

Emotional communism

More than ever, we need the common life we can create for each other, a shared life for the benefit of all.

by [Isaac S. Villegas](#) in the [February 2025](#) issue

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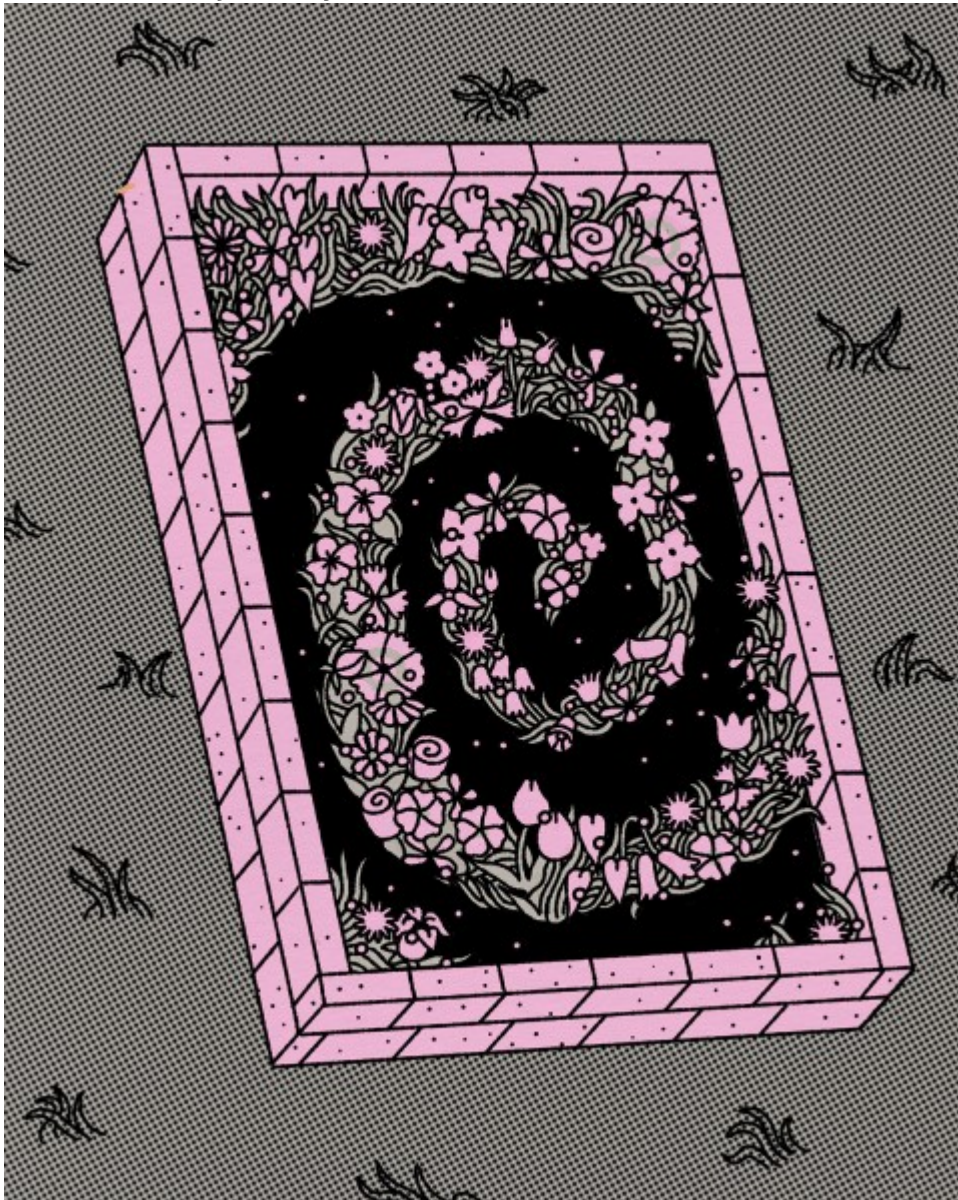


Illustration by Claire Merchlinsky

My church's order of worship includes a time to ask for prayer. During a service several months ago, as people passed the microphone from row to row for congregants to make their requests, I decided to raise my hand for a turn to share. I'd been suffering from a health condition that baffled doctors. I spoke up to ask my community to pray for me. There, as part of our worship, my community held my concerns in their prayers, entrusting my well-being into God's care.

We need each other. We need the God who shows up when we share our lives, when we open ourselves to the Spirit's care made available in our communal life. "Christ is present to us in so far as we are present to each other," writes the Dominican theologian Herbert McCabe.

Sarah Jaffe has been reporting on our increasing isolation from each other, our collective experience of deprivation from friendships, from mutual care. We can't survive without others, yet the forms of community that foster those relationships disintegrate all too easily. Friendships take a lot of work to maintain. We busy ourselves with careers and household demands. Political and cultural disagreements strain family relations, which has been especially the case with the election, again, of Donald Trump. "We need human relationships that extend beyond the romantic or the transactional," Jaffe writes in *Work Won't Love You Back*. Yet "when our relationships fall apart, we still blame ourselves, rather than looking to all the social, institutional pressures that made it nearly impossible to continue them."

The problem isn't simply that we fail to make time for each other, she argues, but that capitalist society gobbles up our lives, leaving us emotionally and physically exhausted. The daily grind of making do in a world where the richest 1 percent of US residents own more wealth than the poorest 90 percent has bled our lives from the existential resources that capacitate us for healthy relationships. No matter which socioeconomic rung we've reached, we never seem to satisfy our fantasies of success. We're driven by cultural forces beyond our control to want what is impossible to have. And with our focus narrowed on those personal or household goals for a successful life, we pay little attention to the ongoing expropriation of our collective wealth by the few, while the many learn to make do with ever-diminishing public goods.

Elite power brokers have structured our political economy in such a way as to abandon the majority of people who make up our society. Bernie Sanders built the

platform of his presidential campaigns on this reality in 2016 and 2020. The leaders of the Democratic Party sidelined him and his populist appeal. And Donald Trump capitalized on the opportunity, stoking working-class resentment of a world that has been rigged against the financial dreams of the masses.

Given the ascendent political forces of economic divestment in public well-being, Jaffe worries that we're becoming all the more isolated because we're scared and desperate—it's isolation as a defense mechanism, a natural social reflex to hold onto what we've got before we lose everything, cloistered lives for the sake of survival in a brutal world. The irony, however, is that we need each other now more than ever. We need a common life that extends beyond the household—networks of care to restore and renew our strength, to enable us to build worlds in the hollows of this one. We need emotional communism, Jaffe explained recently in an interview on the *Ordinary Unhappiness* podcast. She quoted Karl Marx's line from *Critique of the Gotha Programme*: "from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs." We need the common life we can create for each other, a shared life for the benefit of all.

To admit neediness, I'm learning, is to open myself to the world I want for all of us. To acknowledge our lack is to disillusion ourselves from our fantasies that we can survive on our own, in seclusion from our neighbors and the neighbors of our neighbors—all of us bound together in common life that belongs to everyone, a world of relationships that depends on each and every member of society. To confess a need is to entrust ourselves to another's grace. To request prayer is to invite someone to wait with us for God's mercy.

This world seems more fragile this year than last year. The community—in all its beauty, in all its diversity—that makes me who I am feels under threat. Nothing is stable. Everything appears to be spinning out of control. To steady ourselves we'll need to find each other, to make room for one another around a table, in our living rooms, at church. To share our concerns and find our strength—according to our abilities, according to our needs. And to wait, together, for God's wisdom.