

The Lonely Century

Ross Welcome to Renegade Inc. The pandemic has physically isolated everyone. But another epidemic has been with us for longer than this virus. The loneliness epidemic is a silent killer that breeds in large groups of people. Toxic social media, polarised politics and decades of neoliberal economics, have pushed communities to breaking point. The question now, how do we avert the lonely century?

Ross Noreena, welcome to Renegade Inc., in partnership with KAKAnomics, our wonderful Norwegian friends - a Nordic meeting place, as it's called. So what we're trying to do is attract thinkers, writers, authors to come and talk about what they have discovered. You've written *The Lonely Century*, a wonderful book. What did you discover about the Nordics or Europe that shocked you or surprised you when you were writing the book?

Noreena Hertz Well, in my research, what I discovered was that loneliness really is a global phenomenon affecting all of us. And even though, of course, there is a crisis of elderly loneliness in the United Kingdom - two in five pensioners - their main form of company is their television or pet. So even though loneliness is an issue amongst the old, it's actually amongst the young who are the loneliest. And that was one of the aha moments that got me thinking about this whole subject because I was teaching at university and I realised that students were coming to me and in office hours they were confiding in me how lonely and isolated they felt. And this was a new phenomenon. I've been teaching for many years and it was really only about five years ago that I started realising that something was going on. And it wasn't only that but when I assigned group assignments to students, I also noticed that they were finding it increasingly hard to interact in person face to face.

Ross Wow! And was that a light bulb moment, too?

Noreena Hertz Yes. And I had dinner with the president of one of America's biggest universities, and he said to me that he was noticing exactly the same thing to the extent that there they were having to run how to read a face in real life classes. So I thought something here is going on. And that was kind of one of a few very different aha moments I had at roughly the same time that made me think, OK, I want to explore loneliness in much more depth. I define loneliness in perhaps a broader sense than some people might think of it. I define loneliness as not only feeling disconnected from your friends or family, not only feeling that you're lacking intimacy or company, but I define loneliness as also feeling disconnected from your fellow citizens, from your politicians, from the state. Loneliness is also feeling unsupported by your government. I see loneliness as being something political as well as personal, economic as well as individual.

Ross What has been sort of one of the most surprising things when you've written the book? What's changed you as an author?

Noreena Hertz So I'm somebody who always saw myself as an internationalist, someone who saw the value in multilateralism, in multilateral organisations. But I think in my earlier work, I hadn't really acknowledged the importance too of the local and acknowledged it explicitly.

Ross When you say the local, you mean the community?

Noreena Hertz Like really our local neighbourhoods, our local high streets, our local communities. And doing this research, I came to realise how important the local is. So I'm not saying that we shouldn't bridge. We need, of course, to bridge between communities, but we also need to anchor ourselves, nurture, support, water, tend our local environments, our local high streets, our local shops, our local libraries, our local public parks, our local youth clubs, if we are to be able to not only be rooted and then enable the branches of globalism to grow, but also it's in these micro interactions, in our physical environments that I argue that we best are able to practise what we might think of as inclusive democracy. Through even at a local grocery store, you're kind of working at how you navigate the space and who goes first with the trolley or in your local community centre, the role you might be playing. It's through those micro local interactions that we learn skills like kindness, reciprocity, civility - the kind of skills that really underpin the kind of democracy we should aspire to. Local independent shops play, and historically have played, a critical role in nurturing communities and helping people come together, whether it's the barber shops or local bookshops, which historically have played, you know, in many countries, a really important role in anchoring and nurturing communities. A chain you might be surprised about, McDonalds, plays actually an important role in many communities by offering low cost coffee and tea and enabling people to just sit there for a time and congregate, has actually played quite an important one. We might think of a third space role in community building. So this isn't big companies necessarily bad or capitalism, you know, disastrous. But it's about thinking about what kind of capitalism do we want and what role can business play and where does government need to step in?

Ross Because there are a lot of corporates out there who realise this and realise the nuance. So they'll go to an advertising agency and say, we actually need to get in on this sort of megatrend, if you like, which is looking after people. Famously, the Pepsi ad, which was disastrous, which tried to hijack, protest and say, you know what, if you just drink Pepsi, all your economic and social ills will go away. I mean, that's a classic example, is it not, of getting this horribly wrong and trying to hijack what is a social movement?

Noreena Hertz Yes, and I call it 'wewashing'.

Ross What is that? What is wewashing?

Noreena Hertz So there's that term greenwashing. So it's when brands affix a kind of green label on something that's obviously a toxic product. So in the same way, what we've seen in recent years has been a rise in wewashing, so seeing communities as a brand being stamped on products or services. I mean, if you think about Apple stores, for example, they kind of rename themselves Town Squares, their aisles as avenues. So kind of taking over the lexicon of community, but not actually delivering anything meaningful. And you see it, of course, with the rise of co-living and co-working spaces, which, again, used wielded community as a marketing tool. WeWork is, of course, the most famous of those perhaps in its failed IPO, not because actually the premise isn't right, people understandably do want to work together and live together. But it used the word 'community' one hundred and fifty times in its marketing prospectus for its IPO. And yet when I went to WeWork and spoke with senior executives

there and they told me very proudly about how much they kind of measure everything and they get data and everything. And I said, OK, you're all about community. How do you measure community? And they said, tellingly, I thought, the number of transactions that take place between our members. I think the idea that community can be imposed from the top down, the idea that community isn't something that we have to co-create, that we actually have to do. The idea that community is a label rather than a practise, I think has been quite misguided. And we've seen businesses try and do that. And we've seen politicians, of course, also try and co-opt the language of community without recognising explicitly the effort that building a community can take. I don't want to romanticise the word community. I want to be clear on this because communities can be very excluding as well. So you know, we can talk about nurturing communities, but at the same time, we have to be, I think, very cognisant of the need to bridge communities as well and make sure that they're not so exclusive that they become that the only people who get given community, get the privilege of community, are the wealthy.

Ross One of the points that we make fairly regularly on this programme is that back in the 70s, 60s, 70s, beginning of the 80s, politicians and their rhetoric, they'd often use the word society, which is good for society. And suddenly something changed around the mid 80s. Who knows what happened then.. But basically politicians started using the word economy instead of society. Just talk a little bit about that, because is there any way in your book you can relate that change to why we're dealing with this epidemic and loneliness now?

Noreena Hertz Absolutely. I mean, there are a number of drivers for why we've become more lonely but what we might think of as neoliberal capitalism. So a particular form of capitalism that really kind of grows in its ascendancy in the early 80s under Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, and then became pretty much the orthodoxy across the globe. This particular form of capitalism, I think, has a lot to answer for when it comes to the rise in loneliness. On few counts. First, because really under neoliberalism, what we've seen over the past few decades has been a massive widening of the gap in terms of income and wealth between different groups in society, and meaning that considerable numbers of people literally have been left behind, forsaken and abandoned in economic terms, and therefore feel more marginalised, more lonely in that more political sense. But also because the neoliberal neoliberal mindset, what we might think of it, a mindset really championed by governments, a hyper competitive, hyper individualistic mindset, was never going to be compatible with a cohesive, collaborative society. And, you know, in many ways, it's not that we are instinctively selfish people. I mean, we're not. There's very interesting research in evolutionary biology, which shows that actually at our core we are not selfish, but decades of that being the mindset which has been valorised, you know, it has taken its toll and people came to see themselves increasingly as competitors, not collaborators, takers, not givers, hoarder's, not sharers. In some ways, that was the rational response to a world in which if I don't look after myself, who else will? But this me first, self-interest first mindset inevitably was going to mean a lonelier, more atomised, more fragmented society. As early as 1992, researchers started to see a link between social isolation, people who felt socially isolated, and people who were voting for right wing populists. Research done in France showed a link between Le Pen voters back then and people who were socially isolated. And I also crisscrossed the globe interviewing and listening to right wing populist voters. So from Trump voters, railroad workers who actually had historically for many generations voted Democrat who turned to Trump in 2016.

Video clip (Donald Trump) Every day I wake up determined to deliver a better life for the people all across this nation that have been ignored, neglected and abandoned. I have visited the laid off factory workers and the communities crushed by our horrible and unfair trade deals. These are the forgotten men and women of our country, and they are forgotten, but they're not going to be forgotten long.

Noreena Hertz The forgotten people. I hear you. I'm listening to you. Both Le Pen and Trump have effectively used that rhetoric in the past and of course, also offering community in a very exclusive and excluding form, speaking too to another trait that the lonely disproportionately have, which is to see the world as a more hostile, threatening place, a world in which outsiders need to be shut out. I'm not, of course, saying that everyone who feels lonely sees the world in this way, or that everyone who feels lonely is aggressive towards outsiders. Of course, that isn't the case. But statistically, the lonely disproportionately showed such tendencies and right wing populists have played to this very effectively.

Ross We talked in that first half about how politicians exploit people, especially populist politicians, with the offer of community, because people feel atomised, desperate, lonely. I just want to make this link because we've done a lot of work on inner city estates and gangs. Is it also the case that gangs offer the same kind of thing as a politician? A gang will say, or gang leader will say, 'Look, we know you've come from a broken family. We know there's an absentee father. Actually, you're going to be way more protected with us and there's an economic benefit to that. We'll look after you. We'll also look after your family. Come this way'. Is the mechanism with inner city gangs and populist politicians similar?

Noreena Hertz There's definitely a parallel that one can make, often weaponizing community in a way to exploit, as you use that term, I think it is correct in some regard to use - exploiting the vulnerabilities of those who feel lonely and isolated.

Ross Is it that neoliberalism as an economic system has ridden roughshod, if you like, over those communities and created that vacuum which allows those populist leaders and those gangs to exploit? Let me qualify. Because in the book, what you've done is you haven't shied away from criticising the neo liberal mentality and the system, if you like. And that's rare because a lot of authors, economists, will get to that point and go, 'Oh, well, I don't talk too much about that'. But you've gone straight for it. There's a lot of noise. You've gone for the signal - actually, this is a neo liberal problem?

Noreena Hertz Yeah. I mean, I think it is a number of factors of which neo liberalism is clearly one. You know, if we look at the drivers in particular of right wing populism, there are a number of drivers of which loneliness and economic circumstance are critical ones. But they're not the only ones. So I think we need to be clear about that. And with the rise of loneliness, neoliberalism clearly does play a part. I mean, we can see it in the way that language has evolved over the past few decades. So whereas in the past, words like 'duty', 'share', were used much more regularly, such words got supplanted over the past few decades with things like, 'individual' or 'myself' even when it comes to pop song lyrics. So if you look at pop song lyrics - and people have studied pop song lyrics from the 1970s onwards - what you see is through the 80s onwards, words like 'we', 'us', 'our' in pop songs falling at the same

time as words like, 'I', 'me', 'my' going up. So, 'We Are the Champions' - Queen, versus, 'I am God' - Kanye West.

Ross If we agree with your central thesis that this is the lonely century and we're in the midst of it. If you look at what's happening, for instance, with antidepressant drugs, you know, they're being prescribed hand over fist. We do have this atomisation. You just have to look at some of the architecture in London, if you want neo liberal type architecture, whether it's a park bench that doesn't let a rough sleeper or a homeless person sleep on it, over to the glass and chrome boxes, which are apparently luxury apartments. When we talk about the pendulum swinging back and forth, if we agree that that isn't the optimum state for society, where are we on that trajectory? Where is the pendulum at the moment and where should it be heading?

Noreena Hertz Well, I mean, at the moment, if you take for example - we've talked about neo liberalism and the role that it plays in the loneliness crisis is a significant one. But if we take another aspect of the loneliness crisis, another key driver, social media, for example, and our smartphones. What my research has made clear - and I came to this really quite neutral, just thinking what role, if any, does social media play in today's loneliness crisis? - and what I found through digging through the academic literature and also through my interviews, is that it's playing a really, really significant role, especially amongst the young. One young boy who I interviewed, Peter, really his story, I think was very poignant, but also epitomised kind of what's going on. He told me about how lonely he felt when he would post on Instagram and then wait, wait, wait desperately to see if people liked his post and if they didn't ask himself, what am I doing wrong? Or Claudia a teenager who told me about her friends, having told her that they weren't going out after school. And then she was scrolling on her social media feeds and she saw that they were going out having fun without her and she felt so excluded. She felt so unpopular. Social media companies also, of course, playing a massive role in amplifying divisiveness, hatred, anti other sentiment, racist rhetoric, anti-Semitic rhetoric, sexist rhetoric, etc.. A key part of the reason society is more atomised, people feel more lonely and excluded, that's a whole sector of society that governments have not sufficiently regulated. In many ways, social media companies are the tobacco companies of the 21st century and yet, for the ill that they potentially create, are being very light touch regulated. So when you ask about kind of some of the ways that capitalism has swung too far in one direction, that would be a way. You know, we need governments to properly regulate social media companies so that they have a duty of care to their users. And when it comes to younger users, I would go so far as to, say, ban addictive social media for children with the knowledge that in so doing, social media companies will be incentivised to make their products less addictive because they are consciously designed as such, like slot machines with colours and flashing lights. And it's making life less connected, paradoxically, more atomised, more fragmented and more lonely for many people.

Ross But the irony is it's sold as community, as social. It's sold as these things. And what you're saying, you're saying in the book, actually, it's the polar opposite of that?

Noreena Hertz Yes. And I do acknowledge that there are, of course, some cases - the LGBTQ kid growing up in a small village somewhere where there's no one like them around who has found their community thanks to social media. And there are those examples. So this isn't true in all cases. But on balance, net, social media clearly is making the world a lonelier,

more atomised place. And in my book, I have lots of examples. And actually, I was very touched just in the last few weeks somebody wrote to me in the wake of reading about the book, and they said that they had been somebody who was very lonely, who had found their community in far right groups on Facebook, and thankfully had realised the kind of dangers of the path they were going down. But again, what are these social media companies doing when it comes to stopping really, at times, dangerous groups mushrooming on their platforms? Incredibly little.

Ross When we come to solutions, you've said coming together. The tagline is really interesting in the book. You're an author that says, look, here's all the problem, you get a boot, go and sort it. You actually come to solutions. So what would your three solutions be? And I know that's a little bit glib, but what are your three solutions so we can come together in a world that's pulling apart?

Noreena Hertz Can I have three for governments and three for individuals?

Ross You can have three for both. But don't mess up because the future of this century is on your shoulders.

Noreena Hertz Of course, my book's full of many suggestions all the way through. But if I had to pick three, when it comes to governments, I would say first, governments need to invest in the infrastructure of community. There need to be public spaces where people of all kinds can meet, mingle, do things together. In the United Kingdom, 800 public libraries were shut down since 2008, the financial crisis, a third of youth clubs, day centres for elderly people, parks losing investment, all these public spaces seeing funding slashed. The temptation is going to be, of course, now that we're moving into a time of economic downturn to keep slashing such funding. And I would say that really shouldn't be the case. Second thing that governments really can and should do is regulate, as we've discussed, social media companies. Ban addictive social media for under 16 year olds, for example. And third, value care and kindness more explicitly. It's a travesty that those who care and serve us in kind ways - teachers, nurses - are often the least paid when it comes to public sector jobs. That needs to be reversed as a matter of urgency. When it comes to individuals, there's much that we can do too. We can put down our phones and be present with each other. It's hard given how addictive they are. I literally try and put my phone out of arm's reach because if it's within arm's reach, I do tend to reach out to it.

Ross You give yourself a physical barrier?.

Noreena Hertz Absolutely. Absolutely. I think, also, we can value kindness more in each other and in those around us - something that we often have stopped seeing as a quality to valorise. And thirdly, in a very practical way, especially now, given how tough times are, think about whether there's somebody in our own network who might be feeling lonely. And if there is, reach out to them, pick up the phone, even better meet them in a socially distanced way. Just showing someone that we see them, that we hear them, that they're visible to us, that they matter, can make a huge difference in someone's life.

Ross Do you subscribe to David Goodhart's idea? He's written a book called Head, Hand, Heart. And we've given an awful lot of credence to the cognitive class, as he calls it, you

know, people who use their brains, but actually the hand and heart people who work with their hands, empathic carers, etc., do you think that we have, through this narrow liberal lens and financialization, given an awful lot of credit and pay and some societal status to people who've been the bankers, the politicians, the lawyers and actually the people that we've seen during the pandemic who are absolutely vital to key workers, have been neglected?

Noreena Hertz Well, I actually did some research as part of this book. I looked at a leading jobs website and I looked at jobs that specified qualities like kindness, kind, care, those kind of words in the ad. And those jobs paid significantly less than the market average. So the market clearly has undervalued such qualities. And yes, it's not enough in the United Kingdom, every Thursday night during lockdown, we stood on our streets and we clapped for our carers, for our national health service workers, which is I mean, obviously we wanted all of us wanted to show how grateful we were. But moving forward, claps for carers isn't enough. We have to pay those in society who care for others significantly more, because if we are to truly reconcile capitalism with compassion, governments will have to step in because there has been a market failure in this regard.

Ross Congratulations on the book, *The Lonely Century* - two and a half years in the making, but really vital, especially now.

Noreena Hertz Thank you.

Ross Thank you very much for your time.