

# **A World on Edge**

**W**e know it is time to wake up. The planet is growing feverish, with scientists predicting disastrous consequences if we cannot curb the increase in global temperature. Poisoned air kills millions of people every year. Extinction rates are accelerating. Our oceans are rising, acidifying and swirling with garbage, their fish so overrun with plastic it ends up on our dinner tables and in our bloodstreams.

In 2019 Greta Thunberg addressed world leaders at the UN Climate Action Summit. There were amused murmurings from the crowd as the petite 16-year-old began to speak, but the tone in the room quickly grew sober. “We are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!” Thunberg accused. “You say you hear us and that you understand the urgency . . . How dare you pretend that this can be solved with just ‘business as usual’ and some technical solutions? . . . The world is waking up. And change is coming, whether you like it or not.”<sup>1</sup>

Yet change is slow to arrive. People are increasingly conscious of the existential threats Thunberg described, but we can’t seem to get a handle on it. For example, roughly 70% of those surveyed by Yale and George Mason Universities in 2019 agreed that global warming

was happening, were worried about it, and described it as personally important, with the youngest respondents reporting the greatest concern. A far smaller number of people, however, were willing to donate money, volunteer, or contact government officials about the issue. Only about 10% said they had taken action.<sup>2</sup>

From time to time the world's attention is captured by a clarion call to "wake up," as in Thunberg's address, and we're shaken from the trance of the status quo. But the sense of urgency always dissipates. There is a familiar wave of alarm and excitement that crests into entertainment, meme-making, then dips toward banality and boredom. The wake-up call recedes from consciousness. It's like the alarm goes off, we rouse a little, and hit snooze once again.

I use the term *we* broadly, for all of human beings—but especially Western human beings from industrialized areas—because I believe the environmental crisis is demanding a widespread, more fundamental examination of our human condition. It's clear that some groups of people are profiting from environmental destruction while others are exploited, and we need to face this and make corrections. Still, I don't think it helps for some of us to claim we are "awake" and point at others as "asleep." The story of "us" and "them" is a story of separation and competition, driven by the same kind of thinking that contributes to the destruction we must reduce. Our task now is to tell a story of mutual awakening and togetherness. If there's one thing that has become clear to me through my years of research and work with people, it's that we need each other.

## **Paradise Burning**

Poet Robert Frost pondered whether the world would end in fire or ice. From what we know of melting glaciers and recent observations of earth's hottest years on record, the odds are clearly in fire's favor.

A 2022 UN report shows changing patterns in wildfire activity, including record-breaking fire seasons in previously low-risk areas like the Arctic and the Amazon rainforest. The report predicts a 30% to almost 60% increase in wildfire events by the end of the century due to climate, land-use, and population change. Disastrously, scientists anticipate that as wildfires destroy critical carbon sinks such as peatlands and rainforests, they will “accelerate the positive feedback loop in the carbon cycle, making it more difficult to halt rising temperatures.”<sup>3</sup> Each fire tilts us further toward a steep hill, while simultaneously rendering our brakes less and less effective.

The reality of increasing fire activity hit home in the United States in recent years with particularly brutal wildfire seasons in the West and Southwest. In late 2018 the deadly Camp Fire burned through Butte County in Northern California, violently erasing the towns of Concow and Paradise.

Three years later, between Christmas and New Year’s day of 2021, my husband and I watched the orange glow of the Marshall Fire out on the horizon, burning 30 miles north of our home. The fire consumed over 1,000 structures in Boulder County in a matter of hours, making it the most disastrous in Colorado history in terms of lost property. It ravaged houses and business centers in its suburban path of destruction. It burned the spiritual center we frequented to the ground. It killed two people. Although the links between this winter grassland fire and climate change are less clear than California’s Camp Fire or even Colorado’s 2020 Cameron Peak Fire that burned a record 208,663 acres, Colorado’s climate-related drought conditions likely played a factor in the blaze.<sup>4</sup>

Symbolically, fire has many positive connotations. It can represent the beauty of purification and transformation, a sense of eternity, hope, or spiritual passion. But it can also point to destructive desire (as in Frost’s “Fire and Ice”), obsession, madness, and the infernos of hell.

In recent years, intellectuals and activists have increasingly pointed to connections between the warming climate and the flames of human desire that sustain today's capitalist systems. Harvard Business School professor Rebecca Henderson begins her 2020 book *Reimagining Capitalism in a World on Fire* by personalizing the decline of the world's forests for which she has a "deep and abiding love." Referring to her early career as a consultant who helped businesses profit, Henderson states, "my comfortable life was one of the reasons the forests were in danger. . . . I came to believe that our singular focus on profit at any price was putting the future of the planet and everyone on it at risk."<sup>5</sup>

In *Overheated: How Capitalism Broke the Planet—and How We Fight Back*, Kate Aronoff takes a different approach, guiding our gaze to the top of the trickle-down economy and squarely on the fossil fuel industry. She writes:

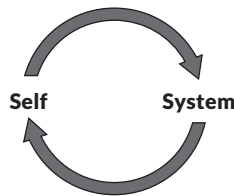
Capitalism hasn't tended to be a popular protagonist in stories about the climate crisis . . . it's tempting to turn inward . . . seeking personal absolution by lowering your carbon footprint: have fewer kids, take fewer flights, and turn off the lights when you leave the room. Yet, not long after Watt first fine-tuned his steam engine, just ninety corporations—almost all of them fossil fuel producers—have been responsible for two-thirds of all greenhouse gas emissions. Since 1965, just twenty shareholder and state-owned fossil fuel producers have spewed out 35 percent of the world's energy-related carbon dioxide and methane emissions. The richest 5 percent of the world's population, by and large those most insulated from the effects of the climate crisis, consume more energy than the poorest 50 percent.<sup>6</sup>

In reading Henderson and Aronoff, we might see two competing approaches to our current crisis: individual responsibility versus systemic change. I propose it's most helpful to see this as a both-and scenario, where these views are equally important and completely intertwined. Henderson starts with the personal and goes on to examine the systemic, reimagining approaches to finance, industry self-regulation, and governance. Aronoff maintains a systemic focus but inevitably includes the personal, noting connections between climate change and individual overwork in capitalist systems.

On the one hand, most all of us who live in industrialized countries are party to a capitalist system. We support and participate in capitalism with our money, time, and attention, thus collectively generating the system we inhabit.

At the same time the system shapes, limits, and propels us, giving rise to our behaviors, our feelings, our thoughts, and our very identities. Therefore, although we create the system, it also creates us. We might even say it traps us in an endless feedback loop, a feedback loop that has become the fuel, the fire, and the wreckage of our current situation (see Figure 1.1).

That's what this book is about—how the system creates us while we create the system. This closed cycle will continue until something changes, until we step back to see the whole dynamic for what it is, until we face head-on the fires that burn in our environment and in our own psyches, that grow increasingly hot and devilish. Until we wake up and together create something new.



**Figure 1.1** Feedback loop

## Stressed to Death

For many of us, our current capitalist system brings material comforts and health-related luxuries that were unimaginable in ages past. It's so easy to take for granted the small and large wonders of modernity—the space heater in my office, the digital thermometer that has been helping me monitor my ill toddler's temperature, the child-palatable bubble-gum flavored amoxicillin we use to treat his ear infection, the computer that allows me to connect with clients and colleagues from the comfort of my home and that allows me to type these words. If I stop and reflect, the list of gratuities goes on and on. In his 2018 book *Enlightenment Now*,<sup>7</sup> Steven Pinker presents one graph after another of improvements in the human condition we have observed over the past centuries that have occurred in tandem with the rise of science and capitalism: increased life expectancy and global wealth; decreased famine, improved nutrition; declines in battle deaths and homicides. In so many ways, our modern world is looking bright.

Still, capitalism as we know it today brings unique forms of human suffering that, similar to the climate crisis, seem to be reaching a toxic crescendo. Some types of suffering are borne by those with less material wealth and access to formal power, a truth that often goes unacknowledged by the people the system favors. Yet even those of us who enjoy some of capitalism's excesses are essentially unsettled. In the United States and other industrialized countries, it is as if the turbulence in our natural world is mirrored by an epidemic of busyness, the average person's day a frantic hurry from one activity to the next.

When the 2020 pandemic first hit, many of the millions of Americans sheltering at home felt compelled to take on additional projects and activities in their supposed extra time. Aspirational bread making caused General Mills' flour sales to surge by 75%.<sup>8</sup> Celebrities tweeted to remind us that Shakespeare wrote one of his masterpieces during

a quarantine. Even as commuting was suspended and all-day pajamas became a reality for those who had the ability to telecommute, people struggled to sink in and relax. In fact, many professionals felt *pressure* in the face of a more spacious schedule. “Stop trying to be productive,” urged Taylor Lorenz in the July 2020 *New York Times*, her article illustrated with a tense, wide-eyed shut-in, surrounded on his bed by books, art projects, and dumbbells. “The urge to overachieve,” Lorenz wrote, “even in times of global crisis, is reflective of America’s always-on work culture.”<sup>9</sup>

Rates of anxiety nearly tripled during the COVID-19 pandemic,<sup>10</sup> but American stress was not a new phenomenon. Journalist and think tank director Brigid Schulte described in her 2014 book *Overwhelmed*, “[T]his is how it feels to live my life: scattered, fragmented, and exhausting. I am always doing more than one thing at a time and feel I never do any one particularly well. I am always behind and always late, with one more thing and one more thing and one more thing to do before rushing out the door.”<sup>11</sup> Many of us can relate. Modern busyness keeps us at the edge of our seat, with no time to look up from the next task on the to-do list and no time to consider the bigger picture of our lives.

Critics point out that this busyness is often self-imposed. Overscheduling and workaholism are now worn as badges of honor among those with relative privilege. In his 2012 *New York Times* article “The ‘Busy’ Trap,” Tim Kreider alleged, “Busyness serves as a kind of existential reassurance, a hedge against emptiness; obviously your life cannot possibly be silly or trivial or meaningless if you are so busy, completely booked, in demand every hour of the day. . . . I can’t help but wonder whether all this histrionic exhaustion isn’t a way of covering up the fact that most of what we do doesn’t matter.”<sup>12</sup> Further explorations led to coinage of the term *busy-bragging*, an idea that was scientifically validated by a team of business school researchers whose experiments supported the conclusion, “The busy

person is perceived as high status.”<sup>13</sup> As *Inc. Magazine* put it, “I’m busy’ really means ‘I’m important.’”<sup>14</sup>

However, status signaling does not entirely explain the busyness epidemic. In 2021 the Brookings Institute described a “middle class time squeeze,” with average workers struggling to balance the demands of paid work and family care in a culture where work has become central. The researchers state:

While many participants expressed anger and resentment about their workplaces controlling and demanding more and more of their time, their solutions to the time squeeze they experienced centered on personal strategies such as self-discipline, making endless to-do lists, and emphasizing “time management.” Although our participants framed time management as an individual responsibility, they also shared the perception that living their lives at a frantic pace, rigidly scheduled down to the minute, did not allow them to authentically connect with their families, learn and grow as people, fulfill their own physical and emotional needs, or contribute to their communities. These themes suggest that middle-class Americans may be mistakenly blaming themselves for struggles that are pervasive and systematic, and that women tend to bear a disproportionate burden of stress and self-blame when policies are not developed to address the time squeeze.<sup>15</sup>

In other words, individuals tend to pin the busyness epidemic squarely on themselves, and that’s a mistake. Writing about busy-bragging in *The Guardian*, Oliver Burkeman says, “The real culprit is a socioeconomic system that relentlessly instrumentalizes everyone, forcing us to become productivity machines, valued by our output alone. (We’re complicit, obviously, since we are that system.)”<sup>16</sup> He

points to the same cycle I illustrated in the previous section: a closed loop where we find ourselves running in circles.

It's a cycle that is killing us. *Karosbi*, a Japanese term for “death by overwork” that was once reserved for that culture, is now recognized as a global phenomenon. The World Health Organization and International Labour Organization found that in 2016, nearly 500 million people worldwide had been exposed to overwork, resulting in close to 750,000 deaths and millions of additional years of life lost due to heart disease and stroke.<sup>17</sup>

The United States is relatively low on the list of countries where overwork leads to death, yet statistics show we are an incredibly frazzled population. Gallup's 2022 State of the Workplace Report identified US and Canadian workers as among the most stressed in the world, with half of respondents experiencing stress for much of the day.<sup>18</sup> In 2020 The American Psychological Association (APA) declared a “National Mental Health Crisis,”<sup>19</sup> and in 2022 it found that more than a quarter of US adults are so stressed they can't function, with the highest rates of incapacitating stress reported by the youngest respondents. Eighty-three percent of professionals report work-related stress each year, often to a level that is “paralyzing.”<sup>20</sup> This stress is estimated to cost almost \$200 billion in health care costs each year and to cause 120,000 deaths via intertwining health-related routes including smoking, excessive drinking, depression, and cardiovascular disease.<sup>21</sup>

All things considered, it makes sense that most people are not actively combatting climate change, even if they can see the existential threat looming on the horizon. Stress is going to kill them first.

## **A Failed Prediction**

It wasn't supposed to be this way. Today's portrait of stress and overwork stands in stark contrast to where some imagined we would be, including one of the world's most famous economists, John Maynard

Keynes. In 1930 Keynes wrote the essay “Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren,” predicting that within 100 years the “struggle for subsistence” would be a thing of the past. Keynes envisioned a world of advanced technology and economic growth, where the average person would not wrestle with work-life balance, but rather with questions of how to best use their leisure time; how to live, as he put it, “wisely and agreeably well.” Keynes foresaw a work week of just 15 hours.<sup>22</sup>

As we near 2030, the endpoint of Keynes’s prediction, his vision seems a bit ridiculous. Keynes was not entirely wrong. Working hours have declined significantly in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. Available data shows that annual average working hours in the US have dropped from 2,316 in 1929 to 1,757 in 2017, for a reduction of about 25%, although the decline has leveled off in recent decades.<sup>23</sup>

Yet these numbers contradict the way many Americans experience their working hours. Leisure time seems to have dwindled with economic growth and technological development. Innovations such as the smart phone as well as tele-working arrangements have blurred the boundaries of work, bringing the office to our dinner tables and night stands. According to a 2019 LinkedIn study, the majority of US employees—almost 60%—check in with their boss or coworkers *daily* during vacation,<sup>24</sup> and a third report feeling guilty for taking off any time at all.<sup>25</sup> In 2018, US professionals forfeited 768 million vacation days, essentially leaving billions of dollars in benefits on the table.<sup>26</sup>

The average person does not enjoy abundant free time, nor has Keynes’s vision of widespread financial security materialized in the United States. In 2021, 38 million people—11% of the population—were living in poverty.<sup>27</sup> More than 10% of households were food insecure.<sup>28</sup> In 2022 the number of Americans without health insurance hit an all-time low, yet 26 million people still lacked that safety net.<sup>29</sup>

Even the time-strapped US middle class is now struggling to afford the three Hs: housing, health care, and higher education. In April 2022 *Time Magazine* wrote, “The costs of all three H’s have soared over the past few decades,” and many who identify as middle class have been left “reaching” for these basic elements of the American dream.<sup>30</sup>

We’ll never know whether Keynes’s world of material security and abundant leisure would have materialized. A sharp pivot in the 1980s launched us into a different type of economic experiment, toward a set of policies and practices most often associated with scholars and politicians like Friedrich Hayek, Margaret Thatcher, and Ronald Reagan. The pivot was toward what some call *neoliberalism*, and although its impacts have in many ways remained under the radar, it continues to have profound implications for the way we live today.

## **Keynes Versus Hayek**

The turbulent years of the Great Depression and World War II were marked not only by physical battlegrounds but also intellectual wars over how the world should operate. When it came to economic policy the main figures in capitalism were Keynes, a Brit who was born, educated, and spent his career in Cambridge, England; and Friedrich Hayek, an Austrian educated in Vienna, who would go on to teach and influence at schools of economics in London, Chicago, and Freiburg.

The differences between Keynes’s and Hayek’s approaches are nuanced, and I leave it to economists to describe them in detail. But the heart of their disagreement was over government intervention in capitalist markets. Keynes advocated for more intervention, particularly during recessions and depressions, and Hayek advocated for less. Keynes believed in a kind hand of government, and Hayek put his faith in the invisible hand of the market.

After World War II, Keynes's ideas won over much of the world. Although Keynes himself died in 1946, Keynesianism was already shaping economic policy in his home country of Great Britain, in Australia, and in the United States, where it would reign triumphant for decades. In *Keynes Hayek: The Clash That Defined Modern Economics*,<sup>31</sup> Nicholas Wapshott calls the years of 1946 to 1980 "the Age of Keynes." The United States' 1946 Employment Act followed Keynesian logic in naming the federal government as responsible for full employment, and Presidents Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, and Carter all employed Keynesian messaging and strategies to the approval of the public.

Meanwhile, Hayek and his supporters waited in the wings. A year before the end of World War II, Hayek had published an oblique challenge to Keynesianism called *The Road to Serfdom*,<sup>32</sup> in which he rejected government intervention as a cure for unemployment and other economic ills. As Wapshott describes, "The principal targets of *The Road to Serfdom* are what Hayek deemed the twin evils of socialism and fascism. . . . He reiterated his belief that as economic planners cannot know the will of others, they end up acting like despots." Hayek was convinced that free markets, not governmental planning, most reliably represented individual needs and desires, and therefore best translated into individual freedoms. His approach was also called *liberalism*.

*The Road to Serfdom* was controversial but successful, and although the ideas it laid out were not in vogue at the time, Hayek attracted ardent fans and collaborators, among them young economist Milton Friedman. Starting with the first meeting of the Mont Pèlerin Society in 1947, these like-minded scholars quietly strengthened their network and influence. They bided their time, anticipating chinks in the Keynesian armor.

As Hayek predicted, it took decades for these vulnerabilities to appear, but when they did liberal economists and politicians were

ready. In the 1970s Britain struggled with a weak economy, eventually entering a “Winter of Discontent” characterized by widespread worker strikes. Following the 1973 oil crisis, the US entered a period of “stagflation,” meaning rising prices (a.k.a inflation) accompanied by high unemployment. This was a nightmare scenario that Keynesian economists had hardly believed possible. With the dominant economic paradigm unable to offer good answers, stagflation as Friedman says “discredited essentially the Keynesian vision.”<sup>33</sup>

Margaret Thatcher, an avowed Hayekian, was elected British prime minister in 1979. She was famous for pulling one of Hayek’s books from her purse, slamming it on a table and declaring, “This is what we believe!” A year later, Ronald Reagan defeated Jimmy Carter in the US presidential election, having campaigned on lower taxes and smaller government. “Government is not the solution to our problem, government is the problem,” he declared at his 1981 inaugural address.<sup>34</sup> With Milton Friedman as his economic advisor, he would put into action many of the ideas that had been cultivated over the decades since that first meeting of the Mont Pèlerin Society. With Thatcher and Reagan’s ideals and policies taking over both sides of the Atlantic, Hayek’s time had come.

Just as Keynes’s 100-year experiment did not run to completion, we cannot say that Hayek’s vision was ever truly realized. The past 40-odd years have been characterized by hybrid influences from Keynes and Hayek. Still, Hayekian emphasis on individual freedom and responsibility captured the cultural imagination in ways that remain prevalent today. Wapshott describes, “The freewheeling Reagan years had altered the mood in America. Private enterprise replaced communal action as the preferred way to change society. The free-loving flower children of the 1960s ‘Love Generation’ had given way to the self-centered ‘Me Generation’ of the 80s and 90s. Bob Dylan’s ‘The Times They Are a-Changin’ had been superseded by Gordon Gekko’s mantra ‘Greed is Good.’”<sup>35</sup>

What came to be called *neoliberalism* affected across party lines and around the world from the 1980s onward. As economic anthropologist Jason Hickel writes, “After Reagan and Thatcher, these policies were carried forward even by putatively progressive administrations such as Clinton’s in the USA and Blair’s in Britain, thus sealing the new economic consensus across party lines.”<sup>36</sup> Historian Gary Gerstle<sup>37</sup> calls Bill Clinton the “facilitator” of neoliberalism, with political moves including support of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), loosening regulation of the banking industry through repeal of the Glass-Steagall Act, and passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act, a bill that sounds like a line out of a Hayekian playbook.

The neoliberal agenda that swept in during the early 1980s promised freedom and prosperity, but just as flaws in Keynesian economics were exposed in the 1970s, free market capitalism eventually came under fire. In 2016 research economists from the International Monetary Fund published a paper called “Neoliberalism: Oversold?” in which they acknowledged that “instead of delivering growth, some neoliberal policies have increased inequality.”<sup>38</sup> Others launched more severe critiques, with journalist and activist George Monbiot calling neoliberalism “the ideology at the root of all our problems.”<sup>39</sup>

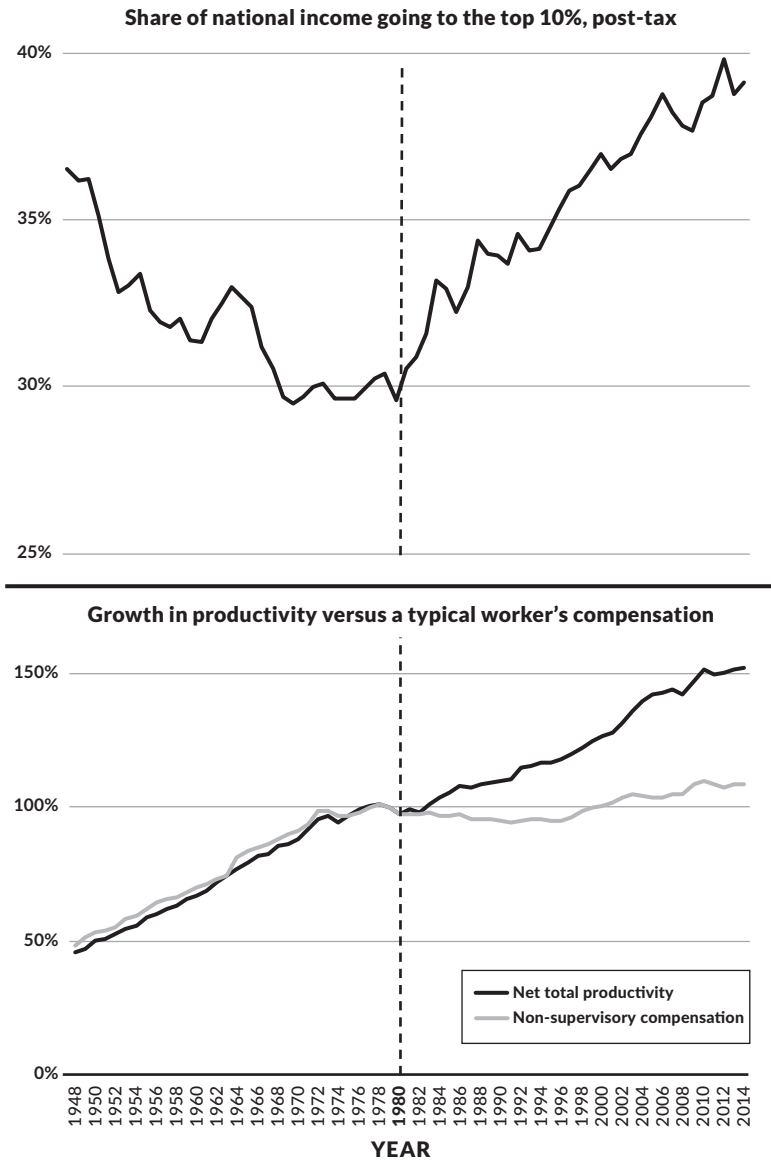
But whether you gently poke or aggressively prod at neoliberalism’s 40-year experiment, the results look troubling. “Income inequality in the US has increased since 1980 and is greater than in peer countries,” Pew Research wrote in 2020,<sup>40</sup> with charts showing widening gaps between the top 10% and bottom 10% of wage earners from 1980 to 2018. French economist Thomas Piketty has traced similar trends, his graph of income inequality in the United States showing a steep drop after World War II that held steady in the age of Keynes, followed by rising inequality from the beginning of the neoliberal era in 1980.<sup>41</sup>

Then there is the matter of wage stagnation. In 1930 Keynes predicted increasing productivity over time, and indeed his vision has been realized in the United States. But average income, at least for average workers, has not kept up. Although there are a variety of ways to calculate the relationship between productivity and wages,<sup>42</sup> reputable models show a dissociation between the two starting right around—you guessed it—1980. In sum, policies of the neoliberal era appear to have divorced productivity from prosperity and widened the gap between the haves and have-nots in this country (see Figure 1.2).

Eight years after the 2008 financial crash, economic scholars Michael Jacobs and Mariana Mazzucato questioned capitalism on the whole:

On the one hand the capitalist economies of the developed world, which for two hundred years transformed human society through an unparalleled dynamism, have over the past decade looked profoundly dysfunctional. Not only did the financial crash lead to the deepest and longest recession in modern history; nearly a decade later, few advanced economies have returned to anything like a normal or stable condition, and growth prospects remain deeply uncertain. Even during the pre-crash period when economic growth was strong, living standards for the majority of households in developed countries barely rose. Inequality between the richest groups and the rest of society has now grown to levels not seen since the nineteenth century. Meanwhile continued environmental pressures, especially those of climate change, have raised profound risks for global prosperity.<sup>43</sup>

It's tempting to nostalgically turn back toward Keynesianism, or fish around for other past models that might serve us better. At the



**Figure 1.2** The neoliberal turn

Sources: Gabriel Zucman, <https://gabriel-zucman.eu/usdina/> and <https://www.epi.org/blog/growing-inequalities-reflecting-growing-employer-power-have-generated-a-productivity-pay-gap-since-1979-productivity-has-grown-3-5-times-as-much-as-pay-for-the-typical-worker/#:~:text=In%20contrast%2C%20productivity%20grew%2085.1,prices%20rather%20than%20consumer%20prices.>

very least, recent titles like *Rethinking Capitalism* and *Reimagining Capitalism* point to the need for some robust tinkering. But mustn't there also be possibilities we have not yet explored, realities not bound by capitalism? Is there really, as Thatcher proclaimed at a women's conference in 1980, "no alternative"?<sup>44</sup>

In *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Mark Fisher writes, "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism. That slogan captures precisely what I mean by 'capitalist realism': the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it." Fisher points out that capitalism has slippery ways of absorbing even anti-capitalism, of commodifying and selling back to us our own distaste for inequality and consumerism. He uses the example of Disney's *Wall-E*, a film that "shows an earth so despoiled that human beings are no longer capable of inhabiting it. We're left in no doubt that consumer capitalism and corporations . . . [are] responsible for this depredation; and when we eventually see the human beings in offworld exile, they are infantile and obese, interacting via screen interfaces . . . supping indeterminate slop from cups." Fisher goes on to say, "A film like *Wall-E* exemplifies what Robert Pfaller has called 'interpassivity': the film performs our anti-capitalism for us, allowing us to continue to consume with impunity."<sup>45</sup> In this way, the system remains closed. We consume our own anti-consumerism, and the cycle keeps spinning.

The book you are reading now is not intended to be anti-capitalism, pro-communism, pro- or anti-socialism, or really an argument for or against any -ism at all. It is an invitation to conversation, creativity, and above all a deep exploration of who and what we take ourselves to be, and what we might create together. After all, new systems of organization seem not to emerge from limited rejiggerings of the old. They emerge from leaps forward in the ways human beings

experience themselves and the world. Where do we think capitalism came from in the first place? As R. J. Holton writes in *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism*, “The concept of ‘capitalism’ emerged in the mid-nineteenth century as one of a number of key concepts designed to characterize the changing nature of Western European society . . . all such notions entailed a sense of qualitative change in the character of entire social systems (or wholes) not simply in some particular sphere of social activity.”<sup>46</sup> If we can remain awake to this potential for qualitative change, we might be able to step back, recognize more fully the crash course we seem to be on, and have the chance to discover viable and surprising alternate pathways.

## **The Heart and Soul of Neoliberalism**

Deep in the human psyche is a tension between oneness and separateness<sup>47</sup>; between unity and individuality, between human being as wave and human being as particle. We begin in the womb, in complete union and symbiosis, then separate at birth only to attach again, emotionally and psychologically, to caregivers and community. As we grow, we launch further into the world, continuing a dance of individuality and mutuality that develops over a lifetime.

We can see this dance of oneness and separateness in the ways human beings experiment and struggle with modes of organization. On the one hand, there are arrangements where the collective comes before the individual, or the individual may not be considered to exist at all. This is expressed, for example, in the Japanese saying, “the nail that stands out gets pounded down,” and in the common American sports idiom, “There is no ‘I’ in team.” This saying was amended and propelled toward the other extreme by basketball stars Michael Jordan, who said, “There is an I in ‘win,’” and Kobe Bryant who added, “There’s no ‘I’ in team. But there’s an m-e in that motherfucker.”<sup>48</sup> Arrangements on the opposite end of the spectrum

prioritize the individual above the group, and in the same fashion may not acknowledge the existence of the collective.

Neoliberalism is an approach that, like any economic system, reaches into human experience and touches these fundamental issues of identity. Margaret Thatcher knew as much. In a 1981 interview she explained, “it isn’t that I set out on economic policies; it’s that I set out really to change the approach, and changing the economics is the means of changing that approach. If you change the approach you really are after the heart and soul of the nation. Economics are the method; the object is to change the heart and soul.”<sup>49</sup>

In a wide swing toward one end of the individual-collective spectrum, neoliberalism stands for human-as-particle, an expression that burst forth and has been building since the Enlightenment in the 1600s and 1700s, which we will discuss further in Chapter 3. Neoliberalism assumes, even depends on, the existence of an independent, rational, self-interested individual. That individual’s task is to progress toward their chosen goals in a complex and competitive world. As Thatcher famously declared, “who is society? There is no such thing! There are individual men and women and there are families and no government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first.”<sup>50</sup> Similarly, Reagan advisor Milton Friedman stated, “Every individual should be regarded as an end in himself.”<sup>51</sup>

I want to highlight two drawbacks to this perspective. First, by emphasizing individual responsibility above all else, neoliberalism fails to recognize that the playing field is not level for everyone who must compete. Such a worldview is unconscious to historical and current-day inequalities that perpetuate injustice. It creates a system that keeps the have-nots in their place and holds them responsible for it. As author and dissident of neoliberalism George Monbiot describes, “We internalise and reproduce its creeds. The rich persuade themselves that they acquired their wealth through

merit, ignoring the advantages—such as education, inheritance and class—that may have helped to secure it. The poor begin to blame themselves for their failures, even when they can do little to change their circumstances.”<sup>52</sup> I can’t help but think of pop icon Kim Kardashian’s response during a 2022 *Variety* interview, when asked for her best business advice for women. “Get your fucking ass up and work. It seems like nobody wants to work these days,” she replied. Faced with backlash, Kardashian claimed the comment was taken out of context. But many pointed to Kardashian as the one missing context—of the advantages she was born into and the connections she was able to capitalize on in her pursuit of success.<sup>53</sup>

The second problem with our current neoliberal tack is that, as we have been exploring in this chapter, even those who enjoy relative privileges are trapped in a limited orbit. Hayek’s approach to economics was built on values of freedom and liberty. He aimed to do away with despots and emancipate the individual to pursue their own interests and dreams. This is an admirable vision at face value, and one that resonates deeply with American ideals. What I am proposing in this book, however, is that rather than eliminating tyrants, neoliberalism caused them to proliferate. For better and for worse, neoliberalism has made each of us the king of our own castle, responsible for building, defending and fighting in service of an empire of “self.”

Today, the head that wears the neoliberal crown is growing heavy. We are realizing that even with all that freedom to choose, we are not truly free. Rather, we are trapped, isolated within fortresses of “self,” separated from the earth, from each other, and our own deeper longings. We are told we have the power and also the responsibility to generate our own “brand,” our own “well-being,” and even our own “destiny.” But this is a Herculean and some might say a Sisyphean task, where the boulder never quite steadies at the top of the hill. We are tired, anxious, lonely, and depressed. We are

resigning, disengaging, or just “quiet quitting.” Externally and internally, we see physical and psychological landscapes ravaged by endless battles of self-interest that swirl into sinkholes of destruction and emptiness. The whole thing is collapsing; we are faltering. And nowhere do we see the urgency of this moment expressed more clearly than in the generation whose birth coincided with the rise of neoliberalism, the largest generation in the United States, the millennial generation.

