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Boomers, Doomers, and Zoomers: Examining America's Existential Moment

by

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Boomers, Doomers, and Zoomers: Examining America's Existential Moment

Dissertation Abstract—Idaho State University (2021)

The early 2020s have been described as an “existential moment” for the United States by pundits and the public because of the culmination of many factors which cause uncertainty in the practices and culture of Americans. Polarization, geographic sorting, and increased political instability are cited as symptoms of this notion. This dissertation uses both existential and post-structural philosophy to examine some of the possible contributing factors to the urgency and division in American culture experienced at this time. Rapid changes in techne, or the means by which tasks are accomplished, the American mental health crisis, and the COVID-19 pandemic are demonstrated as contributing factors to the cultural divisions witnessed among Americans. Utilizing current scholarship on the disruptive nature of new technologies and data on diseases of despair, this dissertation argues that the divisions among Americans are a result of real conflicts in interest between groups that experience different cultural and economic realities. As the coastal cities become more dominant in both economic and cultural terms, rural America is particularly affected by economic disruption and cultural identity problems. Many of the groups that are at a high risk of labor disruption due to changing technologies are also at a higher risk of being victims of the emerging disease of despair crisis, particularly uneducated rural white men. The maintenance of past and existing cultural notions regarding human nature as an inherent moral good make up an important part of this group's identity at a time when the economic realities of changing techne are incompatible with those expectations. This conflict between culture and economic reality is a major contributing factor to the current existential crisis of culture in the American context.

Keywords: Existentialism, mental health, automation, techne, political culture

Chapter I: Introduction

The current moment facing humanity is relatively unique in the number of crises and rapid developments occurring simultaneously. Climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, market uncertainty, and a wavering of the 20th century international dominance of liberalism converge on a moment of rapid international economic growth and development. The United States is particularly challenged in its position, having been hit hard by the pandemic. Simultaneously, its position as the defender of democracy has been outflanked by authoritarian leadership abroad and populist unrest at home. While the United States is recovering from the pandemic and mass economic indicators have begun to return to normal, there is a qualitative sense that American political culture and dominance may never be the same. Even early in 2021 events like the January 6th capitol insurrection, increased racial tension, and the return of the United States' mass shooting epidemic indicate that the culture and experience of America may remain in crisis for the immediate future.

Non-Academic Salience in an Academic Contribution

This moment has been described as “existential” by media outlets, politicians, and analysts. They describe climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic as “existential threats” with the ability to fundamentally change or destroy American society as it is known today (Stanton 2020). Some analysts invoke existential philosophy to personify the United States as the subject of a collective existential crisis, one which is moving us towards a collective identity crisis or threatening the very existence of the United States as a distinct political unit. The former is the form of “existential” on which this dissertation will focus. Republicans have inconsistently held a similar position for decades, describing changes in America's attitudes about the LGBT community, racism, and sexism as indicative of a culture war being waged on traditional values.

Yet, in using the phrase “existential” these positions miss the advantages that an ordered examination of existentialism provides for understanding the experience of America by its disparate groups and everyday citizens.

This generalized approach focuses incorrectly on the destination rather than the journey of existential transformation and treats a construct, rather than a human subject, as the entity experiencing existential processes. Existential philosophy focuses primarily on the constant process of “becoming” rather than the immediate, static state of “being.” In addition, existential philosophy usually focuses on the individual human experience of existence. We affect the collective process of “becoming” for one another because of social and political interaction, but this is different from analyzing a country as if it is not made up of millions of individuals experiencing this existential moment in unique ways. The turn of the 2020s is an existential moment in America because of the disparate humans experiencing this process of change rather than the gravity of the institutional situation. The Trump supporting coal miner in Appalachia who is worried about the decline of fossil fuels and conservative values in America has differing experiences of the same historical time than does the Black Lives Matter protestor in Missouri, yet they both may sense the urgency of the current moment. Both may also simultaneously feel the weight of their relative freedom colliding with the limitations of their place in America. This creates a tension that is palpable in the political climate of the day between what America was and what it is becoming. Existential theory allows us to explore this phenomenological aspect of American political culture in a different way by focusing on the experiences of individuals that culminate in the sense that this moment is “existential” for the United States.

The overarching contribution that this dissertation is to use existential theory to demonstrate the ways by which American culture exacerbates the negative existential

experiences of Americans in the current historical moment due to incompatibilities between culture and changes in the specifics of human activity. It applies existentialism to very real and consequential political and economic issues in a humanistic way that forces a different confrontation with the way we construct our view of ourselves, others, and our sociopolitical relationships. Rather than being placed through the lens of a specific objectivity-seeking scientific discipline, the subjectivity of the individual is placed centrally to understanding their view of our social world. This forces us to think more broadly and philosophically about political subjecthood as we seek more objective and applicable understandings of politics and policy. From a more theoretical perspective, this dissertation places existentialism squarely in the realm of “political theory” while also questioning the arbitrary disciplinary barriers placed between “political theory” and the rest of philosophy. This dissertation argues that traditional American culture’s perspective on work and human activity are increasingly incongruent with the rapidly changing nature of technology and productive techniques. It does so by analyzing the systemic experiences of individual Americans regarding the rapidly changing nature of work and employment, the mental health and diseases of despair crisis, and the exacerbating nature of the COVID-19 pandemic. By analyzing these recent historical trends through the lens of a synthesis of existential and post-structural theories, this dissertation proposes that this incompatibility between expected norms of American culture and the changing economic and political landscape creates an existential moment of crisis for the United States and its mainstream American culture.

Existential Moment Thesis

The central thesis of this project is to present the early 2020s as an “existential moment” for the United States. This is not the same as stating that we face an “existential threat”, though

the former could lead to the latter under specific geopolitical circumstances. A threat to the existence of the United States as a state is a fundamentally different issue, yet the conflicts of identity make the country both vulnerable to internal disintegration and weaker in comparison with our international competitors. The former is a reflection of our shared sociocultural experience, a distinct paralysis of identity and initiative in the face of conflicting values, competing crises, and a breakdown in political cohesion. In the terms of existential philosophy, America is experiencing an existential crisis made up of subsequent and coinciding political and cultural crises. This dissertation argues that as America's traditional culture surrounding work, human activity, and politics becomes increasingly incompatible with the significant shifts in techne driven by more innovative and progressive aspects of American society, this existential moment represents a crisis of faith in the system and its values.

It is important however to note that because of the individual nature of existentialism, an abstract construct like America cannot experience existential phenomena the same way that the individuals who make up our polity do every day. This dissertation focuses on some of the processes and events that have contributed to the people of the United States having collective experiences of feelings that existential philosophy is well suited to explain. In doing so, it illustrates both the political nature of existentialism and its usefulness for a humanistic understanding of America's current situation.

A complex combination of continuing and emerging cultural, economic, and political crises contributes to the culmination of the country's current existential crisis. One of the primary themes of this project is the gradual and systemic splitting of the United States as a political unit and Americans as people along the fault lines created by our neglect of existing divisive issues. For example, the experience of Americans living in rural Idaho is increasingly

fundamentally different from those living in a major metropolitan area. Likewise, the culture of Seattle and a town of 2,000 in Appalachia is so substantially different that if one did not know they were a part of the same country it would be easy to assume they were from opposite sides of the globe. While a dedication to the success of America, western liberalism, and capitalism may have held America's cultural diversity together in the 20th century, the increasingly polarized nature of the progressive and conservative movements has exacerbated ongoing divisions to create today's sense that there are indeed two America's accelerating rapidly away from one another but still operating under the same political system. The situation has not elevated itself to an immediate threat to the existence of the United States but does create an existential crisis of political culture. These two (or, likely, more than two) Americas have vastly different uncompromisable priorities and values that their representatives in national politics seek to impose on the other. As this dissertation demonstrates, however, the divisions that we face are more than our squabbles over Dr. Seuss, gerrymandering, or partisan purity. The geopolitical and economic makeup of the country is being fundamentally split apart as well. The questions that America will face as it goes through the current existential moment will force shifts in American culture because, as will be discussed further, the classically liberal yet traditionalist aspects of our culture that many conservatives and moderates cling to is fundamentally incompatible with today's rapidly changing circumstances. Liberal "bootstraps theory" cannot work in a world where half or even a quarter of low qualification jobs suddenly or even gradually do not exist due to automation. The promise of freedom and prosperity vs. the limitations of economic and social reality have long been a theme in American history and will play a central role in an existential examination as well.

Political polarization has become a critical issue for an empirical understanding of this process. The two primary political coalitions in the United States have moved farther apart ideologically in recent years and elected member of each are equally less likely to find reasons to compromise. Both sides are also increasingly disillusioned with the processes, traditions, and institutions that have forced compromise. The increasingly interconnected yet uneven nature of the partnership between the states has made areas of agreement and overlap increasingly scarce in the creation of national policy. Evidence of this process can be seen in the gridlocked Senate's erosion of the filibuster and the inability of many to accept the true certified result of the 2020 presidential election. Yet both sides have internally rational reasons for their lack of compromise. It is hard to establish a line of compromise on issues related to the rights of people marginalized because of their race, gender, or sex. Such principles of universalized rights cannot be compromised if one is to take them seriously because a compromise on the rights of, for instance, racial minorities exhibit an acceptance that there is a "right level" of discrimination in society. Likewise, if a conservative in a rural town sees the changing of cultural morals and capitalism as a fundamental threat to themselves, it is difficult to find a point of acceptable loss in that discussion. The process of geographic sorting, wherein individuals move where people are more politically and culturally like themselves, also exacerbates this issue by partially segregating the two Americas from one another, decreasing likelihood of productive conversation and the necessity of "getting along."

An example of this trend can be seen immediately after the January 6th, 2021 insurrection at the capitol. House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer (D-Maryland) stated during his initial speech on the floor after Congress reconvened to certify the presidential election results that, "if those were the people, we are in big trouble!" (C-SPAN 2021). While not necessarily wrong in his

prognosis, this comment implies that “the people” that Hoyer is used to in Maryland are very different from “the people” that showed up at the capitol that morning. While those were the most vocally conservative, radical, and violent of “the people” not from states called Maryland, anyone with personal experience living in red states can tell you that the scenes from the capitol looked like “the people” in their states. There are increasingly polarized and diverse views about who “the American people” are and what the United States of America is. Yet, for “the people”, regardless of which kind of “the people”, the experience of all this tension, uncertainty, and frustration has real consequences. The economic and social realities of living under such political conditions necessitate a correction that may significantly benefit either “side” of the debate or force a state of cooperation, but something in the current situation is going to have to “give.” The culmination of simultaneous environmental, public health, economic, and diplomatic crises will necessitate adaptations in our culture and political system.

This project proposes to address the old problems of how individuals experience the rapidly changing and inconsistent nature of American political culture with a new theoretical approach. The new approach synthesizes existential and post-structural social theories into a response to the failure of liberal theories of change to drive at the ontological and experiential aspects of the relationship between cultural, political, and historical development for real people. To organize and frame this exploration of America’s existential moment, this dissertation focuses on three main topics for constructing an existential narrative of the early 2020s in the following chapters, these being technological development and its impact on our collective identities, the growing mental health and deaths of despair crisis, and the exacerbating factor of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Changes in “Techne” as a Contribution to the Existential Moment

The core change that will be discussed will be those found in the technologies and techniques of human activity, broadly defined. The conceptual focus will be on technology which disrupts human action or behavior. This feature can obviously include any specific physical example of technological change, as technology is normally purposed with being a replacement or supplement for human action. However, physical and digital technologies as an expression of new capital, tools, or gadgets do not wholly describe the concept being examined, as it also includes techniques or ways of doing and accomplishing goals. The term “techne” is used to combine both technology and technique into one conceptual framework. When “technology” is used in this dissertation it should be extended to imply changes in technique as a logical necessity from changing tools (a more traditional conception of technology).

Changes in techne have an impact on the experiences of individuals that is variable in magnitude. For instance, in our travel we used to rely on printed maps or instructions to navigate, requiring us to plan more thoroughly or take time to consult our printed information. In a modern vehicle, it is a simple matter of a voice command to get accurate and flexible directions to wherever one needs to go. While a small change in the grand scheme of our complicated society, it has an impact on the experience of the traveler and the industries that rely on travelers. This alters both the tools and the means of accomplishing a goal and, in turn, the experience of the actor.

It is existential feelings over these replacement or disruptions in existing techne that are of specific relevancy to this discussion. The economic and survey data on this topic paints a mixed picture both in terms of the magnitude of coming technological disruption and the reactions that individuals have to these developments. However, techne and its role in American

society remains an important topic being discussed by politicians and analysts making sense of the direction the 21st century will take. Because of its increased prevalence in regular life, it is an increasingly important aspect of our political culture. Changes in dominant expressions of techne and their impact on human behaviors create existential questions for individuals, and this necessarily translates into altered political views and behaviors.

Changes and development in techne appear inevitable, even though they rely on the collective decision of humans to become reality. What remains to be seen is the impact that these developments will have on how we engage in economic and political activity. This dissertation focuses on the role that changing techne has in our political and social culture through the phenomenological lenses of the mental health crisis and existential philosophy. Rapidly altering ways of doing activities represents disruption of human input and action has important implications within the American cultural context. America's traditional conceptions about hard work, economic success, and a comfortable middle-class life are increasingly challenged, and new technologies are a significant contributor to our near-term questions of identity and culture. Existentialism can be applied in this area by examining our anxieties surrounding being replaced by technology in our personal and professional lives and the overall systemic inequality questions raised by displacing labor for greater wealth accumulation without a corresponding mitigation strategy, as well as the experiences of living in a rapidly changing society for those who are, in many ways, "left behind."

As a result of this more humanistic approach, to examine technological change and shifting labor markets in a cold, econometric manner misses the fundamental experiential anxiety and dread that humans have when faced with technologies that could replace or disrupt their existing status quo. The existing scholarly literature on current technological changes and the

disruption of labor has mixed results with many authors critiquing the notion that we are going to see massive unemployment leading to major structural change. These empirical disagreements will be discussed in some detail. However, the purpose of this project is not to dispute or reconcile those disparate results, but to show their nuance in a new theoretical context. It may be true that the overall econometric picture of the 4th industrial revolution will not be Earth shattering and capitalism will simply adjust itself, creating new winners and losers as it always has in the past. However, for those who are affected this issue is truly existential and significant because employment is a significant part of American economic, social, and cultural life. In alleviating these experiences, is not enough simply tell individuals to adapt and offer nominal programs for retraining or education even if those policies are successful in the liberal sense of success, which is to ensure employment and income with little concern for concepts like fulfillment, happiness, or mental health. Existential and post-structural philosophy, when synthesized, allows us to have a political understanding of concepts like existence, being, and becoming as experienced by actual political subjects in the face of social change outside their direct control. Thus, it is well suited for this purpose.

A clear symptom of underlying existential questions in American society can be seen in the current pandemic of “deaths of despair.” These include deaths from causes that are rooted in underlying mental health and personal wellness crises such as suicide, drug abuse, and alcoholism related illnesses. Suicide and drug use is a common theme in existential philosophy, with Albert Camus once writing that “there is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy”(Camus 2015). The question of suicide or other intentional death as a result of the pressures of the existential questions facing all individuals has important

political and social implications if one accepts that the “deaths of despair” pandemic is related to political decision making and the underlying culture of our society.

For instance, to only treat the deaths of despair pandemic as a clinical mental health crisis ignores the experiential element, the underlying true and entirely valid anxiety and despair that individuals feel in this moment. For example, the oil or coal worker who finds himself addicted to pain killers after an injury may also find himself without a job due to changing technological or political developments favoring green energy or more efficient extraction and refinement methods. This individual does not experience “clinical depression over changing labor conditions coupled with opioid addiction” as his therapist might call it, even if that conceptualization offers a path to relief. For him, he truly experiences existential concepts seen in the works of existentialists like Heidegger, Kierkegaard, Sartre, and Camus. He may feel hopelessly “thrown” into a situation beyond his control and experience “dread” over the perceived futility of his past situation and “anxiety” over the choices now ahead. He may be a politically free citizen of a capitalist democratic republic, but that freedom comes with a crushing weight of choices that seem theoretically endless, but which are practically nonexistent, producing a sense that one has been thrown into a situation beyond their control but for which they will always be held individually responsible by our liberal society. All of this culminates in a sense of hopeless absurdity to be overcome within his own perspective and through attempts to live more authentically, a task which for many seems impossible. The importance of these concepts from existentialism is significant and are explored in depth.

However, it is important to recognize that clinical mental health remains an excellent practical tool for addressing sources of human suffering leading to deaths of despair. A more humanistic approach through existential philosophy is also useful for understanding the

experience of despair beyond its diagnosis. While critical of *only* examining issues of mental health, suicidality, and despair through a clinical lens, this dissertation does not dismiss the practical value of mental health services or therapy for many individuals. Rather, the purpose is to examine the underlying sociopolitical experiences that contribute to mental health issues and deaths of despair through the lens of existentialism. From this perspective, it is not enough that individuals be given therapy to cope with their current situation without resorting to substance abuse or suicide, as though the goal is only reflected in those statistics. We must also consider despair and anxiety as valid feelings in response to structural and practical limitations and suicide and substance abuse as behavioral extensions of valid frustrations. To echo aspects of Camus' discussion of suicide, it is not enough to merely convince someone not to commit suicide and return to their life which causes them feelings of despair and hopeless absurdity, notching up a win for the mental health home team. We must be prepared to consider suicide in a humanistic way, wherein it is not enough to convince someone to continue living in their current life because life is inherently worth living according to an objective measure decided upon by the social world, but to strive for them to have a life worth living according to their own individual criteria.

The COVID-19 pandemic is discussed as a culminating and accelerating event to ongoing forces. With more than half a million lives lost, the pandemic has been a significantly disruptive force for the economic and political development of the United States. The existential implications of the pandemic for the future of America's political future are deserving of a lengthy project all its own. However, in this dissertation it will be discussed separately as an exacerbating and accelerating factor in relation to the political culture impacts of technological development, mental health, and deaths of despair in the United States. Prior to the pandemic,

discussions of technological change and its impact on the global economy, particularly for many low-wage workers, was common. Andrew Yang's unsuccessful presidential bid focused primarily on a long-term vision of mitigation and adaptation to a world in which many jobs are simply automated out of existence (Yang2020 n.d.). Yang's campaign promoted the idea of Universal Basic Income payments to Americans, which may have primed the American political system to favor three direct payments in pandemic response aid packages. The mental health crisis and deaths of despair pandemic were already well underway prior to COVID-19 spreading in the United States during early 2020 (Case and Deaton 2020). However, new indicators suggest that COVID-19 has played a significant role in making these problems worse and accelerating America's "existential moment." The CDC has identified significant mental health impacts because of the pandemic (Czeisler et al. 2020) As America adapts and constructs a "new normal" after the worst of the pandemic, there are few reasons to believe that these issues for regular citizens will go away because of even the most favorable economic and healthcare policy choices because they were already present. COVID-19s impact may have made the problems worse, but as the pandemic passes, we should not assume the mental health and life satisfaction issues will return to pre-pandemic levels quickly, let alone improve upon them.

Outlining the Dissertation

In the following chapters, this dissertation discusses the evolving nature of techne in the US economy, in the context of its interaction with the culture of the United States through careful application of existential philosophy. The existential moment is more complex than techne, and other factors could be examined through the same theoretical lens. However, the scope of this dissertation is to demonstrate the importance of changes in techne to the development of an existential moment of American culture and politics. This is because techne

represents the sum of all human activity and how we engage in that activity. Leisure, employment, communication, political participation, and the consumption of information are all expressions of this concept and are all important to understanding changes in culture and political behavior. Because America's culture focuses so significantly on what one does, particularly in employment, but also in our private lives, it is an excellent starting point for exploring how existentialism and phenomenological process are related to social and political changes.

Change in techne is a constant of human history, with its current iterations having an especially significant impact on human behavior and activity. These changes were occurring in the background noise of capitalism and scientific invention, developing slowly but still yet faster than our social and political institutions have adapted to them. The mental health crisis, most starkly illustrated in the deaths of despair pandemic, is a more recent trend that provides evidence for the despair and anxiety contributing to the experience of an existential moment for Americans. After decades of consistent progress on morbidity rates among adults, these statistics have stagnated or increased in the last decade with the primary culprits being deaths of despair (suicide, drug overdose, and alcohol related illness) (Shanahan et al. 2019). Yet, this trend was already starting in the latter half of the 20th century, with working class, non-college educated men (particularly non-white, non-college educated men) succumbing to deaths of despair at an increased rate through the 1990s and continuing up until the present. However, this mental health and existential crisis experienced by non-whites prior to the 2000s takes on new urgency when it begins to impact white men. Traditional American culture is white culture. As most of America becomes less white and the economic power becomes concentrated in the more diverse cities, the existing economic, political, and cultural power of the middle-aged white man is challenged. The

existential and mental health crisis of people of color that already existed was an acceptable level of phenomenological suffering because of who it impacted and who it did not. However, now that the dominant cultural group is experiencing its own existential crisis of faith in our changing culture and political system, it has become an existential crisis for the entire country.

Today, the mental health crisis has met a twin pandemic in COVID-19 which has exacerbated and accelerated existing economic and health statistics phenomena. Existing economic and political trends had already placed America on a path for existentialism to come into a new relevancy for understanding America's new constant state of internal crisis. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the critical moment of self-reflection and adaptation. In philosophical terms, increased inequality and polarization, declining mental health, and increases in deaths of despair are the "situation". We had become accustomed to these problems, and they were consistent with expectations even if they represent an ongoing crisis for those who are paying attention. The COVID-19 pandemic is an "event" that upended the "situation" by accelerating its effects. After 9/11, Slavoj Zizek wrote that the United States had been living in a fantastical world separate from the realities of the global world and the US' place in it. For Zizek, our internalization of 9/11 into our national psyche represents a fundamental confrontation between America's fantastical version of the world and "the real" (Zizek 2002). In many ways, the pandemic is also a confrontation with the reality of America's fragile economy and healthcare infrastructure as well as our dubious ability to work together at a national level in response to a crisis. However, its effects have had a long-lasting impact on our long term "situation." COVID-19 is now a central part of any sustained collective initiative and is likely to remain a consideration in the United States for years. If existential despair was already the

situation for many Americans, we have exacerbated it with our response to the event of COVID-19 and the increasing unlikelihood of large-scale change to address our previous vulnerabilities.

Existentialism is well suited to be brought into our discussions of political theory in a more immediate and applied fashion because of the examples the United States currently provides. The example of the United States is used to further this more disciplinary point within the field of political theory. In addition to utilizing existentialism to make theoretical arguments in response to applied developments, this dissertation argues that existentialism should be considered relevant political theory in conjunction with more canonical theory. The three trends in recent US history that make up the applied focus of this dissertation (rapid technological development, deaths of despair and mental health crisis, and COVID-19) are all significant in their impact and highly conducive to the use of existential theory for arguing that the United States is facing an existential crisis of cultural and political identity.

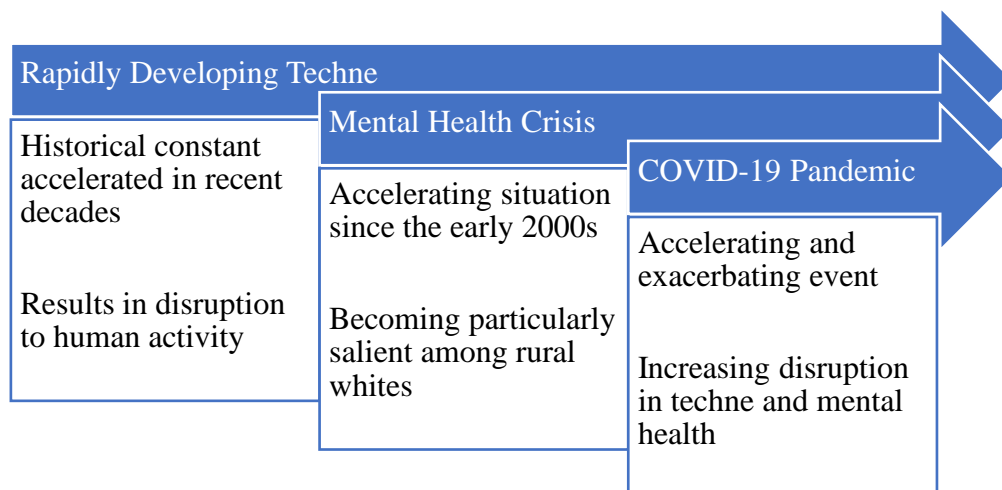


Illustration A

Chapter II: An Existential Approach to Political Interpretation

Existentialism as Political Theory

Existentialism is not typically considered among the canon of political philosophy/political theory, usually being discussed in the philosophical fields of ethics and ontology. However, this is reflective of the failing of disciplinary political theory to sufficiently replicate itself and expand the scope of its work. It is no surprise that survey political science courses on the history of political philosophy often *end* around 1900 with Marx and Nietzsche, perhaps throwing in some 20th century liberal thinkers like Rawls. Conversely, social philosophy courses in sociology departments *start* at 1900 with Marx, Durkheim, and Weber yet including many important political thinkers such as Foucault or Kimberly Crenshaw. Political theory has long been a self-referential subfield, constantly going back to canonical writers and reinterpreting their work. This is important research but comes at the cost of *doing* theory, to the intellectual and disciplinary detriment of the subfield. John Gunnell issued the challenge of restoring the importance of political theory as a discipline by way of synthesizing ideas and updating political philosophy to address current issues. In other words, it is not enough to reinterpret Locke and Machiavelli again or ask what they might think of today's issues. We must start *doing* theory again by using those ideas to produce new applications and spark new ideas about political and social matters (Gunnell 1979).

Towards this end, the interpretation and analytic approach to using theory in this project are exactly that: to *use* existing theories as tools and materials to pursue theory crafting relevant to a 21st century problem. The philosophical concepts used to examine the issue of technological disruption and our existential moment are synthesized from a diverse cast, from existentialists like Kierkegaard and Heidegger to poststructuralists such as Foucault. These works often

disagree with one another and are not meant to be considered a part of a cohesive theory if they are simply mixed haphazardly. The analytic approach itself is quite Foucauldian, carefully dissecting past ideas for useful concepts, and largely ignoring the canonical position of the author in question or the departments in which they are assigned or ignored at universities. “The coming into being of the notion of “author” constitutes the privileged moment of individualization in the history of ideas, knowledge, literature, philosophy, and the sciences” (Foucault 1994b) Foucault encourages us to ignore the arbitrary boundaries of disciplines, schools, and philosophies and deal directly with the text and its historical context. He goes so far in an interview to propose a game wherein all authors submit their manuscripts anonymously for a year to see who becomes published and who does not (Foucault 1994a). In all publishing fields, the name and prestige of the author is often considered above their ideas. For political theory in particular, the disciplinary refrain “but that is not political theory!” may well be leveled against existentialism, Foucault, or this dissertation itself because none of these philosophical contributions operate within existing institutional paradigms of liberalism, communism, or authoritarianism. However, this approach does allow us to ignore those conventions and use the concepts for that which they are intended, to produce knowledge and understand the social world. If political theory is to “do theory” again, we must resume playing with the ideas in their raw form. None of this is to say that interpretative work is not important or that the historical context of a particular piece is not useful for understanding its purpose or message (Skinner 1969). This dissertation also does not imply a Straussian approach, reading deeply for hidden meanings that may or may not exist and insisting upon a singular interpretation. However, if these concepts are to be used seriously today, the ideas and concepts themselves matter more for

the goal of understanding current phenomena in context than the author's relationship with canon or the traditional uses of that author.

Existentialism becomes political because of its particularization of the individual's experiences in relation to other individuals and the social world. In any social interaction, there is power differentiation and thus politics. Politics occurs whenever humans interact, whether it is obvious or not. No modern government or institution is necessary for this to be the case, and the power differentials that create politics can be completely unknown to the individuals interacting, though they subconsciously acknowledge it. Existentialism puts this tendency in plain relief but separates it from specific institutional and behavioral arrangements. For instance, when Heidegger speaks of "Das Man" or "The They", he does not identify a specific "they." This is because everyone experiences a different imperial "they" affecting their experience and modifying their behavior (Heidegger 1962). Even in our common vernacular we often refer to a nameless "they" in political discussions with phrases like "they don't want you to know about this but..." or "they won't allow that to happen." The "they" in reference is often different for everyone based on their experiences and political perspectives. It is also ironic that "das man" has similarities to the slang term for authority, "the man." While "the they" has a broader connotation and is not necessarily in reference to a figure of official authority, this similarity explains the distinction being made in using existentialists like Heidegger as political theory. We refer to "they" or "the man" without always being explicit about who "they" or "the man" are. The focus is on individual experience and perception rather than institutional and behavioral arrangements found in most canonical political philosophy. Ultimately, the strength of existentialism is its ability to construct a concept of the self or the "subject" that is universalizable and malleable enough to fit all political circumstances. This chapter defines what

this existential political subject is and establish key analytic concepts for an application of existential theory to politics. It also provides context for the lineage of philosophical conversation into which the dissertation injects itself.

Constructing the Existential Political Subject

This project seeks to bring existentialism to bear on current developments in political culture surrounding the development and implementation of new technologies within the United States context. As examples from the introduction indicate, existentialism operates with its own sets of terms and concepts to express human experiences. Existentialist philosophy is primarily ontological and ethical in nature, attempting to understand how the human experience can truly produce meaningful ethics or actions given the apparent lack of a singular purpose to existence. It assumes that we exist prior to the construction of meaning or rationality, thus creating an experience that makes freedom, action, and comprehension seem like absurd concepts in the face of individual and structural barriers to deciding what one actually wants and then how to attain it. This nebulous way of thinking about human experience is difficult to translate into the more concrete areas of political philosophy. Thus, an overview and examination of which existentialist terms will be used and how they are defined is necessary to proceed.

Primarily, this overview is necessary to understand the “existential subject” who is to become a political subject in this dissertation’s application. Because existentialism is primarily concerned with the phenomenological and experiential nature of the social and ethical world, a theory of the individual that is sufficiently descriptive yet universal is necessary. Existential philosophy has a diversity of specific interpretations and nuances in its theory of the individual. However, some key similarities exist and are clearly constructed and improved upon as the lineage of the existentialist conversation continues. For existentialists, the modern subject is

adrift with questions and competing ways of understanding the world. Because existentialism mostly assumes no fundamental “meaning of life” or objective ethical purposes originating nor prioritized prior to our existence and ability to rationalize our environment, individuals are constantly internally conflicted between the demands of the social world and the desire to live “authentically.” The ability of individuals to rationalize their situation becomes a blessing and a curse. We are aware of our theoretically infinite freedom as rational actors at the same time as the myriad of practical and social limitations on our ability to fulfill the promise of that freedom. This conflict becomes ever more important in the political context of liberal democracies like the United States that culturally promise freedom and opportunity for prosperity and fulfillment for all and is a concept useful for understanding the United States’ current existential crisis.

There are two philosophers who can be said to have inspired and initiated the line of questioning that existentialism follows. While Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) is considered by many to be the first existentialist philosopher, his approach remained steeped in a Christian framework that advocated faith in God as a solution to existential problems. His work remains critical to understanding existentialism and will be discussed in this project. However, in understanding the modern existential subject we must start with Nietzsche, because Nietzsche places the existential conundrum mentioned above within a specifically modern context. Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) is in many ways a proto-existentialist of the more modern and secular variety. Nietzsche occupies a fascinating position in the history of philosophy because he would inspire much of the revolutionary and consequential philosophy important to modern philosophy and social science. His work is often cited as being among the beginnings of postmodern philosophy and a more secular turn in philosophy more generally. Nietzsche presented an early form of modern existentialism by explicitly rejecting the existence of God, but

more importantly illustrating the move away from God and supernatural explanations of the metaphysical that occurred during the enlightenment and industrial era. “God is dead” is Nietzsche’s famous phrase, but it refers primarily to the lack of a guiding hand upon the process of secularization and rationalization. Without God to provide a meaning or essence to life, we seek out other meanings and often find them wanting. For Nietzsche, the historical process of separating from Christianity is positive yet difficult as it leaves us afloat to create new reasons to live and new explanations.

Existentialism (including Kierkegaard) focuses much time on the internal struggle facing modern humanity between the freedom and advances made in history and the crush of limitations placed upon our individual potential and curiosity by the social world. Nietzsche’s work builds the stage for 20th century philosophy to embrace the notion that ethics and politics are largely subjective, especially in a secularized society. Furthermore, he began laying the groundwork for a path forward for humanity, encouraging new, secular forms of ethics that are true to values such as “life” and “nature”, believing that it would take a special kind of person (“over-man”) to overcome this ambiguity and live life according to new, more productive rules.

Nietzsche accuses humans following what he considers to be outdated Christian ethics and modern promises of rationality and science of being slaves to forms of thinking that limit possibilities and do not offer new “meaning” to live the most fulfilled life possible. Nietzsche’s exhortation to liberate the individual from ways of thinking that prevent individual transcendence is critical to understanding the roots of existentialism. Nietzsche wants us to use our reason and abilities to transcend the easy options laid before us and pursue a path that celebrates life for its own sake. However, Nietzsche argued that few would be capable of living in a manner that the existentialists would come to call “authentic.” He referred to these hypothetical individuals as

Übermensch, or “over-man” and predicted that these select individuals would be capable of leading humanity towards a more individually fulfilling existence. In Nietzsche’s parable *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, he presents a process of the human spirit allegorized by animals. For Nietzsche, the journey towards being an Übermensch starts with the spirit being a camel. Nietzsche commonly referred to those who had not yet begun to question the established ways of thinking about life as various labor animals. This is because these individuals suffer and labor under the system because they are convinced that it is ethical and relatively advantageous to do so. For some, these burdens inspire a transformation of the spirit into that of a lion. Those with the spirit of the lion follow the path of questioning established rules to become “freer” to attain individual authenticity. Lion spirits are tasked by Nietzsche to defeat the great dragon. “Who is the great dragon whom the spirit will no longer call lord and god? “Thou shalt,” is the name of the great dragon. But the spirit of the lion says, “I will.”” (Nietzsche 2005). This process of expressing individual will against those who declare “thou shalt” allows the individual to express their authentic will and espouse new ways of thinking about the world to others. However, again, Nietzsche was skeptical that many would achieve lionhood, let alone face the dragon “thou shalt.” He believed that most would simply follow some creed or belief system and stay within the herd. Existentialism would take this historical and philosophical analysis and apply it more directly to the experiences of modern individuals and attempt to theorize a way for people to follow a similar path to living authentically.

While the nature of existence itself is discussed by all existentialists, the concepts of German philosopher Martin Heidegger are the most generalized and applicable for this theoretical approach. Heidegger conceptualizes individuals as *dasein*. This concept is translated several ways but can be understood as “being-there.” Throughout *Being and Time*, Heidegger

uses *dasein* as his analogue or example that stands in for “individual” yet seeks a more ontological term that allows us to forgo the baggage that typically accompanies trying to universalize human experiences. The purpose of this term is to separate the experience of being uniquely human from loaded or presumptive terms such as “man” or those within a specific disciplinary context with presuppositions about the empirically correct or objective nature of the human experience such as biology’s *homo sapiens*. It also provides a means of separating Heidegger’s understanding of human existence from the social or the natural and scientific and towards a more fundamental conception of what it means to exist as a human before placing that concept back into the social world. *Dasein* can be expressed in different states of being, such as *Dasein-being-with*, which describes *Dasein* in the social world with Others. *Dasein* is typically left untranslated, as the term is specific to Heidegger’s philosophy and does not translate in a way that captures its full meaning. In Heidegger’s own words:

If the question about Being is to be explicitly formulated and carried through in such a manner as to be completely transparent to itself, then any treatment of it in line with the elucidations we have given requires us to explain how Being is to be looked at, how its meaning is to be understood and conceptually grasped; it requires us to prepare the way for choosing the right entity for our example, and to work out the genuine way of access to it. Looking at something, understanding and conceiving it, choosing, access to it—all these ways of behaving are constitutive for our inquiry and therefore are modes of Being for those particular entities which we, the inquirers, are ourselves. Thus to work out the question of Being adequately, we must make an entity—the inquirer—transparent in his own Being. The very asking of this question is an entity’s mode of *Being*; and as such it gets its essential character from what is inquired about—namely, Being. This entity which each of us is himself and which includes inquiring as one of the possibilities of its Being, we shall denote by the term “*Dasein*.” (Heidegger 1962)

For Heidegger, two assumptions are made that are relevant to further understanding of human existence. First, *dasein* is self-aware in that humans are aware of their own existence. This necessitates the reality of his second assumption, which is that *dasein* can examine and consider its own existence in relation to the world. For Heidegger, human beings are the kind of

beings that think about being. This makes us unique in our ability to ponder our own existence, which is simultaneously a miracle of the human experience and a curse. Most relevant to this project, it allows us to ponder our existence in relation to others. While from a liberal perspective this may appear a liberating and triumphant example of the human spirit and modern rationality in which the gumption of the individual is allowed to forge their own path through rational thought and decision making, for the existentialist this makes the human experience a horror show by default unless properly navigated.

Heidegger illustrates this in his conception of *dasein* by explaining that *dasein* experiences “thrownness” (Heidegger 1962). Thrownness is the concept that *dasein* is “thrown” into events already unfolding which affect their experiences and state of being for the duration of their lives. Most of these things are not sufficiently manipulable by *dasein* and are thus outside its control. This concept is phenomenological and experiential; there is no “thrower.” Rather, we experience the sense that we have been thrown (thrownness) into the world without any say in whether to exist and must find a means of getting on with life.

While this may appear tautological, for existentialists this is an important factor. Thrownness sets *dasein* up to be in a state of crisis when engaged with others. “Others” for Heidegger includes an intriguing decentralization of the self. When *dasein* is in the state of *dasein-being-with* (*dasein* in the social world) it experiences Others as coming from the world itself. Others are not just those who are not *dasein*, the subject. Instead, *dasein* is conceptualized as being a part of the mass of Others. “Other” merely denotes the existential separation of entities, not the categorical “me vs. them.” *Dasein* is truly a part of this “Other” even though it experiences Others as an environmental factor because of the direct actions and interactions observed in these “Others.” Every *dasein* becomes every other *dasein*’s example of an Other

because within the social contexts under which the Other emerges all examples of dasein are the same and a part of this existential process of “being.” These Others become political because of our tendency to compare ourselves to all Others in our behavior and appearance, a tendency Heidegger calls “distantiality”(Heidegger 1962). Dasein’s individual being is made subject to the broader social commitment of being a part of the mass of Others. When the Others are conceptualized in this way, Others become a new concept which is more imperial in its effect on dasein’s identity and existence. Heidegger’s *das man* or “the They” emerges to contain the individuality of dasein. In Heidegger’s words:

...the real dictatorship of the “they” is unfolded. We take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as *they* [*man*] take pleasure; we read, see, and judge about literature and art as *they* see and judge...we find shocking what *they* find shocking. The “they”, which is nothing definite, and which all are, though not as the sum, prescribes the kind of Being of everydayness (Heidegger 1962)

The They forces Dasein through a process of “leveling down” to “averageness.” For the They, there is a drive for Dasein and all Others to become similar, inauthentic, and unwilling to resist. Yet Heidegger does not give Das Man a conscious will nor does he entirely accept that Dasein is unanswerable for their actions. Rather, Das Man is a subjective projection of Dasein. The They are Others which Dasein assigns as authority figures and those who dictate social morality. Dasein is deprived “of its answerability” in this process, as “they” are always involved in failures of ethics or setbacks in life (Heidegger 1962) If we think about common political communication, “they” are always invoked to refer to a nameless group for which bad outcomes or intentions should be held to account. Phrases like, ‘*they* don’t want you to know this...,’ or, “*they* want us all to...” can be seen in common political discussion quite regularly. This has important implications for understanding the subjective nature of an existential understanding of our contemporary politics. You can think of Das Man as literally “The Man” for a loosely related

contemporary conception. “The Man” does not physically exist, is nameless, and his, her, or their actual identity is different depending on your perspective. “The Man” (singular) is a stand in for a plurality of groups and individuals who, for any specific Dasein’s perspective, seeks to demand averageness and conformity.

Heidegger seems to suggest that for each particular Dasein, there is an accompanying floating definition of the They. In today’s political parlance, a Republican in Iowa is going to have a different conception of Das Man in terms of who it is that is limiting their authenticity than a Democrat in Connecticut. This will have significant impacts on how we understand today’s existential crisis of identity in the United States, because the existential “enemy” of authenticity (or ownedness, as Heidegger puts it) is not commonly agreed upon as our various definitions of authenticity have diverged.

Jean-Paul Sartre would expand upon this notion in 1943 with *Being and Nothingness*, though he would focus his attention primarily on the way that the experience of the individual (for Heidegger, Dasein) would place them in a state of good or bad faith, living authentically or inauthentically. For Sartre, like Heidegger, we are constantly inundated with socially constructed barriers to our ability to live authentically and create values and behaviors for ourselves. We often live in what Sartre calls “bad faith”, wherein we are living the lies we tell ourselves to enjoy the practical benefits that conformity may contain. Sartre encourages us to live in “good faith” or “authenticity” (Sartre 1992) For Sartre, this would mean to put aside social pressures and practicalities and live in ways that coincide with our internal ethical and philosophical beliefs.

This was not, for Sartre, a license to do any number of horrific acts. Rather, by the logic of authenticity, using the principle of authenticity to defend an act was inauthentic, as the entire

point of authenticity is to produce thoughtfully reasoned acts not originating from social pressures. To say, “I am acting authentically,” with no contributing reasoning is not enough to truly be acting “authentically” by Sartre’s standards. In a similar way, simply giving someone credit for the authenticity of “saying exactly what’s on their mind,” is not worth that much if the underlying reasoning for what is on their mind is inauthentic in its lack of concrete justification on factual and normative grounds. For Sartre, the pursuit of authenticity requires self-reflection and the knowledge of oneself to be in command of one’s actions more than the social pressures of the moment. Through this process, Sartre believed that individuals could attain what philosophers call a “transcendental” level of authenticity by which individuals attain an understanding of the ethical that is not inherently known, or which exists separate from human rationality.

However, other existentialists disagree with this notion. The writer Albert Camus was not a philosopher, nor did he claim the title of existentialist, but he did propose his own ideas of authenticity within his work. For Camus, the issue of authenticity and existence is not a matter of ontological specificity but of an understanding of our epistemological position in the world. Camus argued, along similar lines to Heidegger, that individuals are thrown into the world without an instruction manual or given purpose, one which we desperately want to attain through our actions in life. It is this very fact of not knowing what the purpose of life is or what the nature of humanity should be that we face “the absurd,” the gap between our knowledge and the answers to life’s biggest questions. We continually seek these answers but are constrained by our material and personal circumstances. For Camus, this impossibility of existence creates the existential crises we face in life. We cannot know the future or the answers to the big questions in life and must accept this absurdity. Camus’ path to what would be the equivalent of Sartre or

Heidegger's authenticity or ownedness is to embrace absurdity and focus on what is immediately known and experienced in life. For Camus, there is no way out of our existential reality, no solution to the puzzle of life that we can feasibly attain. Therefore, the only authentic life is to live within what one knows and can know and embrace life as it is with the initiative to pursue immediate happiness. This concept comes from Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*. In it, Camus presents the question regarding suicide, stating that it is the only true philosophical question. Why should individuals not kill themselves in the face of all this anxiety over not knowing our place in the world? Camus rejects suicide as a result of these stresses because it would support the value of the transcendental path, of becoming and knowing more than the immediate human condition allows (Golomb 1994). Camus relates this struggle to that of the Greek legend Sisyphus, who is doomed by the Gods to roll a boulder up a hill only to watch it roll back down again for eternity in punishment for seeking immortality. Camus concludes that once he had accepted his fate, Sisyphus would be happy. In the same way many members of modern humanity are constantly pushing boulders up hills to watch them roll back again in their personal and professional lives. Camus rejects the notion that we can escape these existential conundrums by seeking transcendental answers. For him, we must be happy with the present and make the most of it through our own initiative rather than looking for a transcendental meaning or way out of the absurd (Camus 2015).

What is the result of all these relatively broad concepts of differing forms of existence? What happens within us that causes harm that would rise to the level of political division? We can return to Kierkegaard for several concepts that will describe the consequences of living in bad faith or without authenticity as discussed by these thinkers. Kierkegaard believed that these existential feelings were a result of living separately from the Christian God's plan for our lives

coupled with our inability to know that plan. He argued that we experience “anxiety” (sometimes called dread) at our seemingly infinite choices the results of which we cannot know (Kierkegaard 2015). Free will as granted by God is a weight upon our psyche precisely because the myriad of choices we can make are limited by our circumstances and our knowledge of possibilities and consequences. Furthermore, we experience despair when we live outside God’s plan, make mistakes, have regrets, and feel as though our life is not within our control (Kierkegaard 1983). Kierkegaard encourages us to take a “leap” which asks us to have faith in God and the world that we will arrive at our proper destination and make better choices in the future (Kierkegaard 2019). This project however, focuses primarily on a contemporary version of the concepts of anxiety and despair. The subject in the work of all these philosophers have either suggested or explicitly mentioned the psychological effect that our uncertainty about the world can have. I posit that anxiety and despair are excellent tools for our current analysis. The modern political subject experiences anxiety at the myriad of life choices presented today regarding career, education, and lifestyle. However, the material and social limitations of American society are great. Not everyone gets their version of going to Harvard and getting a job they love in a successful partnership with children, in fact very few do so. This produces a paradox of competing values and interests. The United States is promised to be a land of freedom and opportunity, with the classic American dream still being promised and discussed, albeit increasingly with the caveat of “for people like me, not for people like thee.” Despair enters the equation when the promise of human freedom by existence and backed up by our political rhetoric meets the disappointing reality of the limitations placed on individuals in the United States. The individual finds themselves between these alternating existential experiences, of being worried then disappointed,

full of anxiety then despair. Surely good things do still happen in the United States. However, for many average citizens, this is not the case.

One final theoretical steppingstone is needed to allow for a more explicitly political idea of existentialism. While thus far we have established the concept of the existential subject, constantly worried about the future and disappointed about the past and present, thrown into a world over which they have no control, and looking for answers about life that do not exist, this subject has not become a political subject in the traditional sense. They are not subject to any specific government or other institutions, and the institutional effect upon them has been vaguely attributed to Others and the They. Yet we can somewhat formalize and politicize this position by way of introducing another postmodern theorist's conception of the individual's experiences and behavior.

The later work of Michel Foucault offers a way to connect the individual conflicts of agency and structural limitations with the rest of what we normally consider government and politics. Foucault discusses the means of enacting changes and having influence over the world as an expression of technology or "techniques." He presents three primary types of technologies, those of power, production, and the self. Foucault defines technologies of power as technology that "determine[s] the conduct of individuals and submit[s] them to certain ends or domination, an objectivizing of the subject", with technologies of production being the more traditional conception of technology in the economic sphere (Foucault 2003b). This technology is the focus of much of Foucault's middle career. However, Foucault later altered the framing of his investigations towards the concept of the political subject. In this pursuit, Foucault also defines what he calls the technologies of the self, being technologies "[Which] permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own

bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (Foucault 2003b).

If Heidegger’s *dasein*, through the technologies of the self, has identified its goals (whatever they may be) for life and the future in keeping with the identity it has and wishes to foster (prior to consideration of outside entities) it has set authentic goals which in turn set the terms and parameters for anxiety and despair to do their work in pressing that individual outside the realm of authenticity and towards existential crisis. Thus, *dasein* is faced with the mere existence of a limited facet of possibilities in conduct, limited only by natural limitations preceding the social. However, once *dasein* is thrown into a state of Being-with, we begin to see additional Foucauldian power concepts at play. Prior to this state of Being-with, *dasein* was essentially free, constrained only by the limiting potential of human existence. This exercising of power over *Dasein*, according to Foucault, “is a ‘conduct of conducts’ and a management of possibilities” (Foucault 2003c). *Das man* has the ability to enforce itself upon *dasein* upon reaching the state of *dasein-being-with*. This structuring of possibilities is what Foucault defines as “governing,” and it takes place at every level from the national and international governments commonly discussed in political science to the individual level of governance, wherein the individual is governed by one’s own needs and ethical standards yet is influenced by the social governments of the family, church, and state (Foucault 2003a). Through Foucault’s conception of a multi-level understanding of government that includes the individual’s own ethical and personal motivations for acting, the subject is again actively engaged with their own governance by way of governing the self. In this way, the impact of the complexities of policy making and political economy impact the very existential nature of the individual subject. The individualistic and personal experiences that existentialism focuses upon is made political by its interaction with

the social world, and Foucault offers us a way to more robustly make this connection apparent in a more overtly political sense. By reconceptualizing the struggle of the individual vs. Das Man as a political struggle, existentialism can be made a political theory with important concepts for understanding America's current existential crisis.

Some additional definitional clarifications are also necessary to discuss the increasingly complex interaction of party identification, overall ideology, and specific views in the US' political context. Overall, this dissertation uses the term set of comparative politics and political theory rather than the vernacular of American politics. This is essential to expressing the precision needed for this theoretical undertaking. American politics uses terms like liberal and conservative in a unique way that is imprecise and inaccurate when taken to the level of overall ideology. At the level of ideology, there is extraordinarily little about the United States that is not "liberal." Liberalism is a primary founding principle of the United States in opposition to the relative conservatism of colonial monarchy. It focuses on individual freedom and responsibility, but for the purposes of this dissertation it is the ideology of free markets and support for business as we commonly see it in the United States. There are few mainstream politicians and movements within the United States that are not a form of liberalism, with recent trends towards white nationalism on the right and social democracy on the left being the primary examples of abandoning liberal principles. The Republican party and their more "conservative" views represent classical, laissez faire liberalism, with the Democrats' more "progressive" views being characterized as reform liberalism. When liberalism is used without one of these qualifiers, it is meant to encompass the entirety of our mainstream thought on the role of government, business, and individual workers. Conservative and progressive shall be used to denote the

differences of opinion on specific political and cultural issues that sharply divide our liberal society.

It is also important in this project to carefully distinguish between the United States as a political and institutional entity (the “state” of the United States) and America/Americans as a cultural expression of being a citizen or resident of the United States. This project seeks to focus on the American experience in applying the phenomenological approach of existentialism. However, the experience of individuals within a particular country has implications on the overall stability and character of that country, particularly in democracies. Thus, this dissertation carefully distinguishes between the United States and America/Americans on these grounds.

Outlining the Rest of the Dissertation and its Approach

The dissertation proceeds from here in two chapters to serve the purpose of backing up the primary contribution of this dissertation, followed by a conclusion chapter. There is a chapter on the background of development in techne followed by a chapter reinterpreting the evidence regarding changes in techne through the philosophy of existentialism. The overall approach to this project is characterized as a qualitative fusion of history, social science, and philosophy. The central arguments of this project are highly theoretical but are backed by both qualitative and quantitative social science data and observations gathered from the existing available data and literature. However, the approach to gathering evidence and presenting it in support of the central existential moment thesis is inspired by the historical analytic method of genealogy used by some of the theorists being applied, namely Nietzsche and Foucault. Genealogy is an approach to studying history which focuses on the development of key aspects of society which are often overlooked or glossed over in the construction of more cohesive narrative histories. It is well suited to analyzing cultural and structural changes which impact political distributions of power

in society. Foucault describes the genealogical method as the writing of a “history of the present” by way of examining key aspects of historical development that have had a significant impact on today. It focuses particularly on the way that we communicate and define specific trends and values (Garland 2014). While this work does not go back far into “history”, focusing primarily on the last 20 to 30 years, it retains the historical and genealogical approach to analyze recent and current events. Thus, the evidence that is usable for this purpose is not limited to quantitative data or interpretive and cultural contributions. The fusion of social science data with a genealogist’s eye for wider cultural contexts offers flexibility in obtaining information from a wide variety of sources to present a more cohesive theoretical picture of the struggles facing the United States and, more importantly, Americans during this existential moment.

The next two chapters represent the evidentiary and analytic body of the present research. In the next chapter, this dissertation presents the background information necessary to underscore the importance of changes in techne that have occurred over the course of recent history in the American context. This provides the evidence and applied knowledge necessary to engage in a genealogical and existential analysis that is relevant to observed events and tendencies. The use of data on these issues supports the central existential moment thesis of the dissertation by demonstrating that there are similarities in which groups of Americans and regions of the United States are especially impacted by these issues and set the evidentiary terms for applying existential theory to the experience of Americans under these circumstances. The subsequent chapter reinterprets these data and information through a genealogical and existential analysis in the context of the mental health and disease of despair crisis.

A background chapter in techne, broadly defined as both physical technology and techniques or practices, provides the applied evidence necessary to proceed with a new

interpretive approach. This argues that the rapidly changing nature of the United States economy due to these developments are an underlying historical and systemic frame through which the circumstances for an existential moment has emerged. Specifically, it argues that Americans are facing a “double bind” of technological disruption to activity characterized by a “squeeze” at the bottom from automation which disrupts more manual tasks and a “squeeze” at the top from artificial intelligence and computer advancements which disrupt white-collar and managerial tasks. Evidence for this chapter comes primarily from studies which explore the disproportionate impact that disruptive changes in technology and techniques of economic activity have on Americans and attempt to forecast possible disruptions, such as the 2019 Brookings Report on Automation and Artificial Intelligence and other published work from more academics debating the empirical nature of technological disruption (Muro et al. 2019). After presenting the empirical state of the conversation on these issues and the possible implications of the evidence, the chapter re-contextualizes the issue within the framework of existentialism to demonstrate the utility of these theories to understanding the way that development impacts those who experience it.

This development-focused backdrop primes a discussion of the deaths of despair pandemic in the wider context of our mental health crisis as an essential part of the existential analysis of chapter 4. This analysis demonstrates that the recent history of the United States indicates that many of the individual citizens of the country were already experiencing existential uncertainty, dread, and anxiety. Mental health has long been an issue in the United States, but the crisis has only become more dire in the last two decades. While the focus of this discussion is on the application of existential philosophy it is presented in the context of a wider mental health and social cohesion crisis that extends to other violent and destructive behaviors like mass

shootings, domestic abuse, and political unrest. As evidence is presented from empirical and interpretive sources on this issue, it is contextualized in a comparative way with the evidence presented on technological and economic change to show that the challenges of economics and mental health often impact the same groups. One of the primary sources for this chapter is the data and analysis of Case and Deaton's *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism* (Case and Deaton 2020), which trace the unique circumstances of trends in United States mortality related to mental health and substance abuse diseases. Specifically, it points to the geographic and demographic trends that indicate that these problems are especially difficult for underserved populations but exist in most groups. Taken with other work such as Moretti's *The New Geography of Jobs*, we can demonstrate that the mental health crisis and rapid economic and technological change are at least circumstantially linked by showing that many of the same places being impacted the most by changes in techne are also the most impacted by the deaths of despair pandemic. Subsequently, many of these places are also becoming increasingly Republican and conservative. For example, middle aged white men in red states are beginning to emerge as a group more likely to be affected by both technological disruption in their economic lives and mental health problems that in turn make them more likely to die from deaths of despair. Like the chapter on technological and economic development, this chapter is concluded through the issue being reframed within the existential theoretical lens to demonstrate its efficacy in expressing the challenges currently facing the United States and its political culture and identity.

A concluding chapter examining both the place that this dissertation holds within the wider conversation, its importance, and suggestions for future research finishes off the dissertation. It includes both a more tailored academic conclusion, presenting the empirical

findings and once again presenting the key evidence and conclusions from exploring these three phenomena within the context of existential theory. It also serves to present this dissertation as a starting point for future theoretical, historical, and empirical research on these issues and raise important questions for this research to pursue. Finally, the dissertation concludes with a discussion section that explores the possibilities for policy proposals and longer-term cultural evolutions that can help mitigate the potential harm that these trends have had on individuals that emerge as a result of an existential analysis like this dissertation proposes.

Chapter III: America's Experience with Changing Techne

The Importance of Techne to Human Action and Culture

Changes in techne, or the means by which tasks are accomplished, economic value produced, and human beings engage with their surroundings, has been of historical significance to all societies. The ability of the Romans to produce high quality road materials and the subsequent emphasis placed on the mobility of legions around the empire is one such example from antiquity. In more recent centuries, the development of industrialized manufacturing through steam power and electricity revolutionized the availability of consumer goods for the average citizen, encouraging a heightened level of consumerism in our culture in the 20th century. Physical technologies and the decisions made about how human action will take place has always been important to our species and its social structures. While other intelligent animals are capable of a concept of tools and reinforced use of the environment for their gain, humans are separated from other animals by our mental emphasis on techne as much as our ontologically unique position of being the only animal capable of existential self-reflection. Since the time of fire, the wheel, and the agricultural revolution, how we get things done has been a prime driver of our ways of living and our shared expressions of meaning and purpose. Our ability to use our minds to solve practical problems of self-preservation enabled the massive population boom, among one of the most complex animal populations on earth, observed throughout recorded history. The study of changes in technology and its impact on our social world are well established in the field of history as a major variable of human events (Nye and Marvin 1989). Of most relevance to the questions asked in this dissertation is addressing the way our techne impacts our culture, and its importance of being the very lens through which we view the world.

The United States is particularly interesting in terms of the relationship between techne and the formation of our culture. The early United States was primarily agrarian, with some manufacturing and other early industrial business interests in the northern colonies and states. If one examines the early disagreements of the founders, the place of slavery and the economic direction of the country becomes of significance. The purpose of this dissertation is not to trace the entire history of disagreements over techne in American politics. However, the split between Federalists and anti-federalists, the defenders of slavery and the abolitionists, the progressive movement of the early 20th century, and the widening gulf between conservatives and progressives today are all in part a debate about the very ways of life and activity that represent American culture. The longstanding cultural rift between the conservative, agrarian, rural areas of the United States and the urban hubs of cultural and technical change has been variably intense, but sees a resurgence in importance today. The ways that the remote tech worker in San Francisco accomplishes tasks is quite different from the farm laborer in Oklahoma, and the accompanying values and norms from those tendencies are also quite different. The importance of “work” and “employment” within the American cultural context is no accident, and the productivity of a group or individual towards the ostensibly communal well-being of the United States is ingrained into our ways of constructing meaning and value. The agrarian traditions of the early United States is seen today, even as the actual techne and economics of agriculture has led to a smaller percentage of the population employed in those sectors. This point is critical to the main argument of this dissertation: that the dominant, white, rural culture of America is increasingly incompatible with the economic and technical realities of our present and near future.

It is important not to overstate any historical singular factor, even one as broad as techne. This has long been one of the traps of historical research, to select one's area of interest and proceed as though history revolves around the nexus of one's interest. Techne is not the singular key to understanding American history, as there is not singular variable or subject which can encompass every debate in American political history. However, it remains an important theme within wider political debates and informs cultural change. In chapter 5, an analysis of changing techne and its impact on American culture within the context of today's existential crisis of identity will expand on the importance of techne within the American context. It is first important to present the current data and evidence that will provide a grounding for this cultural argument. To establish an incongruity within the narratives of dominant American culture in comparison with changing economic and technical trends, it is necessary to understand the economic changes currently underway as they relate to developments in techne. Only then can issues of culture be compared with likely trends and conflicts between belief, practice, and evidence be confronted and resolved.

Changing Techne in the American Context

The techne of the United States has changed significantly throughout its history, even as the culture and mentality of Americans has been slow or inconsistent in its development in response. The pace of this change has only accelerated in recent decades. This dissertation argues that the incongruence between the rapid change in techne and the slow development of political and cultural reactions to that rapid change are a contributor to our increased polarization and decreased faith in the system, contributing to an existential crisis of identity. Early America was mostly characterized by agrarian life, with coastal cities being hubs of international and domestic exchange. As the country filled from coast to coast, with the vast and empty center being

backfilled from the coastal population centers in recent decades, regions have developed their own cultures surrounding the economics and politics most relevant to the lives of the people living within them. If one looks at the development of labor in the United States, the progression from slavery, indentured servitude, and the poor working conditions of the waged employee to our modern concepts of a minimum wage, workplace safety, and limitations on hours worked, it is easy to see how our values and practices of labor have changed in reaction to developments in both technology and culture. However, the persistence of a class of individuals “left behind” in poverty and exclusion from the promise of the individualistic American middle-class lifestyle remains.

Historically, technology has always been labor disrupting. However, disruptions of previous eras have been met with accompanying social adaptations that have ensured employment and relative economic stability. For instance, the mechanization of the 19th century quickly led to the urbanization of the working classes through work in factories. In the United States, the decline of the manufacturing and industrial sectors in the latter half of the 20th century saw the rise of innovations in restaurant (such as the McDonald’s model) and other service industries as well as a diversification of opportunities for the working class. Simultaneously, many middle-class occupations began requiring increasing levels of education and certification. Labor prospects for “unskilled” workers today come with inadequate compensation in relation to the middle-class lifestyle that is associated with the idealized American experience. By its very nature, manufacturing has experienced a long journey of increased automation, the pace of which has only quickened in the last decade. However, retail and food sectors have rapidly begun a previously unexpected level of investment in labor disrupting technologies (online order and pickup, a delivery focus, and artificially intelligent management systems). Soon, even these few

jobs that do not require a significant amount of special training may be threatened by changes in techne. Fast food, which has become a staple of entry level work in the United States, is likely to be largely automated in the next decade (Semuels 2018). Whereas human interaction-based tasks were previously thought to be largely immune to these trends, studies demonstrate that people are open to interacting with a robot rather than a human being for service-related inquiries under the right circumstances (Mende et al. 2019).

In analyzing these trends, it may be useful to assume that any task done by a human being could plausibly be done by a piece of labor disrupting technology. This underscores the point that changes in techne seem naturalized, as if they happen on their own through invention and adaptation. However, it remains the case that while technology changes and is implemented over time, such implementation is always the choice of human beings. Furthermore, our social adaptations to such changes can encourage mutual cooperation and adaptation to new realities or intense resentment, fear, or despair. If any task can be done by a piece of technology, then anyone is at risk of losing the advantages that simply being able to perform a task of some sort provides them in an employment centric economy and culture. Similar to John Rawls' theory of original position, if we assume nearly all employment could be replaced, we can dispose of our individual egos in the labor market and seek more collectively positive results from technological development. While this assumption is not supported by the data, as some human labor is unlikely to be replaceable and an even larger number of jobs may be undesirable to replace with a piece of technology, it does offer a thought experiment that forces a reckoning with the cultural and political forces prevalent in the United States regarding technical innovation.

Labor Disrupting Techne and the Double Bind of Disruption

“Disruption” is the most cohesive and appropriate term used in the literature to describe the effect that the techne relevant to the current discussion has on the world. While the term disruption often carries negative connotations (a notion that will be examined in more depth later in this chapter), and its use in the literature is often accompanied by additional discursively negative language, its use here should not be construed in that way. Disruption should be understood as a new event or development that forces adaptation and change to an existing status quo. Its consequences can be positive or negative due to responses or adaptations made, not necessarily by the nature of the disruption itself. In particular, no specific technology is necessarily undesirable by its inherent physical attributes. It is only in the context of how it is used and treated by humans that cultural development can assign normative values to how and when a technology should be used and what societal adaptations are necessary in response to its development. This very development also did not happen because of spontaneous, natural processes. Humans are necessary for the development of a technology as much as for its implementation, and judgement of that technology should be made in the social context of its application.

While all technological advances are inherently disruptive, because of changes to how humans behave and interact with the world, at its core the disruption in this discussion is that of human action. Many kinds of labor and human action exist (emotional, physical, mental, etc.) and all of these can be disrupted by technology. Because of the emphasis that American culture has on employment and labor as a mark of success and desirable social status, it is economic labor that is of significant emphasis for this dissertation. However, future research should expand

these discussions into the areas of more interpersonal and emotional labor and relationships as well.

The primary concern presented when one discusses automation and other labor disrupting techne (LDT) is that of “replacement” in employment. AI and automation have the potential to increase productivity and wealth, but also the potential for causing employment problems (Furman and Seamans 2019). When a job is replaced with a machine in its entirety, someone becomes unemployed, and there is concern that this happening on a grand scale would lead to mass unemployment. However, the evidence suggests that disruption of employment related labor does not have to lead to net job loss. In many cases, technology merely changes how labor is performed. This is equally a disruption because it requires changes in training and outlook that disrupts the human and institutional experience into which the technology is introduced. If a job that could be done by an individual with a high school diploma and a training certificate now requires coding and computer experience, the net job gain or loss may be neutral but still displaces a particular kind of individual and affects their experience of the world. As such, the American experience is not a universal one, with demographic and geographic factors having a significant impact on the economic, cultural, and social experience of any given individual.

From the perspective of its disruptive capacity, LDTs today can be described as creating an economic “double bind” of disruption for humans who still depend on the economic power that their labor represents to make ends meet. This is defined by the kind of activity or operation that an LDT is meant to replace or enhance. The lower flank of this double bind can be found in what is typically referred to simply as “automation,” which replaces simple physical actions in a way that is more precise, swift, and cost effective. This is done through a piece of technology which replaces the physical action of one or more human beings. This primarily, but not

exclusively, effects those at the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum. The upper flank of the double bind is typically characterized by artificial intelligence (AI) technologies. AI can disrupt more mental tasks such as logistics, management, risk assessment, and communications.

Developments in AI increasingly have the potential to disrupt work done by those higher up institutional and economic hierarchies (Chelliah 2017). Thus, it becomes difficult for the mass of individuals to find a way to navigate between these two flanks.

Variable and Disproportionate Impacts of LDTs

There is disagreement in the literature on the degree to which we should expect widespread impact on the general employment status of the United States because of LDTs. It is estimated that around a quarter of the jobs in the United States are at a high risk of displacement by LDTs due to their reliance on easily disrupted tasks such as those that are menial and repetitively physical (Muro et al. 2019). This implies that a significant shift may be coming within the makeup of our labor markets, working class life satisfaction, and our relationship with technology. Some politicians and observers have begun speculating on the disastrous or utopian effects this could have on our society. Such speculations are discussed, to some degree, in Chapter 5. However, the current available data point to a wide range of possibilities, with the likely outcomes falling somewhere between a post-work paradise and a dystopia of inequality and unemployment. It is likely that changes will occur, even changes which fundamentally alter our relationship with work, technology, and each other. However, it is unlikely that drastic change will occur quickly, with the rate of adoption being a critical variable in the level of disruption to the labor market.

Observers with a less stark view of the future of labor data in relation to LDTs have pointed out that technologies both disrupt and replace jobs, albeit with the displacement currently

outbalancing the creation of tasks, (Acemoglu and Restrepo 2019). In other words, technological change is disrupting automatable jobs faster than they are creating new, more technical positions. However, in the long run, these trends may even out as institutional reactions make the skills and education necessary to fill those jobs more readily available. In fact, other estimates, which take into account the specific tasks of an employee and the transferability of those skills when estimating risk of displacement, suggest only 9% of all jobs being at high risk of being displaced (Arntz, Gregory, and Zierahn 2017). This uncertainty makes knowing how to prioritize resources and agenda time difficult for those who would attempt to address or anticipate the issue through the policy process.

What emerges in the literature is a sense of change in the labor market, rather than a slide towards an absence of work in a more general sense. This is particularly true when looking at literature focused on the short to medium term of projectable technological development. Barring a massive breakthrough in robotics and AI that vastly improves the ability of machines to perform comparably to humans in many more roles, the current literature suggests an atmosphere of uncertainty but, likely, stability. The way jobs are performed may change more than positions being outright eliminated (Michael Chui, James Manyika, and Mehdi Miremadi 2016). All of that said, simply changing the way things are done can have a major impact on the individuals for whom those decisions are being made and who have to implement these changes. This idea is one of the central arguments of this dissertation, just changing the techne of a position is fundamentally similar to a catastrophic loss of employment for many Americans. The individual experience of the job market, making up 40+ hours of most every week of their lives, and the psychological processing that goes on when they return home, are fundamentally shifted

as a result of simply changing the way things are done by introducing a new technology, technique, or value to the workplace.

AI and automation are more adept at particular kinds of tasks, specifically those which are mechanical or require logical analytic skills that predicate an optimal outcome. LDTs are less likely to replace tasks which are human by their nature, namely emotional and empathetic tasks (Huang and Rust 2018). Those tasks which require the human capacity to think, processing information in a less systematic and rational way than does AI, are less likely to be satisfactorily completed by a piece of technology. Understanding the empirical facets of this issue is complex. We do not have robust data on the interrelated tasks and considerations that determine whether a task will be disrupted. However, it is important to plan for a wide range of contingent possibilities because of this uncertainty (Frank et al. 2019; Wang and Siau 2019).

A stark example of a sector with a significant role in the US economy that remains at a high risk of labor disruption by technology is service. Service sector jobs have been associated with the kind of low wage, low skill employment that many individuals rely on in the United States. Fast food has adopted LDT in increasingly sophisticated ways, from logistical organization (including managing the tasks of food preparation workers), to point of sale mobile applications and kiosks. This trend is likely to increase over the next decade due to the improved efficiency, quality control, and convenience it offers producers and consumers alike (Semuels 2018). Moreover, while it was previously thought that human-facing service jobs would have less potential for disruption, a recent study found that, if engineered correctly, human service robots would be accepted by the consumer public (Mende et al. 2019). With food service making up a large portion of the entry-level market for those with only a high school diploma or less, it's the increased potential for automation in the kitchen, at the front desk, and in the manager's

office that makes it a potential source for disappearing opportunities for those who are uneducated and less wealthy. Furthermore, this does not mean that the issue is only facing those with the lowest paying jobs. Service sectors that have traditionally been a source of more well-paying jobs, such as healthcare, also face disruption (Korzep 2010) and education (Sharkey 2016).

Rapid changes in technological development in areas which displace jobs may result in a substantial rise in inequality as particular categories of people and employment sectors are at a significantly higher potential for disruption (Berg, Buffie, and Zanna 2018). As previously suggested, those who are already most economically and socially vulnerable are also the most likely to see their jobs automated out of existence or otherwise significantly impacted; up to half of the jobs requiring only a high school diploma are at “high risk” of being impacted (Muro et al. 2019). Individuals who are in low wage jobs are also more likely to be at risk of disruption by changing techne (Chessell 2018). The ability of technology to do jobs that would otherwise mostly be filled by those without postsecondary education or training underscores the increased importance of postsecondary education and training. This comes at a time when the cost of quality higher education and skyrocketing balances of student loan debt create an additional barrier to gaining the very advantages essential for adults with only a high school diploma to compete for jobs that are becoming increasingly technical and adaptive.

The potential effects are also disproportionately distributed based on gender and race. Men and non-whites face more potential for their jobs being automated or otherwise significantly disrupted (Chessell 2018). This is not necessarily because of anything inherent or related to these characteristics themselves. Rather, the jobs that men and people of color tend to have also happen to be in industries that make them more susceptible to disruption. Men are more likely to

be involved in menial physical labor, the very kind of labor that is most susceptible to automation disruption. Women have traditionally been more likely to pursue the kinds of positions that are less likely to be subject to automation. For instance, careers dominated by women that are related to the care of other humans such as nursing, teaching, or childcare are particularly resilient to automation because of the emotional labor required. (It is also worth noting that these industries suffer from a host of other systemic problems such as a shortage of qualified workers and stagnating wages.) Such jobs are likely to continue to exist because they require the previously mentioned human capacity to process information in a less systematic and rational way. Thus, they are ill-suited to disruption by technology, although they will remain as another example of an essential service that goes largely unappreciated in terms of the compensation offered.

The location of jobs and economic opportunities are increasingly centralized to specific large cities that serve as hubs of technological and cultural innovation (Moretti 2013). This creates a geographic component to both the technical and sociopolitical changes that developments in techne can produce. Much of the current cultural and technological development that encourages rising wages, educational opportunities, as well as a simple sense of belonging with the forward motion of history, is occurring within the largest and richest cities in the United States. As this trend continues, much of the country will fall or appear to fall even farther behind in terms of the implementation of new techne and cultural developments. Techne is critical to the economic and cultural division between the urban centers of growth and innovation and the rural areas that make up much of the political geography of the United States. The cultural and economic divisions between urban and rural today are exacerbated by the

inequity of opportunity and education found between the cities and the most rural parts of the country.

Despite current buffering, these hubs are not necessarily going to be safe from the effect of LDT forever. If technology can replace jobs outside the reproduction of that technology, it is only a matter of time before coding, design, and troubleshooting jobs in the tech field can be disrupted by AI (Martineau 2019). The new question becomes how the human experience and how we interact with the economy and each other will change because of long-term trends in disruptive technology, as well as what active steps are necessary to create a positive outcome for this transition.

Public Reaction to Changes in Techne

The public view of technology is highly dependent on the degree to which individuals predict major changes to their lifestyle from automation and are aware of current trends. Those who are more aware of current trends support increased pay for the jobs that do exist for humans. However, the big split in public opinion comes from those who are enthusiastic versus those who are worried about these developments. Enthusiasm makes an individual more likely to support more sweeping reforms like Universal Basic Income as well as increased pay for human workers, whereas worry about these developments make individuals more likely to support those reforms as well as controls on the use of automation (Nam 2019). This, combined with relatively low support across the board for policies related to technologies such as these, indicates that not enough citizens are aware of the current trends to make the issue of labor disrupting technologies, and related policy adaptations, particularly salient to their political calculus.

While a significant portion of the jobs in the United States have a high probability of being automated, the potential is lower in the United States than developing nations such as

China and India. Americans are also less likely, than people in other countries, to believe that robots and computers will replace much of the human labor force in the next 50 years (Chessell 2018). More privileged individuals (white, educated, males with higher income) support greater implementation of LDT. Yet, most Americans have some degree of apprehension or fear regarding LDT and favor careful regulation (experts in tech fields are more optimistic) (Zhang and Dafoe 2019). A sizeable part of the population can be described as fearful of changing technology and its implications. This group places more emphasis on the potential downsides of innovations in techne such as job loss or changing culture and are more likely to have anxiety related illnesses (McClure 2018). Nam (2019) examines specific behavioral cues that indicate an individual's views on LDT policy, with enthusiasm being correlated with adjustment policies such as the implementation of Universal Basic Income or pay supplements for workers, whereas those who are pessimistic about LDT favor direct regulation to discourage the transition. Atkinson (2016) points out that much of this apprehension is a result of cultural and narrative assumptions that are not necessarily grounded in the reality that we face. As robots become more common, for example, they reflect cultural and political assumptions that are not entirely obvious or expected. For instance, we tend to assign racial cues to robots based on their color and other attributes, such as associating the color black with military and police robots (Bartneck et al. 2018).

Electoral Saliency

Electoral politics in the United States has begun to more explicitly reflect these challenges. Part of the drive for this trend may be the expert view that the rise of Donald Trump's political movement is partially due to increased adoption of LDT in the upper Midwest swing states that were traditionally centers of manufacturing employment (Frey et al. 2018).

These states were critical for the success of President Trump in the 2016 Electoral College. Although experts had been sounding the alarm about issues that could lead to the rise of populist movements if left unchecked, these issue had not become explicitly salient in electoral politics (C. B. Frey and Osborne 2017). Trump himself did not make the issue of adoption of LDT a central part of his campaign even though, during the 2020 Democratic Primary, Andrew Yang and Senator Bernie Sanders (among the most progressive of the candidates) both presented explicit solutions to these disruptions. Yang famously ran his campaign on the implementation of a Universal Basic Income (UBI) program to offset the long term effects of LDT (Yang2020 n.d.). Sanders opted for a more traditional approach, favoring job retraining and programs to help workers adapt, but stopping short of a UBI program (BernieSanders.com n.d.). This represents a generational and philosophical split within progressive policy solutions regarding LDT. Yang would go on to argue that job retraining is not feasible as the only solution to LDT related issues, because many individuals are not going to want or have the means to use those resources, and many who do go through the program do not actually find employment in the field for which they were retrained (Desmoinesregister.com 2019). Evidence for this assertion is mixed. A report (D’Amico and Schochet 2012) evaluating retraining programs states that roughly 37% of participants find work in their retraining field. This suggests that in many cases, such programs may or may not be more effective than a displaced worker looking for work without the retraining program (the report lacked a specific and robust control group). Thus, Yang’s proposal is more about adaptation into a new reality rather than an attempt to maintain the current one as Sanders’ proposals do. While President Joe Biden has acknowledged the uncertainty of the future related to developments in LDT (Schobert and Reeves 2019), his proposals in response to this policy area are more measured than the progressive wing of the Democratic party would like and

are unlikely to see implementation given the extremely close partisan split within both houses of Congress at the beginning of his first term.

Cultural and economic rifts between those who will benefit from current trends in changing techne, and those who will be “left behind,” mirror the larger rifts of partisanship, geographic location, and ideology. The rise of populism, particularly on the right, is strong among the same groups who are more likely to be impacted from rapidly developing techne, both in terms of job disruption and feelings of being “left behind” by a rapidly changing culture and economy for which they were never prepared: working class, uneducated, rural men (Levy 2018). While far from a measurably causal variable, changes in the “way things get done” and how we think about productivity are rapidly changing away from that which is comfortable and advantageous for this group of people. Such disruption necessarily has an effect on political behavior, including voting.

Policy Reactivity

While technological advancement and the forces of capital appear naturally occurring, they are ultimately social in nature. The implementation, regulation, and use of new forms of technology are subject to our human dictation about our own future as we construct the social contexts around which technologies exist (Wajcman 2017). Entering the policy arena on these issues, it is important to keep our options open to proactive response to emerging technologies and their implementation.

Much policy literature focuses on concepts of life-long learning and job retraining across economic sectors (Lund et al. 2019). Increasingly, changes in techniques of productivity in reaction to new technologies are coming at employees more quickly than they can keep up. The constant need to always be retraining places additional strain on employees who are already

concerned about their role as employees and experiencing mental health issues as a result. Job retraining was the central pillar of adaptation policy in the United States, both during and before the administration of Donald Trump. The Trump administration doubled down on reskilling, recognizing the need for adaptation in its economic reports but maintaining an optimistic tone about the maintenance of the human role in the economy, even if some tasks are automated (The White House 2019). The administration established a Council on the American Worker by executive order (Executive Office of the President 2018) to examine issues facing workers displaced by technology and economic changes. However, the approach taken by this office had been to entice private businesses to keep employment opportunities and invest in job training, rather than to invest directly in solving the problem. Thus, the progress made in preparing for the economy of the future was slow, and the success of such approaches has yet to be fully evaluated or understood. The rate of technological change will determine the degree of disruption, but policymakers should begin examining solutions for widespread disruption before it is an immediate problem (Djankov and Saliola 2020).

America's Battles over Techne in the Context of Great Power Politics

Until recently, the United States was considered by many to be the lone post-Cold War superpower. However, China's global ascendance has begun to challenge this assumption in a significant way. China has invested heavily in its economic, military, and diplomatic position on the global stage at a time when the United States is becoming increasingly focused on maintaining its internal cohesion and productivity. To underscore the importance of techne to the United States' culture, in part shaped by its global position, a brief comparison of China's approach to technical advances is useful.

China's approach to labor disrupting technology is influenced by its strategic and economic situation as well as its political culture. China has primarily been known for the mass production of physical goods of mixed quality. Roughly 30% of its GDP is from manufacturing, much of which is exported to the United States (World Bank n.d.). However, because of the low cost of the goods produced, China has, until recently, relied on volume rather than favorable prices to become an economic superpower. With advances in AI and automation technologies being a primary driver of increased efficiency in the private sector, and the boom of robotics and advanced software development, largely in the United States, there is a significant motivation to adapt existing economies to integrate such tools. China is taking this to heart, making it a central part of the state capitalist regime's 13th Five Year Plan (Central Compilation & Translation Press 2016). More specifically, the Central Committee documents the goal of transitioning away from human resource intensive practices that produce inexpensive export products and towards the use of LDTs that can manufacture large quantities of technologically advanced products to be more competitive in the world market (Karabegović 2018). Both the 13th Five Year Plan and the subsequent and accompanying Made in China 2025 Plan outline specific investments and plans for making this transition (U.S. Chamber of Commerce 2017).

The COVID-19 pandemic offered a specific opportunity for China to implement its drive towards automation and the use of robotics, with robots being used increasingly both for production in lieu of putting workers at risk and in providing essential services. China has increased its use of robots to deliver food to quarantined individuals and perform healthcare services that would be risky for a human to do (Fannin 2020).

The Central Committee clearly views technological sophistication, combined with active but careful administration of its application, as the way to compete or surpass the economic

might of the United States. Given the agrarian reality of the interior, China's massive population, and the poverty experienced by many individuals on the ground, it may seem unlikely that such a massive refitting of the country's largest economic sector (now rocked by COVID-19) would be more than a theoretical aspiration. However, the government and private partners have made progress toward making it reality. The manufacturing centers of Dongguan have become a center of discussion and an example of the success that the regime has had in this long term adaptation, with much of its production now being automated (Sharif and Huang 2019).

Adaptations have been necessary elsewhere in the Chinese state and economic system (often intertwined) to prevent significant negative consequences from these disruptions. Without policy adjustments targeting disrupted labor, such a large undertaking could have major implications for the future of the regime and its ability to meet economic goals as inequality increases due to disruption in the manufacturing labor market (Zhou and Tyers 2017). Made in China 2025 contains some of the same proposals that are commonly suggested in the United States. These include investment in retraining and reskilling programs for displaced workers, investments in social safety nets, and adaptations to the internet economy to ensure proper tax collection (Liu and Wang 2019). The Chinese economy as a whole has begun the transition away from a manufacturing economy and towards one based on service industries as well (Tham 2017). While information that could be detrimental to the agenda of the government is difficult to obtain, some sources have uncovered the impact that this has had on the laboring class. Many find themselves falling through the cracks of LDT implementation, and the steps being taken to adapt make the experience of individuals in China more similar to that of Americans than might be expected (Zhou 2019).

The United States remains the leader in development and implementation of robotic and artificial intelligence technologies (Ding et al. 2018). However, this advantage in development capability does not negate the advantages that China has in implementation due to the differing motivations and goals of the two states, as well as the difference in political will to utilize more LDTs. While China relies heavily on trends and capacity in American and European research and development, China is leading in targeted and intentional investment in LDT implementation (R. D. Atkinson 2019). Furthermore, given China's history of disregarding foreign patent claims and engaging in industrial espionage, the state may be able to make up for these shortfalls using those methods as well as its own growing research and development capacity. Public-private partnerships within China also drive much of the process of deploying LDT, meaning that China's central state is not entirely equipped to unilaterally mandate deployment and use of particular technologies (Zenglein 2019). China is a state *capitalist* regime after all, and without some level of economic liberalism would face less private investment within the otherwise tightly controlled country.

America's existential crisis of identity is influenced by its relationship to rapidly changing technology and the unwillingness of culture and practice to adapt to existing circumstances. Compared with China, the United States should have the edge in the development and implementation of technical achievement and the subsequent social adaptations necessary for positive outcomes. However, it is the political culture of America surrounding labor and technology that often prevents adaptation. The democratic nature of the United States means that when a new development threatens the interests of a particular region or demographic, the representatives of that interest in Congress and the lobbying industry surrounding it are more capable of encouraging technical protectionism by way of policy and public opinion. It should

not be assumed that every technical change or development should be followed or encouraged in every country or that China's willingness to break political norms (by American standards) to change its economy is a universal strength. The American system and its economy have competed on the global scale with other superpowers in the past and operate on different values that place more emphasis on individual freedom, dignity, and happiness. However, the more eager willingness of China to disrupt its people and make necessary policy adjustments to make advances in the tools and practices of production and human action should not be taken lightly as the United States seeks to compete and/or cooperate with China in the future.

US Culture and Rapidly Changing Techne

As this chapter demonstrates, the United States and its relationship with the rapidly changing nature of techne is one of critical importance and political saliency. The available research suggests that a large number of Americans may face displacement by the quickly changing landscape of techne and employment. Few jobs or tasks may be immune to this effect, as a "double bind" of advances in robotics and artificial intelligence could heavily impact both menial physical tasks as well as managerial and logistical tasks associated with more white-collar work. However, in many cases, those who are already the most vulnerable are also the most impacted from this development. Those in low paying jobs without a college degree, people of color, and rural white men are particularly vulnerable to economic and personal disruption from these trends.

While the issue has seen some saliency in the political and policymaking spheres, little progress has been made to formulate cohesive and broad plans to adapt. The popularity of populist candidates such as Donald Trump in rural areas and among those who are especially impacted by this problem. While Donald Trump's campaign and presidency primarily focused

on seeking to preserve existing jobs, regardless of their likelihood to exist for long in a rapidly changing economy, other candidates have put forward more prescient ideas. For instance, Andrew Yang's presidential candidacy brought the concept of Universal Basic Income into the mainstream of political discussion as a response to the potential for large scale shifts in the labor market as a result of rapidly developed techne. Yet, on the policy side, little has been done to directly address or plan to address this issue in future.

This chapter has also alluded to the importance of American culture and the broader relationship that Americans have with labor and technology. As the discussion on China's relatively more eager approach to automation, robotics, and artificial intelligence shows, the attitudes of American culture and public opinion regarding technology places the United States in an awkward strategic and political position. The maintenance of jobs for their own sake is a political value that is highly regarded in the context of the United States, and policymakers are beholden to these ideas because of their popularity around election time. China must maintain control of its society in many of the same ways but is culturally and politically less constrained. Thus, questions over how cultures and political systems deal with rapidly changing techne have significant consequences for international diplomacy and economics. As the world has become significantly globalized, the economic practices of the great powers affect all countries and their relationship with those great powers.

The following chapter will proceed from this discussion by demonstrating the effect that our relationship with labor and human tasks has on the phenomenological experience of the individual in America. It does so by examining the existing mental health and disease of despair crises in the United States through the lens of existential theory. By demonstrating that many of the same groups that are more likely to be disrupted by rapidly developing techne without

adaptations that mitigate negative outcomes and bolster positive ones are also at high risk of developing diseases of despair, it will show how existential problems become political ones. Those suffering from simultaneous crises of economics, mental health, and culture seek new political ideologies and leaders. In this case, the rise of populism (particularly conservative populism) in the United States is closely related to the existing unresolved problems that are the focus of this dissertation.

Chapter IV: Mental Health and the Existential Moment

In the previous chapter, it was established that the current situation of rapidly developing techne is becoming a critical economic situation both for the United States and the rest of the world. Throughout the history of the United States, techne has been a force for disruption, with even the Civil War being fought primarily over issues related to slavery. While there is a great deal of variability in the exact future impact of Labor Disrupting Techne, In the American context it may be disruptive in ways that go beyond the economic. There is an increased disconnect between the changing economic landscape and the values of the dominant culture. Whereas employment for its own sake once was a value that could satisfy both economic and cultural needs, today it meets many challenges. Among them are longstanding concerns, such as the systemic mismatch between the lowest paid jobs and the cost of living in an area. After the pandemic, many Americans, particularly low-income parents, have not returned to work because of the low wages available to them. Workers are simply demanding higher wages to return to work when it is possible for them to do so. In response to the worker shortage for these low wage jobs, fast food chains and other industries are raising wages slightly but are also looking to simply replace the workforce with technology which is almost always less costly than an employee regardless of the wage level. The rapidly developing sector of LDTs contributes to possible future barriers to work. This is particularly true for those already in low wage, low skill service and manufacturing positions. Currently available research summarized previously indicates that many of the most economically vulnerable are at a higher risk of being displaced by changing technology. While people of color are especially at risk in more urban areas, one disproportionately impacted group stands out from the perspective of cultural and political instability. Poor, uneducated, white men from rural areas are at a higher risk of being disrupted

than many other groups due to the kind of jobs that these men tend to hold being ripe for automation. This group had been a dominant cultural force in the United States for many decades, and its political response to losing that cultural power at the same time as it loses the small amount of economic certainty it had has significant impacts on mental health. This chapter will discuss the mental health aspect of the existential moment facing many Americans regarding their relationship with employment and their own labor.

American Existential Political Subjects

To conceive of the existential political subject within the American context, it is worth beginning with the way that existentialism tends to construct the individual. Martin Heidegger's concept of "dasein" has already been defined and discussed elsewhere. Throughout this analysis, "dasein" is used to denote the generic of a political subject. No gender, race, sexuality, or other demographic indicators are assumed by this term. It can be extended to any specific expression of the individual or be used as a generic term for the individual. In this analysis, the latter is the assumed usage unless specific differentiations on demographic grounds are made in the experience of dasein-being-with. Pronoun usage in reference to dasein shall take the neutral or object form, "it" or the singular "they" being the most appropriate. Heidegger himself refers to dasein in both these ways, as one of the purposes of dasein as a concept is to divorce the individual subject from all form other than that of existence. A person becomes an "it" in this way because Heidegger wants us to begin from a perspective that prevents us from assigning any humanistic detail to the dasein we are imagining. We are not necessarily meant to identify with dasein because the concept represents a blank slate until it is placed in the context of physical and social reality.

The use of dasein in this way is not intended to disregard demographic differences or inequalities. Highlighting, not obfuscating, inequalities and differences in political experience is the purpose of this project after all. However, by starting from a point of the generic phenomenological subject separated from any material or social input more clear attention can be paid to the experience of dasein once it is in the state of being-with. In existential philosophy, precision of ontological states is essential due to the important task of cutting straight to the experience of dasein without becoming trapped in institutional or behavioral concepts. In effect, to understand the American political subject through the existential philosophical lens, it is important to start from a concept that is a blank slate other than the assumption of existence without an objective measure of the value of that existence. From this starting point, the political subject can be placed within a specific institutional and behavioral framework for analysis, the state of dasein-being-with.

Heidegger conceives of dasein as being “thrown” into existence, placed into a circumstance beyond its control. No instructions are given, no lifestyle preferences considered (or even formed by dasein to propose). Dasein simply suddenly exists. Dasein now must contend with the Others and Das Man in its path towards attempting to live authentically within the social context into which it is thrown. Dasein must “be-with”. Through the process of distantiality, of comparing oneself to the Others by the standards of Das Man, dasein begins to construct itself in the image of its surroundings. In the social sciences, we often call this process “socialization.” For existentialists, however, this process is more fundamental and problematized. The individual’s authentic self and potential is lost within the process of averaging into the mass of the Others.

In the American context, dasein should be offered the best possible opportunity for an authentic life, even if some distantiality necessarily occurs. The concepts of freedom and liberty are paramount in the culture of the United States and are important to the goals of existentialism as well. To be able to live a comfortable, middle class life on the fruits of working hard in a full-time job that you find fulfilling has been the fundamental economic social contract of the United States for almost a century. While it is questionable whether this contract was ever reflective of the economic reality, particularly for people of color and women, the growing inequality of wages coupled with the gap between growth in wages and growth in the cost of living the quintessential middle class American life make it particularly suspect in the 21st century. For many, simply existing is a challenge, never mind the contemplation of what it would mean to be “authentic” in one’s existence. Yet, the cultural narratives that Americans continue to tell one another are incompatible with this reality. “Work hard and you will succeed,” may never have been true as advice, but in today’s economic climate, those who find themselves working the hardest are often rewarded the least. This is to say nothing of “work ethic”, only the parameters of a particular occupation. Those with the least desirable jobs are often also paid the least and face the least opportunity for advancement (food and retail service, menial labor, and care industries, for example). Inequality in access to quality education and other barriers have created a stratified and unequal distribution of tasks to do and the economic rewards for accomplishing them.

In the context of American liberalism examined through existential theory, freedom, liberty, potential, and productivity are the marketing and “talent acquisition” buzzwords of the Others and Das Man. To make dasein believe that they are free to be authentic through the imposition of a liberal institutional and behavioral structure, the story of the American dream is

told to citizens from a young age. The promise of working hard to achieve a comfortable life is drilled into the psyches of all Americans, convincing the working class that they are merely temporarily withheld from their rightful place in the McMansion of their dreams and working just a little bit harder for Das Man will get them there. Freedom and liberty to pursue that lifestyle at all mental and phenomenological cost is fundamental to the narrative of the American way of life. Implicit in this narrative is the promise that *dasein* will be fulfilled in some way that goes beyond simply having a job and not starving to death. Freedom and liberty to do *as one pleases* without interference implies an authentic goal originating in the real desires of the individual, not the circumstances into which they are thrown. Yet, as soon as *dasein* expresses an authentic desire or interest that is not within the interest of the dominant culture, Das Man must necessarily respond.

In the 20th century, this often took the form of moral outrage or outright expression of political power through force or policy. This is seen in the backlash to the sexual revolutions of the 60s and 70s, the civil rights movement, and new forms of artistic culture like rock music and video games. Today, however, it is more likely for that expression to be co-opted into the greater “averageness” of the dominant culture. Neoliberal American Das Man appears more benevolent, more tolerant, and more understanding than the culture of the 20th century. Yet, it is merely more capable of absorbing new expressions into that which it finds acceptable. For example, the United States is only 30 years from beginning to commonly see positive LGBT representation on television. Yet many corporations today change their publicly facing logos to represent Pride Month. Some of these companies were avoiding hiring LGBT employees not that long ago, and now “stand with pride.” In this way, American economic culture’s interest in that which is outside the norm is clear. If it can be turned into a tool for the process of “averageness” as

Heidegger would put it, it is acceptable. If it is fundamentally opposed to those goals, it must be deemed undesirable. If it can sell a T-shirt or coffee mug, it is a good thing for today's neoliberal sensibilities.

The promise of authenticity through freedom and liberty in the 21st century neoliberal American context is made complex by the duality of freedom and experience. Freedom and liberty to pursue authenticity runs against the limits of our increasingly unequal economic experiences. The American dasein is constantly encouraged to pursue its authentic desires and told that the system will support that endeavor. Yet, when that dasein is within the context of social and economic limitations unique to the experience of Americans, such authenticity appears impossible. If one's only career and life prospects are to enter the service workforce out of high school or accrue massive debt on the hope that the degree they obtained from their local community college will make them the manager at McDonald's rather than the fry cook, any conception of "authenticity", happiness, fulfillment, or the American Dream are likely already left far behind. To be constantly told of the potential for great things while wallowing in the reality of that potential's practical impossibility creates an existentially, mentally, and phenomenologically unsustainable situation within dasein. Inequality, uncertainty, and fear are the barriers to dasein's authenticity in many contexts, not just that of the United States. However, the culture of the United States constantly attempts to convince most of its members of the feasibility of attaining authenticity through economic freedom while simultaneously creating the class parameters for its impossibility.

Isaiah Berlin's two conceptions of liberty fits excellently in this distinction. Classical liberalism holds at its roots the notion of "negative" liberty, the liberty to do as one pleases without interference from the government. In negative liberty, the value of the available choices

is considered to only a small degree. Only the presence of barriers to the desired action by the subject is a violation of negative liberty, regardless of the specific options or choices being made. “Positive” liberty on the other hand requires active maximization of choices and the quality of the available choices matter, even if that means allowing government interference or regulation (Berlin 2013). Under measures of positive liberty, the subject’s liberty only goes so far as the quality of available choices. For instance, negative liberty would only be concerned with the ability of consumers to choose their healthcare plans without governmental interference. However, if many individuals face a situation where they could not afford to choose any healthcare plan or must pay extremely high rates for an insufficient plan, a negative liberty framework has few objections. If measured by positive liberty however, the lack of any quality choices is deemed to be a barrier to liberty. If it is impossible for one to make a positive choice, a choice that would truly meet the needs or desire of the subject, then under a positive liberty analysis the situation offers little liberty at all, regardless of how hands off the government may be. Berlin’s two conceptions of liberty gives another look at the struggle of existentialism displayed by Kierkegaard. The anxiety of knowing one can make choices and that the political system is relatively tolerant of those choices comes into direct conflict with the despair of knowing that most choices are truly impossible. Anxiety over the future reflects our liberty as individuals to act. Despair is the knowledge that because of the past and present, most choices are not available. To arrive at authenticity is to successfully navigate this experiential dichotomy while retaining a true sense of “self” and an adherence to internally determined ethical and political standards (Kierkegaard 2015).

But what can even be meant by “authenticity”? Is it possible to have a conception of “living authentically” that would not necessarily be dictated by the social world and of Das Man?

It would be easy to lean into the phenomenological aspect of existentialism and suggest that authenticity is defined only by the specific *dasein* that is seeking it. However, asking someone if they are living “authentically” is not going to yield any useful information regardless of how many criteria or leading questions are used. Authenticity is a subjective concept, defined by the experience of the individual. However, existentialism as a philosophy seems concerned with being able to identify authenticity in a more objective way to determine the quality of a particular *dasein*’s “good or bad faith” (Sartre 1992). Certainly, the simple release of serotonin in an individual’s anatomy as a result of some accomplishment or happy moment cannot rise to the level of “authenticity” or “good faith” that more transcendental existentialists like Sartre would like. In the American context, Camus’ objection to the existence of an objective concept of authenticity that can be attained through a specific set of actions or thoughts comes to bear more clearly. If many Americans are, like Sisyphus, rolling a boulder up a hill only to watch it roll back down once more, then in the American context there is someone standing at the top of the hill telling the roller that if they just roll the boulder a few more times they will no longer have to do it or they will gain some reward for the rolling of the boulder in this life or after their death (more on the latter forthcoming). Regardless of whether this reward ever comes, rolling of the boulder for its own sake becomes an individual moral test within the context of America’s relationship with human action and labor.

One distinct facet of American culture that makes the existential circumstances of the American Sisyphus different from the original tale is that, for Americans, rolling the boulder is not a punishment from the gods for a slight. For American workers, rolling the boulder up the hill, being told that rolling the boulder itself is good for them and the community, then watching it roll back down again is just another day. Regular people are not tragic heroes upon which to

create an allegory. Their existential self-reflection is less dramatic, but no less important and somber than that of Sisyphus. As the mental health crisis and crisis of life satisfaction in the United States demonstrate, the American Sisyphus is anything but happy. In this way, Camus' conclusion that the immediacy of life can provide meaning or, "a reason not to commit suicide," fall short in the context of this analysis. Sisyphus is doomed to roll his boulder for eternity. For Americans, the freedom and liberty to *pursue* an end to their rolling of the boulder with no guarantee of success is, as Kierkegaard suggests, a worse situation for the experience of the individual. Whereas Sisyphus could not hope to be freed from his predicament, leading to Camus' conclusion that he would eventually find happiness within his struggle, Americans cling to the cultural narrative of future success and fulfillment because of their own "grit and determination." Surely, rolling the boulder faster or with more enthusiasm will lead to a different circumstance. While Camus' skepticism in transcendental existentialism like that of Sartre is warranted in analyzing the American experience due to the subjective nature of "authenticity," his conclusion also leaves us wanting. Americans do not need to accept that boulder rolling is their eternal destiny. The American Sisyphus finds itself within an economic situation that is soon to produce machines that can roll the boulder for them and a political system in which they may demand a different set of circumstances once they are no longer spending all their time rolling boulders. In short, the American Sisyphus can change their circumstances through collective action. This freedom frustrates the mental experience of the individual because of the responsibility and limitations involved. It also provides the means for entering a new situation.

American Culture and Techne

America's culture surrounding the various aspects of techne are relatively unique and prone to exacerbating the existential and mental challenges discussed in this dissertation. Like

many liberal societies, America subscribes to the economic theory of Adam Smith that labor begets value (Smith 2018). In short, the value of a good or service is tied to the amount of labor required to produce it. However, the American relationship with labor is more complex than simply ascribing value to it. Rather, American culture appears to value labor as a moral good in and of itself regardless of the practical or economic practicalities or value added by that labor (Wisman and Davis 2013; Porter 2010). Discussions of labor policy or “jobs” in general appears to see employment, occupation, and the expending of calories as a fundamental positive. “Job creation” is a phrase paramount to American economic discussions, with the unemployment rate being an important indicator of political outcomes and the job performance of various elected officials, regardless of the actual causal connection between those two factors. When it comes to the moral evaluation of the individual, the attainment of employment and the prestige or advantages of that employment are important to the identity of that individual. In casual conversation, “what do you do?” is an icebreaker, regardless of whether knowing someone’s employer will tell you anything about them as a person. These cultural tendencies are not entirely unique to the United States, but the way that these assumptions impact the political process and the formulation of policy are important.

The historical roots of American culture’s complex relationship with techne, with “getting things done,” can be traced back to the mixing of cultural and political values from the colonial period. It is important to remember that many of the early European settlers in what became the United States were considered too hardline in their beliefs for mainstream European religious society, necessitating their move across the Atlantic (Popescu 2020). We refer to these individuals as “puritans” today, but their legacy remains an important part of mainstream American culture regardless of how far the rest of our culture has deviated from that of the

puritans. Most relevant to this project is the concept of the “Protestant work ethic.”¹ In short, the Protestant work ethic is a theological belief that hard work in this life will beget access to heaven in the afterlife. Working hard and expending energy in the workplace, either for oneself or an employer, becomes a moral good in and of itself divorced from its economic reality. This concept is not unique to the early American puritans, and the idea that one should work hard in life is a common one in many faiths. Yet, in the American context, its specific application has created a unique culture of work and employment that remains tied to the moral value of work. It is a transcendental value, implying that those who work hard may achieve some higher knowledge or reward (Porter 2010). Historically, it has been tied to the salvation of one’s immortal soul. However, the genealogical approach of this chapter will demonstrate that its impacts are still important for a more secular concept of salvation or transcendence.

Foucault offers us a way to modernize and secularize the Protestant work ethic. For Foucault, much of the authority and power which governs us has historically been pastoral in nature, following from the power of the clergy. Clergy were the shepherds of their flock through moral uncertainty towards salvation in the afterlife. Foucault proposes that as secularization and modernization takes off in the 19th and 20th centuries, that disciplinary professionals in secular roles take the place of the clergy in the role of moral guidance. Rather than spiritual or eternal salvation, however, modern pastoral power offers a form of salvation in this life by way of specific and secular conceptions of desirable traits. Healthcare, education, and psychiatry were the institutions of focus for Foucault on this point. He would analogize the teacher, therapist, and doctor as a recipient of the confessional and the guide for returning to or staying on the path of

¹ It should be noted that early sociologist Max Weber popularized this term in arguing that the Protestant work ethic was instrumental in making Protestants the driving force behind the creation of capitalism and that Protestants are more productive than their Catholic counterparts as a result. There is dispute about this historical assertion, and this dissertation uses the concept as a normative value without commenting on this empirical debate.

health and proper moral behavior (Foucault 2003c). However, in its own way, the modern workplace has a similar place in our social culture, with the penance of spending 40 or more hours a week at a place of work being a kind of penance or tithing for existing in society, the manager or boss taking the place of the priest, and the corporate training and performance review process being a new kind of confessional. Americans may not be as overtly religious or puritan in their views on employment and labor as previous generations, but the cultural reverence for employment separated from its economic and personal context has striking similarities to the kind of power that Foucault describes. Our professionalized and secularized political and social world still maintains a kind of pastoral power, and this extends to how we think about our workplaces.

The conservative view on work and labor in the United States, particularly today, follows the Protestant work ethic theory regardless of whether it is discussed in a particularly religious context (Jones, Furnham, and Deilea 2010; Malcomson et al. 2006). In the post-Trump era of American conservatism and particularly in the recovery of the COVID-19 pandemic, simply being employed may become the last truly communal, small-r republican value held by the conservative movement. There is little discussion from the mainline of conservative circles about any aspect of employment other than the binary of being employed or not and opposing increases in wages or workplace regulations. While some liberal Republicans of the time may support policies like an increased minimum wage (Senator Mitt Romney, for instance), the conservative ideology of the party does not. This is not a position held only by the most conservative.

American culture's mainstream remains fixated on labor markets and the unemployment rate (Conover, Feldman, and Knight 1986). Work satisfaction, the cost of living vs. wages, and other truly phenomenological factors are not as reported by the media and are not examined commonly

by the average American. While the simple data of unemployment and workplace participation can tell us how many people are working, they cannot tell us anything about what it is like to work in the United States in various occupations nor the value that such work has on the well-being of the worker and their family. Working becomes a communal responsibility, and thus working in a job that does not cover one's expenses becomes, in a manner like that of the Soviet work culture, a public service. Dispensing cheap hamburgers in a low paying service job during the pandemic may make someone a momentary cultural "hero," but those "heroes" may gain little from having done so (other than perhaps COVID) in the long term.

In terms of life satisfaction or "fulfillment," the individual is held entirely responsible for the construction of their contributions to the nation's techne and their own career. More recent neoliberal trends have begun to encourage the development of a personal "brand" for oneself, further pressing the economic identity of an individual as the primary identity. While recent discussions have begun to turn towards the issue of access to job training and education, it remains the responsibility of the individual to obtain the knowledge and skills that will ostensibly put them in a better economic position. Cuts to aid for students and the skyrocketing cost of attending college (one of the primary indicators of economic success) indicates a culture that is likely to encourage the anxiety of choice but do little to alleviate the despair of failure and limitation. The systemic restraints someone may face towards attaining economic fulfillment, let alone existential "authenticity" are discussed in mainstream political discussions, particularly among those on the left who are concerned with rising inequality, but little is done to combat it in a meaningful way. In voice, those in that situation are encouraged to "seize the day" and embrace the anxiety of the future. In policy and practice they are encouraged to take their place at the bottom of Sisyphus' hill. Once in place, these specific expressions of dasein are expected

to identify as proud boulder pusher, as in American culture one's employment is tied to one's worth and identity. In the United States, *dasein* is expected to accept the thrownness of their situation and identify with whichever career or employment opportunity to which they have become attached, regardless of the actual economic or personal benefit involved.

All that said, this analysis stops short of criticizing those who would happily call themselves Sisyphus. The experience of an individual towards their employment or their work is subjective, and thus no specific occupation may be externally categorized as "boulder pushing" or "a fulfilling and great opportunity." *Dasein* constructs the experience of a particular task in their own experience as well as their emotional and mental response to that task. It has already been stated that the concept of "authenticity" is subjective, and any individual's situation should not be subsequently subject to the suspect attempt at objective evaluation by an existential philosopher. One *dasein*'s boulder pushing is another's dream career.

Hannah Arendt's three categories of human activity can be helpful in this case, though they are reverse engineered for different purposes. Arendt categorizes human activity (the human contribution to *techne*) by the durability of the results of the activity and the economic status of those results. Arendt is primarily pulling from the example of ancient Greek society for these examples, but they have remained useful and relevant throughout history. For the Greeks (and Arendt), *labor* is the lowest form of human activity. Arendt argues that labor represents activity which produces results that are temporary and necessary to the sustenance of life. This is not just private activity such as cooking or hunting for food. In the context of the Greeks, the slave classes were commonly associated with labor because they did what was needed for survival and the continuation of the status quo, but the products of their labor were short lived. Like Sisyphus, their work is never truly done. *Work*, on the other hand, was the domain of craft workers and

artisans. They may toil and perform what we would call “labor”, but the result of that activity is more durable. The slave who worked in Greek orchards was never done harvesting and planting, and thus could not see any permanent result or relief. However, the toolmaker in the city could take pride in the durability and unique qualities of the product made. Artisans throughout history can leave a mark of identity on their goods in a way that those engaged in what Arendt calls “labor” cannot. Finally, *action* represents acts of political or otherwise public engagement. To engage in town meetings, vote, or write legislation is the most permanent of products for Arendt, because it impacts the community. It is the most celebrated but also most consequential type of human activity, and this sentiment is common in Greek philosophy. Arendt leaves these distinctions as historical objective qualifiers for understanding the nature of human activity and the social construction of value surrounding it, arguing that labor has become the dominant type of human activity by which we are evaluated in modern cultures (Arendt 1959). However, Arendt does not look at these types of activity from the perspective of the subject who is engaged in activity, only from the view of an external categorization of activity. Implicit in her evaluation of each is the notion that the pride that the *worker* has in the durability of their goods is going to necessarily fulfill them more so than the *laborer* whose toils are endless and rewards few. What is not taken into account is the subjective view of the subject being studied. Someone who engages in an act which Arendt would categorize as labor may not feel less fulfilled or happy than someone who Arendt would call an artisan or worker. If the categories are to be useful in examining a phenomenological aspect of employment, the individual actor’s categorization of activities is more useful. In short, the durability of goods in Arendt’s definitions may be less relevant to today’s actors than should be assumed. The sense of fulfillment associated with work may be experienced by someone engaged in labor. Thus, one *dasein*’s labor becomes another’s

work so long as the attachment to the purpose of that activity brings feelings of fulfillment. For the purposes of this work, it is the categorization of subjective experiences that matters, not the categorization and evaluation of jobs themselves. In analyzing the political economy of the United States, this is important because of the tendency for our culture to categorize jobs under similar criteria. Being a coal miner in Appalachia comes with different cultural connotations than being a tech developer in Silicon Valley. Yet, the coal miner may remain more or less happy and fulfilled regardless of the difficulty, risks, and cultural position of their work. As we examine more specific experiences in the United States in this chapter, it is important to avoid the mistake of mainstream American culture and Arendt by categorizing jobs by their external cultural position and worth rather than the experiential and economic benefit (or detriment) it has to the specific holder of that job by their subjective standards rather than our own.

In most societies, historical and contemporary, there is a class of people who perform the least commonly desired work, are paid less than the cost of living (sometimes nothing) and remains typically unfulfilled in an experiential sense. Their economic contribution is to labor in some way, often in an identical way their entire lives. In the United States, slaves, indentured servants, cheap immigrant labor, and low-wage service workers have taken this role at various points in history. As previously stated, occupation becomes a critical part of our identity in the United States, to both positive and negative mental result depending on the circumstances and perspective of the individual. Much of an individual's self-worth and social value is wrapped up in their economic circumstances and their employment status. However, if many tasks that would otherwise lead one to be employed can be performed more cheaply and effectively by a machine, the tendency of employment and labor to define the individual within American culture faces a critical juncture. If many jobs simply cease to exist because of the increased efficacy and

complexity of our tools, this evaluative and ontological aspect of American culture becomes increasingly incompatible with the economic faced by many individuals.

Aristotle is among the first to conceive of the idea that if tools and machines could think for themselves and anticipate the needs of individuals that there would be less need of laborers. He would use this to state that this would free up individuals to pursue passions and engage in politics, specifically stating that slavery (his time's lowest class) would not be as necessary as a result (Aristotle 2013). More recent theorists have placed an explicitly optimistic and Marxist utopian spin on this idea, with some questioning whether a time will come that little direct human labor will be required in the grand scheme of *techne*. These theorists argue that the value added being entirely from capital will force a situation in which most humans can enjoy a life of leisure, recreation, and personal productivity that divorces their experience from having to simply labor to survive (Bastani 2019). To use Arendt's terms, this represents the notion that one day most modern humans in advanced nations will be rid of the need to labor in favor of personally fulfilling productive work or public action. This dissertation assumes the possibility of these outcomes as a thought experiment, but they do remain unlikely. However, a more incremental version of these ideas is already occurring and may be scaled up to include situations which involve massive numbers of tasks being automated by labor disrupting *techne*. Under a culture which places so much individual scrutiny on the place of labor and employment, the possibility of displacement by technology creates a cultural and phenomenological existential crisis of identity. The cultural expectations of America's unhealthy and unproductive relationship with work are increasingly incompatible with economic realities.

Anxiety, Despair, and Techne

As Chapter 3 discussed, individuals seeking to find a place in the American economy face a double bind of labor disrupting techne (LDT). Robotics and computerization are able to perform an ever increasing number of menial tasks which would otherwise have been done by a service or production worker. Artificial intelligence is advancing rapidly, threatening more professional and managerial jobs. No matter the color of the collar on the individual employee or the task being performed, it is likely that a machine or program could do that task. While some professions are more insulated from these trends than others and estimates vary on the actual number of jobs that would be displaced without replacement, the discussion of LDTs displacing jobs is an important one in the political context of the United States.

American culture places a major significance on employment and the number of people who are unemployed. It is often used as a general metric for the direction of the country's economy. On an individual level, the obtaining of employment (regardless of the specifics of that employment) is seen as a communal obligation and a critical indicator of ethical worth. What then is likely to occur in an economic climate where the very foundations of accomplishing tasks could move away from needing humans to do many tasks? Furthermore, what does it mean when the tasks that are left are increasingly technical or humanistic and require advanced training and degrees? These big questions are the ones the United States faces today. The preconceived notions held in American culture about work are becoming incompatible with the realities of economic and political developments. Combined with the increasingly inequitable nature of the economy and polarized political and cultural environment as well as the unresponsive nature of the policy process to combat big challenges, and the future of the American experience becomes

quite unclear. The current system of creating policy in the United States is not prepared to deal with these changes, even if they do turn out to be relatively modest (West 2018).

The existential questions of LDTs and their desperate need for answers extend beyond the workplace. Personal robots in the home could disrupt domestic labor not only for the professionals who are paid to perform it, but those who do so in their own homes. American culture still partially clings to household gender roles, meaning that domestic tasks commonly performed by women could be eventually done by a robot or artificial intelligence. LDTs in personal activities could be liberating, allowing women to participate in the workforce more easily, pursue higher education, or simply enjoy not being expected to perform household tasks. However, there is a downside to this tendency, assuming that the patriarchal tendencies of our culture do not evolve as the availability of domestic technologies grows. These patriarchal assumptions tend to value women for their domestic, emotional, and sexual labor relative to their (assumedly) male partner. For example, Shokri and Asl (Shokri and Asl 2015) point out the possibility of the emerging sex doll and sex robot industry disrupting personal relationships, power dynamics, and even displacing the desire of straight men to pursue relationships with women. Of course, in a technical sense, all these trends could be the same with the gender concerns reversed. However, the market appears to be partial to one permutation, men purchasing analogs of women. If we only value one another in relationships for our various forms of labor because of the gender divisions in our dominant culture, then a robot that can perfectly or at least sufficiently replace said labor in the home may have a high potential for displacing possible personal relationships. When robots can provide the kind of labor typical of a human romantic relationship without any of the courtship, communication, and compromise

involved with maintaining said relationship, our culture surrounding sex and gender is primed to create a problematic national situation should domestic robots become commonplace.

Serious questions arise about the ability for individuals to attain authenticity or fulfillment without some form of occupation that forces them to deal with the outside world economically. While it may be possible for people to pursue a life of leisure and personal growth with all that extra time, this is only possible if society and culture are reoriented to encourage these pursuits (Danaher 2017). Even if work is only changed and not displaced, it is likely that adaptation will be required in how resources are distributed to those who are less likely to fit the new techniques (Spencer 2018). This adaptation is entirely possible, as Japan's culture is increasingly embracing robotics as a part of everyday life, going so far as to issue government documents granting some limited "rights" to specific robots (Robertson 2014). However, the American context is unique in the sense that the process of distantiality, of comparing oneself to another, is heavily reliant on economic indicators related to profession. When the Other that one is comparing oneself to is not even a human being, but a fabricated machine, the process of distantiality is modified. It no longer becomes possible to simply improve oneself or find another position. If we continue to measure ourselves by our ability to participate in a capitalist occupation for the benefit of others, the disruption of labor by technology will always cause us to find ourselves lacking.

The Existential Moment and Despair

Evidence for the deterioration of the way Americans are experiencing their lives can be seen in the mental health crisis that has been plaguing the United States for decades. In particular, the increases in deaths of despair, those associated with substance abuse and suicidality, is a cause for concern. While the mental health crisis is being discussed and states are

engaging with the problem, it may not be enough to simply address the mental health problems without addressing the underlying problems in the experience of those suffering from them. Rather than seek to simply cure a disease or prevent a suicide for its own sake, this dissertation looks to understand the underlying reasons individuals find themselves in such deep and permanent despair. Despair is a key conceptual link between mental health and existentialism. In many ways, the nebulous nature of the term eludes concrete definition in the world of mental health (Shanahan et al. 2019). However, in existentialism it lies in the acknowledgement of one's own limitations in the face of the anxious freedom that comes with the territory of being human. Those limitations may often be imposed from outside *dasein* itself. Often, they are perceived as coming from the Others and *Das Man*. Thus, mental health becomes increasingly political, as the cause of despair is rooted in social dynamics, not the mind or chemistry of the individual.

Diagnosis in diseases of despair has increased substantially in recent decades and are becoming a major health crisis (Brignone et al. 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic the mental health crisis became even more pronounced because of the fear of the virus and the necessary steps taken to stop the spread of the virus such as quarantine and social distancing. "Mental health conditions are disproportionately affecting specific populations, especially young adults, Hispanic persons, black persons, essential workers, unpaid caregivers for adults, and those receiving treatment for preexisting psychiatric conditions" (Czeisler et al. 2020). However, the impact of diseases of despair and the mental health crisis are neither chronologically nor demographically consistent. Some groups have been dealing with mental health crises for much longer than others. This is particularly true when examining the racial data. For instance, African Americans had *already been* experiencing higher rates of midlife despair related deaths through the end of the 20th century (Case and Deaton 2020). However, white rates of despair related

deaths surpassed that of black Americans in the early 2000s (Case and Deaton 2020). It was at this point that the seriousness of the mental health crisis became discussed more openly in American culture. Because white culture is the dominant American culture in most of the United States, the problem of despair became a more mainstream and salient problem contributing what was already a truly national crisis when it became a *white* mental health crisis. The mental health crisis of whites has become more visible because of the increased visibility of whites in society, with data often leaving out populations such as the homeless who cannot access mental health care services (Williams, Rosen, and Kanter 2019). It is no surprise that it is around the time whites overtook people of color in cases of diseases of despair that the cultural upheaval and identity crisis begins to take hold. When the dominant ethnic group becomes concerned about the direction of the nation's culture and is experiencing higher rates of despair, it follows that a reckoning with the makeup of that culture will occur. Furthermore, the existing inequalities in access to mental health services and the strong connection between inequality and mental health outcomes might suggest further that even an otherwise more privileged group such as rural whites are beginning to face additional economic challenges, with rapidly changing techne being one of them (Sami and Jeter 2021). The political ramifications of the white existential crisis stemming from changes in techne and mental health crises is the focus of this discussion, but it is important to highlight that the problem has impacted people of color at a significant rate for many decades.

One of the starkest indicators of risk for deaths of despair is education levels. Rates of mortality related to diseases of despair among whites between 45 and 64 without a college degree were more than 3 times that of whites with a college degree in 2016 (Case and Deaton 2020) In both educational categories, men were significantly more likely to die a death of despair

than women. Each 5-year age cohort also saw an increase in deaths of despair among those without a college degree (Case and Deaton 2020), meaning that this problem is no longer one only faced by those in middle age. Given the advantages that higher education already gives on the job market, analyzing this tendency through an existential lens becomes clear. If the dominant cultural value of Das Man is to be employed and to become successful because of hard work, not having a Bachelor's degree makes meeting the demands of Das Man even more difficult. Issues of self-worth and worries about economic security for oneself have a significant impact on the mental health of the individual, leading to despair in both the clinical and existential sense. Rapid changes in techne, both from the perspective of labor disrupting techne as capital and alterations to the practices and skills necessary to participate in the workforce necessitate greater education and adaptability. For many, the changes necessary to better compete for a fulfilled and authentic life, by one's own standards or those of Das Man, becomes a constant source of that despair.

Shanahan et al. (Shanahan et al. 2019) explicitly point to personal economic stagnation because of systemic and social forces as an environmental factor leading to diseases of despair and increasing the likelihood of a despair related death. When taken with the geographic data from Moretti (Moretti 2013), the geographic information we have on the despair pandemic matches quite well. Cities, which Moretti demonstrates are primed to become the hub of both culture and economic opportunity, also exhibit lower rates of despair symptoms than rural parts of the United States. Case and Deaton (2020) point out the cruel irony that rural states and areas which are supposedly tranquil and happy places to vacation are anything but that for those who live there full time due to the lack of well-paying jobs and cultural or educational opportunities. The deaths of despair pandemic has also hit rural America hard because of the lack of adequate

healthcare support, particularly mental health services (Smalley, Warren, and Rainer 2012). The masculine, conservative frontier culture of these states also discourages seeking mental health services when they are available.

When one compares the groups disproportionately impacted by disruptions in the labor force by technology to the groups more affected by the recent explosion in diseases of despair, much overlap exists. White, uneducated, poor, rural men are the primary intersection of these two simultaneous disruptions to attaining the fulfillment of an American middle-class life. Simultaneously, the United States is becoming more racially aware and diverse (W. Frey 2020), women are becoming dominant in universities and taking on more leadership in the workplace (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2021), and the economic power of rural America is waning relative to the coasts (Moretti 2013). The culture of the United States is increasingly dictated by the cosmopolitan values of the growing progressive cities, a trend that feels alien and morally wrong to many rural citizens. It is easy to imagine rural whites are led to feel left behind by the economic and cultural developments driven by technology and progressive culture. The despair and anxiety these individuals feel can be expressed in many ways. However, it should not be ignored that white, uneducated, rural men make up the core of Trump supporters and other increasingly violent and extreme conservative social movements. Additional research would be necessary to link mental health problems and anxiety over changes in techne to support for right-wing movements. However, the demographic similarities between the core group of both crises and support for these movements is difficult to ignore. Given the events surrounding the 2020 presidential election and the insurrection on January 6th, 2021, the political ramifications of failing to address these issues of polarization and inequality from both a cultural and economic perspective could be disastrous. To ignore the disruptive nature of rapidly changing techne with

no strategy for mitigation is to ignore the growing incompatibility of longstanding assumptions in American culture with the economic realities being faced.

Chapter V: Conclusion and Discussion

The start of the 2020s has presented unique challenges to both the United States the globe. Mental health, COVID-19, changing economic circumstances, and increased international tensions between liberal democracies and authoritarian regimes all contribute to the current moment and represent a potential historical turning point. In the United States, the increasingly polarized cultural and political climate combined with these emerging political, economic, and mental health crises have presented a particularly potent portend of shifting possibilities. The polarization has resulted in a largely unresponsive federal policy structure regarding longstanding issues of consistent salience such as crumbling infrastructure, access to higher education, and immigration. This lack of substantive response at the federal level is also seen in more the prescient policy areas discussed in this dissertation such as mental health and addressing the rapidly developing world of Labor Disrupting Technology and its subsequent effects on the tasks and roles of employees. Yet, many of the divisions seen in American culture and politics may be due, in part, to these trends. As discussed in this work, changes in techne, or how things are accomplished, makes a significant impact in a cultural context where employment and task completion are closely tied to ontological expressions of identity and the self. Many Americans, particularly poor, white, rural men, find themselves in a situation at the intersection of rapidly changing techne and an ongoing physical and mental health crisis. Many of those most impacted seek relief from the feeling that the world is leaving them behind in populist politics, particularly the conservative populism of Donald Trump.

The situation we find the United States in currently has been described as existential in a casual sense. This dissertation uses existential theory and its phenomenological approach to demonstrate the ways that American culture exacerbates existing negative experiences because

the values and expectations of that culture are incompatible with changing empirical circumstances in the American economy. The use of existentialism's phenomenological approach exposes and explores the concerns and experiences of individual Americans experiencing this moment. It presents a simple thesis, that the early 2020s are an "existential moment". As revealed in this work, this is supported through utilizing established existential theory with an applied use of empirical data and examples to show the linkages between technology and disruption of human action or behavior. It combines theory, history, and social science approaches to present a genealogy of the recent past and its relationship with the mental health and technical situation of the last 20 years.

When the ongoing, unresolved, and declining situation surrounding techne and mental health met the event of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was both accelerated and disrupted. The nature of the rapidly changing situation created by COVID-19 emphasized and heightened the development of culture-changing technology. Among other areas, work environments were directly impacted by COVID-19 and thus pulled on technology. This shift, as discussed in chapter 4, included an acceleration towards remote work and more labor disrupting techne. These changes led to greater isolation and anxiety and thus a decline in mental health. COVID-19 sped up the processes of changing techne—business and industry were pushed to find ways to continue functioning during the COVID-19 lockdowns and developed technology as a means to remain viable. This move altered culture in many ways, including ways that we are still attempting to understand.

Rapidly Changing Techne Exacerbating the Cultural Existential Moment

Techne was the major conceptual focus of this dissertation. In this context, it was used to simply describe any factor in the means and tools of accomplishing a goal. In particular,

productive and economic tasks associated with waged employment were the focus. The concept of Labor Disrupting Techne was explored as a means to understand what kind of disruption is being observed or predicted. In the context of American culture, LDT is especially significant. As chapter 3 demonstrates in detail, many Americans are at risk of being disrupted economically as a result of rapidly developing LDT. Because rapid changes in techne support and interact with the uneven level of cultural change in the United States, some groups experience the negative effects than others. This is particularly true among those who were already most vulnerable, namely low wage workers without a college degree already struggling to make ends meet. Many of these workers lack the flexibility or training to simply find another position in the case of being displaced, and the positions available may not be sufficient to meet their needs. The problem is particularly salient because of its impact on rural white men without a college degree. This group makes up the political core of the current conservative populist movement, and also experiences diseases of despair at a disproportionately high rate.

Because American culture values labor and the exertion of energy for its own sake, any disruption to opportunities to work has both economic and cultural significance. The process of culturally evaluating oneself and others becomes more complicated when one of the major virtuous aspects of American culture is in significant flux, namely the Protestant Work Ethic which values the exertion of labor for its own ethical value separate from its economic value. The intersection of anxiety and despair upon the subject attempting to navigate these uncertain economic waters contributes to the notion of a cultural existential moment. An existential moment in culture exists in this case because of the incompatibility of the culture's expectations with reality. Those who hold the values of the dominant culture surrounding employment and labor are faced with a world in which those values do not match lived experiences. Because

culture represents the way we construct meaning in response to our environment, changes in the economic environment that are incompatible with the existing expectations of behavior rise to the level of an existential crisis. This crisis is experienced as an inability to make sense of what appears to be absurd within the dominant cultural context. If the culture expects one to be able to gain social status and economic stability from hard work, being faced with the potential for disruption by an object of technology creates a fundamental mismatch of expectations. For the individual, anxiety and despair manifest as they attempt to navigate reconciling these incompatible ideas.

The normative values of what has been American employment culture are increasingly incompatible with developing economic empirical reality. As previously discussed in chapter 4, the process of distantiality which forces dasein to compare itself to the Others around it is disrupted in this particular case. Because the dominant culture determined by Das Man values work and exertion as a primary normative good, being displaced from one's ability to demonstrate this cultural virtue is significant. American culture often looks down upon the unemployed, regardless of their specific circumstances. For those specific instances of dasein who are displaced from economic opportunity, additional anxiety and despair places strain on their mental health. If one is looking to their career and employment as a source of validation, fulfillment, and authenticity because that is what their culture has taught them to do, the ability of a machine to displace that individual from employment has a significant phenomenological effect. American culture's expectations regarding work for its own sake have thus become increasingly difficult and impractical to meet for many individuals.

Mental Health Crises as Evidence of a Cultural Existential Moment

Assuming culture does eventually adapt to these changes, the interim period is likely to cause additional strain on the mental health, self-ideation, and political expressions of many Americans. Thus, it should not be surprising to find an intersection between those most at risk for LDT displacement support conservative populism. To be able to slow down cultural and technical change through politics may seem to be the only path forward for those who have, in many ways, been left behind by the rapidly changing culture and technical capacity of the United States.

Existentialism offers us a way to examine issues of culture through evidence based in mental health outcomes. Mental health perspectives, and clinical perspectives more broadly, often see deviant expressions as a problem to be solved through the reorientation of the subject's perspective, their environment, or through medication. This dissertation has taken a different approach. This dissertation takes the expression of anxiety, depression, and despair that result from the incongruity between the dominant culture and the economic experiences of everyday Americans who find themselves impacted by rapidly developing LDT. There are reasons people are addicted to alcohol and opioids. People are killing themselves for very real reasons that make them unable to answer Camus' fundamental philosophical question: why continue to live? It cannot be enough to convince the individual to stick around for one more day (or, if one were to take an economic perspective, one more shift) in a situation that is causing their mental illness. It is essential that the environmental and social factors that cause diseases of despair and mental illnesses be addressed. Living amidst a conceptual conflict between the values one holds regarding employment and labor and one's immediate economic reality causes negative mental health symptoms, but represent an even deeper crisis of identity. If one is taught to see their

occupation as their identity and that identity is easily replaced with a machine or string of code, the sense of self is disrupted as much as the income. This deep experience of anxiety and despair may, in many cases, lead to the development of a disease of despair.

As this dissertation and literature cited within have stated, the clinical perspective does not discount environmental factors, nor is it without importance for alleviating the suffering of individuals. However, the use of the existential perspective allows for concepts related to mental health to be discussed in ways that are more humanistic and sympathetic to the reasons behind mental health symptoms. It allows for the demonstration of the link between rapidly changing techne and uneven cultural evolution in the context of the United States through mental health as evidence of heightened existential anxiety and despair. The very culture in which we construct meaning and value for one another is fundamentally at question because of how closely connected practices of techne are to how we evaluate one another in the American cultural context. Disruptions to this evaluative tool have implications for how we conceive of ourselves and one another.

The political ramifications of many individuals between the coasts suffering from a feeling of separation from the main drivers of economic and cultural development are dire. In many ways, the ongoing “culture wars” are real expressions of how divided we are in terms of our perspective on productivity, employment, and the collective identity of the American nation. Many of those on one side of this debate suffer from being inexorably linked to areas and groups disproportionately impacted in practical ways by our rapidly changing attitudes and practices regarding work. While the white man living in the rural parts of the country is not the first group to experience this process, the economic and cultural power this group previously held is increasingly held by those who are living in the more affluent coastal cities. Because dominant

cultural groups are now finding themselves in the middle of economic and cultural decline, the crisis becomes an existential crisis of culture for the entire nation.

There is much speculation about the future parameters of changing techne and the possible responses to it. Universal Basic Income, expanded temporary unemployment, mass job retraining, and investment in education have all been proposed by various groups to address this problem. While there are proposals and possible plans for future legislation being debated by think tanks, interest groups, and politicians, the federal policy process itself is not ready to seriously consider significant policy changes to address these problems. Most political and policy production systems tend to be more reactive than proactive. However, the United States Congress is increasingly incapable of addressing the issues that both parties have generally agreed should be addressed for decades (immigration, infrastructure). For Congress to make proactive plans for problems as variable as changes in the role of technology seems entirely impossible without a change in the underlying political culture surrounding technology, employment, and human labor.

The Changing Role of Humans in Liberal Culture

While this dissertation has sought to provide a more humanistic perspective on issues of changing technology and the mental health crisis, one of the largest assumptions of humanism and its legacy in liberalism should be re-evaluated. Liberalism assumes the primacy of human beings as special and unique, both as a species and individuals. However, outside of specific occupations that are intrinsically human in nature, it may be that most human tasks can be done by an artificial machine or rendered unnecessary through changing practices and priorities. In this sense, humanity becomes a form of technology to be compared externally to another means of accomplishing a task. This is to say, humans are not special due to an external promise or

guarantee of excellence and success. Rather, humans are special due to our capability to reason about our surroundings and think about our own existence. Liberalism attempts to celebrate the human by elevating the subject as having natural rights sourced in the ether. In the American context, it assumes that hard work by the individual will lead to moral virtue, personal success, and salvation (either in the secular or theological sense). This cultural context places employment by another as a part of the very identity and value of the individual. When we assume that most tasks could be done by a machine, what is left is to evaluate what all the remaining people will do and how they will pursue a fulfilling life. Francis Fukuyama argues that we should reassert the primacy of the liberal human, even if it means stifling technical innovation and change. In short, he argues that we should prevent ourselves from having to answer this question by slowing the rate of technical innovation to simply give people things to do (Fukuyama 2007). However, given the need for emotional labor, humans innate desire to communicate with one another, and the existence of jobs that are fundamentally humanistic, humans will find work to do, even if they are no longer spending most of their time laboring. Confronting the inherently unremarkable nature of the productivity of humans in comparison to the machines we have created and the innovations in efficiency we have made allows us to refocus on the things which make humans uniquely remarkable.

If some theorists, speculating about the results of LDTs, are correct, it may one day become normal for most humans to be unemployed. It is possible for LDTs to one day become so efficient that most jobs simply do not exist in the most developed nations. The manufacturing of the machines themselves may be completed in developing nations, but it is not outside the realm of possibility to imagine a time when every step of the process of making advanced machinery can be automated, from the lithium mine to the shipping of the final product. Utopian

ideas about this process imagine a world in which individuals are left to pursue hobbies, produce art and literature, and pursue education and research for its own sake (Bastani 2019). In this way, the very activities that humans are uniquely suited and intrinsically inclined to accomplish make up most of the activities being performed. Individuals can find authenticity separate from any occupation by following their inherent inclinations. Other futurists worry about the potential for systemic ennui and resulting mental health problems that come from removing the need to chase the brass ring. However, our current educational policies and attitudes towards humanistic, artistic, and academic pursuits may be a cause for concern that the latter path may occur. Shifts away from the humanities, liberal arts, and fine arts in K-12 and postsecondary education and discouraging the pursuit of artistic careers in young people may be inadvertently setting us up for a crisis of boredom. If we do not instill a love for the uniquely human rather than an insecurity about one's place in comparison with a machine, future generations may be incapable of rediscovering what does make humans unique.

Avenues for Future Research

This dissertation is meant as a starting point for more targeted philosophical, historical, and empirical research. Any of the topics discussed could be an avenue for future work that examines the role of technology and mental health within specific cultural contexts. The dissertation is broad in scope, making theoretical contributions applying existentialism to more empirical political contexts. However, there are avenues for future research that should be explored.

One area that is important to this project that should be expanded upon is the history of techne in the American context. While histories of technology and its impact on America exist, a more theoretical focus on techne and its place in the psyche and culture of Americans would

strengthen this study. Many of the disagreements and political developments of the United States have existed since the founding. Applying a genealogical approach to this historical context would allow for a timeline of disagreements over techne. In many ways, our most important and fundamental disagreement, the American Civil War, was fought over different economic and political interests and views on labor and techne. Because of the importance of work and labor in American culture, tracing “the way things are done” through history would offer new insights into the development of our political culture as well.

Additional research into public opinion on rapid changes in technology and procedures would bolster this line of inquiry. The work used in this dissertation to discuss the impacts of technology on public opinion are limited, giving a general idea of who is optimistic about the future and who is not. However, to improve some of the political arguments made in this dissertation, surveys asking respondents about issues explicitly related to those discussed in this project would provide essential data for more robust and empirical connections. For instance, while the overlap of demographic groups impacted by changing techne and deaths of despair and support for conservative populism is illustrated in this dissertation, public opinion data that collects party ID and ideology as variables to compare against both mental health and techne related questions would provide a stronger empirical basis for discussing these connections.

Existentialism has made in-roads into the mental health literature and some clinicians use it to treat patients. However, additional work should be done to bridge the gap between where this dissertation leaves the distinction between theory and therapy. In particular, examining how the use of existential concepts to help individuals coping with mental illness as a result of specifically economic exacerbating factors should be explored. As previously mentioned, this dissertation does not engage the clinical approach to mental health, only the sociopolitical and

phenomenological. However, the contributions of this research should be taken in consideration with the existing literature on existential therapy towards connecting real environmental factors in mental illness with existential concepts.

An additional avenue for future research lies in examining disruption to the home environment as a result of LDTs. As previously mentioned, the potential for disruption in domestic and interpersonal spaces by technology is both intriguing and alarming. In particular, romantic and sexual relationships between humans have been commoditized in recent years by the prevalence of hookup and dating applications and websites as well as the expansion of the sex toy market. While these are not necessarily negative developments on their face, without examination of the cultural and behavioral impacts on interpersonal relationships, it is unknown the degree to which this could be disruptive.

Conclusion

This dissertation is limited in its approach and seeks to apply existentialism to both politics and specific areas of sociopolitical development in the American context. More research is needed to amplify and strengthen the arguments made. However, this work primes the discussion by placing the needs of the individuals experiencing this existential moment front and center and explaining these experiences through existential concepts. While many remain optimistic or take a more measured tone regarding the future of work itself, ultimately some level of disruption is likely. Any level of disruption will impact some individuals disproportionately, having major economic and cultural impacts on some Americans and likely the entire culture and institutional framework. The American dream within the American context is built on the idea that working hard and being employed is the path to secular or theological salvation. Recent and future economic trends may erode faith in this assumption in ways that rise to the level of a

national existential crisis of faith in the existing culture and institutions as the crushing weight of freedom and possibility (anxiety) meets the wall of systemic inequality and individual limitations (despair). A culture which celebrates this process rather than seeing it is a practical means to provide a comfortable life for all in an advanced democracy cannot be reconciled with the likely futures we face.

This existential crisis of culture due to rapidly changing techne, mental health crises, and the accelerating event of COVID-19 may divide us along partisan and ideological lines. These lines often follow generational patterns. However, we are increasingly divided by our relationship with techne, particularly advanced technology. The “boomer” mindset of previous generations accepts the notion of the Protestant Work Ethic and hard work as an ethical good in itself. It may be characterized by a reluctance towards new technology and a frustration with the rapid changes observed. These generations may have benefited from previously more robust social safety nets and a more secure labor market that could provide for a family, and are concerned about the rapid pace of today’s society. The “doomer meme” commonly associated with the precise mental health and career crises discussed in this dissertation perfectly encapsulates the mood among many millennials and Gen Xers, the age groups who are increasingly either being disrupted by rapidly changing techne or struggling to find a path within the new normal. Doomers face the mental health difficulties and the career difficulties head-on, and are the groups at the forefront of the accompanying mental health and existential crises. For instance, the millennial generation is the generation who was promised that student debt for college would be worth it once they were able to get a job. The reality behind that promise has been less fruitful, especially as college becomes the new normal and institutions seek to maximize student enrollment and satisfaction rather than rigor. Finally, there is hope that the

“Zoomers” of Generation Z, who have come up with the clarity of the mistakes made by Doomers and the technical skills of a generation who always knew the advanced technology and rapid pace of today’s society. This generation is used to using technology to adapt and improve their situation, particularly following their experiences with remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. It should be noted, however, that the titular groups of this dissertation are not necessarily strictly generational. Boomer, doomer, and zoomer are a mindset, not an age. These loose groupings are defined by their perspective on changing technology and society as well as their relative ability to adapt. The boomer refuses to adapt or accept changes due to generational or socialized expectations regarding the role of technology and human activity. The doomer despairs because even if they have done everything right according to what they are told, they can remain in a situation that is financially, mentally, and personally unsustainable. The doomer is used to things being difficult, even when told they should not be and may take on a more pessimistic or nihilistic perspective in reaction. This group is primarily made up of those who may be at high risk of techne based disruption or mental health problems, but do not share the regressive views of the boomer group. They want to move forward, but are held back due to their circumstances or personal shortcomings. Finally, the zoomer group are those who are beginning to thrive under the new situation of rapidly developing techne. They may face many of the same mental health challenges as the doomers, but are more prepared to actively engage in the world. However, the distinction between the doomer and the zoomer archetypes are not only based on their career outcomes. Those with a doomer perspective may thrive, whereas a zoomer may find difficulty with employment. These groups are about the perspective they hold towards rapidly changing technology and the new cultural landscape. In short, where one fits into the current existential crisis of culture facing the United States relates to one’s relationship with technology

and one's willingness and ability to adapt under rapidly changing circumstances. The divisions in the United States are in many ways defined racially, geographically, and by ideology. However, the groupings of perspectives on the issues relevant to this dissertation are unique as political coalitions and groups. What remains to be seen is whether there is a resolution that can accommodate the needs of boomers, doomers, and zoomers alike.

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