

The Self-Infliction Argument: How U.S. Private-Sector Labor Unions Participate in Density Decline

Abstract:

In this article, the self-infliction argument will be introduced; I contend that because U.S. neoliberal essentialism pervades social conventions and is negatively related to the deterioration of private-sector union density, it is likely that neoliberal essentialism pervades the organizational standards set forth by U.S. private-sector unions, exacerbating density deterioration in the process. In particular, Antonio Gramsci's concepts of hegemony and common sense inform the frame of reference from which neoliberal essentialism is expressed as a traditionally inherited and reflexively accepted social perspective of the world, assuming the inevitability and equity of neoliberalism. To further substantiate the self-infliction argument, statistical analyses will be conducted to determine whether U.S. public support for labor unions and big business positively correspond to declining trends in union density during the neoliberal era. If sound, the self-infliction argument underscores the urgency of U.S. private-sector labor unions to transcend neoliberal thinking and foster a collective vision for a post neoliberal, labor-centric hegemony.

I. Introduction

In the United States, labor union density¹ suffered fractional regression from its mid-20th century national peak through the late 1970s, the formational moments of neoliberalism.² Promoted as a redeemer of socioeconomic wellbeing in an era of stagflation,³ U.S. neoliberalism has since accompanied deteriorating labor union density of severe proportions, unparalleled by preceding decades.⁴ It is the latter point I seek to address in this paper. But first, to substantiate forthcoming arguments, a degree of clarification is necessary.

Neoliberalism is itself a complex and historically rich concept, with an evolutionary tale dating back to 1947.⁵ Thus, for the sake of establishing foundational consistency, I have drawn upon previous scholarship⁶ to define U.S. neoliberalism accordingly: a late-1970s socioeconomic philosophy proclaiming social equity as an organic reward achieved through free market primacy, privatization of public institutions, economic deregulation, reduced social assistance, and individualistic values. It is important to note that the distinguishing feature of U.S. neoliberalism is the disintegration of a sociopolitical/economic dichotomy. Rather than viewing free-market capitalism and deregulation as an impacting factor to be mitigated in the interest of social wellbeing, the priority of capital is definitive and considered foundational to sociopolitical rationale and wellbeing.⁷

¹ Vachon et al., "Union Decline." Density is demarcated by the proportion of union membership among the total workforce population.

² Darmofal et al., "Federalism"; Hirsch, "Sluggish Institutions"; Koenig, "Economic Inequality"; Wallace et al., "Union Organizing."

³ Dean, *Democracy*, 53-54.

⁴ Darmofal et al., "Federalism"; Hirsch, "Sluggish Institutions"; Hirsch et al., "Union Membership"; Koenig, "Economic Inequality"; Milkman, "U.S. Labor"; Wallace et al., "Union Organizing."

⁵ Brown, *In the Ruins*, 8-14.

⁶ Brown, *In the Ruins*, 29; Dean, *Democracy*, 51-52; Koenig, "Economic Inequality"; Vachon et al., "Union Decline."

⁷ Holdren and Tucker, "Marxist Theories"; Langergaard, "Neoliberalism"; Wrenn, "Corporate Mindfulness."

The negative associational consequences of neoliberalism on union density are recognized by scholars worldwide, focusing on varying degrees of justification and justificatory interconnectivity.⁸ Hirsch, for example, categorized primary justifications for the deterioration of private-sector union density into three distinctive but interdependent descriptive groups: structural, competitive, and institutional.⁹ Hirsch effectively argues that competition, though independently robust, is fundamental to both institutional and structural justifications. And while assessments of this sort emphasize causal connections between neoliberal logic and the decades-long decline in private sector union density, underlying neoliberal priorities indicate impoverished union efficiency in free-market environments rather than the other way around. “Because the typical union workplace does not generate value-added sufficient to offset higher union compensation, the union premium reinforces the long-run decline in private sector unionism.”¹⁰

This paper’s ambition is not to discount the veracity of associational explanations in the neoliberal/union density debate but draw attention to the oft-assumed neoliberal inevitability in such justificatory reasoning. Accordingly, with respect to exhaustive scholarship and research produced on neoliberal/labor union density correlations, this paper ventures to diverge from classic causative justifications by turning attention to the paradox of labor union/neoliberal interdependence as an explanatory wedge and contribution to the debate. Drawing upon a Gramscian frame of reference, the self-infliction argument will be introduced to illuminate this apparent paradoxical interdependence. I will argue that, in the U.S., private-sector labor unions (PSUs) are not merely victims of neoliberal activities but, given commitments to neoliberal essentialism, likely play a role in exacerbating density decline. A Gramscian frame of reference is vital to the interpretation of neoliberal essentialism and ultimately the soundness of the self-infliction argument.

The early 20th century social philosopher, Antonio Gramsci envisaged a nuanced socioeconomic reality expanding upon, if not surpassing the sheer material implications of Marxist philosophy.¹¹ Part of Gramsci’s philosophy, as cultivated in *Prison Notebooks*, reasons that power struggles are complex relationships between dominant and subordinate groups of society, emphasized by two primary concepts: hegemony and common sense.¹² In agreement with Gramsci, these concepts inform a frame of reference from which neoliberal essentialism is developed and the self-infliction argument defended.

According to Gramsci, the hegemonic (dominant) class mitigates social conflict through delicately maintained relations between hegemonic and subordinate groups.¹³ Maintenance of hegemonic power requires imposed but consensual leadership by appealing to common moral, cultural, and ideological interests.¹⁴ But although social consent to leadership is essential to a successful hegemony, it is overshadowed by the primacy of socioeconomic power and control.¹⁵ On these terms, given the recognition of shared values, subaltern factions cautiously acknowledge and

⁸ Aleks et al., “Hero or Villain?”; Hirsch, “Sluggish Institutions”; Koenig, “Economic Inequality”; Rosenberg, “Challenges”; Vachon et al., “Union Decline”; Wallace et al., “Union Organizing.”

⁹ Hirsch, “Sluggish Institutions.”

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Fresu, *Antonio Gramsci*, 297; Jones, *Antonio Gramsci*, 32.

¹² Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks: Vol. I*, 136-137; Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks: Vol. II*, 200-211; Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks: Vol. III*, 330, 333, 360, 369.

¹³ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks: Vol. II*, 173-174.

¹⁴ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks: Vol. III*, 161, 338, 373.

¹⁵ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks: Vol. II*, 200-201.

accept popular hegemonic processes and standards.¹⁶ A successful hegemony must, therefore, carefully persist in amalgamating social ideals and desires with its vision of power, helping to influence social common sense.

Unlike modern usages of the term, the notion of Gramscian common sense is analogous to folklore—socially common but uncritically held beliefs, traditionally inherited and reflexively accepted as essential realities of the world.¹⁷ But as with folklore, common sense contains features of truth and lived experience that reproduce perceptions of worldview coherence, despite the existence of underlying contradictions. It is through common sense that consent to hegemonic rule is formed and maintained.¹⁸ However, so as to distinguish common sense from false consciousness, integral to the notion of Gramsci's philosophy is that common sense is realized not by "a mistaken view of the social world" but "when the ideas of the ruling class sufficiently displace rivalling ideas and become the 'common sense' assumptions and beliefs held by subordinate classes."¹⁹

Therefore, with respect to the historical significance and contextual uniqueness of Gramsci's model,²⁰ along with indebtedness to erudite Gramscian and neo-Gramscian scholarship, the arguments presented in this paper are simply influenced by Gramscian thought and intend to neither challenge nor supplement Gramscian scholarship but inform the critical position taken here regarding the significance of neoliberal/labor union incongruity. In light of this, the historical preservation of U.S. neoliberal power illustrates the dynamic, adaptive processes maintained in power retention amid times of socioeconomic instability.²¹ With state assistance and through public institutions, core neoliberal ideals are preserved and disseminated through the amalgamation of neoliberal aspirations with commonly shared individualistic values,²² sustaining neoliberal common sense (neoliberal essentialism) in the process.²³ In this way, commitments to neoliberal essentialism help bind the economic, political, cultural, and moral facets of society, while reinforcing common beliefs that prosperity and social equity necessitate the prioritization of free-market capitalism and minimal state regulation.²⁴

From here, section II will introduce and defend the self-infliction argument in virtue of U.S. neoliberal essentialism and the drastic deterioration of PSU density throughout the neoliberal era. A correlative relationship between U.S. neoliberalism and PSU density deterioration will be demonstrated in premise one. Premise two will develop neoliberal essentialism from a Gramscian frame of reference, followed by a statistical data analysis of U.S. public support for labor unions and big business; hypotheses will be tested to determine how, in the U.S., public support for labor unions and big business corresponds to the decline in union density throughout the neoliberal era. If successful, the self-infliction argument finds that neoliberal essentialism ultimately pervades organizational standards set forth by PSUs, exacerbating density deterioration in the process. In section III, for the sake of generating creative but productive sociological discourse, some

¹⁶ Gramsci, *Selected Writings*, 328.

¹⁷ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks: Vol III*, 333.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 330.

¹⁹ Fletcher & Redman, "The Sanctions."

²⁰ Fresu, *Antonio Gramsci*, 209; Wells, "Teaching Austerity."

²¹ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks: Vol. I*, 137-138; Gramsci, *Selected Writings*, 423-424.

²² Gall and Harcourt, "Union Default"; Koenig, "Economic Inequality"; Rosenberg, "Challenges"; Wallace, "Union Organizing."

²³ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks: Vol. III*, 69-70.

²⁴ DuRand, "Neoliberal Globalization"; Rosenberg, "Challenges."

plausible objections to the self-infliction argument will be presented and evaluated. Lastly, section IV will round out the paper with considerations of sociological praxis for extant labor unions and novel unionizing efforts as a path to developing a shared vision for socioeconomic justice.

II. The Self-Infliction Argument

In this section I will attempt to establish that, because U.S. neoliberal essentialism pervades social conventions and negatively affects labor union density, it is likely that U.S. neoliberal essentialism pervades organizational standards set forth by PSUs, exacerbating density deterioration in the process. For the sake of maintaining clarity, the self-infliction argument is offered in its formality below, followed by detailed justifications for each of its premises.

The Self-Infliction Argument

- (1) In the U.S., neoliberalism is negatively related to PSU density.
- (2) Furthermore, in the U.S., neoliberal essentialism pervades social conventions.
- (3) However, if (1) & (2), then it is likely that, in the U.S., neoliberal essentialism pervades organizational standards set forth by PSUs, exacerbating density deterioration in the process.

(1) In the U.S., neoliberalism is negatively related to PSU density.

Premise (1) concentrates on the adverse effects of U.S. neoliberalism on PSUs. After all, through institutional and legislative influence, PSUs have been uniquely targeted by neoliberal assaults and pummeled to the point of unrecognition and borderline extinction.²⁵ And while public-sector unions have experienced an adequate share of neoliberal abuse, the public-sector fares relatively well with an overall density of 33.2% in 2022, contrasted with 6.0% private-sector density of the same year.²⁶

In 1954 more than a quarter of the U.S. workforce were unionized at 28.3% density.²⁷ Over the course of nearly two decades PSU density had merely declined by an average of 0.216% per year, reaching a density low of 24.2% by 1973. The early years of U.S. neoliberalism instigated the beginnings of severe PSU density deterioration; by 1980 PSU density had plummeted to 20.1%, an average of 0.586% per year.²⁸ Yet, by 1990 density was 11.9%, reaching single digits by the new millennium.²⁹ And data collected in 2022 reveal an alarming PSU density of 6.0%.³⁰ In contrast to its hegemonic predecessors, U.S. neoliberalism has accommodated sharp deterioration in PSU density, averaging an approximate 3.7% per decade decline.

PSU strength and density have historically been undermined by neoliberalism's pro-capital influence in the U.S., seeing the expansion of anti-worker policies designed to diminish the significance of workers' voices and engagement in workplace procedures—in *all* labor markets.³¹

²⁵ Darmofal et al., "Federalism"; Hirsch, "Sluggish Institutions"; Hirsch et al., "Union Membership"; Vachon et al., "Union Decline."

²⁶ Hirsch et al., "Union Membership."

²⁷ Koenig, "Economic Inequality."

²⁸ Hirsch and Macpherson, "Union Membership."

²⁹ Ibid.; Milkman, "U.S. Labor."

³⁰ Hirsch et al., "Union Membership."

³¹ Hirsch, "Sluggish Institutions"; Rosenberg, "Challenges."

For example, in a novel study, Rosenberg examined the close association between neoliberal influence and corporate power in resistance to workplace expression and unionization efforts. The study revealed an alarming discrepancy in workplace organization during the neoliberal era, seeing union elections tumble from roughly 8,000 per-year in the 1970s to an average of 200 per-year between 2011 and 2018.³² Decades of successful retaliation to unionization efforts have resulted in greater corporate power and freedom, while severely diminishing worker aptitude and strength to maintain active labor unions.

Furthermore, neoliberal influence in U.S. institutions and legislation fosters contradictory and lopsided visions of liberty for workers and labor unions. In 1935 the U.S. passed the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), establishing the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) to administer and adjudicate procedural matters pertaining to unionization, labor disputes, and workers' rights.³³ And though pro-labor safeguards have been besieged by corporate interests since the NLRA's inception, neoliberal influence has unprecedentedly and relentlessly shaped NLRB attitudes.³⁴

Koenig explains that pro-labor policies established under the NLRA are straightforward but neoliberal influence weakened the NLRB, resulting in sluggish or stagnant reactions to labor disputes and often curtailing the momentum originally set forth by initiatives to expose employer misconduct. Interpretation of labor law, for instance, is administratively vulnerable and dependent;³⁵ U.S. Presidents have actively persuaded NLRB case judgements in favor of neoliberal objectives to the detriment of workers' rights and protections, while carefully circumventing blatant anti-labor/anti-union legislation in the process.³⁶ Though instigated by the Reagan administration, the NLRB's anti-union standards and systematic suppression of labor disputes have endured both conservative and liberal administrations.³⁷

Overall, acute deterioration of PSU density throughout the neoliberal era has been relatively constant, but recent evidence of deterioration slow-down deserves attention.³⁸ As demonstrated above, current PSU density in the U.S. is approximately 6.0%; a slow-down at this stage is unsurprising. However, particular years of irregularity or slow-down often indicate unsettling statistics. For example, the U.S. Department of Labor reported a fractional slow-down in PSU density decline for 2021, accompanied by vigorous growth in private-sector *non-union* density.³⁹ The labor pool is expanding, and PSUs are dwindling. Against the backdrop of an expanding population and sluggish PSU density, the steady growth of private-sector non-union labor plainly underscores anti-labor/pro-capital priorities of U.S. neoliberalism.

Moreover, under U.S. neoliberalism, suppression of workplace organization and labor unionization is promoted as a natural effect of, but essential to the preservation of organic free-market regularities and liberty. From this standpoint, liberty's preeminence is foundational to neoliberal activities and preoccupations, while considered a nuisance in counter-neoliberal

³² Rosenberg, "Challenges."

³³ NLRB, "Wagner Act"; Wallace et al., "Union Organizing."

³⁴ Gall and Harcourt, "Union Default"; Koenig, "Economic Inequality"; Rosenberg, "Challenges"; Wallace et al., "Union Organizing."

³⁵ Koenig, "Economic Inequality."

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Hirsch, "Sluggish Institutions"; Rosenberg, "Challenges."

³⁸ U.S. Department of Labor, "Union Members."

³⁹ Ibid.

unionization efforts.⁴⁰ Gramsci correctly opined that a dominant hegemony's control of state institutions implicitly preserves hegemonic interests through legislation and policies directed at protecting economic objectives. Thus, hegemonic influence in deregulatory state legislation and policies is itself state regulation, despite the widespread belief that *laissez-fair* socioeconomics intuitively entail reduced state involvement.⁴¹ In this way, U.S. neoliberalism promotes obligations to abandon state involvement while paradoxically relying on a neoliberal-suffused state to achieve a version of pre-WWII *laissez-faire* capitalism. Taking all of this into consideration, premise one of the self-infliction argument is evident: in the U.S., neoliberalism is negatively related to PSU density.

(2) *In the U.S., neoliberal essentialism pervades social conventions.*

Defense of premise (2) is a two-parter. I will first develop U.S. neoliberal essentialism from a Gramscian frame of reference, drawing a philosophical equivalency between Gramscian common sense and neoliberal essentialism. Secondly, a statistical analysis will explore longitudinal trends in public feelings toward labor unions and big business to discover whether, in the U.S., public support for labor unions and big business positively corresponds to the decline in union density throughout the neoliberal era. It will be argued that inconsistency in public feelings toward labor unions and big business reinforces the proposition that U.S. neoliberal essentialism pervades social conventions.

U.S. neoliberal essentialism from a Gramscian frame of reference. As explained in §I and above, at odds with affirmations of equity, U.S. neoliberal hegemony has influenced socially austere pro-capital policies, dismantled state mediation, and encouraged anti-labor legislation.⁴² However, despite its austere socioeconomic effects, social consent to neoliberal leadership is reproduced in the U.S., albeit somewhat cautiously, by what I refer to as neoliberal essentialism. Drawing on Gramscian philosophy, U.S. neoliberal essentialism is regarded here as a conventional social perspective of the world, both traditionally inherited and reflexively accepted, assuming the inevitability and equity of neoliberalism.⁴³ Essentialist conventions allow a substantial portion of U.S. society to uncritically presuppose the veracity of neoliberal logic and coherence, in the face of inequalities and injustices entailed by neoliberal activities. In this way, neoliberal hegemonic power is preserved by influencing consent to neoliberal essentialism through the arrogation and conflation of commonly held individualistic values. And although individualistic concepts are wide-ranging and perhaps useful to a certain extent,⁴⁴ persuasion of neoliberal essentialism in the U.S. is contingent upon amalgamating individualistic values with hegemonic visions of power.

In the interest of developing philosophical strength and avoiding ambiguous uses of terminology, the individualistic values assumed here capture notions of liberty, free choice, self-reliance, and personal responsibility.⁴⁵ Wrenn explains how these sociopolitical standards are appropriated and reproduced as neoliberal values, stimulating a common perception that individual liberties and self-worth are susceptible to deterioration if community values and/or state regulation are

⁴⁰ DuRand, "Neoliberal Globalization."

⁴¹ Gramsci, *Selected Writings*, 210-211.

⁴² Azevedo et al., "Neoliberal Ideology"; Ferreras et al., *Democratize Work*; Leyva, "Towards a Cognitive"; Rosenberg, "Challenges"; Wrenn, "Corporate Mindfulness."

⁴³ Gramsci, *Selected Writings*, 328; Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks: Vol. II*, 200-201; Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks: Vol. III*, 161, 338, 373.

⁴⁴ Greene, "Fourth Ideology."

⁴⁵ Harvey, *A Brief History*, 23, 181; Wrenn, "Corporate Mindfulness."

prioritized.⁴⁶ Nonetheless, to Wrenn’s point, the promotion of individualistic values in such a manner simply weakens personal obligations to community and societal wellbeing.⁴⁷ Consequently, appropriated individualism propagates a false dilemma: either abandon social collectivity or lose individual liberties.⁴⁸ In other words, commitments to neoliberal essentialism foster the notion that sociopolitical wellbeing necessitates individualistic ideals, in contrast to a society comprised of interconnected aspirations for collective achievement and wellbeing. Moreover, neoliberal essentialism appeals to individualistic values as the acme of economic success and welfare; that individualism is essential to maximizing free-market efficiency for the creation of jobs and sustained livelihoods. Rosenberg argues, it is commonly believed that privately regulated socioeconomic endeavors will nurture social and technological advancement.⁴⁹ As such, it is assumed that institutional or organizational regulation—the state or labor unions for instance—merely hinders economic advancement and spoils individual liberties.⁵⁰ In this way, neoliberal essentialism unites individual and neoliberal liberties under the banner of individualistic ideals.

Neoliberal essentialism exposes glaring contradictions in U.S. society where democracy, equality, and unity are presumed essential to social wellbeing. This folkloric conflict is underscored, given the function of neoliberal essentialism as the prioritization of hegemonic interests through appeals to common principles. With regard to such conflict, Azevedo et al. argue that neoliberal policies directed toward deregulation, dissolution of labor unions, obstruction of societal protections, etc. merely diminish individual liberties presumed by neoliberal logic, while strengthening corporate liberties and prioritizing neoliberal hegemony.⁵¹ Although U.S. neoliberal essentialism comprises individualistic ideals in service of hegemonic inevitability and correctness, essentialist notions of the sort are “*acritically* absorbed” and produce “a disjointed, incoherent, and inconsequential conception of the world that matches the character of the multitudes whose philosophy it is.”⁵²

Longitudinal trends and statistical analysis. An analysis of longitudinal trends further substantiates the proposition that, in the U.S., neoliberal essentialism pervades social conventions. Representing intermittent snapshots of time throughout the U.S. neoliberal era, time-series datasets were extracted from the American National Election Studies datacenter, for selected years 1976, 1980, 1990, 2000, 2008, and 2020.⁵³ Longitudinal trend analyses were conducted to evaluate variables concerning public feelings toward labor unions and big business with intent to answer the following: does public support for labor unions and big business positively correspond to the decline in union density during the U.S. neoliberal era?

If U.S. neoliberal essentialism, in fact, pervades social conventions, then it is expected that union density trends will contradict public feelings toward labor unions and big business. In particular, capturing the elegance of Gramsci’s articulation of folkloric common sense,⁵⁴ acritically embraced

⁴⁶ Wrenn, “Corporate Mindfulness.”

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Harvey, *A Brief History*, 5

⁴⁹ Rosenberg, “Challenges.”

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Azevedo et al., “Neoliberal Ideology.”

⁵² Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks: Vol. III*, 333.

⁵³ ANES, “ANES Data Center.” The American National Election Studies (www.electionstudies.org). These materials are based on work supported by the National Science Foundation under grant numbers SES 1444721, 2014-2017, the University of Michigan, and Stanford University.

⁵⁴ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks: Vol. III*, 330-333.

U.S. neoliberal essentialism reproduces perceptions of worldview coherence despite prevailing value contradictions. Hence, it is reasonable to expect contradictory sentiments among a population suffused with neoliberal essentialist values. As such, against the backdrop of severe density deterioration, public feelings are expected to lean favorably toward labor unions and unfavorably toward big business, i.e., the neoliberal *raison d’etre*.

Therefore, hypotheses are presented accordingly:

H_{alt}: Public opinion of unions and big business are *inconsistent* with downward union density trends of the neoliberal era.

H₀: Public opinion of unions and big business are *consistent* with downward union density trends of the neoliberal era.

On the alternative hypothesis (H_{alt}) it is expected that declining union density will correspond to favorable feelings toward unions and unfavorable feelings toward big business. Inconsistency in public sentiments will suggest plausible reflexive and contradictorily held neoliberal essentialist ideals. Conversely, on the null hypothesis (H₀), it is expected that declining union density will correspond to favorable feelings toward big business and unfavorable feelings toward unions. Consistency in public sentiments will imply either doxastic happenstance or consciously and consistently valued neoliberal essentialism.

Selected datasets were accessed and evaluated through IBM SPSS Statistics software, version 28.0.1.0 (142). One-sample t-tests were processed to attain 95% confidence intervals for the purpose of establishing confidence in average population opinions amid selected variable years. To maintain consistency in public sentiment from year to year, *Union Thermometer* and *Big Business Thermometer* were selected as target variables. Variable questions invited respondents to rate their feelings regarding labor unions and big business on a degree scale from 0 – 100, with 0 – 50 degrees indicating *unfavorable feelings*; 50 – 100 degrees indicating *favorable feelings*; and 50 degrees for respondents with neutral feelings.⁵⁵ Table 1 illustrates the t-test results pertaining to *Union Thermometer* and *Big Business Thermometer*, years 1976, 1980, 1990, 2000, 2008, and 2020:

Table 1

95% Confidence Intervals for Public Feelings Toward Unions and Big Business by Year

	1976	1980	1990	2000	2008	2020
UNION THERMOMETER	45.73 – 47.78	53.12 – 55.64	54.90 – 57.39	54.23 – 56.62	57.98 – 60.06	57.80 – 58.90
BIG BUSINESS THERMOMETER	47.49 – 49.45	51.64 – 54.08	n/a	54.39 – 56.43	54.30 – 56.25	47.28 – 48.32

The data in Table 1 indicate, with 95% confidence, that for every year (with the exception of 1976) population average feelings toward unions consistently leaned in a favorable direction, with averages marginally rising successively. Additionally, an assessment of sample means shows a 24.8% increase in union favorability from 1976 to 2020 (see Appendix A). This statistic

⁵⁵ For instance, consider hypothetical variable X. If a one-sample t-test returned the result of 57 – 60 for variable X, we can be 95% confident that the population’s average feelings toward variable X fall somewhere between the result range. In this case the average population feelings toward hypothetical variable X lean (slightly) favorably.

contradicts the downward trajectory of union density during those years. Following a similar yearly arrangement, union density data⁵⁶ are presented below in Table 2:

Table 2

Union Density per Unionstats.com

	1976	1980	1990	2000	2008	2020
UNION DENSITY (overall membership)	21.3%	20.1%	11.9%	9.0%	7.6%	6.3%

Statistical data in Table 2 indicate a 15% decrease in PSU density from 1976 to 2020, in contrast to the slight growth in public favorability toward unions during the same period. Conservative trend analyses of Table 1 confidence intervals interpret the data as relatively consistent in population favorability toward unions, hovering slightly above feelings of neutrality. Nevertheless, a moderate approach simply calls attention to slight mutability in union favorability between 1976 and 2020, which unambiguously conflicts with declining union density trends throughout the same period.

Regarding the big business variable, as suggested above, conscious neoliberal essentialism would likely cohere with declining union density trends and correspond to favorable feelings toward big business. Nonetheless, despite missing big business statistics from 1990, Table 1 conveys quite the opposite. The data suggest, with 95% confidence, that population average feelings toward big business were teetering on neutral/unfavorable in 1976. Moreover, trends in public feelings toward big business, between the years 1980 and 2008 were similar in growth to union favorability. That said, between 2008 and 2020 big business favorability waned, shifting slightly to feelings of unfavorability by 2020. Thus, careful trend analyses of Table 1 confidence intervals interpret population favorability toward big business as fairly steady, though leaning unfavorably by 2020. Once again, feelings toward big business unambiguously conflict with declining union density trends of the same period.

Hence, the following proposition is confirmed with 95% confidence: by 2020 the average U.S. population favored labor unions but disfavored big business. Assuming data accuracy and sufficient interpretation, the null hypothesis may therefore be rejected in favor of the alternative:

H_{alt} : Public opinion of unions and big business are *inconsistent* with downward union density trends of the neoliberal era.

Inconsistencies demonstrated above suggest a contradiction between public opinion and neoliberal logic, further indicating the suffusion of neoliberal essentialism among U.S. society. Considering neoliberal essentialism from a Gramscian frame of reference and longitudinal trend analyses of public sentiments toward labor unions and big business, premise two of the self-infliction argument is sustained. In the U.S., neoliberal essentialism pervades social conventions.

(3) *In the U.S., PSU Organizational Standards Exacerbate Density Deterioration*

The final conditional premise of the self-infliction argument suggests, considering the truth of antecedent premises, it is likely that neoliberal essentialism pervades organizational standards set forth by PSUs, exacerbating density deterioration in the process. Defense of premise three will

⁵⁶ Hirsch and Macpherson, “Union Membership.”

substantiate the veracity of such an inference by drawing attention to the activities of the world's most significant labor coalition—the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO). If it can be established that neoliberal essentialism pervades AFL-CIO organizational standards, at least two crucial elements emerge: (i) one of the world's largest PSU coalitions paradoxically assist the exacerbation of density deterioration and (ii) AFL-CIO constituents and other PSUs in the United States likely follow similar patterns.

The following review of the AFL-CIO highlights the organization's neoliberal tendencies through its motives and aims. The AFL-CIO is a global coalition of unions comprising 12.5 million workers, with a commitment to ensuring equitable workplace conditions and remuneration through skill-building and corporate accountability.⁵⁷ Liz Shuler, AFL-CIO President, has publicly denounced anti-worker, pro-capital neoliberal policies and calls for labor-centric procedures designed to foster socioeconomic justice.⁵⁸ However, by partnering with organizations sympathetic to neoliberal aspirations, for example the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) and the International Labor Organization (ILO), AFL-CIO commitments to social and economic justice fall short of abandoning neoliberal influence and control.⁵⁹ Objectives of this sort are constrained by hegemonic conventions, which indirectly propagate neoliberal essentialism and legitimacy.

For instance, LaDou argues that the ILO, though established to counter neoliberal anti-labor tactics, continually fails to represent equitable workplace standards. LaDou highlights the fact that the ILO cannot enforce the standards it sets, which paves a path for countries to support the ILO while ignoring its policies and procedures. Globally held neoliberal principles further compound the problem by dissuading ILO membership and encouraging dismissal of ILO requirements by its established members.⁶⁰ Analogous to NLRB anti-union tactics,⁶¹ neoliberal essentialist ILO standards circumvent explicit anti-labor directives by nurturing organizational indifference toward workplace justice.⁶² Unless the AFL-CIO fosters improvement in ILO patterns, a seat at the table simply legitimizes neoliberal essentialism.

Furthermore, the USMCA, an extension of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), is guided by neoliberal logic in its motivation to cultivate free-market associations in a competitive world market.⁶³ An intersectional view exposes neoliberal racialization under USMCA enforcement, which often exploits Mexico for its resources and labor by delegitimizing Mexico's domestic laws, customs, and manipulation concerns. According to Hernandez-Lopez, legal efforts to establish Mexico's socioeconomic equity under USMCA membership are frequently vetoed on grounds of conflict with USMCA conventions. With U.S. assistance, the USMCA naturalizes neoliberal standards *a priori* at Mexico's expense.⁶⁴ Gramsci reminds us that “through law, the state renders the ruling group homogeneous and aims to create a social conformism that serves the

⁵⁷ AFL-CIO, “About Us.”

⁵⁸ AFL-CIO, “Schuler: Trade”; AFL-CIO, “Schuler: Global.”

⁵⁹ AFL-CIO, “Schuler: Trade”; AFL-CIO, “Schuler: Global”; AFL-CIO, “Resolution 9.”

⁶⁰ LaDou, “World of False Promises.”

⁶¹ Koenig, “Economic Inequality and the Violation Economy.”

⁶² LaDou, “World of False Promises.”

⁶³ Galvez, “Efficiency”; Hernandez-Lopez, “Racializing Trade.”

⁶⁴ Hernandez-Lopez, “Racializing Trade.”

purposes of the ruling group's line of development."⁶⁵ From this perspective, the USMCA is a vessel through which neoliberal objectives are imposed.

Paradoxically, the AFL-CIO explicitly acknowledges the adversity and inequality occasioned by U.S. neoliberal hegemony, while contradictorily fostering a worker-centric economic paradigm embedded in neoliberal essentialism. Building alliances with neoliberal-appeasing international organizations, such as the ILO and USMCA, simply legitimizes neoliberal logic and renders the AFL-CIO powerless in efforts to transcend the oppressive nature of neoliberalism labor unions intend to challenge. As Gramsci noted, "[t]he emergence of an industrial legality is a great victory for the working class, but it is not the ultimate and definitive victory."⁶⁶ Perhaps alliances with neoliberal institutions are mere steppingstones toward organizational infiltration and access to sizeable platforms for the sake of promoting socioeconomic justice. Nevertheless, the AFL-CIO has yet to demonstrate transformative action of the sort.

To conclude this section, the explanatory power and scope of the self-infliction argument positively endorse the proposition that: in the U.S., it is likely that neoliberal essentialism pervades organizational standards set forth by PSUs, exacerbating density deterioration in the process. If true, the self-infliction argument exposes reflexive U.S. neoliberal essentialism and its paradoxical relationship to the deterioration of PSU density, warranting sincere consideration in future correlative studies. In the following section I will explore plausible objections to the self-infliction argument and provide elaborative argument-sustaining justifications in response.

III. Plausible Objections

The self-infliction argument is valid, but soundness necessitates the truth of its premises. And though possibilities for counterexamples are endless, *plausible* objections are anticipated for the sake of practical philosophy and the advancement of sociological praxis. In this manner, I will consider some charitable objections. Premises (1) and (2) are basic, empirically derived assumptions worthy of critique. Because premise (3) is a derivative of premises one and two, it encounters problems if either (i) premises one and/or two are false, or (ii) the consequent of premise three is false. As such, the sustainability of the self-infliction argument stands on the vitality of premises (1) – (3).

Premise (1)—in the U.S., neoliberalism is negatively related to PSU density—is an associative proposition. A counterexample to premise (1) demands attention to the likelihood that neoliberalism is merely coincidentally associated with PSU density, but correlatively dissociated. A plausible objection might address international inconsistencies:

Neoliberalism is an international phenomenon, but neoliberal regions such as the U.K. and Germany report substantially greater union density rates than the U.S.

More specifically, for nearly four decades the United Kingdom (U.K.) and Germany have consistently held a considerable lead over the U.S. in overall labor union density rates.⁶⁷ And by 2019, the U.S. density ratio was 9.9%; the U.K.'s was more than twice the density, at 23.5%; and Germany's density was 16.3%.⁶⁸ With extracted data from OECD, I generated a graph to establish

⁶⁵ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks: Vol. III*, 69.

⁶⁶ Gramsci, *Selected Writings*, 93.

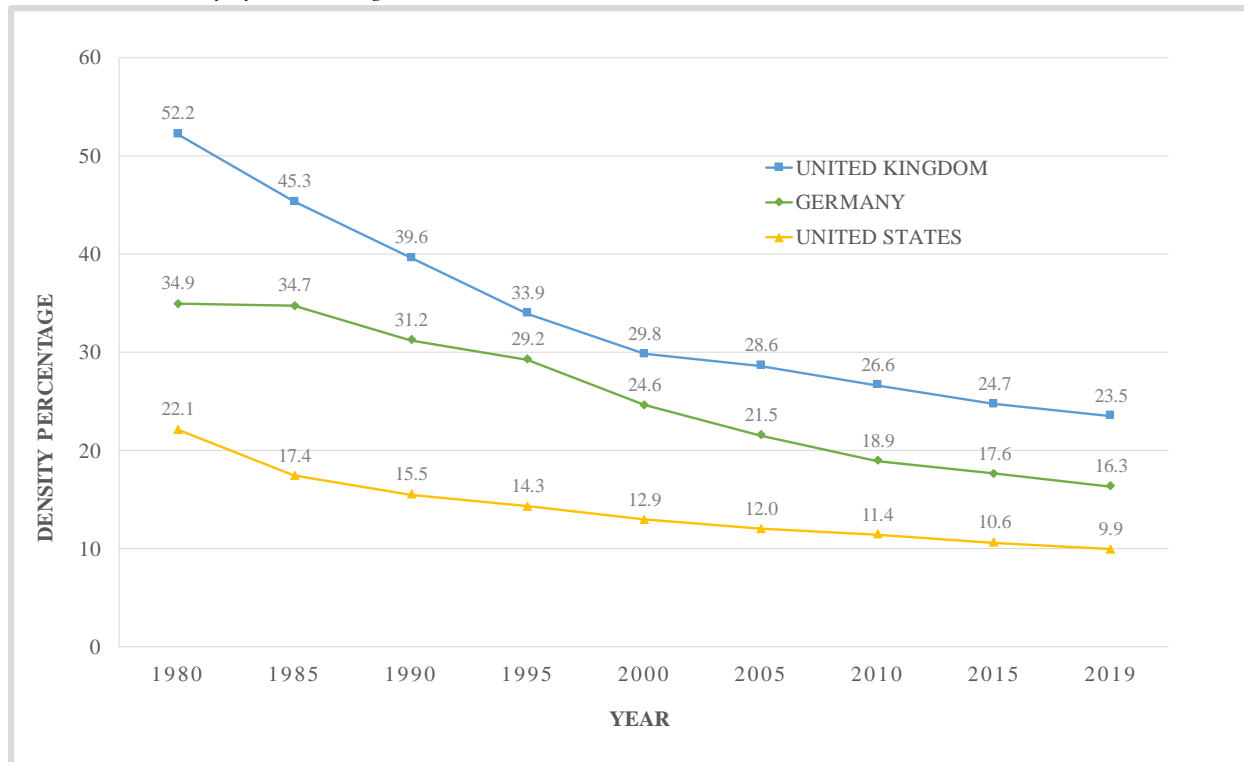
⁶⁷ OECD, "Trade Union Dataset."

⁶⁸ This translation was not created by the OECD and should not be considered an official OECD translation. The OECD shall not be liable for any content or error in this translation.

a visual representation of union density divergence rates among the U.K., Germany, and U.S. (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Overall union density by selected region, 1980-2019.



Source: OECD Trade Union Dataset (www.oecd.org)

While labor union density rates are greater in Germany and the U.K., Figure 1 illustrates a constant decline for all three regions. Likewise, the U.S. experienced a remarkably moderate decrease in overall union density over the 39-year period in contrast to its German and U.K. counterparts. If PSU density follows a similar trajectory, the deleterious consequences of neoliberalism on density rates are internationally substantial. Furthermore, as shown in Figure 1, in contrast to more than a third of Germany’s workforce and more than half of the U.K.’s workforce, less than 25% of the U.S. workforce belonged to labor unions as neoliberalism emerged. Why? Barring neoliberal essentialist commitments, epistemic allusions to union density divergence in socioeconomically similar regions underscore cultural and legal precedence pertaining to unionization standards and U.S. exceptionalism.

For example, U.S. labor unions are rarely successful without employer consent to unionization—or union recognition. According to Disney et al., the existence of recognition standards reduces bargaining power for both union and non-union workers by increasing employer awareness, which enables employers to strengthen anti-union and preventative policies.⁶⁹ In the U.K. and Germany, however, cultural and legal precedence entail greater support for collective bargaining, regardless of union representation and employer recognition.⁷⁰ And although the U.K. adopted recognition legislation in 1999, requiring 10% support among workers to trigger collective bargaining rights,

⁶⁹ Disney et al., “British Unions.”

⁷⁰ Ibid.; Logan, “Union Recognition.”

the U.S. recognition laws demand a company-wide majority vote to qualify for unionization.⁷¹ Union recognition standards set the U.S. apart from its contemporaries and offer explanatory power to international discrepancies in union density.

This sort of U.S. exceptionalism is historically significant as well. Perrow argues that early American organization and corporatization was unparalleled by contemporaneous European economies. And with scarce governmental and institutional oversight, the early American economy favored deregulated business and organizational practices,⁷² empowering corporate influence and control of the economy and state.⁷³ In light of this, it is unsurprising that U.S. labor union density historically and currently trails its international neoliberal cohorts.

A counterexample to premise (2) requires one of two options: argue for the implausibility of neoliberal essentialism or that neoliberal essentialist social conventions are nonexistent in the U.S. A plausible objection, therefore, could be framed accordingly:

Core individualistic social conventions have pervaded U.S. society for centuries. Thus, it is a categorical mistake to attribute individualistic conventions to neoliberalism.

While individualistic values predate neoliberalism, it is the appropriation of those individualistic values and concepts that distinguish neoliberal rationale. U.S. neoliberal essentialism entails the notion that individuals freely and meritocratically determine personal success, further reducing personal commitments to social responsibility, while stressing individual responsibility for hardships perpetuated by neoliberal agendas. Usurped individualistic values celebrate pro-capital/anti-worker advancement as the inevitability of individual merit and reward for tireless work and dedication.⁷⁴

The notion that U.S. neoliberalism is negatively related to PSU density is currently sustained, given the substantive decline in density among comparative regions and exceptional anti-labor/pro-capital culture of U.S. society. Therefore, conditional premise (3) is a reasonable inference. A challenge to the premise must deal with its consequent by demonstrating that either PSUs are immune to neoliberal essentialism or unions' commitments to neoliberalism do not interfere with density rates. Developing a plausible counterexample to (3) may be arduous and fruitless by virtue of contrary evidence, but admiration goes out to those who try. In closing, the counterexamples offered above are neither presumed exhaustive nor the most compelling but present modest objections to the self-infliction argument. As such, the intent is to actively nudge the debate in a creative but productive direction, and hopefully initiate further discussion in sociological studies and stimulate praxis.

IV. Considerations for Praxis

The self-infliction argument draws necessary attention to the neoliberal/labor union conflict as experienced in the U.S. Because neoliberal essentialism pervades social conventions, it is likely that PSUs are not merely victims of neoliberal activities but play a role in exacerbating density decline. PSUs are constrained by anti-labor motives entailed by U.S. neoliberalism and relegated to managing stability under hegemonic control. Through increased membership, labor unions

⁷¹ Madland, *RE-Union: How Bold Labor Reforms Can Repair, Revitalize, and Reunite the United States*, 96. This is an updated section on union recognition. The prior version insinuated a lack of union recognition in the U.K.

⁷² Perrow, *Organizing America*, 28-29, 33-34.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 102-104.

⁷⁴ Wrenn, "Corporate Mindfulness."

might gain enough momentum to develop negotiation power and slightly influence legislative processes. However, as Gramsci noted, compromise within an anti-labor system is ultimately limited and detrimental to workers, unless cooperation signifies a step in the advancement of pro-labor hegemonic transformation.⁷⁵ As such, the epistemic force of the self-infliction argument demands profound consideration of (i) the direction and message of established labor organizations in the U.S. and (ii) growing interests in unionization within the U.S.

In §II a survey of the AFL-CIO accentuated a potential contradiction between organizational principles and actions. It was argued that this shortness of congruence enables the AFL-CIO to protest the detrimental effects of neoliberal policies and norms while partnering with organizations entrenched in neoliberal logic. Collaborative platforms of this sort may prove essential to initiating and/or broadcasting socioeconomic justice, but absolute justice is unattainable if lopsided alliances prioritize and facilitate adversity in pursuit of profit. Transcending neoliberal constraints demands transcending neoliberal essentialism! Accordingly, established pro-labor organizations and unions (akin to the AFL-CIO) must adopt and disseminate a political morale designed to initiate critical thought and critique of U.S. neoliberalism, fostering a transformative praxis designed to undermine neoliberal logic. As Wells effectively argues, Gramscian-influenced political education encourages open critique of conventionally reproduced hegemonic assumptions and norms.⁷⁶ Wells explains that such educative processes must exceed mere transmission of data from educator to student, by fully immersing educators and students in an awareness of hegemonic adversity for the sake of transcending self-defeating common sense.⁷⁷ Along these lines, in addition to acknowledging the austerity related to neoliberal policies, organizations like the AFL-CIO could promote awareness of neoliberal essentialist thinking and encourage conceptual creativity.

Concerning social unionization awareness, recent polls report exceptional labor union approval in the U.S.⁷⁸ As discussed in §III stringent union recognition legislation inhibits unionization efforts in the U.S. by increasing employer control and curtailing organizing abilities. For this reason, novel workplace organizing efforts must redirect attention to the importance of collectivity and the justice that collectivity itself serves! Specifically, because it is ultimately self-defeating to bargain collectively within a social structure prioritized by neoliberal regulation and activities, attention to collective bargaining *rights* must be abandoned for collective action that embodies a common vision for a post-neoliberal society. Only through this purpose can public conceptions of the world, structural patterns, and institutional standards supplant neoliberal essentialist thinking and produce socioeconomic justice. Given remarkable labor union approval in the U.S., and its volatile political climate, society is ripe for institutional and structural transformation. Nonetheless, novel organizing efforts must bear in mind that the “relation between theory and practice becomes even closer the more the conception is vitally and radically innovatory and opposed to old ways of thinking.”⁷⁹

V. Conclusion

U.S. private-sector labor union density has significantly deteriorated since its all-time high in the mid-1950s, facing the most drastic regression throughout the neoliberal era. It was argued from a Gramscian frame of reference that social consent to neoliberal hegemony, despite its antinomy, is

⁷⁵ Gramsci, *Selected Writings*, 92-93.

⁷⁶ Wells, “Teaching Austerity.”

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ McCarthy, “U.S. Approval.”

⁷⁹ Gramsci, *Selected Writings*, 335.

maintained through the arrogation of commonly held individualistic values, promoting commitments to neoliberal essentialism. Along this line of reasoning, the self-infliction argument was introduced as an entering wedge to the neoliberal/labor union debate, arguing for the likelihood that neoliberal essentialism pervades organizational standards set forth by U.S. private-sector unions, ultimately exacerbating density deterioration in the process. If the self-infliction argument is sound, U.S. labor union success is contingent on society's willingness to critically contemplate traditional beliefs and ordinary conceptions of the world. Moving forward, pro-labor organizations and contemporary unionizing efforts ought to consider the limitative reach entailed by collective bargaining within a system designed to prioritize capital. But transcending neoliberal restrictions necessitates the abandonment of neoliberal essentialism. Occupational and workplace justice is accomplished, not merely through collective bargaining, but through advocating commonly held visions for a post-neoliberal society.

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Appendix A

SPSS One-Sample Statistics and T-Tests

Years: 1976, 1980, 1990, 2000, 2008, 2020

1976

One-Sample Statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
UNION THERMOMETER	1...	46.76	21.946	.521
BUSINESS THERMOMETER	1...	48.47	20.993	.499

One-Sample Test

Test Value = 0

	t	df	Significance		Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
			One-Sided p	Two-Sided p		Lower	Upper
UNION THERMOMETER	89.708	1772	.000	.000	46.756	45.73	47.78
BUSINESS THERMOMETER	97.219	1772	.000	.000	48.469	47.49	49.45

1980

One-Sample Statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
UNION THERMOMETER	1323	54.38	23.359	.642
BUSINESS THERMOMETER	1304	52.86	22.457	.622

One-Sample Test

Test Value = 0

	t	df	Significance		Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
			One-Sided p	Two-Sided p		Lower	Upper
UNION THERMOMETER	84.674	1322	.000	.000	54.379	53.12	55.64
BUSINESS THERMOMETER	85.002	1303	.000	.000	52.862	51.64	54.08

1990

One-Sample Statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
UNION THERMOMETER	1861	56.15	27.358	.634

One-Sample Test

Test Value = 0

	t	df	Significance		Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
			One-Sided p	Two-Sided p		Lower	Upper
UNION THERMOMETER	88.532	1860	.000	.000	56.146	54.90	57.39

2000**One-Sample Statistics**

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
UNION THERMOMETER	1468	55.43	23.277	.608
BUSINESS THERMOMETER	1495	55.41	20.145	.521

One-Sample Test

Test Value = 0

	t	df	Significance		Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
			One-Sided p	Two-Sided p		Lower	Upper
UNION THERMOMETER	91.232	1467	.000	.000	55.425	54.23	56.62
BUSINESS THERMOMETER	106.348	1494	.000	.000	55.409	54.39	56.43

2008**One-Sample Statistics**

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
UNION THERMOMETER	2021	59.02	23.826	.530
BUSINESS THERMOMETER	2063	55.27	22.583	.497

One-Sample Test

Test Value = 0

	t	df	Significance		Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
			One-Sided p	Two-Sided p		Lower	Upper
UNION THERMOMETER	111.367	2020	.000	.000	59.024	57.98	60.06
BUSINESS THERMOMETER	111.169	2062	.000	.000	55.274	54.30	56.25

2020

One-Sample Statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
UNION THERMOMETER	7318	58.35	24.003	.281
BUSINESS THERMOMETER	7339	47.80	22.680	.265

One-Sample Test

Test Value = 0

	t	df	Significance		Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
			One-Sided p	Two-Sided p		Lower	Upper
UNION THERMOMETER	207.950	7317	.000	.000	58.348	57.80	58.90
BUSINESS THERMOMETER	180.563	7338	.000	.000	47.803	47.28	48.32