

Book Review

Title: *The Lonely Century: coming together in a world that's pulling apart.*
By Noreena Hertz (2020). 399 pp. Amsterdam, Sceptre ISBN: 9789000368778.
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Reviewed by Max Runge, University of Antwerp

In her book *The Lonely Century*, Hertz argues that loneliness is one of the most pressing problems today with major consequences both for society and for the individual. Loneliness does not only affect the mental and physical health of the individual. It also has negative consequences for the economy, politics and voting intentions. In this book, Hertz discusses the different causes, consequences and possible solutions to tackle the problem of loneliness. For loneliness is not inevitable. “Community is something what we should create ourselves actively, if we all want to benefit from it” (Hertz, 2020, p. 105). That is, if we build communities, we might save ourselves from an age of loneliness. In this review we will first look at the technical aspects, then the content and structure of the book. Afterwards the book will be evaluated with critical notes, the importance for political psychology, the goal of the author and a conclusion.

Technical aspects

To go over some technical aspects, the book is 399 pages long. From the 399 pages, 108 pages consist of the bibliography, the notes and the register. The book contains eleven chapters and there are up to 80 notes per chapter, because of all the references to research, policies and examples. On the cover, you can see different people all sitting on their own apartment in a flat. There are no other illustrations in the book. The release date of the book is 2020, after the first wave of the COVID-19 crisis passed.

The Lonely Century

The book consists of eleven chapters, all focusing on a different view and aspect of the concept ‘loneliness’. In the first chapter, *this is the lonely century*, Hertz describes how she got in touch with the problem and what has driven her to write about this subject. Hertz sees loneliness not only as a feeling of disconnection from family and friends. It includes more: feeling disconnected from the government, the community, fellow citizens, employers and politicians. The feeling of being unseen, unheard and invisible. With a few anecdotes from her own life as a

professor at University College London and with some shocking numbers, Hertz tries to concretize the issue.

In the chapter *loneliness is deadly*, Hertz is summing up and connecting different researches about loneliness and the effects on the mental and physical health of a human being. To give an example, loneliness is as deadly as 15 cigarettes a day. Loneliness causes stress, and stress sickens the body. Yet we can tackle these health-issues. Hertz gives an optimistic view about the positive health effects of living together with good relations to people around you. Society needs a change in culture where care, friendliness and compassion are being rewarded.

Chapter three is called *the lonely mouse*. To me, this is the most interesting chapter of the book. It's about the effect of loneliness on politics and voting intentions. According to Hertz, many people are attracted to populism because they do not feel connected to the community. They do not feel heard within the mainstream political specter. Populists make people part of a community, which is a feeling that they are not used to. Trump for instance often uses the pronouns 'we' and 'us'. Trump thereby makes people feel as if they belong to a community, a bigger narrative. Chants like 'Make America Great Again' also contribute to such feelings. Indeed, Hertz says that we need politicians that can strengthen the feeling of a community on local, national and international levels.

This is a bridge to the next chapter, called *the lonely city*. The epicenter of loneliness lies in the cities, which is a result of policies and the rise of technology. More people are living on their own. Living together with a romantic relation is not as common anymore and people are getting married and have children at a late age compared to 25 years ago. Modern life in the city makes us anti-social, Hertz argues. This is due to social changes, but also due to technological changes. The loneliness-economy is a consequence of the free-market ideology, where nothing is from nor for the community or its citizens. Everything is in the hands of big companies that are based around anonymous share-holders: AirBnB, Uber, Uber eats, Deliveroo, etcetera. There is no communal life left in the city, also because of the rise of expats and people who are only living in the city merely for work. Hertz argues in favour of the return of fixed structures and more physical personal interactions instead of digital ones.

Chapter five is called *the contactless era*. Hertz discusses that people are getting less and less in contact with each other. It would however benefit the individual to have human contact: in the supermarket for instance. It would also benefit society at large if there was more human contact: e.g. it would be good for all of us if we would have been less hostile to homeless people. Here she does an appeal on us, the reader, to be friendly towards each other and to bond with the local community.

The next chapter is called *our screens, ourselves*. Hertz continues to describe the main issue of the lonely century: digitalization. Especially young people are victim of the digital age, because of their dependence on it and their vulnerable age. From 'Instagram-reality' to online bullying. This is also a consequence of policies: the government and other institutions are using digital solutions themselves and are making policies around digitalization instead of limiting it. People are addicted to the online world, and become lonelier in the physical world as a consequence. Digital platforms should be regulated and decency should become central in algorithms instead of hate. But the main solution is a change in behavior of the consumer.

The seventh chapter is called *alone in the office*. Loneliness on the workplace has also grown, mainly because of policies. Flexible workplaces and 'office gardens' stimulate people to avoid contact with others and their surroundings. The kind of work has also changed: we spend more time in the office, more time on e-mailing and more time on telecommuting. Hertz is pointing to the responsibility of the companies, for instance in the collective employment agreement.

In chapter eight, *the digital whip*, Hertz is criticizing the use of algorithms, which replaces human beings. This differs from a solicitation procedure. Namely, a smart-camera watches the employee and interprets their behavior solely through the use of algorithms. More policies on regulating algorithms and robotization might stop this process.

Chapter nine is called *sex, love and robots*. This chapter is about the lack of intimacy and affection. This gap is more and more filled in with paid intimacy and even robots both for old people who have no loved one's anymore as well as young people who are just too busy with their careers and have no social network. According to Hertz, society loses its fundamentals if we stop caring for each other. The human nature of caring for each other should become central, which can't be done by hiring other people or making robots.

The second-last chapter is called *the loneliness-economy*. Hertz is concluding that the economy based on loneliness got hit badly by the COVID-19 pandemic. In times of need, the local companies and local communities helped the one's suffering. It's crucial that local independent companies won't be pushed away by large multinationals. Private and privatized communities should be protected, but only if it's done for a higher moral obligation than making money.

The final chapter, *coming together in a world that's pulling apart*, is a hopeful ending and the conclusion of the book. The COVID-19 crisis is finally showing how shaky our society is looking at human contact and loneliness. Hertz explains that loneliness has to be interpreted from a much broader perspective than is done in previous books and research. Many previous literature is connecting ideology to the psychological concept 'loneliness'. Conservatives often blame it on the fall of the traditional family, the left blames it on privatization and sees people all the time as victims. Noreena Hertz is pleading to connect capitalism with care and compassion again. Change begins with ourselves: from rat-race to relations.

This book is specifically relevant for the field of political psychology, because of the extensive subject in the book about the effect of loneliness on populism. According to Hertz, especially right-wing populism is gaining popularity in the Western world because of loneliness. Supporters are having a feeling of being left behind by the government, social institutions and employers. They don't have the feeling of being part of a community. (Right-wing) populist parties are filling that void with political rhetoric. They use 'we' all the time, or the 'family of [party]'. Supporters are gaining the sense of being part of a community. Populist leaders are often speaking about 'us' versus 'them' to strengthen that feeling. The fear for immigrants is used to create a sense of community, an "Us vs. Them" narrative. Trump rallies, for instance, are known for people wearing red, caps with 'Make America Great Again' on it and 'MAGA'-pins. The supporters are singing chants (like 'Lock her up') to make them feel like one big family. Populist parties in Europe are organizing summer camps for the youth and beer evenings in nightclubs for people below the age of 25. All this to achieve, what is called, *belongingness* or a *sense of belonging* (Hagerty et al., 1996). Up until now, the effect of loneliness in society on populism has not been sufficiently emphasized in academic literature on political psychology. Hopefully this book is the start of more awareness within the field of political psychology to further research on the psychological concept of loneliness.

The Lonely Century is of interest for anyone who is interested in political psychology. Hertz shows that politics is deeply connected with our feelings of belonging and loneliness. Hertz convincingly shows that loneliness and uprootedness can endanger social stability. She convincingly describes the relations between the psychological, the local and the social domains of our lives. That is, Hertz tries to involve the reader, by constantly asking directly if the reader recognizes a certain problem in his/her own surroundings. Hertz does a good job in breaking down the problems, causes and consequences of the concept 'loneliness' to the reader's perspective. On the one hand, the loneliness we feel in our lives did not fall out of the sky: it is the conse-

quence of neoliberal policies. On the other hand, the decline of family and neighborhood likewise gave rise to new political movements such as populism.

Yet I however disagree with Hertz' pessimistic outlook. I will give two examples to illustrate my point. First, some examples and scientific researches that Hertz is using to address the problem are too far-fetched. This is of course to make her point clear, but it could scare off some readers. For example, she talks about sex-robots, robots for elderly people and so on. Yet this is not the norm. Most people use robots not to escape human contact but in order have more time to have human contact. Take for example the washing-machine, the vacuum cleaner, and so on. These are robots that give us the opportunity to spend less time on housekeeping, so that there will be more time for social gatherings. Second, Hertz, in her chapter on social-media, is focusing on the dangers of social media and the consequences for the 'real' outside world. She however ignores the fact that social media – and the internet more generally – can also bring people together from all over the world. It offers platforms for people to meet each other which used to be impossible in the pre-digital age.

The author does describe the possibilities of technology to fight loneliness, but only in the future tense and as a possibility. This is however already happening and will continue to be so. Technology can also – and did – help many people during the COVID-19 pandemic. How would we have felt today without Zoom or Teams? Now the theatres are closed, many performances can be seen live on Zoom. Now we cannot meet our grandparents, we meet them on Zoom. Technology is not only a threat and this is underexposed in the book.

Her solutions are also unrealistic sometimes. In my opinion she is too optimistic about the influence of policies. Hertz continually emphasizes the influence of policies on our feelings of loneliness. If we simply change our politics, Hertz seems to believe, we can thereby escape our condition of uprootedness. I believe this is a utopian approach to the relation between politics and social-life: we should not put so much trust in the manufacturability of our daily lives. Indeed, Hertz is focusing too much on treating the symptoms instead of focusing on the underlying structures such as globalization and technologization. These underlying structures cannot be changed by politics. You might slow them down, but it seems that globalization and technology are inevitably connected to modern life. Hertz' utopian approach also blinds her particularly for certain civil liberties. She for example proposes to regulate social media. Surely, the world would be a better place if everyone treated each other kindly on social-media. However, forcing people to be kind contradicts our right to the freedom of speech.

The negative aspects aside, Hertz is addressing a subject which was underexposed for a long time. There was never a (semi-)scientific book or article that treated loneliness with the definition Hertz uses: Loneliness' effects on physical health, mental health, politics, macroeconomics and businesses. To my knowledge, no book has been published before that treats the causes of loneliness so thoroughly. Hertz does an excellent job in connecting the current COVID-19 crisis to the problem of loneliness. The COVID-19 crisis accelerated and exposed the loneliness crisis.

With every aspect Hertz is explaining in the different chapters, she uses the same structure: the occasion with a personal anecdote, an overview of relevant scientific researches and policies regarding the aspect and finally, a link to the present day, the COVID-19 crisis and the connection to reader's personal surroundings. Hertz gives a clear overview of the causes, consequences and solutions based on anecdotes, researches, mind experiments, policies and the link to certain philosophers and psychologists. With this fixed structure and the combination of relatively easy to read language Hertz made an accessible book around the psychological concept of loneliness.

The author's main goal is to bring attention to the problem of loneliness, which is more urgent than one might think. It could have a disruptive effect if society does not tackle the problem. It is a cry for help and the first step Hertz does is an appeal on the reader: try to put your

phone away more often, try to connect with your local community and smile occasionally to the cashier. Noreena Hertz is described by Vogue as ‘one of the world’s most inspiring women’ (Noreena.com, 2020) and by The Observer as ‘one of the world’s leading thinkers’ (Noreena.com, 2020). She is a honorary professor at University College London and is an opinion maker for The New York Times, The Guardian, The Washington Post and The Financial Times. Previously Hertz wrote books about the negative effects of global capitalism and the burden of debt in the developing world (Hertz, 2005).

All in all, the book the book gives a clear overview of the different causes (globalization, technologization & decay of social institutions), the problems of loneliness (physical health, mental health, macroeconomics, politics, microeconomics) and possible solutions. The book lies a broad fundament to further research the psychological concept of loneliness. To further dive into the subject of loneliness, the negative effects of globalization and political psychology, I suggest: 1) *Bowling alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, by Robert Putnam. In this book, Putnam is addressing loneliness as one of the first writers (Putnam, 2000); 2) *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, by Charles Taylor. This is recommended as a more historically and philosophically genealogy about the rise of loneliness in modern times. (Taylor, 1989); 3) *National Populism: The Revolt against Liberal Democracy*, by Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin. This last recommendation gives an overview of populism in the west, the causes of it and the consequences for Western democracies (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018).

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