they want a continued say in community decisions, and they want to have ownership *over* these decisions¹¹³—an impulse that opposes, at the very least, absentee ownership of behemoth corporations, which extract resources for the benefit of industries that remain largely inscrutable to local residents, and which act in ways almost certainly contrary to their interests. Such “solutions” may improve conditions for a short while, but they can hardly replenish a local well that has nearly run dry—a well from which large industries continue to draw.

In a world where forces remote and far-flung appear staunchly set against local interests, it is racial minorities who receive the bulk of rural criticism and scorn. From his many years of close observation, Wuthnow concluded that racial prejudices, though hardly definitional to small-town America, are still implicit in its prevailing “moral order.” What is more, rural citizens consistently rank “diversity” as something of lesser value, requiring only incremental or token overtures, and

¹¹¹ Wuthnow, *The Left Behind*, 113.

¹¹² Ibid, 86.

¹¹³ Ibid, 87.

indeed, “part of their anger is assuredly the view that the promotion of diversity is a further intrusion of big government.”¹¹⁴ This suggests that efforts to reform these communities from many steps removed are likely to heighten tensions, if anything, lending substance to the populist view that hordes of foreign enemies are now cruelly pitted against local ways of life. This mistrust only increases as material and social conditions worsen and as residents hunt far and wide for a ready scapegoat; in many cases, as we saw earlier in rural Wisconsin, “immigrants and undocumented workers become easy targets” for residents who feel uncertain of what to do, and who are boiling with “anger and fear about how [their] community [is] changing.”¹¹⁵ Uncertain, exactly, as to why everything has gone so wrong, they search for a racial target to blame for their evident hardships.

As Wuthnow sees it, however, we would be mistaken in assuming that rural Americans are “more prone toward bigotry than many people living in suburbs and cities.”¹¹⁶ More accurately, rural Americans succumb to the same vices observed, from time immemorial, in those facing real or perceived threats to their identities: They lash out in predictable fury at those who most obviously embody an alien culture.¹¹⁷ It is thus unsurprising that a presidential candidate like Donald Trump would receive vocal support from millions of citizens in thousands of crumbling communities. What should we learn from this? If we take Wuthnow at his word, then neither race nor wealth inequality are the central issues; rather, communal loss is for many citizens the most pressing concern of all.

¹¹⁴ Wuthnow, *The Left Behind*, 11.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 146.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 158.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

Appalachian Rags to Silicon Riches

The third work we will examine is less empirically rigorous than the two which preceded it, but it was frequently cited, nevertheless, as an explanation for the successful candidacy of Donald Trump. It was, in brief, a bestselling memoir propitiously authored by an up-and-coming celebrity—a conservative icon, of sorts, who surmounted the toxic culture of his Appalachian past to achieve something like the American Dream: a successful stint in the Marine Corps, a B.A. degree at Ohio State University, a Yale Law degree, and a thriving career as a budding venture capitalist. In his memoir *Hillbilly Elegy*, J. D. Vance movingly recounts the major stages of his literal rags-to-riches story, and he shines a bright spotlight, more importantly, on the social pathologies that tragically afflicted his small-town upbringing, granting readers a timely glimpse of the white working class.

In this section we will focus primarily on the different responses this bestselling book has received, and we will examine divergent and sometimes wildly conflicting assessments of its central subject—namely, life in and around “Greater Appalachia.” Before we do that, however, it is useful first to consider what the prevailing message of the memoir is: All throughout its pages, Vance vividly describes the hardships faced by a “hillbilly” culture that has clearly gone awry—a culture that abandoned an ethic of personal responsibility and hard work for one of dependency and entitlement. As Vance sees it, economic conditions are first and foremost a reflection of social maladjustments, not vice versa; the reason that Appalachian towns are fading economically is a direct consequence of a prior loss of character, as indicated most distressingly by rising rates of drug addiction, alcoholism, and family breakdown. Appalachian communities have become virtual slums, that is, because of their “culture of poverty,” which only intensifies material deprivation. Vance concedes, on the other hand, that the “industrial Midwest” has seen a gradual “hollowing out of [its] economic core,” but more interesting from his perspective are the futile responses of the

working classes, or their habit of “reacting to bad circumstances in the worst way possible.”¹¹⁸ At issue is a noxious “culture that increasingly encourages social decay instead of counteracting it.”¹¹⁹

Central to this narrative is the aspirational spirit of the American Dream, a term Vance uses repeatedly to describe his own achievement of social and economic mobility. Indeed, Vance is hardly bashful about broadcasting his own impressive triumphs or his diligent efforts in realizing them, and he carefully juxtaposes his own story, full of hope and promise, with that of his down-and-out neighbors in Breathitt County, Kentucky and Middletown, Ohio. Many readers of the memoir have thus assumed, perhaps unfairly, that Vance means to suggest that the misfortunes of his fellow citizens are due largely to their singular lack of pluck, as well as their ignorance of mysterious forces like “social capital” and “networking power,” which is the “the air [that students] breathe” at Yale University.¹²⁰ Admittedly, Vance lends considerable weight to this “bootstraps” message by expressing it through a family proxy, citing the early advice imparted to him (in his own description) by his comically “lunatic” yet otherwise admirable grandparents: His Mamaw once admonished him to “never be like those f—ing losers who think the deck is stacked against them.... You can do anything you want to.”¹²¹ For many, this is the takeaway point that Vance seems most eager to convey—that the economic and cultural misery of the white working class is the result, not of “governments or corporations or anyone else,” but of ultimately self-destructive behavior.¹²²

¹¹⁸ J. D. Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* (New York: Harper Collins, 2016), 7

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid, 215

¹²¹ Ibid, 36.

¹²² Ibid, 256.

In general, the memoir has been favorably received by members of the metropolitan elite, perhaps because it confirms what they are already predisposed to believe. It seemingly validates their conviction that the financial ruin of thousands of small towns across America has little or nothing to do with they themselves—or with the actions of the political and financial organizations they oversee—but is rightly imputed instead to the excessively crude and vulgar citizens who occupy them. This message reflects the elitist perspective long exemplified by a publication like *National Review*, a conservative editorial magazine, founded by William F. Buckley Jr., at which Vance now contributes, and which also played a substantial role in widely supporting and publicizing his work. In this context it is interesting to note that fulsome blurbs for the memoir were penned by Reihan Salam, executive editor of *National Review*; by Peter Thiel, a Silicon Valley executive and sometime employer of Vance; and by Amy Chua, the controversial “tiger mother” who played an advisory role to Vance during his years attending Yale Law School. Joining these voices was the approving commentary of conservative columnist David Brooks, who described *Hillbilly Elegy* as “essential reading,” lauding it for its forthright portrayal of an older “honor code” undermined by “rampant consumerism, ...celebrity culture, [and] reality-TV fantasies that tell people success comes in a quick flash of publicity, not through steady work.”¹²³ These accolades were later echoed by Rod Dreher, a senior editor at *The American Conservative*, who suggested the book was arguably the most important in its class to be published in the leadup to the election.¹²⁴

¹²³ David Brooks, “Revolt of the Masses,” *New York Times* (June 28, 2016): <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/28/opinion/revolt-of-the-masses.html>. Accessed June 3, 2020.

¹²⁴ Rod Dreher, “Trump: Tribune of Poor White People,” *The American Conservative* (July 22, 2016): <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher/trump-us-politics-poor-whites/>. Accessed June 3, 2020.

Hillbilly Elegy received a favorable reception well beyond conservative audiences, however. It received stellar reviews from a diverse suit of media outlets including the *New York Times*,¹²⁵ *Bloomberg News*,¹²⁶ the *Washington Post*,¹²⁷ and the *Economist*,¹²⁸ and its author was, in short order, invited to major news networks like CBS, ABC, NPR, and CNN, where Vance later received a coveted position as commentator. Moreover, critical acclaim for the memoir was so pronounced inside the Capital Beltway that one observer called it “all the rage in DC.”¹²⁹ On both sides of the partisan aisle there was seemingly mutual agreement that the story Vance told, as shocking as it sounded to well-mannered ears, was independently capable of explaining the breakdown of Middle America, and who was or was not rightly to blame for it. Likewise, on “white” Appalachians a new consensus began to form: At issue, apparently, was the apathy and laziness of a welfare-dependent class too enamored with drugs and alcohol to pick itself up or otherwise alter its destiny. Larger processes of deindustrialization, automation, and globalization played a contributory role, to be sure, but a mostly trivial one in a social and economic collapse that was all but inevitable anyway.

¹²⁵ Jennifer Senior, “Review: in ‘Hillbilly Elegy,’ a Tough Love Analysis of the Poor Who Back Trump,” *New York Times* (August 10, 2016): <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/11/books/review-in-hillbilly-elegy-a-compassionate-analysis-of-the-poor-who-love-trump.html>. Accessed June 3, 2020.

¹²⁶ William R. Easterly, “Stereotypes Are Poisoning American Politics,” *Bloomberg News* (December 16, 2016): <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2016-12-16/stereotypes-are-poisoning-american-politics>. Accessed June 3, 2020.

¹²⁷ Amanda Erickson, “A Hillbilly’s Pleas to the White Working Class,” *Washington Post* (August 4, 2016): https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/a-hillbillys-plea-to-the-white-working-class/2016/08/04/5c1a7a56-51ca-11e6-b7de-dfe509430c39_story.html. Accessed June 3, 2020.

¹²⁸ William R. Easterly, “Why Donald Trump Speaks to So Many Americans,” *Economist* (August 11, 2016).

¹²⁹ James Hohmann, “The Daily 202: Want to Know Why Trump’s Winning Ohio? Drink a Beer with ‘The Deplorables’ in Boehner’s Old District,” *Washington Post* (October 4, 2016): <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/paloma/daily-202/2016/10/04/daily-202-want-to-know-why-trump-s-winning-ohio-drink-a-beer-with-the-deplorables-in-boehner-s-old-district/57f288a6e9b69b0592430082/>. Accessed June 3, 2020.

A far different reaction to the memoir has come from prominent voices in Appalachia itself and from the people that Vance, through the details of his personal story, tacitly claims to represent and explain. It is worth exploring some of these criticisms, not because all of them are necessarily sound—I will suggest later, in fact, that they arguably misrepresent or misunderstand the message that Vance intends to convey—but rather because they provide an interesting window into how citizens in many of these rural spaces understand themselves in relation to the rest of the country.

Notably, some of the criticisms directed Vance's way are undoubtedly a consequence of genuine differences in political ideology. More than a few residents of the Appalachian region, from all levels of education, continue to challenge and dispute a narrative that, in their view, minimizes systemic injustices and instead blames individuals, and their vices, for all the documentable suffering they experience. Appalachian historian Bob Hutton, for example, argues that Vance ends up merely parroting "the oxymoron [that] capitalism and its defenders require," which is that "any hardworking individual can rise to the top, but, any given time, far more individuals must remain at the bottom."¹³⁰ The privileged classes can accept inequitable outcomes without a major crisis of conscience, in other words, as long as they maintain the expedient lie that "the white working class" is "uniform, tractable, and easy to understand," victims of nothing but its own incompetence.¹³¹

As yet another example, Appalachian sociologist Dwight B. Billings characterizes *Hillbilly Elegy* as a mouthpiece for "corporate capitalism"—a work that, true to its genre, admonishes its Appalachian readers to conceptualize "friends and acquaintances as 'social capital,' the art and music we love as 'cultural capital,' our environment as 'natural capital,' and, ultimately, ourselves as

¹³⁰ T. R. C. Hutton, "Hillbilly Elitism" in *Appalachian Reckoning: A Region Responds to Hillbilly Elegy*, edited by Anthony Harkins and Meredith McCarroll (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2019), 32.

¹³¹ Ibid in Ibid.

readily deployable units of ‘human capital.’”¹³² The problem is less the particular story that Vance tells, however one-sidedly, and more the ideology that underpins it. “In a neoliberal capitalist order that imagines us to be little more than isolated and competitive entrepreneurial selves,” Billings adds, “who better to give us hard advice about how to live and what to choose than an investment broker like J. D. Vance?”¹³³ What the Appalachian region most needs, by this way of thinking, are individuals who embody the rational, calculating, self-maximizing mindset of homo economicus.

These thinkers have an ideological axe to grind, and their biases almost certainly influence their perceptions of Vance and his memoir, including observations of his that, by any honest assessment, reflect more than a small dose of on-the-ground reality. As one fellow-Appalachian remarks, “The onslaught of these various critiques demonstrates an aversion to acknowledge and rightfully address these statistically concrete facts about our own communities.”¹³⁴ On the other hand, criticism of Vance and his memoir has similarly come from thinkers on the opposite side of the ideological divide. For example, in a review penned for paleoconservative *Chronicles Magazine*, Louisville resident Jerry Salyer criticizes Vance for his allegedly casual treatment of some deeply troubling trends. “The way Vance puts it,” he writes, conveys the feeling “that only small-minded provincials could regard globalism as a threat to Appalachian life.... By glossing over the problems of finance capitalism Vance offers balm for the consciences of fellow Ivy Leaguers who might otherwise be tempted to do a bit of soul-searching in the wake of Brexit and the Trump triumph.”¹³⁵

¹³² Dwight B. Billings, “Once Upon a Time in ‘Trumpalachia’” in *Ibid*, 45.

¹³³ *Ibid* in *Ibid*, 45-46.

¹³⁴ Kelli Hansel Haywood, “In Defense of J. D. Vance” in *Ibid*, 189-198.

¹³⁵ Jerry D. Salyer, “Silicon Hillbilly,” *Chronicles Magazine*, March 2017.

In a similar vein, a review written for Catholic publication *First Things*—this one penned by conservative commentator Rod Liddle—takes Vance to task for his blithe acceptance of the very individualistic creeds which contributed to generational poverty in the first place. It was, according to Liddle, the doctrine of “rampant individualism and free expression—sexually, morally, politically—which unpicked the fabric painstakingly woven by our parents and their parents before them.”¹³⁶ This permissive ethos was later accompanied by “a rapacious individualism at the expense of the larger society”—with the “imperative to strive to make money and to spend, to consume and consume without the constraints which had previously attended.”¹³⁷ Individualism is thus at the heart of the problem needing addressed; it is not a lasting solution to social stagnation.

Thus, in the view of conservative thinkers like Salyer and Liddle, Vance has presented a too simplified gloss on a considerably more complex reality. As they understand it, Vance has left many of his readers with the regrettable impression that Appalachia should now be regarded as a lost cause. It warrants an “elegy,” as his title pithily puts it, because it is now all but dead and may even deserve to stay that way. According to this reading of his memoir, Vance has all but asserted, his good intentions notwithstanding,¹³⁸ that the best that impoverished “hillbillies” can hope to achieve is to transcend their point of origin and become, as he has himself, an exemplar of the American Dream. The best hope of those still coming of age in Appalachia is to leave home and stay gone.

¹³⁶ Rod Liddle, “A New Poverty,” *First Things*, January 2017: <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2017/01/a-new-poverty>. Accessed June 3, 2020.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ According to Haywood, Vance remarked in correspondence, “I love my people, and I really hope that comes through in my book. But for all the beauty, there are families like mine and yours, and we’ve got to recognize the good in those families and the bad if we ever hope to help them” (“In Defense of J. D. Vance,” 197).

In a blistering review of *Hillbilly Elegy*, Appalachian resident Ivy Brashear expresses this point powerfully, voicing her fear that “people will read [the memoir] and assume all Appalachian people, if they are smart, are trying to actively run away from their culture; they will understand it to be less than and the people they came from to be crazy lunatics.”¹³⁹ This patronizing attitude is what Brashear took most from a memoir which, in her polemical construal, “has no class, no heart, and no warmth”—a memoir which contains no mention, even, of the extractive companies that “stripped Appalachia of every resource from which they could make a buck, and left very little wealth behind.”¹⁴⁰ As Brashear and other like-minded reviewers see it, any “tough love” message that ignores these externally imposed wounds is dishonest and condescending; it reveals a character more eager to condemn than to redeem and restore—a personality more disposed to realize economic and social mobility than a weightier responsibility to safeguard community.

The Appalachian culture that Vance describes in *Hillbilly Elegy* is exceptionally difficult to digest and unpack, in part because it has fractured and fragmented to a degree not yet experienced most elsewhere in the country. In telling his personal story, moreover, Vance provides his readers with a small window into the cultural degradation that has contributed, in some form or fashion, to the economic quagmire faced by the entire region. He highlights the domestic conflict and violence, the abusive homes, the substance addiction, and the self-defeating mindsets of individuals more likely to blame their problems on others than to take responsibility for them. What readers like this believe is conspicuously absent in his memoir, however, is any mention of positive efforts to rehabilitate the region, or even efforts to restore, to some extent or another, the many towns and neighborhoods comprising it. Vance offers a solution focused first and foremost on personal

¹³⁹ Ivy Brashear, “Keep Your ‘Elegy’” in *Appalachian Reckoning*, 161

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, 161, 162

achievement, but some readers believe that he has done so at the expense of community. And it is this aspect of his work that local critics have singled out for rebuke, each in their own way.

More so than partisan differences, a better predictor of whether *Hillbilly Elegy* has or will receive a favorable review is the ability of its critics to identify with the particular region and culture it describes—a culture that Vance, again in his title, seems to suggest is irredeemably “in crisis.” The variance in opinions expressed by elite and non-elite readers, and their different perceptions of the memoir, is notable enough to warrant further attention and analysis. Why have readers in successful industries, in large coastal cities, or inside the Beltway responded with greater enthusiasm to a book that others, those who most identify with its subject, regard instead as a frontal attack?¹⁴¹ Why have liberals in exclusive circles expressed greater delight for a memoir that their equivalents in Middle America, also from the political Left, view as a betrayal? Why have right-leaning authors at *National Review* endorsed a work that their traditionalist counterparts consider superficial? This discrepancy in how readers perceive an author like Vance (and his self-disclosure) is not unlike that which occurred in the 2016 election, when Donald Trump erased the customary lines dividing Republicans from Democrats.¹⁴² For that reason alone it deserves a second glance.

One revealing exercise is to consider what Vance represents to those on both the left and right who were born and raised in a wealthy cosmopolitan culture and who have succeeded, at least in part, in consequence of their superior placement in the socio-economic hierarchy. For such as these, Vance exemplifies the potential for upward mobility in a country that has forever prided

¹⁴¹ Besides the reviews and articles already cited, see James Branscome, “Lamenting ‘Hillbilly Elegy,’” *Daily Yonder*, August 3, 2016: <https://dailyyonder.com/review-lamenting-hillbilly-elegy/2016/08/03/>. Accessed June 2020; and also, Biller Turner, “Another Take on Hillbilly Elegy,” *Daily Yonder*, August 16, 2016: <https://dailyyonder.com/review-another-take-on-hillbilly-elegy/2016/08/16/>. Accessed June 2020

¹⁴² See Mike Davis, “The Great God Trump and the White Working Class,” *Catalyst*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2017): 151-172.

itself, however mistakenly, for the equal opportunity it affords to every ambitious, hard-working soul. His memoir invites elite audiences to believe, in the words of Hutton, that “white American poverty has nothing to do with them or with any structural problems in American economy and society and everything to do with poor white folks’ inherent vices.”¹⁴³ If Vance proved capable of transcending the dire circumstances he faced, then surely everyone else can, too, which means those who recognizably fail to achieve this goal must either be indolent or hopelessly incompetent. Several tenuous assumptions underlie this view, but one that often goes unmentioned is that every rational actor necessarily desires to transcend the evident limitations of her home culture. In this view, any person who stays put economically or even geographically must suffer from a serious lack of nerve. After all, why would anyone long to remain in the hillbilly ghettos of Greater Appalachia?

For many readers, Vance seemingly represents the liberal archetype we discussed in the introduction. He is the self-made man who was able, through luck and pluck, to shatter the chains of time and place, of custom and habit, and to forge his own path free of the constraints of the petty and arbitrary tyrants who once dominated his early life. Without question, Vance has battled great odds in his journey from Appalachia and the Rustbelt Region to the sparkle and shine of Silicon Valley, and he deserves any and all commendation he has since received. But his is not the only possible story arc. To assume otherwise is to erase and ignore the millions of citizens in and around the Appalachian region whose dreams and aspirations do not comport with this liberal model. It is to condemn, with paternalistic conviction, the community-oriented souls who follow and pursue a different set of ideals, and who want their family, friends, and neighbors to thrive and prosper together—not as isolated individuals bent on pursuing their own personalized path, but within a community marked by a shared history, common habits and traditions, and gracious reciprocity.

¹⁴³ Hutton, “Hillbilly Elitism,” 23.

To his immense credit, Vance himself began to articulate, as early as July 2016, a growing sense that the values and ideals of small-town folk, in Appalachia and elsewhere, were not receiving a fair hearing. Reflecting on his own rise to fame, he expressed compassion and understanding for those in his own region who now regard him with suspicion and who often resent his message: In light of the great “hostility between the working class and the elites,” he writes, “there will always be some wariness toward those who go to the other side. And can you blame them? A lot of these people know nothing but judgment and condescension from those with financial and political power, and the thought of their children acquiring that same hostility is noxious.”¹⁴⁴ Here we have a vital acknowledgement from Vance that a privileged life does not hold universal appeal for everyone living in depressed areas. Many people who feel most resentful of the wealthy elite have no desire to *be* elite themselves; that would entail, in their view, a renunciation of their own culture.

Reflecting further on the obvious appeal of Donald Trump, Vance next describes the apparent failure of politicians on both the Left and Right to express themselves in an idiom familiar to everyday Americans, much less to promote policies that adequately address their needs and concerns. “The two political parties have offered essentially nothing to these people for a few decades,” he observes. “From the Left, they get some smug condescension, an exasperation that the white working-class votes against their economic interests because of social issues.... Maybe they get a few handouts, but many don’t want handouts to begin with.... From the Right, they’ve gotten the basic Republican policy platform of tax cuts, free trade, deregulation, and paeans to the noble businessman and economic growth.”¹⁴⁵ What makes this analysis interesting is that it stands at tension with how many readers interpret his memoir. He argues in this context that working-class

¹⁴⁴ Quoted in Dreher, “Trump.”

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

folk, or a good number of them, wish they could support themselves and their families without needing any government assistance at all—an honorable sentiment that was strangely missing in his earlier descriptions of working-class culture. More interesting still, Vance further suggests that neoliberal “pro-growth” policies will necessarily hold little attraction for this same constituency.

Putting these two, seemingly incongruent, ideas together, we are left with a policy synthesis that is bound to confuse politicians on either side of the political aisle: According to Vance, working-class people often view comprehensive efforts to redistribute wealth with placid indifference, and even at times with outright hostility. Yet they also have little affection for a globalizing economy, and they increasingly view Corporate America and its financial interests with suspicion and distrust. Vance nowhere explains how these different sentiments might somehow make sense together, or whether he even thinks they can. As I argued earlier, however, and as we saw in the cases described in turn by Cramer and Wuthnow, a community-oriented frame helps to make these ideas and feelings more understandable; it explains why they exist in a kind of harmonious tension that is often inexplicable, not only to the wealthiest elite, but also to the individuals who hold them.

Notably, in March 2017, Vance penned an editorial for the *New York Times* explaining why he had recently decided to abandon Silicon Valley and relocate back to his native state of Ohio. As he now understood it, his earlier decision to emigrate from the Midwest and from his Appalachian past to the hustle and bustle of the West Coast had been personally advantageous, but it was also emblematic of a much wider trend that has proven devastating to thousands of communities, depriving them of the indigenous resources they require to make anything like a full recovery. What Vance came to realize, in his own words, is that “we often frame civic responsibility in terms of government taxes and transfer payments, so that our society’s least fortunate families are able to provide basic necessities. But this focus can miss something important: that what many

communities need most is not just financial support, but talent and energy and committed citizens to build viable businesses and civic institutions.”¹⁴⁶ We see here that the story Vance previously told about himself is still under revision. He began as the liberal hero that Mill obliquely describes in *On Liberty*, but now he risks association with those who, absorbed in their own communities, are so little liked and so little understood in today’s globalizing world, sometimes even by themselves.

Stakes of the Argument

Not everyone residing in small-town America wishes to remain there. Nor is everyone who is born in the ruins of a once-cohesive culture themselves driven by a romantic impulse to recover its lost vitality. The American Dream still holds a powerful allure for a capable minority who have been raised in the worst kinds of poverty, but who aspire, with grit and determination, to leave their impoverished past behind them. They want what the fictional character George Bailey expresses with such vehemence at the earliest stages of his young adult life: They want to shake off the dust from their “crummy little town,” and they want to see and conquer the world. Notably, this is the spirit that J. D. Vance allegedly embraced for himself early on, and it seemed the controlling metaphor of his life. For individuals like this, personal catastrophes matter more than communal ones; if they fail, for whatever reason, to achieve upward mobility, then they run a real risk of ending, like George Bailey almost does, in a mental and emotional breakdown of the worst kind.

Why are rural citizens so resentful? The standard assumption in elite circles is that rural discontentment reflects little more than individual grievances; it represents, all things considered,

¹⁴⁶ J. D. Vance, “Why I’m Moving Home,” *New York Times*, March 16, 2017: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/16/opinion/why-im-moving-home.html>. Accessed June 2020.

the psychological angst of those who want for a decent education, occupational (re)training, and a clear path forward, and who have been left behind by a globalizing economy. This narrative is a powerful one, and it captures something real. We can safely assume that many such individuals reside somewhere in the American hinterlands, only they, in contrast, have not experienced Vance's heady success. They feel aggrieved and offended that others are apparently prospering where they are not, and they strike out in the most indefensible forms of rage. We should acknowledge, not only the reality of such people, but also the considerable influence they now exert over politics.

Yet it is noteworthy that George Bailey later comes to exemplify, if at first with reluctance, a different sort of character altogether—the sort that often goes nameless and unspecified, or else is commonly misunderstood. We have seen, in the studies and analyses described above, that a substantial cohort of small-town Americans has inherited this most heterodox of temperaments. Their hearts dance to a different tune: Rather than strive for something like the American Dream, they find most of their meaning and fulfillment in their local community, and they delight in the common identity they share with family, friends, and neighbors. Rather than begrudge the commercial ties that bind their entire community together, they endeavor to honor and preserve these ties.¹⁴⁷ It is their inability to do so that constitutes their actual source of resentment, which only deepens as they watch the material scaffold of their culture begin decisively to buckle and fall.

My purpose is not to glamorize these small-town citizens, nor even to downplay their ample failings; neither is it to minimize the blame they surely deserve for many of their adversities. Small-town vices have become, if anything, progressively more obvious: Anyone willing to pass a few idle

¹⁴⁷ If this analysis is correct, then we should see a similar dynamic with populist movements elsewhere in the world. And we now have at least some supporting evidence for claim. For a similar analysis about the sentiments fueling Brexit voters, for instance, see David Goodart, *The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics* (London: Hurst, 2017)

hours in a decaying rust-belt community, amid countless numbers of decrepit houses, used syringes discarded carelessly along public sidewalks, and emergency sirens blaring insistently in the background, will obtain a passing familiarity, at least, with what Vance himself describes and disparages in his memoir. Not all blame for this deterioration can be laid at the feet of external, or freestanding, agents; material poverty always reflects a deeper cultural malaise to one degree or another, a fact long observed by our most ancient wisdom literature.¹⁴⁸ It seems doubtful that small-town America would be where it is unless it, too, had contributed to its own condition.

Nevertheless, it is much too easy to make sweeping judgments of those who have failed, not only because of inherent weaknesses, but also by reason of the damaging actions of others. We should bear in mind, in any event, that agents and agencies capable of inflicting injuries on rural communities, and which routinely profit from doing exactly that, are also more than capable of pathologizing the broken bodies they leave in their wake, all while underplaying their culpability. This is relevant even with cases where small-town residents seem chiefly responsible for the adverse outcomes they suffer—as with the opioid epidemic, for example. Just a few short months after Vance published his popular memoir, in fact, a major multipart story tellingly broke in the *Charleston Gazette-Mail*: Readers learned that large pharmaceutical companies like McKesson, Cardinal Health, and AmerisourceBergen had knowingly distributed nine million painkillers to a single West Virginian hamlet of less than 400 residents, an exploitive transaction duplicated in countless communities, most of them coal towns, across southern portions of the state.¹⁴⁹ This revealing story underscores the futility, as Billings observes, in “focusing on drug use in Appalachia

¹⁴⁸ See, for instance, Proverbs 24: 30-34.

¹⁴⁹ Eric Eyre, “Drug Firms Poured 780M Painkillers into WV amid rise of Overdoses,” *Charleston (WV) GazetteMail*, December 17, 2016: https://www.wvgazettemail.com/news/legal_affairs/drug-firms-poured-780m-painkillers-into-wv-amid-rise-of-overdoses/article_99026dad-8ed5-5075-90fa-adb906a36214.html. Accessed July 2020.

without examining the pharmaceutical industry that pushes its painkillers by the millions on the region, the doctors and pain centers that promoted them, the DEA that refused to police this, and the politicians who fail to provide money for treatment and rehabilitation.”¹⁵⁰ Whenever we ignore these clear instances of manipulation and abuse, we inevitably facilitate their eventual recurrence.

My aim in the remaining chapters is thus to balance the scales; more specifically, I will argue that small-town citizens are increasingly subject to the arbitrary whims of agencies public and private, which are often too vast and disengaged to take a genuine interest in the rural populations they dominate. Many separate volumes could be authored on this subject, and a few notable works have been written already, detailing specific cases where the large and powerful have blatantly exploited the vulnerable denizens of small-town America. Any reasonable and fair account of the Appalachian region, for example, must make reference to the illuminating study of Clay County, Kentucky, authored by sociologists Dwight Billings and Kathleen Blee—a work which examines how elite actors effectively dominated local industries and politics, creating for themselves a new low-wage economy and, in consequence, a permanent underclass throughout the entire region.¹⁵¹ Studies like these are richly informative, but what is equally relevant, they belie the notion that impoverished citizens in rural, outlying areas are in fact responsible for everything they endure.

Sometimes these abuses are obvious and direct while other times they rely on systemic processes, which then makes them easier to ignore or downplay, as I will argue in later chapters. One pressing reason to embrace this project, then, are the looming costs and damages inflicted by systems that extract from, rather than contribute to, our rural communities. This is not something

¹⁵⁰ Billings, “Once Upon a Time in ‘Trumpalachia,’” 47.

¹⁵¹ Dwight Billings and Kathleen Blee, *The Road to Poverty: The Making of Wealth and Hardship in Appalachia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); see also John R Burch, *Owsley County, Kentucky, and the Perpetuation of Poverty* (West Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2007).

we enjoy the luxury of avoiding; the social and political costs of a populist movement teeming with resentment is itself partly a result of the community breakdown that these all-encompassing systems engender. If we fail to understand this resentment and address its root-sources—or respond with nothing but moral outrage, however justified—then we risk additional divisions and ruptures. Indeed, the preening condescension of urban elites who feel sure of their own moral superiority is highly unlikely to gain converts in the “purple” zones of the electoral map. If anything, it will further alienate voters alleged to be most responsible for the demagogues currently in office. It should be obvious, in any case, that such condescension is rhetorically counterproductive.

Consider, in closing, a 2016 editorial by commentator Kevin Williamson, a regular columnist for *National Review*. Williamson spares no punches in his disdainful descriptions of the ill-informed working classes infatuated with Donald Trump. Members of these latter groups, he charges, sit gloomily in front of their living-room windows, waiting with restless impatience “for the father-führer figure they have spent their lives imagining, the protector and vindicator who will protect them, provide for them, and set things in order.”¹⁵² Little do they realize that the reason for their hardships is not globalization, much less the actions of the privileged few. Neither are wars and famines, plagues and foreign invasions, in any sense responsible. Rather, rural citizens in struggling communities are “in thrall to a vicious, selfish culture whose main products are misery and used heroin needles,” evidence that their own “dysfunction and negligence” are the relevant issues.¹⁵³

The conclusion that Williamson draws, brutal in both its severity and finality, is that rural communities are best left to deteriorate on their own; anyone with any sense would abandon them

¹⁵² Kevin Williamson, “Chaos in the Family, Chaos in the State: The White Working Class’s Dysfunction,” *National Review*, March 28, 2016: <https://www.nationalreview.com/2016/03/donald-trump-white-working-class-dysfunction-real-opportunity-needed-not-trump/>. Accessed July 2020.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

for greener pastures—which consist, parenthetically, of endless stretches of pavement and asphalt. He writes, “The truth about these dysfunctional, downscale communities is that they deserve to die. Economically, they are negative assets. Morally, they are indefensible.... [Their residents] need real opportunity, which means that they need real change, which means that they need U-Haul.”¹⁵⁴ The patronizing message here could hardly be clearer: Anyone who remains in a provincial community and clings to its customary ways is effectively servile and weak. And the only proper or legitimate course of action, for those courageous enough to live freely, is thus to strike out boldly and alone.

Individuals animated by a different philosophy and ethos, who have little interest in their own personalized advancement but who constantly agonize over their communities, are not likely to be persuaded by a message, like Williamson’s, that mocks and belittles them entirely. Why does this matter? It matters, in brief, because rural citizens clearly suffer from a deep and unsettling sense of uncertainty. All they know, or think they know, is that their communities have fallen on difficult times and that they themselves are not solely responsible. Who better to blame, therefore, than the same voices who denigrate everything that they hold dear? With articles like Williamson’s, populist resentment is all but a foregone conclusion, and I believe we can and indeed must do better. This dissertation and the chapters which follow are respectfully submitted in that spirit.

¹⁵⁴ Williamson, “Chaos in the Family.”

Chapter 3: Political Conflict and Market Formation

In the modern world we experience a degree of comfort beyond the grasp of even the most affluent of our predecessors. The material benefits of a market system rapidly reaching global dimensions speak for themselves: Every doom-and-gloom naysayer who rejects these benefits (for whatever principled reasons) must eventually confront the objection, how is this *not* the best of all worlds? Are not more people fed and indeed overfed than ever before? Have we not secured the greatest good for the greatest number? Furthermore, if crumbling communities and social anomie is the ultimate consequence of such a system—a debatable claim, in any case—is this not a price worth paying? Is it possible to achieve something better? And should we even make the attempt?

These questions are unavoidably normative in character, which means we should expect different people to arrive at different conclusions. Many of us accept as an article of faith that modern advances have made us all healthier, safer, happier, and more prosperous.¹⁵⁵ But others among us doubt whether physical comfort and safety are always a net positive, or we worry that our reckless pursuit *of* such things will prove damaging or harmful to our general wellbeing.¹⁵⁶ I observed in the last chapter that community-oriented citizens will often come to conclusions starkly different from many of their peers, at least on difficult points of assessment such as these.

¹⁵⁵ See, for instance, Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism and Progress* (New York: Penguin Books, 2018).

¹⁵⁶ See, for instance, Ross Douthat, *The Decadent Society: How We Became the Victims of Our Own Success* (New York: Avid Reader Press, 2020)

Implicit in what I argued in the previous chapter is that modern systems of economy and culture are encumbered with moral freight and are thus necessarily “value laden.” They tend to provoke either moral support and affirmation, on one hand, or strong moral condemnation on the other, depending on the worldview assumptions of the respondents in question. Whether we favor or oppose these systems will depend in large degree on our beliefs, values, and preferences—on whether they comport with our overall vision of reality, or with our understanding of what kind of life we each ought to be pursuing. This is a moral question, not a strictly technical one. In that sense it is also a *political* question; it involves enough moral ambiguity that we can and indeed should debate it in the public square, and those who embrace a liberal ethos should, for the sake of consistency, be cautious about casually imposing their beliefs on actors that do not share them.

One immediate objection to this, however, is that citizens in rural communities suffer, not because of political decision-making, but rather because of spontaneous advances in a free-market system operating with no or minimal intervention from government. International supply chains, supranational corporations, industrial outsourcing, economic globalism and financialization—all such outcomes have resulted from millions of buyers and sellers engaging in free enterprise, unimpeded by government. Rural resentment thus has little to do with politics, rightly understood.

In this second chapter I challenge this conventional account and argue that politics, not economics, was most decisive in stripping rural societies of their functional independence; these developments were in one respect a product of “business as usual,” but it was the business that occurs initially in Washington D. C. and only later in the actual marketplace. For the last 150 years and counting, big business and government have combined to produce monolithic systems of technology and infrastructure, stimulating aggregate growth at the national level at the expense of local or regional growth. And the consequences, we should all readily concede, have in one sense

been markedly productive: We have witnessed a dramatic increase in our collective standard of living as measured by standard market indices. And yet rural citizens have been left, not just behind, but increasingly at variance with the world around them—a world that conflicts with their values and preferences regardless of whether they themselves happen to prosper and thrive in it.

At this point we encounter a second objection: Even if our infrastructure systems sprung into existence as a consequence of political decision-making—some of which doubtless occurred in the proverbial “smoke-filled backrooms” that grace our nation’s capital—they differ in no essential respect from what we *would* have created through a longer and more spontaneous process. Minor differences aside, the reason the world has taken its current shape is because it *works* with such a high degree of predictability, and because the alternatives, whatever they may be, simply do not. Any infrastructure system will eventually be tested by competition and compared against other possibilities. If it fails to pass this test, it will quickly be replaced by a more competent system.

What this objection ignores, however, is that infrastructure systems tend to be far less responsive to standard competitive pressures than the enterprises operating *in* and *through* them. We call these infrastructures “systems” precisely because they function like the rules of a game: They give form and structure to competition and help determine what we subsequently deem successful or profitable. They may in the end prove to be so inadequate, of course, that they ultimately collapse under their own weight, but even the worst of such systems is likely to be salvable to one degree or another; its mere existence over a lengthy period does not necessarily or automatically demonstrate its superior efficacy. There may be other conceivable options, moreover, that would prove equally successful if only they were given half a chance. The competitive “game” that occurs in the marketplace can likely function according to different operating manuals—what some philosophers call “multiple realizability,” where more than one set of rules has the potential

for achieving feasible outcomes.¹⁵⁷ In this chapter I highlight evidence that corroborates this intuition: In particular, I examine 19th century debates over developing railroad systems, summarizing the conclusions of a major case study conducted by political scientist Gerald Berk. And I point to long-term data indicating the general applicability of this case to our modern context.

In a related vein, I will argue that infrastructure systems are also decisively political in their *consequences*. They have a controlling influence over the distribution of power and authority across society, and they ensure the eventual dominance of one set of values and interests over other alternatives. It just so happens that the chief “losers” in this contest have mainly been rural citizens, who are then naturally attracted to political candidates who promise to transform their fortunes and make them “winners” once again. Public arguments over 19th century railroads are again instructive because they involved political differences as much as economic ones, and they pitted two opposing normative visions against one another—one of them republican and the other liberal.

It is the republican vision that resonates most strongly with the populist movement today. I conclude this chapter by highlighting these important similarities, and I suggest that rural decline in the 21st century, much like the early railroad systems, entails decision-making that is at least as much ideological as technical. This counternarrative strongly implies, by the way, that rural citizens do in fact have legitimate grievances, the full nature of which I will explore in greater depth in chapter three. But the danger I address here is that we continue to misidentify these grievances because of our propensity to reify or naturalize outcomes that are in reality thoroughly political.

¹⁵⁷ The concept of “multiple realizability” has been most frequently employed in the philosophy of the human mind and consciousness. See Carl Gillett, “The Metaphysics of Realization, Multiple Realizability, and the Special Sciences,” *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 100, no. 11 (2003): 591-603). But it has also been applied fruitfully in international relations theorizing by Benjamin Most and Harvey Starr, “International Relations Theory, Foreign Policy Substitutability, and ‘Nice’ Laws,” *World Politics* Vol. 36 (1984): 383-406; as well as by Alex Wendt in *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

Technology and Infrastructure Construction

It would be difficult to exaggerate the degree to which technological innovation since the industrial era has profoundly shaped our modern economy. Over the past 200 years, advances in modern science stimulated the ingenuity of a new inventive class that feverishly applied its new-found knowledge to the benefit of society, and the results have been nothing less than astonishing. We now have technologies that ease the burden of resource extraction, that expedite transportation and communication processes, and that have strikingly improved our material wellbeing.

Many of these technologies would never have emerged without a combination of private and public resources. This was true in some measure in the 19th century but has become increasingly the reality in the intervening period; technological innovation has always depended on the willingness of political and economic actors to collaborate in pursuit of their common aims. Before the industrial revolution had reached its apex, for example, the government played a supporting role for countless numbers of inventors, industrial scientists, and engineers, all of whom depended on patent laws to remunerate the costs, in both time and money, of pursuing their projects.¹⁵⁸ Through its war-making activities and other major defense projects, moreover, the United States government played the role of both consumer and innovator, spurring novel production methods that would change the industrial face of the nation. In the process, it prompted

¹⁵⁸ Thomas P. Hughes, *American Genesis: A Century of Invention and Technological Enthusiasm* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1989), 14. See also B. Zorina Khan, *The Democratization of Invention: Patents and Copyrights in American Economic Development, 1790-1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

a spate of technological discoveries that would eventually trickle down to the domestic sector, resulting in a variety of new commodities like sewing machines, bicycles, and automobiles.¹⁵⁹

While the government had a major impact on the industrial revolution, it assumed an even larger role for itself at the end of World War II—a role it has never since relinquished. As sociologist Fred L. Block recounts, the postwar era witnessed the creation of an impressive network of federal laboratories loosely modeled after the Manhattan Project.¹⁶⁰ Around the same time, the government also became the principal funding source for scientific research, and “a significant cadre of government officials took more direct responsibility for pushing forward the technological frontier,” whether in public laboratories or the growing university system.¹⁶¹ These efforts would only intensify during the Cold War with the formation of NASA, DARPA, and the National Science Foundation (NSF), which made a point of supporting research with a heavy industry focus.¹⁶²

Government policies continue to spur technological advances in the present, a fact that innovation economist Mariana Mazzucato has recently emphasized in a bestselling work devoted to the topic.¹⁶³ A major takeaway from Mazzucato’s research is that government agencies remain the driving force behind three specific technologies that are jointly indispensable to modern economic growth: biotechnology, nanotechnology, and the internet. As all three areas involve “high capital intensity and high technological and market risk,” they are “avoided by the private sector, and have

¹⁵⁹ Fred L. Block, *State of Innovation: The U.S. Government’s Role in Technology Development* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 4

¹⁶⁰ Block, *State of Innovation*, 6.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid*, 7.

¹⁶² *Ibid*, 7-12.

¹⁶³ Mariana Mazzucato, *The Entrepreneurial State: Debunking Public vs. Private Sector Myths* (London: Anthem Press, 2013), chapter 1

required great amounts of public sector funding (of different types), as well as public sector vision and leadership to get them off the ground.”¹⁶⁴ They entail such a high degree of risk, in other words, that venture capital effectively shuns them until their profitability is an already-established fact.

Perhaps the best example of this public-private interchange are the technologies that companies like Apple and Microsoft have sold to the public for billions in profit. Almost without exception, these technologies were first developed by the government for military and strategic purposes, and in particular by federal agencies like DARPA and In-Q-Tel, the latter of which is the venture capital arm of the Central Intelligence Agency.¹⁶⁵ Additional examples could be cited in other sectors: The government has sponsored and directed technological progress in industries as far apart as transportation, health and pharmaceuticals, and agriculture, and it continues to do so directly in research centers or else indirectly through its sponsorship of an array of universities.¹⁶⁶ It is for this reason that innovation economists now emphasize the importance of larger “innovation systems” that link private firms, research institutions, and government agencies.¹⁶⁷ The combined efforts of these different groups are not random or haphazard—like much that occurs elsewhere in the market—but involve high levels of deliberate coordination. The upshot is that technological progress has been (and still is) steered by well-placed actors in both the private *and* public sector. What is perhaps equally interesting, furthermore, is that this public-private collaboration was as

¹⁶⁴ Mazzucato, *The Entrepreneurial State*, chapter 1

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, chapter 5

¹⁶⁶ See, for example, a detailed historical account of government involvement in agricultural research in *The Land-Grant Colleges and the Reshaping of American Higher Education*, edited by Roger Geiger (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2013)

¹⁶⁷ See B. Å. Lundvall, *National Systems of Innovation: Toward a Theory of Innovation and Interactive Learning* (Anthem Press, 2010); and C. Freeman, “The ‘National System of Innovation’ in Historical Perspective,” *Cambridge Journal of Economics* Vol. 10, No 1(1995): 5-24.

much a reality in the 19th century as it is now in the 21st. Despite myriad differences in economic and social context—as we swiftly progressed from an industrial, post-industrial, to information or digital economy—technological development has remained at least partially a political process.

Technologies, of course, rarely exist in a structural vacuum. They require a supporting infrastructure, or sometimes a suite of infrastructures, to be maximally useful or effective, ensuring that they provide the most benefits at the fastest speeds and at the lowest possible cost. It should thus come as no surprise that new infrastructure is almost invariably constructed with the precise objective of increasing the utility of new or already-existing technologies. As with other developmental tasks, this constructive effort is jointly undertaken by private-public collaborative partnerships involving various corporations, foundations, and bureaucratic agencies. But the government itself often breaks new ground in this process, spurring ventures that are intended to accelerate the rapid movement of ideas, products, and people for the sake of the general welfare.

In the 19th century, the U.S. government helped expedite railroad and telephone networks, which linked together national resources at then-unprecedented speeds.¹⁶⁸ And in the 20th century, the government aggressively constructed the interstate highway system during the Eisenhower administration, joined decades later by the global system of computer networks we now refer to as the Internet.¹⁶⁹ All such systems have depended on government to one degree or another, either to spring into existence in the first place or to enforce consistent practices necessary for their use.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁸ Block, *State of Innovation*, 5-6.

¹⁶⁹ The government's role in the creation of the internet has often been understated. See Michael Moyer, "Yes, Government Researchers Really Did Invent the Internet," *Scientific American*, July 23, 2012: <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/yes-government-researchers-really-did-invent-the-internet/>.

¹⁷⁰ Due to "network effects," early telephone systems were in some sense self-creating, but they still required government intervention to help unify what was largely a patchwork of independent networks into a single,

Central to this process are standardizing laws, regulations, and codes that incentivize and sometimes require consumers to utilize existing infrastructures. These regulatory measures are now considered indispensable means for stimulating market growth.¹⁷¹ For infrastructures to function efficiently, in other words, they require a dense array of *nonmaterial* technologies—often termed “infratechnologies”—which are then employed on a uniform basis. These infratechnologies have arguably become just as vital to economic productivity as any tangible product or machine.¹⁷²

Granted, not every such infratechnology can be directly attributed to the public sector. The budding railroad system that emerged in the mid-19th century, for example, relied on consistent time-zone blocks to coordinate activity, prevent costly mishaps, and thus increase consumer confidence.¹⁷³ Although this uniform system clearly qualified as an early infratechnology, it was first implemented by the railroad companies themselves, with little explicit input from government officials or other members of the taxpaying public.¹⁷⁴ And yet, even in this specific case, the government played a critical role in sustaining the various transport systems that were then developing, as I will argue later. Government agencies, besides, have taken the lead in formulating

aggregate system. See Jon Henke, “The Secret History of the Telephone Network,” *Reason: Free Minds and Free Markets*, August/September 2014: <https://reason.com/2014/07/31/the-secret-history-of-the-tele>.

¹⁷¹ See Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, trans. by John Wilkinson (New York: Vintage Books, 1964), 13-22, 171-173.

¹⁷² According to Gregory Tasse, an economist at the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST), any “‘systems’ approach to economic strategy” must begin with nontangible technologies such “as process models, methods, techniques, etc., that are not embodied in a piece of equipment or a product. Instead, they are used to *integrate* products, both hardware and software, into efficient economic systems” (*Technology Infrastructure and Competitive Position* (New York: Springer Science+Business Media, LLC, 1992), 3.

¹⁷³ Interestingly, these changes were featured prominently in Jules Vern’s *Around the World in Eighty Days*, a novel that largely functions as an advertisement for the major technological innovations of the 19th century.

¹⁷⁴ See Robert McNamara, “Why We Have Time Zones,” *ThoughtCo*, April 6, 2019: <https://www.thoughtco.com/why-we-have-time-zones-1773953>.

national standards in the many decades since,¹⁷⁵ and today they supervise our transportation and communication networks, though usually in close collaboration with private industries. Our current systems reflect, in short, nearly two centuries of deliberate political strategizing and management.

Yet does it really matter, in the final analysis, whether the government has always played a decisive role in developing our technologies and infrastructures? After all, these systems still operate in a competitive environment and thus are theoretically vulnerable to market pressures. Can we not assume that they are vastly superior to alternatives—or can we not at least assume, more modestly, that even sub-optimal systems are preferable to continuous arguments over what the hypothetical ideal would be? According to this line of reasoning, these systems have more than proven their worth simply by nature of longevity; their political origin is ultimately beside the point because they still face a competitive gauntlet that applies regardless of whether they originated in the basement of a solitary entrepreneur, a research institution, or a politically funded laboratory.

Above I mentioned the possibility, on the other hand, that infrastructure systems face fewer competitive pressures than industries do, which implies that longevity is not always or necessarily indicative of market value. If this hypothesis is correct, then infrastructure systems are political in more than one respect: not only in their origin, but also in the kinds of measures necessary to reform or replace them further down the road, as their social, cultural, and economic effects become more apparent. As it stands now, of course, few of our infrastructure systems are an ongoing subject of political analysis, but they arguably *should* be. Contrary to popular perceptions, it is likely the case that many such systems are not, nor indeed ever have been, brute economic facts.

¹⁷⁵ See Gregory Tasse, “Infrastructures and the Role of Government,” *Technological Forecasting and Social Change* Vol. 21, No 2. (1982), 163-180

Or that is what I will now contend. One immediate challenge this argument faces, however, is in substantiating a counterfactual: How can we demonstrate that our infrastructure systems are no better, necessarily, than alternative systems that have never or at least seldom been attempted? This argument would likely require both a negative and a positive element to be at all compelling—first, to demonstrate that large-scale national infrastructures are often *less* effective than generally imagined, and second, to demonstrate that other regionally oriented alternatives are equally or *more* effective. Arguably the best time to investigate and search for such evidence would be in the initial stages of a developing infrastructure, when by all appearances it still faces a modicum of competitive pressures and has not yet achieved a position of dominance. Additionally, to control for confounding variables, such a study would ideally examine one of the first major infrastructures constructed in industrial society, when alternative systems still had a viable chance of competing.

Happily, one such study *has* been conducted by Gerald Berk, who critically examines the formation of 19th century railroad systems in a work fittingly titled *Alternative Tracks*. The upshot of his work is that railroad systems, too, can be structured in different ways and according to different models. Indeed, they *were* structured in different ways throughout much of the 19th century, until the government tipped its hand decisively in favor of one particular model. The takeaway of the study is thus that political ideology, not economics, proved the definitive factor.

Railroad System-building

In his detailed historical account, Berk describes how the burgeoning railroad systems of the late 19th century generally adopted one of two growth strategies. The first was to focus on long-haul, high-volume bulk freight, which depended on a parallel commitment to national system

building—expanding railroad systems across the entire continent—and uniform ratemaking.¹⁷⁶ Notably, this strategy also catered to coastal mega-cities because it depended on “relatively large scale centralized markets.”¹⁷⁷ The second strategy focused on shorter distances and heterogeneous cargo, and it catered primarily to industries within a single region. The distinction between these two strategies was visibly apparent in their physical layout. Railroad systems that adopted the first strategy traversed the entire country, like a centipede, with lengthy trunklines and short feeders, whereas systems that adopted the second strategy often took a “hub and spoke” or “maple leaf” form, with one major trunkline road connected by intra-regional tracks of nearly equal length.¹⁷⁸

Before the turn of the century, both railroad systems had a base of customers that, though different, still slightly overlapped, and it was not yet readily apparent which system would prove its market superiority. With the benefit of hindsight, we might assume that the railroad systems which triumphed in the end—those which adopted the *first* strategy—must have been more profitable than their intraregional counterparts, but the reality is more complicated. In this case, the economic success of long-haul systems had as much to do with politics as economics, and the same is true of the short-haul systems that, a few decades into the 20th century, had at last begun to falter.

The paramount example of an interterritorial train that ended in abysmal failure was the Wabash, St. Louis, and Pacific railroad, operated and controlled by financial speculator Jay Gould. This railroad was self-consciously designed as a massive economy of *scale* stretching from coast to coast, so its failure is illustrative of the competitive weaknesses of this model. Notably, it was not

¹⁷⁶ Gerald Berk, *Alternative Tracks: The Constitution of American Industrial Order, 1865-1917* (John Hopkins University Press, 1994), 75

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, 75.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, 117.

the only such railroad system to experience a major financial failure in the latter two decades of the 19th century, but its many days in court, highly publicized as they were, grant us crucial insights into “the role of the federal courts in the political construction of the modern railroad corporation.”¹⁷⁹

Operating in a densely competitive market, Gould planned to undercut his Midwestern rivals through extensive rate cuts, but he discovered that increased consumer traffic could not sufficiently compensate for his overall loss in profit, and he was forced to assume even greater debt to meet his daunting operating costs—a strategy that made his railroad system even more vulnerable to competition and other related fluctuations in consumer demand. Additional short-term loans only aggravated his precarious position, and he eventually had no choice, in late 1883, but to petition the courts for assistance, in this case by adjusting financial obligations to corporate shareholders. This legal tactic proved fruitless at the outset, but by 1886, just three years later, it succeeded “in the hands of a federal judiciary committed to protecting national systems.”¹⁸⁰ In short order, the court all but strong-armed Wabash bondholders to reduce their financial claims on the railroad, and creditors felt compelled to trade their guaranteed income for various concessions.

When the Wabash finally exited receivership in 1889, the controlling vision of Gould still defined its character and vision, despite its obvious failures in the marketplace. For the foreseeable future, “economic instability would no longer threaten management authority or system tenacity,” and this was because “Gould had used the protective arms of the court to reconstitute fixed costs (and the rights attached to them) in order to meet the contingencies of interterritorial system building—not, as the prevailing interpretation has it, the other way around.”¹⁸¹ The reasoning of the

¹⁷⁹ Berk, *Alternative Tracks* 52.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

courts in this case is instructive. Worried as they were that the evident failure of the Wabash would threaten capital investments in other sectors, and convinced that Gould's railroad had effectively become too big to fail, the courts intervened to save a failing system from losing out to superior and better-run competitors. It was a perfect example of government supervision of infrastructure construction, which was too important to national wellbeing to leave to the vagaries of the market.

The Wabash case was not an isolated one; rather, it set a major precedent for future cases, in part because long-haul railroads usually extended well beyond state boundaries, thus requiring, when disputes with shareholders erupted, the arbitration of federal courts. The prevailing ideology of the federal justices who ruled on these cases automatically favored the kinds of railroad systems that Gould and others like him were most interested in building. According to Berk, most of these federal "judges had been appointed by the same national administrations that made huge land grants, ...tight money, and national banking—that is, *continental development*—the pillars of economic policy. In this political environment, and under the influence of an emerging elite and specialized corporate bar, Wabash became gospel."¹⁸² Thus, in what constituted a major departure from previous jurisprudence, the courts prioritized "system integrity," or the continued viability of systems "too big to fail," over legitimate claims on revenue from shareholders and lenders. These railroad systems survived, not because of their competitive superiority, but rather because of federal judges who were absolutely determined to ensure, come what may, that they would not fail.

Federal courts decided these cases, in short, in ways that favored national system-building and interregional infrastructure. In other words, the historical record does not support the conventional view that postbellum courts prioritized utilitarian reasoning over other, politically motivated ideals. More accurately, federal "courts were hard put to decide *which* utilitarian end—

¹⁸² Berk, *Alternative Tracks*, 58.

investor confidence or system integrity—to favor,” nor could they be sure which decision would prove most economically profitable over the long-term.¹⁸³ Facing such uncertainty, federal judges fell back on their own philosophical resources and issued decisions that reflected their narrow political biases. The success of many long-haul railroads thus depended on political decisions made by unelected officials, who acted unilaterally and without receiving significant input from members of the public. “It was in this sense,” Berk concludes, “that Wabash and the cases following it were decided on substantive and ideological grounds. There were no easy solutions to receivership conflicts on utilitarian or instrumental criteria alone.”¹⁸⁴ The enduring result, nevertheless, was the now-dominant perception “that large scale interterritorial systems were inevitable, efficient, and needed protection.”¹⁸⁵ However contradictory, these ideas ultimately became received wisdom.

Federal arbitration also altered the underlying incentive structure of other railroads. If the experience of the Wabash case had proven anything, it was that federal courts would likely come to the rescue of any existing system that overextended itself in a financially irresponsible fashion. In practice, this meant that conservative railroads faced a competitive disadvantage while railroads that engaged in riskier moves could only benefit from doing so. Granted, high-risk systems might renege on their financial obligations and be forced into receivership, but they could be confident that federal courts would ultimately rule in their favor. Through their Wabash decision, federal judges had effectively changed the rules of the game, rewarding behavior previously considered suspect. And the entire industry took notice: Wabash “competitors and imitators pushed regional

¹⁸³ Berk, *Alternative Tracks*, 59. Italics added.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid, 60.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid

systems well beyond formerly accepted 'national territory,' to build huge interregional systems in the 1880s," each of them "attempt[ing] to preempt the others through interterritorial expansion."¹⁸⁶

The railroads were being conditioned, not by the market, but rather by the federal courts. Contrary to the view first made popular by business historian Alfred Chandler,¹⁸⁷ railroad expansion was "shaped not so much by the necessities of railroad technology (high fixed cost) and market size as by the background conditions of capital-market institutions, credit entitlements, and national debt policy."¹⁸⁸ Evidence for this conclusion includes the many bankruptcies that transpired over the next two decades: "In the 1890s alone, one-third of all railroad mileage in the United States was in receivership," and "system after system toppled under the weight of debt and declining demand."¹⁸⁹ Nothing about this outcome was surprising. Nor was the response of federal judges, who continued to issue rulings consistent with management expectations. These decisions ensured that the "fixed costs" of railroad management, and in this case railroad debt, specifically, would be permanently slashed, or become *unfixed*, in order to keep failing systems from collapsing. It is mistaken to assume, therefore, that railroad expansion reflected the needs imposed by the fixed costs of technology. Rather, "fixed costs were adjusted to meet the contingencies of large size."¹⁹⁰

Thus, many interterritorial railroads succeeded in the end, but not on their own merits. If not "for the coercive machinery of the federal courts available to inside managers and their allies in investment banking," and if not for "friendly receivership," many of these systems would have

¹⁸⁶ Berk, *Alternative Tracks*, 61.

¹⁸⁷ See Alfred Chandler, *Railroads: The Nation's First Big Business* (New York: Harcourt, 1965).

¹⁸⁸ Berk, *Alternative Tracks*, 61.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 65.

collapsed.¹⁹¹ Indeed, most of the railroad “systems which had attempted to reorganize without receivership in the late 1880s inevitably failed” on their own terms.¹⁹² The reason they stayed afloat was because various *other* systems—political, legal, and financial—had been reconfigured to serve their needs. Their eventual triumph was thus politically rather than economically determined.

If long-haul interregional railroad systems succeeded in large measure because of the intervention of a friendly court, the short haul, or *intraregional*, systems initially succeeded in the face of intense opposition, not only from competitors, but also from state regulators. The most prominent example of this alternative approach was the Chicago Great Western Railway, which was constructed and operated by A. B. Stickney. This railroad system had a mostly checkered history, and it experienced, at turns, successes as well as failures over its lengthy 75-year tenure. However, given the myriad political challenges that it faced, the Great Western demonstrates, in terms of its overall performance, “that railroad regionalism was a practical alternative to nationalism.”¹⁹³

This begs the question, of course, why the Great Western and other regional alternatives did not, in the end, fare better over a longer timeframe, and why the national systems carried the day. One answer commonly given is that regional railroads were burdened by unique logistical costs. In particular, they faced “the complex problem of hauling heterogenous traffic—long and short-haul, carload and less-than-carload lots of freight.”¹⁹⁴ In practice this meant that more trains would, in such a regional system, potentially carry less valuable freight than their interregional counterparts, and they would receive a correspondingly smaller return on their expended costs. Thus, from an

¹⁹¹ Berk, *Alternative Tracks*, 61.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Ibid, 116.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid, 124.

efficiency standpoint, it seems all but inevitable that railroad systems like the Great Western would gradually lose ground to sleeker systems carrying homogenous freight at a much larger scale.

Under Stickney's management, however, the Great Western proved capable of offsetting many of these costs by decentralizing management tasks to smaller operational hubs, which encouraged "substantial discretion among station agents, dispatchers, and freight handlers."¹⁹⁵ In other words, the Great Western succeeded by adopting an entirely distinctive management model, one with less bureaucracy and top-down control: It "flattened its operational hierarchy and redistributed discretion from its administration to its operational periphery," and that reform enabled local supervisors to mix-and-match freight at their own discretion, or as needs arose.¹⁹⁶

One term often used by economists to describe these structural reforms is "economies of scope," which, as Berk explains, "are cost reductions resulting from the use of technologies or processes within a single operating unit to produce more than one product."¹⁹⁷ These processes may differ from one industry to another, but in a transportation context, they involve "mixing and networking, rather than segregating, heterogenous traffic distinguished by class and destination."¹⁹⁸ The Great Western succeeded, that is, by empowering local operators to load empty or half-empty train cars with whatever freight was available, combining different cargo on a single train, or combining standard cargo with human passengers. The result was a system that better served the dynamic needs of specific regions, which often faced a wide variety of transport needs on any given day. Under such a system, local businesses with a smaller quantity of freight and

¹⁹⁵ Berk, *Alternative Tracks*, 124.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid, 125.

shorter haulage distances could avail themselves of a railroad system operating in and among local communities. This regional system was thus able to serve a wider clientele, not all of whom were large enough to ship resources or products to destinations across the country. Local demand for an “economy of scope” in the transportation sector naturally remained high; the only hurdle, at least initially, were the operational difficulties, which the Great Western slowly yet efficiently overcame.

Indeed, Stickney would later claim that his railroad’s integrating of short and long-haul freight was less costly than a more segregated approach, as soon, that is, as logistical wrinkles were effectively ironed out.¹⁹⁹ This was partly achieved by ensuring that lighter trains covered shorter distances—Stickney himself imposed a 100-mile minimum—and by creating more waystations with greater access to local communities. This second innovation, specifically, facilitated vendor access to markets that had hitherto been inaccessible, increasing consumer demand by making the railroads more amenable to local needs. Thus, whatever challenges the railroad faced at its outset, it quickly recovered by tapping into new markets through a more efficient expansion of its operational *scope*: Managers found that “mixing local and through freight to intermediate traffic nodes” ensured that its “Maple Leaf [model] reduced joint costs and provided better service.”²⁰⁰

It is also notable that these structural innovations often conflicted with the scalar approach adopted by other railroads; to implement either approach effectively, each railroad system had to make careful choices about management hierarchies, formal procedures, and divisions of labor, as well as other technological provisions (e.g., how many side or feeder tracks, or switching facilities, needed constructed). Either approach was economically feasible, and they each faced unique logistical challenges, but they were also mutually exclusive. It was thus inevitable, as Berk suggests,

¹⁹⁹ Berk, *Alternative Tracks*, 126.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

that “maximum efficient scale was likely to be lower on regional than national railroads, while the efficient number of spokes was likely to be smaller on the former than feeders on the latter.”²⁰¹ It is significant today, in a related vein, that we tend to think of an “efficient” process as one that always and necessarily increases operational *scale*. Yet this particular way of defining the term reveals, if nothing else, our unreflective partiality for aggregate output over varied and more regionally dense yields. If we change the criterion utilized to determine success—adopting a more value-neutral stance on which is ideally preferable—then “efficiency” can take on very different meanings.

Why, then, was the Great Western railway incapable of maintaining its profit margins over the long-term? In answer to this question, Berk suggests that the main reason for its eventual demise was due to administrative and legal undercurrents. And the main political conflict, to be more precise, centered on the explosive issue of ratemaking decisions. This issue was an especially controversial one for Stickney’s railroad system, which traversed a highly competitive territory in the Midwest. His trains were surrounded by collaborative “pools” of interregional railroads with vastly different needs and interests, and for this reason, conflict was all but a foregone conclusion. One constant source of controversy was the fact that pooling agreements imposed standardized rates favorable to “through traffic,” rates that tended to “bypass the regional markets on the Missouri River the Great Western had labored to cultivate.”²⁰² Stickney realized that the best way to compete with what amounted, in his view, to a discriminatory rate-making system was to increase the productive capacity of regional producers, and of grain and livestock producers in particular. With this goal in mind, he temporarily reduced transport rates for select agricultural products.

²⁰¹ Berk, *Alternative Tracks*, 129.

²⁰² *Ibid*, 135.

Did this new rate change itself constitute a “discriminatory” practice as defined by the 1887 Interstate Commerce Act? Members of the Chicago Livestock Exchange leveled this accusation, and Stickney was compelled to defend his actions before the Interstate Commerce Commission in 1904. Throughout this testimony, Stickney argued that his new rates did in fact correlate with haulage costs, due to other structural reforms the railroad had implemented. But the ICC, after considering his report, deemed the relevant data to be “inconclusive” and ruled in favor of the Chicago Livestock Exchange, over and above repeated appeals.²⁰³ This ruling was ironic, however, given that the stated purpose of the Interstate Commerce Act was, in the words of one Cedar Rapids packer, T. M. Sinclair, “to prevent the building up of some great cities and some great manufactures at the expense of the country at large and to give local industries a fair chance.”²⁰⁴ And this was because most of the rate discrimination prior to this point had consistently favored interregional systems.

Although the Supreme Court would later issue a ruling, in the 1908 case *ICC v. Chicago Great Western Railway*, consistent with the obvious intent of the Commerce Act, in its aftermath, regional owners like Stickney came to the settled conviction that more drastic reforms were necessary. Legal steps needed to be taken to reconcile the intent of the law, which was to protect regional producers from vested interests, with its strict and narrow wording, which focused on rate-making changes and other price fluctuations that sometimes were, in practice, reflective of genuine competition. To correct this confusion, Stickney drafted a sample rate schedule that accounted for differences in cargo types and haulage distances, but his proposals were never adopted by the ICC.

²⁰³ Berk, *Alternative Tracks*, 137.

²⁰⁴ Quoted in Ibid, 138-139. See also David Potter, “Discriminatory Freight Rates: Implications of the Interstate Commerce Commission’s Regulatory Powers,” *The University of Chicago Law Review*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (1947), 177-188.

Stickney also experimented with a new corporate form, one with a “condominium of ownership and management,” which gave shareholders permanent securities and considerable say over corporate decisions through a board of trustees and a separate finance committee.²⁰⁵ This structural change served the railroad well until at least the first decade of the 20th century, when financiers and investors began to voice their doubts about the “unorthodox” approach characteristic of the Great Western. By this point, the earlier experience of the Wabash case had set new standards for the entire industry; the predominant conclusion was that a more scalar approach to railroad construction was a safer investment, given the likelihood of a favorable judicial process.

The Great Western gradually languished, therefore, because the railroad industry began to modify its character as a consequence of legal and political decision-making; although Stickney had won a temporary victory in the Supreme Court, the political and structural ideals reflected in earlier legislation now seemed passe; such ideals no longer reflected the expectations of system operators, financial institutions, and shareholders, all of whom had been conditioned by previous cases. Great Western finances began to suffer, then, “not for reasons of inefficiency, but rather because [it] ran counter to prevailing norms at the turn of the century. Its defining features—corporate independence, regionalism, economies of scope, ratemaking for intensive development, and the condominium of ownership and management—fell beyond the bounds of railroad orthodoxy.”²⁰⁶

One further point is relevant to this discussion. We might suppose the Interstate Commerce Act was, like the Wabash case, an example of government officials arbitrarily picking winners and losers in the economy, and this may explain why the Great Western survived as long as it did. A reasonable assumption, in other words, is that the Wabash case rectified a partial system, restoring

²⁰⁵ Berk, *Alternative Tracks*, 142.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 149.

a semblance of fairness to an otherwise imbalanced regulatory playing field. If this hypothesis is correct, then interregional success decades later may be an accurate indication of market efficiency; the latter railroads succeeded, in this view, only when a discriminatory market was first remedied.

This hypothesis, however, applies contemporary theories and categories back in time, and it imposes an anachronistic reading on 19th century political economy. Railroad corporations in the so-called “Gilded Age” had a mostly ambiguous status and had not yet cemented their place as independent “legal persons.”²⁰⁷ There were still ongoing debates over the degree to which incorporated businesses were public entities dependent on and answerable to the government, or were instead private actors free to pursue their own self-interested aims.²⁰⁸ Even in our own era, legal scholars continue to puzzle over how to classify and think about corporations, and thus also how to regulate them effectively,²⁰⁹ but these debates were naturally more public and acrimonious in this formative period. Compounding these controversies, moreover, were related questions over public infrastructure: Elected officials were involved in national railroad construction from the very beginning, and they funded these infrastructure projects with national and state subsidy bonds. This raised questions as to what these infrastructures should look like and what they should accomplish. At stake, potentially, was the failure or success of an expanding national economy, and that was not something to be left to chance. At stake were distinct empirical and normative visions.

²⁰⁷ For a detailed historical account, see Adam Winkler, *We the Corporations: How American Businesses Won Their Civil Rights* (New York: Liveright, 2018).

²⁰⁸ See, for instance, the majority opinion issued by Judge Stephen Field in *Munn v. Illinois*, 94 U.S. 113 (1876). Such debates were still ongoing in the early 20th century. See, for instance, John Dewey, “The Historic Background of Corporate Legal Personality,” *The Yale Law Journal* Vol. 35, No. 6 (1926): 655-673.

²⁰⁹ For a thoughtful essay on this issue, see David Ciepley, “Beyond Public and Private: Toward a Political Theory of the Corporation,” *American Political Science Review* Vol. 107, No. 1 (2013): 139-158.

Debates over national and regional transportation thus involved a wide array of contested “assumptions about property, the corporation, railroad economy, and regulatory design,” as well as related conflicts over “citizenship, corporate entitlements, economic efficiency, and market landscape.”²¹⁰ At this particular moment in time, few participants in these debates believed that politics was a wholly irrelevant consideration, much less that government had no substantive role in making such decisions. That would have been a ludicrous proposition given that state and local governments were already heavily invested in the transcontinental railroad. A perennial point of controversy, of course, was the degree to which government *should* be involved—whether it should play a more passive or active role—but not *whether* it would be at all. At issue, that is, were the specific values and outcomes that would inform infrastructure construction and management. In this respect, too, 19th century debates over emerging railroad systems are richly informative, and the Interstate Commerce Act, and the Granger laws before it, need to be understood in this context.

Railroad Politics

Conflicts over national ratemaking saw two political ideologies pitted against each other. Berk helpfully describes the interregional strategy exemplified by the Wabash Railroad as “corporate liberalism.” This approach had several defining characteristics. In terms of industrial organization, it transformed railroads into “huge national firms, hierarchically organized, and characterized by the separation of property ownership from managerial control.”²¹¹ It entailed, in short, massive “economies of scale... serving primarily high-volume, long-haul freight between

²¹⁰ Berk, *Alternative Tracks*, 76, 77.

²¹¹ *Ibid*, 13.

relatively large centralized national markets.”²¹² And its corollary was urban concentration: Most freight was headed across, rather than for, what we now generally refer to as “flyover country.”

Corporate liberalism also had a strong ideological component and generally conceived of market development as beyond “the will of collective or democratic choice.”²¹³ In this particular view, government was not the sole cause for the existence of corporations, but it was responsible, nonetheless, for establishing and maintaining a legal environment amenable to profitmaking activity, and one of its central tasks was to prevent “excessive wealth in the modern corporation through regulated monopoly.”²¹⁴ Government should ensure that powerful monopolies will not exploit everyday citizens in their primary capacity as *consumers*, whom they nominally serve. And the purpose of regulation is to balance, somehow, “the interests of consumers in redistribution with those of the corporation in accumulation.”²¹⁵ Informing this position is a conception of the market as a system composed mainly of urbanized consumers, on one hand, and large industries on the other. If the government is performing its duties, then these latter industries will improve our shared quality of life and will further the common good while pursuing their own narrow interests.

This viewpoint proved especially popular at the close of the 19th century and the dawning of the 20th, when surging productivity and a steady stream of technological advances seemed to augur a more hopeful future. During the heart of the industrial era, for example, novelists like Edward Bellamy suggested that a technological utopia was waiting just around the corner—a brave new world in which a regimented labor force would reap countless benefits from a more efficient, and

²¹² Berk, *Alternative Tracks*, 13

²¹³ Ibid, 13-14.

²¹⁴ Ibid, 14.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

increasingly national, system of production and distribution.²¹⁶ A few decades later, concern over the looming specter of corporate control—and demands for top-down state direction—began to dissolve rapidly in the face of material improvements that “corporate liberalism” seemed to offer.

In the end, “the prospect of unhindered personal consumption and use of goods” ultimately proved so satisfying, according to technology scholar Langdon Winner, that few parties even expressed concerns that corporate size and power had increased enormously.²¹⁷ For many consumers, it was of little import “how electricity was made or carried over a vast electric grid as long as you could flick a switch and have the lights go on. It did not matter exactly what Kellogg was putting in the cornflakes as long as the cereal tasted good and seemed to contribute to strong bones and healthy bodies.”²¹⁸ If individuals were thriving as consumers, then behemoth corporations were behaving as they should, and all was well with the world. Any thought or impression “that ordinary people [in ordinary regions] might want to have control over production or have a say in decision beyond those of the immediate enjoyment of goods and services seemed out of the question.”²¹⁹ Such concerns were deeply at variance with the core values of corporate liberalism.

The second and alternative approach, by contrast, is what Berk describes as “regional republicanism.” In terms of industrial organization, regional republicans favored moderately sized railroads devoted to specific regions—railroads “characterized internally by flatter hierarchies and shared authority between owners and managers.”²²⁰ It also pursued “economies of scope” within

²¹⁶ Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward, From 2000 to 1887* (Bedford, MA: Applewood Books, 2000).

²¹⁷ Langdon Winner, *The Whale and the Reactor: A Search for Limits in an Age of High Technology* (Chicago: University Chicago Press, 1986), 93.

²¹⁸ Winner, *The Whale and the Reactor*, 93.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Berk, *Alternative Tracks*, 14.

self-contained territories, and it had a noticeable effect, in addition, on development patterns, reducing concentration in cities and fostering productivity in regions that were still largely rural.

Regional republicanism, too, had a strong ideological component and its own distinctive hierarchy of values. It combined the civic humanism of the American Framers with a populist sensibility, and it insisted that corporations were in some sense legally determined. Advocates of this second position argued that market infrastructure should further republican norms, which in this case entailed a “decentralized market” in which distinct regions could still function with limited autonomy.²²¹ Rather than conceive of individuals as primarily *consumers*, this alternative vision affirmed the value of individuals acting in concert, or in community, as self-reliant *producers*.

Regional republicans of one sort or another were the driving force behind the Granger Laws and the Interstate Commerce Act. Both measures, importantly, were first intended to rectify market “discrimination,” a term that becomes comprehensible only when set against this wider ideological backdrop. The argument, in short, was that national railroad construction discriminated against certain entire regions; the government was promoting a system that would systematically favor large industries in large cities over the small-to-medium firms operating in small communities across America. As an example, members of the early Granger movement in Illinois argued that railroad rate schedules should “promote ‘home manufactures’ in developing regions,” which meant in practice that the government should “ensure that ‘one industry should not be protected at the expense of the other,’ and that all shippers would have equal access to improved transportation.”²²² What regional groups wanted was railroad infrastructure that facilitated a more even playing field.

²²¹ Berk, *Alternative Tracks*, 14.

²²² *Ibid*, 79.

The merchants and farmers who participated in the Granger movement did so for more than narrowly sectional reasons; beyond their pressing financial interests, they directed most of their attention to the various market systems that were then rapidly taking shape, and their avowed hope was that the resulting configurations would not incapacitate them—or would not, at long last, inhibit them from pursuing their own distinctive conception of a good life. Their staunch support for a certain type of railroad system—of the sort exemplified by the Great Western, for instance—stemmed more from their “vision of regional development than their fixed interests in one or another rate structure.”²²³ Looking well into the future, they rejected any visualization of their region “as a mere primary products tributary to eastern and overseas market.”²²⁴ Regardless of how well such a model would serve them initially, they did not believe it would benefit them over a longer time-span. And it did not comport with their normative ideal of self-sufficient productivity.

As early as 1874, the Granger movement began to enjoy major legislative victories, and the midwestern states of Minnesota, Iowa, Wisconsin, and Illinois appointed regulatory commissions to halt discriminatory practices that weakened regional productivity and, in effect if not intent, prevented alternative systems of infrastructure from seriously gaining steam. However, “no sooner were regional republican norms written into law than they were attacked on corporate liberal grounds,” and the “most intransigent of railroads,” eager to preserve a system that favored their interests, made “a concerted effort to shift the terrain of debate from the construction of market landscape to the distribution of income.”²²⁵ This was, in effect, a conflict over political values.

²²³ Berk, *Alternative Tracks*, 80.

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ Ibid, 81.

While regional republicans like the Grangers were motivated chiefly by concerns over market landscape, corporate liberals focused instead on the effects of state regulation on existing railroad companies, particularly those that benefited from lenient oversight. For members of the Granger movement, by contrast, corporate profit was an important issue, but also a secondary one. Since railroads had been legally incorporated by the government, and since these railroad systems were partially financed via public subsidies, it seemed all but a foregone conclusion that the public should be able, in their distinctive regions and states, to provide substantive input on how these systems should work and whom they should benefit. The Grangers were not suggesting, on the other hand, that the government should *own* the railroads; they were not proto-Marxists. But they firmly believed, nevertheless, that the public had a legitimate interest in the political consequences of publicly financed corporations, as well as the wider infrastructures they were busy creating. If we were to translate this argument into modern terms, the Grangers were essentially arguing that publicly financed companies like Amazon, and larger infrastructure systems like the internet, are within the rightful purview of the public. These companies and systems would not exist in their current form unless they had first received public financing and support, which means they have a somewhat ambiguous status in the market. They are not public entities merely, but nor are they strictly private. Thus, citizens have a right to assess their performance and demand modifications accordingly, assuming they make sensible accommodations for market constraints and feasibility.

The regional alternative was in this case entirely feasible, as observed above; there were, we might say, multiply realizable systems of railroad infrastructure. The only real question was whether state and local governments would, with supporting institutions, make sufficient allowances for them, or whether they would instead favor the national interregional systems. Or that was the argument of railroad industrialists like Stickney, who notably tethered “his private

interests to a public vision of balanced regional development,” and who would later form a number of alliances, toward that end, with “agrarian, mercantile, and manufacturing regionalists.”²²⁶

Stickney would ultimately argue, in a work titled *The Railroad Problem*, that the Granger conflict had proven the need for a sensible approach capable of balancing the rights of railroad companies “to a fair rate of return on their investment,” without which they could hardly operate, with the rights of regional producers “to fair and nondiscriminatory rates.”²²⁷ This was, in fact, the explicit aim of the Granger laws—namely, “to grant parity to the intraregional short haul.”²²⁸ The purpose of Granger legislation was not to redistribute wealth or earnings, but was rather to ensure that existing regulations would not, in actual practice, privilege the large metropolis at the expense of outlying regions, or else show partiality to one political framework over and against another.

Through a painstaking analysis of Granger rate schedules—along with the political arguments that formed its immediate backdrop—Stickney demonstrated how discrimination typically occurred. His conclusion was that interregional railroads had, in response to competition, lowered their rates on national freight to a point well beyond the price of transporting them, but they were later able to recuperate their losses through a proportionate increase on local or regional freight. Thus, the remedy proposed by the Grangers and briefly enacted into law was intended, not to fix prices, but rather to prevent discriminatory rate-setting; the laws still allowed the railroads enormous discretion in their pricing decisions, enabling them to respond appropriately to shifting operational costs, or else to obvious fluctuations in supply and demand. If national carriers, however, were “forced by law to stop cross-subsidizing long-haul competition with monopoly rents

²²⁶ Berk, *Alternative Tracks*, 85.

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ Ibid, 86.

from short haul traffic,” they would inevitably be compelled “to raise long-haul rates to compensate for regulated losses.”²²⁹ The purpose of the Granger laws was thus to ensure that long-haul rates would more accurately reflect market conditions, a demand that seemed reasonable given that railroad practices had a profound effect on regional development, and given that these railroads had received ample financial support and were therefore public beneficiaries. The substance of Stickney’s analysis, by the way, was later confirmed by a non-partisan study conducted in 1903.²³⁰

The Interstate Commerce Act was a similar attempt, like the Granger Laws, to eliminate pricing discrimination for the sake of regional objectives, only this time through federal legislation. Although the specific trigger for this Act was collusion between Standard Oil and the Pennsylvania Railroad, it engaged the same political issues featured in the earlier Granger controversy. It was clear, in any case, that a critical inflection point had arrived. Regionalists in Congress argued that railroads could, under certain conditions, promote “republican ideals of a virtuous and independent citizenry”; if implemented properly, they might be used to further a republican vision of a society comprised “‘of little towns and cities,’ each a local center of manufacturing serving the surrounding countryside, and providing a market for its industrial produce.”²³¹ This vision still acknowledges the value of market expansion, but it subordinates the latter to the aim of regional development.

Again, regional republicans believed that a frank appraisal of how the railroads emerged, profiting as they did from public support, was a necessary plank in their argument. Here is how one such legislator, Senator Vance from South Carolina, poignantly put it: “To give [the railroads] artificial life and perpetual existence, to give them the power to condemn private property of the

²²⁹ Berk, *Alternative Tracks*, 86.

²³⁰ Ibid, 86-87.

²³¹ Henry Carey, quoted in Berk, *Alternative Tracks*, 92.

citizen for their use, and to give them exclusive control of the highway for their vehicles, and then to permit them to go uncontrolled as absolutely as though they were private citizens in the management of their business would be a monstrous proceeding indeed. It would be the story of Frankenstein converted into actual fact.”²³² It seemed only reasonable, in this construal of things, that the railroads should still be answerable to the public to one degree or another, given their political origin. And citizens deserved equal treatment no matter where they happened to reside.

In this case, however, whatever perverse outcomes developed because of major pricing inequities affected, not just individuals, but entire regions of the country. The rights of individuals were in jeopardy, regionalists insisted, precisely because the functioning capacities of communities were likewise in peril. This point was made abundantly clearly in the Collum Committee report, which was published by the Interstate Commerce Committee in 1886. As explicitly outlined in this summary document, railroad “pools” and other forms of corporate collusion had discriminated unjustly “between persons, places, commodities or popular descriptions of traffic.”²³³ Their practical effect, therefore, “was to build up the strong at the expense of the weak, to give the larger dealer an advantage over the smaller trader, to make capital count for more than individual credit and enterprise, to concentrate business at great commercial centers, to necessitate combinations and aggregations of capital, to foster monopoly, to encourage the growth and extend the influence of corporate power, and to throw the control of the commerce of the country more and more in the hands of the few.”²³⁴ Maybe all of these outcomes were ultimately worth it. After all, railroad rate-setting had, on the positive side of the ledger, resulted in “the most efficient service and the lowest

²³² Quoted in Berk, *Alternative Tracks*, 93.

²³³ Quoted in *Ibid*, 99.

²³⁴ *Ibid*.

rates know in the world,” a benefit many citizens enjoyed in their specific capacity as consumers. But interregional railroads did not serve everyone, and their benefits came at the price of regional productivity. Was it worth it? Different parties answered this question in different ways, reflecting different systems of values. The question was indisputably political, however, and proponents of regionalism, for their part, issued appeals thoroughly steeped in republican categories and norms.

We can draw at least three conclusions from these episodes. The first is that railroad-system construction was a political issue as much as an economic one. Each railroad system could pursue one of two possible strategies, both difficult to implement without institutional support, but both capable of functioning effectively when nested within a favorable legal and political order. And each of these strategies, second, reflected different political values—about, for example, citizens and corporations, as well as the relative merits of consumption, urbanization, and regional productivity. Railroad construction did not occur spontaneously, nor was it determined strictly by fixed technology and other market contingencies. It involved rather a major clash of political ideals.

The third relevant point is that corporate liberalism prevailed partly because its ideals were often equated, via *ex post facto* reasoning, with strict economic necessity. This argument hinged on the assumption that regional or republican alternatives were ultimately impracticable, and that their own evident failures, in case after case, were somehow irrelevant. This position is still the prevailing orthodoxy. We often view contemporary systems of infrastructure as brute facts of natures derived from unassailable scientific laws. They are “determined” by the fixed costs of technology, or else by other market realities outside the scope of government. One effect of this fatalistic presumption is to naturalize a system that reflects, in reality, a certain set of political values, privileging one specific party in what should in all fairness remain an open conversation.

Is the Railroad Case Generalizable?

Much has occurred economically since the late-19th century, so it is fair to wonder whether we can safely generalize this case study and apply it to the intricacies of our present moment. There were specific challenges relevant in a railroad context that might be theoretically less applicable in other industries, and perhaps even less so in other economic eras. One such challenge, for example, is in integrating economies of scale with economies of scope. The early railroad systems faced a somewhat binary choice: They could serve a national or a regional market. The physical layout of their infrastructure was evidently less amenable to a more balanced, multidimensional approach.

Many industries today likewise face a difficult choice in whether to pursue economies of scale or scope; the systems in which many of them operate, moreover, often nudge them in one direction or another, rewarding or else penalizing certain techniques and methods. But should we assume that every industry faces an equally binary decision? It seems at least conceivable, anyway, that some infrastructure systems may facilitate a more neutral, balanced approach, in which case it may be possible to further national and regional aims all at once. Why assume a zero-sum world?

We can hypothetically imagine a world where our infrastructure systems somehow strike a perfect balance between regional and national, or even global, productivity requirements; nothing about our present structures are necessarily fixed or determinate. It seems likely, however, that existing systems will generally tilt in one direction or another, given the inherent tension between these two different approaches. And over the last century, that is precisely what we have seen: Productivity has perceptibly shifted from local communities or regions to the megalopolis, and then it shifted once again to the rest of the developing world, where productive labor has been detached, through vast managerial bureaucracies and global supply chains, from local decision-making and control. Indeed, we focused in the last chapter on the failing condition of local communities across

America, but we could just as easily have referenced trends on the global scene, where rapid urbanization and growing divisions between town and country have likewise occasioned a populist reaction.²³⁵ We can see this in popular support for Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, for example, as well as support for the Syriza party in Greece and the Podemos party in Spain. Even the anti-immigrant parties throughout the rest of Europe are at least partly organized in opposition to globalization.²³⁶

It would be foolish to ascribe the shape and form of these developments to a single explanatory cause. But some of them, at least, can be safely attributed to the interplay between technological advances and our prevailing systems of infrastructure. Many if not most of our infrastructure systems embody the ideals that Berk describes as corporate liberalism, and they have for quite some time. Once again it is Winner, a sociologist who specializes in technological development, who helpfully summarizes a trend that has been long in the making: He writes, “The designs of all kinds of technologies—electrical power plants, water systems, highways, and vehicles that run on them, the machines and chemicals of agribusiness farming, supermarkets and the products they stock, television, radio, computers and many others—embody centralization in material form. Artifacts in common use presuppose relatively few centers of production and distribution. In addition, many of our daily activities rely upon systems that we do not make, control, or know how to repair when they break down.”²³⁷ In short, our infrastructure systems have

²³⁵ For data on global urbanization, see Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, “World Urbanization Prospects, The 2014 Revision,” *United Nations* (2015): <https://population.un.org/wup/Publications/Files/WUP2014-Report.pdf>. See also Ishaan Tharoor, “The Growing Urban-rural Divide in Global Politics,” *The Washington Post*, August 9, 2018: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2018/08/09/growing-urban-rural-divide-global-politics/>.

²³⁶ For an analysis of the economic factors common to all these cases, see Dani Rodrick, “Populism and the Economics of Globalization,” *The National Bureau of Economic Research* (2017): <https://www.nber.org/papers/w23559>

²³⁷ Winner, *The Whale and the Reactor*, 94.

been expressly designed in ways that preclude localized processes of command and control; to function as intended, they apparently require that corporate and governmental agencies accumulate ever-larger concentrations of power and service ever-larger masses of consumers.

Importantly, evidence of political efforts to “tip the scales” in favor of large-scale businesses will always be most apparent in the construction of infrastructure—material or otherwise—because the latter are necessarily constitutive of the shape and form of economic *systems*. In the United States, our infrastructures make some actions considerably more costly—like intra-regional cooperation—while lowering the costs of large-scale, cross-country operations. Companies at the forefront of the *construction* of new infrastructures, on the other hand, will likely need the active support of government to mitigate investment risks, which is precisely what we see in the railroad industry; political intervention was necessary to tip the scales in favor of interregional tracks. In the same manner, public support for national telecommunications, the interstate highway system, and the internet has been more blatantly obvious than in other industries, and invariably this public sponsorship has prioritized national integration over regional diversity and productivity.²³⁸

Once an infrastructure system has been firmly set in place, large-scale businesses in other industries can significantly reduce their costs without needing, in every case, direct political support. Thus, public investment in the railroad industry in the late-19th century had a direct impact on the infamous “robber barons” that swiftly emerged around the same period; the irony is that Andrew Carnegie, famous for his support of laissez-faire policies, clearly benefited from the

²³⁸ For the history of telecommunications—and how debates over worries about regional autonomy and control were ultimately resolved by the federal government in favor of national integration—see Roger MacDougall, *The People's Network: The Political Economy of the Telephone in the Gilded Age* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014). For an analysis of how the interstate highway system deliberately prioritized national integration over regional and local diversity, see Howard Kunstler, *The Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America's Man-Made Landscape* (New York: Touchstone, 1994).

interregional railroad systems that the government had explicitly privileged, thereby decreasing many of the costs of exporting his steel and providing him with an edge over regional competitors. Similarly, the interstate highway system benefited the housing industry, which rushed to construct housing developments in distant suburban enclaves, and an auto industry that rushed to meet rising consumer demand. In both cases, interregional infrastructure benefited large-scale suppliers over their smaller competitors, and it is little wonder that in these heady days of postwar economic expansion, market “efficiency” was equated with higher output of standardized products. There were a few exceptions, of course, where even interregional infrastructure was not capable, in and of itself, of necessitating scalar expansion; the agricultural industry, for example, still needed intensive governmental involvement to transition it away from family-owned farms and toward large-scale, monocultural production.²³⁹ But in general, infrastructure changes dramatically altered the cost-benefit ratio that businesses faced, rewarding large-scale over regionally based production.

Indeed, in pursuit of greater market integration and efficiency, the U.S. economy has seen steady consolidation over the past few decades, with entire sectors now dominated by fewer and fewer large firms. The data on this subject is as startling as it is sobering to contemplate, revealing significant declines in the number of smaller independent firms in the construction industry, in manufacturing, in retail, in finance and banking, and in a host of other market sectors, in all major regions and in most major metropolitan areas.²⁴⁰ All signs indicate that the economy is becoming ever-more top-heavy and centralized as an unremitting glut of mergers and acquisitions gradually

²³⁹ For an example of the mentality behind these interventions, see Jules B. Billard, “The Revolution in American Agriculture,” *National Geographic*, Vol. 137, No. 2 (1970), 147-185; and F. M. Esfandiary, “Homo Sapiens, the Manna Maker,” *New York Times*, August 1975.

²⁴⁰ See Stacy Mitchell, “Monopoly Power and the Decline of Small Business: The Case for Restoring America’s Once Robust Antitrust Policies,” *Institute for Self-Reliance*, August 2016, 9-11. See also Heather Long, “Where are All the Startups? U.S. Entrepreneurship near 40-Year Low,” *CNN Money*, September 8, 2016; and J.D. Harrison, “The Decline of American Entrepreneurship—in Five Charts,” *Washington Post*, February 12, 2015.

amass power in the hands of a few powerful corporations, which now exert control over an enormous swath of the market. By even the most generous of estimates,²⁴¹ “a growing number of industries in the U.S. are dominated by a shrinking number of companies,”²⁴² and what is arguably more concerning is that many of the largest companies are now merging with *one another*, thereby augmenting the significant scalar advantages they already possess.²⁴³ The wider impact of these trends, when measured as an aggregate phenomenon, leaves little room for doubt about what is occurring: As finance scholar Gustavo Grullon recently established, over 75 percent of U.S. industries saw major increases in concentration over the first two decades of the 21st century.²⁴⁴

Again, our national systems of infrastructure have at least partially contributed to these developments. Even digital systems like the internet have helped centralize the marketplace. It should come as no surprise, for instance, that as of 2017, “the five most valuable public companies in the world by market capitalization,” according to market researchers Patrick Barwise and Leo Watkins, are “Apple, Alphabet (Google), Microsoft, Amazon, and Facebook,” all of which stand at the forefront of the digital revolution.²⁴⁵ And this is hardly an anomalous occurrence: One recent, well-

²⁴¹ U.S. antitrust enforced loosened the guidelines for what qualifies as a “highly concentrated industry” in 2010. See Rachel Brandenburger and Joseph Matelis, “The 2010 U.S. Horizontal Merger Guidelines: A Historical and International Perspective,” *Antitrust* Vol. 25, No. 3 (2011).

²⁴² Theo Francis And Ryan Knutson, “Wave of Megadeals Tests Antitrust Limits in U.S.” *The Wall Street Journal*, October 2015: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/wave-of-megadeals-tests-antitrust-limits-in-u-s-1445213306>

²⁴³ See Olivia Laveccia, “With New Wave of Mega-Mergers, the Big Aim to Get Bigger,” *Institute for Local Self-Reliance*, November 2015: <https://ilsr.org/new-wave-of-mega-mergers-means-the-big-get-bigger/>.

²⁴⁴ Gustavo Grullon et al., “Are U.S. Industries Becoming More Concentrated?” *Swiss Finance Institute Research Paper* No. 19-41 (2017): <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/138f/249c43bfec315227a242b305b9764d57a0af.pdf>.

²⁴⁵ Patrick Barwise and Leo Watkins, *The Evolution of Digital Dominance: How and Why We Got to GAFA in Digital Dominance: The Power of Google, Amazon, Facebook, and Apple*, edited by Martin Moore and Damian Tambini (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 21.

publicized study conducted by researchers at the Becker Friedman Institute found that market concentration since the late 1970s has been most pronounced in three broad sectors of the economy—namely, services, wholesale, and retail—where information and communication technologies (ICT) have enabled companies to centralize operations, encroach on local markets, and eliminate homegrown competitors.²⁴⁶ Notably, the “super-firm” businesses that utilize or exploit these technologies were also able to increase aggregate demand in each respective industry. In this respect, our digital infrastructures fortify businesses of a gigantic scale, furnishing consumers with many more goods and services—as we would expect in any economy of scale—but also ensuring that the relevant industries become more concentrated and thus more under centralized control.

An interesting conclusion drawn by the authors of this study is that market concentration is less a result of deteriorating competition as a result of “entry barriers,” as some economists have suggested, than scalar advantages associated with the utilization of technological systems, and of the utilization of ICT systems in particular.²⁴⁷ This means that the way we implement and utilize these technologies—how we construct the infrastructures in which they operate—does in fact have profound implications. A scalar system will inevitably centralize operations in larger urban enclaves, and it will tend to weaken, therefore, the many diverse localized systems that precede it.

Corporate liberalism of one form or another has been the prevailing ideology guiding and steering national economic development since at least the early 20th century, and over this period, regional or republican thought has largely atrophied. “Justified as the most efficient and productive way of doing things,” Winner notes, “the tendency has been to allow corporations, public utilities,

²⁴⁶ Chang-Tai Hsieh and Esteban Rossi-Hansberg, “The Industrial Revolution in Services,” *University of Chicago*, Becker Friedman Institute for Economics Working Paper No. 2019-87.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 4-5.

public authorities, and government agencies to manage communications, energy, manufacturing, transportation, and other areas of material culture.... While each specific area of production and distribution has its own history and distinctive mode of organization, the overall pattern is clear. The social history of modern technology shows a tendency—perhaps better termed a strategy—to reduce the number of centers at which action is initiated and control is exercised.”²⁴⁸ Of the many likely outcomes resulting from such a “strategy,” we can include developments like urbanization, rural brain-drain, financialization, corporate concentration, and hierarchically organized firms.

Not every such outcome, of course, has always been positively associated with corporate liberalism. For example, if we consider the last two data points on the inventory just cited—the dominance of hierarchical firms in increasingly concentrated industries—we should acknowledge that the experience of the past century is a mostly checkered one; corporate executives have adopted different organizational and management approaches as different requirements surfaced. It would be simplistic to suggest that national firms in the 1970s were just as concentrated as the “robber-baron” trusts of the late 19th and early 20th century. Nor is it accurate to suggest they were equally hierarchical. Thus, even if corporate liberalism has largely prevailed throughout this period, some of its standard indicators have fallen behind, only to draw level again in the last few decades.

There are, however, several plausible explanations for this patchy record. First, efficiency gains in economies of scale do not accrue with equal certainty in every industry, none of which are immune, besides, from the law of diminishing returns. Many large-scale, hierarchically organized firms lack the flexibility needed to innovate and adapt rapidly to changing conditions in the market, a defect that stems in large measure from their overly bureaucratized structure. We saw this earlier in our summary comparison of the Wabash and Great Western railroads, respectively. The latter

²⁴⁸ Winner, *The Whale and the Reactor*, 93.

system proved more adept at responding appropriately to varying transport needs across different times and spaces, and the reason was because it permitted greater lower-management discretion. There is often a conflict, in other words, between higher efficiency gains and regional innovation, and it was this insight specifically that shook the business world in the middle of the 20th century: Many businesses discovered, as if for the first time, that they needed to balance entrepreneurial flexibility and an innovation-friendly environment with managerial competence and authority.²⁴⁹

Growing realization of this trade-off motivated a slew of organizational reforms in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, as evident in in the advertising industry, for example.²⁵⁰ These reforms were particularly necessary in industries with a higher creativity demand—industries in which companies still make regular efforts to balance puritanical regimentation with bohemian innovation, endeavoring to strike a perfect balance, somehow, between Theory X management styles, which tend to be more top-down and authoritarian, with Theory Y management styles, where the goal is to encourage more engagement and participation from employees.²⁵¹ It seems likely, in any event, that companies with regionalized control and more decentralized processes are in most industries the exceptions that prove the rule. And we can be confident of this point because creativity and innovation are not always in high demand in every industry, and because the intent of these organizational reforms is still, in the main, “liberal” or “corporate” rather than “regional” or

²⁴⁹ The gold-standard book on the topic is Thomas Peters and Robert Waterman, *In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best-Run Companies* (New York: Harper Business, 2004). For a different perspective, see Alfred P. Sloan, Jr., *My Years with General Motors* (New York: Doubleday, 1963). For more on large-scale inefficiencies, see Kirkpatrick Sale, *Human Scale* (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1980).

²⁵⁰ For an insightful and captivating analysis of organizational changes in the advertising industry, see Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997).

²⁵¹ The distinction between Theory X and Y comes from Douglas McGregor, who himself drew from Abraham Maslow. See Douglas McGregor, *The Human Side of Enterprise* (New York: McGraw-Hill Companies, 1976).

“republican.” The goal is to simulate and satisfy consumer demands, not to revitalize regional productivity. The chosen “means” for achieving this liberal “end” may vary in any given era or sector, but they still drift or trend toward corporate regimentation, as the historical record attests.

Our ability to distinguish between ends and means is relevant, too, when assessing the second reason why industry-wide concentration has proceeded in such an erratic pattern: In brief, political and ideological responses to corporate power have hardly been consistent or uniform. Sometimes anti-trust laws and corporate regulation have been much stricter, and other times they have been much laxer. The degree of political variability we see from one economic era to another, however, is still consistent with the kind of corporatized liberalism that Berk describes for us.

Economists and policymakers on the “corporate” or “liberal” side of the ledger have often disagreed over the best mechanisms for addressing market-based power, and thus how closely government policymakers should regulate economic activity. In the first four decades of the 20th century, the tendency at the national level was to strike down progressive legislation intended to oversee or remediate market activity, even when expressly ratified by democratic officials acting in state and local governments. *Lochner*-era jurisprudence employed standard liberal rhetoric to defend the economic status quo and neutralized efforts to grapple with the corporate giants then emerging. This remarkable shift in jurisprudence was nothing if not ironic, of course, given that many of these same corporations had already been privileged by this very same court system.

This early conflict between legislators and judges, progressive and conservative factions, was largely an intramural one. Both parties drank from a much larger ideological well, even if they disagreed, ultimately, over the best means to implement their vision. As progressive thinkers understood it, “American judges steeped in laissez-faire economic theory... acted on their own economic and political biases to strike down legislation that threatened to burden corporations or

disturb the existing economic hierarchy.”²⁵² Progressives believed the rights of individuals in their role as consumers were paramount,²⁵³ while conservatives defended a system they regarded as “natural” from its would-be reformers.²⁵⁴ Yet both factions shared a social imaginary comprised for the most part of consuming individuals and large corporations, which assumed virtual control over production. As republican theorist and political philosopher Michael Sandel argues, describing the consumerist mentality of the early 20th century, “the Progressives who urged Americans to identify with their roles as consumers rather than producers helped turn American politics toward a political economy of growth and distributive justice whose full expression lay decades in the future.”²⁵⁵ As self-producing communities were mostly absent from this framework, progressive reformers came to see industrial concentration as a potentially positive development—so long, that is, as American consumers still reaped the benefits of mass production and plummeting prices.

Unsurprisingly, then, industrial concentration continued apace during the early decades of the 20th century, and even ratcheted up in the “roaring 20s” as federal legislatures aligned with the courts; progressive critics of these economic trends were no more “republican”—and sometimes less so—than those who supported them. During the Great Depression, of course, the national consensus would swing back again, not only to the progressive slogans of the turn of the century, but also, on occasion, to earlier republican ideals. Influential thought leaders like Louis Brandeis often gave voice to both traditions at once. In 1911, for example, Brandeis expressed a typical

²⁵² Matthew J. Lindsay, “In Search of ‘Laissez-faire Constitutionalism,’” *Harvard Law Review* Vol. 123, No. 5 (2010), 55-56.

²⁵³ See, for instance, Walter E. Weyl, *The New Democracy* (New York: Macmillan, 1912).

²⁵⁴ See Cass Sunstein, “Lochner’s Legacy,” *Columbia Law Review* Vol. 87, No. 5 (1987): 873–919.

²⁵⁵ Michael Sandel, *Democracy’s Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1998), 225.

progressive view when he argued “that a corporation may well be too large to be the most efficient instrument of production and of distribution”—but then he added, almost as an afterthought, that such corporations may also “be too large to be tolerated among the people who desire to be free.”²⁵⁶ Years later, Brandeis would elaborate on this second point more fully, arguing that even wealthy and prosperous individuals cannot be “free if dependent industrially on the arbitrary will of another.”²⁵⁷ This particular argument and turn of phrase owes much to republican thinking, and it suggests that republican ideals held some degree of influence over the trajectory of the New Deal.

As a rule, however, arguments for and against stricter antitrust laws, increased regulations, and enhanced government oversight centered on questions of market efficiency; even the postwar “interest group pluralism” advocated by thinkers like Kenneth Galbraith prioritized national over regional productivity, conceiving of the economy as a single homogenous system comprised of competing or “countervailing” forces that were invariably large-scale, hierarchically organized, and monolithic.²⁵⁸ We can also see this in the shifting positions and outlook of the Mont Pelerin Society, the birthplace of libertarian or “neoliberal” economics: According to economic historian Robert Van Horn, many of the influential economists who coalesced at the Chicago School of Economics by mid-century were initially apprehensive about corporate monopolies, and they “opposed concentrations of economic power on the basis of classical liberal doctrine.”²⁵⁹ They were joined in this view by

²⁵⁶ Quoted in Tim Wu, *The Curse of Bigness: Antitrust in the New Gilded Age* (New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2018), 38.

²⁵⁷ Quoted in *Ibid*, 40.

²⁵⁸ See, for instance, Kenneth Galbraith, *American Capitalism: The Concept of Countervailing Power* (New York: Routledge, 2017); and Theodore Lowi, “The Public Philosophy: Interest-Group Pluralism,” *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 61, No. 1 (1967), 5-24. Galbraith would later critique mass consumerism, but he believed it could be remedied through a more top-down prioritization of public sector goods over other private sector luxuries. See Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1998).

²⁵⁹ Robert Van Horn, “Chicago's Shifting Attitude toward Concentrations of Business Power (1934-1962),” *Seattle University Law Review* Vol. 34 (2011), 1527.

colleagues like Canadian economist Jacob Viner, who argued that “the mere *size* of business units tends almost inevitably to result in attempts to escape the impact of competition,” which then has a depressive effect on consumer demand.²⁶⁰ The worry was that industrial concentration would create an increasingly stagnant economy, inhibiting newer startups from serving a growing mass of consumers. Corporate monopolies pose a genuine risk and thus merit a thorough policy response, if for no other reason, in this view, than their hypothesized effects on consumer prices and spending.

By the late 1940s, anti-corporate sentiment began to evaporate, and the new consensus among right-leaning economists was that government interference is generally counterproductive. According to Chicago economist Joseph Stigler, for instance, the leading protector of consumers is an increasingly competitive market, which is vastly preferable to a regulatory framework that is repeatedly “captured” and distorted, in actual practice, to serve the interests of massive rent-seeking corporations.²⁶¹ Or as Ludwig von Mises expressed it, regulations “grant privileges to certain groups of producers by protecting against the competition of more efficient competitors. In many instances [they] have brought about conditions required for the emergence of monopoly prices.”²⁶² Thus, public efforts to regulate particular industries will only backfire and will invariably hamper, not further, consumer welfare, promoting rather than undermining incumbent firms.

²⁶⁰ Jacob Viner Papers, Letter from Jacob Viner to Laird Bell, Box 3, Folder 33 (Nov. 16, 1937), quoted in Horn, “Chicago Shifting Attitude,” 1528. *Italics in original.*

²⁶¹ George J. Stigler, *The Citizens and the State: Essays on Regulation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 12. See also James Wilson, *The Politics of Regulation* (New York: Basic Books, 1982); and Roger Noll, “The Political Foundations of Regulatory Policy,” *Journal of Institutional and Theoretical Economics* Vol. 139 (1983), 377-404.

²⁶² Ludwig von Mises, “Competition” in *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics* (Auburn: Bettina Bien Greaves, 1998), 278-79.

Arguments like these are often blamed for the corporate leviathans that dominate today's markets; according to this perspective, we all live in the afterglow of the supply-side revolution that materialized during the Reagan presidency, and neoliberalism, or corporatism, is its bitter fruit.²⁶³ There is undoubtedly some truth to this claim. What it misses, however, is the steady onward progression of an ideological paradigm that many opponents of "big business" still widely share. Largely absent from public discussion is the regional republicanism of the late 19th century, where the aim was less to serve consumer demands and was more to nurture self-sustaining communities.

By the second half of the 20th century, even the efforts of staunch anti-trust reformers had shifted from its original rationale, abandoning its 19th century focus on regional production for a program focused almost exclusively on consumption.²⁶⁴ According to Sandel, who helpfully reviews this trend, the anti-trust agenda of the 1970s and 1980s moved from a concern for "a decentralized economy sustaining self-governing communities to the more mundane mission of maximizing consumer welfare."²⁶⁵ Notably, this did not mean that antitrust ceased functioning as a major area of partisan contention. Political conservatives, for instance, now believed that antitrust laws were largely "unnecessary because consumer welfare and economic efficiency were one and the same; promoting consumer welfare meant maximizing total economic output, regardless of whether efficiency gains 'trickled down' in the form of lower consumer prices or simply led to higher corporate profits."²⁶⁶ By contrast, Liberals tended to express greater concern over "distributive

²⁶³ See, for instance, David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); and Thomas Biebricher, *The Political Theory of Neoliberalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018).

²⁶⁴ We can think of this shift, in ideological terms, as one from classical republicanism to classical liberalism. As Adam Smith once argued, representing the latter perspective, "Consumption is the sole end and purpose of all production; and the interest of the producer ought to be attended to, only so far as it may be necessary for promoting that of the consumer" (*The Wealth of Nations, Part 2* (Collier, 1902), 442).

²⁶⁵ Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent*, 244.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 245.

effects and issues of fairness; for them, promoting consumer welfare meant lowering consumer prices and improving product quality and safety.”²⁶⁷ Neither of these positions, though, seemed to recognize or affirm the validity of concerns beyond the material welfare of the mass of consumers.

We should grant, in summary, that the scale, shape, and function of modern corporations has varied markedly over the past 100 years, but the political tradition that Berk identifies is still alive and well, which is perhaps why its other standard indicators—like urbanization, rural brain drain, and financialization—have continued along a steadier trajectory. The infrastructure systems which gradually emerged in the 20th century have embodied this tradition to one degree or another. Their bedrock values are abundantly clear; the only lingering question is how they can better promote scalar growth, or what they can do to enhance consumer welfare. And many if not most corporate reforms are little more than private- and public-sector efforts to address these questions.

Regional Republicanism and the Populist Movement

It would be easy to conclude that republican ideals are now of little consequence; the ideological terrain has shifted drastically since the 19th century, and most of us now embrace one or another form of “corporate liberalism.” In the first chapter, however, I argued that the reemergence of populism, which ushered Donald Trump into the White House, signals a profound dissatisfaction with the economic status-quo. Repeated denunciations of the political “establishment” suggest that a growing swath of the voting electorate feels disempowered and underrepresented; its preferences, values, and beliefs are not receiving the attention and consideration they deserve.

²⁶⁷ Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent*, 246-47.

It should also be apparent that the basic political orientation of the contemporary populist movement bears much in common with the regional republican tradition of the late-19th century. An animating impulse in either case has been to preserve self-sustaining, integrated communities, where individuals are bound by mutual responsibilities and obligations and can serve each other both in and beyond the marketplace, through commercial *and* charitable transactions. Each of these movements have likewise opposed any political compromise that forfeits local decision-making for the sake of national or global markets, and both have prioritized communal productivity over individual consumption.²⁶⁸ Members of each movement, that is, have argued that the productive requirements of communities should sometimes take precedence over aggregate growth. In the view of today's populists, for instance, it is far preferable to have industries in thriving regions and communities than slightly larger ones that are remote and distant; they would thus endorse the regional republican view that market "efficiency" should not automatically be equated with mass or standardized consumption. In this respect, the economic conflicts of the 19th century have become increasingly relevant again, and their ideological fault lines should resonate with many of us today.

One notable difference, of course, is that few if any of our present-day politicians or political and media elites have championed this republican perspective, and for that reason, citizens of the America heartland have little recourse but to turn to whomever is willing to engage these issues. A strong case can be made that Donald Trump is not the cause of this ideological rift but is rather its inevitable expression. He has opportunistically filled a political void that Beltway insiders were either incapable of seeing or else made strenuous efforts to ignore, hopeful that it would disappear

²⁶⁸ See, for instance, Oren Cass, *The Once and Future Worker: A Vision for the Renewal of Work in America* (New York: Encounter Books, 2018).

on its own. Thus far, however, that has not occurred: The republican tradition is not behind the times but, quite to contrary, has seldom held more pertinence than it does now in the 21st century.

If we consider for a moment the policy alternatives from which rural citizens can now choose, the world begins to look rather bleak. These citizens perceptively see in one party a studied determination to lower corporate tax rates, slash regulations, and reduce trade barriers. They see, in short, a coalition that purports to serve their interests as consumers by limiting government oversight of an increasingly corporatized marketplace, and by doubling down on globalist policies, compounding their reliance on transnational corporations and an intricate array of supply chains. But the alternative party appears little better. Although Democratic leaders like Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren have promised to curtail the power of corporate giants, they have married this admirable objective to redistributive schemes that flatly contradict regionalist or populist ideals. The result is a policy muddle of near epic proportions: If the goal is higher wages for working class citizens, then policies that reduce the size of larger, multi-layered businesses—where employees receive a higher average salary than they do at small- to mid-size firms—are doomed to failure.²⁶⁹

Anti-monopolism makes sense as a single plank within a much larger regional republican vision, and for that reason it is likely to garner token support among citizens in rural communities, but much less so when it is joined, counterintuitively and paradoxically, to a redistributive program. Indeed, as we saw in the first chapter, citizens who pursue more densely integrated communities have little use for policies that will likely increase their reliance on government programs. And this may explain why Democratic candidates have thus far failed to capitalize on populist frustration with the corporatist, globalizing tendencies of the mainstream Republican Party. For many such

²⁶⁹ See, for instance, Robert Atkinson and Michael Lind, *Big is Beautiful: Debunking the Myth of Small Business* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018), 65; and Charles Lamb, *A Dissertation Upon Roast Pig: One of the Essays of Elia, with a Note on Lamb's Literary Motive* (Palala Press, 2016).

voters, the problem with either platform is that it prioritizes urban, as opposed to rural, values, with the biggest source of conflict between either party centering on regulatory means, not ends.

Consider debates over “free trade” in the leadup to the 2016 presidential election. For politicians across the political spectrum, and for most mainstream pundits as well, any suggestion that unrestricted trade might, on balance, be legitimately undesirable for a sizeable cohort of voters was met with dismissive incredulity. After all, the ironclad law of comparative advantage ensures that fewer trade barriers will necessarily result in increased output, which then translates into substantial savings for consumers. Rural voters had somehow failed to educate themselves on this issue, which was taken as proof positive of their ignorance. What they failed to see was that higher tariffs would elevate the ticket price on necessary consumer goods like smartphones and laptops, and it was they who would feel the greatest impact on their disposable income.²⁷⁰ They were voting against their own self-interest in the most egregious fashion, yet they spurned as “establishment” anyone who sought to inform them, for the good of the country, on the benefits of global trade.

There is no arguing with the fact that fewer trade barriers result in additional consumer savings. That is beyond dispute. But it is less obvious how citizens should weigh the benefits of these savings against the social or political costs they pay for them. This is a normative question that citizens will likely answer in different ways, but it can hardly be reduced to brute fact. Should we worry that entire regions of the country, particularly those in the industrial heartland, have been hollowed out economically, or is this development, too, something that we should all applaud?

²⁷⁰ These savings are often overstated. A 2017 report by the US-China Business Council for Oxford Economics found that increased trade with China lowered the price on Apple iPhones by as little as five percent, as compared with their estimated price if manufactured domestically. See Oxford Economics, “Understanding the US-China Relationship,” paper prepared for the *US-China Business Council*, January 2017, 14-15.

Should we embrace an urbanized future, or do rural communities still merit our attention? How we answer these questions says more about our normative commitments than our cognitive abilities.

It is also notable that recent efforts to mitigate or temper populist hostility have coalesced behind conciliatory policies that roundly miss the point. Perhaps the best example are proposals for a universal basic income, which have circulated in elite circles for quite some time—in recent history, since at least the time of Bertrand Russell²⁷¹—but garnered significant attention in 2019 when publicly advocated by presidential candidate Andrew Yang, an entrepreneur and former tech executive who proved incapable, notably, of advancing beyond the first few rounds of the Democratic primary. The universal basic income is, in a nutshell, a proposal to distribute an unconditional monthly allowance or living stipend to every citizen. This stipend would defray the higher living expenses of advanced technological societies, and it would enable consumers to lead a decent standard of living without working exorbitant hours. It would also enable them to pursue more hobbies and interests outside of employment settings, reducing their dependency on employers. Finally, it would supposedly alleviate the negative effects of corporate outsourcing.

That Andrew Yang, an executive in Silicon Valley, would seriously advocate such a policy is indicative of the commercialized mentality that, for good or ill, often dominates public discussion. Indeed, some of the most prominent leaders in the tech industry, including Mark Zuckerberg and Elon Musk, supported the UBI even before Yang ran for office, presenting it as an all-purpose solution for the future job losses likely to result, not only from outsourcing but also from increased automation.²⁷² The UBI would allow today's corporate leaders to shrink much of their remaining

²⁷¹ Bertrand Russell, *Roads to Freedom. Socialism, Anarchism and Syndicalism* (London: Unwin Books, 1918), 80–81, 127

²⁷² See Shirin Ghaffary, “Many in Silicon Valley support Universal Basic Income. Now the California Democratic Party does, too,” *Vox*, May 2018: <https://www.vox.com/2018/3/8/17081618/tech-solution->

labor force without facing a consequent reduction in consumer demand, as middle-class incomes rapidly decline. It seems clear, in other words, that corporate backers of this proposal are hoping to boost their profits without biting the hand that feeds them. If every citizen enjoys a living stipend, then everyone can still purchase a smartphone, even those without a paying profession or even an entry-level job. Granted, consumers will come to depend on political and corporate actors to an even greater extent than they do at present, but they will still have easy access to the many consumer products that their corporate providers sell to them. It is no great mystery why the Tech industry would find the UBI attractive, and we should not be surprised that its supporters hail from companies like Google and Amazon, many of whom also contributed to Yang's election campaign.²⁷³

A universal basic income, or something closely approximating it, has been tried before. The 18th century Speenhamland Laws in Britain—or more accurately, the cluster of poor relief policies adopted over the late 18th and early 19th centuries—had many of the same objectives, and it, too, dispensed a general allowance roughly equal to a workingman's income. Yet it failed to resolve the existing problems faced by impoverished rural families, and it functioned, at best, as a partial and mostly ineffective response. Indeed, some thinkers have even alleged that it further empowered industrialists and factory proprietors, who were able to drive wages even lower and yet still retain workers whose income was supplemented by the government, and who for that reason could still survive on what was essentially starvation pay.²⁷⁴ Speenhamland all but ensured, according to this

[economic-inequality-universal-basic-income-part-democratic-party-platform-california](#). Accessed December 2020.

²⁷³ Meera Jagannathan, "As Andrew Yang drops out, here's what other 2020 Democrats say about universal basic income," *Market Watch*: <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/heres-what-2020-democratic-candidates-for-president-have-said-about-universal-basic-income-2019-07-09>. Accessed December 2020.

²⁷⁴ See, for instance, Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1944); and Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty: England in the Earlier Industrial Age* (New York: Knopf, 1983).

perspective, that alternative and regionally-based networks like parish charities and voluntary aid organizations would begin to deteriorate, leaving workers with fewer potential sources of assistance over the long-term; in an ironic twist of history, it increased the reliance of labor, not only on the government, but also on the capitalist class that was allegedly exploiting them in factories, and which was the reason for proceeding with this particular remedy in the first place.

Recent historians have questioned the entire causal basis of this analysis, contending that Speenhamland did not have the “perverse incentives” that critics allege; agricultural and industrial wages were abysmally low before and often despite the efforts of various poor relief laws, and there is little empirical grounding for the claim that the latter somehow exacerbated the problem.²⁷⁵ What is not a matter of dispute, nevertheless, is that Speenhamland did not, as promised, liberate workers from an asymmetric bargaining position in 19th century labor markets, freeing them from the necessity of accepting miniscule wages. Nor did it noticeably alleviate rural poverty, in part because it could not alter the reality of their economic and commercial dependence.²⁷⁶ It is difficult to imagine a UBI functioning any differently in our modern context; it seems doubtful that the UBI will satisfy voters who are anxious to preserve, not only their incomes, but also the productive capacities of their home communities. We should therefore hardly be surprised that fewer rural voters support it, according to a recent poll, than urban voters in a similar income bracket.²⁷⁷

²⁷⁵ For a helpful summary and analysis of these criticisms, see Fred Block and Margaret R. Somers, *The Power of Market Fundamentalism: Karl Polanyi's Critique* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

²⁷⁶ According to Block and Somers, various “structural changes in the economy including enclosures and the decline of rural industries” undermined the ability of rural families to supplement their low income with “their own production on small plots of parish commons,” in addition to other “miscellaneous sources of income such as gleaning, fishing, hunting, and casual jobs” (Ibid, 133). The real problem, in other words, was a decline in their own productive capacities, and it was one that Speenhamland could not adequately address.

²⁷⁷ See Matthew Sheffield, “Poll: Younger voters want universal basic income while older ones reject it overwhelmingly,” *The Hill*: <https://thehill.com/hilltv/what-americas-thinking/435278-poll-most-voters-oppose-a-universal-basic-income-programs>. Accessed December 2020.

This is not to say, on the other hand, that renegotiated trade deals and protective tariffs can, as many populists seem to believe, reignite the engines of productivity in the American heartland. The one-off solutions touted by Donald Trump could never possibly satisfy the high expectations generated by his presidential campaign. But that is beside the point. What Trump did more effectively than his counterparts in either party was to speak to the preferences, beliefs, and values of a cohort of voters who embodied the regional republican tradition. In a political system where variants of corporate liberalism have long dominated, Trump lifted the hopes of those who felt increasingly out of place in either party and whose interests were not being heard or represented. As a candidate, Trump was rewarded for the issues he brought to the table more than the policies he advocated, but his strategy could only be successful if certain voices and perspectives have long been drowned out in the general cacophony of a self-reinforcing and self-congratulatory system.²⁷⁸

It is entirely understandable that proponents of corporate liberalism would either fail to recognize possible alternatives or else would happily avoid the necessity of facing them. It is far easier to haggle over means than ends. When everyone seemingly agrees on the driving reason and rationale for market activity, or the defining purpose for every new technology or infrastructure, political debates may still be acrimonious but are necessarily limited in range. When different factions disagree over these larger issues, however, the stakes become much higher: There is the potential for conflict over a far vaster terrain, forcing political representatives to vindicate and justify the bedrock values underpinning material, digital, and regulatory systems of infrastructure.

Ignoring these issues or sweeping them under the rug, nevertheless, is hardly the same thing as making them permanently disappear. And the sorts of conflict that are already surfacing now as a necessary consequence of populism and political demagoguery will likely be more

²⁷⁸ We can see precursors of Donald Trump in earlier support, slowly growing over the last few decades, for conservative candidate Patrick Buchanan in the 1990s and liberal candidate Dick Gephardt in the early 2000s.

destructive than what would have occurred if genuine public debate had been taking place all along, and if either political tradition had learned, through a process of principled compromise, to consider the interests of their counterparts. Since at least the early 20th century, the “corporate liberal” paradigm has been able to preempt this debate by assuming a mantle of inevitability: It operates on the assumption that free-market systems can only take one form, which just so happens to be what we have already. Market competition demands of us that we implement gigantic economies of scale, which means that markets will tend inevitably to serve the interests of corporate producers and increasingly atomized consumers. Some citizens may consider these social costs to be distasteful, or they may mourn the decline of functional communities, but the only alternative is a wholesale rejection of market economies and a reactionary return to a guild system, or a return to medieval serfdom. And who is so foolish or reckless as to make such a proposal?

What we have seen in our examination of 19th century debates over the railroads, however, is that market systems and the infrastructures that comprise them are in fact multiply realizable. We have also discussed how similar assumptions were the driving rationale behind later systems of infrastructure—like telecommunication systems, the interstate highway system, digital networks—all of which have been sponsored by a host of public-private collaborative partnerships. Our markets can operate according to multiple principles of organization, however, which implies that not everything about them has been predetermined by necessity. They are still open to revision. And if we genuinely hope to prevent some of the repulsive consequences of populism, some of which we face today, we should be willing to entertain different perspectives on these issues.

Thus, one reason we should take regional republicanism seriously is because our failure to do so is apparently leading to disaster. By depoliticizing much of the economy, we have created conditions rife for conflict, and we have all but guaranteed a populist backlash. In the interest of

prudence alone, then, we should work to ensure that the democratic process is free and open to all reasonable claimants, especially those who represent a viewpoint with a storied past. In the next chapter, I will argue further that citizens with a communal orientation can reasonably appeal to republican freedom, no less, to vindicate their opposition to the political and economic status-quo.

Chapter 4: Freedom and Community

Community self-sufficiency is a distant reality for many of us today, and we increasingly rely on large and distant industries to meet our most basic necessities. In a globalizing market we depend on an intricate array of supply chains, supranational corporations, and financial institutions to clothe, feed, and house both ourselves and our nearest of kin. We rely on the expertise and continued goodwill of political and corporate actors, almost all of whom are distant and impersonal, to protect us from illnesses and accidents, to treat us when we ultimately succumb to sicknesses, and to supply our pharmaceutical therapies. We depend on them for the capacity to travel freely for work or recreation, as well as the energy necessary to power our vehicles, homes, and places of employment. We depend on them to communicate with family, friends, and colleagues through digital devices we are mostly powerless to create for ourselves. And finally, we rely on them to lend us the capital, through long-term mortgages, necessary to purchase all such necessary items, a process which enables us to function in society but also keeps us, with few exceptions, in a nearly permanent state of debt. Some of us never free ourselves of these considerable financial burdens.

We have grown increasingly dependent on forces outside of our control, operating at a scale and over distances we can barely comprehend. Many of us, however, welcome these developments with open arms, and indeed many of us would happily *intensify* our dependency on remote and far-flung institutions if doing so would entail a higher income, a higher social status, more technological gadgetry, or more opportunities for personal growth, however we choose to define that. But what about everyone else? What about people who view with growing alarm the functional collapse of

their community, or what about those who mourn their abject dependency on outlying agents and agencies? Do they, too, have legitimate grievances, or are they merely bad-tempered and ignorant?

In this chapter I argue that citizens who feel ever more apprehensive about trends like mass consumerism, rural brain-drain, and globalization can reasonably claim that their freedom hangs in the balance, and indeed they are, in a very real sense, victims of structural domination. Individuals who instinctively resist and oppose these developments have valid reasons for supposing they are subject to the arbitrary will of external agencies, which all too often serve their own interests or promote their own vision of the good life without regard for the beliefs and values of others. Many rural citizens are therefore “unfree” in the republican sense. And this implies that advocating for community, as some citizens understand the concept, is now tactically equivalent to taking a stand for individuals. The freedoms of the community effectively overlap with those of the individual.

Republican freedom means in this context the absence of arbitrary domination, as helpfully defined for us by philosopher Philip Pettit. And arbitrary domination often takes a structural rather than a personal form, flourishing in places where political, social, or economic hierarchies have become excessively asymmetric, or whenever one party is differentially dependent on another. It can avail itself, more specifically, of impersonal structures like transportation and communication networks, financial and regulatory systems, and the wider configuration of the market-economy. These structures can become so pervasive and powerful that citizens feel all but obligated to betray their foundational culture or way of life to navigate them effectively; some citizens may have little choice, if they hope to function in civil society, but to disregard fundamental beliefs and values. This is a likely occurrence, moreover, whenever citizens have lost the capacity to abandon or “exit” these systems at will, or whenever there are no alternative systems to which they can feasibly turn.

We noted earlier in the introduction that arbitrary domination is a far more common occurrence in communities where exit costs have become prohibitively high. In such communities, authority figures can easily exploit their subordinates to serve their own capricious interests. Indeed, even when the rich and powerful refrain from manipulating others, their subordinates or dependents may still betray their own beliefs and values to satisfy their whims; without a viable alternative, citizens occupying a lower position in an existing hierarchy may have little choice but to cater to those with a higher position. And this response is all but inevitable, as economist Albert Hirschman recognized, whenever the threat of “exiting” this relationship, communal or otherwise, is essentially off the table, and whenever protest rights are an ineffective compensatory measure.²⁷⁹

Although we typically think of “exit rights” as applying to smaller, integral communities, they can also apply to larger, all-encompassing systems, or that is what I will suggest in this chapter. Rural citizens have arguably reached a critical inflection point where they can no longer “exit” a global, neoliberal economy to establish and preserve integrated communities defined in part by mutual obligations and responsibilities. And many of them feel compelled, therefore, to adopt a more self-regarding, consumer-oriented lifestyle. It is in this respect that the republican freedoms of rural citizens, or any citizens who face similar circumstances, are beginning to deteriorate.

There are several reasons why we often feel indifferent to the plight of our fellow citizens, or why we fail to recognize existing limitations on their freedoms. The first is our instinctive inclination to naturalize or reify outcomes that are thoroughly political—a subject we covered in some detail in the previous chapter. Yet another reason, however, is our difficulty in recognizing or discerning the subtle power dynamics suffusing transactions that are still formally voluntary. This was true, we will see, in a 19th century industrial context, as Labor Republicans like the Knights of

²⁷⁹ See Albert Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970)

Labor objected to working conditions that they regarded as partially fabricated, and which they also were convinced had reduced their ability to fend for themselves or resist the arbitrary edicts of affluent employers. As political scientist Alex Gourevitch argues, the beliefs and values championed by the Knights of Labor were tacitly republican, which makes them a fitting complement to wealthy tycoons like A. B. Stickney, who forcefully urged republican ideals in a railroad context, specifically.

Many liberal reformers, on the other hand, emphasized that industrial laborers were still engaging in voluntary contracts, which made their participants “free” by definition. Thus, disputes over labor relations often hinged on which conception of freedom was employed, and it was philosophical differences like these that prevented many movers and shakers in the classically liberal camp from accepting the impassioned arguments of labor republicans. A similar dynamic is at work in our modern context, as individuals who implicitly appeal to republican freedom, whether wittingly or not, often see them fall on deaf ears. This is partly because arbitrary domination can permeate multiple levels of society, from the directly personal sphere to the more abstract sphere of the economy, which makes it difficult to identify for individuals who are not facing it themselves.

In today’s globalizing economy, extreme relations of dependency now transcend the narrow confines of the workplace; many citizens feel every bit as dependent in their capacity as consumers as they are as producers or employees, and this excessive dependency systematically prevents them from realizing their communal aspirations, subjecting them to the capricious whims of powerful organizations and institutions. This a classic violation of republican freedom, I will argue, but one that is easy to miss because individuals are still engaging in voluntary transactions and are accruing material benefits; unless we adopt a regional-republican perspective, even if provisionally, we are likely to ignore or disregard the threat that even voluntary consumer transactions can pose to individual freedom. Later in this chapter, I will tease out the implications of this argument

through a brief examination of the work of agrarian essayist Wendell Berry, and I will argue that some consumers, like 19th century laborers, are now victims of a multileveled form of domination.

Republican Freedom

For republican theorists, freedom is inescapably connected to and negatively correlated with abuses of power. Republican thinkers and advocates have thus always endeavored to prevent or destabilize extreme power asymmetries, which enable entrenched groups and individuals, and everyone who is at or near the apex of an existing hierarchy, to dominate everyone who is nearer the bottom. “On the republican construal,” Pettit explains, “the real enemy of freedom is the power that some people may have over others, whereas on the liberal understanding, asymmetries in interpersonal power are not in themselves objectionable.”²⁸⁰ In other words, republican freedom has to do with the structural conditions that give form and shape to our relationships—whether active interference is occurring or not—and not necessarily with the specific actions or choices of a dominating agent. The very existence of major asymmetries is worrisome whenever one party or group can, if so disposed, ensure that subordinates comply with its capricious and arbitrary whims.

Importantly, those who identify with this small “r” republican tradition generally have no desire, like Marxists and other revolutionaries, to expunge every source of power and authority from society, much less to eliminate every hierarchical distinction, as if that that were an achievable or even desirable end. To the contrary, republicans have always harbored a healthy skepticism toward anyone who wields an excess of power at the local, national, or global level. This emphasis

²⁸⁰ Pettit, *On the People's Terms: A Republican Theory and Model of Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 11.

is particularly evident, in a specifically English context, in the writings of republican thinkers like John Milton, James Harrington, and Marchamont Nedham, all of whom appealed to a rich body of classical thought to argue that the diametrical opposite of freedom, rightly understood, is nothing short of slavery.²⁸¹ As they saw it, whenever we are forced to act according to the capricious inclinations of a dominating agent, we are “*in potestate domini*, within the power of someone else,” and thus subject to dictates other than our own, bound by decrees with no objective basis other than the will of another.²⁸² It is for this reason that the prerogative power of fallible men must be subject to limitations, for even the best are easily corrupted by the “absolute power” they wield.²⁸³

Early republican theorists spoke with particular disdain of *prerogative* or *discretionary* power, the mere possession of which they regarded as inherently inimical to liberty, no matter how it was exercised.²⁸⁴ For even if a government armed with such power were to refrain from coercing its subjects or from making tacit threats to that effect, they reasoned, it would still leave its citizens so dependent on its continued goodwill that they would be prevented from acting freely and easily in pursuit of their own aims; because citizens would “live in a condition of dependence,” they would suffer “a form of constraint” that attaches, in effect, a prohibitive price on even subtle acts of resistance. Citizens can hardly be said to be free, that is, if they eke out a precarious existence in the shadow of institutions and groups that can easily squash them like so many insects.²⁸⁵ In short, they

²⁸¹ Quentin Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 36.

²⁸² *Ibid.*, 41

²⁸³ John Dalberg-Acton, “Letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton,” April 5, 1887” in *Historical Essays and Studies*, edited by J. N. Figgis and R. V. Laurence (London: Macmillan, 1907)

²⁸⁴ Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism*, 70.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 84.

cannot be free if they are slavishly dependent on the goodwill of others since freedom minimally requires, in the trenchant words of Algernon Sydney, “independency upon the will of another.”²⁸⁶

Republicans like Sydney and Harrington were writing in the context of the English Civil War, when the domination exerted by an absolute monarch was typically immediate, direct, and obvious. Members of the Stuart dynastic encroached on English liberties through their public intrusion in ecclesiastical practice, for example, and their doing so was readily apparent to every relevant party concerned. For republican theorists, however, these flagrant acts of interference needed to be condemned in no uncertain terms, but they were also beside the point; any ruler or magistrate equipped with such an ample supply of prerogative powers is inherently objectionable even when he treats his subjects with extraordinary grace and leniency. His lawful capacity to interfere in the future whenever he so chooses, and on any pretext of any kind whatsoever, is the real offense to liberty, and it is the *structure* of this relationship that demands urgent reform.²⁸⁷

Freedom as non-domination thus requires more than shielding ourselves from the active interference of others, and more, even, than the creation of a cordoned off space or safe zone where we can act with relative impunity, unobstructed by others.²⁸⁸ In the republican construal, an agent can still impose its will on us without expressly limiting our choices or curbing our actions, as in some cases of formalized slavery, for example, where masters treat their charges with extreme tolerance and moderation. Here is how Pettit himself describes these master-slave relationships:

²⁸⁶ Quoted in Pettit, *On the People's Terms*, 7.

²⁸⁷ It is in this sense that Pettit's view of freedom as non-domination is readily applicable to wider social structures, even if we it is ultimately the case, as some have recently argued, that Pettit himself “lacks an adequate conception of structural domination.” See Alex Gourevitch, “Labor Republicanism and the Transformation of Work,” *Political Theory*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (2013), 591-617

²⁸⁸ Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty” in *Liberty: Four Essays on Liberty*, edited by Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 169.

The problem with the subjects of a kindly master is that while arbitrary interference in their lives may actually be unlikely, it will not be unlikely in virtue of their social standing, only in virtue of the contingent fact of the master's goodwill or indifference or inattention. This means that if people have to rely consciously on such contingent facts they will be constrained, at whatever cost in dignity, to keep their masters sweet by practicing self-censorship and self-ingratiation; in the absence of a suitable social standing, groveling of this kind will be their only protection. The cringing, toadying, fawning sycophant becomes the exemplar of someone in this position, whether that person be a cunning slave, a slaving dependant, or a woman who depends on mincing gait and swooning smile to keep her husband in check.²⁸⁹

Whenever we find ourselves in such extreme asymmetric relationships, regardless of how well we are treated, we will often discover that our capacity to make choices depends on our selecting of options that a dominant agent would itself have us choose.²⁹⁰ We are free to pursue our preferences only so long as they prove compatible with those of the agent or agency brandishing power over us. Or we may simply feel intimidated, in other cases, and thus become easier to control through indirect mechanisms; direct interference is no longer necessary because we ourselves will modify our behavior in ways acceptable to the agent or agency who dominates us.²⁹¹ In either such scenario, a dominating agent can deprive us of freedom without issuing a single explicit command.

²⁸⁹ Philip Pettit, "Freedom in the Market," *Politics, Philosophy, and Economics*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2006), 9.

²⁹⁰ Pettit calls this "invigilation" in *On the People's Terms*, 61

²⁹¹ Pettit calls this "intimidation" in *Ibid*, 61

Domination is thus best understood, according to Pettit, as the capacity to interfere on an arbitrary basis in the choices that another actor has at least a possibility of making.²⁹² A dominating agent could utilize several different mechanisms, moreover, to interfere in the choices of others. He or she could hypothetically reduce the range of available options from which we can choose, or else modify the expected costs and benefits assigned to any given option, assuming ultimate “control over which outcomes will result from which options and what actual payoffs... will materialize.”²⁹³ This is sometimes achievable through direct, interpersonal relationships, but at other times it can occur, in a more secretive or covert fashion, through the careful manipulation of social, political, and economic structures. Arbitrary domination can thus occur even in voluntary contractual relations, as when an agent exploits our “urgent needs in order to drive a very hard bargain.”²⁹⁴ The market, too, can function as a site of domination or can be structured to create an excessively asymmetric bargaining situation where one class of agents can easily impose its will on others.

On the other hand, a competitive “free-market” economy also has immense emancipatory potential. Our capacity to acquire a vast array of commodities or to access new technologies and infrastructures affords us a greater measure of republican freedom than we might enjoy otherwise, furnishing us with the necessary (if less than sufficient) means to “stand tall” in society, to free ourselves from the shackles of local authority, and to engage with others as self-determining actors. Whenever we transact with one another on a relatively equal footing, for instance, market competition ensures that we can each realize our preferences, values, and beliefs in the kinds of discrete choices we make, absent the arbitrary domination of others.²⁹⁵ In its ideal form, a perfectly

²⁹² Phillip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 52.

²⁹³ Ibid, 53.

²⁹⁴ Ibid, 54.

²⁹⁵ Ibid, 205.

competitive environment would theoretically be free of major power differentials and would thus enable us to decide how much of our lives are governed by economic transactions in the first place; free competition would occur not just in the marketplace, but also over and around it, as we each decide how much to pursue, or not pursue, communal relationships defined by mutual reciprocity.

A second mechanism by which individuals can free themselves from arbitrary domination is through the public provision of material resources that remain accessible and open to everyone. It is for this reason that Pettit identifies “material infrastructure” as something indispensable for “the widespread enjoyment of freedom as non-domination”: We will enjoy “fewer basic liberties” over the long-term “the less sustainable the environment, the less efficient the energy network, the less reliable the organization of transport and information, the less effective the public health system and, indeed, the less secure the territory of the state.”²⁹⁶ The government must take an active interest in the development and maintenance of energy, transport, and information to ensure that citizens have the minimum of resources necessary to overcome localized forms of dependency.

Pettit also recognizes, however, that these uniform systems are sometimes ineffectual or even counterproductive and can ultimately “over-empower” an entrenched minority. Even the most basic and fundamental of laws and regulations—like those “governing the use of land and, by extension, property in general”—may “enable some individuals to gain such economic power that they are bound to dominate others in certain contexts,” eroding the freedoms they are intended to protect.²⁹⁷ To compensate for this fact, then, it may be necessary to impose “restriction[s] on the

²⁹⁶ Pettit, *On the People's Terms*, 111-112.

²⁹⁷ Ibid, 99

comparative advantages that money can buy.”²⁹⁸ A uniform system of laws, technologies, and infrastructure *may* enhance our freedom, all things considered, but in other contexts it may have the opposite effect. Insofar as it enables various well-placed agents and agencies to impose their arbitrary will on others, it may prove more of a detriment than a boon to republican freedom.

A compounding difficulty is that structures are more difficult to exit the more all-encompassing they become, in contrast to the dominating relationships which occur at smaller scales or in more localized spheres. And without a credible threat of exiting these structures, subjugated parties will often find that their “voice,” or their ability to exercise protest rights, has grown ineffective. As republican theorist Robert Taylor observes, himself drawing heavily from Hirschman, “Free choice and exit can act as effective substitutes for voice, revealed preferences as effective substitutes for stated ones, in compelling interferers to track the interests of interferees.”²⁹⁹ The power to exit a system, in other words, “can empower voice, forcing providers [or other dominating agencies] to heed the words of their clients, be they words of instruction, explanation, or complaint.”³⁰⁰ The problem with economic and political structures is that the costs we bear in attempting to exit them are usually enormous. Although sometimes vital to republican freedom, they also pose a substantial risk to the same individuals they supposedly emancipate. Whenever they are employed for corrupt purposes, they are more difficult to remediate than more localized forms of oppression. In the end, they are necessary but also pose a considerable danger.

²⁹⁸ Ibid, Footnote 19. This admission that has caused some critics to accuse neo-republicans of being fundamentally “antimarket.” See, for instance, Gerald Gaus, “Backwards in the Future: Neo-republicanism as a Postsocialist Critique of Market Society,” *Social Philosophy and Policy*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (2003), 59-91. Pettit disputed this characterization in “Freedom in the Market.” See also Richard Dagger, “Neo-republicanism and the Civic Economy,” *Politics, Philosophy, and Economics*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2006), 151-173.

²⁹⁹ Robert Taylor, *Exit Left: Markets and Mobility in Republican Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 3.

³⁰⁰ Taylor, *Exit Left*, 3

This is precisely why republican industrialists like A. B. Stickney, as we saw in the previous chapter, opposed the ever-increasing uniformity of national railroad systems. He believed these systems had become discriminatory to the degree they availed themselves of legal and regulatory mechanism to thwart and exclude alternative systems. If rural voters had alternative tracks they could utilize—substitute systems to which they could feasibly “exit”—they would still be capable of effectively exercising their voice, in this case through standard market mechanisms. Without the availability of such systems, however, they would find themselves increasingly subject to the whims of industrial powers, which is exactly what was occurring in heartland regions and communities.

The railroad case is a more straightforward one, in a sense, because it involved tangible systems of infrastructure and because its effects were easier to quantify. However, many other such systems or structures are more difficult to assess in a correspondingly accurate fashion. This is particularly true of larger economic structures where individuals suppress their preferences and values to cater to the interests of others. Outcomes like this can occur whenever individuals feel intimidated or, in more typical cases, whenever their capacity to function in society depends on their selecting options that corporate and bureaucratic agencies would have them choose.

In a “free-market” system, individuals who are subject to domination can still engage in voluntary transactions, and they are not obviously subject to anyone; outside of a few chance moments, it is not always easy to determine what agent or agency is dominating them. And this increases the difficulty in making their plight evident to those who are themselves free or can still act in a manner consistent with their values. How do victims of domination help others to recognize their predicament? Early critics of industrialization, including labor organizations like the Knights of Labor, often faced this precise challenge, much as do many residents of rural communities today.

Labor Republicans

Early members of the 19th century labor movement believed that republican freedom, and not poverty, was the primary justification for their efforts, as lately recounted by Alex Gourevitch.³⁰¹ Voicing a view with a long historical purview, the Knights of Labor, for example, depicted industrial wage labor as a form of structural domination wherein, “through human design and institution, workers were left with no reasonable alternative but to sell their labor.”³⁰² The prevailing economic system ensured that most laborers would remain abjectly dependent on economic betters for their daily survival; unlike the independent, property-owning artisans and craftsmen that had already succumbed to mass industrialization, these “propertyless workers would always be dependent on wages. They were free to give themselves a master,’ but they could not choose *not* to have one.”³⁰³

For the Knights of Labor, and for the workingmen groups that were their predecessors, it was a truism that laborers can hardly claim to be free in the republican sense if they remain unreservedly dependent on the arbitrary will of agents or agencies which wield much greater resources and power than they themselves possess. For even when these laborers formally consent to this wage relation and do so in a “voluntary” fashion, their choice still reflects the exorbitant and sometimes life-imperiling costs of pursuing a more independent course of action. In this respect, they remain beholden to external agencies that, absent appeals to natural law or a higher set of moral principles,³⁰⁴ will inevitably subject them to their capricious will, which may bring certain

³⁰¹ Alex Gourevitch, *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth: Labor and Republican Liberty in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

³⁰² Ibid, 109.

³⁰³ Ibid, italics added.

³⁰⁴ It bears mentioning that one of the main republican insights, as was stated earlier, is that power necessarily has a corrupting influence on those who wield it, particularly when they wield much power *relative* to others. In such cases, powerful agents or agencies will almost certainly prove less amenable to any

material rewards but is inimical to true self-government. This perspective was voiced by labor groups like the Knights of St. Crispin, an influential shoemaker's union, which made the radical claim that "the masses... will never be completely free from vassalage until they have thrown off the system of working for hire. [For] men working for wagers are, in a greater or lesser degree, in the bonds of serfdom. The demand and supply of labor makes them the football of circumstance."³⁰⁵

It would be easy to caricature or misrepresent this position as one of opposition to wage labor across the board and without exception. But that is not what most of these labor reformers were arguing. What they opposed, rather, was an industrial system that made it virtually impossible for large masses of people to function in society, and sometimes even survive, without working long hours for low wages on behalf of companies over which they had little or no control. For many such laborers, of course, a low-wage position in an industrial factory greatly diminished their potential for economic and social mobility in the future. The monetary recompense they received was so trifling, and the responsibilities they undertook were so stultifying, that they had little real chance of ever "exiting" this wage relation through the diligent accumulation of material or social capital.

Laborers were therefore stuck in the kind of vicious circle that Karl Marx had famously described: In "Wage Labour and Capital," Marx argued that millions of industrial workers have little choice, if they value their own existence, but to sell their labor power to the bourgeois or "capitalist" class, but in the process of making this allegedly "voluntary" transaction, they begin to lose control of their "life-activity" and further diminish their social status. They are forced of necessity to engage in an alienating form of work that only broadens the yawning chasm that already exists between

appeals we might make to external sources of authority, regardless of whether it derives from natural law or the public itself.

³⁰⁵ Quoted in Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and its Critics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991), 213.

those who own the means of production and themselves; even if they subsequently experience a marked improvement in their material circumstances, their quotidian labors will still empower large-scale enterprises at their own expense, and to the detriment of their freedom. “The material position of the worker [may have] improved,” Marx writes, “but at the cost of his social position. The social gulf that divides him from the capitalist has widened,” and he must rest “content with forging... the golden chains by which” the bourgeois power continues to enslave and control him.³⁰⁶

The Knights of Labor were making a similar argument, only without the full programmatic vision we associate with standard Marxism. They, too, believed that laborers were stuck in a vicious circle and were subject to the arbitrary will of owners and managers; workers were trapped in a dominating relationship that had all the trappings of freedom, with a formally voluntary element, yet without much of the substance. Most of these early labor republicans, however, “were not self-consciously Marxists.”³⁰⁷ What their professed values and beliefs should instead suggest to us, according to Gourevitch, is that many “ideas attributed to Marx are not so peculiar to his cast of mind,” and “there is even a case to be made...that something of the reverse is true. Marx was one of those nineteenth-century thinkers who inherited and radicalized the republican tradition.”³⁰⁸

Most of these 19th century labor organizers had no interest in violent revolution, much less a state-imposed, mass-collectivized appropriation of the means of production. What they believed was necessary, rather, was a righting-of the balance and a clear economic shift, not away from wage labor completely, but from a state-subsidized system that multiplied the difficulties in either

³⁰⁶ Karl Marx, “Wage Labour and Capital” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. by Robert Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978), 211.

³⁰⁷ Gourevitch, *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth*, 185.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid*, 186.

becoming or remaining an independent proprietor. The problem was that working class citizens had few exit rights—not from industrial jobs in particular or the wage-labor system in general. And that meant they were effectively unfree in their relationship to the industries that employed them.

Multileveled Domination

We should think of this Labor Republican critique as a complex and multileveled one. At one level, they opposed the excessively asymmetrical power differentials endemic in the early industrial period. They resented the fact, more specifically, that managers and owners in large manufacturing plants and factories had no concern for their employees beyond the strict confines of the workplace setting, and they resented the fact that workers could be so severely mistreated and abused in environments where they were still nominally “free.” This critique, in short, targeted the specific “terms of labor” that were often destructive to personal health and, over the long-term, reduced laborers to a state of greater dependency; because wages were kept low enough to prevent workers from bettering or improving themselves, their employers effectively “gained undisputed control” over them, forcing them to sacrifice their bodily and social well-being for their own interests.³⁰⁹

This was true even in cases where owners and managers were generally lenient with the workers who labored for them; the nature of the contract that members of the working class engaged in, given the prevailing legal context, granted nearly full discretionary powers to the employer, and it was this feature that ideologically consistent republicans from all socioeconomic backgrounds believed they had good reason to oppose. In any event, labor republicans had reasonable grounds for supposing their position was at least somewhat consistent with classical

³⁰⁹ Robert Layton, quoted in Gourevitch, *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth*, 111.

republicanism.³¹⁰ Their “most deeply felt grievances,” writes Gourevitch, “were often not just with what the contract said—long hours and low pay—but with what it left unsaid—everything else.... Both as a matter of legal right and of cultural assumption, it was expected that once the contract was made the worker would passively obey the commands of the employer.”³¹¹ This was partly due to the unique nature of the labor contract, where the expectation was that workers would sell, not just a physical commodity but rather control of themselves for the lengthy duration of the industrial workday.³¹² Because of certain cultural understandings as to what a labor contract necessarily entails, workers were effectively subject, for most hours of most days, to the capricious will of employers who could and often did abuse their bodies to increase their own financial earnings.

In summary, domination at this level occurred primarily *in* the workplace and was invariably interpersonal and direct in character. This interpersonal domination was an outgrowth, however, of a prior and more structural level of domination extending well beyond the workplace context—a form of domination that was operative even before working class citizens traded their labor for what amounted in most cases to a trifling pittance. The reason why so many workers accepted such devastating terms in the first place was because they had few if any alternatives. The wider economic and commercial structures in which they found themselves made it difficult, if not impossible, to continue to function or even survive through any other means. With all too regular frequency, “as owners of their own labor, wage-laborers were compelled to sell their labor-commodity, because they could not withhold it from the market.”³¹³ They had no capacity to

³¹⁰ For a similar argument in today’s context, see Elizabeth Anderson, *Private Government: How Employers Rule Our Lives (and Why We Don’t Talk about It)* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

³¹¹ Gourevitch, *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth*, 111

³¹² Ibid, 113.

³¹³ Ibid, 106.

withhold this commodity or otherwise exit an asymmetrical wage relation. And in that relevant sense, working class citizens were effectively slaves both within and without the workplace; the primary reason they were incapable of avoiding interpersonal domination from managerial bosses was because they were also dominated outside of a workplace context through all-encompassing financial, legal, and economic structures. One form of domination contributed to another form.

This was also why labor republicans referred to their condition as “wage slavery.” It qualified as a form of slavery, in their view, because it entailed an extreme power asymmetry within the workplace that was reinforced by a legally prescribed form of domination that preceded it outside the workplace. Just like stereotypical slaves, they had no capacity to “exit” this domination, or they at least had few routes for doing so, and that also meant that their political “voice” had become weaker and more ineffective. They had grown wretchedly dependent on industrial employers to secure everyday necessities for themselves and their families, and this extreme state of dependency precluded them from finding alternative means to “stand tall” in society again.

Pettit himself, by the way, acknowledges that this argument is at least provisionally valid from a classical republican perspective. “The image of workers as wage slaves,” he writes, “casts them as dependent on the grace and mercy of their employer, and as required to court paths of caution and deference in dealing, individually or collectively, with their bosses.”³¹⁴ The objections of labor republicans were therefore reasonable “if the employers in any area [were] collectively capable of blacklisting someone who displease[d] them, as many nineteenth-century employers certainly were, and if unemployment effectively mean[t] destitution.”³¹⁵ If workers lacked any

³¹⁴ Pettit, *Republicanism*, 141.

³¹⁵ Ibid.

alternative—and without limits on employer discretion or even sufficient “safety nets” for the unemployed—they were potentially subject to domination even before they set foot in the factory.

At the heart of this argument is the implicit assumption that 19th century laborers were dependent on large industrialists because of a discriminatory economic structure. One of the prior choices in their “option-set” had been effectively removed from them—namely, the ability to forego mass industrial forms of labor for alternative lines of work or more community-oriented vocations. This manipulation of working-class possibilities and options, in this case through larger social structures, constitutes a form of arbitrary domination that Pettit has recently and thoughtfully articulated as being especially germane in an economic context, where even the most voluntary of exchanges can diminish republican freedom. In this view, even when employers or retailers offer a “market award” of some kind—whether a modest wage or a consumer commodity—they dominate others if they simultaneously remove an option previously available.³¹⁶ If their contractual offer comes with an implicit threat of an inescapable penalty or reward, then individuals will feel all but compelled to accept this offer regardless of whether or not it rightly corresponds with their preferences—assuming they lack the requisite resources to bear the frightful costs of refusing it.

It is reasonable to wonder whether industrial workers in the late 19th century had been offered a truly inescapable reward or punishment, or indeed whether the cost of their renouncing industrial labor had been intentionally imposed on them by freestanding agents or agencies. Their economic insecurity may have been due instead to a vast array of spontaneous forces outside of their or anyone else’s control. And if that were the case, then they were not subject to arbitrary domination, in the classical republican view, unless and until they became subject to the capricious will of their employers through a formalized contract; they might occasionally fall victim to a direct

³¹⁶ Pettit, “Freedom in the Market,” 18-19.

and interpersonal form of domination in the employer/employee relationship, as they complied with the dictates of industrial bosses, but they were still relatively free *outside* of the workplace.

Notably, several labor reformers like Thomas Skidmore diverged from their classical counterparts at this exact juncture. Skidmore himself insisted that “*even if* all existing property rights had their origin in perfectly just acts of acquisition and exchange, they would be illegitimate if they produce a distribution of property that made some economically dependent on others.”³¹⁷ In the final analysis, it was irrelevant whether structural inequalities were a product of intentional design or mere happenstance. They still transformed independent citizens into dependent workers. This is not a view that every republican would affirm. As Pettit has recently argued, representing the classical view, we are not subject to domination just because we happen to reside in a world where, for example, the spontaneous choices of hordes of consumers have inadvertently limited our capacity to exercise our preference in reading a tangible newspaper. In such cases, it sometimes happens that “other people come to rely on electronic sources of news, put the newspaper out of business, and thereby vitiate [our] choice of reading the newspaper.”³¹⁸ And as a consequence, our prior “option set” has been reduced, but not because of the “intrusive will of another agent or agency,” a fact that rightly colors our view of whether personal freedom is genuinely at stake.³¹⁹

Labor Republicans were facing a somewhat different scenario, however. As they understood it, the primary issue was not that they had fewer options from which they could choose in the abstract, but rather that their capacity to lead an independent life was the specific option that had been removed from their option set—an option that, once vitiated, placed them in an asymmetric

³¹⁷ Gourevitch, *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth*, 79. Italics in original

³¹⁸ Pettit, *On the People's Terms*, 40.

³¹⁹ Ibid, 39.

bargaining position and rendered them excessively vulnerable to the arbitrary will of employers. Even if this reduction in their option set occurred through the spontaneous actions of others—as in the example of the newspaper—it was still worthy of concern because it left them dependent on industrial bosses to such a degree that they could no longer exercise or maintain their freedom.

Even the stricter position that Pettitt puts forward is at least somewhat compatible with this conclusion; classical republicans, too, believe that domination is present in certain all-encompassing systems that over-empower an entrenched minority. These systems are presumably problematic even when they arise through spontaneous mechanisms, and they may require serious alteration. Indeed, Pettit admits in passing that even the “aggregate consequence of how people are independently motivated to act”—which is what generally distinguishes the market sphere from the sphere of politics— “can impact on free choice” and “may constitute a structure or pattern that facilitates the invasion by some people of the choices available to others,” amounting “to an indirect, structural form of invasion.”³²⁰ Although these spontaneous choices are not themselves an invasion of our choices, they can, once aggregated, enable other agents or agencies to do so in the future.

It is significant, in any case, that Labor Republicans like Skidmore regarded this question as more or less hypothetical because, as a matter of fact, “the history of property was *not* a sequence of perfectly just actions of acquisition and exchange.”³²¹ They belabored this point, moreover, with lengthy analyses of the “series of violent, unjust expropriations” that gradually acquired “sanction in law” and reduced the living condition of millions of citizens to one of desperate dependence.³²² If the prevailing economic structure reflected the intentional meddling of financial, corporate, and

³²⁰ Pettit, *On the People's Terms*, 44.

³²¹ Gourevitch, *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth*, 79

³²² Ibid. Italics in original.

managerial elites, then working class citizens could reasonably claim they were subject to the arbitrary will of others in more than just one or even two senses: not merely in the workplace, and not merely in the prevailing economic structure, but also in the processes by which this structure came into existence, in a structure specially created to serve the interests of others, not themselves.

This leaves us with three interrelated forms of arbitrary domination that, while not formally specified by Gourevitch, are at least implicit in what he describes. Labor Republicans believed they were facing, first, a direct or interpersonal form of domination initiated through a voluntary wage contract and subsequently localized in a workplace setting. They were also facing, second, a structural or systemic form of domination that rendered them dependent on large industrialists. Finally, they were facing a third form of “system-building” domination, which preceded the other two forms chronologically. This third form was different from the other two in the sense that powerful agencies had *indirectly* dominated the working class through their *direct* interference with the systems regulating their interactions. It involved more active interference than is typical with structural domination, but without the interpersonal dimension that is present in the workplace.

For rhetorical purposes, if nothing else, the Labor Republicans insisted they were facing domination on all three fronts. And they naturally and quite reasonably believed that the third form of domination (of the system-building variety) would help motivate their argument. After all, even if neutral or disinterested members of the public became convinced that existing legal, regulatory, and technological systems favored the wealthy elite at the expense of the working classes, they still might conclude that this inequitable system, with its remarkably uneven playing field, would be remedied in due course through the same spontaneous processes that originally produced it. This assumption is not always as valid as it initially appears—even systems that emerge spontaneously

can benefit from “network effects” that make them difficult to supplant in the future³²³—but it shifts the burden of proof on those who insist that political meddling in the marketplace is now requisite.

If members of the public have reason to suspect, on the other hand, that these systems are to some significant extent an artifact of political negotiation and compromise, or if they conclude that they were intentionally modified to serve the interests of the few rather than the many, then they will likely consider a “leave it alone” strategy to be less than adequate. Given this new “origin story,” they can reasonably conclude that the same agencies which helped construct or modify these systems may still be exerting a considerable influence over its future trajectory. The burden of proof should arguably shift, therefore, to anyone who insists that repeated acts of interference are no longer occurring and that chance mutations will somehow create a more egalitarian system. Absent contrary evidence, the new assumption should be that system-level reforms are necessary.

Labor Republican Reforms

Labor Republicans believed the solution was to create new and more healthy structures that would empower working class citizens so they could stand on their own two feet again, no more beholden to the mass, democratic collective than to major titans of industry. And it was this decentralized approach—an approach previously advocated and even anticipated by John Stuart Mill³²⁴—that came to characterize their movement. For example, members of the Knights of Labor organization advocated “an economy of interdependent producer and consumer cooperatives,

³²³ See, for instance, Michael L. Katz and Carl Shapiro, “Systems Competition and Network Effects,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* Vol. 8, No. 2 (1994), 93-115.

³²⁴ See John Stuart Mill, *Principles of Political Economy with some of their Applications to Social Philosophy*, ed. William James Ashley (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1909, 7th ed.), Book IV, Chapter VII.

collectively owned and managed by workers.”³²⁵ Their objective was to establish a dense network of self-regulating, productive hubs in manufacturing and other related industries, which would each collaborate in pursuit of common interests and would be owned and operated by everyday citizens. More so than the consumer cooperatives we enjoy today, these productive hubs would allow working class citizens to avoid “wage slavery,” enabling them to engage in constructive work without substituting their own values and beliefs for the interests of capricious industrialists.

Guiding this reform was the insight that domination was occurring across three interrelated levels, and that the first such level had a certain logical and sequential precedence. In the view of Labor Republicans, it was by constructing new and original systems, or else by altering existing ones, that corporate industrialists had acquired their position of market dominance, and this suggested that similar mechanisms could be utilized to reverse this process—or if not reverse it entirely, then to establish systems that would effectively equalize the playing field. What was needed were systems capable of facilitating working-class cooperation, initiative, and self-reliance.

Such a cooperative scheme, if successful, would remove the many asymmetric power differentials both within and without the workplace setting. Just as importantly, it would also facilitate a whole host of practical reforms—on issues like “hours, conditions, assessments of safety, introduction of new technologies, and so on”—while eliminating “the many small-scale, petty abuses that never rise to the level of being worthy of a court or arbitration battle, but which nonetheless persist in the current workplace.”³²⁶ It would, in short, target the root rather than the symptoms of domination, addressing the many artificial disparities on which the latter were based.

³²⁵ Katz and Shapiro, “Systems Competition and Network Effects,” 118.

³²⁶ Ibid, 180.

In this respect, cooperative labor resembles the structural reforms implemented by the Great Western railroad, which flattened corporate hierarchies and reduced arbitrary domination for citizens outside the railroad industry by stimulating the economic output of rural producers. It is also a solution, importantly, that would doubtless appeal to many rural citizens today, whose conception of “community” is similarly informed by a production-oriented vision. Assuming for the sake of argument that this cooperative scheme would work as intended in a competitive market—and that is admittedly a generous assumption—it would enable many citizens to preserve vibrant and economically productive communities without relying on a steady stream of political funding. Thus, although the Knights of Labor did not explicitly frame their proposal as a community-saving measure, it was nonetheless compatible with the sorts of concerns that rural citizens voice today.

This is not to say that Labor Republicans thought of self-regulating cooperatives as the ultimate panacea. For later participants of this movement, in fact, such cooperatives remained little more than a pipe dream, and efforts to implement them rapidly gave way to more conventional reforms. Indeed, one temptation the labor movement increasingly faced was to abandon concerns over objectionable economic structures in favor of more tangible goals like improving workplace conditions and raising wages. The temptation was to dissociate structural domination, as pervasive as it was, from the interpersonal and direct domination occurring in immediate occupational settings. And by the turn of the century, given the accelerating nature of industrial trends, the comparatively mild efforts of social democrats began to look vastly preferable to those of the stern, republican-minded organizations that preceded them. Standard workplace reforms seemed more achievable, anyway, and their success would ultimately stifle harsher critics of status-quo systems.

Rejecting the provocative argument “that ‘slavery,’ not poverty, was the overriding issue of modern times,” these social democrats set their sights, according to historian Christopher Lasch, on

a “more expansive conception of distributive justice” whereby the fruits of production would be allocated more equitably.³²⁷ Their goal was to make every citizen better off materially and thus ensure that every socio-economic class benefited from recent advances in industrial productivity; they had little interest in increasing local proprietorship across the board, however, or in reforming financial, regulatory, and technical systems such that “effective control over production remained at the local level.”³²⁸ Throughout most of the Progressive Era, in fact, the producerist vision of the early labor reformers would command a smaller audience, as did, too, the republican ideals that had always informed it. The kind of vision urgently advocated by William Jennings Bryan and later revived by corporate reformers like Louis Brandeis was generally absent from liberal discourse.

As the 20th century progressed, the social democrats retained a controlling influence over much of the labor movement, re-defining its legacy in accordance with their milder, yet also more attainable, objectives. Early concerns over republican freedom faded from public consciousness and were quickly replaced by more expectant and optimistic appeals to the future. Thanks to new and innovative technologies, the hard-fought gains of trade unionism, and liberal regulatory reforms, the working-class and lower-middle class groups of the future would enjoy a material standard of living medieval kings could only look upon with envy. Thus, a critical shift occurred in which a material lifestyle once beyond the reach of harried laborers became valued more highly than freedom itself. That the average standard of living had markedly increased made it all the easier, decades later, to ignore the naysayers: Growing opposition to giant chain stores in the 1920s and

³²⁷ Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven*, 329.

³²⁸ Ibid, 334, 335.

30s—opposition often articulated in republican terms—fell easy prey to the claim that consumer welfare (as measured by “better goods at lower prices”) took priority over regional concerns.³²⁹

More recently, scholars who either identify as “republican” or else support many of its aims have begun to revive this political tradition, emphasizing its applicability to contemporary abuses of power in the workplace.³³⁰ This renewed focus on the Labor Republicans is commendable, but it risks irrelevance if it downplays the arbitrary domination occurring across multiple and interactive levels, beyond the sphere of employment. It is this latter issue, specifically, that unites urban factory workers with their rural agrarian counterparts, along with much of the populist movement today. And it is also an issue that increasingly revolves around *consumption* as much as it does production.

Agrarian Republicans

Since at least the 17th century, leading agrarian thinkers on both sides of the Atlantic have made arguments eerily like those advanced in the 19th century by Labor Republicans, and they, too, have tacitly appealed to republican freedom to justify their position. The Digger and Leveller Movements in England, for instance, promoted an idyllic vision of a country populated by small-scale producers, each able to provide mutual support for one another in densely organized communities; for citizens could only “remain independent from the state or the wealthy,” they believed, “if they controlled their own labor and met their needs through the proceeds of that labor.”³³¹ In an American context, Thomas Jefferson would later lend his own influential voice to

³²⁹ Michael Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 227-231. See also Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Knopf, 2003), 112-165.

³³⁰ In addition to Gourevitch, see also Elizabeth Anderson, *Private Government*.

³³¹ Gourevitch, *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth*, 70.

this perspective, arguing that medieval laws of primogeniture and entail created major wealth disparities that would erode the freedom and independence of small-scale producers.³³² These citizens would be able to preserve their liberty only if they remained economically independent, to some limited degree, of the merchant and financial powers that dominated Northeastern cities.

Throughout much of the 19th century, modest-sized farmers and producers throughout the Midwest continued to identify with this republican message, even if the specific agrarian aims of Jefferson, narrow and stringent as they were, had failed to materialize in a rapidly industrializing society.³³³ As we saw in the last chapter, the legislative successes of the Granger movement that erupted during the construction of the transcontinental railroad, which was followed in turn by the Interstate Commerce Act, integrated the concerns of Midwestern farmers with those of small-business owners operating in medium-sized towns and cities across the American heartland. Their central rallying cry, as they understood it at the time, was a republican vision of productive regions capable of resisting the economic, cultural, and political dictates of large, industrialized powers. It is little wonder, then, that Labor Republicans like Skidmore were themselves accused of peddling a “dangerous agrarian” message as they actively exposed severe dependencies in the labor market.³³⁴

The principles and motivations driving both movements were sufficiently similar, in other words, to attract the notice of their staunch critics. As many Labor Republicans understood it, however, there were aspects of this comparison that were ultimately unwarranted and unhelpful:

³³² Gourevitch, *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth*, 70-71.

³³³ On the radical disjunction between the “political economy” of Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison, on one hand, and post-industrial America on the other, see Drew R. McCoy, *The Elusive Republic: Political Economy in Jeffersonian America* (Chapel Hill: Omohundro Institute and University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

³³⁴ Gourevitch, *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth*, 91.

In contrast to their agrarian counterparts, they purposely shifted their focus away from concerns over escalating rates of landlessness and debt peonage to the central issue of wage labor, and they firmly believed that the agrarian aim of eliminating primogeniture and entail would no longer be enough to remedy a discriminatory system.³³⁵ Needed instead was a more radical redistribution of existing property and productive resources—not only in terms of land, but also industry—which necessitated in turn a more activist government to manage and oversee this organizational process.

In short, the Labor Republicans were often willing to take a more militant policy stance, even if their concerns, at base, were at least ideologically comparable to the early agrarians. This made them tactically useful, by the mid-19th century, to agrarian parties like the National Reform Association, which in appealing to the “worky” heritage of the early Labor Republicans was able to forge a mainstream movement capable of uniting urban industrialists with rural farmers; it was precisely this urban-rural coalition, in fact, that propelled the passing of the Homestead Act.³³⁶ At that date, it was the agrarians, more so than the Labor Republicans, who strategically emphasized and affirmed the affinity between both such movements, and they did so to great political success.

Decades later, while the Labor Movement underwent a major identity crisis at the turn of the century, its republican vision and ideals would again enjoy an intellectual renaissance in the agrarian revival of the 1930s, which like its 19th century counterpart, strategically emphasized the basic harmony between labor and farming interests. Important, this agrarian revival that had several distinctive branches. Much better known, of course, are the controversial Southerners who

³³⁵ Gourevitch, *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth*, 91.

³³⁶ See Mark Lause, *Young America: Land, Labor, and the Republican Community* (Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2005).

congregated at Vanderbilt University,³³⁷ but a comparable and less conspicuous branch developed simultaneously in the North around writers like Ralph Borsodi, Herbert Agar, and Chauncey Stillman, who together launched the journal *Free America*.³³⁸ According to historian Allan Carlson, many of the issues raised by these writers had been the rallying cry of earlier labor reformers, and they doggedly revitalized the work of American economist and social reformer Henry George.³³⁹

Borsodi, for example, actively critiqued “the artificial nature of the joint-stock corporation which granted privileges to commercial entities—limited liability, perpetual life, and the ability to raise capital through stock, bonds, and other debt instruments—that were denied to ‘natural families.’”³⁴⁰ And he likewise “condemned modern economic thought for ignoring the value of home production,” which enabled individuals, families, and communities to lead a more self-sufficient existence and remain free from the productive demands of organized factories.³⁴¹ Similarly, Agar argued, following the “distributism” of Hilaire Belloc and Gilbert Keith Chesterton, that “true liberty could only exist within a nation where the great majority of citizens were holders of real property.”³⁴² In his view, republican freedom required a measure of economic self-sufficiency. And in strictly policy terms, this necessarily entailed diligent efforts at “land reform that transformed tenants into farm owners, the promotion of productive homesteads, limits on retail chain stores, the

³³⁷ See *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*, edited by Susan V. Donaldson (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2006).

³³⁸ See *Land & Liberty: The Best of 'Free America,'* edited by Allan C. Carlson (Wethersfield Institute, 2019)

³³⁹ Allan C. Carlson, “The Small and the Human, and ‘Free America,’” *Kirk Center*, June 2019: <https://kirkcenter.org/essays/the-small-and-the-human-and-free-america/>. Accessed January 2020

³⁴⁰ Ibid.

³⁴¹ Ibid.

³⁴² Ibid.

decentralization of industry, and worker participation in the ownership and control of necessarily big enterprises”—a combination well-calculated to attract members of the Labor Movement.³⁴³

The focus of this agrarian critique was larger economic structures that inhibit men and women in families, in voluntary associations, and in communities from pursuing their conception of a good life. When small-scale homesteaders and business-owners are beholden to external agencies to secure basic necessities—regardless of whether these agencies are public or private—they are subject to the potentially arbitrary will of these same agencies, and that is particularly problematic when the preferences, beliefs, and values of the latter do not comport with their own. For agrarian thinkers, therefore, regional or communal productivity is an issue of vital importance; it constitutes a necessary, if not sufficient, means for preserving the independence and freedom of rural citizens.

Unlike the Labor Movement, the Agrarians retained a laser focus on our all-encompassing financial, legal, and technological systems, and this focus would later enable them to adapt more readily to the consumer-oriented economy of the 20th and now 21st century. They realized that mass dependence or one sort or another transcends the labor market and includes, somewhat paradoxically, the everyday transactions of a mass consumer market. This is especially problematic for those who prioritize economically productive communities, as most Agrarians have. If the working ideal is to nurture and maintain relationships of mutual dependency and reciprocity in the communities and regions with which citizens identify, and in which they affectionately reside, then mass consumption is arguably every bit as destructive of that end as is mass production. The two are separate dimensions of the same root phenomenon, and they need to be addressed together.

These threads come together most obviously in the writings of Kentucky farmer, poet, and essayist Wendell Berry, who is the latest in a long line of agrarian thinkers. What Berry captures, on

³⁴³ Carlson, “The Small and the Human.”

a more personal level, is the existential angst and intense feelings of powerlessness that rural citizens feel in a market system that increasingly clashes with their most cherished principles. He writes not just of the demise of traditional, family-run farms, but also of a communally-oriented way of life that is now rapidly disappearing in a globalizing and urbanizing world—which as we saw in some detail in chapter one, is a complaint often voiced by throngs of populist voters today, many of whom may not hold such agrarian predilections themselves. Berry’s thought is thus helpful in identifying why these voters have a legitimate complaint, from a republican perspective, even if they never experience the direct, interpersonal domination that triggered the Labor Movement.

Wendell Berry and Republican Freedom

A key premise in Berry’s position is that agricultural trends disproportionately reflect corporate interest and technocratic management; they bear the imprint of politics at least as much as economics, and they embody the beliefs and values of the managerial elite more than they do the millions of farmers who once worked and tilled the land on smaller-scale homesteads. Once this fact has been firmly established, moreover, it becomes easier to see how citizens might suffer from arbitrary domination in their capacity as both producers *and* consumers. They suffer not only when they experience interpersonal domination from owners, executives, and managers, but also when they are forced to exchange one mode of production—a way of life they deeply value—for one with a radically different character, or when they are forced to dispense with their agricultural holdings altogether. Citizens experience domination whenever they feel compelled to abandon their culture and way of life because of political decisions made by others, well beyond their influence or control.

Berry himself was born into a multigenerational family of farmers, a member of a small Kentucky agricultural community, so his arguments have an intensely personal feel to them. When

he references agricultural specialists in corporate and university settings, or when he speaks of the self-appointed experts at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, he is writing about agents and agencies that he believes have diminished the freedom of both himself and countless others.³⁴⁴ He thus sees himself as defending, not just farmers, but also millions of citizens in communities across America, many of whom once depended on a local economy comprised of all sorts of home-grown producers. It is precisely people like this, he argues, whose interests have long been denied and rebuffed; they have fallen prey to a prearranged “agricultural revolution” specifically designed, as its promoters acknowledge, to disrupt and destabilize rural communities—a revolution that triggered a mass rural exodus and beget a society with few “country people,” land, or community.³⁴⁵

As a postwar successor of the agrarian tradition, Berry often emphasized structural, rather than directly interpersonal, forms of domination, yet he still provided his readers with a complex and multileveled assessment that is at least somewhat reminiscent of the Labor Republicans. At the first and primary level, in his view, is the deliberate reshaping of national agriculture through various financial, regulatory, and technological systems—what we referred to above as “system-building” domination. This process entails, more specifically, a meticulous blueprint advocated and implemented by a group of self-designated “agricultural prophets,” who invariably operate on the assumption that the world they are consciously designing will ensure in the end that everyone will be far happier, healthier, and wiser in all relevant senses and without meaningful exceptions.

These farming specialists generally believe that an increasingly mechanistic approach to agricultural production—an approach that relies not only on politically-financed research but also a

³⁴⁴ See Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 1977), 63-80.

³⁴⁵ Ibid, 67-68.

steady supply of fossil fuels and other industrial inputs—will ensure that a substantial portion of rural populations is liberated from the drudgery of mind-numbing farm work, enabling them to pursue “higher,” or more lucrative, callings. Rural citizens stand to benefit, too, from greater access to an historically unprecedented abundance of monoculture foods. They will, in short, experience a dramatic increase in standard of living, and they will be freer to pursue a more individualized path.

The difficulty, of course, is that some such citizens would rather not travel this path at all. As Berry suggests in no uncertain terms, this agricultural blueprint only diminishes, if anything, the freedoms of small-scale farmers and homesteaders by supplanting their own interests and their own way of life for a vision that better encapsulates the interests and preferences of others. In other words, when the political and managerial elite blithely assume that everyone in flyover country shares their own values, beliefs, and preferences, they run a profound risk of implementing policies that produce effects exactly opposite those they originally intended. “The specialists who conceive these models,” Berry writes, “...undoubtedly believe in the doctrines of personal liberty and dignity, equality of opportunity, etc.,” and they believe that their idealized urban citizen will enjoy a higher quality of life in areas specially reserved for their “living, working, and recreation.”³⁴⁶ But they are mistaken in thinking that this postulated urban future—which does not contain a densely cohesive community, as rural citizens understand it—is necessarily what every rational person would prefer.

For citizens who conceive of the “good life” in a more densely communal sense, efforts to corral and enclose them in urban spaces, or incentivize them to adopt a neoliberal mentality, may be regarded as inherently degrading and even “illiberal.” Citizens forced to modify or abandon their culture for the sake of such a technocratic future, Berry writes, may still “be *allowed* to be free to do *certain* things in *certain* places prescribed by *other* people,” and they may “be free to work in the

³⁴⁶ Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 78.

places set aside for work, free to play or relax in places set aside for recreation, free to live (whatever that may mean) in places set aside for living.”³⁴⁷ They may still have access to an abundance of pre-curated options from which they can choose, a buffet of consumer goods that is always ready at hand. They will not, however, be free to integrate their work, leisure, and play into a community-oriented whole, nor will they be able to pursue a cohesive community where neighbors work with and for one another. They will no longer possess multigenerational farms of their own, and they “will have nothing to say about how the land is used or the kind or quality of its produce,” at least not on “farms obviously designed for the ownership and management of huge ‘agribusinesses’ that will control them ‘privately’” for their commercial ends.³⁴⁸ For citizens like this, the freedom to choose the “good life,” with its communal emphasis, is precisely in jeopardy.

The “system-building” project initiated by agricultural specialists thus reduces the “option-set” from which rural citizens can still choose, shattering the community-oriented lifestyle to which they are most accustomed both temperamentally and ideologically. Describing this project with all the pathos of one who had himself suffered from it, Berry even likened it, in a rhetorical move unlikely to win him many friends, to the industrializing processes occurring simultaneously in the authoritarian East: “I remember, during the fifties, the outrage with which our political leaders spoke of the forced removal of the populations of villages in communist countries,” he writes, adding, “I also remember that at the same time, in Washington, the word on farming was “Get big or get out”—a policy which is still in effect and which has taken an enormous toll. The only difference is that of method; the force used by the communists was military; with us, it has been economic—a

³⁴⁷ Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 79.

³⁴⁸ Ibid.

"free market" in which the freest were the richest."³⁴⁹ Berry's point is that this project was foisted on farming communities with little input from their members, and often without their knowledge. Indeed, in his assessment, "this community-killing agriculture, with its monomania of bigness, [was] not primarily the work of farmers" but rather of "institutions of agriculture: the university experts, the bureaucrats, and the 'agribusinessmen,' who have promoted so-called efficiency at the expense of community (and of real efficiency), and quantity at the expense of quality."³⁵⁰

Although Berry does not himself articulate it in this way, a clear implication of his argument is that this agro-industrial project infringed on the republican freedoms of rural citizens: It reflected and served the values and interests of the industrial elite rather than their own. And it contributed to domination at a second structural level, as soon as it had finally taken a more concrete form: In a rapidly urbanizing world, small-town citizens soon found themselves dependent on, and implicated in, processes and systems increasingly impersonal, massive in scale, and consumer-oriented, spurring them toward an atomized existence all but devoid of established, cohesive communities.

In much of his work, Berry describes the inherent fragility and vulnerability of onetime farmers-turned-consumers, who have everything and nothing all at once, and who have grown pitifully reliant on corporate and industrial agents that reap enormous profits from their inability to fend for themselves economically. "We cannot feed or clothe ourselves," he writes, "or entertain ourselves, or communicate with each other, or be charitable or neighborly or loving, or even respect ourselves, without recourse to a merchant or a corporation or a public-service organization or an agency of the government or a style-setter or an expert."³⁵¹ Because the most basic necessities

³⁴⁹ Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 45.

³⁵⁰ Ibid, 45-46.

³⁵¹ Berry, "Think Little" in *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry*, edited by Norman Wirzba (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2002), 84.

of life have been delegated to agencies that are large, distant, and impersonal, the agrarian ideal of self-sufficient individuals inhabiting self-sufficient communities has become all but impossible to achieve. How can citizens take care of their neighbors and communities if everything they have is a product of far-flung industries? And how can they realize or achieve the sorts of community we analyzed in chapter one, where members are freely bound by mutual responsibilities and needs?

Berry was hardly blind to the fact, of course, that mass industrialized farming has provided citizens in rural communities with an abundance of choices and options they did not previously possess. The problem, however, is that a growing body of citizens are unable to make what he elsewhere referred to as “significant” choices, or the capacity to choose from options that they themselves consider important. It constitutes a poor exchange for citizens to enjoy more consumer goods or a higher standard of living if, in the process, they are reluctantly and grudgingly compelled “to conform not to local ways and conditions but to a rootless and place monoculture of commercial expectations and products”—or if they became “indissolubly married to a hundred corporations that regard us at best as captives and at worst as prey.”³⁵² Assuming that this exchange will always be difficult to accept for a certain proportion of citizens, how are they not subservient to the arbitrary will of others? And how are they not provisionally beholden to their commercial masters?

Berry’s distinctive insight is that citizens can suffer under the rule of external agencies, not only when transactions are voluntary in a nominal or formal sense—as many Labor Republicans recognized in a workplace context—but also when they stand to obtain measurable benefits from it. Individuals can suffer from arbitrary domination even when acting in their capacity as consumers, as they transact with others on a voluntary basis and for the sake of material gain. If they resist or

³⁵² Berry, “Sex, Economy, Freedom, and Community” in *The Art of the Commonplace*, 164. Italics added.

oppose the ubiquity of the consumer relation itself, or if they mourn, in other cases, their growing reliance on agents or agencies with values and interests they either do not share or else strenuously reject, then they may experience a loss of freedom even when they engage in a “free” market economy. And this naturally leaves citizens like this with a profound sense of powerlessness, even supposing they retain, in political constitutions, a substantial number of freedoms. Writes Berry,

If you can control a people’s economy, you don’t need to worry about its politics; its politics have become irrelevant. If you control people’s choices as to whether or not they will work, and where they will work, and what they will do, and how well they will do it, and what they will eat and wear, and the genetic makeup of their crops and animals, and what they will do for amusement, then why should you worry about freedom of speech? In a totalitarian economy, any ‘political liberties’ that the people might retain would simply cease to matter. If, as is often the case already, nobody can be elected who is not wealthy, and if nobody can be wealthy without dependence on the corporate economy, then what is your vote worth? The citizen thus becomes an economic subject.³⁵³

The implications of this argument are truly stunning in their scope: A proportion of citizens cannot be free in the republican sense until their dependency as consumers is significantly reduced. And they will not be free until their communities and regions transform once again into productive local economies where individual members can serve themselves and their neighbors without being reliant, in every instance, on global supply chains, financial institutions, and corporations.

³⁵³ Berry, “Conserving Forest Communities” in *What Matters? Economics for a Renewed Commonwealth* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2011), 168-169.

In the most extreme cases, citizens in their capacity as consumers face a “tragic choice” not unlike that described by political theorist Martha Nussbaum—choices where “all the possible answers to the obvious question, including the best one, are bad, involving serious moral wrongdoing.”³⁵⁴ Citizens who have learned or been informed of rampant abuses occurring in sweatshops around the globe, for example, may have no reasonable response that effectively ends their own involvement in a system they now believe is appallingly unjust. Unless they are blessed with substantial financial reserves—and sometimes even not even in that case—they will remain tragically implicated in the petty domination, dehumanizing conditions, and extreme cruelties inflicted on countless individuals laboring on their behalf.³⁵⁵ Because of their material dependence on sweatshop-produced clothing, most consumers are tacit participants in this severe injustice.³⁵⁶

Even in cases less obviously “tragic” in this narrow sense, however, consumers have good reason to believe that their extreme economic dependence, and their virtual inability to become *less* dependent, is a grave concern. It strips at least some number of citizens of their freedom, subjecting them to a culture and way of life that is not their own, but which caters instead to titans in the tech industry, to global financial markets, and to swollen government bureaucracies. Economic dependence can erode republican freedom even in cases where clear injustices are not occurring.

³⁵⁴ Martha C. Nussbaum, “The Costs of Tragedy: Some Moral Limits of Cost-Benefit Analysis,” *The Journal of Legal Studies* Vol. 29, No. S2 (2000), 1007.

³⁵⁵ Some of the challenges consumers face in minimizing their implication in these abuses are recounted by Tim Bartley, et al. “Apparel and Footwear: Standards for Sweatshops” in *Looking Behind the Label: Global Industries and the Conscientious Consumer* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 146-178

³⁵⁶ See Benjamin McKean, *Disposed to Justice* (forthcoming from Oxford University)

This narrative may be especially counterintuitive for those who believe that freedom is integrally related to market consumption in every instance.³⁵⁷ This commonsense view is hardly unreasonable given that many citizens acquire, through voluntary transactions in a relatively free and open market, the social, cultural, and material resources they need to counter and effectively resist the dominating power of would-be oppressors. When individuals obtain a higher income or improve their social status, they are less dependent on localized sources of authority and are thus generally freer to be or pursue whatever they please. In another relevant sense, of course, they may have simply traded one form of dependence for another; they may be less fiscally reliant on their families, neighbors, and employers and yet more so on larger financial and economic systems, or on the corporate and bureaucratic entities that predominate in these systems. Nevertheless, if their preferences and values still align with these entities—which it will of necessity if they happen to prefer a lifestyle mediated invariably through consumer transactions—then they will not, in all probability, feel particularly subject to anyone. They can enjoy a vastly increased standard of living without any subjective feeling of powerlessness. Their own volition perfectly aligns with the profit-seeking motivations of behemoth corporations—which themselves make every effort to cater to their commercialized preferences—and by and large with the ideological aims of public agencies.

Individuals who do not effortlessly fit this procrustean bed, however, have an altogether more painful experience, as Berry so movingly displays throughout his many essays, poems, and stories. Indeed, Berry admits to feeling something akin to “despair” when forced to conclude, as recently as 2017, that rural America has become a “colony,” and a “colonial economy” at that.³⁵⁸

³⁵⁷ For an historical and philosophical analysis of this dramatic shift in how we conceptualize freedom, see Eric MacGilvray, *The Invention of Market Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011)

³⁵⁸ Wendell Berry, “Southern Despair: A Defense of Rural America,” *The New York Review*, May 2017: <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2017/05/11/southern-despair/>. Accessed January 2021

And he expresses constant dismay over policies aggressively implemented by public-private partnerships—policies that helped erode, over more than a century of concerted effort, “the decent, small, independent livelihoods of rural America.”³⁵⁹ Importantly, because the complaint of citizens like Berry is with these economic relations themselves, they have few remaining outlets to voice their frustration. Indeed, political elections are, in theory at least, one of their few remaining outlets in a world where everyday market signals, including what they consume and how much of it, is too excessively marred by their own excessive dependence to signal reliably their dissatisfaction.³⁶⁰

What Berry further demonstrates is that political and economic reforms that narrowly target everyone will likely be counterproductive and, for that reason, may provoke even greater long-term resentment. Even supposing we were to adopt the wide-ranging reforms advocated by Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen, for example, and expand the “capability set” or “basic capabilities” that individuals possess,³⁶¹ our efforts will still be largely ineffectual if we disregard what these concepts specifically entail for citizens like Berry: For such as them, a more relevant issue is the basic capability set of communities, or the capacity of their communities to cultivate mutual loyalties and responsibilities. It is impossible to serve sufficiently the interests of citizens like this without also meeting the functional prerequisites of towns and villages across America. Far from conflicting with one another, the needs of the individual and community are in this case closely aligned. And this means that the distinctively republican emphasis, as Pettit elsewhere puts

³⁵⁹ Berry, “Southern Despair.”

³⁶⁰ For a similar account of how domination often pervades the consumer relationship, see Charles E. Lindblom, *The Market System: What It Is, How It Works, and What to Make of It* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 66-71.

³⁶¹ See Amartya Sen, *Inequality Reexamined* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992) and *Development as Freedom* (New York: Knopf, 1999); and Martha Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) and *Creating Capabilities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

it, on a “context-independent condition”—or on the condition, in other words, that individuals can still pursue references and beliefs without depending on the favor or complacency of superiors—requires that communities of necessity remain a viable option for a segment of the population.³⁶² Our economic systems should not preclude the very possibility of densely integrated communities, where members can still to some significant extent produce, sell, and trade with one another.

This close relationship between communal and individual freedoms is a perennial theme in traditional republican theory. Steeped as they were in classical sources, the English republicans often took it for granted, for example, “that any understanding of what it means for an individual citizen to possess or lose their liberty must be embedded with an account of what it means for a civil association to be free.”³⁶³ There is a close and mutually beneficial relationship, they believed, between the freedom of citizens, on one hand, and the freedom of groups on the other, regardless of whether the latter are labelled for our purposes as “governments,” “commonwealths,” or even nations.”³⁶⁴ And it is invariably the case that individuals cannot be free in a meaningful sense unless the economic and political groups with which they are affiliated are likewise free and independent.

We can think of this relationship in one of several ways, both of which are at least implicit in the agrarian position that Berry articulates. First, we can think of the freedom of the community as an essential prerequisite for the freedom of certain individuals: The enslavement or destruction of the very possibility of a particular kind of community or commonwealth will have necessary ripple effects on the citizens who inhabit them, subjecting them to the will of external agents and agencies

³⁶² Pettit uses the “context-independent condition” to distinguish his neo-republican position from the capabilities approach advocated by Sen. See “Capability and freedom: A defence of Sen,” *Economics and Philosophy* Vol. 17, No. 1 (2001): 1-20. For a response, see Amartya Sen, “Reply,” in *Ibid*, 51-66.

³⁶³ Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism*, 23.

³⁶⁴ These were the terms employed by Milton, Harrington, and Sidney, respectively. See *Ibid*.

whose culture and interests do not comport with their own. And this means, by implication, that many such individuals cannot be free if their political community has been effectively neutered.³⁶⁵

Second, we can think of the freedom of the community as psychologically integral to those individuals who highly prioritize their communal affiliations. This psychological integration often occurs when individuals develop a strong affection for the group or community to which they most intimately belong, and thus come to associate its health and wellbeing with their own. A slave who has escaped to freedom, for example, may still feel psychologically enslaved if his wife and children still suffer under his previous master.³⁶⁶ This man may still be free in a formal sense, but he realizes that his desire to preserve the health and prosperity of a group with which he is closely affiliated—in this case, with his most intimate family—has been thwarted by the dominating will of another.

For individuals who value community in ways even slightly comparable to Berry, a similar dynamic applies whenever their town or village loses its economic vitality. They lose an essential prerequisite of freedom as they are forced to rely increasingly on external agents and agencies. And they lose, in the process, a group with which they were most aligned psychologically, which inhibits them from enjoying any lasting satisfaction in their free capabilities as individuals. This also means that individuals can suffer from communal loss even when they later come to reside in a major city.

Arbitrary Domination Across the Urban-Rural Divide

³⁶⁵ This republican argument is perhaps most apparent in Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on the First Decade of Titus Livius* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, & Company, 2006).

³⁶⁶ This helpful example comes from Yoram Hazony in “National Freedom as an Ordering Principle” in *The Virtue of Nationalism* (Basic Books: New York, 2018).

Arguments from an agrarian thinker like Berry may at first glance appear to have nothing of value to say to citizens who suffer from arbitrary domination in expanding urban regions; as his social and economic critique revolves around issues related specifically to agriculture and community, it is hardly self-evident how it relates to the unique challenges faced by ethnic minorities or working-class citizens who inhabit a service-oriented, post-industrialized metropolis. As we come to recognize the relevance of Berry's critique across three separate yet interrelated dimensions, however, and as we come to see its relevance for the consumer relationship itself, then we can begin to make connections that transcend the urban-rural divide. And we can begin to see that rural concerns are not so radically different from those that many urban citizens confront.

Berry explicitly argues, in fact, that the manufactured destruction of smaller-scale, family run farms bears directly on our impoverished inner cities, and thus on the significantly diminished freedom of countless citizens who either presently inhabit or once occupied these spaces.³⁶⁷ This connection is not just conjectural but has verifiable historical roots. Berry writes, for instance, of the slow yet steady disappearance of black farmers in the rural South—farmers who numbered in the hundreds of thousands, or nearly a million strong, in the 1920s but who today total a mere 45 thousand.³⁶⁸ This data point would arguably be less a cause for concern if these erstwhile farmers had freely chosen this transition from country to city in every specific instance. We know that a decent proportion of them, at least, strove to escape the political domination they faced in the form of Jim Crow laws, which made living in the South cruelly unjust and effectively untenable; the so-

³⁶⁷ See Wendell Berry, "Racism and the Economy" in *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry*, edited by Norman Wirzba (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2002)

³⁶⁸ See U.S. Department of Agriculture, "Farm Producers," *2017 Census of Agriculture*, https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/Highlights/2019/2017Census_Farm_Producers.pdf. Accessed November 2019.

called “great migration” was a result of institutionalized racism at least as much as anything else.³⁶⁹ What is arguably less appreciated, however, is the role of public-private agencies in steering agricultural changes less conducive to tenant farming, compelling penniless individuals, both black and white, to move from the South to North and West for work capable of supporting themselves. We should not assume that all these individuals are satisfied even today with this lifestyle tradeoff.

As recounted by sociologist Neil Fligstein, this process began even earlier in the 20th century in the intensive organizational and lobbying efforts of groups like the American Farm Bureau, which was initiated by the government during the 1920s.³⁷⁰ Over its first few decades of existence, the Farm Bureau tended to prioritize the interests of the largest and most rapidly industrializing farms, and its members “tended to be relatively well-off farm owners.”³⁷¹ During the 1930s, this peculiar economic alignment surfaced in demands for additional government subsidies to remunerate farmers for falling prices resulting from overproduction. Much like the scalar, interregional approach adopted by many of the early railroads, in other words, industrialized farming was a risky enterprise that depended to some degree on the government actively stabilizing it from fluctuating price shocks, which would prove especially damaging to farmers who had enthusiastically invested in new technology and had taken on inordinate debt. Thus, the Farm Bureau helped pass the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933, in addition to later legislation closely modeled on this initial piece of legislation, and they ensured that subsidies would be distributed to tenants via larger landowners, enabling the latter to seize, on the most meager pretense, the greater

³⁶⁹ See Steven Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South, from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

³⁷⁰ Neil Fligstein, “The Transformation of Southern Agriculture and the Migration of Blacks and Whites, 1930-1940,” *The International Migration Review*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (1983), 274-275.

³⁷¹ *Ibid*, 275.

share of these funds for their own benefit.³⁷² The historical record is clear that these political interventions were not “oriented towards alleviating rural poverty” but rather towards increasing the income of the largest agrobusinesses willing or able to invest in industrialized agriculture.³⁷³

Informed by this historical perspective, Berry reminds his readers that black farmers, too, were caught in the crosshairs of these larger political developments, which helped accelerate migratory patterns that were already in motion because of Jim Crow. These farmers were therefore victims, not just of political control in the form of racist and discriminatory laws, but also of *economic* control. They were effectively stripped of their land and livelihoods through system-building domination, which then enabled interpersonal domination, further downstream, from powerful Southern landowners. They were victims of arbitrary domination at multiple levels and were often treated, in Berry’s words, as “excess population” easily “replaceable by machines.”³⁷⁴

In many cases, however, African Americans forced of necessity to abandon tenant farming found themselves scarcely freer, if at all, in the industrialized cities to which they emigrated. Their cross-country migration would have been less a cause for concern, in other words, if they had found “secure jobs and agreeable dwellings in the cities” rather than, what was more often the case, “poor jobs or no jobs, and deplorable living conditions.”³⁷⁵ What was arguably most concerning, though, was that the black agricultural community felt compelled to surrender any functional competence it

³⁷² Fligstein, “The Transformation of Southern Agriculture,” 266-67.

³⁷³ Ibid, 278.

³⁷⁴ Berry, “Racism and the Economy,” 50.

³⁷⁵ Ibid, 49

had gradually acquired in the countryside, and its members became increasingly dependent on corporate employers and industries, and later on government bureaucracies. Berry summarizes,

The move from country to city.... deprived [black farmers] of their competence in doing for themselves. It is no exaggeration to say that, in the country, most blacks were skilled in the arts of make-do and subsistence. If most of them were poor, they were *competently* poor; they could do for themselves and for each other. They knew how to grow and harvest and prepare food. They knew how to gather wild fruits, nuts, and herbs. They knew how to hunt and fish. They knew how to use the things that their white 'superiors' threw away or disregarded or overlooked. Some of them were becoming capable small landowners. In the cities, all of this know-how was suddenly of no value, and they became abjectly and dependently poor as they never had been before. In the country, despite the limits placed upon them by segregation and poverty, they possessed a certain freedom in their ability to *do* things, but once they were in the city freedom was inescapably associated with the ability to *buy* things.³⁷⁶

As Berry sees it, most of these members of the black agricultural community were worse off than they were before, not because they necessarily earned a lower income than they had in a rural setting, but rather because they had lost the ability to fend for themselves as a self-sustaining community. They no longer had the means and wherewithal to stand tall on their own feet and lead lives of their own making within a communal nexus characterized by mutual obligations and needs. In the new "cash economy" in which they found themselves, "their economic status [had] become

³⁷⁶ Berry, "Racism and the Economy" in *The Art of the Commonplace*, 49-50. Italics in original.

more dependent, consumptive, and degraded than it was before,” without any “direct connection to the productive capacities of the country itself, hence no ability to perform within the legitimate economy on their own behalf.”³⁷⁷ Due to industrialized advances in farming, and due to the myriad systemic innovations that accompanied them, black farmers faced a new economic configuration in which their ability to move and act freely was now contingent on their ability to accumulate money as speedily as possible. Should they fail in that objective, they would experience a form of domination in the economic sphere comparable to their political domination under Jim Crow; they would still be subject to the capricious and self-serving impulses of powerful agents and agencies.

The usual solution to inner-city poverty, of course, has been to implement reforms that improve the basic capabilities of individuals who find themselves in dire financial need and are thus abjectly dependent on others. Through redistributive policies, social security, public goods, and carefully regulated markets,³⁷⁸ those who are suffering from severe privation can acquire the skills and competencies they require to navigate the modern world. And they will, in short order, enjoy a longer life expectancy, greatly improved nutrition and health, higher educational achievements, and more opportunities for genuine social and economic mobility.³⁷⁹ Over the long-term, if not also over the short-term, they will be adequately equipped to lead a semi-independent and prosperous life.

What Berry emphasizes, however, are several potential drawbacks to this approach as a stand-alone option. He gives voice, first, to a characteristic republican concern over the prospect for permanent relations of dependency, and thus for permanent domination as well; it remains a real

³⁷⁷ Berry, “Racism and the Economy” in *The Art of the Commonplace*, 52.

³⁷⁸ See Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 123-126.

³⁷⁹ In addition to Sen and Nussbaum, see Elizabeth Anderson, “What is the Point of Equality,” *Ethics* Vol. 109, No. 2 (1999), 287-337.

possibility that impoverished minorities will grow ever more reliant on distributive agencies in the political domain. The whole point of these agencies, of course, is to reduce their reliance on *other* agents or agencies with which these individuals were previously entangled, helping them to make do as they remain in a state of poverty or even, in more ideal cases, as they begin to experience an at least marginally higher standard of living. But all too often, the only real achievement is the substitution of one kind of dependency in the private sphere for yet another in the public sphere.

This concern of Berry's has proven to be an entirely reasonable one, moreover, given that proponents of steady increases in welfare services have often wavered on the question as to whether redistributive policies ought to reduce poverty, first and foremost, or whether they should strive instead to eliminate asymmetric relations of dependency.³⁸⁰ If minorities remain beholden to state and federal agencies or else to corporate employers, then they still occupy the bottom rungs of a dominating relationship where the will and preferences of the former can easily supplant their own, sacrificing their own well-being to serve the interests of others. Add to this picture the decades-long trends with which we are all familiar—industrial outsourcing, financialization, and increased automation—and we have a perfect recipe for arbitrary domination: Even if their circumstances slightly improve, many individuals will continue to rely on the goodwill of others as they navigate post-industrial cities where wealthy rentiers now far outnumber manufacturers.³⁸¹

Berry has an additional concern, however, that applies even in cases where various redistributive programs or the free-market economy function precisely as anticipated, enabling highly motivated individuals to acquire the material and social resources they need to lead a free

³⁸⁰ See, for instance, Alice O'Connor, "Poverty Research and Policy for the Post-Welfare Era," *Annual Review of Sociology* Vol. 26 (2000), 547-562

³⁸¹ See Michael Lind, "The Rioters and the Rentiers: Post-industrial Cities Aren't Working," *The Spectator*, June 2020: <https://spectator.us/rioters-rentiers-democratic-city/>. Accessed January 2021.

and independent life. One mistaken assumption behind this approach, he argues, is that we can somehow rid the world of arbitrary domination “merely by recruiting more blacks and other racial minorities into colleges and then high-paying jobs,” thereby “elevating them to full partnership in the problems of the racial majority” so they can become as self-serving, and equally capable of dominating their supposed inferiors, as are many “affluent American whites.”³⁸² If the goal is to enable a few specially privileged individuals to achieve upward mobility and thus realize the American Dream, then all we will accomplish is a gradual changing of the guard, where yesterday’s serfs become today’s nobility. For everyone else, all the while, little can be said to have changed.

Notably, a similar point has been repeatedly made by political scientist Adolph Reed, who specializes in Afro-American politics. According to Reed, this “self-help” solution to structural inequalities is conveniently “consistent with neoliberal premises that eschew collective action in favor of individual voluntarism and deny the significance of social structures in shaping political opportunities.”³⁸³ The apparent goal, in other words, is not to reduce relations of dominance but rather to open new management positions for those who were once excluded from them. In a more practical respect, it is simply to ensure that the “black professional-managerial strata have been embedded in and are agents and minions of what we now call neoliberalism,” and thus to render invisible, in the process, any of the “rank-and-file black population” who are otherwise occupied “as postal workers, teachers, truck drivers, carpenters, clerks, warehouse workers, electricians or line workers, nurses, cable technicians, etc.”³⁸⁴ As Reed sees it, members of this latter cohort are tacitly treated as participants in “an undifferentiated mass to be ventriloquized and ‘uplifted’” in the

³⁸² Berry, “Racism and the Economy,” 49.

³⁸³ Adolph Reed, “The James Brown Theory of Black Liberation,” *Jacobin* (2015). <https://jacobinmag.com/2015/10/adolph-reed-black-liberation-django-lincoln-selma-glory>. Accessed March 2021.

³⁸⁴ Adolph Reed, “Antiracism: A Neoliberal Alternative to a Left,” *Dialectical Anthropology* Vol. 42 No. 2 (2018)

future—and if not uplifted, then at least to enjoy every opportunity of proving themselves capable of doing so in the future, regardless of whether that actually reflects their preferences and values.³⁸⁵

In a meritocratic economic system, however, the more substantive goal of ensuring that every person achieves the same social or economic status, or that every person enjoys a perfectly equal distribution of goods, does not appear to be even remotely attainable. We face a seemingly irresolvable dilemma, in short, where some individuals will reluctantly modify their lives or even abandon their ideals to comply with conditions established by others, making them a permanent victim of domination; while some other individuals, in turn, will willingly succeed in this system, enabling them to become a dominant agent themselves, or else to contribute to a dominant agency. In either such case, the reality of arbitrary domination is not lessened or reduced in *absolute* terms.

No Effective Exit

An implicit premise in this argument is that nearly every citizen, whether urban or rural, black or white, lacks functioning exit rights. They lack the capacity to leave relationships mediated almost exclusively through economic channels. And they now inhabit a system—what is often described pejoratively as “neoliberal”—where they remain vulnerable to domination as long as their beliefs and values do not align with the specific behavior and aptitudes it demands of them. As Berry elsewhere argues, this system will always be “freest to those who have the most money, and is not free to all those with little or no money,” which means in practice that the “large corporation ‘freely’ competing against local, privately owned businesses has virtually all the freedom, and its

³⁸⁵ Reed, “Antiracism: A Neoliberal Alternative to a Left.”

small competitors virtually none.”³⁸⁶ It is a system where individual freedom is increasingly associated with the power to amass vast amounts of wealth through self-maximizing behavior.³⁸⁷

Even the ability to accumulate wealth or improve our social status, on the other hand, often proves to be ineffective as a mechanism for exercising exit rights, assuming for the sake of argument that we are, like Berry himself, personally invested in the kinds of ideals embodied in a community of necessity. In most cases it would take an enormous amount of capital to establish and maintain a traditional community, especially in a market system where the latter are rapidly disintegrating. At best, the most affluent denizens of our megacities can buy a second or third home in the countryside, where they can revel in the sentimentality of the bucolic countryside or can help transform rural municipalities, many of them now dilapidated, into coveted tourist destinations for the rich and famous. Individuals who somehow manage to elevate themselves to the top of the economic heap, even if regretfully, can find in this rural “escape” a kind of nostalgic consolation prize, but they can hardly pretend to have attained a genuinely integrated, cohesive community.

Thus, citizens who identify with this communal ideal have no meaningful exit rights, and that engenders profound feelings of powerlessness. This is exceptionally ironic, of course, given that the absence of viable exit rights has often been associated with members of more cohesive groups, and not with their opposite. One common complaint leveled against especially tightknit communities, we saw in the introduction, is that they sometimes impede a minority of citizens from reaching their full potential, thereby empowering local tyrants who can dominate them with relative impunity. The best way to assist these citizens in their upwardly mobile pursuits, or in

³⁸⁶ Berry, “The Idea of a Local Economy” in *The Art of the Commonplace*, 253

³⁸⁷ As Melvin Tumin argued, this system requires that “business principles and themes” pervade every institution and sphere of life. See “Business as a Social System,” *Behavioral Science* Vol. 9, No. 2 (1964), 12.

other cases to augment their political voice, is to ensure that they have a realistic path forward or can exit their community in the future without facing exorbitant costs. This is a typical liberal concern, so it is paradoxical, to say the least, that a similar dilemma now confronts citizens of all types who are interested in preserving local communities. These citizens are incapable of exiting pervasive systems that they know from experience are progressively eroding their entire way of life. Nor can they reduce their own entanglement in the processes they consider most objectionable.

What is perhaps most interesting about this development is that the exact reforms offered as a remedy are likely only to heighten the causal impetus behind it. Proposed efforts to empower employees by facilitating their exit rights, for example, may reduce their dependence on any one employer or company, but it does not necessarily diminish their reliance on certain *kinds* of (large and impersonal) companies. Policies that incentivize a gig or contract economy, or alternatively, proposals like the universal basic income, may facilitate individual movement from one market sector to another, and they may significantly reduce arbitrary domination at certain targeted locations, but they are entirely ill-suited for individuals who want to build deeper communal roots rather than constantly navigate the marketplace.³⁸⁸ Indeed, policies that facilitate exit rights at the micro level may actually weaken these rights at the macro level. And that leaves a cohort of citizens seriously in the lurch, including metropolitan residents who find themselves in a roughly analogous situation: They, too, will either be a subject of domination or an inadvertent perpetrator of it.

When we recognize citizens like this as lacking an effective exit strategy, it changes what we believe ought to be done to remedy their circumstances, or how radical we think these remedies should be. It would be easy to conclude, weighing the experience of early Labor Republicans or agrarians like Wendell Berry, that we inhabit a zero-sum world where one class of individuals will

³⁸⁸ These are the kinds of solutions proposed, for example, by Robert Taylor in *Exit Left*.

be happy with the current economic arrangement while another class will be effectively dominated. But if all we need to achieve are feasible exit rights for both classes of people, then in theory we can pursue a moderate approach that strives to preserve this tension, enabling individuals to engage in integral communities, if that is their preference, or else to vacate them for a more consumptive and individualized lifestyle. We examine next how we might sensibly avoid either of these extremes.

Chapter 5: Pluralism and Rationalism

Today we can theoretically choose either to welcome the benefits of modernity with wide open arms, or we can forego any number of such benefits, often at enormous cost to our own wellbeing, out of concern for the crippling dependencies that observably follow in their wake. It goes without saying that many citizens consider this “Hobson’s choice” to be no choice at all; the rising costs of “exiting” a globalizing economy have become too prohibitive for the average citizen, even for those who would prefer to distance themselves to a trivial degree. This means that many citizens find themselves implicated in processes and systems that are strikingly at variance with their values, and they face an uncertain future where at any moment they risk suffering a profound reduction in their freedom; they have grown helplessly dependent on the continued goodwill of agents and agencies which do not always share their interests. In this important respect, then, communally minded citizens in the 21st century face a position basically analogous to that of nonconformist citizens rigidly bound, in previous eras, by the customs and norms of their villages.

Over centuries of development, the configuration of our markets has gradually shifted from one polarity to another—from systems characteristically local or “pluralist” to those increasingly universal or “rationalist” in form. Both extremes of this wider spectrum are prone to various abuses, and they both attract a certain type of personality. Indeed, we have examined in earlier chapters how the recent agitations of the populist movement are at least partly reflective of a much deeper conflict over which vision of the good life receives precedence in public policy, but we could easily examine earlier periods in history, conversely, where those who wanted to *abandon* their

communities were also those who were most incapable of realizing their preferences and values. What this suggests is that we should strive for a more balanced system—or in other words, an equilibrium—where individuals of varying temperaments and beliefs can freely pursue their ideals.

That market economies in the early modern era were closer to achieving this equilibrium is attributable, in part, to a perennial struggle between two opposing schools of political thought—schools that thinkers like Robert Nisbet and Jacob Levy have fittingly described as “rationalism” and “pluralism.” Up until the past century, neither of these traditions was able to oust the other from its position of influence, and their lasting rivalry proved to be a highly productive one, ensuring that citizens of all types had at least a small chance of resisting arbitrary domination from authorities with a personal face and close to home, as well as from those remote and increasingly bureaucratic. Even in the 21st century, we see this productive rivalry in our federal system of government, which effectively offsets the power of centralized administrators with those characteristically regional.

Although our political institutions have preserved a semblance of equilibrium, however, our market configurations have taken a more extreme form; they increasingly are universalist in scope, ordered by regimented rules and procedures, and driven by pervasive processes and systems that reward high-volume production of standardized commodities over high-quality, locally sourced output. Thus, any productive tension that once existed between “rationalist” and “pluralist” systems of economy has all but evaporated. Certain trademark features of rationalist systems—features like bureaucracy and standardization—have proven enormously productive in terms of their aggregate efficiency, and the resulting increases in gross productivity have made it much too easy to disregard their attendant costs and risks. This is particularly true of those who have only benefited from them, and who therefore assume that further “rationalization” has no political downside at all.

In this chapter I will highlight these inevitable yet regularly ignored tradeoffs, applying insights from Nisbet and Levy to the economic sphere specifically. And I will tease out important parallels between “bureaucracy” in the sphere of politics and “aggregate efficiency” in the free-market economy—both of which are applications of the “rationalist” agenda in their respective domains. In this chapter we will also examine the work of sociologists Lewis Mumford and Jacques Ellul, both of whom warned, in the most ominous of tones, of the threat posed by overly “rational” markets to a communal existence, and both of whom insisted that progressively uniform systems of technology and infrastructure, law and finance, can easily become instruments of domination. Their thought is thus especially apposite for the challenges we face today, for they demonstrate that our emancipatory efforts require much greater attentiveness to technical, legal, and financial systems.

Building off these insights, I conclude this chapter with some provisional thoughts on the collaborative steps necessary to promote greater pluralism in the marketplace. In this final section we will examine prospective reforms in technology, infrastructure, and investment—three factors which together play a decisive role in ordering our commercial and financial interactions. Because these factors are mainly systemic in character, they have an enormous influence on the behavior of the agents who make use of them, and who are thus necessarily responsive to structural incentives. Any effort to create a more balanced market structure, therefore, should begin with these primary organizational features that reward or else penalize certain categories of activity and behavior, and existing laws and regulations should likewise be reformed to support a more even playing field.

Local and Distant Sources of Domination

In a world replete with necessary and unavoidable trade-offs, we often experience more republican freedom in one domain precisely because we also experience fewer such freedoms in

another; freedom from *local* forms of arbitrary domination is often negatively correlated with freedom from *distant* sources of domination. And the reason is because the agents and agencies capable of protecting us from arbitrary domination in one setting, and from one potential threat, may in another setting enslave us to its own capricious whims. What poses as our political savior one day is still prone to corruption on another day, as is sadly common with all human institutions.

This important principle, while implicit in republican theorizing for quite some time, has attracted new attention over the last few decades from scholars in the “neorepublican” camp. For example, Philip Pettit has distinguished between the *private* domination we commonly suffer in families, workplaces, and associations from the *public* domination that characteristically emanates from a centralized bureaucratic state.³⁸⁹ In his view, preserving republican freedom is a complex task and requires that we engage in a delicate balancing act: In our efforts to reduce private or localized abuses of power, we must always keep a wary eye on the public agents necessary to achieve that end. We need a government to free us from interpersonal domination, but we also need to ensure that it does not itself dominate us in a capricious manner.³⁹⁰ For the very political institutions capable of saving us from petty bullies can itself become a formidable oppressor.

Pettit notably describes this tension as a division between the public and the private sphere, or as a division between the sphere of politics, as we normally understand the term, and everything else—which makes intuitive sense if only because “government” is as an indispensable mechanism for reducing domination but is also a leading candidate for exerting such domination over others. Yet another useful way to think of this division, however, is between *local* and *distant* forms of

³⁸⁹ Pettit, *On the People's Terms: A Republican Theory and Model of Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 6

³⁹⁰ Ibid, 147-148.

domination. After all, one benefit of *local* forms of government, specifically, is an additional layer of protection from the overweening power of political institutions at the national or even global level. These local institutions can intervene or interpose between the state and the citizen whenever the former acts tyrannically.³⁹¹ In a similar vein, whenever local governments act in what is obviously an oppressive manner, citizens can appeal to a higher authority to redress their grievances. The distinctive virtue of a federal system of government, in fact, is that it provides citizens with these multiple sources of authority, enabling them to appeal “up” or “down” as circumstances require.

We can see the same dynamic in the private sphere of the marketplace. Some individuals may suffer directly and personally under local bosses and managers, or they may find that their capacity to start their own businesses or access certain commodities is hampered by insular guilds and trade unions, which restrict individual freedom for the sake of preserving a more dynamic local economy. Other individuals, however, may find that their capacity to preserve functioning communities has severely weakened, subject as they are to the profit-seeking motives of larger financial institutions and supranational corporations, as we discussed in the previous chapter. Hence, in the economic sphere, too, individuals face threats to their freedom that are more precisely described as “local” or “distant” rather than “public” or “private.” A more useful and appropriate distinction is thus between agencies smaller in scope and more up-close and personal, on one hand, and those larger in scope, distant and sprawling, and more *impersonal* on the other; as citizens we are vulnerable to arbitrary domination from agencies with a human face, but we are often equally vulnerable from bureaucratic agencies that are entirely aloof and even indifferent to our

³⁹¹ James Madison, for example, argued that whenever the national state exercises “palpable and dangerous” powers not explicitly granted to it, the local state governments “have the right, and are in duty bound, to interpose for arresting the pro(gress) of the evil, and for maintaining within their respective limits, the authorities, rights and liberties appertaining to them.” See *Virginia Resolutions*, 21 December 1798. <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/01-17-02-0128>. Accessed January 2020.

individuality—agencies typified by the business corporation and the corporate state and controlled by a ruling class composed of administrators, managerial experts, bureaucrats, and technicians.

We commonly face a tradeoff, in short, between local or parochial abuses of power and the more general abuses that occur at a national level; we can seemingly only immunize ourselves from the former by multiplying opportunities for the latter, and vice versa. What we require, therefore, is a conceptual framework that emphasizes this vertical or longitudinal dimension rather than, as is more common in liberal theories, one that focuses narrowly on the distinction between public and private actors. It is fortunate in this case that the history of political thought is so richly productive.

Two Political Traditions

In the 1960s, conservative sociologist Robert Nisbet produced his most important work, *The Quest for Community*, which was later republished with the revised title *Community and Power*. Its central claim was that intermediary organizations and institutions—what we often refer to simply as “community”—had seriously begun to hemorrhage in the liberal West, leaving individuals increasingly vulnerable to the domineering power of the centralized state. Nisbet’s self-appointed task was thus to draw from the ample resources of the past to help reconstruct these mediating bodies, providing his readers with a normative basis for promoting the interests of community not despite, but rather on behalf of, the individual. He was thus well ahead of his time in recognizing that the freedoms of the individual and the community are not always locked in a zero-sum contest. And it was this important theme that he would reiterate in later works like *Twilight of Authority*.

Nisbet himself never lived to see these ideas come to practical fruition, but he did inspire renewed interest in a political tradition that has not, for whatever reason, received the attention it deserves. More recently, political theorist Jacob Levy, who himself identifies as a “liberal” thinker,

has again brought these ideas to life in his work *Rationalism, Pluralism, and Freedom*, which delves even more deeply than Nisbet did into the historical roots and philosophical lineage of this community-oriented tradition. Taken together, the works of both thinkers provide an invaluable framework for evaluating and coping with arbitrary domination across multiple levels of society.

As Nisbet understood it, then, the history of “Western social and political thought” is a narrative in large measure of the struggle between two philosophical traditions that cannot be easily classified as either “liberal” or “absolutist.” The first tradition is the prevailing one today: Beginning with Plato and continuing, centuries later, with thinkers like Hobbes, Rousseau, and Bentham, it emphasizes the preeminent importance of “government” or later the “territorial state” in securing the rights and freedoms of the individual. This storied tradition tends in practice to diminish or even “extinguish” the many “other forms of association” between the individual and the state, and it regards the social sphere as “so inherently ridden with conflict and corruption that only through the most stringent uses of political power may the individual be saved.”³⁹² Intermediary groups such “as family, locality, neighborhood, church, and other autonomous associations” are viewed with suspicion and sometimes even hostility because of their tendency to fetter individuals to the dominating power of local authority, impeding their efforts at personal progress.³⁹³

We can conceive of this as a “rationalist” tradition, as Levy suggests, “committed to intellectual progress, universalism, and equality before a unified law, opposed to arbitrary and irrational distinctions and inequalities, and determined to disrupt local tyrannies in religious and ethnic groups, closed associations, families, plantations, the feudal countryside, and so on.”³⁹⁴ For

³⁹² Robert Nisbet, *Twilight of Authority* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2000), 224.

³⁹³ Ibid.

³⁹⁴ Jacob Levy, *Rationalism, Pluralism, and Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 2

the sake of the individual, it tries to flatten or at least diminish the many social hierarchies in which individuals constantly find themselves. And it tends to leave individuals, in the process, residents of a social world comprised mainly of *other* individuals, each of them purportedly free and equal.

The second tradition begins with Aristotle's "famous criticisms of Plato's unitary state" and continues through later thinkers like Thomas Aquinas, Althusius, Burke, and Tocqueville.³⁹⁵ Its central concern is not to liberate individuals from localized sources of authority but rather to protect them from the prospective oppression of any centralized power capable of extending its reach "to encompass all spheres of social, moral, economic, and intellectual existence."³⁹⁶ A universal bureaucratic power is, according to this way of viewing things, more of a threat to the freedom of the individual than is any single intermediary body, and freedom in society is therefore contingent on "the relationship that exists between [the] political state... and the several institutions of the social sphere."³⁹⁷ The best avenue for protecting individuals from arbitrary domination is to ensure that they can freely come together in densely integrated associations, or in cohesive communities, that serve as a buffer between them and the coercive reach of the state.

Thus, the greater the number of institutions or "authorities" in society, the greater the freedom of its members.³⁹⁸ For individuals to be capable of realizing their ends and abiding by their

³⁹⁵ Nisbet, *Twilight of Authority*, 224.

³⁹⁶ Ibid.

³⁹⁷ Ibid.

³⁹⁸ This formula shares important commonalities with Pettit's distinction between "constitutional provision" and "reciprocal power" (see *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 95). On the other hand, Pettit focuses narrowly on the distinction between the public and private sphere, as noted above, and he blithely rejects the emancipatory potential of the "reciprocal" option without providing much supporting argument. For a useful critique, see David Watkins, "Institutionalizing Freedom as Non-Domination: Democracy and the Role of the State," *Polity* Vol. 47, No. 4 (2015), 508-534.

beliefs, in other words, it is necessary that they inhabit a system with a larger variety of institutions, which prevents any one agent or agency from treating them like interchangeable atoms of virtually equal character or temperament. Freedom in this scheme is “found in the interstices of authority” and “is nourished by competition among authorities,” for that is the requisite means to ensure that centralized power will not dominate individuals who without such resources are vulnerable.³⁹⁹

In his own work on this subject, Levy describes this alternative tradition as a “pluralist” one precisely because it emphasizes the importance of maintaining a plurality of institutions in the social sphere, which mediate between the individual, on one hand, and large bureaucratic agencies on the other. This tradition tends to be “skeptical of the central state and friendly toward local, customary, voluntary, or intermediate bodies, communities, and associations,” but it takes this position not out of indifference toward the individual, but rather because of a different assessment as to which source of authority or power poses more of a potential threat to individual freedom.⁴⁰⁰

Both traditions form different assessments, then, of the value of authorities local and distant, centralized and decentralized. But they also emphasize and ask different kinds of questions. It is the second pluralist tradition that concerns itself most readily with the relative power of national and local authorities, whereas the rationalist tradition focuses primarily on the benefits and weaknesses of different constitutional arrangements.⁴⁰¹ Thus, proponents of either perspective raise issues of critical significance, even though dismissive, in general, of the concerns raised by their counterparts. This is unfortunate because both schools of thought are necessary and bring valuable insights to the table. If ever we inhabited a world where only one such tradition enjoyed a

³⁹⁹ Robert Nisbet, *Community and Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), xii.

⁴⁰⁰ Levy, *Rationalism, Pluralism, and Freedom*, 2.

⁴⁰¹ Nisbet, *Twilight of Authority*, 224.

public hearing, we would be deprived of something vitally important. One way to preserve them both, therefore, is to keep them in a state of relative equilibrium, making serious adjustments, when necessary, to redress and equalize a political or economic system reflective of only one approach.

Equilibrium

We can recognize our vested interest in maintaining an equilibrium between these two traditions, of course, while still preferring and even advocating for one of them over the other. Nisbet himself was hardly a neutral participant in this clash of ideas, nor did he relegate himself to the sidelines. Rather, he explicitly argued that the pluralist tradition is “more interesting and also valuable” than the rationalist one, and it needed a respectful hearing to counter the centralizing tendencies of the modern era.⁴⁰² “No doubt there are ages and societies in which affirmation of the centralized power of the state is valuable,” he acknowledged, “but we live nevertheless in a time of saturation of social order by political power, and I suggest that it would require a great deal of political retreat from the social sphere before anything resembling a crisis in this respect would be likely.”⁴⁰³ The bureaucratic reach of the centralized state had reached alarming proportions, in his view, and that enabled him to take a position as tactically sound as it also was philosophically.

In contrast to Nisbet, Levy has taken a more obviously neutral or impartial approach. Indeed, one of his more controversial claims is that the pluralist and rationalist traditions are, despite their evident tensions, integral to liberalism itself. These tensions “lie at the heart of liberal theory about intermediate groups,” he argues, which means that self-identifying liberals can

⁴⁰² Nisbet, *Twilight of Authority*, 225.

⁴⁰³ Ibid.

happily maintain these tensions, and they can even vigorously disagree over how best to manage them, while still staying authentically “liberal” and remaining faithful to their ideological tenets.⁴⁰⁴ For his part, Levy acknowledges that his own intellectual contribution is plainly intended to give the pluralist camp a fuller and more adequate defense, but as with Nisbet, he means for this intervention to be tactically minded at least as much as it is philosophically. His work is not a defense of the pluralist tradition taken in isolation, but only “as against the pretensions of some rationalist liberals that it should be ignored altogether.”⁴⁰⁵ It may now be necessary to offer a robust defense of pluralism, not because it is always superior, but rather because these opposing traditions have lost their prior equilibrium, leaving individuals free along only one such dimension.

This leaves us with several perplexing questions, however. We are left wondering, for starters, what just the “right” amount of tension is between these different traditions, and what the most suitable mechanisms are for maintaining it. The most neutral approach would obviously be one that strives to maintain a perfect equipoise—an approach that ensures our political and economic systems cater equally to fervent adherents of one or the other position. If individuals are susceptible to arbitrary domination from sources local and distant, then we must, according to this line of thinking, ensure that both forms of powers act as a counterweight against the other, achieving a perfect state of parity by preventing either of them from ever attaining the upper hand.

This assumes that every person in a democratic society would agree that localized abuses of power are of equal concern as abuses of power at the national or global level. But contemporary experience, to say nothing of the experience of history, suggests that this is a highly questionable

⁴⁰⁴ Levy, *Rationalism, Pluralism, and Freedom*, 10. Importantly, Levy also suggests that adherents of political “conservatism” or “socialism” may have their own alternative ways of managing this tension.

⁴⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 3.

assumption. There will always be individuals like John Stuart Mill, for example, who for reasons of principle or temperament are more concerned with the reactionary leanings of localized tyrants in communities, churches, and families, and there will always be others, like Alexis de Tocqueville, who worry instead of the specter of a powerful, centralized power capable of dominating atomized individuals in a world increasingly devoid of mediating associations and communities.⁴⁰⁶ It would be naïve to suppose that passionate adherents of either perspective will ever set their differences aside. And even supposing, in the most optimistic scenario, that they come to affirm the merits of the opposing view, they may still disagree vehemently over which threat is of greatest concern.⁴⁰⁷

Another difficulty is that arbitrary domination comes in a variety of different forms, and not all of them are equally obvious or apparent, as we discussed in the previous chapter. Part of the reason that populist support for Donald Trump has provoked so much surprise is because the specific grievances animating these voters are difficult to identify or even understand for those fortunate not to be facing them themselves. Structural domination is inherently more challenging to discern than the closely interpersonal domination that occurs in families, communities, and workplaces. And this is precisely why it is incumbent on all of us to take these populist grievances seriously and make a genuine effort to weigh their merits. If a sizable portion of the population feels abused or victimized, then we should at least investigate whether they have an objectively sound reason for feeling in the manner they do. We should do this not because they are necessarily right—

⁴⁰⁶ See Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, translated and edited by Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), Volume II, Part IV, chapters 6-7.

⁴⁰⁷ This disagreement may itself reflect entirely different moral frameworks or, as yet another possibility a different assessment as to what will ultimately redound to one's own benefit. For example, a larger proportion of women and minorities prefer, according to some accounts, a more centralized, consumer-oriented system because it frees them from local sources of domination. See Elizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Random House, 2003), 18-51.

subjective perceptions do not always correspond with reality—but rather because we recognize our epistemic limitations. Not every abuse of power is as readily apparent to every single person.

That the populist movement took so many people by surprise, in other words, reveals a truth that should have been obvious all along, which is that even the most well-meaning of individuals can overlook or disregard abuses of power occurring beyond their own subjective experiences. Thus, even if we all formed the same threat assessment of authorities local and distant, and even if we came to the same normative conclusions, we would still be likely to make different *empirical* assessments as to which authority or power was most immediately worrisome at any given moment. And for that reason, we could still be blindsided, potentially, by the sudden agitations of individuals or groups whose own assessment differs substantially from our own.

What further compounds these difficulties is that we often disagree over which reforms are politically possible, or which will prove to have a positive impact in the future. Even if we all affirm the principle, for example, that bureaucratic supervision of local affairs will redound to the benefit of countless individuals over the short-term, we might still oppose these bureaucratizing trends in the settled conviction that centralized authority is by its nature disposed to various long-term abuses. A key principle in both republican and liberal thought, in fact, is that individuals in positions of authority require stringent checks on their power to prevent them from abusing it for their own interests. This principle tacitly assumes that humans are inherently corruptible and are therefore likely to become worse versions of themselves so long as they can act with impunity; any political or economic system that swings more toward one extreme than the other, weakening federal checks on authority, is for this reason prone to corruption and is best avoided whenever possible.

Individuals who affirm a more optimistic anthropology, by contrast, may have fewer qualms about implementing systems that reflect their moral sensibilities, whether that means expanded

powers at the local or national level. Or they may worry, on the other hand, that granting too much power to local authorities will render everyone vulnerable to various existential threats, as many of the American Founders apparently believed when they replaced the Articles of Confederation with the U.S. Constitution. In this case, reasonable concerns over long-term feasibility derive, not from concerns over the corruptibility of power, but rather over our evident propensity to fragment and divide over trivial matters—or because of our unsocial sociability, as Kant so memorably put it.⁴⁰⁸

For all these reasons, we should expect there to be considerable disagreement over where on the spectrum our political and economic systems should rest. Every one of us, after all, draws different normative conclusions, makes different empirical assessments, and holds different anthropological assumptions, all of which influence our view as to where power should ultimately lean, or where its center of gravity should be. Some of us have greater trust for smaller authorities in more localized spheres, and some others among us are instinctively more trusting of large and distant authorities. In the best of cases, we form these judgements by carefully assessing different bodies of evidence, but in other cases we form these judgements in a haphazard manner. Given how complex the relevant questions are, in any event, we often find ourselves with the strangest bedfellows, aligning ourselves with individuals or groups who reject some of our foundational beliefs. Or else we find ourselves opposing those with whom we largely agree on the substance.

One area where we commonly agree, nevertheless, is the general utility of keeping power distributed across multiple spheres of authority; most of us take it for granted that it is preferable to have a federal system where power is distributed both locally and nationally, and we naturally recoil from the thought of granting power to individuals or institutions in only one of these spheres. We may, and often do, disagree over *where* on the spectrum our political and economic systems are

⁴⁰⁸ Immanuel Kant, “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose” in *Kant: Political Writings*, edited by Hans Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

best situated, but we generally agree that there *should* be a spectrum. We might recognize the value of a federal structure, for instance, because we believe our political and economic systems should be as “value-neutral” as possible, and thus worry about imposing a dominant system on those with firm convictions that radically conflict with our own. Or we might worry that a single, monolithic, all-encompassing system will prevent many individuals from exercising their political voice—due to a greatly diminished capacity to “exit” it in the future—and will therefore render them unduly susceptible to arbitrary domination when and if this system ever drifts in a more authoritarian direction. But whatever the reason, most of us believe that local authorities should be checked by centralized authorities, and vice versa, to some degree or another. Thus, even if we disagree over how or where to balance the two political traditions that Nisbet and Levy highlight, we can still join hands in affirming that they *should* be balanced. We should strive for an equilibrium of *some sort*.

Economic Implications

The argument of earlier chapters was that our markets have been “rationalized” to such an extreme degree that citizens who value “communities of necessity” cannot feasibly realize them, in many cases, unless they already possess an abundance of capital. Our markets lack any equilibrium between the rationalist and pluralist traditions, which enables certain agents or agencies to dominate others arbitrarily, sustaining relations of excessive dependency. Just as the individual can become excessively beholden to national or global governments in the political sphere, so too can they grow in dependence on abstract, distant, and increasingly impersonal agents in the economic sphere, which then prevents them from establishing durable ties in local, integrated communities.

We might wonder, however, whether this framework applies just as readily to economic structures as it does to political ones. It is hardly obvious, for example, what a “federal” market

structure would look like in practice, or how we might even go about constructing one. How do we encourage mediating institutions in the marketplace, and what kinds of systems might be necessary to nurture and maintain productive communities? This is a question that Nisbet himself never addressed explicitly. Far more worrisome for him was the expanding reach of an all-powerful state, which could only be curtailed, in his view, through the purposeful cultivation of local institutions, associations, and governments.⁴⁰⁹ In a similar vein, Levy confesses his reluctance to apply pluralist or rationalist insights to the economic sphere, in part because he disagrees with how some thinkers (like Friedrich von Hayek, most prominently) have achieved this synthesis,⁴¹⁰ and partly because he questions how feasible it would be to integrate these insights in ways that adequately account, at a macroeconomic level, for the needs of every person.⁴¹¹ Applying this framework to government is more straightforward, anyway, and benefits from innovations developed over hundreds of years.

We have good reason to question, on the other hand, whether the “pluralist” tradition has anything constructive to offer today so long as it refuses to address this economic dimension. And the reason is because local institutions and communities have always depended on material conditions to some degree or another, as we have argued in previous chapters. This is an insight that Nisbet himself tacitly articulated, and this despite his more usual emphasis on the state: He fully understood that many of the mediating institutions he championed would likely dissolve to insignificance if they ever lost their functional competence, even if they still satisfied preferences and values that individuals highly esteemed, and even if their eventual demise left a vacuum that

⁴⁰⁹ This remains Nisbet’s focus throughout his career, but it is especially obvious in some of his earlier essays. See, for instance, “The Politics of Social Pluralism,” *The Journal of Politics* Vol. 10, No. 4 (1978), 768-786.

⁴¹⁰ See Jacob Levy, “Liberalism’s Divide After Socialism and Before,” *Social Philosophy and Policy* Vol. 20, No. 1 (2003), 278-97.

⁴¹¹ Levy, *Rationalism, Pluralism, and Freedom*, 14.

individuals would struggle mightily to fill in the future. Economic utility is somehow integral to the deepest and longest-lasting relationships that have always been fundamental to human society.

Nisbet is no clearer on this point than when he focuses on the family. The reason that the “modern” family has proven surprisingly vulnerable to fragmenting forces, he argued, is because other institutions have gradually assumed its previous functions. Tellingly, the primary institution Nisbet singles out for criticism is the state itself, which has abrogated authority and appropriated tasks related to social, cultural, and economic provision that in traditional societies once belonged to members of a family, clan, or tribe.⁴¹² Some of this is for the better, of course: The modern state emancipated countless individuals who were burdened, in too many cases, by the oppressive power of domestic tyrants. In a similar vein, the state freed “individuals from the often oppressive structures of guild, monastery, class, and village community,” offering the practical means to withdraw from relationships where arbitrary domination tended to flourish.⁴¹³ The short-term impact of national governments was in this respect beneficial, in Nisbet’s view, because it compelled a necessary correction in societies that were too pluralistic, inching them toward a greater state of equilibrium. But the sphere of the all-powerful state expanded later to such a degree that institutions like the family, guild, and community lost most of their vital functions.⁴¹⁴

This critique could easily be extended to major economic organizations such as big-box retailers, financial institutions, and supranational corporations, on which many if not most families, small businesses, and local communities now depend for their every necessity. The functional

⁴¹² Nisbet, *Community and Power*, xii.

⁴¹³ Ibid, 107.

⁴¹⁴ For a similar and recent take on the economic preconditions necessary for flourishing families, see Allan Carlson, *Third Ways: How Bulgarian Greens, Swedish Housewives, and Beer-Swilling Englishmen Created Family-Centered Economies—And Why They Disappeared* (Indianapolis: ISI Books, 2007).

capacities of these local institutions have been abrogated, not just by the mega-state, but also by the mega-corporation, whose tentacles now penetrate deeply into every societal domain. And the consequence is that individuals are increasingly unable to pursue cohesive communities. The ideal embodied so poignantly by George Bailey in *It's a Wonderful Life* has all but gone by the wayside, and mass reliance on the impersonal state and corporation has incrementally taken its place. In other words, as individuals began to consume more and produce less, they finally lost the capacity to form the many cross-cutting, reciprocal relationships characteristic of communities of necessity.

It is macroeconomic trends, in short, that help explain why it is that the rationalist tradition has so thoroughly prevailed in the 20th and 21st centuries. And these trends also underscore why individuals who value more cohesive communities have legitimate reasons for concern. As regional productivity continues to decline, individuals will feel increasingly compelled to abandon their communities out of sheer necessity, even if they would vastly prefer not to do so. Any so-called “communities” that remain—the vacation getaways of the rich and famous—may satisfy certain emotional needs but are functionally capable of little else. They are little more than a hobby or diversion for those with the financial resources to pursue them. And this leaves less affluent citizens with fewer resources to “exit” the mass economy in favor of its communal alternative.

Simply put, once a choice that was previously in an individual’s “option-set” loses its economic feasibility, it becomes far less attainable for them in the future. In the medieval era, for instance, individuals who wanted to strike it out on their own could seldom do so because, at that moment in time, there were far fewer commercial opportunities of which they could readily avail themselves. This created a fertile environment for local abuses of power. Now we have the opposite problem where individuals can seldom remain within, and much less effectively preserve, their local communities, and that creates an environment rife for various abuses perpetrated by large

bureaucratic organizations of both a political and economic character. It is the mega-corporation, not the local petty despot, that has become most emblematic of arbitrary domination today.

As historian and social critic Christopher Lasch put it, centralized bureaucracy is the central and defining feature of the “rationalist” tradition in all its varying forms. And bureaucracy can take both a public and private form, which is why citizens have little chance of meaningfully resisting “professional dominance” so long as they devote their energy and attention to the state alone; to counter arbitrary domination effectively, they must also assert some degree of “control over production and over the technical knowledge on which modern production rests.”⁴¹⁵ In the most practical sense, this means that citizens have to think about their market choices as carefully as they do their political choices, and they need to recognize the necessary relationship between the two. “To break the existing pattern of dependence and put an end to the erosion of competence,” Lasch contends, democratic citizens “will have to create their own ‘communities of competence.’”⁴¹⁶ In other words, their only means to escape mass dependency is to identify the actual mechanisms, bureaucratic and otherwise, that inhibit them from sustaining capable and cohesive communities.

According to this view, what needs to be accomplished politically and economically is just as much a positive task as it is a negative one. Citizens need to rejuvenate their local and regional economies by resisting and effectively countering the bureaucratizing trends of the rationalist approach. This does not mean, however, that ordinary citizens need to reject or destroy the free-market economy. The problem that they face is not reducible to “capitalism” or even “modernity,” as if economic productivity is itself inimical to human prosperity—a claim radically at odds with even recent history. But we also have growing indications that a substantial proportion of citizens

⁴¹⁵ Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), 235.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid.

require an entirely different *form* of economic configuration than is presently available, or else they will remain, as now, subject to the capricious whims of agents and agencies that do not share their values. In a positive sense, this means we need different kinds of markets, or different kinds of infrastructure systems, that actualize more than one principle. Economic rationalism is not enough.

It is important to recognize, finally, that “rationalized” systems are a relative problem, not an absolute one. They are only worrisome to the degree they foreclose the possibility of alternative operating principles, effectively giving us “too much of a good thing.” Assuming for the sake of argument that our present-day systems fit this polarizing description—and more and more signs indicate that they do—then we can all join hands in opposing economic rationalism for largely tactical reasons alone, even if we ultimately disagree on the relative merits of the rationalist or pluralist perspective, and even if we disagree on what constitutes an ideal state of equilibrium.

Rationalism and Bureaucracy

Many of us have grown so enamored with economic rationalism, even if unconsciously so, that we ignore its deficiencies or are ignorant and uninformed about them. We doubt whether a market can function any other way, and we view with skepticism anyone who suggests otherwise. Economic growth depends on economic productivity, which in turn depends on large economies of scale run with ruthless efficiency by a decision-making hierarchy comprised of managers and bureaucrats. To produce the most commodities at the lowest possible cost, we need corporate machinery that is vast, centralized, and “rational.” And we need to implement universal standards that minimize operational diversity. A productive economy is a standardized and “rational” one.

In chapter two, we saw that more pluralistic systems are altogether feasible, as the case of the Great Western Railroad demonstrated in the late 19th century. Part of the reason we struggle to

recognize these alternatives, however, is because of the language we typically utilize to describe prevailing conditions in the marketplace. We often assume, for example, that economic productivity depends on how “efficient” our markets are, which is less jarring to our sensibilities than synonymous adjectives like “rationalized” or “bureaucratic”—terms more often applied to the political sphere than the economic. Indeed, to many of us it seems downright regressive to suggest that markets could ever be *too* efficient in a scalar sense—the word does not easily lend itself to such an unorthodox idea—whereas proposals to limit or reduce *bureaucracy* generally receive a positive reception. The irony here is that both terms capture different dimensions of the same basic reality—at least in an environment where, given the shape and form of prevailing infrastructure, efficiency gains have come to be associated with necessary increases in operational *scale*.

We usually think of bureaucracies as large hierarchical organizations with an excessively rigid set of procedures and rules. These organizations can take a distinctively political form, when they function as an arm of the administrative state, or an economic form when ensconced within a larger corporate enterprise. Bureaucracies in this colloquial sense are imminently rational and efficient, and they impose a general and consistent body of regulations that operate at a high level of abstraction, enabling their decision-makers to apply them to wildly varying circumstances.⁴¹⁷

In this case, what is true of the whole is equally true of its parts: Even in terms of internal composition, bureaucracies follow rigid procedures that apply to all, or virtually all, of its members or parts. As sociologist Max Weber put it, the typical employee “occupies an ‘office’ with its own peculiar functions and expectations and is thus “subject to an impersonal order to which his actions are oriented.”⁴¹⁸ Duties and obligations are owed not to other individuals with a unique personality,

⁴¹⁷ See Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, translated by A. M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1947), 330.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid.

but rather to an impersonal structure that defines what is permissible, what is requisite, and what cannot be tolerated at all. Executive positions of authority, for their part, seldom afford the right to issue decisions based on personal discretion. Those who occupy them have no power “to regulate... matter by individual commands given for each case, but only to regulate... matter abstractly.”⁴¹⁹

We can think of bureaucracy, then, as more than an efficient organization; it is equally the generalized processes and procedures that we have come to associate with it, as well as the effects these processes have on the individuals who embody them, or who are otherwise subject to them. We can also think of bureaucracy as a mechanism of control implemented to serve some larger end or goal. It always has an objective toward which all its efforts are directed.⁴²⁰ In the political sphere, for example, bureaucracy enables governmental bodies to impose generalized laws and regulations that cover a vast geographical terrain, and thus to govern more efficiently than is normally possible across different locations and cultures. Government bureaucrats can employ comprehensive and standardized rules that, in theory at least, apply to everyone equally, providing a semblance of harmony and unity to localized systems that might otherwise engage in conflict with one another. We see this, once again, in the federal system of government in the United States. The national government in Washington, D. C. imposes standardized laws that unite the many distinct states that comprise it, and in doing so it prevents perilous levels of fragmentation and division.

In the economic sphere, the main purpose of bureaucracy is to increase aggregate output, an objective it usually has little difficulty achieving. According to Weber, bureaucratic organizations

⁴¹⁹ Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, edited by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 958.

⁴²⁰ James R. Beniger, *The Control Revolution: Technological and Economic Origins of the Information Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 35.

are “capable of attaining the highest degree of efficiency,” which then enables a much larger scope of operations.⁴²¹ This explains why bureaucratic processes are the most preferable “means of exercising authority over human beings”—as evident in the modern state—but why they are also ideal for the development of “modern technology and business methods in the production of goods,” yielding a greater quantity of commodities and a larger stream of revenue.⁴²² For business entities with a profit-imperative, some degree of bureaucracy is thus inevitable. And for those who control these entities, bureaucracy is the ideal means of augmenting their capabilities. It enables them to control their personnel with greater efficiency, and it also enables them to reap a larger return on their personal investment. Yet bureaucracy can also benefit individuals at much lower rungs of the decision-making hierarchy, who may see improvements in their standard of living; bureaucracy sometimes enables them, too, to better their social and economic circumstances.

The reason bureaucracy works as successfully as it does is because it “rationalizes” data and processes. This concept of “rationalization” likewise comes from Weber, who used it to describe just how bureaucracies achieve efficient systems of control. As elaborated further by sociologist James Beniger, we can think of rationalization as a process that increases the general flow of information by greatly decreasing its complexity. For example, by depersonalizing other human subjects, the bureaucrat can effectively “rationalize” the relevant information necessary to monitor, manage, or control them. When we think of humans as interchangeable units, or as any other easily quantifiable datum, “the amount of information about them that needs to be processed is thereby

⁴²¹ Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, 223.

⁴²² Ibid, 223.

greatly reduced and hence the degree of control—for any constant capacity to process information—is greatly enhanced.”⁴²³ Humans *qua* objects are easier to understand and regulate.

This helps explain why bureaucracies are characteristically impersonal, and why the laws and regulations they implement often take an excessively abstract and generalized form. They are designed to ignore the additional nuance and complexity that might prevent the easier synthesis of information. In a bureaucracy, effective control requires treating different things as though they were really the same, minimizing any features that are not shared by each of them collectively. This makes it “possible to maintain large-scale, socially complex systems,” writes Beniger, “that would be overwhelmed by a rising tide of information they could not process were it necessary to govern by the particularistic considerations of family and kin that characterize preindustrial societies.”⁴²⁴ In this respect, bureaucracies take a characteristic feature of human cognition—simplifying reality for the sake of understanding—and push it much further than is common at an individual level.

Bureaucracies rationalize information, in other words, by standardizing subjects and objects to improve efficiency and increase aggregate output. We can think of this ongoing process of standardization, moreover, in two related senses. As a first and preliminary step, bureaucracies treat different entities as analogous or equal in the abstract, even though they are markedly different in the real world and are far more complex than is communicable using simple quantities. We see this in attempts, in the social and economic sciences especially, to conceptualize human subjects as interchangeable machines who respond to external stimuli in entirely predictable ways. When this first process fails, however, bureaucracies can also standardize, in the second place, by

⁴²³ Beniger, *The Control Revolution*, 15.

⁴²⁴ Ibid.

stipulating that subjects and objects all *conform* to one generalizable model, reducing complexity and diversity in the real world for the sake of maintaining and improving system-wide efficiency.

According to some critics, we see this second form of standardization in attempts to fashion individuals into neoliberal subjects who always seek to maximize their general utility, who are always improving their “social capital,” and who embody the distinctive virtues of the business world.⁴²⁵ Or we see it in attempts to impose tighter regulatory standards on products and services across different markets. In either case, the apparent goal is to reduce diversity and complexity to increase productivity gains and to speed the flow of goods and information from one location to another. This strategy often pays enormous dividends, though not in every instance: As we saw earlier in chapter two, for example, interregional trains that pursued a long-haul economy of scope ran a high risk of defaulting on the loans needed to construct their systems, and they often had to resort to novel pricing mechanisms, along with considerable public financing, to remain solvent.

As an example of bureaucratization in action, Beniger himself highlights the standardized processes that improved the speed and reliability of these transportation networks.⁴²⁶ To facilitate the movement of information and products, it was necessary, for example, to implement uniform time zones that ignored the actual differences in time from one village or town to the next—differences that naturally reflected the rotation of the earth—and instead subject every location to a consistent time designated for one of 24 zones that effectively blanketed the entire globe. This bureaucratizing process eventually ran up against natural limitations; no corporate or political bureaucracy could eliminate, either then or even now, certain cosmological realities, much as they might wish that they could. What was still within their power, however, was to adopt the first and

⁴²⁵ See Melvin Tumin, “Business as a Social System,” *Behavioral Science* Vol. 9, No. 2 (1964), 129.

⁴²⁶ Beniger, *The Control Revolution*, chapters 4-6.

more simple strategy of simply ignoring inconvenient facts. By subjecting different locations to a standardized time, they reduced much of the chaos induced by information overload, diminishing complexity and nuance for the sake of efficiency. And the altogether reasonable assumption in implementing these changes was that any cost of doing so—like to human biorhythms, say—was more than worth whatever productivity gains would result.⁴²⁷ Ignoring the natural diversity of the actual world is sometimes necessary to initiate processes more conducive to human flourishing.

Yet it is also possible to take this rationalizing process beyond what is either prudent or justifiable. At a certain point, any efficiency gains resulting from increased standardization will be minimal, and the costs will become increasingly burdensome for those who would stand to benefit instead from greater diversity. As a case in point, one of the hallmark features of a globalizing economy is the bland uniformity spreading steadily across the entire globe, as foreign nations which once boasted an idiosyncratic culture now play host to the same producers and suppliers, manufacture products with nearly identical specifications, and even consume the same mass-produced food.⁴²⁸ Given these homogenizing trends, it is reasonable to wonder whether further “rationalization” is still desirable or beneficial from a cultural perspective, if nothing else.

Another reason for serious misgivings, however, is that bureaucratic processes are severely and even grotesquely impersonal. They work as effectively as they do by treating every individual and every community as basically alike, and thus as substitutable cogs in one vast machine. It is in this respect that bureaucracies can often dehumanize individuals who do not fit effortlessly into the procrustean bed they impose on insiders and outsiders alike. When individuals are forced to modify

⁴²⁷ For a helpful commentary, see Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 84-85

⁴²⁸ See, for instance, George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* 5 (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 2007).

their behavior, their beliefs, or their values for the sake of systems that are necessarily rigid and uncompromising, much of their own distinctive personality will have to be suppressed. As sociologist Neil Postman puts it, “In a culture in which the machine, with its impersonal and endlessly repeatable operations, is a controlling metaphor and considered to be the instrument of progress, subjectivity becomes profoundly unacceptable. Diversity, complexity, and ambiguity of human judgment are enemies of technique.”⁴²⁹ In pursuit of greater efficiency, rationalization elevates the importance of technique and minimizes the importance of creative problem-solving.⁴³⁰

All these critiques are familiar ones, forming the stock and trade of the pluralist position. But one further point that is often neglected are the effects of bureaucratization on individual freedom. More than merely dehumanizing individuals who fail to perfectly conform, rationalization also has the potential to increase or severely heighten the costs of opting out of these bureaucratic systems in the future, or even of reducing, to some nontrivial extent, one’s personal entanglement in them. And this often leaves individuals with fewer resources at their disposal to resist arbitrary domination whenever it arises. In cases where public or private actors steer these bureaucratic systems in ways ultimately beneficial to their own interests, for example—as when they underwrite regulations clearly inimical to local interests⁴³¹—they can easily dominate individuals who are locked in these systems as a basic condition of maintaining a suitable position in civil society.

⁴²⁹ Postman, *Technopoly*, 158.

⁴³⁰ For a practical example that focuses more narrowly on the medical industry, see Ivan Illich, *Limits to Medicine: Medical Nemesis, the Expropriation of Health* (London: Marion Boyers, 2010).

⁴³¹ This practice, whether intentioned or not, has been especially noticeable in the regulatory response to the recent pandemic. See Leticia Miranda, “A tale of two pandemics: Big-box stores rake in record profits while small businesses fold,” CNBC, August 2020: <https://www.nbcnews.com/business/consumer/tale-two-pandemics-big-box-stores-rake-record-profits-while-n1237464>. Accessed April 2021.

When political and economic systems become excessively rationalized, in other words, it becomes possible to lodge more substantive critiques against them; our opposition to them can be rooted in more than reactionary nostalgia, or in more, even, than reasonable concerns over the dehumanizing character of technology. Times may arise when rationalized systems of economy pose a threat to individual freedom comparable to that posed by overly centralized systems of *government*, in which case the same basic concerns apply. But the solution in this case is likely to be different from what we see in the political sphere, involving issues of greater technical complexity; the promotion of market pluralism seemingly depends on issues as much technological as political.

Pluralist Voices: Technological Critics

It is significant that some of the more articulate advocates of market pluralism in the 20th century were technological critics by profession; they were hardly economists in the formal sense of the term, nor were they political thinkers first and foremost. This suggests that the historic debate between rationalism and pluralism has in recent history taken a more concrete turn, which itself suggests that our capacity to preserve and defend the freedom of the individual now depends just as much on the character of our technology and infrastructure as it does on our formal political arrangements. In other words, the highly abstract or theoretical debates that have long dominated our political discourse may no longer hold the pressing relevance they once did, and we may need to focus anew on questions that we often regard as strictly technical in character. The work of two sociologists—Lewis Mumford and Jacques Ellul—underscore the importance of making this pivot.

Perhaps no one has contributed more to our knowledge of the history of technology than Mumford; it was only later in his life, however, that he addressed more explicitly the political implications of recent technological development in the West. In the second volume of his *Myth of*

the Machine, he notoriously argued that modern technology, or “megatechnics” as he termed it, had advanced in a manner that severely undermines human dignity and freedom. The more organic or qualitative aspects of life had been sacrificed on the altar of greater mechanical efficiency—for the sake of everything measurable, repeatable, predictable, and determinative. And the result were massively imbalanced systems characterized by much higher productivity, but which also subjected countless individuals to a few centralized agencies operating in both the public and private sector.

Mumford argued further that Western societies have long assumed that quantifiable gains in efficiency, technical ingenuity, and mechanical function and output are always a liberating force. And initially this was a reasonable conclusion given that this “rationalizing” process did emancipate entire populations from the tyranny of the mundane and the provincial; there were more potential avenues individuals could explore and thus more means at their disposal to “exit” oppressive relationships bound by practical necessity alone. Because this developmental process advanced with little opposition, however, what started as an effort to control for the wild vicissitudes of nature, empowering individuals to pursue a more materially prosperous existence, ended in increasingly sophisticated efforts to conquer and dominate the human person. It resulted, that is, in a vast “megamachine” that imposes “machine-like docility on a scale never before conceivable,” exercising power through technical mechanisms as much as formal political institutions.⁴³² This megamachine improves tangible systems of infrastructure and increases productivity, but it also profoundly reorganizes education and consumption. In the end, it enables a powerful few in the public or private sphere to exert “more effective control over large populations than any merely political unity” can achieve—a power more difficult to resist as it rapidly expands in scope.⁴³³

⁴³² Lewis Mumford, *The Myth of the Machine: The Pentagon of Power* (New York: Harcourt, 1970), 240

⁴³³ *Ibid*, 241.

Mumford believed that the megamachine comes with both benefits and costs, the latter of which begin to accumulate at a nearly exponential rate, particularly as more processes and systems are swallowed up within it. Invariably it is the case, he wrote, that “all the properties of individual machines—high energy inputs, mechanization, automation, quantity output—are increased by their inclusion in the megamachine: but so likewise are the disadvantages of such machines—their rigidity, their irresponsiveness to new situations, their detachment from human purposes other than those embodied in the design of the machine. The chief of these embodied purposes is the exercise of power.”⁴³⁴ Beyond its ample material advantages, in other words, the megamachine grants awesome powers to centralized authorities, and it robs individuals of the skills and resources they need to resist their edicts. This poses a less obvious dilemma for those who either would happily accept this tradeoff or who have good reasons for believing that their own preferences and values will rarely conflict, in the final analysis, with the centralized agents and agencies on which they, too, have come to depend. But for most everyone else, the megamachine poses a major threat to their happiness and freedom, and it likely spells the death of community.

It is only natural, moreover, that a system that prioritizes efficiency and productivity would reward individuals whose main objective will be to consume more tomorrow than in the past or present. Utilizing and depleting material products becomes if anything a civic obligation, which means the greatest prizes await those who have acquired the capacity, through fortune or their own diligent efforts, to engage in more extravagant forms of consumption. Virtually every citizen, Mumford contends, “must, in duty bound, acquire, use, devour, waste, and finally destroy a sufficient quantity of goods to keep its increasingly productive mechanism in operation. Since the productivity of this system is immense, this turns out to be not quite so light a duty as it might

⁴³⁴ Mumford, *The Myth of the Machine: The Pentagon of Power*, 240.

seem.... In order to perform the duty of consumption, the worker himself must increase his own productive commitment."⁴³⁵ This is not a system that looks kindly on individuals who want nothing more than to establish and maintain dense communities bound by reciprocal needs and obligations.

We can see in Mumford, in short, a vigorous and forthright critique of the rationalizing processes that undergird our technologies, our infrastructures, and our contemporary economic systems. Indeed, Mumford makes it abundantly clear that greater pluralism and diversity in the marketplace is precisely what is necessary to preserve the freedoms of all individuals, and not just a few. This is not to say that rational, efficient systems are always or intrinsically a problem. They are, to the contrary, utterly necessary in economic and political systems characterized by excessive fragmentation, disorganization, and disintegration.⁴³⁶ In the era of the megamachine, however, the greatest threat to human freedom comes from the centralized planners, be they nominally public or private, who favor "the kind of external order that [can] be achieved by a single mind, like that of a baroque prince, detached from precedent, breaking with popular customs, acting alone, [and] commanding unqualified obedience."⁴³⁷ This is the sort of personality that, for love of the mechanical efficiency of perfectly uniform systems, designs cities and infrastructures and markets according to a rational, predetermined plan; it is the sort that has nothing but disdain for discrete villages, towns, and regions that have undergone a less uniform trajectory of organic growth, and which have thus incorporated the accumulated insights of multiple generations. It is the kind of temperament that is willing, in a word, to clear "the way for the uniformities and standardizations

⁴³⁵ Mumford, *The Myth of the Machine: The Pentagon of Power*, 329.

⁴³⁶ Ibid, 74.

⁴³⁷ Ibid, 80

imposed by the machine” by the diligent “stripping away of the constituent groups that compose any real community—the family, the village, the farm, the workshop, the guild, [and] the church.”⁴³⁸

This insightful critique of the “megamachine,” penned near the end of Mumford’s life, finds a fitting complement in the work of sociologist Jacques Ellul, who likewise emphasized the vital role played by technology in constructing a more uniform, standardized, and rational economy. As Ellul understood it, one of the central features of advanced economies is the promotion of a continuous process of standardization—or the tendency, in other words, to urge the “normalizing” of various products and services. Today policymakers on both sides of the partisan aisle take it for granted that this normalizing process is nothing less than an essential condition for all economic progress; as far as they are concerned, the only relevant question is how best to guarantee it—whether through top-down managerial control, spontaneous activity in the market, or some ingenious combination of the two.⁴³⁹ But it is assumed that only a “rational” economy can be a successful one.

In practice, this often means that policymakers situated across the ideological divide will continue to haggle over means but not ends, and they will utilize both public and private means—or public-private-partnerships—to ensure that markets become more uniform and efficient; their shared objective, in other words, is to ensure that transportation, communication, banking and finance, and a host of other industries all follow the same processes and are subjected to the same standards. Only then can aggregate increases in production be ensured, as methods are streamlined to make them as cost-effective as is humanly possible. But this also comes at the cost of market diversity. The longer that this normalizing or rationalizing process is underway, Ellul contends, the more it “devalues the older economic types and the older industrial organizations. Norms mutually

⁴³⁸ Mumford, *The Myth of the Machine: The Pentagon of Power*, 81.

⁴³⁹ Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1964), 156.

entail each other and presuppose certain synchronizations. It is almost impossible to conceive of localized [economic] norms.”⁴⁴⁰ For the sake of efficiency, it becomes necessary to impose uniform standards and processes on discrete communities and regions, which makes it all but inevitable that smaller firms will yield ground, in the end, to the far better-organized mega-corporation.

As markets are further standardized, pluralism and diversity tend to decrease not only at the communal level but also among individuals, and increased pressure is brought to bear on those who for whatever reason fail to conform. Importantly, this process rarely avails itself of direct or interpersonal forms of domination, much less out-and-out coercion; there is generally “no need for repressive measures.”⁴⁴¹ Rather, the remaining outliers in the market who have vastly different values and preferences will face rising costs as they strive to realize their own conception of a good life. They will feel a constant and mounting pressure to abandon their way of life or their staunch beliefs to ensure they are not the “losers” in the rat race, as they see it, that increasingly defines their reality. In most cases, this requires their abandoning of community values altogether. Writes Ellul, “The social man envisaged by the plan is a man integrated more and more into modern society. His needs are more and more collectivized, not indeed by direct pressure, but by publicity, standardization of goods, intellectual conformity, and so on.”⁴⁴² It is through these subtle yet potent means that the values and preferences of one cohort of citizens is made the standard for the rest.

Ellul and Mumford both recognized that continuous increases in productivity and efficiency do not always redound to the benefit of every citizen. This implies in practice that productivity and efficiency are best viewed as a means rather than an end in themselves. They are indispensable, at a

⁴⁴⁰ Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 172.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid, 175-176.

⁴⁴² Ibid.

minimum, in providing individuals the requisite means to transcend the stinging pain of poverty, or to free them from the dehumanizing constraints of localized forms of oppression. But in emancipating one kind of citizen—the liberal ideal of the self-made man or woman—they can easily become a further means to oppress and burden another kind. Hence, market rationalization needs offset by some degree of market pluralism, and this requires, as Mumford and Ellul understood, that we re-politicize products and processes that we typically evaluate using technical criteria alone.

Pluralist Technology

Thus far we have seen that a rational *political* order often goes hand in glove with a rational *economic* order, and when the latter achieves an excessive degree of standardization—when it loses any semblance of equilibrium—then it loses much of its emancipatory potential for a sizable cohort of citizens and can easily become an instrument of domination. It goes without saying that whenever this occurs, citizens face a significant challenge; because these systems have taken many decades to construct, it is safe to conclude they will take just as long to equilibrate. This is not an undertaking that is resolvable in a few simple steps, but one that requires considerable efforts over a longer timeframe. In this case, the adage that “Rome was not built in a day” very much applies.

Bearing this in mind, it is important to recognize that formulaic attempts to decentralize government (as a stand-alone variable) is nowhere even close to an adequate solution. A return to Reagan-era “devolution” will not set everything right—quite to the contrary, in fact, since economic rationalization advanced leaps and bounds in a political era when local decision-makers supposedly enjoyed more discretion than they had for quite some time. Enabling local governments to assume greater ownership over the shape and color of their regional and communal economies may be a necessary first step at reform, but it is hardly a sufficient one. After all, local decision-makers may

themselves contribute to rationalizing trends in the economy if they have been conditioned, for example, to believe that increased productivity is the only relevant metric of prosperity, or if they have lost the capacity to pursue policies that are more advantageous to economies of scope.⁴⁴³ What we learn from sociologists like Mumford and Ellul is that the character of our technologies and infrastructures matters more than who or what has a controlling hand in implementing them.

The danger in politicizing questions that we usually perceive as narrowly technical, on the other hand, is that we end up succumbing to a reactionary position that ultimately causes more harm than good. It would be easy to assume that modern technology is itself the totality of the problem, which leads in turn to the unfortunate conclusion that a simple reversion to primitive technologies and systems would somehow set everything right again. It is only natural that such luddite fantasies would pose a major temptation for those who, in the interest of community, view many of the technical achievements of modernity with suspicion or even outright displeasure. In the worst of cases, however, these feelings can fuel a kind of negative energy and restlessness, unleashing a retrogressive wave of destruction that diminishes freedom more than preserves it.

This reactionary position stems in part from the idea that the technology is independently the problem that needs resolved; it assumes that technology always determines, rather than merely influences, social and political outcomes. As Langdon Winner observes, this more extreme position holds in its strongest form that “the adoption of a given technical system actually requires the creation and maintenance of a particular set of social conditions” that accompany it as a practical necessity.⁴⁴⁴ We can see this deterministic thrust most prominently in the writings of Karl Marx

⁴⁴³ See Howard Kunstler, *The Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America's Man-Made Landscape* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 113-114.

⁴⁴⁴ Langdon Winner, *The Whale and the Reactor: A Search for Limits in an Age of High Technology* (Chicago: University Chicago Press, 1986), 32. Emphasis mine.

and Friedrich Engels, and more recently in renowned business historian Alfred Chandler, who likewise recognized but little “latitude in the forms of power and authority appropriate within modern sociotechnical systems.”⁴⁴⁵ This more fatalistic position dismisses the power of human efforts to alter or reform any technological system already in place: Although we may enjoy an initial choice in the technologies we pursue, we exercise virtually none thereafter. We can choose *whether* to create a Frankenstein golem, but its powers exceed our control as soon as it is breathed into life. And that means we may have little choice but to destroy everything we previously built.

A more reasonable position, by contrast, “holds that a given kind of technology is strongly compatible with, but does not strictly require, social and political relationships of a particular stripe.”⁴⁴⁶ Because this alternative position rejects technological determinism or any such fatalistic interpretation, it leaves ample room for political discussions and debates, not only about whether to implement a proposed technology, but also about the most effective means for ensuring that already-existing technologies remain congruent with, or otherwise advance, our political ideals.

It was in this spirit, at least, that economist E. F. Schumacher recommended pursuing, in the mid-20th century, decentralized technologies capable of operating on a more human scale, which would theoretically lead to increases in communal productivity but would also be less capital intensive than many of their modern counterparts.⁴⁴⁷ These “intermediate” or “appropriate” technologies would ideally pose fewer financial and technical barriers to users of lower income or

⁴⁴⁵ Winner, *The Whale and the Reactor*, 35. See also Friedrich Engels, “On Authority” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, edited by Robert Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Princeton University Press, 1978); and Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Vol. 1* (Pacific Publishing Studio, 2010).

⁴⁴⁶ Winner, *The Whale and the Reactor*, 32.

⁴⁴⁷ See E. F. Schumacher, “Social and Economic Problems Calling for the Development of Intermediate Technology” in *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973).

education; they would likewise be more accessible to the everyday man or woman if they were easier to repair and maintain locally, or were less reliant on natural resources. And they would, along these lines, emancipate countless individuals and businesses from relations of abject dependence on industrial forces well beyond their control, affording them greater self-sufficiency.

This idea attracted considerable attention and enthusiasm when Schumacher first proposed it, and efforts were made to implement it in developing nations specifically. As an example, the so-called “universal nut-sheller” drastically increased the capacity of smaller-scale farmers and food producers to extract peanut oil in a productive and efficient manner, yet without requiring an exorbitant investment in either money or natural resources.⁴⁴⁸ A treadle pump, as yet another example, enabled farmers in developing nations to access and retrieve water by hand or bicycle power, granting them the capacity to grow and sustain a larger quantity of crops without requiring more expensive irrigation dams, or without needing, in other cases, an elevated water tank and pressure pump.⁴⁴⁹ Although these technologies were developed and implemented for operators in distant parts of the world,⁴⁵⁰ there is no reason in principle why similar technologies could not be developed for local applications as well—especially given the recurrent complaint of agrarians like Wendell Berry that high-energy and high-cost technologies have all but ruined family-run farms.⁴⁵¹ Nor is it unreasonable to suppose that open-source processes might spur innovative applications

⁴⁴⁸ Tamara Dean, *The Human-Powered Home: Choosing Muscles Over Motors* (Gabriola, BC: New Society Publishers, 2008), 39-44.

⁴⁴⁹ See Melvyn Kay and Tom Brabben “Treadle Pumps for Irrigation in Africa,” *Knowledge Synthesis Report* No.1, 2000: <http://www.fao.org/3/x8293e/x8293e00.pdf>. Accessed April 2021.

⁴⁵⁰ See Anthony Akubue, “Appropriate Technology for Socioeconomic Development in Third World Countries,” *The Journal of Technology Studies* Vol. 1, No. 26 (2000): 33-43.

⁴⁵¹ See, for instance, Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 1977), Chapter 9

beyond simple agriculture⁴⁵²—processes that would surely benefit, furthermore, from public sector involvement, as have technological innovations that are larger in scale and more capital intensive.

Even if we were successful in creating and implementing these intermediate technologies, however, our efforts would likely do little to stem a rationalizing economic tide unless we also, and simultaneously, targeted our reforms at the wider systems in which these technologies operate. Otherwise, we too would be guilty of promoting a form of technological determinism, under the dubious assumption that new technology (of some variety or another) will inevitably liberate us. And that in turn might cause us to overestimate the emancipatory potential of a given technology.

As but one example, consider recent analyses of “block chain” technology, which according to some critics will enable citizens to recover some of their digital independence from technology giants or “Big Tech,” as this sector has recently been described. Because this technology is believed to be compatible with local or regional processes, and because it can protect data from centralized control, it has been hailed by some technology gurus as an inherently “democratizing” innovation that will radically change the face of the market. Renowned investor and economist George Gilder, for example, has argued that blockchain technologies spell the inevitable demise of “Big Data” and of the technology companies, such as Google, that have recently acquired such vast resources and power.⁴⁵³ Through blockchain alone, it may be possible to counter many of the globalizing systems that now dominate our lived reality, liberating users from the powerful influence of Big Tech.

⁴⁵² See Joshua Pearce, “The Case for Open Source Appropriate Technology,” *Environment, Development and Sustainability* No. 14 (2012): 425-431.

⁴⁵³ See George Gilder, *Life After Google: The Fall of Big Data and the Rise of the Blockchain Economy* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 2018).

On the other hand, blockchain technologies are themselves multiply realizable. They can operate within different systems and be subjected to a variety of applications, some of which are far more compatible with the rationalist than the pluralist mentality. Blockchain technologies can aid in the implementation, for instance, of a permanent digital ledger where our most personal and intimate details, much of it derived from wearable technologies, is accessible for future technocratic applications—details including our monetary assets, health statistics, biometric data, voting record, educational credentials, and even our social interactions. Already, blockchain is being explored as a mechanism to create “learning ecosystems” where educational activities and outcomes can be constantly monitored,⁴⁵⁴ or to construct digital vouchers that are subject to centralized control.⁴⁵⁵ Thus, depending on its implementation, blockchain technology could ironically end up fueling more rationalization and technocratic control of not only the market, but also of the individuals who comprise it. What this example underscores for us is that efforts to increase market diversity or rejuvenate local and regional economies—or to reduce dependency on centralized agents and agencies—must consider multiple factors at once. It is not enough to focus narrowly on discrete technologies, and indeed even indulging such a fantasy may well prove deeply counterproductive; to be maximally effective, we also need to consider and evaluate existing systems of infrastructure.

Pluralist Infrastructure

⁴⁵⁴ See, for instance, the whitepaper sponsored by the Ford Foundation: American Alliance of Museums, “Building the Future of Education: Museums and the Learning Ecosystem” (Washington, D.C, 2014)

⁴⁵⁵ See, for instance, Alex Grech and Anthony Camilleri, “Blockchain in Education,” *European Commission* (December 2017); and Jonathan Butcher, “Financial Technology and Parental Choice in Education,” *The Heritage Foundation* (December 2017).

Some of the most vociferous critics of market centralization have been careful to emphasize this distinction between technology and infrastructure, even as their thought has been casually and mistakenly identified as reactionary. For example, the early labor republicans we discussed in the previous chapter were not opposed in principle to various industrial and mechanical advances. They firmly believed, however, that newer technologies were frequently being used as instruments of domination, and thus any attempts to emancipate laborers would have to account for this reality. As Alex Gourevitch argues, the labor republicans “were not luddites who viewed technology itself with suspicion, but they did object to the way in which it became part of the employer’s apparatus of control.”⁴⁵⁶ It was with this understanding that they advocated worker-owned and operated cooperatives—in essence, new systems of industrial organization—to reap the myriad benefits of technology without becoming enslaved by it, with the goal of utilizing it in a more enriching fashion.

A similar, if also more stringent, view of technology was voiced by Wendell Berry, who as an agrarian thinker was often vigorously opposed to industrial expertise—a position informed in large measure by his personal experience. It was, after all, the continuous insertion into rural economies of debt-financed technologies that helped destroy the many family-owned farms that he loved. It is also true, furthermore, that Berry himself took immense pride in his efforts to relinquish or forego the use of technology whenever possible: He even refused to utilize a typewriter as he went about composing his essays and stories. Yet Berry also realized that *how* these technologies are utilized, and in what context, are often decisive factors in determining whether they enrich or destroy.⁴⁵⁷ Usually it is *systems* of technology that bear the brunt of responsibility for community erosion.

⁴⁵⁶ Alex Gourevitch, *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth: Labor and Republican Liberty in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 114.

⁴⁵⁷ For Wendell Berry’s more developed view on the subject, see *The Unsettling of America* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 1977), Chapter 6.

As Berry understood it, this community-eroding effect occurs whenever new technology is applied everywhere and to everyone in the same undeviating fashion. Modern transportation systems, for example, were in his view nothing but a “pure abstraction, built to serve the two abstractions that are the poles of our national life: commerce and expensive pleasure.”⁴⁵⁸ Because these networks were constructed “not according to the lay of the land, but according to a blueprint,” they perfectly epitomized the kind of “rationalizing” mentality that glibly sacrifices communal and regional variety, and much also that is life-sustaining, for the sake of what is merely hypothesized to increase the efficient production of standardized goods.⁴⁵⁹ Here again, rationalizing processes are most glaringly evident in technological *systems* rather than the actual *hardware* that make use of them: Roads are not themselves toxic or harmful, but they *can* be whenever they comprise a system with but a single operating principle—which in this case is scalar or aggregate economic growth.

It is admittedly easier to pinpoint these effects well after the fact than while they are still occurring in real-time. We can see easily in retrospect how railroad structure and design has influenced patterns of regional development, and we can lament, with Berry and many others, the fact that the interstate highway system has encouraged low-density, auto-dominated sprawl. As we focus our analytical resources on the decisions of the past, however, we often end up neglecting the infrastructure projects of the present. This is partly a reflection of the comparative difficulty of, on the one hand, analyzing causal relations already long established, and on the other of accurately predicting what is likely to occur in the future. But it also reflects the difficulty in assessing the nature or character of infrastructure systems with which we have not yet been long acquainted. Perhaps the best example is the now ubiquitous digital system we popularly refer to as the internet;

⁴⁵⁸ Wendell Berry, “A Native Hill” in *The Art of the Common-place* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2002), 12.

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid.

it should be readily obvious to everyone that the internet could easily be used to promote a more rationalized economy, but it is not yet clear how it might be tailored, if at all, to promote greater pluralism instead. Thus, future predictions over the democratizing effects of technologies (like blockchain) suffer from this ambiguity; until we have adequately explored all its many potential uses, we can never be certain how best to utilize the internet to promote community interests.

Yet even questions like these, important as they are, can obscure the myriad other forms of development with which we are already comfortable—so comfortable, in fact, that we rarely even acknowledge that they are still ongoing, much less take the time to interrogate them. Because our interstate highways were first implemented in the 1950s, for example, it is easy to ignore the fact that countless roads are still being constructed at a feverish pace today; as with highways, these roads are invariably designed to promote low-density development and higher levels of consumption. They thus contribute to the same rationalizing processes initiated in the 19th century.

This open-ended developmental trend has recently been highlighted by Charles Marohn, a land-use planner and municipal engineer who also founded “Strong Towns,” an organization which advocates for the development of denser and more cohesive towns and communities.⁴⁶⁰ After years of research and first-hand experience in this area, Marohn has come to the conclusion that state and local governments are promoting an unsustainable growth pattern—one that fundamentally alters the expected costs and benefits of economic investments, speeding the transfer of financial capital away from established communities to newer developments instead. Part of the reason this occurs is because decision-makers have increasingly adopted a rationalist mentality; their aim is generally

⁴⁶⁰ See Michael Hendrix, “A Stronger America Needs ‘Strong Towns’ First,” *The American Conservative*, September 2019: <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/urbs/a-stronger-america-needs-strong-towns-first/>. Accessed April 2021. See also <https://www.strongtowns.org/>.

to lead, rather than follow, investment opportunities—as they design highly conjectural blueprints of future commercial and residential districts, and as they construct infrastructure to support them.

There are at least several reasons why this approach ultimately proves to be a misguided one, but the first, quite simply, is that it channels future investment into quantitative expansion at the expense of qualitative improvements. By defraying much of the cost associated with expansion, state and local officials increase the profitability and investment attractiveness of suburban sprawl— with its commercial strip malls, big box stores, and newer infrastructure—rather than nurturing and developing more complex ecosystems in already-existing towns and communities.⁴⁶¹ That is to say, governments increase the available supply of viable spaces by their subsidization of newer developments, which in turn significantly reduces property values and incentivizes investors to abandon areas already “developed” for pastures believed to be at least temporarily greener. This naturally has a depressive effect on communities that are already facing a severe fiscal shortfall, and it makes it difficult and sometimes impossible to achieve anything remotely close to a recovery.

In this view, the problem is not that communities face difficult straits economically, which are a perennial feature of human history; it would be laughable even to suggest that such challenges will ever disappear entirely. The real difficulty, rather, is that previous investment opportunities in these communities, or their financial lifeblood, is slowly being drained from them, and they are losing the capacity to adapt creatively to trying circumstances or to increase value internally. In earlier historical periods, on the other hand, communities would mend their long-term prospects by imaginatively responding to economic scarcity; they made necessary adaptations largely in response to existential stress, which motivated local decision-makers to contemplate new and

⁴⁶¹ Charles Marohn, *Strong Towns: A Bottom-Up Revolution to Rebuild American Prosperity* (Hoboken: Wiley & Sons, 2020), Forward, EPUB

innovative ways to utilize local resources more thoughtfully and effectively. The result was communities that were far less “fragile” than they once had been, and thus more immune from future shocks;⁴⁶² those communities capable of weathering the storm often came out stronger.

What communities desperately require, in other words, is a “continuum of improvement” where existing resources are modified and amended through various qualitative enhancements.⁴⁶³ As an example, Marohn points to the many municipalities across America that paradoxically host public buildings “with Roman columns, vaulted domes, and marble staircases.”⁴⁶⁴ The reason why so many of these communities invested heavily in these public structures was not because of excessive vanity or an enormous surplus of resources; they pursued these outwardly grandiose projects, to the contrary, because it was one of the better ways they could “squeeze a return out of an otherwise nonreturning investment.”⁴⁶⁵ They needed to make visible improvements to their most prominent civic spaces to have any hope of revitalizing their communities; they understood that economic value is determined as much by qualitative improvements as quantitative ones, an insight that spurred them into transforming buildings that were “merely functional” and utilitarian “into something that radiated wealth to the community.”⁴⁶⁶ Thus, although these enhancements may appear incredibly risky and even extravagant today, in previous eras they usually paid enormous dividends, encouraging citizens to work or reside in closer proximity to the town center,

⁴⁶² This principle has been recently highlighted by Nassim Taleb in *Antifragile: Things That Gain from Disorder* (New York: Random House, 2012).

⁴⁶³ Marohn, *Strong Towns*, Chapter 1, EPUB

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid, Chapter 3, EPUB

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid.

and thereby raising property values as a first step in the “virtuous cycle” necessary for positive development to occur. A more attractive town is also one with greater appeal to potential investors.

By their very nature, these qualitative improvements are incremental and open-ended. They involve a long and delicate process of trial and error, and they require watchful experimentation in response to context-specific outcomes. As Marohn explains, this developmental approach allows each element of an existing ecosystem to receive constant “feedback to changes as they happen,” responding as needed to both “positive and negative stressors” and making vital adaptations that will itself have a necessary impact on every other element; it is an approach, in short, “predicated upon failure—preferably small, earlier failures—as a path to wisdom.”⁴⁶⁷ The rationalist approach to economic development, as a striking contrast, papers over the messier contours of life with a neatly conceived abstraction. “The key difference between historic development patterns and the way Americans began to build cities in the twentieth century,” Marohn writes, “is our capacity to skip the messy iterations and jump to what we perceive to be the perfect end. Today, we build in large leaps, and we build to a finished state. We envision the end condition—for a building, a block, or a neighborhood—and that is what we go forth and create.”⁴⁶⁸ The problem with this hurried model, however, is that it struggles to anticipate or respond effectively to future shocks; because it is more “fragile,” it encourages investors to skip from one developmental project to another, restlessly searching for a greener pasture to develop according to the same formulaic blueprint.

The great shortcoming in this approach is that even the most rational of models can never be sufficiently complex to account for the infinite variety of life, with all its myriad contingencies. The expectation that everything is to be planned and accounted for from the very outset, rigidly

⁴⁶⁷ Marohn, *Strong Towns*, Chapter 2, EPUB.

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid.

dictated by experts, results in residential and commercial spaces that are less amenable to dynamic revisions in the future. Nor does this rationalizing approach lend itself to nuanced multivariate analysis; those who engage in it tend to focus on only one set of parameters—increasing aggregate efficiency—and they generally make no attempt (even in appearance) “to harmonize many competing priorities.”⁴⁶⁹ This would be less a cause for concern if community survival were not itself one of the priorities that often goes by the wayside. Communities that are preplanned from the beginning are inherently unstable, that is, because they are far less capable of responding effectively to changing needs and concerns. And they struggle for that reason to service the debt on their supporting infrastructure: Many cities fail to recoup enough money from property taxes to maintain the dead-end streets in even their affluent neighborhoods, which are tragically incapable of accommodating themselves to substantial improvements or other innovative feedback.⁴⁷⁰

Thus, a second independent reason to steer clear of this approach—beyond its tendency to cannibalize resources from established communities—is its inability to respond or readily adapt to contextual variations. It is not an approach that can easily meet its liabilities over the long-term. In far too many cases, in fact, policymakers who have heavily financed a developmental project will, in response to major revenue shortfalls, pursue a second or third growth opportunity in a hitherto untapped area, which provides an immediate increase in revenue but increases liabilities in the future. The conclusion that Marohn draws, surveying this pattern, is that developmental efforts which are “government led, spread out, and mostly homogenous across the entire country” are ultimately unsustainable and depend on never-ending quantitative growth to maintain, even to a

⁴⁶⁹ Marohn, *Strong Towns*, Chapter 5, EPUB.

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid, Chapter 3, EPUB

minimal degree, the low-density neighborhoods and commercial centers developed previously.⁴⁷¹ What this oddly implies is that more “rational” models of growth appear increasingly inevitable not because they are succeeding, but rather because they are failing; low-density developments are ostensibly necessary to cover the growing liabilities accrued from previous such developments.

The accumulating effects of this obscene, Ponzi-like arrangement are evident not only at local levels, but also in our mounting national expenditures, as Marohn carefully chronicles:⁴⁷² According to the highly respected American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE), for example, over \$1 trillion in federal tax money was the estimated cost of major infrastructure deficiencies in a period stretching from 2011 to 2021, and the only way to avoid similar costs in the future was to invest \$2.2 trillion—more than double the predicted loss—on infrastructure upgrades and expansions.⁴⁷³ Judging by this report, the ASCE apparently believes that the only way to meet or cover our rising infrastructure liabilities is to engage in the very same developmental process that precipitated them in the first place. Nor does the ASC believe, strikingly enough, that this ongoing crisis is likely to be resolved in any reasonable timeframe; it is expected by their own estimates that declining infrastructure will entail the loss hundreds of thousands of jobs by fiscal year 2040.⁴⁷⁴ It is little wonder that Pete Buttigieg, Transportation Secretary in the Biden Administration, has proposed a vehicle mileage tax, of all things, to finance a new multi-trillion-dollar infrastructure proposal.⁴⁷⁵

⁴⁷¹ Marohn, *Strong Towns*, Chapter 3, EPUB.

⁴⁷² Ibid, Chapter 4, EPUB

⁴⁷³ American Society of Civil Engineers, *Failure to Act: The Economic Impact of Current Investment Trends in Water and Wastewater Treatment Infrastructure* (Boston: Economic Development Research Group, 2011).

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁵ See Thomas Franck, “Vehicle mileage tax could be on the table in infrastructure talks, Buttigieg says,” CNBC, March 2021: <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/03/26/buttigieg-says-white-house-is-weighing-mileage-levy-to-fund-infrastructure.html>. Accessed April 2021.

One practical lesson we can draw from these numbers is that a uniquely pluralist approach to national and local infrastructure ought to entail, for starters, the construction of far *less* of it. A strong case can be made that the public sector has, though its ongoing infrastructure projects, taken the clear initiative in developmental projects that are best left to incremental and organic forces. When the public sector leads with these projects, the tendency is to engage in over-rationalized planning that results in costly over-extension and an unsustainable growth pattern. As we look to the future, therefore, government agencies should renew their focus on maintaining infrastructure between already-established communities rather than continuing to subsidize and help construct additional sprawling developments. As Marohn helpfully summarizes, governments “need to be done with building horizontal infrastructure” that cannot, in all likelihood, be supported “by the private wealth in our communities.”⁴⁷⁶ We need far less public investment in infrastructure expansion than we have at present—not because infrastructure is unimportant, but more accurately because public officials are now leading development rather than following and supporting it. And the consequence is a simplistic, sprawling pattern that leaves governments in a financial bind: Because they have fronted much if not most of the initial investment in them, they are necessarily implicated in their long-term prospects—which often add up to long-term failures.

Even in cases where new infrastructure clearly needs to be built—this time in response to organic growth that is already occurring—governments should creatively endeavor to reduce their financial liabilities, which would free them from having to engage in speculative investments later. One feasible way to do this, as Marohn argues, is to mimic the basic investment strategy adopted centuries earlier by various trading monopolies: Governments could purchase the developable land around a prospective infrastructure project at pre-development prices, only to sell the land back to

⁴⁷⁶ Marohn, *Strong Towns*, Chapter 8, EPUB

the highest bidder, upon completion, to recuperate construction and maintenance costs.⁴⁷⁷ Yet another option is to levy taxes based on ex-post-facto general assessments of the increased value resulting from completed infrastructure projects.⁴⁷⁸ This alternative method is difficult to implement on a larger scale, of course, but that is probably for the best; as fewer such projects are initiated, investment capital can begin channeling back into existing municipalities. This small step, simple as it is, could dramatically alter the cost-benefit ratios stakeholders face as they contemplate investment opportunities, and in that respect, it is a necessary first step in revitalizing communities.

Pluralist Investment

As government officials back away from their commitment to infrastructure expansion, they will soon find it essential to revise their existing investment strategies; governments and other public-private partnerships will need to avoid investment projects with a higher-risk profile—projects likely to deliver immediate rewards but which have dubious value over the long-term. On this issue, Mahron draws from his experience as a municipal advisor in suggesting that cities and towns adopt the more typical “barbell” strategy utilized by sophisticated investors; this strategy entails a portfolio made up primarily of “boring, low-risk” assets—approximately 90% of the portfolio—with the remaining 10% devoted to genuinely high-risk projects.⁴⁷⁹ Under this approach, only a small fraction of public investment has any significant chance of failing, and governments are thus free from a potential bind where they are forced to engage in expansionary projects to meet accruing liabilities. The virtue of this approach is that it avoids, for example, the scenario we

⁴⁷⁷ Mahron, *Strong Towns*, Chapter 4, EPUB

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid, Chapter 8, EPUB

considered in chapter two with the railroad industry, when high-risk development depends on an improbable increase in consumer demand. Such profligate risk-taking becomes more attractive in the private sector when backed by a tacit promise of taxpayer support, which is a reasonable expectation whenever public officials are themselves engaging in this same investment strategy.

In practice, a “barbell” investment portfolio would encourage governments to display an obsessive attention to detail as they maintain the infrastructure they already have, thereby promoting qualitative improvements—and multifaceted economies of scope—over quantitative enlargement. Mahron further suggests that local governments focus their maintenance efforts on higher-productivity areas, which reap immediate dividends that ripple throughout the rest of a community. These maintenance investments should not be confused, importantly, with larger and riskier attempts to transform or gentrify entire neighborhoods: The goal is not to engage in “large projects built all at once to a finished state with efficiency as the value elevated above all others”—as a rationalist planner or “baroque prince” would doubtless recommend—but rather “ongoing basic maintenance” that strives to make only minor changes in a gradual and incremental way.⁴⁸⁰ This distinction between detailed maintenance, on one hand, and gentrification on the other may at times be challenging to apply, but a narrower focus on investment portfolios can effectively check or restrain public officials who are personally predisposed to exceed sensible and necessary limits.

This approach will likely feel overly restrictive for public officials who are conditioned to think of “development” as the top-down implementation of a prearranged design, and it will require a singular act of courage on their part to trust that small, disaggregated actions will almost certainly produce a more complex, if also less tidy, pattern of development. Yet all the same, these limitations

⁴⁸⁰ Mahron, *Strong Towns*, Chapter 8, EPUB

are necessary to recalibrate markets that have grown excessively imbalanced: Put simply, the aim of governments at the national level should be to support and maintain the quality of life of existing communities—not to engage in never-ending expansionary projects—and the aim of local governments should similarly be to provide a supporting context where residents “have the confidence to take their own energy and resources off the sidelines and put them to work building wealth.”⁴⁸¹ In either case, the aim is to incentivize organic, value-added growth—a radical shift in mentality that ironically begins with a moratorium on high-risk investment from the public sector.

If the problem that most needs addressed in the public sector is too much investment—or too much of the wrong *kinds* of investments—the distinctive problem in the private sphere is a growing scarcity of investment instruments sufficiently tailored to local, qualitative development. Traditionally, regional businesses and investment ventures have relied heavily on community banks and local credit unions, which utilize face-to-face interactions and provincial knowledge to make sounder lending decisions, as they generally have a more nuanced understanding of their customers. Regrettably, however, these institutions have been steadily declining in number since at least 2003, which experts believe is at least partly due to restrictive regulations, many of which are especially burdensome to smaller banks and increase the difficulty in launching new financial institutions.⁴⁸² For communities to meet investment needs in the future, it is imperative that federal and state regulations be reformed to remove these compliance barriers that, using a “rational” or one-size-fits-all approach, discriminate invidiously against institutions that are small and local.

⁴⁸¹ Mahron, *Strong Towns*, Chapter 8, EPUB

⁴⁸² See Martin Neil Baily and Nicholas Montalbano, “The community Banks: The Evolution of the Financial Sector, Part III,” *The Brookings Institution*, 2; and Marshall Lux and Robert Greene, “Dodd-Frank Is Hurting Community Banks,” *The New York Times*, April 2016: <https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2016/04/14/has-dodd-frank-eliminated-the-dangers-in-the-banking-system/dodd-frank-is-hurting-community-banks>. Accessed April 2021.

Beyond community banks, however, the creation of regional exchanges and clearinghouses is likewise necessary to help stimulate local investment. Such exchanges will become increasingly attractive to investors as governments cease promoting and subsidizing new developments; as we saw with Stickney's Great Western Railroad, transportation companies that have more "skin in the game," with a financial stake in the regions they serve, will be more attracted to community investment opportunities. And regional exchanges are a perfect mechanism for satisfying this need because they level the financial playing field, providing additional visibility to companies that are regularly neglected in the larger exchanges. There are, to be sure, several logistical challenges that would need to be ironed out before these regional exchanges are sufficiently profitable to account for their higher transaction costs, but according to economist Michael Schuman, an expert in regional development, any such difficulties are almost certainly resolvable.⁴⁸³ And it is likely that investors will respond favorably to evidence of the multiplier effect at work in their communities.

Importantly, Schuman considers the biggest hurdle to regional exchanges to be standing federal law: Securities regulations have turned what was initially a reasonable concern—namely, protection for unaccredited investors—into an exclusionary principle, making it prohibitively difficult for smaller would-be investors to engage in exchanges.⁴⁸⁴ Yet another contributing factor is the conviction of many economists that investment integration is preferable to regional diversity

⁴⁸³ See Michael Schuman, *The Small-Mart Revolution: How Local Businesses Are Beating the Global Competition* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2007).

⁴⁸⁴ See Michael Schuman, "Local Stock Exchanges: The Next Wave of Community Economy Building," Twenty-Seventh Annual E. F. Schumacher Lectures, October 2007: <https://centerforneweconomics.org/publications/local-stock-exchanges-the-next-wave-of-community-economy-building/>. Accessed April 2021; and "Ditching Wall Street For A Local Stock Exchange," *Fast Company*, April 2012: <https://www.fastcompany.com/1679679/ditching-wall-street-for-a-local-stock-exchange>. Accessed April 2021.

because (why else?) it leads to rapid quantitative growth.⁴⁸⁵ This would be a reasonable concern if we were not in a market so excessively top-heavy as it is; in the current economic environment, it seems little more than a gratuitous effort to defend the status-quo system from necessary reform.

Concerns for quantitative growth likewise downplay many of the attendant costs of a centralized investment system, including its increased vulnerability to fraudulent activity. The critical importance of this point was underscored just recently when evidence surfaced that hundreds of Chinese companies perpetrated a decades-long securities fraud on the U.S. stock exchange, robbing private investors across America of billions of dollars in revenue.⁴⁸⁶ According to the shareholders and financial specialists responsible for uncovering this fraudulent activity, incidents like this put in starker relief a reality that has long been an open secret—that larger investment networks have greater opacity, almost by definition, and thus function as perfect havens for deception; their impersonality and scale prevent investors from detecting the kinds of nuanced information that might help them weed out productive companies from the merely fraudulent ones, and the various auditing agencies and law firms tasked with monitoring SEC filings are themselves operationally unable (and sometimes financially disinclined) to form an accurate assessment.⁴⁸⁷

⁴⁸⁵ This argument arguably applies in the context of Africa, specifically, which is still a developing continent and thus will likely benefit from greater integration than it has at present. See Jacqueline Irving, “Regional Integration of Stock Exchanges in Eastern and Southern Africa: Progress and Prospects,” IMF Working Paper No. 05/122, *World Bank* (2005); and Masimba Tafirenyika, “Harnessing African stock exchanges to promote growth,” *African Renewal*, August 2012: <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/august-2012/harnessing-african-stock-exchanges-promote-growth>. Accessed April 2021.

⁴⁸⁶ See Ben Kenigsberg, “‘The China Hustle’ Warns of Dickey Investments,” *The New York Times*, March 2018: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/29/movies/the-china-hustle-review.html>. Accessed April 2021.

⁴⁸⁷ See Mark Hughes, “‘The China Hustle’ Is The Most Important Film Of 2018,” *Forbes*, March 2018: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/markhughes/2018/03/30/review-the-china-hustle/?sh=4a4b1d7b3357>. Accessed April 2021.

If the impact of fraud were not as severe as it is, then we could reasonably dismiss these cases as a necessary evil. However, the negative effects of a securities fraud continue to reverberate throughout the market even well after it is detected—hurting just about everyone other than the investors who “short sell” its stock—and it has a disproportionate impact on local communities.⁴⁸⁸ Thus, the various costs and benefits of rationalized markets are distributed unequally, which is precisely why local exchanges should be at the forefront of efforts to revitalize regional markets.

Concluding Thoughts

The promotion of market pluralism is a massively daunting task. As Landon Winner argues, “Given the deeply entrenched patterns of our society, any significant attempt to decentralize major political and technological institutions would be a drastic undertaking.”⁴⁸⁹ At a minimum, it “would require that we change many of the rules, public roles, and institutional relationships of government,” and “it would mean that society move to increase the number, accessibility, relative power, vitality, and diversity of local centers of decision making and public administration,” to say nothing of “necessary efforts to redesign and reform technology itself.”⁴⁹⁰ Although these changes could take a variety of forms, they would likely require enormous determination to implement. I want to suggest these changes are still achievable, however, if we focus on larger systemic factors that stimulate the wealth-generating initiative of local firms and agencies; through targeted reforms

⁴⁸⁸ Urska Velikonja, “The Cost of Securities Fraud,” *William & Mary Law Review*, Vol. 54, No. 6 (2013): 1887-1957.

⁴⁸⁹ Winner, *The Whale and the Reactor*, 96.

⁴⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

in technology, infrastructure, and investment, we can effectively change the “rules of the game” and reorder the incentives—or the cost-benefit ratio, in other words—that private actors confront.

It is also important to note that we now live in a moment, in the era of Covid-19, where such changes seem altogether necessary anyway. Political and economic leaders around the globe are increasingly supporting efforts to restore and rectify many of our existing processes and systems. There is a growing consensus, apparently, that we need to implement drastic reforms capable of more effectively inoculating communities from sudden disasters, shocks, and vulnerabilities, and that such an objective can only be achieved by “building back better” the systems we previously put in place.⁴⁹¹ Gone are the days when we can easily pretend to ourselves that all such systems have developed spontaneously, and gone, too, is the self-deluding notion that nothing political is at stake.

This is not to suggest that political and economic decision-makers have radically reversed their position. Over the course of 2020 through 2021—at the time of this writing—the tendency of these global leaders has if anything been to strengthen their commitment to the same rationalizing approach that has been characteristic of Western modernity for at least a century. Their explicitly stated aim is to rid the world of the purported inefficiencies caused by multiple, interlapping systems, and thus to increase global “cooperation.” According to the World Economic Forum, this requires higher levels of “coordination” in regulatory and fiscal policy, in technological and economic goals, and in social and medical practice.⁴⁹² In a word, it requires that local decision-makers cede much of their remaining authority to global technocrats, who will manage these

⁴⁹¹ See, for instance, World Bank/GFDRR, “Building Back Better in Post-Disaster Recovery”: https://www.recoveryplatform.org/assets/tools_guidelines/GFDRR/Disaster%20Recovery%20Guidance%20Series-%20Building%20Back%20Better%20in%20Post-Disaster%20Recovery.pdf, Accessed February 2020.

⁴⁹² See Klaus Schwab, “Now is the Time for a ‘Great Reset,’” *World Economic Forum*, June 3, 2020: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/06/now-is-the-time-for-a-great-reset/>. Accessed February 2020.

worldwide systems with historic levels of altruism and impartiality. Nothing is to be excluded from this rationalizing vision: “Every country, from the United States to China, must participate, and every industry, from oil and gas to tech, must be transformed.”⁴⁹³ By implication, the proposed international requirements will take unquestioned priority over regional objectives and concerns.

Despite appearances, however, I want to argue that the recent pandemic provides us with a unique opportunity to advocate for greater pluralism, and thus for reforms that would clearly benefit from coordinated efforts across multiple overlapping domains. There is, after all, a growing realization that political and economic decision-makers have a substantial say in how these systems are formulated and in what kinds of ideals they embody or advocate. And there is likewise a growing realization that these systems leave much to be desired; they are not nearly as stable, nor even as sufficient, as many of us once believed. We have a small window of opportunity, therefore, to advocate the pluralist perspective to individuals and groups that have already been primed to treat it with greater seriousness, which increases the odds of us making the world freer for individuals from all walks of life, including those who value a more robust form of community.

⁴⁹³ Schwab, “Now is the Time for a ‘Great Reset,’”

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