Loneliness and the Crisis of Work

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Edited by Pritika Nehra

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

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This book first published 2021

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-5275-6912-8
ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-6912-6

CONTENTS

Part III. Concerns from the Pandemic

INTRODUCTION

PRITIKA NEHRA

Freud was once asked what he thought a normal person should be able to do well. He responded: "Lieben und arbeiten," which translates neatly into English as, "To love and to work."[1] This is the normalcy that is lost in the contemporary world. Following this loss/absence of the stability of work and that of love for the other, as the most intimate form of belonging among human beings, it is difficult to distinguish between social pathology (Loneliness) on the one hand and normalcy/social order on the other.

The volume is a collection of twelve articles that philosophically reflect on the new forms of structural domination, vulnerabilities, and alienation in the contemporary social relations of work. The essays are categorized under three sections: the first section presents theoretical perspectives on the theme, the second section includes essays on loneliness and the crisis of work with particular reference to a critique of capitalism, and the last section offers emerging concerns of loneliness and work under the global Covid pandemic.

Reflecting on what role the activities of work perform in human lives, it was Hannah Arendt, who linked work with the enterprise of world-building. Contrary to what Marx had hoped, one can also ask: is it possible to get rid of work in an ideal society? How does one understand the legitimacy of work? In the background of these concerns, the volume seeks to address the crisis of work/social labor and loneliness within contemporary capitalist work settings (Academia, corporations, etc.) to understand new modes of domination, vulnerabilities, exclusion, and meaninglessness in the present times. The essays present a socio-political and collective dimension of precarious work, unemployment, and loneliness which are often characterized as a matter of individual failure.

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[1] Qtd. in Elms, A.C (2001). 'Apocryphal Freud', *Annual of Psychoanalysis*, Vol. xxix, 2001: 9-10.

In the context of work, the term 'crisis' subsumes a broad range of issues spanning from economics to ethics. Therefore, 'Crisis' is used in a plural sense here, which is not seen as an economic dysfunction of the society *per se* but also as a 'lived crisis' within social, political, and cultural domains. Some of these lived experiences include the industry of precarious contractual positions, the speed-up culture of performance-oriented academia under the market forces, the digitalization of intellectual work through videos/power-point accumulations as a cookbook of the teaching pedagogy, the failed possibilities of any effective political resistance, the regulatory environment of constant surveillance through regular appraisals, intellectual bullying within the academic circles, lack of care, and the existential anxiety and dread. There is an inadequacy in addressing these lived experiences of the crisis within the existing discourse on the matter. Further, we find that popular descriptors of the problem like 'crisis' and 'social pathology' are redundant as they fail to motivate any actual social and political critique, once they acquire a social standing. Consequently, we refer to the terms 'crisis' and 'social pathology' with caution, since once we interpret our experiences as a crisis/pathology, we end up attributing a normative meaning to it.

In this volume, we deliberately deviate from the narrow understanding of loneliness as a mere social pathology. The main reason for this divergence is that the idea of pathology in a general sense implies a converse state of 'normalcy' or a state, where there is no need for a treatment for a specified problem. We approach Loneliness as a problem that is not discovered by the critic based on a utopian vision of future social health but in a degenerating social/political system that is already showing objective signs of dysfunction in the present. Through such an approach, we also intend to consider how to interpret loneliness as suffering coming out of a dehumanizing experience at workspaces and the causes thereof. Loneliness is thus characterized by the fact that it cannot be properly diagnosed or treated at the level of the individual. It is associated with what Adorno calls, cases of domination (*Beherrschung*), which he later extends to his analysis of politics and society. The key thrust of the volume is to examine how the contemporary work crisis and loneliness can be seen as inseparable from domination and vulnerabilities in the first place so that some transformation can be brought about in the discourse concerning these issues, which sideline any focus on these issues behind the veneer of stress management, psychiatric treatment, and counseling as the only form of available care.

The first section includes five chapters that present theoretical perspectives on the theme of loneliness and work. Pritika Nehra's paper sets the tone to

the volume in her explication of political concerns of loneliness by connecting loneliness and precarious work of the academic with intersubjectivity, freedom, and structural domination. Charles Djordjevic and Georgias Karakasis offer new perspectives on the conceptual understanding of work. Djordjevic suggests a task-oriented approach to work that connects the subjectivity of the worker with new ways of interacting with the world (tradition). He proposes an ethics of soul-craft in a deliberate creation and re-forming of the self to connect with others. Such a soul-craft is not easy but comes at the price of difficulty/hardship in the becoming and being of a person. Karakasis insists on integrating joy in work to avoid alienation of the worker from the activity of work and the product of work. He compares two different kinds of alienation in the works of Marx and Heidegger to further his point. The last two chapters in this section by Anton Rennesland and Navjot Kaur discuss the loneliness of the academic. Rennesland views the loneliness of the anonymous academic in an encouraging, positive light as paving a way to thinking in solitude, a divergence from capital's normalcy, a slowness contrary to capital's speed, and cultivation of emotions of rage. In contrast, Kaur views the loneliness of the academic as a negative response to capital-driven academic structures without having the necessary preparedness or self-enrichment to deal with it. She suggests an overall change in attitude and expectations concerning academic work to combat this situation.

Instead of a commonplace negative characterization of loneliness, Pritika Nehra's *The Political Concerns of Loneliness* posits loneliness as a response to intersubjectivity that underlines political considerations of belonging. She views that Solitude and loneliness emerge as affinities to the self through our encounter with an 'other.' Social or civil freedom from loneliness requires the presence of others who are trustworthy and non-dominating. This is further linked with political concerns of plurality and sameness. Drawing from Hannah Arendt, she elaborates that loneliness is a peculiarly dehumanizing experience in the paralyzing impact on the capacities of thinking, speech, and action. Her critique raises concerns about democracy at the workplace: 'to consider how unjust socio-political structures are bound to create social pathologies; how we respond to vulnerable others in the work settings and maintain exceptions about their silence and invisibility with impunity.' In the present times, when we are experiencing increasing concern about mental health issues and stress management at workplaces, we also find that the socio-political conditions that form the background for these pathologies take a back seat. We are continuously captivated by a picture of politics that on the one hand celebrates the voices of the vulnerable but on the other hand also

consistently undermines them and obscures their agency, which creates them in the first place. The negative experiences of suffering in an already degenerating socio-political system that contributes to our pathological social reality are kept at bay by making its victims invisible, lonely, and superfluous. Political equality allows everyone to express their differences in the public domain whereas the sameness of our biological make-up homogenizes us as humans having the same fundamental needs for survival. Loneliness also brings into question the dualism of the external world and the internal reality of human beings (subjectivity and the world) more sharply. It makes us think about our bodily embeddedness in the world. Nehra views that the importance of uncovering the political concerns of this suffering and making it visible lies in its potential to change our approach to loneliness at workplaces to resolve it.

In *Making things difficult: Work on/and soul-craft*, Charles Djordjevic explores a radically different conception of work and the human condition that purposefully imposes hardship on people. He views work as one of the 'precondition[s] for becoming and being a person within a specific community'. He discusses two different approaches to work: the activity view and the Task-oriented view of work. The activity view of work regards work as nothing more (or less) than the 'filling up' of Newtonian time with labor power for mere survival. This view of work becomes strangely 'a- or anti-social, something one does out of sheer necessity and, ergo, something that occludes intersubjectivity, freedom, and subject formation'. To avoid this, he suggests changing to the Task-Oriented approach to work. He argues that this view of work is a constitutive condition for forming a particular sort of community. Extrapolating from Kierkegaard and later Wittgenstein, he criticizes the idea that hard work is some sort of anathema to the human condition. He draws from Kierkegaard's conception of 'being a self and belonging to a community must involve a particular sort of temporalization–narration.' Narratives have a unique structure based not on homogenous chunks of time, but end-states, repetitions, and suffering. Narration work requires that the end-state that structures task-oriented work not be 'naturalized' but be adopted explicitly by the worker as her goal. It requires a willed repetition that guides work and 'presupposes both that the workers have a reflective understanding of the content of their work as well as a sense that they transcend the mere activities that constitute it'. He draws affinities from Foucault's thoughts on ethics as soul-craft, i.e., the deliberate creation and maintenance of a particular sort of self. And it is precisely this form of ethics that connects task-oriented work with subjectivity, tradition, and one's belonging to a unique kind of community. By tradition, Djordjevic implies not a grasp of dead propositions/dogmas but 'enacting

ways of interacting with the world'. Tradition secures a narrative understanding of time and 'is realized by repetition wherein an end-state is (re-)affirmed by a person as she constantly (re-)orders her activities in its terms.' He links his critique further with anthropological research into the 'Islamist' movement in Egypt, drawing from the work of Saba Mahmood and Talal Asad. He argues that lowering the price of admission or hardships may lead to loneliness. Task-oriented work relies not on the workers' ability to express themselves but on their constitutive ties to their tradition. One way to deal with the endemic sense of loneliness, and the pathologies it engenders, is precisely by willingly joining a task-oriented work community. A natural outcome of membership in task-oriented work communities is that these will inflict suffering as they re-form the self. But it is precisely this re-formulation that constitutively connects a person to others via tradition.

Georgios Karakasis' *Rediscovering Joy in Work*, insists on the necessity of reintegrating joy in labor. Drawing from Marx and Martin Heidegger, the chapter examines how workers in the modern capitalist society are alienated both from their product and from their productive activity. The worker is alienated from the product of his work because his work is now totally automatized and mechanized. The worker is also alienated from himself/herself as a worker, having lost the joy of work as the creation and the relationship with the creation. Karakasis suggests that the joy in labor and recovery of the connection to labor as creative activity can be found only through freedom and the will to treat nature and the product of labor as the reflection of the completion of self-consciousness. He concludes that the goal of the modern capitalist human being is to tame the world, make it bend to his rules, and make the whole world creation of the human beings image. Drawing a comparison between the two kinds of alienation (as discussed by Marx and Heidegger), He writes: 'While for Marx, the worker separates himself from the world due to the alienation taking place during and after the productive activity, according to Heidegger the modern capitalist human being, due to the limitless capacities offered to him by technology, separates himself from the world through his desire for utter domination and control. The beings no longer stand against us as the unsurmountable objects, as the enemy that has to be overcome, but now become mere resources and the entire world an enormous warehouse always ready-at-hand to satisfy our incessant needs and desires. Even the distinction between subject and object disappears in this vortex where everything, human being included, becomes resources and raw material; everything becomes "standing-reserve".'

Anton Rennesland's *Cynical Reason in the Academe* uncovers the academician's vulnerable condition through Peter Sloterdijk's critique of the Enlightenment project concerning the discontent with capital. He finds that in this peculiar (pseudo-)enlightenment, reason emerges as cynical, falling short of actual enlightenment and embracing false consciousness. The dictates of the capital and the neoliberal stronghold have commodified the university as "University of Excellence" concerning itself not with spaces of the enclosure but with specializations, services, and control. The academician has become *Anybody* (*Das Man*), tantamount to citations, published articles, and students' evaluations. Rennesland discusses this peculiar loneliness of the academician under this veil of anonymity. He views that becoming-*Anyone* disburdens us of the more serious questions of life. Existentially, it eradicates identity and uniqueness, and in theory, leaves each alone to fend for herself. He reflects on our cynically blind religious dedication to Capital's language. The system reinforces itself by providing the same images and expressions that numb consciousness: 'It prompts a paranoia in each to outdo the other, to be cunning in playing the rigged game because without enough performance one is easily replaced.' What matters in the University of Excellence is not how hard the academician plays Capital's game but her behavior in playing. In face of Capital's dominating language, the academician vexes between the fear of non-compliance and dedication to one's discipline. A consequence of this obedience is that we experience alienating assimilation by growing nearly identical to each other with the same dreams, goals, and even causes of suffering.

Rennesland nudges us to reconsider the academician's loneliness from a mere existential offshoot to her magnifying lens when engaging with society: 'This magnifying lens affords her a seriousness not at what Capital provides, but ironically a seriousness of not taking things too seriously, a humor that releases us from our emotional comfort zones and affords us a shift to another plane, a cultivation not of diffused emotions but rage within this novel economy of garrulous discontent and resentment'. Loneliness as a divergence ought to be reckoned as a reminder of nature lost. It provides silence amidst Capital's commotion and a release from *Anyone*'s tyrannical overabundance. Paving a way for the positive potential of loneliness, Rennesland writes that from this lonely state, one realizes how thinking is at work in solitude. Isolation stands as a stimulus of thought, a slowness in contrary to Capital's speed. The authenticity of the cynic thus is the divergence from Capital's normalcy, and the academician's loneliness is not just a divergence but is in itself the difference, the opportunity to traverse to other planes for a reassertion of critical thought.

In *On the peculiar nature of work crisis in Academia*, Navjot Kaur attributes capitalism as the reason for the precipitation of a crisis in Academy. She finds that there is a shift in the perception of the nature of intellectual work from Aristotelian *praxis* to *poiesis*, which is contrary to the very essence of academic engagement and fosters loneliness. She views that the recognition of loneliness as a task of inwardness. She finds that in most cases the individual is responding in some or the other manner to the felt deficiency without actually having the necessary personal preparedness to deal with it. The preparedness to deal with it comes from 'the constant endeavor by an individual to enrich oneself, of developing one's creative faculties which allow his smooth transition into a thinking being'. Unable to find solace in one's response to the onslaught of affections the nature of which is not clear to oneself, one becomes a victim of the structures of manipulation working to keep one ignorant and passive.

Loneliness is a genuine response of an individual to the manipulative structures. It signifies one's discontentment with the affairs around. She draws from Berdyaev on the sad state of affairs of an academic environment where a genuine attitude of contemplation finds no appreciation. She proposes a change in attitude and expectations from the overall work, nature, and environment of the University to a change in the understanding and execution of academic work from what is in Aristotle *praxis* to *poiesis* form of activity. In the pressures of performance appraisals, the time and peace required for the roots of knowledge to grow are lost. The ad-hoc nature of teaching appointments has made the University an avenue for the exchange of benefits and mutual adjustments. Besides, she views that the protestant work ethic which feeds capitalism creates a fundamental discrepancy between the genuine expression of the self and the work culture. Work as a refinement of one's self, as one's constant endeavor at self-beautification is lost in the urgencies of the capital-driven academic structures.

The second section includes three essays that discuss loneliness and the crisis of work under capitalism in different contexts. Jedan Christoph's study on responsible capitalism demonstrates how large-scale and unrecognized loneliness is collectively produced by an invisible frame that structures work under capitalism. Cristopher Morales Bonilla focuses on the crisis of minimum wage labor under capitalism. He suggests transforming hierarchical jobs under capitalism to deal with this crisis. Irene Ortiz finds that considering precarious employment under capitalism as a matter of individual choice or personal failure is a fallacy. Highlighting the collective dimension of socio-political processes of discrimination, technological

changes under capitalism, and globalization in creating unemployment, she offers hope in collective action and solidarity of the vulnerable groups.

Jedan Christoph's *The Invisible Frame* analyses 'the nexus of loneliness and work in the context of today's 'responsible capitalism' in an empirical-philosophical way. The study combines conceptual insights and interview data conducted with 'Ellen,' HR manager in a multinational energy company. Acknowledging that loneliness is not an inexorable ingredient of the human condition, through the study he argues the point, how loneliness is collectively produced 'by the ways in which we allow work to be organised'. The study shows the numerous instances of the darker side of work. Christoph finds that the employee-facing side of 'responsible capitalism' is the combination of two potent ideologies, neoliberalism and the human potential movement in management studies. Combined, they provide a 'frame' that structures policies, programs and perceptions, yet—and this is crucial—without the individual even noticing this. This frame is 'invisible to all intents and purposes yet it informs the thinking of participants to an astonishing degree.

The uncertainty of employment turns every worker into a hunter for possibilities and chances. Those who cannot keep up, become the prey. However, life as a hunter does not produce meaning and no occasion for reflection and sense. Drawing from Zygmunt Bauman's analysis of work and loneliness, he finds an odd mixture of acute observations and a disturbing undertone of quiet resignation in the present. Such large-scale and largely unrecognized loneliness forms the backdrop to a vast variety of practices around us today. Towards a more specific analysis, Christoph asks: 'Which ideological constructs inform the structure of modern work to produce this omnipresent loneliness?'

In *Cooperatives, Mental Health and The Critique of Wage Labor*, Cristopher Morales Bonilla discusses the crisis of wage labor as a social phenomenon that manifests itself in many ways. Its main characteristic is the destruction of the equivalence between work and survival, that is, the possibility that a worker can have a job but cannot guarantee the minimum necessary to have a decent life. However, this is not the only feature of the crisis of wage labor. It is also shown in the emergence of numerous mental illnesses associated with wage-earning activity itself. Depression, anxiety, sleep disorders, etc., have become some of the most notable consequences of the new ways in which work is managed. Bonilla raises concerns over the key issue: How can we solve such a crisis? He finds that the transformation of many hierarchically organized jobs into cooperatives is

proving, in many experiments throughout the world, to be a way of reducing the occurrence of such mental illnesses.

The bare life of the unemployed by Irene Ortiz analyses the mechanisms through which people are forced into unemployment and loneliness in societies that tend to prioritize social recognition through wages and the type of work. She discusses the example of social movements that try to revoke the situation of loneliness and ostracism through collective mobilization and the resignification of precariousness. The case insight is the transformation brought about by the platform, People Affected by Mortgages, *PAH* in Spain in changing people from victims to activists and offering them roots and belonging. She also insists on not forgetting the important role that the capitalist system plays in the tacit condemnation of precarious people. Ortiz recommends that any claim that views the most precarious people, with worse working conditions and lower wages as a matter of individual choice is a fallacy that we must denounce.

There is no freedom of choice when the option is to choose between working under the conditions set by the employer and not being able to pay the rent for your accommodation. In this sense, Ortiz finds that it is important to recognize the abyss that separates her reading of the unemployed from that which only underlines the meritocratic system, where wealth is the result of effort. She finds that free choice is a chimera in an already degrading system, where what is presented is the imposition of working to survive. The absence of work, especially if an unemployment benefit is being collected, is understood as an individual failure. The responsibility, therefore, falls on the unemployed person, who not only has economic problems but also lacks social recognition. Thus, we avoid thinking about the labor market, the work system, and, ultimately, the economic system. Ortiz finds that it is not only a situation of economic precariousness but also an emotional one. Therefore, 'not only is the debate on unemployment monopolized by different types of expert and excludes the unemployed themselves, but in addition, the media broadcast strongly stigmatizing material about the jobless, concentrating on the responsibilities of the individuals themselves and not on the profound changes suffered by the country in a very short space of time.' She views that any attempts to analyze the unemployment situation without considering technological changes within the capitalist system, as well as the impact of globalization, as an error. In this way, the process of depersonalization of those excluded from the world of work has consequences on their psyche and on the way, they connect with their environment. Precisely due to the processes of discrimination, stigmatization, and depersonalization suffered by unemployed

people, Ortiz invests in their potential for collective action and solidarity in restoring their dignity as a group that has been unjustly mistreated.

The last section includes four chapters on various concerns on the theme of work and loneliness in the context of the pandemic. Somyabrata Chowdhury discusses the concern of the subjectivity of migrants workers, both in their bodily life and in their reflective consciousness. With particular reference to Work from Home during the pandemic, Joseph Arel examines the relationship between alienated labor and home. Loneliness experienced during such a scenario invokes revolt and resistance against being separated from a genuine connection with the others and to the self. Tyler L. Jaynes discusses the legal concerns of labor performed by AIS (Artificial Intelligence Systems) concerning labor market expectations of patients with AIS-dependent bionics in the context of the pandemic. Thomas Spiegel takes up the concern of the digitally enabled parasocial relations that claim to curb loneliness. He finds it as an unfulfillable promise and rather cautions us against them in that parasocial relations may be conducive to the rise of totalitarianism.

Somyabrata Chowdhury's *Migration and Subjectivity* analyses the historical conditions of migration concerning its changing function in economic and social theory from the end of the 19th century to the present. He suggests a new political understanding of migratory subjectivity in terms of collective desire and emancipation instead of the purely historical determination of the migrant. He begins by analyzing the historical circumstances under which the physical movement of the migration takes place and then, presents the structural amplitude or range that supports the physical movement of migrants with the circumstances in which they take place. He finds that the most obvious example of such structural amplitude is the development of the global circuits of capitalism in at least the last hundred years that have led to both emergent patterns of the migration of labor and accelerated intensity of the very idea of migration. Chowdhury's analysis raises concerns over the modes of being of the migrant's existence both in its bodily life and in its reflective consciousness. He raises key questions about the migrant's subjectivity: 'Does the migrant consent to the larger logic of history that produces her migratory experience? Or even more directly and obscurely, what does the migrant want? Suppose one were to imagine that having gone through the historical and physical experience of migration the so called migratory subject that is the migrant refuses this experience…what form of subjectivity would correspond to this refusal?' He foresees that we might quickly put forward the hypothesis that this refusal marks the threshold of a political possibility. He views that this possibility can only

arise from a passionate and difficult traversal of the historical and structural conditions of migrant's existence but it arises also as a certain intellectual refusal of the very conceptual terms of migration commonly used to describe the experience of migration.

He does not prescribe a political "solution" to the problem of migration but hopes to get a little closer to the 'real of history' that makes it possible to both de-familiarise ourselves to the so-called natural conditions of migration and also allows us to think of the minimal existential counter-conditions for a politics released from the dogma or fetish of migration imposed by capitalism today.

Joseph Arel's paper assesses the relationship between alienated labor and the home with particular reference to a world in which working from home is the norm. Unlike workspaces, home secures for us privacy of space and time. In the vicinity of one's own home, one can live as one desires, creatively or even as strangely as one wishes. He views that through the home, we retain the possibility and at times the reality of a measure of freedom made possible by having our own space, a place where we can shut the door and separate ourselves from work. This may change, however, in a world where working from home is increasingly the norm. Drawing from Marx, Arel writes that although our time away from work is where feeling at home is possible, the nature of alienated labor has made it difficult to feel at home. Work from home presents the possibility of a more totalizing form of alienation. When the ability to distinguish between the time at work and time away from work becomes vague, the integration of work into time off work is made more complete. Arel infers that 'If our time at work is alienated, and if we begin to feel as though we are always at work, then all of our time is alienated'. This implies an omnipresence of the office. All spaces are public spaces with the demands that this puts on us. The freedom of home becomes less and less a possibility. The private space of home becomes public through the surveillance of the camera or microphone, or even simply the requirement that all space available becomes workspace.

Besides, Arel cites a further form of dissociation found in our ability to relate to or understand the meaning of what we are doing. It refers to the inability to achieve some degree of mutual recognition since intimacy requires the active participation of the self and others. Arel elaborates: 'If I am alienated in my home, and this alienation seems to run around the clock, there will be no time where I am my self. This means that I will lose touch with myself, finding only an alienated self or, as Marx says, I will 'feel free only in my animal functions.' Following an intersubjective understanding

of selfhood, Arel argues that, far from showing a particular weakness of ourselves as individuals, loneliness testifies to our nature as fundamentally a being-with-others. From out of the alienation of our labor, exaggerated by much of the WFH labor, comes a revolting signal from our nature. On a positive note, he views that the loneliness experienced urges resistance against being torn apart from a genuine connection to others and, as a result, to ourselves.

From Specialized to Hyper-Specialized Labour by Tyler L. Jaynes focuses on the legality of labor performed by artificial intelligence systems (AIS), and concerns for the labor market expectations of patients with AIS-dependent bionics. He argues for a legal distinction between augmented human groups and AIS to protect the computer, human, and laborer' interests in this realm. With the transition of the pandemic-gripped labour market *en masse* to remote capabilities to avert from national or international economic meltdowns, a concern arises that many job seekers simply cannot fit into the new roles being developed and implemented. Beyond the loss of on-site work, the market is unable to reverse the loss of many roles that are, and have been, taken over by artificial (computer) intelligence systems (CIS). The "business-as-usual" mentality that many have come to associate with pre-pandemic life supposedly took these losses into account, much to various societies' detriment during this international crisis. And unlike at the turn of the millennium, the market has come to realize that it cannot function without advanced CIS. Arguments can be made that humanity's currently most sophisticated CIS come nowhere near replicating the nuances that would prompt one to classify the system as being "human-like," and that they will remain this way for the foreseeable future. Jaynes argues what is conveniently ignored in this assessment is how not even three generations have passed since computer systems became an integral aspect of daily life. While the loss of work for humans as a result of this advancement of technology may not immediately reach concerning levels, it still raises concerns for how society should react to a lack of non-specialized work and the value of "humanness" in the labor market whether nationally or internationally. Jaynes's work intends to explore these concepts and provide anticipatory guidance on how humanity should adapt to post-pandemic life.

Underlying these transformations is the endless struggle to balance between repetitive functions that can be entrusted to a human and the ceaseless progression of artificial (or computer) intelligence systems to take these tasks either partially or entirely out of human hands.

Thomas J. Spiegel's chapter *Parasocial Relations, Loneliness, and Alienation in Digital Technologies,* takes up the question of parasocial relations, namely, What truly are parasocial relationships? How do they differ from regular interactions on a deeper level? What is the social ontology of parasocial relationships? Spiegel views loneliness as a secondary, yet fundamental existential condition of being human that consists in the absence of the second person. Trivially, loneliness is problematic in many different ways. Parasocial relations promise to curb loneliness through connecting people digitally to (re-)introduce the second person. Modern parasocial relationships are those which are qualitatively different in important aspects that are closely connected to the kind of lopsided interactivity and reciprocity enabled by internet-powered mass media, specifically influencer culture of Instagram or TikTok and interactive video and streaming services like YouTube and Twitch.

Drawing on the work of Martin Buber and Edith Stein, Spiegel argues that parasocial relationships of the kind enabled by contemporary social media technologies do not qualify as relationships of the kind which would be able to dissipate loneliness. This is because they do not feature the second person at all. He writes: 'The specific mode of interactive engagement, while pretending to traverse the 'gulf' between the first and the second person, serves to mask this fundamental disconnect – a disconnect which is not present in genuine I-Thou relationships.' They offer merely an unfulfillable promise of companionship in an increasingly atomized social world. The article closes by pointing towards the connection between loneliness and totalitarianism famously posited by Hannah Arendt to the effect that parasocial relationships, rather than combatting loneliness, might be conducive to the rise of totalitarianism.

PART I.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

THE POLITICAL CONCERNS OF LONELINESS

PRITIKA NEHRA

> ‘No man is an island,
> Entire of itself,
> Every man is a piece of Continent,
> A part of the main.’
> —John Donne[1]

> ‘You'd be surprised how quickly the mind goes soggy in the absence of other people. One person alone is not a full person. We exist in relation to others. I was one person: I risked becoming no person.’
> —Margaret Atwood[2]

> ‘It isn't running away they're afraid of. We wouldn't get far. It’s those other escapes, the ones that you can open in yourself, given a cutting edge.’
> —Margaret Atwood[3]

Loneliness brings into question the dualism of the external world and the internal reality of human beings (subjectivity and the world) more sharply. It makes us think about our bodily embeddedness in the world. Loneliness is not merely a subjective response but more importantly, it is a response to the intersubjectivity of the world. Through the lens of Hannah Arendt’s views, first I develop a phenomenology of various lonely states viz., isolation, solitude, loneliness, superfluousness, and virtuality to demarcate them from each other. Then, I proceed to establish how each of them connect with intersubjectivity within a common, shared world and the political conse-

[1] Donne, John (1624). ‘Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions, Meditations XVII’ in *Donne's Devotions*. Cambridge University Press: 98.
[2] Atwood, Margaret (2020). *The Testaments*. Vintage: 132.
[3] Atwood, Margaret (1996). *The Handmaid's Tale*. Vintage: 18.

quences of experiencing these states of loneliness. Instead of a negative characterization of loneliness as a subjective emotion of lack/absence/loss[4], I propose to view loneliness as a response to the intersubjectivity of the human world which calls for political considerations. Instead of approaching the subjectivity and the world as separate, I consider both the internal human experience and the external socio-political world as connected. The experience of the other plays an important role in not just loneliness but all experiences of the ego. It is important to know what triggers the rupture or gap that dislocates the ego from itself ('the two-in-one') in case of loneliness. What makes loneliness a dehumanizing experience is its impact on the capacities of thinking, speech, and action. The critique also raises concerns about democracy at the workplace: to consider how unjust socio-political structures are bound to create social pathologies; how we respond to vulnerable others in the work settings and maintain exceptions about their silence and invisibility with impunity. In the present times, when we are experiencing increasing concern about mental health issues and stress management at workplaces, we also find that the socio-political conditions that form the background for these pathologies take a back seat. We are continuously captivated by a picture of politics that on the one hand celebrates the voices of the vulnerable but on the other hand also consistently undermines them and obscures their agency, which creates them in the first place. The negative experiences of suffering in an already degenerating socio-political system that contribute to our pathological social reality are kept at bay by making its victims invisible, lonely, and superfluous. The importance of uncovering the political concerns of this suffering and making it visible lies in its potential to change our approach to social pathology.

1. Solitude, Loneliness, Superfluousness, Isolation, and Virtuality

Solitude (*Einsamkeit)* and loneliness (*Vereinsamung)* are concerned with the experience of intersubjectivity, i.e., how to *inter-act* with other human beings. Loneliness as a phenomenon emerges whenever there is a lack/absence of a tangible common world and connectedness. It is the nearness to others that is lost in loneliness. However, it is not enough to say that loneliness is merely the absence of a common social world and inter-connected-

[4] This approach is common among psychologists. Recently, loneliness as an emotional condition of absence has been proposed by Roberts, T. and Krueger, J. (2021), Loneliness and the Emotional Experience of Absence. *South J Philos*. https://doi.org/10.1111/sjp.12387

ness and that it can be understood in negative terms only. Instead of a negative characterization of loneliness as a lack/absence/loss, I posit an understanding of loneliness as a response to the intersubjectivity of the human world. Such an understanding has important implications in our understanding of political freedom and democracy concerning situations of exclusion from the socio-political spaces and domination as freedom's other. The tangible common world and interconnectedness are not merely some desired material 'social goods'[5] or subjective psychological needs that can be externally refilled as a cure to loneliness but they express a relationship to the human socio-political world. The condition of absence of a common social world and intersubjectivity is a political question in the sense that it relates to the concerns of freedom, belonging and equality, i.e., an absence of considering another person as an equal fellow human or even a complete human being (as in case of slaves in the ancient times and stateless people); of abandoning her/him from the space of listening and caring. How does everyone in society become unavailable or absent for the lonely? How does the lonely become invisible to others? Although, the other people are still around, and yet they cease to mean in any relationship to the lonely person or one ceases to belong to the world? One is lonely when the important others are not present for any real meaningful conversations leading to a lack of belongingness required to participate in a common world[6].

Loneliness always refers to a sphere of social intercourse, wherein one is deserted by all human companionship ('abandoned by everything and everybody') whereas isolation refers to reaching an impasse, when the political sphere of a person's life is destroyed. One can be isolated and lonely without being alone. Isolation renders one impotent for collective action, that constitutes one's political agency. It happens during tyrannies when 'human capacities for action and power are frustrated' (Arendt 1994, 474). One can also be isolated and alone but not lonely, i.e., despite the inability to act collectively, one can still act on one's own and create new objects for consumption by the human world. Isolation marks the impotency to act collectively but one can still act individually. Isolated people are powerless by definition. Although the political contacts are broken, yet all contacts are not severed. The sphere of private life and the capacities for experience,

[5] For example, Roberts, T. and Krueger, J. (2021) in their paper 'Loneliness and the Emotional Experience of Absence.' *South J Philos* write that one of their aims in the paper is 'to highlighting the range and depth of the social goods that may be experienced as absent in this complex emotion'.

[6] How do conversations cease to be meaningful? I shall take up this concern further in the section 4 on conversations with the lonely.

fabrication (work), and thought are left intact. However, isolation in the form of labor[7] disables the presence of others as it disallows even a common material world of objects. This kind of isolation in the form of labor paves the way for loneliness.

In the state of loneliness, one can neither act collectively nor alone. It is the state of uprootedness that is a harbinger of superfluousness, a state of having no place/belongingness in the world[8]. There is no common shared world with anyone, marked by a loss of sense of time and place or any society or hope of being visible/heard by others. Superfluity is the limit condition under which no form of politics is possible as the agency of the superfluous is obscured in the political sphere. It marks a relation of abandonment and how domination is fluidly connected with the social spaces by rendering the superfluous and lonely to invisibility and nakedness of bare life. Loneliness, a social pathology is associated with domination in that it underlines that there is something wrong in the socio-political domain of intersubjectivity. Loneliness alters our reality into a spacelessness and atemporal existence in the experience of the present moment ('now'). It is a breaking up of the lifeworld as a means to illuminate our concrete existence in going beyond the 'idle talk'.

Solitude requires being alone, in the sense of absolute independence. However, loneliness 'shows itself most sharply in company with others' (Arendt, 1994, 476). Solitude opens up doors to thinking dialogue with oneself while still being connected with the human world of others through an imagined community. But it is not the same as isolation, which is the fertile ground for killing solitude. Isolation kills the social connection with other humans when one is not able to see one's reflection in the eyes of others[9]. Solitude is something to be sought but it shouldn't always be found because solitude

[7] Arendt defines labor as an activity done for preserving biological necessities for self-preservation. Labor is also ascribed to slaves in ancient times. (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 7, 83-84)

[8] In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt writes: "To be uprooted means to have no place in the world, recognized and guaranteed by others; to be superfluous means not to belong to the world at all. Uprootedness can be the preliminary condition for superfluousness, just as isolation can (but must not) be the preliminary condition for loneliness. Taken in itself, with our consideration of its recent historical causes and its new role in politics, loneliness is at the same time contrary to the basic requirements of the human condition *and* one of the fundamental experiences of every human life." (475)

[9] However, one can also be physically isolated and socially connected as in the case of the present covid-19 pandemic globally.

can also become loneliness. This happens when all by oneself one is abandoned by one's self. In loneliness, the self disappears and one ceases to be. While the self is intact in solitude and engages in thinking dialogue with oneself; in loneliness, the self disappears due to the lack of affirmation by others, who are equal and trustworthy and one ceases to trust one's thoughts. It brings anxiety and fear. In response to the question of how to *inter-act* with others, solitude seeks a way inwards by engaging with the world through thinking, loneliness seeks a way outwards through collective action/agency which is denied to it. Both are a response to the plurality of the shared human world. Organized loneliness is more lethal than the unorganized impotence of those who are ruled by tyrannical forces.

Virtuality is the disembodied, technological space of mere appearance. A virtual presence/absence creates fragments/manifolds of assembled identities without any wholistic view. Virtuality also creates a specific kind of identity which is non-haptic and disembodied.

These experiences of fragmented temporalities and intersubjective distancing impact the political existence of human beings in a shared common world. Solitude and isolation screen out any external collective action. Loneliness limits the possibility of any individual or collective action. The horizon of possibilities of virtually distanced, disembodied collective and individual actions is also curtailed in being open to manipulations within the digital space of technology and thereby, lacking any space in the real world. These experiences of loneliness/isolation/superfluity/solitude/virtuality result in framing a new form of limited or no political existence in the human world concerning a curtailed intersubjectivity.

2. Loneliness and Intersubjectivity

In an ontological sense, human beings exist in a relationship with the world. In this sense, Solitude and loneliness are varied forms of existence in the world. Although, we no longer live in Arendt's description of 20th-century totalitarian crisis, the historical ground for fragmentation and atomization of the society, yet we find that the world is increasingly inhabited by large populations of lonely, isolated, solitary humans that remain invisible to one another in their full humanity. Solitude and loneliness emerge as our affinities to the self through our encounter with an other (either a radically different 'other' that invokes solitude or an 'other' who is same enough to abandon the ego to loneliness). It would be a mistake to infer that since loneliness is a subjective experience, intersubjectivity or the connection

with others is inessential to it. The experience of the other plays an important role in not just loneliness but all experiences of the ego. It is important to know what triggers the rupture or gap that dislocates the ego from itself (the two-in-one) in case of loneliness.

Loneliness is not just social alienation but also a self-alienation, namely, that we no longer belong to ourselves too. It is symptomatic of a feeling of no longer belonging to the world and that there is no place for the lonely on the face of the Earth. It leads to a loss of trust in oneself and a loss of confidence in the world. An easy way to avoid the domination of the exclusionary forces acting on the lonely is to find solace within when no place in the world is available to you but freedom from loneliness cannot be achieved either in isolation or solitude. Social or civil freedom from loneliness requires the presence of others who are trustworthy and non-dominating[10]. For a way-out of solitude, the internal two-in-one dialogue needs to stop for which one needs the other for the 'two-in-one' to become one again, i.e., one unchangeable individual whose identity can never be mistaken for that of any other.[11] (Arendt 1994, 476) It happens when the outside world intrudes upon our thinking and curtails the ongoing flow of thought. Loneliness emerges only when one is confronted with an other, who is just like the ego that leaves the ego unchanged. Adrian Costache explains it in very lucid terms:

> "… solitude and loneliness ought to be defined as a rapport to oneself through an other. Such a rapport becomes solitude when the other encountered is a radical alterity displacing the ego from the self and subjecting it to a complete transformation (This also explains why solitude is sought after and always takes the form of a re-collection.) And it takes the form of loneliness when the other encountered by the ego is just an other like the self, an other which leaves the ego completely unchanged even though it introduces a gap within itself. In solitude one becomes two-in-one through a third while in loneliness one encounters a same and is multiplied three times. According to this logic being neither alone, nor lonely means arriving through a third person not to a two-in-one or a multiple of one but straightforwardly to a

[10] In *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government*, Philip Pettit views social or civil freedom as "the status associated with living among other people, none of whom dominates you" (Pettit 1997, 66)

[11] In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* Arendt writes: "For the confirmation of my identity I depend entirely upon other people; and it is the great saving grace of companionship for solitary men that it makes them 'whole' again, saves them from the dialogue of thought in which one remains always equivocal, restores the identity which makes them speak with the single voice of one unexchangeable person." (Arendt 1994, 476)

> two. Being neither alone, nor lonely means arriving to a two through a third." (Costache 2013, 138)

Arendt makes a distinction between equality and sameness. While equality is a political concept that refers to a normative ideal, sameness implies the similarity of the natural givenness of our biology as human beings. Equality is an artificially agreed-upon political notion. Since humans are different from each other in their social, cultural, economic circumstances, we agree politically to allow everyone the treatment of equality in the public sphere and equality before the law. Political equality allows everyone to express their differences in the public domain whereas the sameness of our biological make-up homogenizes us as humans having the same fundamental needs for survival. In this sense, equality is not opposed to difference but it opposes sameness. Reducing the political space of human affairs to the sameness of life of bare necessities (i.e., the life of *animal laborans*) is extremely dangerous as it extinguishes the space for all differences and plurality and thereby, creates the experience of loneliness.

3. Thinking alone

In face of the lack of intersubjectivity, the most affected faculty is that of thinking[12]. We enter alien modes of speech and thought, where there is no common ground for understanding with others and self-understanding. But does loneliness lead to thoughtlessness?[13] The answer to this question lies in the fact that in loneliness we trade our capacity to think for rhetorical and performative speech that barricades any thought. This inability 'to stop and think' (Arendt 1978, 4) while immersed in loneliness further frustrates all communication with others. Since there are no strong forces of habit, tradition, common sense, or religion that can bring people together into a fold of any sort of belonging in the present times, there is an increasing yearning

[12] Arendt writes, "The only capacity of the human mind which needs neither the self not the other nor the world in order to function safely and which is as independent of experience aa it is of thinking is the ability of logical reasoning whose premise of the self-evident. The elementary rules of cogent evidence, the truism that two and two equals four cannot be perverted even under the conditions of absolute loneliness. It is the only reliable "truth" human beings can fall back upon once they have lost the mutual guarantee, the common sense, men need in order to experience and live and know their way in a common world." (*The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 1994, 477)

[13] Martin Shuster takes up this question in his article 'Language and Loneliness: Arendt, Cavell, and Modernity' *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* Vol. 20(4), 2012: 473–497.

for a home and belonging among the rootless and lonely people. Any opportunity of membership into any form of a community (even if that involves obeying a certain norm and a logical set of operations) is irresistible for the lonely because it gives a temporary meaning to her/his life. In the absence of intersubjectivity and plurality of our socio-political world, the internal dialogue that one has within the self is the last trace of company. This internal two-in-one dialogue is also the space of solitude in which thinking takes place[14]. It is a secure, private space where active thinking is possible. Often, we seek such solitude in crucial moments in life as this inward journey offers opportunities for discoveries of resources and avenues within us[15] But this internal dialogue after the withdrawal from the socio-political world does not offer any salvation for the lonely. This is because there is an added dimension of suffering along with solitude in the case of loneliness. Thinking under conformism and pressure changes its outcome. One must also note that thinking is not the same as rationalizing. Arendt describes thinking as 'a kind of action' which arouses us to kick out of the clutches of mass conformism[16]. It is the force of thinking that draws us out of dark times to act when everyone else is swept away unthinkingly. However, standing apart from the crowd does not imply standing alone as thinking is brought to fulfillment only when one enters the public space for action. Without a free space for speaking, questioning, and answering others, thinking ceases to flourish. Thinking is reduced to a set of logical operations for the lonely. Although one can deliver oneself out of the thoughtlessness of loneliness by the sheer ability to replace it with the illuminating thoughtfulness of solitude, it is not a solution to loneliness as it calls for the presence of others who are equal. In loneliness, both the ability to recognize the plurality of the self within and the plurality of the others in the world are lost simultaneously.[17]

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[14] Arendt writes that thinking originates in 'absolute solitude' (Arendt 2005, 20-21). Yet, she is skeptical of any thinking that takes place outside the world (any transcendental space or a view from nowhere as they are unavailable to human beings). Although thinking demands separation from the affairs of the world, yet it is always about the talkative and contested spaces of our human world.

[15] Arendt quotes Cato in *Questions on Moral Philosophy* to emphasize this active solitude: "Never am I more active than when I do nothing, never am I less alone than when I am by myself" (Arendt 2003, 99)

[16] "When everybody is swept away unthinkingly by what everybody else does and believes in, those who think are drawn out of hiding because their refusal to join in is conspicuous and thereby becomes a kind of action." (Arendt 1978, 192)

[17] In the words of Arendt, 'Self and world, capacity for thought and experience are lost at the same time' (Arendt 1994, 477).

4. Conversations with the Lonely

All our experiences of the world are mediated through linguistic speech and gestures, signs, symbols which too can be interpreted linguistically. Arendt emphasizes the importance of speech in humanizing the world: 'we humanize what is going on in the world and in ourselves only by speaking of it, and in the course of speaking of it we learn to be human.' (Arendt 1995, 25) Speech also concerns the ethical struggles of our life when we try to express ourselves in dark situations where language alienates our experiences off the world. To be impoverished of others also makes us lose our voice and having nothing to say.

Arendt had the stateless person in mind while discussing loneliness. She also mentions the slave in ancient times in this context. Drawing a comparison between the stateless person with the slave, she is of the view that the slave is still exploitable and useful to others for various reasons of labor and work and has some rights (for example, the master cannot kill the slave but nobody will ask questions about the murder of a stateless person), which are completely denied to the stateless person. In the context of precarious work as the contemporary analog to slavery, the position of speech is reserved only for the authority figures while the jobholders need to understand only orders and not speak as any such speech is automatically registered as defiance. They can only make noise or revolt (akin to an *animal laborans*) but the capacity for speech is reserved only for the authority in control. It is a problem of not acknowledging the speech of the other and not considering them as a complete human. The lonely are often speechless for this reason. This idea of leaving the essence of being human (as capable of thinking, speech/*zōon logon ekhon*, and action/*zōon politikon*) untouched, impinges on their human dignity making them superfluous. It is dehumanizing and tyrannical to not allow any political action from individuals.

Speech is not mere talk or content of the conversation but it is the pleasure in the person that makes a conversation meaningful. That is why many people become unavailable for conversations with the lonely because they cease to have respect or trust in them. They no longer stand unto their words. It is hard to take advice from a hypocrite or share your thoughts with someone who makes you feel insignificant or who is snotty enough to think of themselves as all-knowing. The tone of such conversations also implies considering oneself as educating another, of knowing better or being better than the other, which sounds like a play for emphasizing power. Such conversa-