



## Noreena Hertz, *The Lonely Century: How to Restore Human Connection in a World That's Pulling Apart*

New York: Penguin Random House, 2021. 368 Pages. USD 28.00 (hardback)

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Long before the COVID-19 pandemic struck the United States, three in five adults considered themselves to be lonely. Elderly persons in Japan were committing petty offenses for the sole purpose of going to jail, where they hoped to be less lonely. People around the world were hiring friends through a company called Rent-A-Friend. Noreena Hertz shares many such provoking stories in her new book, *The Lonely Century: How to Restore Human Connection in a World That's Pulling Apart*, which explores the origins of our lonely century and proposes solutions along the way. Her driving thesis is that a “particularly harsh form of capitalism,” or “neoliberalism” is the origin of our loneliness (Hertz 2021, p. 14). As Hertz (2021, p. 16) details: “neoliberalism has made us see ourselves as competitors not collaborators, consumers not citizens, hoarders not sharers, takers not givers, [and] hustlers not helpers.” Hertz offers a compelling look at loneliness around the world and gleans insight into why we face this epidemic. Hertz’s solutions, though, rely heavily upon top-down solutions and her thesis overlooks competing explanations of the lonely century.

Hertz begins her book by presenting many stark stories that are emblematic of our lonely century. She breaks from traditional definitions of loneliness that focus on an absence of love, company, and intimacy. While those represent one half of loneliness, the other half, she argues, is feeling excluded politically and economically. She defines loneliness “as both an internal state and an existential one – personal, societal, economic, *and* political” (Hertz 2021, p. 11, emphasis original). This definition, Hertz argues, is in line with thinkers like Marx, Durkheim, Arendt, and Huxley, among others (Hertz 2021, p. 11).

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Her second chapter goes on to discuss how “Loneliness Kills” – it causes higher blood pressure, higher cholesterol, greater risk of heart disease, and other ill fates. Community, she argues, is the antidote. Hertz documents the Haredim community (an ultra-orthodox Jewish community) – who have unhealthy diets, little exercise, low amounts of sunshine, and are relatively poor – but have fantastic health outcomes relative to comparable communities. She presents evidence that it is the tight-knit community, who spend nearly all waking hours together praying, volunteering, and cooking, that makes the Haredim so healthy. The third chapter discusses how loneliness makes individuals more aggressive and less empathetic. Capitalism encourages a selfish, individualistic mentality that disregards tradition and community and often favors some groups above others, leading to marginalization of other groups. She argues that the rise of populism – especially right-wing populism – is a response to such loneliness and marginalization by the state.

The fourth chapter details the rise of the “solitary city” or the feeling of loneliness one often experiences in large cities, brought on by the self-reliance and ‘hustle’ culture encouraged by neoliberalism. The fifth chapter explores our newfound “contactless age” in which shopping, working, and even architecture are pushing people apart – a trend that the pandemic has escalated. Hertz’s sixth chapter describes the detrimental role cell phones have on society, particularly on children who grow up on screens before they can even walk or talk.

Her seventh chapter details the rise of office loneliness. 40% of office workers say they feel lonely at work, where lunches are taken in solitude and workplaces have less meetings and more emails. Her eighth chapter is a follow-up to her seventh. With a rise of an ‘always on’ work culture spurred by capitalism, “The Digital Whip,” or intelligent designed employer monitoring and hiring processes, alienate and dehumanize us. For instance, when a FedEx warehouse packer has an inflamed wrist, the metrics-manager she wears on her wrist tells her to pick up her pace, not to take a break.

Chapters eight and nine discuss robots, which are not only monitoring and replacing workers, but are also being used to replace human interaction. There are cuddle robots, sex robots, companionship robots, and more, all of which allow for individuals to further distance themselves from society. While she argues they can provide some benefits, they inevitably do more harm than good.

In chapter ten, Hertz focuses on the decline of local businesses that once fostered personal relationships between workers and customers. Now, ‘commercialized communities’, where individuals pretend to be together but really are just as apart as ever, are the norm. Hertz calls this “WeWashing” (akin to greenwashing) (Hertz 2021, p. 217). Think of WeWork spaces: many sit for hours with headphones on and limit themselves of any contact. Community can’t be bought; instead, it must be forged. But the incentives to forge community, she argues, have withered due to the ‘I’ not ‘we’ culture of neoliberalism.

In her final chapter, Hertz outlines how to combat the lonely century. She first argues for a “more cooperative form of capitalism” (Hertz 2021, p. 231) that isn’t rooted in free markets and deregulation. At minimum, governments must address inequality through greater access to welfare, social security, education, and health-care. She also calls for governments to tax robots and to create human-only jobs by building community spaces and green technology. Hertz argues that regulation must

prompt businesses to incorporate more inclusive practices and reign in big tech's "digital whip" norms. Hertz proposes that governments fund these improvements by placing the tax burden on the wealthiest individuals and corporations.

While government policy is one half of the picture, individual interactions are the other half. Individuals must consistently practice democracy and all that it demands, including civility, kindness, and tolerance (Hertz 2021, p. 239). Hertz's proposal rings notes of the Ostros' 'art and science of association' – and such an art is necessary to a well-functioning economy and society. This can happen in all sorts of community associations, whether it be the PTA or a church committee. We must also frequent local shops, organize book clubs, and avoid, in Putnam's words, bowling alone. Our local communities need to thrive to provide a sense of, well, community.

Hertz's argument deserves serious consideration. We would be wrong to deny that many individuals plug into their phones more often than not, and that digitized innovations, while timesaving and revolutionary, reduce face-to-face interactions. Especially in a post-COVID-19 world, we must consider how much we want to digitize and streamline our lives. As economists stress, *tradeoffs are everywhere*. Austrian economists should especially take Hertz's thesis seriously, as we place special emphasis on the fact that the market is a social process derived from the meanings its participants attach to it. With communities withdrawing from such spaces, there is cause for concern. I have written of the breakdown of commercial relationships during COVID-19 and find it to be a topic of utmost importance (see Storr et al., 2021).

That said, Hertz's solutions may rely too heavily upon government and her thesis might miss other phenomena causing loneliness. First, Hertz argues that certain values like kindness are not valued in a capitalist world because they are not efficient. A necessary inclusion to her argument, though, is that non-monetary criteria are valued by employers because they are valued by employees. It might be more efficient for companies to give more vacation days, paid paternity leave, and so forth, as employees demand it. She even discusses how Microsoft's Japan office ran an experiment giving employees several Fridays off work without pay decrease and gave them stipends for family vacations, which made the company 40% more productive, among other benefits (Hertz 2021, p. 149). If companies recognize these programs are beneficial, then perhaps enforcing them through regulation isn't a productive route, especially given that this would be detrimental to Hertz's goal of preserving mom-and-pop shops as they may be regulated out of the market. This isn't to say capitalism always selects upon desirable traits – Hertz's "Digital Whip" chapter should particularly concern us. That said, over time, the market tends to select upon criteria that employees – and ultimately, consumers – demand, as employers will have to pay a pecuniary penalty to indulge other preferences (Becker, 1957).

Relatedly, Hertz's reliance upon government solutions ignores knowledge and incentive problems. Hertz calls for a "New Deal"-esque policy to implement a more cooperative form of capitalism, but even if we assume benevolence, it is worth examining the unintended consequences. While there are likely immediate benefits from her policies, knowing what unintended consequences they may have is difficult, if not impossible (Ikeda, 2005). Dropping the benevolence assumption, the outlook for such a large plan becomes bleaker. Looking to the New Deal, Couch and Shughart (1998) explore a host of incentive problems leading to policies that were

“influenced more by presidential politics than by the plight of the unemployed millions.” We have good reason to be skeptical of such large proposals.

Last, we must examine the larger thesis at hand: are free-markets the cause of our lonely century? Hertz writes that separation from the state, due to rising deregulation and neoliberalism, is a large cause of loneliness. But it may be perhaps the opposite: that the state is too big, overtaking private life. She dismisses this thesis but doesn't address it head-on. Market systems are in fact linked to many benefits that are antithetical to loneliness – they create commercial friendships (Storr, 2008), and they make people more cosmopolitan (Storr & Choi, 2019). Globalization and technology expand our core discussion networks, leading to less isolation, not more (Cowen, 2002; Hampton et al., 2009). Relatedly, Hertz's work could benefit from engagement with Tocqueville, as Tocqueville believed a leading success of America was its vast array of civic associations and that a growing government could destroy such associations (Tocqueville, 2000 [1835], p. 489–492). It is worth considering that civic engagement didn't decay because of capitalism, but because of a growing state that has superseded the role of local organizations. Hertz calls for individuals to practice the art of democracy, but perhaps such practice withered due to the rise of a soft despotism (as Tocqueville names it), not due to a rise of neoliberalism.

Overall, I praise Hertz for her ability to handle the complex and multifaceted issue of loneliness in the twenty-first century. Although her work could benefit from engaging with competing hypotheses and concerns stemming from top-down solutions, I recommend her book to all who are worried about loneliness and seek to engage in the broader debate about markets and morality. Austrian economists specifically could benefit from reading her work, as there is cause for concern for what could happen to market spaces if communities truly are pulling apart.

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