



**Narrative  
Initiative**

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# **Beyond Neoliberalism: A Narrative Approach**

**Richard Healey and Judith Barish**  
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# About Narrative Initiative

Narrative Initiative catalyzes durable narrative change in order to make equity and social justice common sense. We make connections between people and organizations, amplify the best tools and methodologies from an emerging field, and activate new collaborations that lead to greater alignment. By weaving narrative thinking into a multidisciplinary field, we build toward a community of practice that creates a long-term shift in hearts and minds.

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# Executive summary

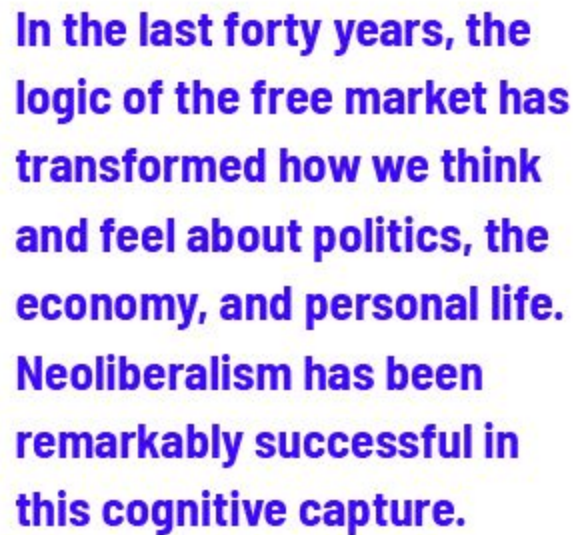
Neoliberalism is in crisis. Forty years ago Reagan and Thatcher unleashed a “free-market” economic system in a wave of privatization and deregulation. Now, there is a growing sense that it is time for something new. Productivity has slowed. Growth has been unstable. Inequality has soared, concentrating wealth and political power in the hands of a shrinking number, undermining democracy and producing growing political instability around the world. Even the successes of neoliberalism have been mostly double-edged: economic growth has destroyed small businesses, weakened communities, filled the oceans with plastic, and hastened the warming of our planet.

In the spring of 2019, we interviewed academics, activists, communications experts and leaders of think tanks to hear their thoughts on the neoliberal system. We probed the possibility of replacing it with an economic model more responsive to human needs. We aimed to explore the possibility of undertaking a deliberate effort to shift public sentiment and discourse to support such a transition. What we heard was a vast array of theories, analyses, instincts, emotional responses, and plans. Responses were so diverse they are hard to summarize in a single document.

Most people agreed that now is a time of opportunity. There is a feeling of change in the air. Structures that have felt solid for decades seem a little more permeable, if not flexible. The political conversation is widening to consider previously unthinkable policy ideas. Now is a moment when a well-designed narrative strategy could help promote the development of a more inclusive, egalitarian, and sustainable economic system. Some of the people we spoke with are already advancing this kind of strategy. Indeed, even during the six months we worked on this paper, the public conversation developed rapidly.



Amidst a growing agreement that neoliberalism is in crisis, we encountered little consensus about what would come next. But we did hear agreement that far-sighted actors could play a critical role in propelling the development and adoption of a successor. In particular, observers agree we need to take on the intellectual and narrative dominance of neoliberalism.



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In the last 40 years, the logic of the free market has transformed how we think and feel about politics, the economy, and personal life. Neoliberalism has been remarkably successful in this cognitive capture. In order to disrupt this system and make space for a more democratic economic order, advocates must challenge the idea that the free market is natural and inevitable. They must also offer an affirmative vision with which to replace it.

Activists, organizers, advocates, intellectuals, journalists and others who want to fight neoliberalism on the battleground of ideas face one immediate question: how can a narrative change approach challenge neoliberalism’s cognitive capture? We heard four suggestions:

## 1. Synthesis: Narratives can coalesce incoherent critiques

As the sociologist Fred Block put it, the various critiques of neoliberalism “are like little yipping dogs at the heels of the neoliberal colossus, which can kick them away and proceed uninterrupted.” Narrative strategy can integrate various analyses into a holistic synthesis. It can create a political space in which people who agree on

fundamental principles can pursue a productive dialogue about the points of disagreement.

## **2. Cohesion: Narrative can hold together a center-left coalition**

In the current moment, thinkers to the left and right of center are converging around the idea of the end of neoliberalism. We think this agreement is vital. It signals the willingness of people across the political spectrum to find a compromise. A smart narrative strategy could preserve and expand this space for consensus, while facilitating maximum structural change.

## **3. Translation: Narratives can translate elite theories into popular discourse**

Felicia Wong argues that the narrative challenge we face today is how to *translate* the understanding of neoliberalism's elite critics to a wider audience. This explanation gives narrative a critical mission. The charge is to develop the language, stories, and cultural tools that will reach community leaders, grassroots organizers, clergy, journalists, local politicians, and the general public in order to convey what some expert observers already know.

## **4. Redirection: Narratives can provide alternatives to authoritarian populism**

Working people today feel a mounting sense of anger, hopelessness and betrayal. In recent years many have taken advantage of this discontent, including racists, white nationalists, authoritarian strongmen, and separatists. However, by using inclusive populist narratives, progressives could create a new common sense around

the role of government and challenge market fundamentalism, redirecting despair and anger away from authoritarian aims.

These options are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive. They can help jump start a conversation about the purpose of narrative strategy.

At the end of the paper, we turn to the nuts and bolts. We propose a set of considerations for working out the who, what, and how of a narrative strategy that could advance one or more of these functions. Who do we want to address? What are the most resonant and effective narrative approaches? How should we disseminate these messages?

Finally, we encourage the convening of people currently considering this problem – ideally by bringing thinkers together across lines of difference. We hope this paper instigates conversations between disparate groups as they wrestle with the potential of the current moment and where we go from here. We imagine dialogue between academics and activists, intellectuals and organizers, economists and communications experts.

Ultimately, the emergence of a new economic paradigm or structure is a political project. There is no ‘Next Model of Capitalism’ waiting in the wings. Rather, this moment of crisis is one in which various options are possible. The winning one will have to be built through intellectual labor, strategic coalitions, power building and a set of political and policy victories. Sometimes you have to figure it out as you go along.

# The current moment

Neoliberalism is in crisis.<sup>[1]</sup> The neoliberal version of a “free-market” economic system emerged in the 1970s and 80s in a wave of privatization and deregulation, championed in Britain by Margaret Thatcher and in the US by Ronald Reagan. It was the increasingly uncontested and dominant mode of political and economic policy for more than 40 years. But since the economic crash and recession of 2008, even mainstream economists have concluded that this new order generates persistent crises. Speculative bubbles expand and burst. Growth has been weak and unstable, built on household and private sector debt, and accompanied by a decline in private sector investment. Productivity has slowed, which is the opposite of what the apostles of the free market had promised. These failures go to the heart of the neoliberal project, demonstrating its weakness on its own terms.

Worse still has been the growth in inequality.<sup>[2]</sup> Simon Kuznets’ famous theory that modern capitalism would first increase then ultimately reduce inequality is no longer viable. Even as the stock market soars and unemployment falls to its lowest level in decades, inequality in income continues to rise and wealth has become even more unevenly distributed. Median wages for average workers have stagnated. Life expectancy in the US has fallen for the last three years, the longest sustained decline since World War One. Economic inequality has also maintained and deepened racial disparities. In every economic downturn of the last generation, people of color have lost the most and been slowest to recover. Women of color have emerged as the most exploited workers of the new economy. The most vulnerable people in our society have thus become systematically more vulnerable, disadvantaged, and exploited.

As growing inequality has concentrated wealth and political power in the hands of a shrinking number, it has enabled the richest Americans and the largest corporations to escape the constraints of democracy by buying policies that favor their



interests. This has decimated the conservative argument that a rising tide lifts all boats. (It apparently doesn't even lift all yachts.) It has put a final nail in the coffin of the Bill Clinton-Robert Rubin growth model of unleashing capital from its regulatory constraints and then redistributing it through progressive tax policy. Sixty of the country's largest corporations – including Amazon, Chevron, Eli Lilly, and Netflix – paid no federal taxes in 2018, a benefit of the Trump tax cut. As Joseph Stiglitz put it in a recent New York Times editorial, “We are now in a vicious cycle: Greater economic inequality is leading, in our money-driven political system, to more political inequality, with weaker rules and deregulation causing still more economic inequality.”<sup>[3]</sup> Neoliberalism undermines democracy, while democracy's decline ratchets inequality up still higher.

Neoliberalism has also accelerated the destruction of the global environment. Addressing urgent and mounting threats to our entire planet – of which climate change is only the most pressing – seems to be beyond the capacity of the current neoliberal order.

Growing political instability has resulted from these mounting and unresolved challenges. A crisis that feels simultaneously economic, political, environmental, and moral has unleashed forces on both right and left – including ones on the left that have been dormant for decades. On the right, economic inequality paired with the delegitimization of democracy has spawned an impotent rage. In frustration – and following the lead of cynical political elites – working people increasingly blame the challenges they face on “menacing” minorities: immigrants, people of color, Jews, Muslims, foreigners and LGBT people. In the US, white nationalist groups are resurgent. Last year, hate crimes rose 17%, with attacks on Latinos rising 24% and anti-Semitic violence spiking 37%. When nativist anger makes common cause with kleptocratic strongmen, we get the global rise of what Anne-Marie Slaughter calls

patriarchal authoritarianism:<sup>[4]</sup> Trump, Putin, Orban, Duterte, Modi, Erdogan, Bolsonaro, Johnson and other leaders.

If the crisis of neoliberalism allowed white nationalists to come out of the closet, it has opened doors for leftists as well. Since the financial crisis of 2007, the US has witnessed a string of potent cultural social movements: Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, Standing Rock, Poor People’s Campaign, #MeToo, and March for Our Lives. All of these movements call for radical structural change. Since the 2016 Democratic primary, presidential candidates, senators and members of Congress have spoken out for ideas that once were far off the political agenda: Universal Basic Income, Medicare for All, free college, and jobs guarantees. The success of Bernie Sanders, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and Elizabeth Warren demonstrates how the Democratic Party – which has been heading rightward since at least the early 1990s – is now moving left. Other

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indicators are the renewed popular interest in Karl Marx, the success of Thomas Piketty’s book on *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, the growing membership of the Democratic Socialists of America, and the opening of the Overton Window to allow the word “socialism” to be uttered in American political conversation without being meant as an insult.

To many observers, the current moment bears the hallmarks of potential deep structural change. Actors on the left, right and center are demanding (or predicting) some sort of systemic transformation, though they differ wildly

in how they characterize the needed change. Futurist Ari Wallach labels this an “intertidal” moment, a period of time when many possible futures lie open. Without meaningful change, we are likely to face continuing symptoms of social and political decay.

A striking convergence of thinkers are advocating that we face a crisis of neoliberal capitalism. Alain Touraine was writing about the end of neoliberalism as early as 2001,<sup>[5]</sup> and obituaries for neoliberalism began to appear after the global recession of 2008.<sup>[6]</sup> In Britain, a group of radical thinkers discussed what came “After Neoliberalism” at a 2015 conference. The findings were then published as *The Kilburn Manifesto*.<sup>[7]</sup> But it wasn’t until the political upheavals of 2016 that the argument really began to gain traction. The end of neoliberalism was articulated by Michael Jacobs and Laurie Layburn-Langton in their seminal 2017 paper “Moving Beyond Neoliberalism,” in which they argued an economic paradigm shift is due, one similar to the transition from Keynesianism to neoliberalism during the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>[8]</sup> Larry Kramer of the Hewlett Foundation echoed this argument in a 2018 paper entitled “Beyond Neoliberalism.”<sup>[9]</sup> A February 2019 forum in *The Boston Review* brought together a trio of influential economists on the left – Suresh Naidu, Dani Rodrik, and Gabriel Zucman – discussing “Economics After Neoliberalism.”<sup>[10]</sup> In May 2019, the Brookings Institution published a new report entitled “Beyond Neoliberalism: Insights from Emerging Markets.”<sup>[11]</sup> These are just some of the many voices reporting on or calling for a new economic system.

Those who call for an end to neoliberalism come to this battle from different standpoints. Some on the left are hopeful the time has come when we can reform the economy to reduce corporate power, improve racial and economic equity, slow climate change, and strengthen democracy. Mark Schmidt of New America, writing in early 2019, says we are entering “one of those rare and remarkable periods where the ideas that we and others have developed may begin to find a real audience in the political process. As this policy window opens, we hope that the ideas and perspectives we’ve

put forward over the last several years will begin to see some paths to progress.”<sup>[12]</sup> Center for American Progress’ Ruy Teixeira has developed an argument that predicts the inevitable triumph of progressive economic public policy, a result of technological progress, economic development and demographic change.<sup>[13]</sup>

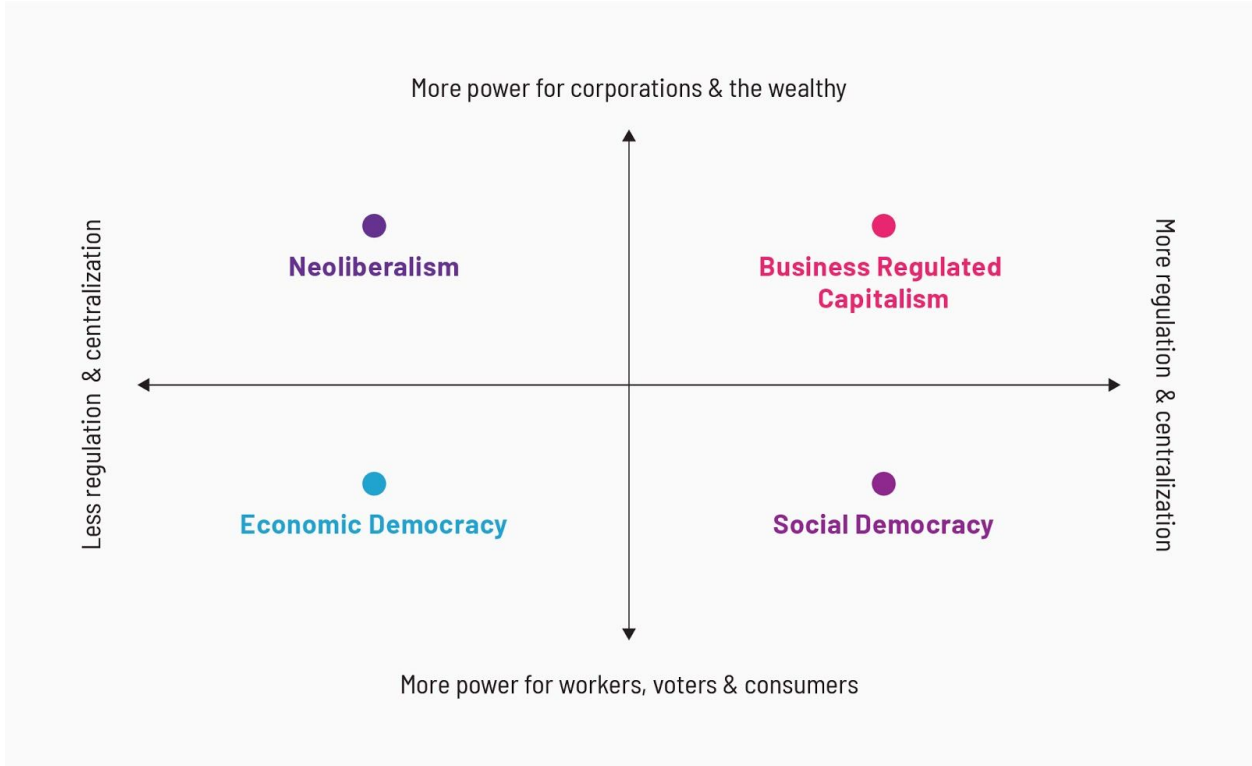
From a different perspective, some centrists now entertain major reforms to capitalism out of concern that social movements of both right and left could threaten the status quo. In the last few years, they have anxiously observed the growth of nationalist extremism, hostility to globalization, tariffs and attacks on free trade from the right, plus growing redistributive movements on the left. Fearful that the current crisis could threaten their interests, they seem to be moving cautiously towards a reformist perspective. Editor Ian Malcolm, publisher of Piketty’s *Capital*, calls this the “Bismarck approach” where elites seek to curb inequality “largely in order to prevent revolution and for stability.”<sup>[14]</sup>

The convergence of these two strands – leftists who want to reform capitalism and centrists who want to rescue it – has produced a terrain of possible consensus. As Jacobs and Layburn-Langton put it, “demand for [a coherent alternative to neoliberal thinking] has become much more widespread....[L]eading international economic organisations have become increasingly critical of mainstream policy prescriptions. In different ways the World Bank, the OECD, the IMF, and the World Economic Forum have all in recent years begun to articulate new models of ‘inclusive and sustainable’ economic growth and to identify new ways of measuring economic success.”<sup>[15]</sup>

# Landscaping the alternatives

Amidst a growing agreement that neoliberalism is in crisis, there is little clarity, much less inevitability, about what comes next. The time-frame is also a matter of disagreement. This paper maps out a five- to twenty-year timeline. Analysts and academics lay out various possible scenarios, which can be thought of as falling along two axes. One axis describes how powerful capital – including both corporations and the very wealthy – is in comparison to workers, voters, and consumers. The other describes how regulated or centralized the economic order is. Thinking about how the economy might be transformed, we can imagine four possible futures.

## Figure 1: Four Future Economies



*Richard Healey and Judith Barish, 2019*



## **Neoliberalism** (*The top-left quadrant, Figure 1*)

Stiglitz describes it this way: “If we don’t change course, matters will likely grow worse.” Neoliberalism further enriches the rich. As their wealth increases, the political power of corporations and the wealthy grow. They weaken antitrust enforcement, environmental regulations, labor laws, consumer protections, safety net programs, and progressive taxation. This in turn increases their wealth, worsens inequality, and impoverishes working people. If the crisis of neoliberalism continues without a democratic resolution, the US could become increasingly authoritarian, a political tendency with which neoliberalism seems to be all too compatible.

## **Business Regulated Capitalism** (*Top-right quadrant, Figure 1*)

David Kotz, author of *The Rise and Fall of Neoliberal Capitalism*, holds that the current crisis cannot be resolved without restructuring capitalism itself. He predicts the emergent form that supersedes neoliberalism will be a business regulated version of capitalism, in which a more active state intervenes in the market to prevent financial bubbles and speculative crises. Tracing a historic oscillation between more and less regulated forms of capitalism, Kotz argues we are due for a shift to greater regulation and control of markets. In this model, capital would continue to dominate labor. The state would intervene in the financial sector to prevent instability and direct credit to productive uses, invest in military and civilian infrastructure, promote innovation, and stimulate public-private partnerships. “The right-wing version of this economic structure would emphasize building up the military, an aggressive foreign policy, and a repressive policy toward dissenters. The centrist version would focus on building up civilian infrastructure, a foreign policy that worked through international coalitions, and greater respect for civil liberties.”<sup>[16]</sup>

## **Social Democracy** *(The bottom-right quadrant, Figure 1)*

A third possibility would be a form of social-democratic capitalism. State economic intervention would regulate capitalism to serve the interests of the majority by promoting low unemployment, limited inflation, environmental laws, consumer protection, workplace health and safety, antitrust provisions, stimulation of new (including green) technologies, and investment in public goods like welfare, public education and infrastructure. Bernie Sanders is the most famous proponent of this model in the US, but many of the bold policy ideas floated by Democratic political candidates – free college, universal jobs guarantees, universal basic income, Medicare for all, etc. – fall under this category as well. In Britain, the IPPR Commission on Economic Justice paper “Prosperity and Justice,” written by Michael Jacobs, articulates this model as an alternative to neoliberalism. The ten-part plan in this document calls for a new industrial strategy directing public investment to spur innovation for the public interest, a reshaped labor market with higher wages and more power for unions, changes to corporate governance to encourage equity and long-term thinking, antitrust policies to open markets, and other policy options to produce more equitable outcomes and ensure markets function in the public interest.

## **Economic Democracy** *(The bottom-left quadrant, Figure 1)*

A final possibility aims to redesign the process of economic decision-making, promoting democratic and local participation in setting the rules of the economy. The writings of Gar Alperovitz exemplifies this approach. His ten-point plan for change contrasts dramatically with Michael Jacobs’ approach. Addressing individuals and local communities rather than the state, he calls not for large-scale restructuring of the economic order but for steps that individuals and local communities can take, such as: “democratize your money” by putting cash into a credit union and participating in its governance, create or invest in worker co-ops, demand participatory budgeting for local fiscal decision-making, organize local non-profit institutions like universities and

hospitals to use their power for good, and promote community-based economic development.<sup>[17]</sup>

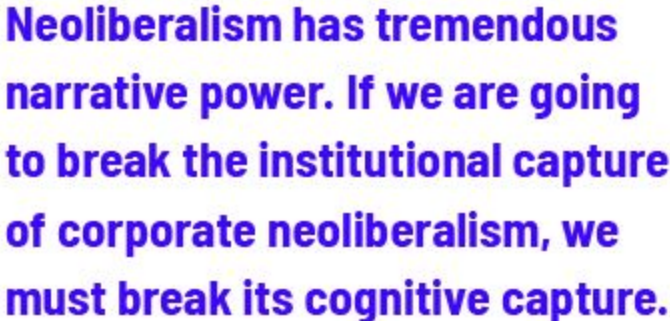
This approach is bottom-up rather than top-down. It aims to dismantle corporate power by fueling alternatives to it, rather than to rewrite the rules. It focuses on the process rather than the outcome, on democracy more than equity. But it is not merely a difference in approach. "Instead of the extractive and concentrating forces of corporate capitalism," write Joe Guinan and Martin O'Neill, "the emerging new political economy is circulatory and place-based, decentralizing economic power, rebuilding and stabilizing regions and local communities, allowing for the possibility of real democracy and participation, and providing the long-run institutional and policy support for a new politics dedicated to achieving genuine social change."<sup>[18]</sup>

This school of thought has growing traction in Labour Party circles in the UK.<sup>[19]</sup> In the US, proponents of this model have typically flown beneath the radar of some of the big-systems thinkers, and may appear fringe or unserious to some analysts. The New Economy Coalition, based in Boston, is an organizational space that brings together two hundred individual groups roughly oriented around this framework. (Many are local community-based organizations engaged in the sort of bottom-up projects that Alperovitz advocates.) This model also has a deep history in African American communities, as detailed by Jessica Gordon Nembhard in her pathbreaking work, *Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice*.

# Neoliberalism's narrative power

Given the range of economic scenarios, it seems reasonable to wonder how progressives could encourage the development of an economic order that is more democratic than the status quo. The specific question we asked was: Is there a role for narrative strategy to encourage the development of a democratic successor model and to promote it? Absolutely. Though they described it differently, everyone we spoke to agreed on this point. There was wide consensus that sophisticated and intentional narrative work was called for, particularly because of the intellectual and narrative dominance of our adversary.

Neoliberalism has been a hegemonic system. It has captured institutional, economic and political power on the one hand and intellectual and cultural power on the other. While it has remade our economy, infiltrated our politics, demolished labor unions, rewritten the rules of global trade, shrunk the public sector, and deregulated a



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variety of institutions, it has also restructured the way we think and talk. It has conquered our way of making sense of the world. It has made itself invisible by persuading us that it is inevitable, permanent, a bedrock part of the order of things. All the communications experts we spoke with underlined this again and again.

Neoliberalism has tremendous narrative power. If we are going to break the institutional capture of corporate neoliberalism, we must break its cognitive capture.

Within neoliberalism, as in other hegemonic systems, institutional power and cultural power reinforce each other. As Margaret Thatcher once said, “Economics are the method; the object is to change the heart and soul.” Guinan and O’Neill paraphrase: “Economic conditions shape the outlooks and interests that fix the boundaries and horizons of political possibility.”<sup>[20]</sup> The power to change policy helps narratives spread and take root, even as narratives build the power to change policy.

Narratives are the systems of stories – explicit and implicit – that underlie our common cultural understanding of the world. These stories are bound together by sets of resonant themes, ideas, and values. More concrete than an ideology or worldview, more abstract than messages, narratives comprise a background web of knowledge, rarely made explicit, which informs what people sometimes call ‘common sense’.

The cultural narratives of a given historical place and time set the rough boundaries and rules for making sense of the world. They tell us when to cheer and when to boo. They name heroes and villains. They tell us how to recognize danger and where to find safe harbor. They make some choices possible and others unthinkable. We find them reflected in the language people use to talk about their personal lives, current events, social challenges, aspirations, and fears. Deep cultural narratives can be evoked by a single word, a phrase, or a resonant anecdote. Narratives are the memes of the public conversation.

The narratives of neoliberalism have been enormously successful at remaking our thinking – and at making themselves invisible. This intellectual victory is grounded in a few key deep narratives:

## Individualism

Within neoliberal discourse, the unit of the social world is the individual human being. As Margaret Thatcher famously said, “there’s no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families.” In this theme,



each of us is on our own, and we all compete with each other. Connection is dependence, and dependence is weakness: to depend on anyone or anything is a loss of freedom and power. Meanwhile, respect and dignity have to be earned, one individual at a time. Individuals triumph by competing on their own merit, and winning out over less qualified people.

## The free market

Neoliberalism presents the free market as a place where individuals buy and sell, compete with each other, rise and fall. Through the magic of the invisible hand, this system of transactions allocates goods fairly and resolves conflicts judiciously. It is the best method of organizing economic life to promote growth, innovation and the greatest good for the greatest number. It's not just the best way: it's the natural way. As Thatcher used to say, "There is no alternative." Its processes are inherently fairer and more rational than any political decision-making process. All problems of allocation can be solved by subjecting them to the market. The free market recognizes differences among individuals, provides a level playing field for them to compete on, and appropriately awards benefits to those who are superior. Like alchemy, the market transmutes lead into gold, turning a million moments of competition, conflict, domination, or pain into a just and harmonious whole.

## Limited Government

Within neoliberal discourse, the proper role of government is to get out of the way so the market can work naturally, without artificial constraints. By definition, smaller government is better, because government action crowds out, impedes, obstructs, distorts, or disrupts the natural flow of the market. Markets are natural and rational; political action is artificial and inevitably partial.

## Race and Racism

Neoliberalism claims to be blind to group identities like race, gender, sexual orientation, or religion. Because the market is a fair system for distributing benefits, differences in outcome point to differences in merit, ability, intelligence, hard work, or other individual characteristics. If a particular group fares poorly in the marketplace, this confirms the inferiority of its members. Thus racism fuels neoliberalism, and the logic of the market confirms the validity of racism, even while claiming to be race-blind. At the same time, neoliberalism implicitly maps the private/public division onto a white/black binary, so that privatization and shrinking the role of government go hand in hand with disinvesting from programs that support people of color.

## Freedom

“Freedom” is the most potent word in American political discourse, according to pollster David Mermin. As seen through the prism of neoliberal narrative, freedom is the liberty to participate in the market, to buy and sell, and to make individual choices without restraint. Freedom is always “freedom from.” Freedom means being left alone, to do what I want.

In the last forty years, these interconnected themes and their endless narrative variations have been extraordinarily successful in transforming how we think and feel about all aspects of individual choice and personal life, many of which have been reconfigured according to the logic of the market: free, rational, individual actors making interest-maximizing choices in a competitive environment. The success of neoliberal narratives prevents us from considering economic alternatives because we run up against their invisible logic.

Neoliberal narratives do not succeed because they sound nice. They succeed because those who benefit from neoliberal policy (corporations and wealthy individuals) have poured billions of dollars into promoting these systems of thought through schools, academic institutions, think-tanks, corporate control of journalism, advertising, and political contributions. Michael Jacobs has traced the intellectual origins of the neoliberal paradigm to the think tanks, academic institutions, and corporate funding that launched it. Material support for neoliberal ideas has only grown since the formation of the Mont Pelerin Society in 1947. When it comes to lobbying, for example, corporations today outspend unions and public interest groups by a ratio of 34 to 1. Businesses spend about \$240 billion a year on advertising. Much of that advertising promotes the market system along with the product. As a consequence of this massive propaganda machine, the logic of neoliberalism has felt unshakable for decades.

Yet today, there is a growing sense that neoliberalism and its free market system are in crisis. Which means the narrative clout of this hegemonic system is waning, despite all the money and power behind it. That means it may be possible someday soon to promote structural, economic changes by winning the battle of ideas.

# Toward new narratives

If progressive organizations or advocates want to challenge, displace, or replace the narrative themes that have helped neoliberalism conquer the world, what should take their place? In our conversations, the people we spoke with reiterated two basic precepts for communicators about how to talk about neoliberalism, the economy, and the choices we face. The first was the injunction to challenge the idea that the free market is somehow a natural entity. The second was to offer an alternative normative vision to neoliberalism. In this section, we say a little more about this advice.

## Denaturalize the market

One of the biggest victories of neoliberalism has been to persuade us that the market is natural, while almost any action taken by government disrupts and undermines the natural functioning of the economy. The Topos Partnership refers to the popular understanding that the economy is like the weather, a set of somewhat mysterious forces outside human control. To replace this idea, we need to highlight the fact that the current economic structure is a human creation, the product of decisions made by people. We must show that the market could be structured in many different ways, to benefit different people and groups. Here are some pathways to accomplish this:

### ► Connect individual actions with human-made systems

Talk about the actors who created the current market system and how it benefits them. This has the benefit of setting us up for a democratic alternative. If markets are the product of political decisions, let's make sure we structure markets to meet human

needs. “We already live in a planned economy – we just need to take the steering wheel.”<sup>[21]</sup>

## ► Use metaphors to shift how people understand the economy

Speaking about the rules (in general) and who makes them helps to denaturalize economic operations, making clear that they are within human control. This approach comes from the Roosevelt Institute, which talks about rewriting or reimagining the rules.<sup>[22]</sup> This recommendation comes despite the warning from communicators not to talk about the *rules of the game*, because people recoil from the idea that such important matters are a game. Other useful metaphors (following Topos) include talking about the economy as a foundation upon which you can build different buildings, or as a system of pipes through which money and other resources flow. These metaphors are intended to highlight the human design and decision-making that create the economy.

## ► Talk about markets as one way to accomplish specific goals

People we spoke to they called for describing markets as one tool among many to meet public purposes. Notably, no one we spoke to rejected markets altogether or suggested it was a good idea to demonize markets. Ken Jacobs of the UC Berkeley Labor Center warns that we shouldn’t talk about “areas where markets fail,” because this framing implies that in most cases, markets succeed, and that they do so in some natural, unmediated way. Instead, he argues we should talk about the goals and missions of different institutions, and then propose public processes that could advance those goals, including markets. Mariana Mazzucato’s work embodies this precept. She proposes thinking about the public sector as the agent that “tilts the playing field in a particular direction.” Markets should be considered collective outcomes. Value is co-created by public and private actors. The public sector’s role is to help define the mission of public goods and promote values, like innovation in



healthcare or green technology to reduce fossil fuel consumption. As she writes in her paper on healthcare innovation, “transforming the current system in a more mission-oriented way requires rethinking the role of policy away from simply patching up market failures, towards co-creating and shaping markets to deliver public value.”<sup>[23]</sup>

## Offer a positive normative vision

Anat Shenker-Osorio observed that when people are fearful, the left loses. So the last thing we want to do is trigger fear. Instead, we need to make people hopeful about what the next phase could be, and what it could offer. She boiled this principle down to the phrase “we can have nice things,” which she suggests as a narrative foundation for *all* campaigns.

While some of the people we talked to thought narratives should be based more on argument than on an emotional appeal, there was general agreement that a more democratic order needs to be connected to a set of values. If neoliberalism uses a particular version of freedom to justify itself, a more inclusive economic system should ground itself in a different set of core values and principles. Here are values we heard posited as alternatives to the freedom of the market, potential ethical touchstones for a post-neoliberal regime:

### ► Human flourishing

Sabeel Rahman says that neoliberalism does a great job telling a story about human flourishing, identifying the barriers to that flourishing, and then removing them. The left needs to do the same thing, and similarly recapture ideas of liberation and human flourishing. Ari Wallach said much the same thing.

## ► Mass abundance

Ruy Teixeira suggested that if the left in the 19<sup>th</sup> century struggled for democracy, and in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century for a social safety net as embodied in the welfare state, the organizing principle for the left today should be “the struggle for mass abundance.” This would be, he says, a campaign to make capitalism “fulfill its potential.”

## ► A positive vision of freedom

The idea of freedom has been largely claimed by neoliberal logic. But given its enduring power, a number of the people we spoke with suggested progressives should reframe (and reclaim) freedom. Sabeel Rahman suggested that “freedom of the market is freedom from political domination, but there is also freedom from domination of corporate power, and freedom from racism, sexism, and inequality.” Felicia Wong invoked Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms, which include freedom from want and freedom from fear – a far more substantive freedom than the freedom to contract in the marketplace. A still more robust idea of freedom comes from political philosopher Michael Sandel, who has written about a republican or Tocquevillean ideal of freedom as the freedom that democracy gives the citizen the capacity to be a decision-maker in the policies and systems that affect your life, rather than merely being treated as a political subject. The freedom of the market is at war with this idea: “This individualist idea of freedom – this consumerist idea of freedom – has crowded out a civic conception of freedom as participation in self-governing communities.”<sup>[24]</sup>

## ► Community

The free market has undermined structures of community, connection and belonging, whether that structure is the neighborhood or the nation. So the value of community is a critical value to challenge neoliberalism. Michael Savage makes a case

that progressives should take seriously people's connection to collective identity. Because national sentiments and nationalism are so powerful at triggering feelings of solidarity, he argues it cannot be left solely to the right. Michael Sandel connects these collective identities with civic republicanism. Communities, he says, locate us in the world. Identifying with the particular communities that define us helps equip us to deliberate about the common good. It creates "habits of the heart" as Alexis de Tocqueville called them in his classic study of American democracy. We practice self-government in the small sphere within our reach, but as the sphere enlarges, our reach expands. The civic abilities that we cultivate in smaller forms of community equip us to be citizens of the nation and ultimately to be global citizens. Developing a sense of cosmopolitan citizenship is important, especially to deal with challenges such as climate change. But we can't become citizens of the world until we learn how to deliberate with fellow citizens in forms of association closer to home.

One of the challenges, of course, is how to talk about community or nation without encouraging nationalism, racism, and xenophobia. Sandel argues that if you don't take seriously people's attachment to community and nation, you encourage the wrong kind of tribalism. "Procedural liberalism has left itself open to that kind of political appeal because it hasn't spoken convincingly about patriotism or the meaning of national citizenship."<sup>[25]</sup>

## ► Human dignity and care

Neoliberalism has increasingly shredded the social structures that traditionally made it possible to care for infants, small children, the disabled and the elderly, even as it commodifies caregiving. Even as caring for your own relatives has become incompatible with holding a job, caring for other people's relatives has become a growing part of the emerging economy. These jobs exemplify everything that is wrong with 21<sup>st</sup> century capitalism: they are low-wage, low-skill, boring, unsafe, insecure, without benefits. They are also disproportionately filled by women of color and

immigrants. One way to capture this complexity in narrative is to celebrate the act of giving care, to recall that everyone requires care at some point in life, and to value our shared humanity. Ai-Jen Poo has done more than anyone to elevate this problem and position caregivers as critical historical agents. In some of her recent writing, she argues that the bedrock value to articulate these challenges lies in “our shared dignity as human beings.”<sup>[26]</sup> This common humanity also underlies human connection: “Humanity is at the core of civil society. While there are systems and rules, our values and connection to one another are at the heart of how, and whether, civil society works.” Our current moment is a time of incivility, when it is more important than ever to reinforce our connection to each other. Campaigns based on these principles, she argues, “begin and end with the understanding that we are all interconnected, and human, with similar basic human needs.”

The two recommendations outlined here – to denaturalize the market and to present positive values – point the way to a narrative response to neoliberalism, and sketch some narrative content that might be useful as part of a coherent strategy. But how to put these ideas into action? That's at the heart of narrative strategy.

# Four strategic roles

If we are facing a contest to define the terms, principles, and ideals of the next economic order, there are many questions to answer. It is not clear where the battlefield is, who we are fighting, or what it would mean to win. It's not even clear who belongs to which army. Progressive thinkers contemplating narrative work in what we hope are the waning years of neoliberalism need to answer fundamental strategic questions: What do we hope to accomplish with narrative? Who do we need to convince? How do we define success? Following from these strategic questions are a set of tactical questions. At the end of this document, we have suggested a series of guiding questions to lay out the steps needed to plan a strategic intervention.

In our conversations, we encountered very different arguments and assumptions about what role narrative might usefully play in this period. Here are the four suggestions we heard, each one a potential purpose for narrative to accomplish. Note that these are not mutually exclusive, nor is the list exhaustive. Clearly, the four different options imply different theories of change, since our interlocutors are operating under different and divergent theoretical frameworks. We considered it beyond our scope of this paper to try to unify their philosophies of history and instead have harvested the potential practical implications for narrative strategy.

## 1. Synthesis: Narratives can coalesce incoherent critiques

The critics of neoliberalism are many and varied. While they may be in rough agreement with each other, their criticisms have so far failed to coalesce into a new paradigm. There is a critique based on growing inequality, another grounded in monopoly (the Neo-Brandeisians), another centered on neoliberalism's tendency to financial instability and crisis (the Minskian critique), yet another that relies on Karl Polanyi's theory of false commodities, another centered on race, another on gender

(including the emergence of a care economy that depends on underpaid female labor), and an argument rooted in neoliberalism’s failure to protect the environment. (See *Figure 2* for a summary of these variety critiques.) As Fred Block says, the various critiques of neoliberalism “are like little yipping dogs at the heels of the neoliberal colossus, which can kick them away and proceed uninterrupted.” Paul Mason puts it this way: “Free market capitalism is a clear and powerful idea, while the forces opposing it look ... like they [are] defending something old, worse and incoherent.”<sup>[27]</sup>

Narrative strategy can play a vital role in figuring out how to integrate these various analyses into a holistic synthesis with the simplicity and elegance of neoliberalism’s critique of Keynesianism. One recent attempt is Kate Raworth’s “doughnut economics.”<sup>[28]</sup>

The power of such a simplifying system would be both ideological and practical. Ideologically, it would help swell a tide of opposition to neoliberalism, which could rapidly shift the public conversation and open up political possibility. Practically, it would create space for the critics of neoliberalism, coming to the fight as they do under different banners, to unite on the same battlefield. A unifying narrative could also help reconcile different positive visions, such as the spectrum from economic democracy to social democracy.

As a unifier, no narrative will magically erase the differences between critics with different visions. But a compelling narrative that can speak to people with different theoretical perspectives could create a political space in which people agree on big ideas and a long-term vision – and can engage in a productive dialogue about the points of disagreement (or at least defer such conversation).

## Figure 2: Critiques of Neoliberalism

Central concern	Proponents	Basic argument
<b>Equality</b>	Joseph Stiglitz, Paul Krugman, David Harvey, and many others	Neoliberalism produces economic and political inequality.
<b>Monopoly</b>	Neo-Brandeisians, e.g. Barry Lynn, Tim Wu, Sabeel Rahman	Neoliberalism concentrates capital and power in a small number of firms
<b>Financial stability</b>	Minskians	Neoliberalism produces financial instability and periodic economic crises.
<b>Race</b>	Bill Fletcher, Angela Davis, Randolph Hohle	Neoliberalism increases racial disparities, undermines political efforts at racial equity, and hides race behind the ideology of individualism.
<b>Gender</b>	Nancy Fraser	Neoliberalism exacerbates gender divisions, hides gender behind the ideology of individualism, and co-opts feminism to undermine state solutions to poverty.
<b>Environment</b>	Naomi Klein	Neoliberalism uses up finite resources, creates waste products that pollute the planet, creates global warming, and lacks the mechanisms to limit, address, or fix these externalities.
<b>Accumulation</b>	David Kotz	Neoliberalism prevents capital accumulation and generates economic crises.
<b>Community</b>	Michael Sandel	Neoliberalism encourages market values to invade spheres of life that should be guided by other values.



## 2. Cohesion: Narrative can hold together a center-left coalition

As part of a power-building strategy, narrative can build constituencies or align existing forces. We think this is critically important right now. Narrative can be a vehicle for bringing and keeping together forces able to propel a successor to neoliberalism.

It is notable that observers on the right and left are increasingly talking about a *new form* of capitalism, not the *end* of capitalism. Our conversations suggest that the narrative focus on neoliberalism (as opposed to capitalism) indicates a willingness to compromise and marks out a potential space for collaboration.

On the left, talking about neoliberalism signals restraint – a willingness to suspend or defer an all-out critique of the capitalist system in the interest of finding common ground with a broader set of possible allies. Discussing neoliberalism means accepting reform instead of revolution. It means embracing incremental change as a path rather than an obstacle to deeper structural reforms. It means pursuing compromises with corporations, not their abolition or nationalization. For left critics who talk about neoliberalism as a way to continue their critique of capitalism under a more broadly acceptable guise, it remains nonetheless a meaningful act of self-control.

On the center-right, talk of reforming neoliberalism is a surrender to progressive discourse and an acknowledgment that the status quo is structurally flawed. It indicates an acceptance of reform, and not a loyal defense of the status quo. It shows a willingness to consider large-scale economic changes, instead of demanding free market hegemony. It holds an openness to compromise with the public sector, rather than doubling down on the evils of government regulation.

If there is a public conversation that can move us out of the current economic order in a progressive direction, it relies on this language. Those on the left who talk only about the failures of capitalism pure and simple will be unable to participate, and

the same goes for those on the right who can't name the flaws in neoliberalism as systemic. Thus the language of "beyond neoliberalism" both embodies and maps out the terrain of potential common cause among progressives and centrists when it comes to contemplating significant economic reform.

A narrative convergence around "beyond neoliberalism" is highly significant but also potentially fragile. It could easily be disrupted from the left by radicals who refuse to accept, even tactically, basic structures of capitalism, and from the right by conservatives who are too fearful of social movements to articulate a systematic critique of neoliberalism. Debate over anti-monopoly practices could expose fissures in any alignment, as could the role of multinational institutions.

Without the center, progressives are unlikely to have the power to make significant changes to pull us from the path to greater inequality and we would end up with continued neoliberalism (the top left quadrant of *Figure 1*). Without the left, centrist reformers are likely to embrace a more business-friendly alternative, which would leave us with business-regulated capitalism (the top right quadrant of *Figure 1*). As a result, building a narrative that can contain both poles could be a critical step to building the power to make significant and meaningful changes.

One way of thinking of this critical role of narrative is as a set of guardrails that keep different actors on the same geography as they negotiate differences.

### **3. Translation: Narratives can translate elite theories into popular discourse**

Felicia Wong argues that the narrative challenge we face today is how to *translate* the ideas of neoliberalism's elite critics to a wider audience. She maintains that the argument among experts has largely been won already. "The problem is that while the intellectual argument [for neoliberalism] has been discredited, the common

sense understanding and the institutions that have been built around it persist.” There is a persuasive case to be made that academics and intellectuals have reached some agreement on the failures of neoliberalism (though not, perhaps, on what comes next). This explanation gives narrative a critical mission: at a minimum, we need to develop the language, stories and cultural tools to reach community leaders, grassroots organizers, clergy, journalists, local politicians, and the general public, to convey what most experts observers already know.

Axel Aubrun of the Topos Partnership explores one particular difficulty for this translation problem. He maintains that translating expert arguments for the general public only works if the ideas fit with the cultural common sense. This common sense filter prevents certain ideas from taking root, so a smart communications strategy must figure out how to overcome cultural or conceptual obstacles. In the case at hand, a huge obstacle to changing people’s ideas about the economy, he argues, is the powerful and deeply-held assumption that people are individual actors who are responsible for their actions and the outcomes of those actions. This individualistic frame of reference filters out many of the best arguments made by experts and political actors about the consequences of the current structure and the desirability of change. For Aubrun, then, the process of communicating expert ideas to a general audience involves identifying the mental obstacles that get in the way of people’s understanding and looking for language, metaphors, and narratives that avoid or eliminate those obstacles.

In either case, this analysis offers narrative the function of popularizing concepts that today belong only to a small group of experts, by developing them in ways that make sense to and resonate with a broad audience. This function does *not* imply that the process of narrative development is top-down. Indeed, most of the people we talked to argued that figuring out how to talk about economic principles with a popular audience requires active participation of grassroots communities themselves, and empowering them to talk about what narratives make sense to them, grab them, and motivate them. Grassroots organizers in the field and their community leaders may

well be better positioned than pollsters or communications experts to zero in on the arguments, ideas, language and narratives that will resonate.

## 4. Redirection: Narratives can provide alternatives to authoritarian populism

Working people today in the US and abroad feel a growing sense of anger, hopelessness and betrayal. Wages have stagnated, good jobs have moved away, healthcare is too expensive, caring for aging parents is unaffordable, young people can't afford college, and meanwhile, a group of elite zillionaires on Instagram is reveling in an obscene expansion in wealth. Life expectancy is falling as death by suicide, alcohol, and opioids rises. Politicians come and go, and the problems persist or worsen. The conviction is growing that the system is broken.

In recent years, it has been racists, white nationalists, authoritarian strongmen, and separatists who have best taken advantage of this discontent. They have challenged some elements of the neoliberal narrative (primarily its internationalism), accepted others without question (individualism, faith in markets, skepticism about government). They have also added potent doses of racism and sexism.

If progressives don't provide a powerful narrative alternative to this divisive, racist, authoritarian populism, those who feel betrayed by growing economic inequality and the dwindling of democracy will have nowhere to turn but right. It is critical to provide a narrative vehicle that engages (at least some of) the same people and responds to (some of) the same anxieties, but redirects the sense of despair, anger, and injustice in an inclusive direction.

Narratives can align constituencies in new ways, and in this case, the critical role for narrative is to polarize people along different lines: vertically (the people versus corporations and the wealthy) not horizontally (white people against brown people,

Republicans versus Democrats). The slogan “we are the 99%” is the perfect example of this top-bottom polarizing, as Jonathan Smucker points out in his book *Hegemony How-To*. This conclusion is also at the heart of Anat Shenker-Osorio’s research-backed “race-class narrative,” which encourages people to work together across racial differences, and explicitly makes the argument that elites and corporations benefit from racial division.

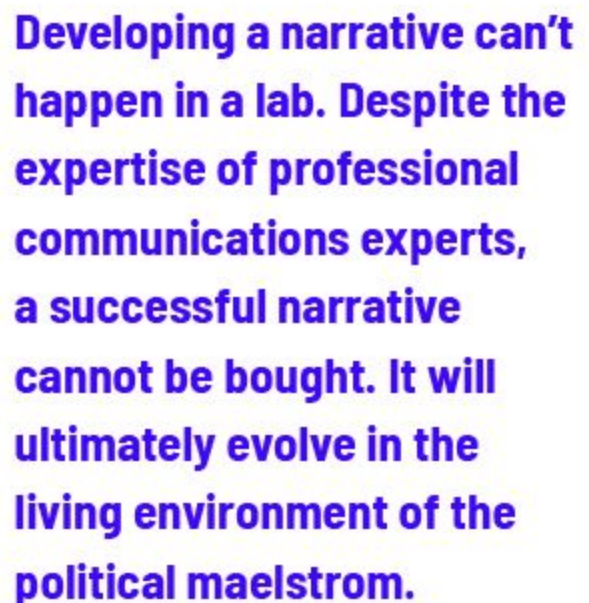
Vertical polarization can also avoid partisanship and allow for new political alignments. Felicia Wong and the pollster David Mermin told us that party identity is becoming more deeply rooted and predictive, overriding all other considerations, including a voter’s perspective on particular policies. Given this divided, partisan landscape, Smucker argues that progressives should avoid triggering the left-right frame because people are already stuck in those identities. Instead, polarizing people vertically with a top versus bottom frame can permit different possibilities of political alignment.

In this case, the role of narrative strategy is to encourage a populist alignment by appealing to a group of actors who have so far best been addressed by the right.

# Guiding questions

Developing a narrative can't happen in a lab. Despite the expertise of professional communications experts, a successful narrative cannot be bought. It will ultimately evolve in the living environment of the political maelstrom. In the immediate future, a lot of narrative development is headed our way during the presidential campaigns of 2020.

We think the best way to advance the process is to open conversations between actors, scholars, and strategists and to invite them to dedicate some of their time, experience, wisdom and instinct to the questions we have asked (and others). After considering the strategy options posed in the previous section, we propose a loosely-structured pathway of considerations to guide the conversation. In a nutshell we need to determine the cornerstones of a narrative strategy: the who, where, what, and how.



**Developing a narrative can't happen in a lab. Despite the expertise of professional communications experts, a successful narrative cannot be bought. It will ultimately evolve in the living environment of the political maelstrom.**

## Who is implicated in our strategy?

First, decide who the audience is. This will follow at least in part from the previous section. If the goal is to redirect working-class whites away from authoritarian populism towards a more inclusive option, the target audience will be different than if the goal is to find common ground between centrist and progressive political

constituencies. Based on the strategic goal, which pillars of public opinion need to be moved, and which communities and networks constitute that pillar?

Potential audiences identified for a post-neoliberal narrative include:

- Intellectuals and academics
- Policy-makers and political elites
- Business community
- Voters who might swing to authoritarian populism: e.g. rural residents, working-class white people
- Base voters: e.g. people of color, urban liberals
- Film-makers, writers, and other creatives

Several cultural institutions were also named as intermediaries or vehicles with which to reach those audiences:

- Clergy
- Organizers and networks of activists
- Journalists and opinion leaders
- Popular culture/Hollywood
- Labor movement popular education and union apprenticeship programs
- Silicon Valley
- Business schools

## Where will the strategy be focused?

The strategy must also include a consideration of where it will operate. Conversations about narrative are mostly national. Although residents of the US, UK, Europe, Africa, and elsewhere are all experiencing the same global economy, virtually no one we talked to was thinking internationally. On the one hand, this makes perfect sense: there are no meaningful international or transatlantic communities of discourse



to target. On the other hand, there are good reasons for advocates of economic change to engage their counterparts in other countries. First of all, learning about the experience of other countries can be exemplary, inspiring, or cautionary. More importantly, international institutions have been vital in propagating and maintaining neoliberalism and dismantling national policies that obstruct the neoliberal project. Consider the role of the IMF in demanding austerity measures. People who want to push for a more inclusive economic order would do well to discuss strategies for democratizing international institutions.

It's also worth thinking about targeting more local communities of discourse, such as US states or metropolitan regions. States have at least three advantages over the nation when it comes to undertaking narrative strategy. First, a smaller universe can make it easier for a set of messages to gain traction. Smaller scale interventions, in theory at least, should yield greater results. Second, with narrative as with policy, states can act as laboratories for experimentation. The narrative work accomplished by Our Minnesota Future (a project supported by the Narrative Initiative, Demos, and Anat Shenker-Osorio, among others) bears this out. Third, states allow us to embrace collective identity and robust attachment to community without encountering the problem of nationalism. While many are ambivalent about “rallying around the flag” and celebrating the United States of America, it is less fraught to be a proud Hoosier or Californian.

## **What narratives do we need to move them?**

After determining the purpose of a narrative intervention and the audience that needs to hear it, it is appropriate to ask what the narrative might look like and which methods could usefully generate and test content. Many of the claims made by experts about the best or most resonant narratives for challenging neoliberalism are based on conjecture or limited research. We still have a lot to learn about which themes and narratives can be most useful in attracting the attention of target audiences and

shifting their way of thinking about the world. Which values and stories will be most resonant? Which will be sticky or viral? Other relevant criteria are that narratives should be “*accurate*, that is, in keeping with a reasonable interpretation of the scientific evidence, holistic, meaning that all the crises can be reasonably understood to be components of this big crisis, and effective, meaning that it should give activists a good framework for convincing non-activists of the need for action to resolve the crisis”[emphasis added].<sup>[29]</sup>

To identify ideas, values, messages and themes that fit these criteria, we should undertake rigorous research. Drawing from the best practices of strategic communications, advocates can commission opinion research: polling, focus groups, message testing, etc. This effort could go beyond the typical research methods. For instance, many real-world changes affect narratives. Certain policy ideas are game-changing: they shift class identities and reshape the political terrain. Adoption of the Affordable Care Act, for example, has led to a widespread change in how the US public thinks about healthcare. Most people now believe that decent healthcare is a right. Even without enacting a policy change, the current discussion of free college has begun to raise dissatisfaction with the cost of higher education and transform the way people think about the role of the government. We could benefit from more research on how and when policy ideas and real world developments propel narrative change.

Given the dynamic nature of narratives, some of the people we spoke with urged us to think about anthropological methods for discovering, excavating or refashioning narrative themes. Just as fashion designers send “cool hunters” into urban neighborhoods to learn what hip teens are wearing, there is a role for researching, cultivating, nurturing, and drawing out insurgent or counter-cultural narratives that are percolating among specific constituencies. Dave Mann of Grassroots Policy Project told us that certain communities have stronger connection to cultural narratives that run against the grain of the dominant worldview, groups like farmers, faith communities and people of color. Sabeel Rahman suggested a path forward was to look

for ideas percolating in communities that have their own diagnoses of power and their own vision of liberation and explore American history as a source of homegrown traditions of resistance.

## How will we disseminate those narratives?

Finally, how should we disseminate the narrative? After the process of narrative development, we must identify strategies for amplifying and spreading the narrative. There are a number of considerations in terms of how to shape the public debate:

- **Elite media versus guerilla media.** At one end of the spectrum would be interventions that aim to influence intellectuals and opinion leaders, like the Global Strategic Communications Council, which aims to change the conversation around climate. At the other end might be Operation Libero in Switzerland, which uses social media, savvy messaging, and a carefully crafted alternate narrative.
- **Mass culture change strategy.** A variety of influencers and organizations have invested in mass culture strategy. For example, Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* reignited the conversation about climate change. Organizations such as the National Domestic Workers Alliance have leveraged Hollywood productions to visiblize domestic workers and worker rights. Others, such as Color of Change, have launched campaigns to influence cultural production, using interventions like writers' rooms and campaigns calling for industry-wide changes that would impact who is telling stories and what kinds of stories get told.
- **Changing narratives by working in and through grassroots constituencies.** Communications strategy isn't just top-down. There is a critical role for involving organizers and grassroots leaders in the process of training spokespeople, developing scripts for door knocking and phone banking, outlining leadership training programs, and developing narrative. The aim is to develop ideas and insights in conjunction with the people who are in a position

to amplify them in their own constituencies. In the UK, NEON has done this sort of work. In the US, Anat Shenker-Osorio's Race Class Narrative exemplifies this process.

- **Think tanks and legislators can craft programs and policy with narrative change objectives in mind.** Examples include the Roosevelt Institute's "New Rules for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century" project and the Green New Deal.

We also heard suggestions about the value of a "rapid response" team or function. Anyone attempting to shape public conversation will tell you that it is critical to be ready for the inevitable but unpredictable moments when a political event or other occurrence opens a space for advancing campaign themes or ideas. For example, few could have predicted that teachers strikes starting in West Virginia would spark a conversation about education as a public good and investments in quality government jobs. Despite the difficulty of forecasting these moments with precision, when organizations are prepared, significant narrative victories can be won. For example, after Hurricane Sandy, Greenpeace deployed an aerial photographer to capture what became iconic images, shaping the narrative about climate destruction in the media and national consciousness. Some coalitions, such as Minnesotans for a Fair Economy, have also developed infrastructural innovations to take advantage of these moments with things like mobile communications teams, which offer flexible capacity for rapid deployment.

Neoliberalism produces innumerable crises when jobs are moved abroad, schools are closed, and different sectors of public life are pervaded by market logic. In many of these cases, people grieve the loss of institutions they are connected to, and these experiences can generate passionate feelings around the ideas of fairness and the corruption of other values. Leo Casey of the Albert Shenker Institute talked about how the teacher strikes of 2018 generated overwhelming public support, often 80% or more, suggesting the power of trusted community institutions such as schools and teachers in rallying people against a nameless, faceless, bureaucratic neoliberal system. They also

demonstrated the powerful resistance people demonstrate when the market encroaches on other values like education as a public good, neighborhood schools, connection with teachers, educational quality, and treating children with respect.

Crises like these are openings for changing the public discussion. They are also hotbeds of narrative experimentation. We can look at them and see which ideas and values were most highly shared. We should consider a crisis response plan to look for these moments and provide a timely narrative response. Because rapid response efforts are so frequently needed, they can serve as experiments to see which narratives spread farthest.

# Next conversations

The preceding set of considerations and questions can help think about the who, what, and how of narrative development and dissemination. As these processes take place, we also advocate sparking ideas by bringing people together across lines of difference to continue discussing the topic. In the time we have been researching this paper, the public discussion about neoliberalism and possibilities for structural change has evolved rapidly. Organizing unlikely gatherings and provocative conversations could push it further. Our conversations and reading engaged people on a spectrum of abstraction from analytic observer to engaged activist – academics, journalists, people in think tanks, advocates, professional communicators, organizers – all drawn from a range of disciplines and various areas of expertise. Very few were master of multiple domains. Convening insightful people with different areas of expertise could provoke new thoughts and insights. Here are a few examples:

## ► Engage thinkers with activists and organizers

Felicia Wong suggested that a logical way to develop narratives and figure out which ones stick would be to create and expand opportunities for conversation between progressive think-tanks and national organizing networks. In recent years, conversations between People’s Action and the Institute for Policy Studies suggested how fruitful this could be.

## ► Engage economic thinkers with communicators

We would like to see conversations between people who are thinking about large paradigm changes and structural shifts (academics, intellectuals, think-tanks, etc.) and

people who have practical expertise in how to change the conversation (Shenker-Osorio, Aubrun, Smucker, etc.).

## ► Convene people from different countries who are working on these ideas

Some of this is already happening – for example NEON held a transatlantic conference in the fall of 2018 – but more would be beneficial. Social movements in different countries are facing broadly similar structural challenges, but often operate in isolation. More transatlantic conversation could encourage narrative leaps.

## ► Create virtual spaces for collaboration

Create digital infrastructure to encourage conversation and innovation, such as a Slack channel, website or listserv. This could be a place for people talking and thinking about these questions to share best practices and also make space for new ideas to ferment.

## ► Connect to existing nodes of conversation

Build on current efforts by organizers and activists to bring their work into this discussion, or rather bring this discussion into their work. For example, Anthony Thigpenn from California Calls is leading an effort with the State Power Caucus to construct a political alliance among national organizing networks, unions, Democrats and social movement formations, following the example of the Movement for Black Lives. Part of the construction of the alliance could be creating spaces for the participants to meet regularly with key thinkers and analysts to make the questions raised in this report, and the people involved, an organic part of the process.



# Conclusion

The emergence of a new economic paradigm or structure is a political project. This moment of crisis is one in which various options are possible; the winning one will have to be built through intellectual labor, strategic coalitions, power building, and a long string of political and policy victories. As Felicia Wong put it to us, “crafting a new narrative happens in the doing, not the thinking.” We can’t always tell which words, phrases, stories or arguments will turn out to be sticky until we’ve had an opportunity to test them in the public sphere. Sometimes, you just have to figure it out as you go along.

Yet, it is a period of radical possibility. We careen from terror that the world is ending to hope that a new dawn is breaking. As the disruption increases, so too does the possibility for positive change. Across the US and Europe, people who could be feeling utter despair are instead talking about the power of community, belonging, equity and justice.

The moment is ripe for a narrative strategy that can encourage a progressive paradigm shift, bring together a constituency for a new economic order, and spark the ideas that will prompt an economy that is more fair, sustainable, equitable, and democratic.

# Footnotes

[1] See e.g. “Rethinking Capitalism: An Introduction,” *Rethinking Capitalism* by Michael Jacobs and Mariana Mazzucato, 2016.

[2] E.g. “We live in an age of astonishing inequality. Income and wealth disparities in the United States have risen to heights not seen since the Gilded Age and are among the highest in the developed world. Median wages for U.S. workers have stagnated for nearly fifty years. Fewer and fewer younger Americans can expect to do better than their parents. Racial disparities in wealth and well-being remain stubbornly persistent. In 2017, life expectancy in the United States declined for the third year in a row, and the allocation of healthcare looks both inefficient and unfair. Advances in automation and digitization threaten even greater labor market disruptions in the years ahead. Climate change – fueled disasters increasingly disrupt everyday life.” Suresh Naidu, Dani Rodrik and Gabriel Zucman, “Economics After Neoliberalism,” *Boston Review*, Feb. 15, 2019. Source URL: <https://bostonreview.net/forum/suresh-naidu-dani-rodrik-gabriel-zucman-economics-after-neoliberalism>

[3] Joseph Stiglitz, “Progressive Capitalism is not an Oxymoron,” *New York Times*, April 19, 2019.

[4] Anne-Marie Slaughter, “Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin want to create a new world order.” *Financial Times*, July 22, 2018. Source URL: <https://www.scribd.com/document/392106112/Patriarchal-Authoritarianism>

[5] Alain Touraine, *Beyond Neoliberalism*, Polity Press: 2001.

[6] Davies, William. *The Limits of Neoliberalism: Authority, Sovereignty and the Logic of Competition*. SAGE Publications: 2017.

[7] Stuart Hall, Doreen Massey, Michael Rustin, *After Neoliberalism? The Kilburn Manifesto*, Lawrence and Wishart, 2015.

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# Appendix 1. Interviewees

Thank you to the following individuals who participated in interviews as part of this project.

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Jonathan Smucker, Beyond the Choir

Brian Stout, Consultant

Ruy Teixeira, Center for American Progress

Ari Wallach, Longpath Labs

Felicia Wong, Roosevelt Institute

## Appendix 2. Bibliography

We found the following books helpful as we explored the questions and issues raised in this paper.

*America Beyond Capitalism*, Gar Alperowitz

*Capitalism: the future of an Illusion*, Fred Block

*The Power of Market Fundamentalism*, Fred Block and Margaret Summers

*Can Neoliberalism be Saved from Itself?*, Colin Crouch

*The Limits of Neoliberalism*, William Davie

*Capitalism*, Nancy Fraser and Rahel Jaeggi

*A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, David Harvey

*Rethinking Capitalism*, Michael Jacobs and Mariana Mazzucato

*The Populist Explosion*, John Judis

*The Rise and Fall of Neoliberal Capitalism*, David Kotz

*On Populist Reason*, Ernesto Laclau

*Post-Capitalism*, Paul Mason

*The Kilburn Manifesto*, Stuart Hall, Doreen Massey, Michael Rustin

*Populism Now!*, David McKnight

*Democracy in Chains*, Nancy McLean

*For a Left Populism*, Chantal Mouffe

*What Money Can't Buy*, Michael Sandel

*Social Class in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Mike Savage

*The Crisis of the Middle-Class Constitution*, Ganesh Sitaraman

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*People, Power and Profits*, Joseph Stiglitz

*The Optimistic Leftist*, Ruy Teixeira